

REVENGE BODY: A NOVEL  
AND  
A DEFENCE OF THE ENGLISH LITERATURE CANON IN AN ERA OF  
HYPERTEXTUAL ABUNDANCE.

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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## Chapter One

In a small room, in a small flat, two figures faced one another. It was cold outside, but far colder on the top floor of the mid-terrace house they shared. It was late September and there was an unseasonable chill in the air, but the couple refused to turn the heating on until the dying days of December. It was a discomfort that each blamed on the other. She was cheap. He was tight. The house was freezing. Their living room was an arena for a gladiatorial contest of wills to see who could remain silent the longest.

Eleri and Marcus were born and raised in a town that was known only for its above average suicide statistics. They resisted the adolescent impulse to slash their wrists or chase down paracetamol with vodka and swing from the ceiling fans. They survived the turbulent teenage years, the roar of their twenties and were creeping through the boredom of their early thirties towards a dark middle age.

Birdwater was a town in South Wales on the outskirts of the capital city's attention. It was a place to be passed through on the way to somewhere else. The town centre had been emptied by the outsourcing of fashion stores and coffee chains to the discount retail park off the M4. Charity shops and e-cigarette emporiums had taken the place of repossessed restaurants and out-of-business bakeries. The people of Birdwater no longer visited the local butcher or did the weekly shop at the greengrocers. They decided against walking five minutes down the road for disappointment when a five-minute drive delivered them a panoply of consumer delights.

Though Eleri had lived in Birdwater all her life, she knew little of its outlying areas. She held vague recollections of childhood car-rides to the seaside with sand buckets and picnic hampers, but she would have been amazed to learn that the endless journey had only been fifteen minutes. She remembered being buckled into her booster seat, watching the concrete of the town transform into acres of farmyards and orchards which gave way to the limestone cliffs and drifting sand of the curved shore.

Her father would sit beside her his hands loose on the steering wheel as he hummed an offkey 'Hallelujah' with Leonard Cohen. Her mother pointed to fields of grazing sheep and horses as though they were new inventions. Eleri paid so little attention to them that they may as well have been. She saw them each time anew and forgot them as soon as she reached home. "What sound does a cow make?" her mother would demand to know, hellbent on educating her idiot daughter. Eleri would shrug. She did not care. She was eight years old and her parents were beginning to worry.

Scenery did not interest her. She did not need fresh air and sunlight. She preferred to be inspired by the majesty of nature from the comfort of the indoors, watching Blue Planet on a 4K plasma television screen with an easily accessible bathroom and a lapful of snacks. The outside world unsettled her. She held tight to the centre of the town for fear it would not hold. She did not own a car and she did not like to walk. Her flat was equidistant from the Chinese takeaway and Tesco's. Domino's delivered to her doorstep. Nothing more was necessary.

As a teenager she had been restless, dreaming of a life outside the limits of her hometown. Family holidays gave her a glimpse of big cities and bright lights. Books and movies filled her head with daydreams of cigarettes along the Seine, literary salons with intellectual Manhattanites, and sunsets watched from the balcony of her big city apartment. Time had stripped her of these pretensions. She no longer pretended to read Proust. She struggled through Gordon Ramsey's autobiography on Audible. French desserts were all that connected the two men through the centuries, but Eleri was a sucker for butter.

Time diminished her ambitions. Birdwater was enough for her.

She experienced the town through her sense of smell. She could shut her eyes on any street corner and know exactly where she was with one whiff. Market Square was scented with the scallops-on-the-turn of the fishmonger's stall. His cries of "fresh off the boat" did nothing to convince her that the green-tinted fish buried beneath melting ice had not been lying in repose for the last week. If she wound her way through streets that rose like staircases – an issue for the substantive elderly population who petitioned the council to install stairlifts on the most vertiginous ascents – she would pass Coach Road. Outside the pubs that lined the

cobblestoned street, toothless old men offered her sniffs of cigarette smoke and cheap ale like perfume samples at a department store. She could catch her breath at the top of Primrose Hill, the scent of snap dragons and sweet peas reminding her that she was entering the affluent part of town. Here, the monotonous rows of Victorian terraces that looked more like army barracks than family homes gave way to detached houses with neat gardens and white fences. Doorways were ornamented with hoods and pilasters, pediments and fanlights. Flowerboxes coloured the windowsills. Each house was unique in its owners' interpretation of middle-class taste, but this was an individuality she could not afford.

The flat that she shared with her partner, Marcus, was as tired and grey as its surroundings. The building's pebbledash render flaked onto the driveway, leaving bricks and mortar exposed in a sexless striptease. The landlord refused to renovate. Eleri and Marcus were incapable of practicalities. The structure was subsiding further into the earth with each rent cheque. The real estate agent did not mention this when she walked the hopeful young couple around the property seven years ago. The area was "up and coming," she purred as she bent down to retrieve the pen she'd carelessly dropped on the stairway. The alcove Marcus hit his head on as his eyes lingered on the outline of her underwear beneath a tight leather pencil skirt was "cosy". It was a "fixer-upper," she assured them as she straightened up, brushing the creases from her blouse. Marcus nodded as her hands found fault with the material covering her breasts, smoothing the silk with thorough circular motions. They could "really do something with the place," she said in the cramped kitchen, arching her back against the doorway to allow Marcus to brush past. He agreed. They could. They never did.

At the time it was all they could afford. Now the rent was three months in arrears, and they could not afford to leave.

"What do you think?" Eleri asked at last.

She could not gauge Marcus' reaction, bundled up as they were in their winter wardrobes. She narrowed her eyes, watching for the twitch of a grey gloved hand or the shrug of his shoulders in their Soviet officer's woollen greatcoat.

"What do you think?" Marcus countered.

“I think you should tell me what you think.”

They spoke in smoke, their breath pluming in the air between them.

“You don’t want to know what I think.”

Eleri tried to remember that she had loved him, once.

They had met ten years ago at the Welsh Anarchist Book Fair. She entered the village hall to escape the rain and instead met the man who would define the next decade of her life. Her fingers brushed the back of his hand as they reached for the same copy of Emma Goldman’s *My Disillusionment in Russia*. She had mistaken the book for a poignant coming-of-age-novel about a young woman’s disappointing holiday.

“I see you know your Chomsky from your Cheryni,” he said.

“I like books,” she replied, though she neglected to mention that she no longer liked to read them. She found practical purposes for literature – the hardback edition of *Infinite Jest* that stopped her bedroom door, the paperback copy of *Ulysses* with an unbroken spine that propped up her iPad.

“And you like the Russians.” It was not a question and Eleri did not correct him. If he over-estimated her intellect she was not to blame. She knew boys always believed what they wanted to about strange girls. She was a blank canvas in ugly glasses upon which he projected his fantasies.

Eleri was not beautiful. When faced with the magnifying mirror, she lamented the grotesque forms her genetics had knitted. Though she marvelled at the circus freakery of her face, the only extraordinary thing about Eleri Hayward was how average she looked. She was pretty enough to escape criticism and not enough to threaten other women into picking apart her flaws. She did not attract unwanted male attention in the streets or the supermarket. This, she felt, was the great injustice of her life.

Her heart shaped face was the canvas for features which appeared plain when not made up. Her green eyes did not sparkle like emeralds. Her white skin was not unblemished like porcelain. Her lips were not full unless filled in with lipstick. Her

badly dyed black hair was coarse and, despite the singe of the hot iron and the promises of John Frieda, never frizz-free. When she first met Marcus, she still put effort into her appearance. Now, she told herself, she no longer cared.

Each entered the relationship with false assumptions about the other. Marcus must have believed Eleri was like him. Eleri was under the illusion that Marcus would not mind when he discovered she was not. Once, she thought, they were so in love they only whispered. A steady diet of frozen dinners and chip-shop takeaways had left them soft, though not tender. The harder their bodies were the gentler they were with one another. Now they spoke in short stab-wound sentences, with words that wanted to draw blood.

The living room was the site for most of these exchanges. It was the room the couple spent the most time in, yet they never bothered to decorate it. There was no need to invest in the décor when the blackout blinds were always drawn. They favoured minimalism for economic rather than aesthetic reasons. No photographs or fairy lights were pinioned to the walls to make the house a home. Their furniture was flatpack and utilitarian. They did not look up from the sofa where they sat bathed in the blue light of the widescreen television so there was no need for embellishments.

Eleri suspected that Marcus did not like coming home. He found excuses to stay late at work. He created emergencies in the IT systems, caused problems in the operating software, only to resolve them late at night when his colleagues clocked out. He never made the last train. Beneath his desk was more comfortable than the bed he shared with Eleri.

“Is this what you’ve been working on for the last six years?” he asked, pinching the bridge of his nose between finger and thumb.

“Yeah!” Eleri responded with the enthusiasm her audience lacked. “Do you like it?”

“I don’t know what to say.” His fingers were restless when there wasn’t a cigarette between them. They roamed from the starched collar of his shirt to the tie that hung like a noose from his neck. It struck Eleri that his body language was still foreign to her, despite their years together.

“So, you liked it?”

“It’s garbage,” he announced with the gravitas of a *New York Times* review.

“Go on,” Eleri prompted.

She stood before him, her hands shaking as they clutched the sheets of paper before her chest. His distaste was palpable, but she chose not to pick up on it. She dressed exclusively for comfort since turning thirty; off-brand UGG boots, old trackie bottoms tight enough to be leggings, and novelty sweatshirts with ironic captions. Today she was wearing her custom printed ‘Fell Over Boy’ T-shirt to commemorate the day that Pete Wentz, the bass player of Fall Out Boy, tripped over a curb in 2007.

“Ei, I know you’ve had a rough –” Marcus paused, counting on his fingers the number of years since she had ceased to function in society. “Time.”

“Great art is the trophy of victorious struggle,” she agreed.

Marcus cleared his throat.

“You know that I’ve been happy to support your writing. I thought it was helping you. But now – I feel like I’ve just been enabling you. You never leave the house, you rarely shower, and I’ve seen you eat chocolate cake out of the neighbours’ bins when you think I’m asleep. I don’t think being this isolated is good for you.”

“You don’t like it.” Her arms were limp at her sides. Her voice was flat, with no upward inflection to indicate a question. She was not an observant person, never one for keen insight, but even she could tell this was not going well.

“This isn’t art,” Marcus continued. Maybe he thought it was more humane to go for the kill than allow her to suffer. Eleri wished he would not. “There’s no substance to it. It’s not even marketable.”

“It’s a post-modern feminist parable about the spectre of womanhood haunting the hegemonic patriarchal system of oppression. Also, time travel,” Eleri reminded him. She could not see how a novel could be more substantial.

Marcus began to pace the length of the living room, forced to change direction every six steps by the limited space.

“It’s about a cheerleader who turns into a werewolf in the middle of a high school football game.”

Marcus advanced towards her. She flinched, wondering if the evening would provide her with enough material for a memoir of domestic abuse. “And then – God knows how, you don’t explain the mechanics – takes an Uber to downtown Los Angeles in the mid-90s to start a new life without Wi-Fi.”

“Duh! It’s an allegory,” she sighed. “*Animal Farm* isn’t just about pigs being dickheads.”

“You’ve only written three pages.” Marcus shook his head. “In six years.”

“I’ve written a thousand words,” she said, before realising that this sounded worse. She had double spaced her paragraphs and used a large font to make it appear longer. “Today. I wrote a thousand words today.” The lie came quickly to her lips. It was easier than honesty.

Marcus, a displeased monarch on the seat of his sofa throne, tried to peer at the pages from a distance. He could not see her typeset. She would not let him.

“It took Ezra Pound fifty-seven years to finish the *Cantos*,” she continued, pleased with her line of defence though she’d never read a stanza.

“I can’t do this anymore,” Marcus announced.

He dropped to his knees and clasped his hands as if in prayer. The pages of Eleri’s manuscript quaked in her fist, fault lines erupting across the topography.

Marcus reached for her, his gloved hand stopping just short of touch. “I care about you. I thought taking some time out would help you figure out what you wanted to do with your life.”

“This is what I want to do.” Eleri tried to be indignant. She waved her magnum opus before Marcus’ averted eyes. “I’m a novelist. I was born to write. The world is waiting for my work.”



There was no confidence in this assertion. The only fictions she had created in the last six years were the lies she told herself. The only creative flair she'd shown had been in the novel ways she avoided her work. The first five years were spent on research – she was tireless in her cataloguing of American teen culture. She analysed every episode of *Beverly Hills 90210*, performed ethnographic studies of adolescent subcultures through the medium of *Mean Girls* and annotated the entire series of *Sweet Valley High* books.

There were other obstacles once she'd completed her field work. Her e-mails needed alphabetizing. She absolutely had to respond to all the Farmville requests she received on Facebook. The consumption of pop-culture was the key to her creativity and so she devoted hours of her gruelling work schedule to watching YouTube videos and scrolling through the *Daily Mail* celebrity section. It left no time for writing.

"You just wait until I hit the best seller list," Eleri said, refusing to look at Marcus. She told herself he did not deserve her gaze. She knew she could not meet his eyes. "You'll be sorry when I'm accepting my Man Booker Prize."

"You'd be lucky to get published on FanFiction.net," Marcus snarled.

Eleri gasped. She was used to him biting his tongue, swallowing blood, as she screamed awful things at him. When her throat was red raw from yelling, he would thank her for letting him know how she was feeling.

"You never cared about my writing," Eleri said, her voice almost triumphant. She'd had her suspicions, but here was the vindication.

"I cared about you," Marcus said. His head was bowed, his voice soft. Eleri noted his use of the past tense.

"Fuck you."

"I'm serious," he continued, despite Eleri's eyes flashing as red as traffic lights. His hand followed the curve of her body as she curled into herself, tucking her knees beneath her chin, arms covering her face. She dealt with conflict in the same manner as the hedgehogs that frequented their back garden. She retreated into herself at the first sign of danger and only emerged for peace offerings of bread and

milk. "I'm worried about you. You go to work twice a week and the rest of the time you shuffle around the house in your dressing gown like the ghost of a 1970s housewife."

Eleri could not defend herself. Without a word she moved into the kitchen, hoping to escape the conversation. Marcus followed, watching as she opened the fridge door and peered inside. The tension was making her hungry. She cast a warning glance at him. It was not the time to comment on her appetite. Her eyes scanned the empty shelves. The tomatoes had thrown on fur coats to keep out the cold. Mushrooms bloomed in the salad drawer and she was no longer sure if they were shop-bought or home grown.

Her hand hovered over a plastic water bottle filled with a Pepto-Bismol pink liquid. The label was torn off, but someone had drawn a double V in neat marker pen on the cap. She frowned. She had seen this insignia before. It was in the bathroom medicine cabinet, the symbol scratched in sharpie across a pill bottle. She thought she'd seen someone at work wearing a T-shirt with the logo; the same black pen, the same low budget. If the gym-bros at the leisure centre were into it, she assumed it was some diet product. She had not bought it. It surprised her that Marcus had, but he was full of surprises tonight. Her lip quivered. She couldn't think about this now. This was not the time for low-calorie options.

She reached in and grabbed a can of Coke from the bottom shelf. The ring pull was open. Ever the optimist, she thought, "half full."

"Do you love me?" Marcus asked.

The question was unexpected. She had not thought about it before. Through all the bitter fights, the late-night screaming matches and Sunday mornings spent in sullen silence, she never doubted they were 'meant to be.' There was nothing romantic in this determinism. She was resigned to her fate. They had been together so long she was no longer sure who she was without him, even if she did not like the people they had become.

She took a slug from the can, allowing herself to look at him behind the aluminium barrier. There was something in his expression that she had not seen before. His face was creased with compassion, the stomp of a crow's foot imprinted

on the skin beneath his eyes. She was used to his pity, but this was different. There was something desperate in the way he looked at her. She wondered if he wanted her to say 'no'.

"Why do you stay with me?" she asked, taking a seat at the Formica table. The discussion seemed safer when there was distance between them. She sensed the end, knew it was coming, but she would not make it easy for him.

"I really thought there was no one else for me," Marcus whispered. He leant against the refrigerator, head in his hands.

"I love you because there's nowhere else for me to go," Eleri admitted. She lashed out because she was defenceless. If he left her, she would not survive.

"I've met someone else," Marcus began to speak before Eleri was finished. It took a moment for her to grasp the meaning of his words. She continued to sit at the kitchen table taking small sips from her drink. Marcus watched with animal wariness, awaiting her reaction.

"What the fuck?"

She sprung to her feet, her chair toppling over in surprise. She stood, Medea-like, muscles coiled like springs, ready to pounce. She wanted to rend Marcus limb from limb, to sink her sharp teeth into his flesh and tear.

"I'm sorry." He remained impassive, though the shake in his voice gave away his fear.

"How did you meet someone else?" she asked, her fingers scraping the flaked paint of the breakfast nook as she advanced upon him.

Marcus may have been the sort of man who struck up conversations with strangers, but he could not sustain them. His small talk spanned the Bolshevik uprising to the fall of the Berlin wall and failed to acknowledge anything beyond the Iron Curtain.

Eleri regarded him as if he were a specimen in a petri dish as he cowered beside the spice rack. He was no longer handsome. He had not taken care of himself in the years they had been together, imagining he would never need to attract anyone else. His gut swelled in a maternal curve above the waistband of his

jeans. His hair spiralled in tight clusters across his scalp, patches plucked by the tuft by male pattern baldness and stress induced trichotillomania. If she could not love him, no one else would.

“It just happened.”

“So, you went out looking for some summer cabbage? Groping for trout in a peculiar river?” Eleri hissed, baring her fangs.

“Stop talking like a medieval rogue,” he begged. “It wasn’t like that.”

She ignored him, escalating her insults instead. The search for outdated verbiage was a welcome distraction from what was happening.

“This is one of the many reasons I don’t love you anymore,” Marcus yelled over her.

“I hope that slice of summer pudding is worth it,” Eleri shrieked. “I –” she fell silent, hearing Marcus’ words. Her jaw went slack. She knew it was coming but was not prepared for how much it hurt.

“Things haven’t been good for a long time,” he was trying to console her, but it felt like an attack. “You were there. You saw that.”

“That’s not my fault!”

“Let’s not play the blame game. It’s just – I feel like your care worker, not your boyfriend.”

“That is so neurotypical!” Eleri’s arms drew architectures in the air as she barricaded herself behind an invisible fortress. “It’s 2019. End the stigma!”

“I just think it would be better for both of us if we chose to walk away from a relationship that is no longer serving us. Don’t think of it as coming apart, think of it as coming together.”

The syntax of his speech was not his own. He was using a lexicon that he had learned online. The words struck Eleri as familiar, something they had read together and laughed at. Then she remembered. He was quoting Gwyneth Paltrow’s ‘conscious uncoupling’ statement. Even now he could not act on his own intuition. He

needed a how-to-guide. Eleri was infuriated. Knowing that his speech was written in advance made the violence premeditated.

“Fuck right off.” Eleri spat out the words as though they were battery acid.

“I don’t want to fight. We need to break up,” he told her with a determination she had not known he possessed. “And you need to move out.”

“Fine! Well, you can have all your shit back, you normie jerk!” Eleri yelled as she rushed to the cinderblock bookcase in the hallway. It was filled with books that Marcus had bought her over the years. Without realising it, Eleri had organised the shelves using the decline of their relationship as a classification system. The volumes of romantic poetry from their first years together were arranged on the top shelf. The second row was a study in small scale unhappiness; Ibsen, O’Neill, Beckett. From the middle shelf to the stacked overflow beneath were shoved the self-improvement manuals and social treatises she refused to read. She picked up a heavy looking hardback and weighed it in her hands.

“Calm down!” Marcus raised his arms to shield himself as *The Age of Narcissism* was hurled at his head. The book hit the window and fell to earth as a wounded dove, its pages splayed open beside the waste-paper bin. Eleri was always a poor shot, despite the inordinate amount of time she dedicated to playing first-person-shooters online.

“You’re so fucking selfish,” she screamed, launching the copy of *Fear of Life* that Marcus had given her for Valentine’s Day across the room. Marcus was prepared this time. He ducked. She watched as he crouched beneath the windowsill, arms raised in surrender. “Things get tough and you’re forcing me out the door. Chris Brown was right – those hoes ain’t loyal.”

Marcus remained silent and still until Eleri exhausted herself and her supply of ammunition. The bookcase was empty, its contents scattered across the floor. She took a deep breath before marching into the bedroom. She pulled a suitcase from beneath the bed and unzipped it, her vision blurring with tears. The wardrobe was empty when she opened it. She noticed the overflowing clothes hamper. She had not done the washing in weeks and Marcus had taken to lugging his dirty laundry over to his mother’s house where it was neatly pressed and ironed, free of charge and

recrimination. With a shrug she tipped the contents of the basket into the suitcase, not caring whether she wore Marcus' jaundiced Y-fronts or her own Primark panties.

"I'm going," she told him as she dragged her luggage down the hallway. "Men are trash."

"Do you need a hand?" Marcus remained beneath the windowsill.

"I don't need anything from you," she told him.

He nodded. It felt like the first time they had really understood one another.

"You don't have to leave tonight," he called from the living room as she stood in the open doorway. Eleri frowned. He had ruined the moment.

"I don't want to stay here," she said, stepping out into the lamplit street.

It was true. She did not want his charity any longer. She had lived on it for too long. She had lost years of her life as a pet, a project, a wounded bird that needed nursing. They had been content in the roles of sinner and saviour, her bad behaviour absolved beneath his gentle hands, but something had changed. She grew restless and spiteful. She resented her captivity. He must have sensed it and known the only gift he could give her was her freedom. She should have been grateful. Instead, she was fucking tamping.

## Chapter Two

The next morning Eleri awoke in a sweaty tangle of limbs and bedsheets on an air bed in the spare room of her father's house. After leaving Marcus – already the narrative was being rewritten – she'd dragged her suitcase to the bus stop opposite their flat. She sat on the stone bench and waited for the bus to arrive. It was past 10pm. There would be nothing until morning. She waited an hour but barely noticed. There was enough on her mind to keep her occupied.

She wondered if she should have seen it coming. The signs were there. The Alpecin in the shower, the diet pills in the drawer, the tubs of protein powder in the kitchen cupboards. The time she'd seen him attempt – and fail – to do one push-up while he thought she was in the bathroom. There were incremental pieces of evidence from which she'd made no conclusions. She could not believe she'd been so stupid.

She choked back a sob, unsure whether she was upset about the breakup, or the logistical problems it presented her with. With no idea where to go or what to do next, she dialled her father's landline. He was not the sort of man to call upon in a crisis, but he was the only one who would answer.

Ian Hayward arrived at the bus stop in his second-hand Ford Fiesta after Eleri had listened to Taylor Swift's 'Better Than Revenge' nineteen and a half times. He was silent as she clambered into the back seat, her headphones still on, arms crossed over her chest. They drove with only the sound of the windshield wipers scraping against the glass. He was a frenzy of air freshener, sprayed to mask the nuanced notes of whiskey, bourbon, and the good port that should have been kept for Christmas. He ran red lights and swerved down side streets, his knuckles glowing white upon the steering wheel.

"Home now, pickle," he announced as he pulled into the driveway of the old family home.

In her memories the property was tinged in sepia. When faced with reality, the building did not retain the warm amber glow of her recollections though she felt like a little girl gazing up at a big house that had never felt like home.

The house stood at the top of St. Mellon's Crescent – a desirable location because of its distance from the 'undesirable' centre of Birdwater. The detached property overlooked the town, shaded by shrubbery and overhanging trees. Eleri was not quite sure what sort of trees, horticulture holding little interest for her. The garden had been her mother's domain. Mrs Hayward had spent hours in the back yard pruning the primulas, her ear pressed against the white picket fence to hear the neighbours' outdoor arguments conducted in indoor voices. It was the same with the house. Eleri assumed it was 'classic' because it was not a new build. If pushed for a description she would have muttered 'red bricks', hazarded a guess at 'white colonnades', and wrongly asserted that the façade was Georgian. Observation, she was beginning to realise, was a skill she lacked.

Her father fumbled with the key in the lock, cursing as he folded himself over the door handle. Eleri stood at the bottom of the paved driveway, allowing events to unfold around her. She said nothing as her father began to pound his fist against the oak panelled front door, knowing full well no one was home. Thirty minutes and three tense phone calls to the home security system company later, Eleri found herself returned to the nest at thirty-one years old.

Her mother and father had separated eight months earlier. Her father was informed of his wife's decision when he peered out the window and saw her lover's car parked on the driveway. Celyn Hayward waved from the front seat and gave an apologetic shrug as the new boyfriend packed the boot with her belongings. Ian, unsure what was happening, waved back. He did not know he was saying goodbye.

The Haywards had been a family like many others; unhappy but unwilling to admit it. Eleri was an only child. It was this accident of birth that she blamed for her many failings. She believed that her parents were incapable of showing her the right amount of attention. She felt smothered by their affection but abandoned when they gave her the space she demanded. They were, in her estimation, awful people.

Her father, Ian – a name as unimaginative as the man himself – was a



General Practitioner at the local medical practice. Eleri's mother worked part-time as a secretary for the walk-in clinic opposite Ian's practice. Looking back, Eleri supposed she should have seen it coming. For thirty-four years Mr and Mrs Hayward had driven to work together. Last year, Celyn had purchased a FitBit and resolved to walk the 10,000 steps to work each morning. Her motivation never wavered. She walked through storms in snow boots and sweated off her sunscreen at the height of summer. Eleri should have guessed that it was not the insistent 'bleep bleep' of the wearable tech on her wrist that kept her going, but the terror of spending time with her husband.

When Celyn summoned the courage to ask her daughter to tell Ian that she was leaving, he fell apart. This, Eleri assumed, was because he came from a generation of men who needed women to look after them. Without a feminine presence reminding him to perform the daily rituals of self-care, he ceased to function. He arrived at work unshaven, his shirt un-pressed and stained with coffee granules from the cafetière he was incapable of comprehending. His dishevelled appearance may well have been a symptom of a crippling depression, but Eleri took it for idiocy. 'Men,' she muttered to herself when he called, asking how to load the dishwasher. It never occurred to her that he might be lonely. She had no idea he was not coping well with the end of his marriage, and so she was blindsided when he announced he was taking a leave of absence from his position at the surgery.

The decision had not been his. The practice manager, a moustachioed man with kind eyes and firm grasp of the 'code of conduct', suggested that some time off might do Ian good. "You can't cry in front of patients," he told his daughter when reporting the conversation. "Apparently it upsets them."

He had always been a man of pendulous moods. His behaviour, though erratic to an outsider, followed a metronomic regularity. Eleri had been educated in the tempo of his temper from a young age. She spent her childhood counting the beats of his bars. She could detect the tonal changes that predicted an upswing of mania, or the crashing cymbals of a depressive episode. She was used to turning up the volume on the television as he sobbed through *EastEnders* and hiding beneath the duvet as he banged on her bedroom door, wanting to teach her – a decade too late – to ride a bike at 11 o'clock at night.

This current crisis did not concern her.

Her father's depression had, for a time, given way to a mania for home renovation. Eleri's bedroom became the first victim of her father's scattered focus. The carpets were pulled up and never replaced. The wallpaper was half-torn down and left to peel itself from the plasterboard. Her room had gone untouched while her mother still lived there. It was decorated for the daughter Celyn had wanted. Laura Ashley florals and soft pastels clashed with Eleri's own improvements. She had covered the candy-striped walls with posters her mother had not envisioned on her mood board. Richey Edwards stared down at his slashed wrists while Buffy Summers held a wooden stake to her lips with a suggestive pout. The blood red pentagram spray painted above her bed did not match the pastel pink cushions strewn across the bedspread. Eleri – dressed in black until she discovered a darker colour – interrupted the aesthetic. Though the ornery cuckoo had flown the nest, her bedroom remained a shrine to her mother's disappointment.

Eleri never expected this to change. She assumed that she would always have a room in her parents' house. She was wrong.

After finding himself in want of a wife after forty years of married life, Ian Hayward purged the house of all memories of the women who had left him. In the ruins of his marriage he erected a temple. Where once he was content to spend his evenings supine on the sofa, he would now worship at the workout bench beneath a signed photograph of Lou Ferrigno. The furniture was replaced with free weights, a treadmill in place of a bed, an elliptical machine where there should have been a wardrobe. He told Eleri that if he could change his body, he could change his wife's mind. Still, Mrs Hayward did not return.

Eleri was unsure whether the most distressing part of her breakup was finding herself boomeranged back into her father's house, or the parallels he insisted on drawing between them.

"Disasters stamped in the likeness of their fathers," Ian muttered, recalling the tragedies of his school days as Eleri unpacked.

On the insistence of his Oxford educated father, Ian had been plucked from his idyllic existence as a child in rural North Wales to attend an elite English boarding

school at the age of six. The English education system, his wife was quick to remind everyone, especially Eleri, had ruined him. He had grown into an embarrassment of a man, she bemoaned, blaming his sibilant lisp and limp wrists on this early instruction. Ian spoke little of his time at Eton. His wife's opinion of his affluent upbringing was an unwelcome reminder of the discrepancy between their backgrounds. Celyn had grown up in the Rhondda Valley and learnt to defend herself with a rolling pin and a rusty bike chain. In retrospect, Eleri thought, it was never going to work out for them.

Eleri had not slept well. The pinprick punctures in the blow-up mattress her father had dragged out of storage only became apparent after she zipped herself into the mildewed sleeping bag on top. With each exhalation the airbed deflated further. She held her breath but could not stop the descent. By midnight she was flat on her back against the floorboards.

When the sun rose, she gave up on getting a good night's sleep. With a yawn and a stretch, she got to her feet and moved towards the bay window overlooking the street. The rain had cleared, the sun was shining. Her mood had improved, despite her lower back pain. She was not her father, she told herself as she stood in her underwear, unconcerned that the neighbour from Number 11 was staring open-mouthed across the road.

The future loomed before her, uncertain, but no more daunting than before. Now, she was free to focus on herself. Her life had been hampered by Marcus. His wants, his needs, his constant demands for physical affection had held her back from achieving her true potential.

She did not know what this potential was, but the idea excited her. As a rule, she never planned further ahead than her next meal. If she thought too much about what was to come it would send her screaming back beneath the bedsheets. As a girl, she had felt an innate sense of fate that protected her from the mundanities of planning, preparing for, or even contemplating her adulthood. She would be carried along by circumstance to the golden shore of success. It never occurred to her that she had reached adulthood, and so she clung to this belief.

Now, standing in the wreckage of her childhood bedroom, painted golden by the sunlight that streamed through the fluttering curtains, she was filled with a new

resolve. Her fingers curled into fists. She would not give way to lazy fatalism. She would pursue the path of rugged individualism, making her own way in the world. Perhaps her best years were behind her, but she wouldn't want them back, not with the fire in her now. She would finish her novel. She would not allow self-doubt, complacency and the valid criticisms of others to stand in her way. Marcus could suck it. What did he know about the contemporary Young Adult fiction market? There were low paid publishing assistants searching through the slush pile right now, desperate to find a novel about a cheerleading werewolf. She would be the one to give it to them.

Her father was stumbling around the kitchen. She could hear the slap-slap-slap of his slippers against the tiled floor.

"Is that you, pickle?" he called as she descended the stairs. He was remarkably calm if he thought there was anyone else wandering around his house.

"Put that coffee down!" Eleri cried as she raced into the kitchen, launching herself in front of the Nespresso Latissimo Pro.

"Okay." Her father complied, placing his mug on an unsolved crossword puzzle. He looked at her with weighted expectation.

"Coffee is for closers," she finished, pointing a limp finger at him. She communicated in pop culture references and never knew what to do when they didn't land.

"Oh yes, that's my favourite Fall Out Boy song," Ian nodded, humming a few bars. "Wonderful album. Truly underrated."

His flannel dressing gown hung open to reveal a stomach that hung like a marching drum beneath his chest. Eleri remembered her mother patting it with feigned affection, referring to it as the "Hayward gut." His hand rested upon it in place of hers, his Marks and Sparks pyjama bottoms riding low on his hips as the drawstring strained. The radio hissed from beside the sink, the static filling the spaces where their voices ought to be. The tail of the Kit-Cat clock ticked each second they remained silent.

"Can I have my coffee now?" he asked, reaching for his drink.

Eleri glanced down, noticing a yellow taint scumming the surface of the liquid.

“There’s something in it,” she warned.

“Butter,” Ian concurred.

Eleri awaited an explanation.

“Why?” she asked after several shakes of the Kit-Cat’s tail.

“It’s Bulletproof coffee,” Ian told her, cupping the mug with both hands, inhaling the aroma as if he were in an infomercial. “Did you know thousands of athletes, high-powered CEOs, busy parents, and people just like you on a quest to get more energy and brainpower, start their day this way?”

“With butter?” Eleri remained sceptical.

“Butter. Coconut oil. A dash of nutmeg. Sometimes I like to sneak in a little whipped cream, just to fancy it up,” he told her with a conspiratorial tap of his nose. Eleri watched as he topped his coffee with a swirl of Tip-Top squirty cream. “After a tough workout, I like to pop in a can of condensed milk.”

“Dad, no, you’ll die,” she murmured in half-hearted horror.

“Eat fat, lose fat,” he corrected. There was pity in his eyes as he looked at her. “It’s all here in this book.” He placed his hand upon the tome beside the bread bin. The front cover showed a handsome young man with carefree curls and a body that showed an anything-but-carefree approach to nutrition. He stood shirtless at a marble topped kitchen counter, smiling at the Brazilian lingerie model serving him a stick of butter on a silver platter. Eleri frowned.

“Do your research. The government is in cahoots with Big Wheat to poison the populace with gluten. The aggro-industrial-complex paid off Major in the ‘90s to recommend a disproportionate amount of starchy carbohydrates in their nutritional guidelines. Grain is the opiate of the masses. Keep the working man bloated and sluggish and he won’t cause trouble.”

“Bread is bad. Got it,” Eleri interrupted her father before he could get going on the chilling similarity between the FDA food pyramid and the insignia of the Illuminati.

“I can make you one if you like?” Ian’s tongue flicked across his lips to collect the sweet nectar that pollinated his moustache.

Eleri looked from the swell of her stomach to the rip-tide abdominals of the man on the book cover. “Sure, why not?” she shrugged. If it was good enough for corporate athletes and high-powered parents, it was good enough for her.

“What’s this?” she asked, pointing to a pill bottle beside the counter. It was the neatly marker-penned ‘VV’ logo that caught her attention.

“Your mother’s.” Ian scowled, his mood darkening. “Or her fancy man left it here while he was making a cuckold of me.”

Eleri was actively avoiding contact with her mother’s new boyfriend. She’d had the misfortune of meeting him twice – once at her mother’s favourite Indian restaurant where he’d unironically ordered chips instead of rice, and once when he came into the leisure centre where she worked for a ‘business meeting’ wearing acid wash jeans and a Motorhead T-shirt. Eleri could only hope the inevitable breakup came before their third encounter.

“It won’t last,” Eleri assured her father. “She’ll be back.”

She did not believe it, but she did not want to plunge her father back into the depths of his depression. She thanked him for the coffee and retreated into the study with a cup full of cholesterol. The room was not ideal, but it would do. The large space was made small by clutter. Medical textbooks spilled from the shelves onto the shag-piled carpet. An anatomical skeleton lay spread-eagled across the leather sofa beneath the window, watching as she sipped her drink. The bronze wall lights had blown their own bulbs rather than look at the clashing chintz prints. The only light came from the dim glow of the banker’s lamp on the sideboard.

She stood before the old teak writing desk, prepared for a day of creative endeavour. Discomfort, she reminded herself as she turned away the phrenological head that stared at her from the mantelpiece, was essential to great work. If Karl Marx had popped out for haemorrhoid cream the proletariat would never have known they were enslaved. Settling herself upon the Swiss Ball in place of a chair, she was uncomfortable enough to create a masterpiece.

“Let’s do this,” she said, fingers tapping at her temples instead of the pads of the keyboard.

Faced with the tundra of the blank page, Eleri checked her e-mails. Her inbox was empty. She moved on to her social media notifications. Hours later, she clicked open a new Word Document. It was midday and too late to start anything. She sighed, reaching to shut the lid of her laptop before pausing to reconsider. She had yet to refresh her Instagram feed and it felt irresponsible to clock off without doing so.

Marcus had already changed his relationship status to ‘single’ on all his accounts; the unmarried Millennial’s *decree nisi*. Her phone pinged with concerned messages from friends she never spoke to. “R u ok hun? Inbox me,” came the illiterate intrusions into her personal grief. She took no notice until Marcus’ name appeared. Her eyes skimmed his message, the furrow between her brows deepening.

“Hey, babe.” It was not a pet name he had used when they were together. He never wanted to diminish her with diminutives or sentimental sobriquets. She was a woman, not a girl. At the time his lack of affection seemed like a mark of respect, but in truth, Eleri longed to hear her name rhymed with celery or elongated with silly syllables. His tenderness was unwanted now. It reminded her of what could have been, if either were capable of emotional intimacy. She read on. “I’m so sorry you had to find out this way. I wanted to tell you myself, but I guess everything is out there now. Hope you’re okay and we can still be friends.”

Eleri rolled her eyes at the cliché. His writing was worse than her own. She had no idea what he meant, and she told herself that she did not care. Still, the nebulous ‘everything’ haunted her. Everything could be anything. Her mind raced. Had he leaked her nude photos? Told her Facebook friends that she was no good in bed? That was more her style than his and she had already deleted every dick pic he’d sent.

She refreshed her Instagram feed. Her forefinger scrolled the screen, flicking

past bikini babes in Bali and sad boys in band Tees, pausing with a lick of the lips on a shirtless selfie of the hot personal trainer from work. God, he was beautiful. She mouthed his name – Robert. It was an old man’s name, an ugly name. There was no variation that made it sound cute. Rob. Bob. Bert. But somehow it was sexy now that it was his. For a moment she forgot what she was looking for, sure that she’d found it, before shaking her head. Men were all the same. They were just disappointing in different ways. She forced herself to keep scrolling.

Amidst all these other lives, Marcus gazed up at her. He was smiling. His arm was slung around the narrow shoulders of a girl that Eleri did not recognise. Her skin was fresh and dewy with the kind of complexion that needed no cosmetics. She looked at the camera with an assurance that came from knowing she was beautiful. Her ponytail was tossed over her shoulder with an indifference that came from design. The arrangement was impeccable. Her hand was raised to sweep aside the auburn strands that fell over her face, drawing Eleri’s eye to the diamond that shone upon her ring finger.

She could not catch her breath. She remained motionless, her heart fluttering like a caged bird against the confines of her chest. This fragile organ seemed incapable of keeping her alive. She worried she might die. She feared she would not. She did not know what she was feeling, only that the emotion threatened to overwhelm her. Her fingers searched her father’s desk drawers hoping to find something to sedate her. Ian was a medical man with a fear of flying and a prescription pad that could demand unlimited Valium. There had to be something. She found only Mars Bar wrappers and sandwich crusts.

“What. The. Fuck.” Eleri snarled, her hands shaking as she dialled Marcus’ number. If she could not numb her hurt feelings, she would inflict them on him.

“Eleri?” Marcus answered, his voice soft and sleepy, coming to her from beneath his bedsheets. She flinched, imagining him lying beside his beautiful fiancée, skin flushed and beaded with sweat from their exertions beneath the sheets.

“You’re engaged?”

“Eleri,” he said her name as though it were an incantation before a bathroom mirror. “I’m sure you’re upset.”



Eleri did not comment on the arrogance of this assumption.

“Who the fuck is,” she narrowed her eyes to read the name of her usurper. “Bronwen Jones?”

She hoped he would tell her that she was no one. That she meant nothing. She was a distant cousin with expensive taste in jewellery, or a stranger whose selfie he had stumbled into.

“We met at a YesCymru meeting. We went for a drink and got chatting about social justice and the overthrow of the English elite. You know, just a bit of banter. Things just sort of went from there.”

Eleri found herself relaxing into the even tone of Marcus’ voice. Her shoulders dropped. Her breathing slowed.

“She looks young.” Eleri squinted at the photograph.

Marcus exhaled. She imagined him pinching the bridge of his nose like he always did when he wanted to keep himself from saying something cruel.

“We’re in love. Age doesn’t matter.”

“She’s eighteen,” Eleri exclaimed, aghast as she checked Bronwen’s Twitter.

“She’s an adult,” Marcus replied.

“Barely! She was a child last week,” Eleri said, noting the birthdate in the bio.

Marcus did not respond.

“Well, I hope it all works out for you in 2019. I’ll keep an eye out for the harrowing #metoo piece in *The Western Mail*.”

“At least she’d be published before you,” Marcus spat back, his diplomatic façade cracking under Eleri’s assault.

She shifted on her father’s Swiss Ball, the plastic letting out a flatulent moan as it grazed the bare skin of her thighs beneath her Hello Kitty boy-shorts. She did

not care if Marcus heard. She let the phone drop from her hand and onto the floor, ignoring the faint sound of his voice inquiring, “did you fart?”

The photograph remained on screen, taunting her. She forced herself to hold the girl’s gaze. The picture held the answer to her unhappiness. Bronwen was everything she was not; young, attractive, thin. As Eleri scrutinised her rival, a pop-up ad promising to help her lose thirty pounds in twenty days appeared. It was comforting to know that, in the depths of despair, Google would always be there for her. The algorithm scanned the database of her soul, sourcing the problem and solving it before she even knew there was one.

Her life would be easier if she looked like Bronwen. The world accommodated youth and beauty in a way it did not age and ugliness. She caught her reflection in the scuffed brass of the banker’s lamp. Her features were distorted, stretched and jaundiced in the metal’s reflection. She lamented the Roman nose inherited from her grandfather. She cursed her Irish eyes that were not like fields of clover but ponds of algae. Most of all, she berated the unbearable weight she had brought upon herself with a diet of cream cakes and full fat Coca-Cola.

She looked at the advert. The double V logo promised her weight loss success. A single mother in her area had already lost eighteen pounds. Her cursor hovered above, daring her to click.

She shook her head, scolding herself for thinking this way. Her thoughts had drifted from literature to liposuction, from the meaningful to the trivial, as they always did. She steeled her mind, determined to write, but she worried that no one would buy her book if they saw the author photo. Besides, there was no glory in the work. What could she contribute to the canon of Western thought? Her ideas were not original. Everything had already been said by men in old style coats and hats. Her only canvas was herself. She had watched enough episodes of *Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian* to know that self-worth did not come from achievement but from personal appearance.

With a sigh, she pushed away her cup of Bulletproof coffee and clicked open the advert for VerdantVitality.

### Chapter Three

Eleri was appalled to find that life went on in Birdwater. Twitching behind the blinds of her bedroom window she glared down at the cobble-streets below. Women were dragging reluctant children towards the school yard. Pensioners were making the dangerous descent into town to catch the early bird special at the local café. A couple jogged past in matching baseball caps. All these people. All this life. How could everything change, yet stay the same?

It was inconsiderate of them, she thought, not to draw the curtains and dress in black. But Eleri's grief was not strong enough to stop the clocks. The telephone lines had not been cut. The sun was not dismantled, nor the moon packed up. She discovered this when she called in sick to work the next day. Her manager, Sandra, listened to Eleri's excuses, making sympathetic clicks of her tongue, before explaining that 'betrayal' was not a legitimate excuse for employee absenteeism.

"Either you do your shift, or you're fired," she said over the speakerphone as Eleri shivered in the kitchen, the tiles cold against her bare feet. "You're already on sanctions for unauthorised sickness."

"What about compassionate leave?" Eleri begged.

"You're better off without him, love," Sandra reassured her. "But you're probably worse off financially. If I were you, I'd get here A.S.A.P."

It was an economic argument that Eleri could not refute. She pulled on her ski-jacket and bobble hat, thanked her father for the travel thermos of black coffee handed to her at the door, and stormed the half a mile down the road to work.

Hello Leisure was a concrete cube clad in corrugated iron, casting a dark shadow against the slate sky. The run-down leisure centre had been opened in 1982 by one of the lesser royals. The 50-metre swimming pool, fully equipped gym and sparkling clean sauna were declared 'state-of-the-art' by *The Gwent Gazette*. They did not know that the exercise machines were second hand and the spa was filled with asbestos. After four decades of budget cuts and tightening purse strings the centre had aged as badly as its clientele. The poodle-haired men and women who

once worked out in Lycra and leg warmers were now as weathered as the building's exterior as they shuffled around the scuffed green of the indoor bowls hall in chinos and flat caps.

Inside was a bright, but unwelcome, contrast. The glass doors slid open to reveal a world of corporate colours. Head Office stipulated that every inch of the interior, from the walls to the floor tiles to the members of staff, should be branded with regulation Motivated Maroon™ and Go Getter Gold™.

It was busy for a Thursday evening. Young men in string vests and flip-flops propped up the reception counter, swigging protein shakes and comparing the size of their forearms. Kids with dripping wet hair were rewarded for twenty minutes in the swimming pool with a temporary dispensation from dietary constraints. They chugged undiluted E-numbers and careened around the centre, all sticky fists and hellion hollering, answering to no one. Their parents were certainly not calling for them – they were sipping cappuccinos and feigning infertility.

Eleri watched from behind the café counter. Her fingers toyed with the strings of her milk-stained apron, envious of the chocolate smeared children. Her diet had begun that morning with the refusal of French toast and fruit juice. "Cheat day," her father whispered, placing the lid of the bread bin over his hardback copy of *The No Carb Caveman*. Eleri was not tempted. The number she'd just seen on the bathroom scale was an effective appetite suppressant, as was the sight of her thighs, white and cratered like the surface of the moon in her terrycloth shorts.

Her morning was measured in sips of bitter black coffee and sticks of sugar-free gum. The question of lunch was resolved with a long nap. It was easy not to eat when she was asleep. It was the waking hours she struggled with.

Her resolve waned with the first fit of wooziness. She bent double before the panini grill, inhaling the scent of melted cheese. Her mind began to rationalise its defeat. Weight loss was a slow and steady process and she would need her strength for it. A few bites of a tuna melt toastie couldn't hurt, not in the long run. Revenge, unlike a toasted sandwich, was a dish best served cold.

"I don't feel great," Eleri announced to her co-workers. The mottled linoleum beneath her feet reflected the flickering strip lights overhead, making her head pound

and her eyes hurt. Her colleagues were used to her chronic ailments. She could not make it through a shift without indexing her catalogue of complaints – her migraines, her lower back pain, the suspected Hodgkin's Lymphoma.

"Not being funny but you look bad, babes," agreed Marilyn, the Client Service Advisor, with her back turned to the reception counter. She regarded Eleri as an invalid, her sympathy spiked with revulsion. "I heard what happened. How are you holding up, hun?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know – Marcus chucking you," Marilyn spoke in a stage whisper as she glanced back at the queue of customers who were tapping their feet and checking their watches. "You must be devastated."

"I'm fine," Eleri replied, picking up a dishcloth and rinsing it in the sink. "Does everyone know?"

"Everyone," Marilyn nodded, unable to conceal her delight. "My Mam heard it off her hairdresser, who heard it off her chiropractor, who heard it off his spiritual medium."

Eleri tightened her grip on the cloth.

"You look bad," Marilyn repeated in case Eleri had forgotten.

"I'm on a new diet," Eleri mumbled. "Started today."

Eleri did not like to talk about her weight. She saw no need to draw attention to her saddlebags and cellulite by commenting on them. Her body needed no introduction, no caveats or explanations. It was already a catalogue of evidence against her. It told of late-night takeaways and three heaped spoonfuls of sugar in her tea. It testified against her unmeasured portions and uncounted calories. She may only have been a BMI point or two above the 'normal' range, but she wore the extra pounds like a scarlet letter.

"You should try VerdantVitality," Marilyn told her, tapping a tub of protein powder on the desk beside her. Eleri noticed the hand drawn double V logo and shook her head.

Eleri had inspected the VerdantVitality website the night before. It had not impressed her. The links were broken. The testimonials obviously fake. She was not convinced.

“Double V?” Dallas, the centre’s Group Exercise Co-Ordinator asked, catching their conversation as he strolled past, clipboard in hand. “Bloody love that stuff.”

“Does it work?” Eleri arched an inquiring eyebrow.

“Would I sell it if it didn’t?” he replied, pulling up his Hello Leisure regulation maroon polyester polo shirt to reveal a green VerdantVitality T-shirt beneath.

Eleri’s stomach rumbled. She had expected to take delight in each stage of her revenge, imagining her hunger pangs as daggers plunging into a voodoo doll. It annoyed her that she was the only one suffering. Marcus could not feel her blood sugar dropping. He would not hear her stomach whining. Her self-denial had no effect upon him. Her eyes drifted to the display case of stale cupcakes and out-of-date doughnuts.

Dallas followed Eleri’s gaze. As if sensing her weakness, he declared “if it doesn’t challenge you, it doesn’t change you.” He was quoting a Nike advertising campaign that he falsely attributed to Ayn Rand. “You know, who *is* John Galt?”

Marilyn was staring at Dallas with admiration.

“You’ve got to get comfortable being uncomfortable,” he continued for her benefit.

“Like wearing Spanx on a full stomach or swallowing sick so you can carry on with your Spin class?” she asked, playing the coquette as she peered up at him through painted lashes.

His lips twitched upwards as their eyes met. Eleri was forgotten in the realisation that they were *simpatico* in self-flagellation.

“I wouldn’t take advice from a man who thinks *Atlas Shrugged* was written by Jillian Michaels.”

Eleri turned to see Robert Fuller emerging from the store cupboard, rubbing his eyes and rolling his shoulders. His dark hair was a tangle atop his head, his

uniform wrinkled. Eleri suspected he'd been sleeping amongst the cleaning supplies again.

"Where you been, mush?" Dallas asked, leaning across the front desk, his biceps flexed.

"Round your mam's," Robert shot back as he mirrored the pose.

Robert was a personal trainer with a poor work ethic. A decade divided Robert and Dallas, but there was an intense rivalry between them, though they contended only for the title of 'best at exercise'. It did not help that the twenty-one-year-old Dallas was Robert's boss. Robert was a proud man and, though he said he did not want the workload of a middle manager, it was clear he resented the power a child had been given over him.

"What were you doing at my mam's?" Dallas asked, hands patting pockets in search of his phone, worried that he'd missed a flurry of S.O.S messages.

"Your mam," Robert clarified.

Eleri laughed, louder than necessary, slamming her fist against the counter.

"Good one," she murmured, wiping a tear from her eye.

Eleri and Robert had known one another since Secondary school, though they had never exchanged more than a few stilted words. They did not need to speak for Eleri to know that she was violently in love with him. He was a stranger, but she knew him intimately. His social media profile told her more about the man than a conversation ever could. Many a night she had sat beside Marcus on the sofa, marvelling over Robert's shirtless post-workout selfies. Her eyes flickered from the Chinese takeaway container balanced on Marcus' gut to the teardrop curves of Robert's quads, the striations of his pectoral muscles, the way his shorts hung low on his hips showcasing a perfect Adonis belt. His face was a work of intricate beauty, synergistic in its structure. The hollow of his cheekbones enhanced the perfect slope of his nose, leading towards lips as lovely as a woman's. His Instagram bio read 'part-time model', but Eleri knew he had full time potential.

"Eleri just got dumped," Marilyn informed him. He did not look surprised. "She's going full *Revenge Body*. Make that fuck boy regret."

Eleri felt his eyes flickering over her body, appraising it and finding it wanting.

“You should do TrampFit™!” Marilyn shrieked, shocked by this sudden stroke of inspiration.

“What’s that?” Eleri asked, looking across the snaking queue of customers towards the pull-up banner that Marilyn was pointing at. She narrowed her eyes to see an energetic woman suspended inches above a small trampoline, a rictus grin upon her face as she clenched her pelvic muscles.

“TrampFit™ is a great low-impact, high intensity workout,” Dallas intoned the description drilled into him at the TrampFit™ training session the staff had attended the week before. “If you’re carrying a bit of extra poundage,” he looked at Eleri knowingly, “means you can go all out without knacking your knees.”

“How many calories can you burn in a class?” Robert asked, turning his attention to Dallas. Eleri remembered he’d fallen asleep during the seminar and refused the offer of reading over Marilyn’s notes.

“Like a thousand,” Dallas moved closer to Robert. “You just bounce till you faint, puke, or die.”

“Cool story, bro,” Robert rolled his eyes as he took a step back. “I need a solid figure. I’m 5’11, 65 kilograms, 3% body fat. How much energy can I expend in a sixty-minute session?”

“Depends how hard you go,” Dallas said, squaring up to Robert.

“Oh, I go hard.”

“No way you’re at 3% body fat,” Dallas snorted his derision, rising onto his tiptoes to meet Robert’s stare. There was a 6-inch difference between the two men, but what Dallas lacked in height he made up for in width. He was a typical Welsh lad, built like a brick shit house for a model village.

Eleri and Marilyn exchanged worried glances. If it was a question of physical strength, the men were evenly matched. If it came down to lean body fat percentage, Dallas was competing with his shoelaces tied and had stumbled straight off the starting block. Eleri knew that he was hovering at around 16%. She had comforted him over it only the week before, patting his back as he sat motionless upon a spin



bike, weeping. It was an embarrassing figure, even in the off-season, placing him almost in the 'average' category of physical fitness. Eleri dreaded what the biometric scales would say of her own non-essential fat stores, but still she scorned Dallas for his.

"No chance, son." Dallas' hooked nose brushed the ski-slope curve of Robert's. The physical contact seemed to break the spell. Both men took an instinctive step backwards.

"Do you want to get the body fat callipers, or should I?" Robert spat.

"Oh my God, stop it," Marilyn moaned in monotone. Her voice was averse to key changes.

"What's wrong? Don't want Marilyn to see you with your shirt off?" Robert goaded. "Worried the callipers will get lost in your gut?"

"Ow, lads!" Eleri glanced down at the walkie-talkie clipped to the waistband of her work trousers. "Some kid's done a shit in the soft play. Which one of you unlucky fuckers is cleaning it up?"

The threat of violence dissipated as the terror of work struck.

"Nope." Robert folded his arms across his chest, tensing his triceps. "I've talked to the union about this. I am a fully qualified exercise professional. I have a degree in Sports Science and at no point did the course cover Shit Management."

"I'll do it," Dallas said with the solemnity of self-sacrifice.

With a sigh, he pushed through the reception turnstile and past the crowd of men in mid-life crisis Lycra. Marilyn watched him with the air of a woman whose husband was being sent off to war. There was something final in his departure. He may return, but he would never be the same. She hesitated a moment before whispering, "I'll get the mop."

"These people are idiots," Robert exhaled, unfurling himself like a flag into a wheelchair left behind the counter by an elderly woman attending a motoring speed awareness course in the conference room. He visibly relaxed as the cortisol spiking his bloodstream subsided. The unending posture of masculinity, the need to prove

you were better than the beta biting at your heels – it seemed exhausting. Eleri almost felt sorry for men. Almost.

“Fuck ‘em,” she moved closer to Robert, her hand raised above his shoulder, stopping short of touch. “They’ll still be here when they’re sixty.”

Robert cleared his throat. Their eyes met for a moment, filled with the unspoken fear that they too would be wearing sweatpants to work in thirty years’ time.

“I’m writing a novel,” she announced.

“Wow. That’s awesome.”

His tone was laconic, but his words led Eleri to believe he was impressed. He smiled at her. She allowed herself to get lost in the twin fires of his flickering blue eyes until the fitness tracker strapped to his wrist emitted a shrill beep that launched him to his feet. She worried he was about to rush off, but he explained, “I have to move every five minutes, or my Garmin gives me an electric shock,” as he began jogging in place.

There was a lull in the conversation. The only sound was the thud of Robert’s Under Armour trainers hitting the ground. He frowned. Eleri felt that he was weighing up whether he should say what he was thinking.

“Don’t you worry it’s an obsolete art form?” he asked, unable to hold it in.

“I guess. It’s just something to do while I wait for death,” she said with a shrug. “Everyone needs a hobby.” She wanted to diminish her ambitions. She felt foolish for having any.

“Do people still read books?”

His concern felt like an assault upon Eleri’s life choices.

She knew that he had gained a place at Oxford to read English Literature but dropped out after three weeks to study Sports Science at Cardiff Met. He must have known the novel was an anachronism.

“Don’t you?”

“I used to,” he said as though confessing an embarrassing affectation. “Before the crippling depression of adult life took hold. Now, I mostly just read *Flex* magazine and call suicide helplines.”

“People still buy books,” Eleri argued. “You know, as furniture. Nothing ties the room together like a first edition Gissing. You can use it as a coaster, or a doorstep. Super versatile.”

Robert laughed. It was a short, staccato burst of mirth. It lasted a second, but it would stay with Eleri for a lifetime. His smile faded, lingering on his lips for a moment like the memory of a kiss. He fell silent. She remembered the paperback copy of *Our Lady of the Flowers* she had seen peeking out from the side pocket of his gym bag. She wondered if he ever read it, or only carried it around as a memento of the man he had once been.

“You’re handsome. You don’t need to read.” In her desperation to carry on the conversation, she did not think about what she was saying. Her face crimsoned the colour of the thousand humiliated blood capillaries rushing to the surface of her skin. Robert did not blink. She continued. “Achievement is for unattractive people. If you’re good looking, you’ve already made it. You don’t need to do anything else with your life.”

Robert took a moment to contemplate this and found he agreed.

“Ugly people still need novels,” Eleri expanded her hypothesis, pounding her fist against her palm with the zeal of a late-night televangelist. “How else are they going to tout their intellectual superiority on Tinder?”

“Do ugly people write the novels or just read them?” Robert asked, driving his knees up to meet his hands with ballistic force. Eleri was unsure whether her ideas excited him, or if the reminder that 66% of the British public were overweight and unattractive triggered his compulsive need to exercise.

“Both. Only unfortunate looking people need to be intellectual.” Eleri began to pace the length of the reception, matching her stride to the thud of Robert’s footsteps. “If you’re attractive you don’t need to bother. You just hang out with other hot people or stare into mirrors for entertainment. Uggos need escapism.”

“What about television?” Robert asked, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

“The surface is too reflective. They might catch a glimpse of themselves and be plunged back into their hideous reality.”

“That makes sense.”

“And all the best literature is written by weird looking dudes.” She clapped her hands together in delight, amused by her own words. It was a silly skit to her – one she was happy to perform if he found it funny. She looked at him, expecting to see an appreciative grin, but his expression was inscrutable. She faltered, unsure whether he was in on the joke. Their eyes met and she longed for him to tell her that she was too beautiful to waste time on the written word.

“Scuse me, love. I’ve been waiting forty fucking minutes for a latte.” A man in Jeremy Clarkson jeans and a salmon pink polo shirt rapped his knuckles against the counter. “How about you stop chatting to your mates and make me one?”

“I’ll do it now, in a minute.” Eleri waved him away, frustrated that a man foolish enough to drink caffeine after 6pm had the nerve to tell her what to do.

She turned back to Robert, ignoring the grumbles of dissent from the queue of customers that stretched back to the turnstiles. He seemed distracted, his eyes roaming the room. Her lips parted as if to speak. Robert raised a hand to silence her.

“I have to go,” he told her, leapfrogging the reception desk and rushing over to a darkened corner of the café where a group of women dressed in active wear took dainty sips from lipstick kissed coffee cups.

Eleri craned her neck to see past the raised fists and crumpled ten-pound notes that blocked her view. She recognised the women and their complicated stevia-sweetened, dairy-free, non-fat, extra foam, macchiato orders from earlier.

They were all the wrong side of fifty, though they wore it differently. One was tall and lean, her arms nothing but sinew and bone, veins running like rivers beneath the clear sky of her skin. She wore a hot pink Sweaty Betty yoga vest that clashed with the dyed red of her hair. Beside her sat a heavysset woman who looked the type to blame all her failings on her body. Eleri imagined her, twirling before the full-length mirror in her cutest outfit – the blue and black leopard print LuLu Lemon leggings,

the racerback vest that read *'Namaslay'*. She probably thought that the girls would have a right giggle at that and was wounded when no one mentioned it. The other women were uninterested in her existence. No one asked her opinion. No one took her drinks order when they went up for refills. Not one of them cared that she was there.

The group appeared to have a leader. Her attitude changed as Robert approached. She clicked her tongue, calling the troops to attention. Eleri could not hear what she said as she rose from her seat, but she disliked the overfamiliar way she greeted him with a kiss upon each cheek. She was a scorched earth of a woman, her age measured and multiplied by the fault lines of her skin. She may have been attractive once, but time and excessive exposure to sunbeds had bleached her beauty bone-dry. There was no way Robert was interested in her.

Eleri hated the way she saw other women. She viewed them through the critical lens of her own internalised misogyny. She should have known better, with her bookshelves filled with Andrea Dworkin and Simone de Beauvoir. She did not. She fell for the beauty myth hook, line and sinker. It made her feel better to tear her sisters down. It was a salve on the festering wound of her own insecurity to know that other women had flaws – and she was expert at finding them.

Under the pretence of cleaning the coffee tables, Eleri grabbed a washcloth and elbowed her way through the crowd of customers.

“Robbie, darling!” The overweight woman gave an exaggerated wave of her arm to attract his attention. Her gestures took on a flamboyant quality the more she was ignored. “What have you got for us?”

“What do you need?” Robert asked with a smile like an unstitched scar.

“Oh God, to lose about three stone?” she said with the sort of laughter that turned to tears. She fingered the gold necklace that hung above her breasts, announcing herself as *'Hillary'*. “Nothing I do is working. I eat like a bird, but I look like a beached whale.”

Her friends coughed their dissent. The group’s leader stifled a laugh as the emaciated Madonna beside her leant across and whispered, “what kind of bird? A buzzard?”

“It’s my metabolism, I know it,” the fat friend opined, shooting a pointed stare at the traitors who sniggered behind their hands.

“You know,” Robert stroked his chin as though struck by an idea. “If you want to lose weight – for yourself, of course, not for anyone else,” he emphasised, “I’ve got something that can give you guaranteed results.” He fixed the women with a grin more chilling than winning. He reached into the pocket of his GymShark joggers, smiling as he noticed the way their eyes followed the motion of his hand towards his crotch, lingering for a moment longer than necessary, before producing a small plastic bottle for their inspection.

The women leant forward in their seats. Robert’s eyes darted around the café before meeting theirs with a conspiratorial wink. Eleri escaped the searchlight of his stare by ducking behind a concrete pillar. She breathed deeply; the dishcloth wrung dry in her hands.

“VerdantVitality XL. It’s the newest and most effective weight loss supplement on the market. My mother dropped two dress sizes in a week without breaking a sweat.”

Robert palmed the bottle and returned it to his pocket. The women blinked, rubbing their eyes as if awoken from a trance. Eleri peeked out from her hiding place.

“Is it safe?” the Madonna asked, echoing Eleri’s own thoughts.

“It’s an all-natural herbal supplement,” Robert told her without answering the question.

“But is it safe?” the group leader repeated her friend’s question, a thinly plucked eyebrow arched at the evasion.

“Gwen, if you want results, you have to take risks.” Robert moved towards her, sensing the sale slipping through his fingers. He knelt at her feet. His subjugation made him powerful. She gazed down at him, allowing her fingers to lace through his own. “If you play it safe, you’ll never win.”

“I don’t know –” Gwen was not convinced.

“I believe in you.” Robert’s grip tightened. “Don’t let your life be defined by ‘what ifs’ and ‘if onlys’.”

“Maybe we could fit in a few more Spin classes, girls?” There was no change in Gwen’s voice; it remained calm and measured though her eyes were screaming.

“At your age?” Robert whispered. His tone was almost tender.

Hillary exchanged glances with the group. They nodded their assent. They looked tired. Tired of the hard work, the deprivation, the exhaustion. Twenty hours of cardio classes a week had gotten them no closer to the finish line of physical perfection. They were always running with their legs going nowhere. They could not out-hop, out-skip, out-jump their sagging flesh. They had crawled over the hill and lay, exhausted, at its summit, terrified of rolling down into fleshy old age.

“I’ll try it,” Hillary declared.

Gwen stared down at Robert’s fingers wrapped like manacles around her wrists.

“You’re fighting a war of attrition, Gwen. Your body is the enemy and there’s nothing wrong with fighting dirty. Your daughter’s wedding is coming up and you know the camera adds ten pounds. Is that how you want to be remembered on the happiest day of her life? As the heifer who couldn’t be bothered to pull on a pair of Spanx?” He spoke soft and low as though to a lover. His words were incongruous with the gentle caress of his thumb across her knuckles.

“Okay.” The admission of defeat escaped Gwen’s lips as if from a deflated balloon.

Eleri watched as Robert took the women’s money. Her eyes narrowed. She had dismissed the same spiel on the VerdantVitality website. The claims were too good to be true. It had to be a scam. Coming from Robert it was far more convincing.

She passed the remaining hours of her shift motionless beside the cappuccino machine. Co-workers streaked around her like chem-trails. Customer requests went unanswered. She was lost in the memories of the diets she had endured throughout her lifetime. Weight Watchers meetings with her mother at ten years old. Cabbage Soup with her father at fourteen. Diet Coke and cigarettes in

Sixth Form. Takeaways and Snakebites offset by weeks of water-fasting at university. She had given up in her thirties. She ate what she wanted. She ate like shit.

Her body would not forgive her for what she had done to it. Though she never went hungry now, she could still feel the gnawing ache of emptiness, the fear that she would never have enough food. Each diet delivered diminishing returns, though not the kind she'd been promised. She sighed, wondering if she could survive it all over again. What chance did she have of attaining her 'revenge body' now, post-thirty, in severe metabolic decline, and with the will power of Caligula at an all-you-can-eat-orgy?

Robert was her only hope.

With twenty minutes left on the clock, Eleri untied her apron strings, grabbed her coat and keys, and made a dash for the exit. Robert was at the bottom of the steps. He leant against the redbrick wall of the centre, lighting a cigarette. He stood as if he were at the edge of the world, the tarmac beneath his feet as black as the sky above. The car park was empty, save for the vehicles of the last few compulsive exercisers who kept the gym attendants waiting to lock up, desperate to escape their miserable lives for an hour or two longer. The cars shone in the gloom, reflecting the sodium glow of the streetlights. There was a stillness in the air, the kind not encountered in big cities where neon lights and loud music never leave you alone. In smaller towns and villages, on the outskirts of interest, there is a sense of solitude as soon as night falls. Eleri felt the darkness separating her from her surroundings as she took the steps down to the carpark two at a time.

"I want to buy some pills," she said, approaching Robert. She stopped beside him, her nose level with his elbow, close enough to inhale the heady combination of aftershave and stale sweat that made up his signature scent.

"What?" His features were veiled with smoke. "I'm not a drug dealer." He flicked the ash from his cigarette into a raised flower bed. "Who told you that?"

Eleri's eyes followed the curve of his lips as he spoke. He was all cut-glass vowels and Received Pronunciation. Like Eleri, he came from the 'posh' part of town, where the lack of an accent was a marker of the middle classes. She remembered



being taunted mercilessly in the school yard for her English inflections. The childhood trauma made her despise the dialect. Robert's voice was like her own, with none of the sing-song sweetness and lilting sincerity of Marcus' valley boy intonation.

"The Verdant Vitality stuff?" her voice raised an octave.

"Oh right. That." His breath was second-hand smoke. She could feel her T-cell count dropping, cancer cells blossoming between her lungs. But he was so handsome she could care less if he was carcinogenic. "Are you interested? How much do you want to lose?" He surveyed the undulating plains of her body, assessing the terrain. The wrinkle of his nose, the sharp intake of breath, led Eleri to believe that the conditions were unfavourable.

"How much do you think?" She did not want to open herself up to attack, but she needed him to know she was pliable. If he told her five pounds, she would lose ten.

"Thirty to start," Robert said without hesitation. "Then we can see what we've got to work with."

"Thirty? That's like –" she tried to convert the measurement into metrics in her head. "A lot," she concluded, unable to complete the calculation.

"About two stone," Robert agreed. "To start with."

"Do you think I need to lose more?" she asked plaintively. She had wanted to echo his words back to him, but the number overwhelmed her.

"Oh definitely. Thirty is the jumping off point. It's like creating a sculpture. Right now, you're a block of unhewn marble. We're just going to keep whittling away until you're perfect."

Eleri did not like being referred to as a 'block', but she appreciated his belief in her ultimate perfection.

"Perfect?" she murmured as Robert placed a hand upon her shoulder, fingertips brushing her neck. She shivered as skin kept at exact mortuary temperature brushed against her own hot flesh. The physical proximity was

electrifying. She had dreamt of his hands on her body. This was a weak approximation of her fantasies, but it gave her enough hope to hang herself with.

She had never seen Robert pay much attention to girls at work. He was only interested in out-benching, out-running, outdoing the other men around him. She never saw him outside of the leisure centre, but she followed his every move on Instagram. There were no women in his photographs. No friends, really, just shirtless selfies. As far as Eleri knew, Robert's real-life social circle was limited to his best friend, Nick Polizzi.

Nick was either punk rock or incredibly gay, she could not tell. He sported the kind of Hoxton haircut that could get your head kicked in outside of the big cities – shaved on the sides, long on top, waxed into delicate finger waves and bleached until his scalp became a rose bed of rosacea. He left comments on Robert's posts signed 'kiss kiss' and asking whether he wanted hotdogs for tea. But Robert listed his sexual orientation as straight and Eleri prayed he had not done so ironically.

"You're going to need the VerdantVitality deluxe package." Robert's tone changed. His lips were too far from hers. She watched his hands return to his coat pockets. He became as brisk as though she were applying for a bank loan. "This is an exciting opportunity for you, but you need to buy in big if you want to maximise your potential."

"I do?"

"Give me your number. I've got a new shipment coming in this week. I'll call you when it arrives."

Eleri allowed Robert to reach into her handbag, extricate her phone, retrieve her number and enter it into his own. She smiled as he wished her goodnight but could not find her voice. He sprinted away with a backwards wave, leaving her dazed. A car idled at the carpark's entrance and he disappeared into the passenger side. Eleri squinted in the half-light at the shadowy figure of a woman in the driver's seat. She hoped it was not his girlfriend.

## Chapter Four

It was Saturday morning and Ian Hayward was determined to seize the day. Eleri – who wanted nothing more than a lie-in – was awoken at eight by her father cursing his reflection in the full-length mirror. She opened a bleary eye to see him red-faced and straining to heave a barbell above his head.

“What are you doing?” she asked, pressing her face into the pillow.

“What does it look like?” Ian returned the weight to the floor with a grunt. “I’m going to win your mother back.” This assertion was made with the absolute conviction of a man who believed that his marriage could be saved by sculpted quads and rock-hard abdominals. “New Year, New Me.” He reached for a tumbler on the unassembled exercise bike. Inside the glass was a dark brown liquid that he assured Eleri was an isotonic energy drink but looked suspiciously like whiskey. “I’ll show her what she’s missing.”

“It’s September. Why don’t you put off the self-improvement until January?” Eleri suggested, confident that she would have found somewhere else to live by then.

“It’s October!” Ian gestured to his Arnold Schwarzenegger wall calendar.

Eleri blinked. A week had passed since she left Marcus – the story she had told her father and was sticking to – and time moved on without her. She thought she would be over it by now. Seven days was more than enough time to mourn the demise of a decade long relationship. Her father thought so.

“Come on, pickle.” The toe of his unworn tennis shoes tapped the back of her head. “You’ve been in bed all week. You should have a shower, at least. Maybe some fresh air?”

Eleri glared at him. He did not understand her pain. How could he?

Ian had kept to himself since Eleri’s return. Their paths crossed at mealtimes and nowhere else. The kitchen was their common ground. At breakfast, conversation was replaced by the clinking of spoons against cereal bowls. The ‘ding’ of the microwave at lunchtime was their call to communion. Though they rarely spoke,

there was never silence. Eleri's Alexa was asked to stream Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* so often that it began reciting the Samaritan's hotline number at the start of each track. 'Landslide' was primed to play from every sound system in the house. It was a record they could both relate to.

Ian's days were spent in his study, flinching at the sound of his daughter's footsteps. Eleri would pause before his door, listening to the crinkling of crisp packets sneaked from the brief case full of snacks to keep him going between trips to the fridge. In the early afternoon he put on his mackintosh and walking boots and walked to the pub at the bottom of the road, staying late into the evening to recover from the exertion. He always returned home for dinner – two portions of chips, cheese and gravy from the chippie tucked under his arm. He would offer the polystyrene tray to Eleri who knew that if she declined it would not go to waste.

Eleri's diet was in the stages of trial and error. It was a trial to abstain from the Epicurean delights her father produced from his *Fuelled by Fat* cookbook, and it was an error to eat them. She did both, alternating between Bacchic frenzy and Apollonian restraint. On the days she did not eat, they did not see each other.

She had settled into a comfortable routine of her own. When she was not picking her way through left over prosciutto and chunks of cheddar cheese like a mouse in the pantry, she lay in bed staring at the stucco-swirled ceiling and wishing she were dead. When she tired of suicidal ideation, she flipped onto her stomach, reached for her iPhone, and began watching old episodes of *Secret Eaters* and *Supersize vs Skinny* on YouTube. "At least I'm not like them," she whispered, fingers pinching the excess flesh at her hips. "Not yet."

She abandoned all hope of writing. Caliope was a lazy muse, but Eleri was lazier. She no longer cared for literature. Ideas did not interest her. She was too weighed down by her body to have her head in the clouds.

"Your mother deserves someone who takes care of himself," Ian said, turning away from his daughter and addressing his reflection.

"Mum didn't leave you because you got fat," Eleri assured him. "I mean, not *just* because you got fat."

“I’m not the handsome young troubadour she fell in love with,” Ian admitted, fingertips searching for the lost jawline beneath his jowls. “I was going places back then. I was going to be a Rockstar. Did I ever tell you I chose your mother over a record deal?”

Eleri groaned her response.

“We could have been huge,” he sighed. “But it meant going to Belgium for six months and I was so besotted with her I turned it down. She begged me to go, but I wouldn’t leave her.”

He took a slug from his whiskey glass, the isotonic energy drink making him maudlin for what might have been.

“She left you though,” she reminded him.

“Faint heart never won fair lady.” Ian drained his drink. “You can do anything you set your mind to, pumpkin. I’m going to get your mother back, whether she likes it or not.”

Eleri watched as Ian began a series of ballistic stretches that resembled the throes of an epileptic seizure. She imagined the routine was cobbled together from boyhood memories of P.E lessons. He resembled a grotesque caricature of his childhood self as he lunged from left to right – his T-shirt tucked into terrycloth shorts, knee socks sagging at the ankles, a sweatband circling his balding head, pushing the last tufts of hair upwards like saplings seeking light.

“I liked you better when you were depressed,” Eleri told him.

“You could do with some exercise,” he noted, redirecting his disapproving stare from the mirror to the bulge of Eleri’s body beneath the bedsheets. “Come on, let’s see if you can keep up with your old man.” He spoke with forced jocularly. It was clear that, in a year that delivered nothing but bad news, his daughter’s return as the heir apparent to his damaged legacy had thrown his wounded masculinity into crisis.

The best approach was to allow Ian to tire himself out. She doubted he had completed a workout since Jane Fonda’s 1982 aerobic fitness VHS. He did not have

the stamina for more than five minutes of physical activity before he collapsed in an undignified heap onto the Sweaty Betty yoga mat beneath his feet.

“Wouldn’t be fair to embarrass you, Dad,” she said as she rose to her feet, draping the duvet over her shoulders. “I’ll leave you to it.”

Shutting the door on her father’s clicking knees and tennis player grunts, she padded downstairs to see what was about for breakfast.

In the kitchen, she noticed the blender stained red with the remnants of raw steak. With a shudder she opened the fridge door, searching for the butter, whipped cream and condensed milk that was becoming an essential part of her morning coffee. The bathroom scale indicated she had put on a few pounds since starting Ian’s all-butter regimen, but she reassured herself that any upswing on the BMI scale would be rectified when she began taking the VerdantVitality supplements. She was still waiting for a phone call from Robert to let her know when his next shipment was in, and the delay was an excuse to overindulge.

Standing in the light of the refrigerator, she registered a shrill noise coming from the hallway. Still half asleep, she did not recognise it as the ring of the telephone. The phone sat gathering dust on an avocado-green console table in the entrance alcove. The only people left calling landlines were call centres and sex pests, so it often went unanswered.

“I’ve never been in a life-altering accident and I don’t need compensation.”

“That’s good to hear,” the voice on the other end of the line replied.

“Mam?”

“Hello sweetheart. Just checking you’ll be home tonight?” Her mother spoke as if through a tin-can and string. Eleri guessed that she was cradling her mobile in the crook of her neck, muffling the speaker with her cardigan. She never rang with her hands free. Eleri resented this. It was as though she could not speak to her daughter without a distraction.

“Can you hold the phone like a normal person? I can’t hear you properly.”

“Is that better?” Her mother’s voice came through, loud, clear and resentful. “I’m at the garden centre with Owain. We’re buying a conifer for the patio.”

“You crazy kids. What’s happening tonight?” Eleri twirled the phone cord around her fingers. She felt a connection that could not be achieved with a mobile device. The cable tied her to her mother like an umbilical cord. She did not like it.

“The family dinner I told you about on Tuesday.” There was a brief pause in which Eleri’s silence was incriminating. She had forgotten because she did not want to go. “It’s important, sweetheart.”

“Slipped my mind. Think I have plans now,” she muttered. She kept her excuses vague, knowing her mother could unpick any untruth.

“I know you’ve had a difficult week,” Celyn said with a sigh. “Your father told me what happened with you and Marcus. Why didn’t you call me?”

Eleri thought about this. She was not the sort of girl to tell all her secrets to her mother.

“Why would I?” she said in an echo of her adolescent self. She was sure she’d had this same conversation around the avocado-green console table decades earlier. “Look, whatever, it’s fine.”

“Are you going to be home for dinner?” Celyn asked, her tone as perfunctory as if she were taking a table reservation at a high-end restaurant. Eleri sensed she was unwilling to get into a fight in front of the elderly ladies milling around the herbaceous perennials. “I haven’t seen you in months.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“I’ll transfer £100 into your account. If you can make time in your busy schedule for us. You haven’t been to see your grandmother since she moved into the home. It would be nice if you made the effort, for her sake.”

Eleri sighed. Negotiations with her mother always came down to emotional blackmail and bribery.

“Okay, I’ll be there. Have fun buying potted plants with your boyfriend,” she snapped, ending the call before Celyn could answer.

It had been a rough year for the Hayward family.

Eleri believed that her parents' marriage was like any other couple's their age – unexciting but comfortable. Passion had long since passed into the realm of the abstract, but their libidos would surely follow suit. In a serene state of asexuality, freed from the tyranny of reproductive imperatives, her mother and father would be relieved to find they had the time to take up watercolours and cross stitch. Eleri never imagined that her parents had regrets that lingered like dull aches, their pain constant and indefinable.

Eight months ago, over coffee and chocolate croissants during a rare mother-daughter day out in Cardiff, Celyn told Eleri that she was tired of co-existing with her dull ache.

Eleri had been suspicious when Celyn suggested a trip to the capital city to hit the sales. It was an opportunity for her mother to pick out clothes that would suit her if she were three sizes smaller and suggest contour palettes at the Lancôme counter that would sharpen her soft features. She wanted to say no, but the offer of a free lunch and afternoon cream tea came at a time when the cashpoint machine wailed alarm sirens whenever she checked her current account.

Her mother had not been interested in shopping. They strolled down the high street, arm in grudging arm, ignoring the red sale signs in shop windows. When they reached the arcade, Eleri was ushered into a cosy patisserie shop and instructed to sit in the wicker chair beside the window.

"Your father is not an easy man to live with," Celyn said as Eleri reached for a menu. This was not an unusual conversation opener. "I've tried my best with him," Celyn continued as Eleri waved at the waitress and began placing her order. "I wanted to make it work, for your sake," she reached across the table and stroked her daughter's hand. Eleri did not like the implication, nor the physical contact. She withdrew her hands and folded them in her lap.

"I can't put my life on hold any longer. I'm leaving him."

Eleri had not been expecting this when she took a sip from her dainty china cup. "The fuck?" she spluttered, spraying the plate of *petit fours* between them with Earl Grey tea. "Why now? You're in your sixties. You're practically dead. Can't you hold out a bit longer?"



Eleri's mother dipped her pain-au-chocolat into a steaming hot mug of Belgian cocoa and, with a sigh, began to tell her story.

Celyn Hayward had been married for thirty-five unhappy years before she decided to do something about it. She joined a book group, following the suggestion of a friend from work. The monthly meetings were held at the village hall and were, she thought, a good way to meet new people. Her social circle had shrunk since her marriage and disappeared altogether with the birth of her child. She needed something to get her out of the house.

When she took her seat on a plastic chair in a draughty rec room, a bourbon cream in one hand and the required reading in the other, her life changed in ways she had never imagined.

They had been asked to read *Wuthering Heights* for their first meeting. It was a book she had struggled with at university and hadn't thought of since. She could not believe that ordinary people felt as intensely as Cathy and Heathcliff. That was until she glanced up and saw Owain Jenkins unzipping his fluorescent yellow visibility jacket. He arrived late, having cycled from work, his long blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail and looking a little windswept as he took the seat opposite her. He pulled a tattered paperback from the back pocket of his jeans and began to read aloud in a voice that didn't speak but sang. The black and white lines came to life with each lilting inflection, the words dancing in time to the cadence of his speech. Sentences that had not struck Celyn as poetic on the page became beautiful pearls in his mouth.

"I never believed in soulmates, until that moment," Celyn whispered, nibbling delicately at the corner of a choux pastry. "And I felt so sad for all the time I'd wasted with someone who wasn't mine."

Eleri caught Celyn's eye as she said this. Noticed the flush across her cheeks. She was tempted to pelt a bread roll at her mother's head. She hated when people talked about their emotions. She could hardly handle her own.

At first, Celyn dismissed it as no more than a school-girl crush that she was too old to entertain. Still, as she lay in bed that night, unable to sleep for her husband's snoring down the hallway, a smile spread across her lips as she thought

of Owain. She scolded herself for being so silly, reaching across her bedside table to where the next month's book lay – *The Story of O*. She had never heard of it before, but she had liked the way Owain blushed as he lent her his well-worn copy, his calloused fingers brushing against the soft skin of her palm. From what she could gather, it was rather racy.

She devoured the book in one night. Locking herself in the bathroom, her back pressed hard against the tiled floor, she rediscovered the joys of masturbation.

“Mum!” Eleri spat out her patisserie.

Celyn refused to spare her daughter the lurid details. They were essential to the story. Eleri, ashen faced, pushed her cake around her plate in protest. She was desperate to scoop up the crumbs that had flown from her mouth, but she assumed a loss of appetite was the appropriate reaction to hearing of her mother's sexual reawakening.

“Owain gave me his number at the book club,” Celyn continued, despite her daughter's pleas for her to stop. “He said we should meet up and discuss the book. I know it was naughty of me, but I called him the next day.”

She had spent hours getting ready. She styled her hair and regretted having it cut so short. She chose an outfit that seemed effortless yet gave the illusion that she'd retained her figure. Her legs were shaved for the first time in months, though she thought waxing her bikini line too presumptuous. She spent almost an hour in front of the mirror making up her face as she'd done when she was young and hadn't needed to. Time constraints and severe post-natal depression had convinced her cosmetics were unnecessary, but as she gazed at her reflection, she wondered how she could have spent all those years haunting her own life like a ghost with a particularly bad complexion.

She met Owain at an ice cream parlour overlooking the seashore, near the caravan park that he owned on the coastal trail. She sat outside smoking a cigarette, feeling like a heroine in a Graham Greene novel as she watched him chain his bicycle to the railings. Ten minutes later she was underneath him, lying on a tartan blanket spread across the back seat of her car, making noises her husband only coaxed from her when she faked a climax to get an early night.

At this point, Eleri excused herself to hide in the ladies' toilets, hoping Celyn would leave without her.

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Saturday night dinner was a longstanding family tradition in the Hayward household and Eleri was unsurprised to find that it survived her parents' separation. In the spirit of open and honest communication, Mr and Mrs Hayward had neglected to tell Celyn's staunchly Catholic mother that they no longer considered themselves man and wife.

Myfanwy Price, or Nana as she was known, was a formidable old battle-axe who used her belief in an almighty God to cast stones at anyone she found disagreeable. Her days were spent devouring red top newspapers and custard creams on the nursing home settee. When asked by well-meaning Health Care Assistants if she was looking forward to birthdays, Christmases, visits from grandchildren, she replied that she was only looking forward to death. Eleri suspected that her mother also looked forward to Nana's death. Growing up she had watched Celyn weave a tangled web of lies to conceal the parts of her life that would upset Mrs Price. It would be a release for her to be free of the tyranny of Nana's disappointment. Until then, however, she would be invited over for pot roasts and rounds of recrimination as though nothing had happened. It was tragic, Eleri thought, to see her father play along in the mistaken belief that it would win back his wife.

After his workout, Ian showered for the first time in weeks. He attempted to shave, his razor stubbled with rust and blunt with disuse. He sprayed the house with Febreze to mask the stench of rotting kitchen waste. He must have contemplated hoovering, going so far as to roll the Henry out of storage, before leaving it on the landing for Eleri to trip over.

The effort seemed wasted when Eleri found him, slumped before the oven, humming the strains of a Puccini aria as he cradled a collapsed soufflé in his arms like a stillborn child.

“You alright?” she asked as she reached across to turn the oven off.

“Dinner is ruined,” he announced, rocking the ceramic dish back and forth as if to comfort it.

“It was ruined the moment you decided to make soufflé,” Eleri consoled him. “Let’s just get a takeaway.”

“Put the kettle on,” Ian instructed, dragging himself along the floor on his stomach until he was level with the cupboard beneath the sink. His hands searched inside for a jar of instant coffee, lingering on the Arabica beans that there was no time to press. “Your mother will be here any minute.”

Eleri was about to boil the kettle when she heard the front door opening and Celyn’s voice in the hall. Ian cursed beneath his breath, elbowing Eleri out of the way as he grabbed a dirty mug from the draining board and filled it with coffee granules and lukewarm water from the hot tap.

“How do I look?” he asked, downing the liquid in one and throwing it into the sink to sit amongst three weeks’ worth of dirty dishes.

Eleri appraised him. He was half drunk, covered in coffee stains, and smelt like a brewery that had hosted a brutal sex party in which several people had died.

“Great,” she reassured him.

Sensing that there was nothing more to be done for the man, she stepped out into the entrance corridor to meet her mother. The guests stood beneath the archway, framed between two Tuscan finished walls as though posed for a family portrait. Owain Jenkins, who had not been invited, whose presence seemed antithetical to the whole endeavour, was helping Nana Price out of her raincoat, a gesture which she resisted as he peeled the mackintosh from her hunched shoulders. Celyn was at the forefront of the scene, rifling through a month’s worth of post left unread atop the Art Deco credenza.

“You’ve put on a bit of weight,” Nana noted, dragging her wooden cane along the parquet flooring as she moved to inspect her granddaughter. This was more than a statement of fact. Her words were a profound moral judgement. Eleri looked to her mother to defend her, to argue that she was Rubenesque, not obese.

"In the face, a bit, yes," Celyn agreed, her hand cupping Eleri's chin, tilting her head from left to right to assess the damage. "Not on the heartbreak diet?"

"Oh, but you look well for it," Nana Price said, voice saccharine with insincerity.

"I am on a diet, actually," Eleri said, presenting the defence for herself and hoping the prosecution would not discover the crumpled chocolate wrappers in her wastepaper basket. "It's going really well."

"Good for you," her mother smiled approvingly. "I've always said you could be quite presentable if you made an effort."

Eleri stood awkward in her mother's embrace, gathering the strength to move on from this inter-generational drive-by on her self-esteem.

"I'm doing it for my health," she snapped. "For myself, not for anyone else."

"Dew, dew," Nana Price shook her head. "She's never had any pride in her appearance." She directed this remark towards Celyn. Eleri watched her mother wince at the sting of recrimination, as though it were her fault her daughter was so disgusting. "That's why that young man you've been courting won't marry you." Nana's raised cane pointed its accusation at Eleri's stomach.

"Dinner's ready now, in a minute," Eleri ushered the guests into the dining room, her hand on Nana Price's back to show there were no hard feelings as she shoved her over the threshold.

"Don't listen to you Mam," Owain followed behind, pausing in the doorway with his elbow propped behind Eleri's head, leaning in to whisper, "you look crackin'."

Eleri found herself unable to speak as Owain's fingers crept like spiders across her shoulder, stroking the thin material that kept their skin separated. Her mouth was a barren womb, host to still born words. Her mother stood in the dining room, smiling to see them getting along so well.

"Dinner will be ready now, in a minute," Eleri repeated.

Dinner was served two and a half hours later, delivered by a young man on a motorbike. They sat down to eat just after ten o'clock. Nana Price, who was up past

her bedtime, had fallen asleep on the downstairs toilet and was only noted missing when Eleri reached for a slice of pizza and found no one to carb-shame her.

“Where’s Nan?” she asked without interest.

After a brief search and rescue mission her grandmother was retrieved from the latrine and the family gathered once more in the dining room.

Mrs Hayward had distracted herself from her marriage by cultivating a passion for interior design. Each room had a distinct theme which the décor adhered to, regardless of functionality. The living room was Aborigine-chic. The master bedroom; Colonial glamour with *Apocalypse Now* accents. The bathroom had been inspired by Melville’s lesser read novella *Benito Cereno*. As a child Eleri had found performing her bedtime ablutions beneath a mural of maimed Spaniards a harrowing experience and supposed it accounted for her recurring night terrors.

The dining room, however, was Celyn’s magnum opus. She had gone for minimalism and taken it to its logical conclusion. The walls were painted ecru and left bare of embellishment. The only furniture permitted was the dining table – a plate glass pane laid across two cinder blocks, circled by five floor cushions. Her husband had been sceptical until she produced the receipts. It may not have been to his taste, but if all it cost him was a couple of cans of Dulux and a trip to the quarry, he could find no reason to complain.

“Darling, go and get Nana a chair from the ethnic room,” Celyn waved her hand towards Eleri, tearing her attention away from her abandoned masterpiece.

“You mean the living room?” Eleri inquired, but her mother had busied herself clearing the table of yellowing newspapers and muscle magazines.

“I’ll get it,” Ian offered, patting Eleri on the head as he disappeared from the room.

He returned a moment later with the trunk of an acacia tree that had been dot-painted and carved into a chair. Nana Price eyed it with suspicion as he set it down in front of her. Sensing her apprehension, Eleri stooped down to pick up a floor cushion and placed it on the seat in the hope that it might prove comfortable enough for a ninety-six-year-old woman with sciatica to sit on.

“Tuck in,” Ian insisted as he settled himself upon a tasselled hassock.

“The oven’s broken?” Celyn asked as she knelt next to Owain, her fingers brushing his thigh beneath the table which she seemed to have forgotten was transparent.

“Pilot light’s blown,” Ian shrugged, reaching for the potato salad.

Celyn raised an eyebrow. She looked as though she might have something more to say on the matter but was interrupted by Nana Price lowering her head and raising her arms to the heavens.

“Bless us O Lord, and these thy gifts –” she began with weighted inflection.

*“Bydd wrth ein bwrdd O Frennin Ne, boed iti fawredd ym mhob lle, bendithia nawr ein hymborth ni, agad I’n wledda gyda hi,”* Owain continued as though the Tower of Babel had never fallen.

It took Eleri a moment to realise that he was speaking in Welsh not Elvish, and by that time she’d missed the mumbled round of ‘Amens’ passed around the table. She had never been present at a prayer-off before, but from the way her grandmother sucked her lips into her lungs, she assumed Owain had won.

Without waiting for an invitation, Ian’s hands flew from their prayer position into the polystyrene tray of BBQ chicken wings. Hot sauce and spittle glistened on the stubble of his chin as he dug in. Eleri watched, impressed and appalled, as her hand hovered above the pizza box like a claw in an arcade machine, never quite closing in.

“Why aren’t you eating?” her mother demanded.

“I’m on a diet.”

“Such a fusspot,” Nana Price sighed, fingers fluttering to her throat. “In my day, you ate what you were given, and you were grateful for it. My mother fed us with the scrumps she got free from the fish and chip shop. I never tasted cod till I was forty-five years old, and that was only when Tino’s father accidentally slipped a bit of fish in with the leftover batter bits.”

“Have a chip and cheer up,” Ian lifted a plate of curly fries from the table and wafted them beneath Eleri’s upturned nose.

Celyn dismissed Eleri’s dietary requirements with a wave of her hand which hovered in the air before coming to rest on her stomach.

“I need to lose a few pounds, too,” she murmured, looking to Owain for affirmation.

“Don’t worry love,” he grinned back. “I’ll get you on the old Owain Jenkins regimen.” He caressed his flat stomach and winked at Eleri. “You’ll be fighting fit in no time.”

Eleri risked a glance at Nana Price, who had fallen asleep fingering her rosary beads, then looked down at the lukewarm cornucopia before her. She wanted to prove to the Price side of the family that she was not an uncontrollable glutton like her father. She could chew her food without choking on it. Her grandmother was not the only one who could place down her silverware between mouthfuls and dab daintily at her lips with a napkin. She was just as capable of pushing away her plate and complaining she was full after a spoonful of coleslaw and a slice of cucumber.

But she was hungry. Children were starving in Africa. Would one bite of something bad really matter? With a shrug and the reassurance that her diet would start tomorrow, Eleri leant forward and grabbed a fistful of chips. Mayonnaise smeared across her cheeks as she shoved them into her mouth and swallowed them whole.

“I’m sorry. She’s such a messy eater,” her mother turned to Owain to apologise.

“Nothing to apologise for, bach.” Owain was transfixed by the pantomime of overconsumption. Their eyes met as Eleri unhinged her jaw like a snake to shovel chicken goujons and Cajun spiced fries into her mouth. “Nice to see a girl with a hearty appetite.”

Excusing herself to the bathroom, the realisation of what she had done began to sink in. She stared herself down in the toothpaste smeared mirror. “What the fuck is wrong with you, you fucking sow?” she asked, dabbing at the fine sheen of



perspiration on her brow. Her fingers fiddled with the undone drawstring of her sweatpants, unable to loosen them any further. She groaned, placing her hands on her belly as though she were a pop star announcing a pregnancy. Her eyes drifted to the weighing scales tucked beneath the sink, their blank stare imposing a profound judgement.

Did she know how many calories, how many grams of fat, she had just ingested? Her heart was beating amphetamine fast, her bloodstream spiked with sugar, her chakras clogged with cholesterol. The diet might start tomorrow, but she doubted she could ever undo the damage.

Her negative self-talk was interrupted by her iPhone vibrating in her back pocket. She glanced at the screen, sure that nothing could pull her back from the void she was teetering over. It was a WhatsApp message from Robert.

“Got what you need, girl,” it read. “Meet outside Hello in five?”

“YAS!” Eleri replied, inserting a smiley face emoji that echoed her own grin. She breathed a sigh of relief. Everything would be okay. Damage control was on the way.

She sprinted down the stairs, grabbing her coat from the bannister as she leapt the final step.

“I’m going out,” she called, though there was no one left to hear. The house was silent but for the gentle snores of her father asleep in the dining room, his face pressed against a paper plate that had become the final resting place for the carcass of a chicken anointed with chilli oil.

Slamming the front door behind her, Eleri dialled the number of the local taxi rank. It was less than ten minutes on foot to the leisure centre and by the time the cabbie arrived, she could have walked there and back. She didn’t care. She had swiped her father’s wallet and was feeling flush. Besides, it wasn’t like she needed the exercise. VerdantVitality was the magic bullet that would allow her to lose weight without moving a muscle.

“It’s not worth the fare, love,” the driver moaned when she announced where to. “Stroll might do you good. It’s nice out tonight.”

He was right. It was almost warm; the deep freeze of the last few months was beginning to thaw. Eleri appreciated the pathetic fallacy, the upturn in her fortunes coinciding with a shift in the weather pattern, but she still didn't want to walk.

"Not every disability is visible," she snarled.

"Sorry, love. I wasn't thinking –" he stuttered.

"Check your privilege," Eleri shot back.

They drove in silence for the next four minutes until they reached the turn off for the recreation centre. She paid her £2.50 fee with a glare that let him know he would not be forgiven by her, or anyone in her online support groups. The taxi sped away as Eleri scoped out the empty carpark.

"We're over here," a woman called, leaning out the window of a blue Ford Fiesta parked behind the industrial skips.

The back door swung open and a hand gestured to her.

"Hey," Robert greeted her as she slid inside.

"What up, bruv?" Eleri flashed him a gang sign with her fingers and immediately regretted it.

There was an intimacy in this small metal space that made her nervous. She felt herself sweating against the heated leather seats. The kebab shop she had devoured for dinner had opened for business in her belly and the residents were protesting with loud groans. She was acutely aware of all the embarrassing ways her body could betray her. Robert was close enough to touch. He looked as though he had just rolled out of bed and into the car, dressed as he was in dressing gown and slippers, hair artlessly tousled. She wished she had not eaten so much. Even her winter coat could not hide the third trimester food baby gestating inside her.

"Sorry. I lost my licence last month," he said with a nod towards the woman in cold cream and curlers.

"What happened?"

The woman answered for him. “He drove through a McDonald’s that wasn’t a drive-thru.” She laughed affectionately, her eyes meeting Robert’s in the rear-view mirror.

“Were you drunk?” Eleri turned to Robert.

“Alcohol is empty calories,” he scolded her. “I was at the end of a twelve-day water fast. I blacked out driving back from SplottCycle. Woke up covered in shards of glass and McChicken burger wrappers.”

“Worst Mukbang ever,” Eleri said. “Was anyone hurt?”

“My summer shred was ruined,” Robert sighed. “I was looking so lean. It’s been two months and I still can’t get that definition back. I’m retaining water like a bitch.”

“Who is that?” Eleri motioned to the front seat.

“That’s Nick’s mum. She gives us lifts sometimes.”

“Don’t mind me,” the woman shouted. “I’ve got the new Rebus on Audible.” She swivelled in her seat to fix Eleri with a warm smile before turning the volume up on the sound system.

“You live your life today, not tomorrow, not yesterday, or the day before, or the day before that, or a few days after that –” the husky voice of Grant Mitchell attempting an Edinburgh inflection came from the speakers.

Eleri turned to Robert, unable to make out his expression in the half light.

“Today is the first day of the rest of your life,” he said, switching into salesman mode. He reached his arm around her headrest, squaring his body against hers. He was a work of abstract geometry, all sharp lines and straight edges. The hard bone of his kneecap dug into the soft flesh of her thigh. The ghost of a chicken wing flapped into her mouth, trying to tease her teeth apart.

“I’m ready for my life to change,” she said, her fist pressed to her lips to stifle a belch.

“You bet you are!” He clapped his hands together. “VerdantVitality is brand new on the market. Trust me, there’s never been anything like this. You’re lucky to be getting in on the ground floor.”

“Is that it?”

Eleri looked down at the white carton Robert placed on her lap. She picked it up, inspecting it with one eye open, the other shut, hoping it would come into focus as something more impressive. The box was from a Poundland value pack. In Biro across the front was spider-scrawled the company logo; a swooping ‘V’ enclosed in an imperfect circle. It looked like the crude sketch of a woman’s thighs in a bikini thong.

“The product is amazing. That’s all that matters. We just need to work on the packaging.”

“Who is ‘we’?” Eleri assumed that he was working alone. “Is this some kind of HerbaLife scam?”

“It’s not fucking HerbaLife.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a premium nutrition supplement guaranteed to boost your metabolism and help you shed fat – fast!” His words tripped over one another in their eagerness to be heard. His hand was resting on her leg. There was an intensity in his stare that was not for Eleri, but what she could be persuaded to part with. Circling his wrist between finger and thumb, she returned the hand to its rightful owner.

“I’m not sure,” she replied, searching for the door handle. “Seems sketchy.”

Robert lunged towards her.

“Do you want to spend the rest of your life like this?”

“Like what?” Eleri wanted to pretend that she did not know what he was talking about, that his disgust was not a palpable barrier between them.

“Covered in pizza sauce and garlic butter?” He held up a finger to silence her. “I’m on a five-day juice cleanse, my sense of smell is extremely heightened. I know exactly what you had for breakfast, lunch and dinner.”

“I didn’t have lunch,” Eleri murmured, cupping her hand over her mouth to test her breath.

“You tell yourself you didn’t have lunch, but you did. You had a share sized bag of Doritos and the dust is still on your fingers.”

“That’s not –” she wanted to defend herself, to say that it was only a snack, but who was she kidding?

She thought of the episodes of *Fat Families* she watched when she was unable to sleep. In what seemed like one of her night terrors, the presenter forced an overweight woman to perform jumping jacks for seventy-five minutes to burn off the calories in one slice of Ryvita with a sliver of low-fat Philadelphia. The show had been taken off the air in the mid-noughties but stood the test of time. There was no such thing as a free lunch. “Watch out massive fatties,” Steve Miller called to her, “I’m here to bust your guts.”

“I know you’re not happy,” Robert whispered into her ear, his voice soft and low as though speaking to a lover he did not like. His breath was hot against her neck. She shivered, scared that he could read her mind. “Aren’t you exhausted by your self-hatred? Don’t you want to look in the mirror and feel proud of what you see?”

Eleri lowered her eyes, her lashes jewelled with tears.

“I just need to take these pills and I’ll lose weight?” she asked, cursing the catch in her voice.

“Absolutely,” Robert nodded before murmuring, “in conjunction with a healthy diet and exercise.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You said ‘exercise.’”

“Never mind,” he dismissed her concerns. “Everything you need to know is in the information leaflet inside.”

“Will it work?” she asked.

"I'm living proof that it does," he told her, a wave of his hand directing her eyes towards his magnificent physique.

"Will it make me happy?" The question embarrassed her, but it had to be asked. "Will I feel better?"

"You can't feel worse!"

"Okay," she said in a voice so small she was surprised he heard it. Pulling out the roll of crumpled bank notes from her father's wallet, she thrust them into Robert's open palm and took the carton.

"You will not regret this," he promised her. "First day of the rest of your life."

"Can I get a lift home?" she asked, leaning over the front seat to tap Nick's mother on the shoulder. The rest of her life could start tomorrow.

## Chapter Five

VerdantVitality exceeded Eleri's expectations. From her first dose, taken with tepid tap water and trembling hands, Eleri became a different person. Fitter. Happier. More productive.

It was easy to follow the meal plan that Robert texted her. She was only allowed to eat between the hours of 3pm and 4pm and was limited to a menu of steamed vegetables and white fish in tasting-size portions. The pre-prepared meals sat in Tupperware towers in the freezer. They were delivered every Sunday morning by a young man in a minivan, diverted from his usual Meals on Wheels route by a crisp ten-pound note. It was a relief, she thought, to be freed from the tyranny of choice. Released from the burden of chopping, cooking, chewing, she could devote herself to higher pursuits. The more she removed from her diet, the better she felt.

At first, she was afraid of the days that stretched before her, blank without the punctuation of mealtimes. Her jaw muscles were the hardest working in her body. She was used to three square meals and a steady supply of snacks throughout the day. What would she do without dinner? Who would she be without food?

VerdantVitality was the answer to all these questions. The pills killed her appetite. Her senses were sharpened. Her mind was focused. She would use all those hours in which she could not eat in pursuit of artistic endeavours. She would read. She would write. She would rediscover herself. She would shake off the apathy that clung to her like cobwebs, put the wasted years behind her, and move on to a glorious future of intellectual fulfilment.

The only difficulty, she found, was that she could not stay still. It was impossible to sit at her desk. Her eyes wandered from the Word Document before her to the cracks in the ceiling. Before she knew it, she was on a step ladder dusting the cornices.

She was filled with a manic energy that sent her flying around the house, polishing knick-knacks, rearranging furniture, throwing away anything that did not spark joy. There was no time for literature. It was a sedentary pursuit. She would never achieve her 'Revenge Body' sitting on the sofa with Henry James or Edith

Wharton. She should be Pilloxing with Kylie Jenner, sweating in a heated spin studio with Robin Arzon, pretzelling herself into impossible shapes on a Gwyneth Paltrow approved yoga mat.

She started jogging in the mornings. The town was so different at five am. She felt as though she'd been granted access to a secret club of early risers. She couldn't go far, or fast, and needed to stop every few steps to catch her breath, but it felt good. She nodded at her neighbour who was dragging heavy black refuse sacks to the curb. She tipped her baseball cap to the eighty-year old newspaper boy who sprinted up the hills as she trailed behind. She thudded down the cobbled-streets and into the park, circling the lake, smiling at the ducks. Then she performed triceps dips and push ups off the picnic benches until the gym opened at six.

The only perk of being a Hello Leisure employee was free access to the club's facilities. In the six years that Eleri had worked for the company she'd never stepped foot in the gym. She felt self-conscious before the floor length mirrors. The unflattering strip lighting picked fault with her body, pointing out the cellulite beneath her bicycle shorts. The equipment confused her. The idea of exercise was exhausting.

That was before VerdantVitality. The pill eliminated all self-doubt. She had read enough *Women's Health* articles to know what to do in the free-weights area, even if she'd never attempted it. She squatted, she pressed, she cleaned, she jerked, and she felt herself becoming smaller and stronger with each repetition.

The only problem with VerdantVitality was that it worked too well. When she found herself daydreaming of her father's French toast drizzled with Maple Syrup and dusted with icing sugar, she popped another capsule. Her appetite meant that she had blown through a month's supply in just two weeks. She did not worry she was overdoing it. The increased dosage only amplified its efficacy. The adverse effects, scrawled on a piece of A5 lined paper and slipped into the carton, listed: nausea, heart palpitations, death. Eleri was not troubled by any of these. She felt incredible.

When she emptied her last blister-strip, she began to wonder how she would live without it. She did not want to find out.



“Hey, could you hook me up with some of that sweet, sweet Double V?” Eleri sidled up to Robert as he bent down to take a sip from the water fountain. She had been following him around the gym all morning, waiting for a break in his unending exercise routine to hit him up for supplies.

“What?” he seemed taken aback.

“Can I buy some VerdantVitality, please?”

Robert looked from Eleri to the exercise mat where his client lay draped over a Swiss ball, limbs twitching like a dying insect.

“I’m training someone at the minute,” he told her, though this never stopped him from wandering off to take selfies in the changing rooms before. “But we should talk about how much of that stuff you’re taking.”

“No talk! Just action!” Eleri chanted the mantra she’d heard him shouting over his client’s complaints. “Don’t think, just do!”

“I admire your positive mental attitude, but you need to be careful,” Robert warned her, watching with alarm as she performed a series of squat press thrusts with increasingly poor form. “You can’t go from sedentary to superwoman in fourteen days.”

Eleri was too winded to remind him that this statement was a direct contradiction of VerdantVitality’s ‘Money Back Guarantee’.

“I can! I will!” she wheezed as she flipped onto her back and began bicycling her legs in the air.

“Take it easy, champ,” he warned as she writhed at his feet. “I’ve got a few boxes of VerdantVitality in my locker. How about four for £200?”

Eleri’s frenetic motions ceased. The colour drained from her ruddied face. In her desire to get more VerdantVitality she had overlooked her want of ready money.

“I’m a little —” she searched for an appropriate euphemism, settling on “poverty stricken.” She patted the pockets of the pyjama bottoms she wore to work out to demonstrate her cash flow problem.

Robert raised an eyebrow. He was looking at her in a way he never had before. His expression softened. His gaze was almost sensuous, the tip of his tongue tracing the curve of his lips. For a moment Eleri thought he was going to propose something indecent. “There are other ways you could pay,” she imagined him saying, with a wink. She was eager to accept when she noticed that his eyes were fixed, not upon her, but the mirror behind her. He was marvelling at the summit of his flexed bicep, admiring raised veins as taut as mountain climber’s ropes.

“Can we do something on credit?” she asked, trying to conceal her disappointment. Robert did not seem to notice. She waved her hand, trying to break the Narcissus spell of the reflective surface.

“No can do.” Robert shook his head as though emerging from a trance. “The Boss wouldn’t like it.”

Robert’s eyes roamed the parameters of the gym, as though searching for recording equipment that could intercept their conversation. Eleri followed his gaze. She saw the yummy mummies with over-plumped lips squatting in time to the techno-beat that blared from the sound system. The treadmills were taken by the regular mid-morning crowd – elderly women in velour tracksuits walking at a brisk pace, necks craned towards the overhead television screens, entertaining each other with unkind comments on Holly Willoughby’s over-exposed décolletage. Young men of dubious employment bowed before the Smith machine, checking their Instagram feeds in between sets of cable pulls and preacher curls. There was nothing to rouse suspicion. Robert relaxed.

“Look – we can’t do credit,” he told her. “But I might have another option for you.”

“Anything.” Eleri agreed to his demands before she knew what they were, still hoping they might be sexual.

“You could become a VerdantVitality Vision Guide,” Robert said, animated by the idea. He began to pace back and forth, his Reebok sneakers squeaking on the polished floor.

“I could,” Eleri nodded. She meant it in the sense that anything was impossible. She had no idea what he was talking about, but the phrase conjured

images of middle-class Millennials on package holidays to imbibe Ayahuasca in the Amazon. “Could I?”

“You could,” Robert affirmed. “And you can make a heap of money doing it.”

“Money is good.”

“Money is great. You could earn more in a day with VerdantVitality than you take home in a month here.”

Eleri thought about this. The idea of working less and earning more appealed to her.

“I’m in.”

“You are?” Robert was surprised. “Don’t you want to know more?”

“Nah, sounds legit.”

Robert’s usually smooth brow was creased with concern. She worried he had missed his monthly Botox injections at the Superdrug beauty counter. The imperfection was disconcerting. It made her trust him less.

“I mean,” she stuttered, her eyes fixed upon his frown lines. “It is, isn’t it?”

“All above board,” Robert assured her, the furrows of his forehead disappearing. Eleri smiled, telling herself that it had just been a trick of the light. He was as handsome and unblemished as ever.

“When can I start?”

“I –” Robert was not used to easy acquiescence. It seemed that he wanted to give her the sales pitch anyway. “Do you want to be your own boss?” His tone had changed. He spoke as if addressing an audience. He was looking at Eleri without seeing her, blinded by the stage lights. “Do you want flexible working hours? How about working to your own timetable without The Man breathing down your neck?”

“I thought The Boss was the boss?”

“You’re the boss!”

“Who’s The Boss, then?”

“You!” Robert cried, slapping her on the back.

“I’m The Boss!”

“You’re your own boss,” Robert corrected her. “But The Boss is in charge. Why don’t you meet me after work? We can drive up to HQ and I’ll introduce you.”

“It’s a date!” Eleri squealed, clapping her hands together.

“It’s a business meeting,” Robert winced, offering his hand to shake. She allowed his strong grip to close upon her limp wrist, solidifying the formal nature of their agreement.

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When Mrs Polizzi pulled up outside Hello Leisure Centre, Eleri had not expected to find her son sprawled across the backseat, his Doc Marten boots muddying the cream leather interior.

“Alrigh’-oh-wha-buttty?” he asked, words running together like tributaries into the River Tawe.

“Nicholas.” Eleri gave him a curt nod. She had not spoken to Nick since secondary school. She could not forget that he was the boy who, in Year Seven, started the rumour that she was having an illicit affair with one of the dinner ladies in exchange for second helpings of spotted dick and pink custard. It was thanks to Nick that she had worn the sobriquet ‘Lunch Lady Lover’ throughout the seven years of her comprehensive career. The children had been cruel, but not clever.

They drove in silence, Ross Kemp doing the talking for them.

“Now I’m not a mug, but I know how to play a mug’s game.”

Rain pounded the windscreen like Grant Mitchell’s fists against a snitch’s skull. Eleri squinted at the street signs as they passed by, unable to get her bearings

as they slipped down back roads and by-ways. They wound into the valleys, past rows of terraced houses with net curtains, their windows lit with a warm amber glow. She allowed the scenery to inform her impressions of The Boss. The further they drove from the neat streets and their windowsill displays of porcelain trinkets, the more she worried. The Ford Fiesta slowed down as it drove past spray-painted schools and rusting play parks. Boys in white sneakers loafed against the electricity boxes, smoking roll ups and swigging Special Brew. Eleri felt her fingers instinctively tighten on the door handle. She hated herself for her ingrained class prejudice, but she was relieved when Mrs Polizzi turned into a cul-de-sac with flower-baskets hanging from the lampposts.

“Here we go,” she said, stopping outside a bungalow with a wicker welcome mat on the front step.

The car idled in the driveway. Ross Kemp growled through the speakers.

“I didn’t know what I was getting myself into, but I was up to my neck in it. And when you’re in the shit, you either swim, or you swallow it.”

Eleri blinked, hoping the audiobook was not prophetic. Robert unbuckled his seat belt. Eleri and Nick took this as their cue and the three of them tumbled out of the car and onto the paved driveway.

“Ready to meet The Boss?” Robert asked.

“I feel like I’m about to meet Bruce Springsteen,” Eleri laughed.

“It’s what he makes us call him,” Robert said defensively.

“Ah, I ain’t afraid of him,” Nick wiped his nose with the sleeve of his denim jacket. “I’ll call him a fucking cunt to his fucking face.”

Mrs Polizzi was smiling blithely as she leaned out of the car window and blew her little prince a kiss.

“Have a lovely time, boys,” she called as she put the vehicle into reverse. “I’ll pick you up at ten.”

“Heads up,” Robert clasped Eleri’s shoulders, pulling her aside as he spoke in hushed tones. “He’s kind of a weird dude. Sound as fuck, but you know –” He finished his sentence with a shrug.

Eleri did not know. She looked up to him, seeking reassurance that he would not lead her into danger. He was dressed in tight-fitting GymShark joggers which outlined the teardrop curve of his quadriceps. Her eyes drifted to his crotch, finding comfort in the sizeable bulge nestled beneath the thin material.

“As long as you’re there I won’t be scared,” she murmured, leaning into him, her head almost resting upon his chest. She smiled as she said this, her gaze meeting Nick’s. He was hovering beside them, his eyes narrowing as he chewed furiously at his labret piercing.

“Okay, let’s hustle. Go, team, go!” Robert yelled, pumping his fist in the air before landing it on the doorbell. His enthusiasm was an unwelcome reminder that it was impossible to take an interest in physical fitness without becoming unbearable to be around. Eleri let her eyes flicker shut as she remembered the paperback copy of *The Well of Loneliness* in his 6Pack Fitness gym bag, nestled amongst his pre-portioned Tupperware containers of chicken breasts and broccoli.

“Go team!” Eleri mouthed her lines, lacking the enthusiasm of Robert’s delivery.

“Whatever,” Nick rolled his eyes.

They waited as Robert rang the doorbell for a second time, the sound of unseasonable Jingle Bells ringing in their ears.

“Alrigh’ bach?”

The door swung open to reveal a man in a turquoise Kappa shell suit. The jacket was zipped to his navel, revealing a string vest and a hint of nipple that looked like an American Hard Gum. Eleri could not look at the man’s face. Her eyes were transfixed upon his chest. His body was an abandoned building site. Tufts of hair twined through the holes of his vest like ivy around a barbed wire security fence. His skin was limestone beneath moonlight, the surface uneven, graffitied with faded tattoos.

"This is Mr Jenkins," Robert aimed a sharp elbow into Eleri's soft side.

"Owain?" Eleri's eyes snapped up towards the man's face.

She was not used to seeing him out of context. It took a moment for her to recognise him without his acid wash jeans and dirty motorcycle leathers. His bleached hair, stripped of its luminescence by time and trauma, was usually pulled back into a low ponytail. Now, it cascaded over his shoulders in a half-perm, half-mullet that even Billy-Ray Cyrus would look askance at. She waited for a flicker of recognition, a sign that she had not imagined knowing him.

"Have you met before?" Robert's gaze flitted between them.

"She's my missus' kid," Owain said after a moment's silence. Eleri could not help noticing the grudging way he made this admission. "I suppose you'd better come in then." He stretched his arms across the PVC door, his back pressed against the floral papered wall as he ushered his guests inside.

"I'm so sorry Mr Jenkins," Robert whispered as they sidled over the threshold, making sure to wipe their feet on the welcome mat and place their shoes on the wooden rack beside the radiator.

"Why don't you go into the living room?" Owain's intonation made it clear that there was no other option. He motioned towards a door at the end of a shag-pile carpeted corridor, an unlit cigar clenched between his teeth. Eleri glanced over her shoulder, meeting Owain's steely stare, before following Nick into the back room.

"Not you." Owain's open palm pressed against Robert's chest as he attempted to pass him in the narrow hallway.

"Boss –" Robert began but faltered. There was nothing he could say. His eyes screamed as he craned his neck to see Eleri and Nick lingering at the entrance of the living room, unsure whether to say something or slam the door shut.

"Be with you now, in a minute." Owain turned his serial killer smile towards them. "Go on through. I've got a big box of Family Circle in there." His attention moved back to Robert. "You wouldn't believe it, butty," he growled, the thin material of Robert's T-shirt gathered in his fists. "Bought a bloody kilogram of biscuits for £1.50 in Home Bargains."

“That’s such a big saving,” Robert gasped, the words catching in his throat and rattling their way back down.

Nick caught Eleri’s eye. She nodded in the tacit agreement that there was nothing they could do. They stepped into the living room, allowing Owain to close the door behind them.

Eleri had never been inside Owain’s house before. She thought that her mother had moved in months ago, but there was no sign of her. Celyn was the kind of woman who established herself through her furnishings. Her presence was so tangible in her husband’s home that no absence could erase it. Ian still wept into the left-behind collection of scarves scented with her signature scent and Eleri did not have the heart to tell him that these were only her mother’s old dust-rags, perfumed with Mr Sheen.

The décor reflected neither of the occupants’ personalities. It was not decorated with Harley Davidson crests and stag heads. There was no aboriginal art upon the walls. It was as if it was not their home at all. Lace netting hung behind heavy curtains. Tacky trinkets collected from European tourist destinations were arranged in a glass cabinet beside the electric fireplace. Above the hearth hung a framed photograph of Owain shaking hands with Cyril the Swan outside Swansea’s Liberty Stadium. There wasn’t a book to be seen, not even on the coffee table where Celyn loved to place unread literature for effect. The shelves were filled with VHS tapes and second-hand DVDs. Eleri noticed that the couple favoured films that came in fours and fives. Their favourite franchise seemed to be *Cheech and Chong*, judging by the multiple copies and collector’s editions.

“Might have one of these bad boys,” Eleri announced, though her tone sought permission. Her eyes had landed upon the crate of Family Circle biscuits displayed elegantly upon a lace doily on the coffee table. They were not on her meal plan, but her appetite was revived as her last dose of VerdantVitality began to wear off. Just one couldn’t hurt, she told herself, if she ate it fast, before Robert returned. “What’s your favourite? I love a bourbon, personally.”

“Shut up.”



Nick did not seem to be in the mood for small talk. He paced the room, his novelty Cookie Monster socks slipping on the high-shine floorboards beneath his feet. It was difficult to tell if his agitation arose from concern for Robert or a strong aversion to baked goods.

“Hello,” a small voice greeted them.

Startled, Eleri turned to find a man sitting upon the white leather settee behind them. His hands were folded in his lap, his torso hunched to meet his long legs. His wan complexion made it possible for him to fade into the furnishings and went some way to explaining why he had gone unnoticed. Eleri took a moment to observe him. His features were high and angular, handsome despite their irregular placement. His hair was a rich shade of auburn, waxed into delicate finger-waves like a down on his luck matinee idol. He was a Modigliani of a man; his too long limbs slender beneath his baggy medical scrubs. From the dark circles beneath his eyes it looked as though he had just been dug up from the graveyard shift at the local hospital.

“The fuck are you?” Nick ducked behind Eleri, using her ample frame as a human shield.

“Jamie,” the man replied. “I’m – not exactly a friend of Owain’s – more of an acquaintance. I mean, kind of a hostage, really. Don’t tell him I said that.”

“Was that a joke?” Nick asked, crouching between Eleri’s legs.

Jamie forced a laugh that only proved it was not a joke.

“You look familiar, actually,” Nick said, squinting at Jamie as he rose to his feet.

“We went to school together.” Jamie tore at a hangnail on his thumb, the embarrassment of not being recognised giving colour to his cheeks. “I used to go to all your shows. I’ve still got your cassette tapes. You guys were great.”

“Oh shit,” Nick slapped his thigh, though it was clear he still had no recollection of his biggest fan.

“What shows?” Eleri interrupted. “You played the school talent show, one time.”

Eleri, though she loathed to admit it, had been just as much of a fangirl as Jamie. The whole school had treated Robert and Nick like rock stars. The guidance councillor had advised Robert not to worry about his GCSEs. He was going places with a face like that. He did not need to work as hard as the other, uglier, children.

Commercial success eluded the duo. It turned out that there was no market for the music of Simon & Garfunkel played in the style of 1980s hardcore punk. Milder Threat took an indefinite hiatus. Robert went to university. Nick stayed at home. Eleri still had their first E.P on a homemade cassette tape she had bought from the unauthorised behind-the-bike-sheds school tuck shop. It was garbage, but it was Robert's garbage, and she loved it.

"Do you still play the accordion?" Jamie was leaning forward in his seat with genuine interest.

"I'm focusing on the spoons right now. Really versatile sound, man. You dig?" Nick said, his feigned nonchalance negated by his wide grin.

"Oh, I can dig it!" Jamie's enthusiasm was less incomprehensible than the men's slippage into outdated jazz slang.

"Do you think Rob's okay?" Eleri asked, glancing towards the closed door.

They fell silent. From the hallway they could hear a man's raised voice, the dull thud of a fist hitting flesh, then a stifled sob.

Eleri held her breath. The living room door swung open and Owain appeared holding a tray of Nana Price's fine china and a pot of freshly brewed tea. Robert leant against the doorframe, clutching his abdomen.

"What was that noise?" Eleri demanded, scanning Robert for evidence of physical damage.

"Silly me," he wheezed. "Fell down the stairs."

Their eyes met. He smiled at her. As if someone had pulled a string, she felt her own lips twitch upwards. She nodded. His proprioception had been off ever since he'd started a new Intermittent Eating regime. As far as she could tell, he only allowed himself earthly sustenance once a month, when the new moon rose. It made

sense that he was a little wobbly on his feet. She shrugged off her suspicions, allowing herself to forget that Owain lived in a bungalow.

Nick rushed towards his best friend. His fingertips brushed the red mark on Robert's temple. "You clumsy cunt," he whispered, the harsh edges of his words softened by compassion.

"He's fine," Owain waved away their concern. He gestured towards the sofa, intent on making their visit as pleasant as possible. "You haven't touched your biscuits." His face darkened as he looked at the unopened crate. Jamie, Robert and Nick sprang into action. Within seconds they were on their knees around the container, their fingers fighting to rip the cellophane from its sides and cram as many custard creams into their mouths as it took to appease The Boss.

"Good lads," he nodded his approval, placing the tea tray upon the table.

He snapped his fingers at Jamie who scrambled to his feet, face covered in crumbs, and rushed out into the hallway. He returned a moment later carrying a large flipchart. Nick and Robert, who had used the interlude to take grateful gulps of tea, put their cups down to help a struggling Jamie set up the board. Owain zipped up his tracksuit, slicked back his hair, and moved to the front of the room.

Eleri settled herself on a crushed velvet ottoman at Owain's feet. Her arrival, she was told, had been unsettling. To see the daughter of the woman he was courting arrive unannounced on his doorstep had been a surprise, though not an entirely terrible one. He had nothing to hide. VerdantVitality was a legitimate business. It was not a scam, nor was it illegal. He impressed upon her the magnanimity with which he was offering her the chance of becoming a member of the ever expanding VerdantVitality family.

"It's not been regulated," Owain informed her, placing an unasked for Jammie Dodger on her plate. "But it's definitely not illegal."

"It's not exactly legal," Jamie interjected.

"*Cysgu yn dawel.*" Owain launched himself at Jamie in a sharp balestra, his telescopic pointer trained upon the young man's neck. Jamie instinctively drew back,

his hands flying to cover his face. Unbalanced by the momentum he tipped backwards into Nick's lap.

"Gerroff me, you bummer!" Nick shrieked, pushing Jamie back towards Owain's blade.

"It's not a scam," Owain intoned, straightening up and returning to the board. He flipped the first sheet over to show the word 'SCAM' enclosed in a red circle with a slash through it. He tapped the symbol with his pointer, before moving onto the next page which featured the same red circle, this time with the word 'ILLEGAL' written inside.

"So, it's not illegal?" Eleri sought clarification.

"You said it," Owain agreed with a smile that looked like an unstitched scar.

Eleri's attention began to wander during the presentation. Her eyelids began to droop, her chin dropping to her chest. She felt inexplicably exhausted. Owain's soporific delivery had not drained her of the will to live; her fatigue went beyond boredom. She was sure it was the effect of eight hours without a hit.

Her fingers fumbled with the empty blister-packs in her coat pocket. She scratched at the lining, picking at the stitching in the hope that she could find one last capsule to keep her going. She remembered how she'd felt without VerdantVitality; sluggish, bloated, unhappy. She could not go back.

She forced herself to focus. Owain was the Cerberus standing between her and her supply. He would not be impressed if she fell asleep during his presentation. She hugged her legs to her chest and sunk her teeth into her knees to ease the gnawing emptiness in her stomach. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak. Her thoughts drifted from pie charts and line graphs to the biscuits behind her. She glanced over her shoulder, her eyes wandering around the room.

"Did you paint those?" she interrupted as Owain began to read aloud from a sheet of client testimonials. She motioned towards a wall painted a dusky pink and hung with portraiture so poor it could only be a personal endeavour. Rows of children posed as cherubim stared out from gilded frames like battery farmed chickens, unashamedly rotund as they lay draped beneath crepe de chine. Eleri grimaced.

Their soft limbs and come-hither eyes were almost obscene under the circumstances.

“A little hobby of mine,” Owain bowed his head in admission of guilt that went beyond possessing no talent for water colours.

“So talented,” Robert gushed.

Eleri tore her attention away from the incriminating art. She had already decided that she would do whatever it took to secure her supply of VerdantVitality and she was willing to overlook the unsavoury aspects of Owain’s character. The less she knew about him, the easier this would be. The ethical terrain might be murky, but if she refused to delve into the swamps of his activity, she could live with being an unwitting accomplice.

“Forget the flip chart,” Eleri said with a wave of her hand. There was a sharp intake of breath from the men. “You’ve answered all my questions. Except for one – how big is the discount?”

“Don’t you want to know more about the sales structure?” Owain raised an eyebrow. “How much money you can make? What you’re actually selling?”

“Don’t patronise me,” Eleri snorted. “I’ve watched every season of *The Apprentice*. U.K and U.S. I think I know a little something about business.”

Owain looked to Robert. His expression was searching. Eleri tented her fingers beneath her chin, her stern gaze fixed upon them, awaiting a response.

“You can have 30% off the old stock we can’t shift.”

“Deal!” Eleri accepted without negotiation. It crossed her mind that she could not afford even this, and so she added, “I don’t have any money though.”

“You’ll be rolling in dough soon enough, bach,” Owain said, his arms spread wide. Robert nodded. Nick swept his hair from his face and shrugged. Jamie strangled a scream and gave Eleri the thumbs up. “This stuff sells itself and the customers always come back for more. I guarantee you that.”

“What *is* it?” Eleri asked, finally asking the question she should have opened with.

“VerdantVitality is an all-natural blend of ingredients that kick-starts your metabolism to help you shed fat, fast!” Robert jumped to his feet as though commanded by the click of a magician’s fingers.

“What’s it made from?”

“All-natural ingredients,” the men repeated in unison.

“Okay, but what are the ingredients?”

“All-natural ingredients,” they chanted.

“It’s not exactly *all* natural,” Jamie broke rank to correct them.

“Shut up, mun,” Nick hissed.

“I’m a man of science,” Jamie protested. “I have to be honest.”

“Have a biscuit, Jamie,” Owain instructed.

“I don’t want one,” he whined. “I’m doing keto.”

“Oh yeah?” Robert’s interest was piqued. He tilted his head to the side as he asked, “how are you finding it? I do raw-vegan-paleo-keto when I’m not intermittent fasting.”

“Oh, I do I.F too.” Jamie rolled his eyes as though it were ridiculous to assume otherwise.

“Yeah, sometimes I just fast for whole weeks, you know. Helps keep me focused.”

“Is that why you keep passing out in the bathtub?” Nick sounded concerned, but his eyes had a faraway look as if reliving the memory of finding Robert naked and unconscious in a haze of steam.

“Have a fucking biscuit, Jamie,” Owain repeated vehemently. With trembling hands, Jamie reached for a Happy Face, a single tear rolling down his cheek.

“What do you do?” Eleri turned to Jamie, unable to ascertain his place in the VerdantVitality hierarchy.

“I’m the VerdantVitality pharmacist,” Jamie said through a mouthful of crumbs. “I’m a Junior Doctor at the hospital, but I help Owain out with product formulation.”

“Why?” Eleri asked, unable to fathom anyone wanting more than one job.

“Let’s just say Jamie owes me a favour,” Owain said with a sly tap of his nose.

Eleri wanted to know more but found herself silenced by Robert’s hand upon her shoulder. He loomed over her as she sunk further into the embrace of the ottoman.

“When you’re a VerdantVitality Vision Guide we expect you to be a billboard for our product. We need you to lose an average of three pounds a week,” he told her.

Eleri groaned, accepting defeat before she had started.

“I’ll help you,” he promised, squatting down beside her. “The better you look, the more you sell. The more you sell, the more you can buy.”

“You’ll help me?” she asked pitifully.

“I’ll be with you every step of the way. Your success is my success and I’m going to make sure we’re both winners.”

Eleri looked into his eyes. She trusted him, though she had no reason to. She nodded.

“Welcome to the family!” Owain grinned, raising his chipped teacup as though he were the after-dinner speaker at a Jordan Belafonte fundraiser.

The men gathered around her, clapping and cheering. She echoed their enthusiasm, though it felt hollow. She had no idea what she’d signed up for, but she knew she could not back out. Nothing could be worse than life without VerdantVitality.

Robert circled his arm around her shoulders, squeezing her tight.

“Girl, we have so much work to do with you,” he whispered into her ear, fingers kneading into the doughy flesh of her upper arm.

## Chapter Six

Everyone knew that Owain Jenkins was not the sort of man you said 'no' to. He was the sort of man you crossed the street to avoid, skipped town to escape, but did not refuse. Eleri did not know this and so when she was invited to attend a mandatory training seminar the following week, she politely declined.

"Nah, sounds boring."

It was the wrong answer.

Owain considered himself a chivalrous man. He would not strike a woman. He might gaslight, grope, or pester, but he would never hit a lady. He told her this with fist held high above his head, quivering with the effort it took to keep it from connecting with her face.

"I thought you were a writer." Robert eyed Eleri with disbelief. "You know what mandatory means, don't you?"

Eleri was acquainted with the dictionary definition of the word but had never found it applicable since there was no engagement, no obligation, that she could not weasel her way out of.

"Is there an online option?"

There was not.

The seminar was held in the bowls hall above Hello Leisure Centre. Robert had informed the management team that he would need the entire space to accommodate his attendees, along with a pyrotechnics crew and a sound engineer. The VerdantVitality budget only bought him a small section of the bowling green, cordoned off behind heavy drapes, while the over-70s National Indoor Bowls Tournament took the rest of the court.

Eleri was sitting cross-legged on a wooden spectator bench, mentally preparing herself to cross the green. She had heard tales of violence – stooped old men in pressed chinos and tucked in polo shirts bludgeoning one another with bowls – and was afraid to interrupt. It was not just her fear of the elderly bowlers that kept



her pinioned in place. The energising thrill of her first weeks on VerdantVitality was wearing off. Increasing the dosage provided diminishing returns, but she refused to accept defeat. Her hands trembled as she reached into her backpack and popped open another blister-pack. She had not lost faith in the pills' power. It would be a case of trial-and-error, she told herself, and she would keep trying until she rediscovered that first euphoric rush.

“You look how I feel,” a voice beside her laughed humourlessly.

Glancing to her left, Eleri saw Jamie. He was out of scrubs and dressed in his best; crisp white shirt tucked into tweed slacks ironed with a traveller's crease and a pair of Italian leather brogues. His tie hung like a noose around his neck and he wore the expression of someone awaiting the executioner's orders. His clothes looked as though they belonged to another man – a well-dressed young professional who had been accosted in an alleyway by a deranged vagrant. His hair was a snarl atop his head, unwashed and splitting at the ends. His skin was sallow, eyes sunken.

“You look how I look,” Eleri shot back.

She allowed him to loop his arm through hers and they walked across the green together as though down a promenade, skirting the rolling balls and muttered curses.

“Let's get this over with then,” Jamie sighed as he drew back the velvet curtain and they stepped inside the conference room.

A large whiteboard dominated the space, the VerdantVitality logo drawn in marker pen upon it. Robert stood before it with a shit-eating grin on his beautiful face. Eleri had not been told that there was a dress-code for the evening, but she got the impression it was decidedly smarter than her own mustard stained attire. She was used to seeing Robert in boardshorts and stringer vests, but he was even more attractive outfitted in a slim herringbone suit with a light blue club collar shirt and tasselled loafers.

He was surrounded by a semi-circle of fold-out chairs filled with six similarly utilitarian men and women. Nick was on the outskirts, attempting to lean against the curtain as if it were a wall. He was manning the merchandise booth and the refreshments table, though there was no distinction between the two. The plastic

cups of room-temperature tap water branded with the Double V logo were going for £1.50 a pop. There was a plate of custard creams and Viennese whirls that advised a minimum donation of £2.50 per biscuit. Beside this was a third table filled with hardback copies of what appeared to be Owain's self-published autobiography. Eleri moved closer to inspect the cover of *My Struggle: The Owain Jenkins Story*. The dust jacket featured a black and white photograph of Owain standing against the backdrop of a full colour Welsh flag, right arm raised in salute to his own success.

Robert adjusted the links on his French cuffs and cleared his throat.

"Eleri, welcome," he waved her over. "Didn't you get the e-mail? It's business casual." He took in her slept-in sweatpants and too-tight ski-jacket with a look of disappointment.

Tearing her attention away from the VerdantVitality products on display – drawstring bags, home-printed T-shirts, gallon tubs of an unspecified substance – she took her place next to a man who spread his legs so wide he took up three seats.

"Eleri is the newest addition to our little family," Robert said as though announcing the birth of an accidental child. He waited a moment for the audience to respond, but there were no cue cards to prompt their reaction. They stared back at him, stony-faced and silent.

"Hey," Eleri raised her hand in greeting. Her new family did not acknowledge it. She felt right at home.

"Alright, well let's get started!" Robert clapped his hands together. "I can tell already this is going to be a great week for VerdantVitality. I'm loving the vibe in the room tonight, guys. Lotta energy, lotta passion. We're all feeling pumped up, aren't we?!"

Eleri looked from side to side. The man beside her had shut his eyes. The woman next to him was swiping left on potential Tinder dates. There was a palpable lack of interest from the audience. Eleri began to feel sorry for Robert. She had seen him psyching himself up for his performance, shadowboxing across the men's changing rooms, chanting "second prize – a set of steak knives!" in between huffs of smelling salts. The effort went unappreciated.

“How about we go around the room and introduce ourselves to our newest member? Let’s hear your names and how your week as a VerdantVitality Vision Guide has been.”

There was a minute of silence in which no respects were paid.

“You,” he gestured to a large man who melted into folds of flesh beneath Robert’s gaze. “Go.”

“Hi, I’m Bob.” The man raised a hand like a gammon steak.

Robert’s lip twitched. He did not disguise the horror his namesake inspired in him.

“Stop sweating. It’s disgusting. Just tell us how many sales you made.”

“I’m Bob,” the man repeated. Eleri wondered if he had chosen to perspire even more profusely as an act of defiance. “I’ve lost five pounds this week.” Robert clapped. “I’m still experiencing black outs and blurred vision, but Rob promised that within six to eight months I will regain full control of my motor skills.” Robert coughed. “And I’ve never felt better.”

“Sales, Bob, sales.” Robert clicked his fingers as he paced back and forth before the whiteboard.

“I haven’t –” Bob lowered his eyes, too ashamed to finish his sentence.

“Boo,” called Nick from the concessions stand.

“Alright, Bob,” Robert pulled an empty seat from the semi-circle and straddled it between his legs. “I’ll deal with you later. Helen, you’re up.”

He pointed his index finger at a woman with ferret-like features who jerked in her seat as though summoned from the dead. Her eyes darted around the room, searching for escape routes. Her wardrobe announced defeat before she spoke. Eleri’s eyes flickered over the velvet scrunchie that held back Helen’s frizzed hair, the bootcut jeans and Birkenstocks, the market-stall fleece patterned with puppy dogs. Eleri could only admire the assassination attempt the woman had made on her own sexuality.

“After our conversation last week,” Helen began in a register inaudible to the human ear. “I was really persistent with my social media campaigns. I’ve lost a lot of Facebook friends. My mum blocked me on Whatsapp. I’m worried I’m alienating everyone I love.”

“You don’t need that negative energy in your life.” Robert scissored his legs as he launched himself from his seat to land in a squat at her feet. “You’re better off without them.”

“I’ve got hundreds of tubs of VerdantVitality protein powder sitting in my garage.” Helen bit her bottom lip, her eyes filled with tears. “I can’t shift it.”

“That reminds me. You all need to make your minimum purchase orders today,” Robert interrupted. Turning his focus back to Helen with a softness of speech that belied the danger beneath, he said, “you can’t keep letting good leads slide through your chubby little fingers.”

“I tried so hard.” Helen’s gaze drifted to the bony hands folded in her lap.

“Try harder. If it’s not working, it’s because *you’re* not working.” Robert rose to his feet, adjusting the sleeve of his shirt to check the time. Eleri noticed the expensive looking gold watch on his wrist. It caught the light, glimmering with the promise of wealth. From a distance it looked like a Rolex, but Eleri had seen it up close and noticed the ‘Nolex’ logo on the mother-of-pearl face. “I didn’t get to where I am today by telling myself that I couldn’t succeed because of structural inequalities, socioeconomic disadvantages, or complex psychological problems.”

Eleri glanced around at the now admiring faces of his audience. The flash of false wealth piqued their interest. The man beside her leant forward in his seat. The custard cream en route to Bob’s mouth was delayed by a signal failure, his attention diverted to Robert’s words. Eleri wondered if they knew that the only place Robert had gotten himself was the top bunk of his best friend’s bed in Mrs Polizzi’s ex-council house.

“I had a dream. I got up. I made it a reality,” he continued. “If you spend your life dreaming you may as well be in a coma.”

“You’re right. I’m a failure.” Helen accepted the epithet with the dignity of a woman who had known it all along. “If I can’t sell this wonderful product –” She took a moment to collect herself. “I really am a waste of space like my step-father always said.”

“You have to believe in yourself.” Robert clasped her hands in his own. “Buy into your own hype because no one else will. You don’t think you can do it? Game over. Go home. Kill yourself.”

The group clapped, slowly at first, but with gathering momentum. Helen released herself from Robert’s grasp to join the applause, pausing only to wipe the tears from her eyes.

Eleri stood up on her seat and cheered. The atmosphere was energising. She was overwhelmed.

“Wait,” she whispered to the man beside her as she settled back down. “What are we doing?”

“You might want to read this,” he told her with a sigh that said, ‘I’m through talking to you.’

Eleri looked down at the black and white photocopied pamphlet he held out to her. She took it, careful not to catch herself on the loose staples.

# VERDANT VITALITY™



*"Not a scam. Not illegal."*

## What Is VerdantVitality™?



Most diets are designed to help you lose the pounds but how about a diet that helps you earn them?! VerdantVitality™<sup>1</sup> is an all-natural<sup>2</sup> herbal supplement designed to help you lose weight and feel great!<sup>3</sup>

## VerdantVitality™ Products

### VerdantVitality™ XL



The original VerdantVitality™ supplement – an “all-natural” blend of traditional remedies and herbs

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<sup>1</sup> Verdant Vitality is not a registered trademark.

<sup>2</sup> May contain ingredients not occurring in nature.

<sup>3</sup> Results not guaranteed.

designed to thermo-charge your weight loss.<sup>4</sup> Dieters using the VerdantVitality™ method lose up to 110% more weight than those that go it alone using outdated methods such as 'eating less' or 'moving more'.

### VerdantVitality™ Shake System



Do you find food derailing your diet plans, despite your best intentions? Science<sup>5</sup> has shown that successful dieters lose the weight and keep it off by taking food completely out of the equation! The VerdantVitality™ Diet Plan recommends drinking one VerdantVitality™ shake per day, alongside 8-10 VerdantVitality™ XL capsules in place of regular meals. With delicious flavours to choose from and each shake supplying your total RDA of nutrients<sup>6</sup>, you won't even miss chewing!

### Delicious Flavoured Fluids!



Our delicious and nutritious shakes come in variety of flavours. We got pizza! Lasagne! Vanilla! Meat! Mystery! Pick your favourite or mix and match. Only £199.99 per gallon tub.

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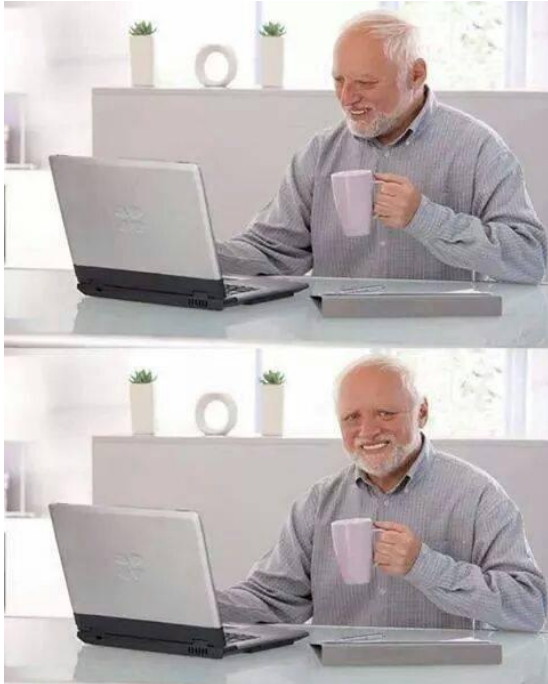
<sup>4</sup> Side effects include but are not limited to dizziness, nausea, vomiting, loose stools, sight loss, death.

<sup>5</sup> Scientific evidence for this statement has not been verified.

<sup>6</sup> This claim cannot be scientifically proven. There have been cases of long-term VerdantVitality™ users developing scurvy, malnutrition, and death. There is no proven correlation between the use of our product and subsequent medical problems.



## Do You Want to Get in Shape, Lose Weight, and Earn £££££££!



At VerdantVitality™ we change lives, not just waistlines. Once you've lost the weight, you'll see that anything is possible. Don't let your limits be defined by your 9-5. When you look better, you deserve better.

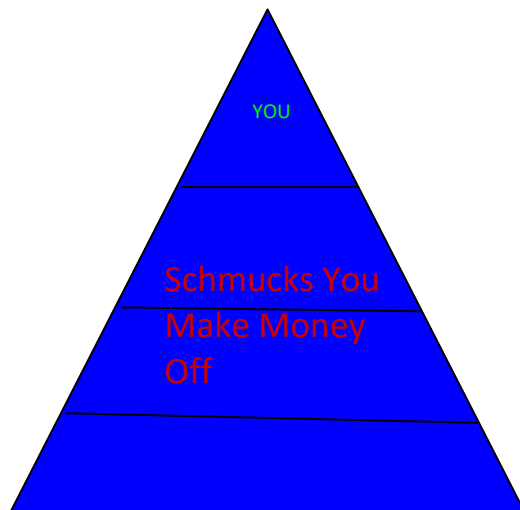
Don't waste your life working for someone else – get in at the ground floor of this DYNAMIC, EXCITING and COMPLETELY LEGAL investment opportunity! Haven't you always wanted to see the number on the scales drop and the digits in your bank account skyrocket? Well now you can!

## Cool, So How Can I Make a Shit Ton of Cash?!



VerdantVitality™ is more than a Multi-Level Marketing scheme – it's a family. You will be joining a community of people who are on the same incredible journey as you.

For the low, low, low bargain basement cost of £699.99 you can purchase your Verdant Vitality Starter Pack. Your incredible transformation story is all you need to sell our products, so you don't need any qualifications, skills or abilities!



### VerdantVitality™ Reward Structure

Earn big bucks by recruiting your friends, family, vague acquaintances and absolute strangers!

For every person you recruit, you will make at least a 25%<sup>7</sup> cut of their earnings!

Claw your way up the Reward Scheme Triangle for even bigger earnings. It's impossible not to make money as a VerdantVitality™ Vision Guide!<sup>8</sup>

### Owain Jenkins, C.E.O



“I am delighted to welcome you to the VerdantVitality™ family. Your journey towards success, prosperity, happiness and eternal salvation begins today.”

Contact: [Owain.jenkins@fraudsters.net](mailto:Owain.jenkins@fraudsters.net)

Or visit our website [www.VerdantVitalityLegitimateBusiness.org](http://www.VerdantVitalityLegitimateBusiness.org)

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<sup>7</sup> Actual figures may vary.

<sup>8</sup> There have been rare instances of independent VerdantVitality™ Vision Guides losing money, becoming insolvent and filing for bankruptcy. This does not reflect the VerdantVitality™ business plan. These rare cases did not hustle hard enough and have brought shame to the good name of VerdantVitality™.

Eleri was brought back to the seminar room by the sound of Robert's fist hitting the whiteboard. Her eyes flickered to the wall clock beyond the curtain. Skimming the pamphlet took seconds, but the hour-hand indicated that she'd missed thirty minutes of the training session. These blackouts were becoming a regular occurrence. Time moved differently on VerdantVitality. Hours went unaccounted for in which she had no idea where her mind or body had been. She shrugged it off. It only meant that there was less time left to sit in a draughty bowls rink on an uncomfortable plastic chair listening to a list of KPIs and sales percentages.

"Where the fuck is Gavin?" Robert demanded. "He said he'd be here. That fucking slacker."

"He's in the hospital," Helen answered. "After Monday's HAIT workout."

Eleri looked to the man beside her for an explanation. When he was not forthcoming, she raised her hand.

"Whassat?"

"Highly Aggressive Intensive Training is an advanced exercise system, formulated by yours truly," Robert informed her. "It removes the ineffective rest periods that makes High Intensity Interval Training a waste of time."

Eleri's arm wavered in the air, but Robert was unwilling to interrupt his own spiel.

"HIIT is so popular because people are weak and lazy and enjoy the downtime those 20-minute Instagram workouts give them. Believe me, guys, there is no room for rest if you want results. Just like in business. Just like in life. If you want to succeed at weight loss and cash generation, you don't have time to catch your breath or take a sip of water. Winners don't need water breaks."

"Gavin did," Helen murmured, gazing into the middle-distance.

"Oh please," Robert rolled his eyes. "I go 'Beast Mode' on him one time and he calls the waa-mbulance. Pathetic."

"He's very ill," Helen addressed herself to the group. "He might not make it."

"He's a weak individual," Robert said scornfully.

“I’ve bought a card for him,” she pressed on, a boat beaten against the current. “I thought we could all sign it and I’d pop it round with some choccies later.”

“Choccies?” Robert repeated, his voice raised an octave in imitation. “Fuck’s sake.”

“Is it Uncle Rhabdo?” the man beside Eleri asked, leaning forward to address Helen.

She nodded.

“Good for him,” Robert said, louder this time. “That’s what you should all be aiming for. Maximum exertion. Don’t quit until you faint, puke, or die.”

“Faint, puke, or die.” The group intoned the mantra.

“Okay, that’s everything for this week.” Robert placed the palms of his hands together in front of his chest and bowed. “Please make your way to my associate, Mr Polizzi, who will be happy to help you complete your monthly minimum purchases.”

Despite having sat through an hour-long seminar on the subject, Eleri was unaware that she was expected to buy £300 worth of VerdantVitality™ stock to sell on to her friends and family. She remained in her seat as the Vision Guides made their way over to the merchandise stand with open wallets and broken spirits.

“Who is Uncle Rhabdo?” she wanted to know, turning in her seat to see Jamie rocking back and forth in the foetal position on the floor behind her. “Is he like John Galt’s down-on-his-luck relative?”

Jamie did not look at her, but his frenetic motion slowed.

“Rhabdomyolysis is the breakdown of damaged skeletal muscles leaking into the body’s circulatory system, leading to kidney failure, cardiac arrest and death.”

“Gnarly.” She waited a moment. “So, who is Uncle Rhabdo?”

“I just told you.” Jamie’s voice was flat and affectless. “It’s a condition caused by strenuous overexertion.”

“Oh!” Eleri’s eyes widened. “Rob might have killed someone?”

“It’s not the worst thing he’s done this week.”

Eleri did not want to think about that. Robert was too handsome to be held accountable for his actions.

“You seem smart. How are you so smart about stuff?”

“I’m a doctor.” Jamie’s body began to oscillate wildly once more. “We’ve been through this.”

Eleri watched as Robert deadlifted a four-gallon tub of VerdantVitality nutritional powder, her tongue tracing the outline of her lips. Jamie’s conversation was static on the radio, she turned the dial and tuned out.

“Do you remember me at all? We went to school together for seven years.” Eleri became aware of Jamie’s fingers snapping in front of her face. She slapped his hand away with a grunt and resumed staring at the gun show.

“Jamie. Lupinetti.” He tried again. “My dad owned the chip shop.”

“Fatty Fatty Fish Guts?!” Eleri exclaimed, her attention finally hooked.

Jamie’s left eye twitched.

He had, he told her, worked hard to distance himself from that playground put-down. His adolescence had been uncomfortable. Not only was he overweight and acned, his pores clogged with deep fat fryer grease, but he was queer at a time when the word was still a slur.

“I think the correct term is ‘person-of-homosexual-inclination’,” Eleri informed him, shocked at his terminology. “Because you’re a person too.”

Jamie did not acknowledge the interruption. He had, he continued, struggled with his sexuality in a place that prided itself on producing premier-league footballers and international rugby players. His weight, like his sexual orientation added to his alienation, and was beyond his control. His mother made up for her deficiencies in the kitchen by using the restaurant’s fryer to make everything from Sunday roasts to salads. The results were delicious but disastrous for her hypertensive children. When Jamie left home for university, he was determined to reinvent himself. Alone at last, he shed his fleshy cocoon to become a geometrical abstraction. It was easy to lose weight once he realised that there were ways of preparing a meal without a chip pan.

“My parents weren’t happy about my career. They wanted me to take over the fish and chip shop. Or, as I call it, the family curse.”

“I love that chip shop,” Eleri sighed, nostalgia softening her features. The last dose of Verdant Vitality had blunted her hunger and she was surprised to find she did not salivate at the mention of battered cod and mushy peas.

“My father called me a ‘bohemian’ for wanting to study medicine,” Jamie muttered. “Maybe he was right. I should have chosen a job where the worst thing I could do is ruin someone’s dinner, not their lives.”

“A bad dinner can ruin someone’s life,” Eleri said ruefully, thinking of the meals that had not met her expectations.

Robert was flexing his biceps at the concession stand. Her attention drifted again. Jamie’s lamentations went unheard.

“You’ve got no chance, mate,” Jamie snorted, following her gaze.

“What?” she blinked.

“You and Rob,” Jamie nodded towards the merchandise booth. “Never going to happen.”

Eleri crossed her arms over her chest. It was not exactly a revelation, but she resented his certainty. Everyone knew that people like Robert were incapable of giving anything of themselves to others. He was something to be looked at, admired, but nothing more. He existed only in his physicality. Beyond that was darkness. His inner life had been systematically stripped away until he thought only in algebra. His mind worked in complex calculations; calories, kilograms, kilometres. He was only interested in what could be quantified. There was no room for her in the equation. He was the end of the universe, dark and devouring, but magnificent in its malevolence. She wanted him in the same way she wanted her father’s French toast – desperately.

“How did you get involved with Owain, anyway?” she asked, diverting the conversation to a topic less likely to hurt her feelings. “You’ve got a proper job. Bet you’re loaded.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” Jamie snarled as he got to his feet. She wondered if he had forgotten that he’d spent the last ten minutes telling her his origin story.

“You alright?” she called after him as he staggered towards the exit, clutching the curtain for support. He turned to face her, shaking his head before disappearing through the drapes. Eleri moved to follow him, but she found herself being pulled backwards by an irresistible force.

“You can’t leave without making your minimum purchase.”

Robert’s arms circled her waist, dragging her to the VerdantVitality stand. The other attendees were filing out of the bowls hall, struggling to carry crates of meal replacement bars and kegs of protein powder.

“How much is that?” Eleri pointed to the unsold copies of Owain’s autobiography.

“The minimum purchase is £300. That book is a tenner.”

“I don’t have a tenner.” Eleri’s lip quivered. “You told me I was going to make money.”

“You have to spend money to make money,” Robert explained.

Nick was packing the leftover stock into cardboard boxes, checking his watch every so often and fixing Eleri with a pointed stare. It was home time, but no one was leaving until she coughed up the cash.

“I don’t have any money.” She patted her pockets and shrugged her shoulders.

“Maybe this isn’t for you,” Nick told her, his eyes trained upon Robert. “I don’t think she’s Vision Guide material.”

Eleri looked from Nick to Robert.

“No, I totally am,” she pleaded. “I need this. I’ll do anything.”

“Okay, look, if you’re willing to do some extra work, we can get around this.” Robert placed a hand on her shoulder. She looked into his hooded eyes, grateful for the infinite mercy contained within them.

The velvet curtain twitched open and Jamie reappeared, glassy eyed and dragging his feet.

“Owain’s ousside.” The words were mangled in his mouth, the cadence of his speech skipping beats and missing vowels. “Come on party people, let’s roll!”

“Are you coming?” Robert asked Eleri.

With a slight nod of her head, she followed the men out of the seminar space and down the exit ramp towards the rear of the leisure centre. Owain was waiting in his Range Rover, the engine idling. He was parked on a double yellow line. The blacked-out driver’s side window rolled down and Owain peered out, his sunglasses slipping to the tip of his nose. He did not tell them to get in. He did not need to.

The men clambered into the car’s backseat. Eleri wavered for a moment, wishing she did not have to ride shotgun, before sliding into the front seat.

“Chippie tea tonight, lads?” Owain said in a voice like gravel in a spin cycle.

Eleri glanced in the rear-view mirror. Nick was grinning. Jamie was unconscious in his lap. Robert was weeping, ever so softly, his face pressed against the window.

She took a deep breath and buckled up.



## Chapter Seven

The weeks passed in a blur. The calendar on the wall went unmarked. Eleri was vaguely aware that the streetlamps were strung with flashing lights and the shop windows were frosted with fake snow. She noticed there were children in costumes knocking on doors up and down the street. There were fireworks in the sky and the smell of smoke in the air. 'Jingle Bells' rang as she jogged through the town centre, filtering through the sound system of the café that advertised Christmas dinner with all the trimmings for £3.99. She no longer knew whether it was breakfast, lunch, dinner or December.

There was no punctuation between days when the full stops and paragraph breaks of meals and sleep ceased to exist. Eleri was on a diet of decreasing rations. Robert's meal plan diminished daily, the only increase being the number of VerdantVitality capsules she popped. She would stay awake all week filled with a manic energy, her legs pounding the treadmill, hands clawed around the pullup bar, before crashing out for God knows how long.

Sometimes she worried that this cycle of boom and bust was not sustainable. Her heart beat kept arrhythmic time with the pulse of the jump rope beneath her feet. She saw stars when she stood up from her squat presses. Though she was the fittest she'd been in years, she was breathless when she reached the top of the stairs.

VerdantVitality's results were undeniable. Friends she'd not spoken to in years stopped her in the streets and asked her secret. Her mother was amazed at the ugly ducking's transformation. Women at work told her she looked great, though she felt anything but.

The bathroom scales recorded her weight and uploaded the data to an app for everyone in the VerdantVitality programme to see. She had lost fifteen pounds in three weeks and was rewarded with a 'thumbs up' emoji from Robert. It was amazing that her body could disappear without her even realising. Where had the weight gone? It was strange to think of parts of herself floating in the ether, willed into nonexistence. It felt like a hastening of her own death.

Her success at weight loss did not translate into sales. Her VerdantVitality franchise was failing to hit its Key Performance Indicators for the third week running. The literature informed her that she could create her own working hours. It was the sort of rhetoric meant to inspire, but it had the opposite effect on Eleri. She was in charge, she thought, so she could take as many holidays and sick days as she liked.

She may have been her own boss, but she soon found that The Boss was not impressed. In a terse text message, Robert informed her that if she did not meet her sales targets that month, she would be out. He advised her to read the small print on her contract. She would not just lose her access to VerdantVitality products – she was liable for all unsold merchandise, not to mention the early termination fees she would incur.

Terror was a strong motivator, though it did not negate Eleri's lack of business acumen. Her limited social circle did not help matters. She soon found she had no one to sell to. The women at work were already owners of VerdantVitality off-shoots. Her mother was shackled up with the company's founder and getting her Double V supply straight from the source. Even her father, a man who fell for every dietary fad, was disinterested.

Her approach grew desperate. Ethics were abandoned. She looked for the easiest targets and decided upon the teenage girls milling outside the school gates. If her experience of being an insecure and overweight adolescent served her right, she would be rolling in cash by the time the lunch-bell tolled.

She had spent the morning outside her old secondary school, scoping out potential clients. There were the girls with thick thighs and rolled up skirts, the creases of their butt cheeks winking at Eleri as they paraded the playground. There were the girls who weren't fat, but thought they were, their winter coats zipped to their throats, walking in hunched apology for their existence. There were the obvious anorexics, famine-mouthed and glassy eyed, hidden in oversized jumpers. Easy pickings, Eleri thought, ignoring the screech of her moral compass spinning off its axis.

"Ladies," she called through a hole in the security fencing. She read the lines Robert had written on her sweating palms, "how would you like to lose weight and feel great, just in time for party season?"

“Fuck off with that diet culture crap,” a girl with fishtail plaits and a teddy coat told her. Her friends agreed, rapping their ramen noodle nails against the railing.

Eleri frowned. The youth were far more woke than she’d ever been.

“This isn’t a diet,” she assured them. “It’s a lifestyle change.”

“I am worth more than my weight,” a schoolgirl with a tongue piercing told her.

“Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels!” Eleri tried again, wondering if these children even knew who Kate Moss was.

“Girl, we are not here for your fatphobia,” the sassy non-binary best friend chimed in. “Ladies you are beautiful,” they said reassuringly, turning their back to Eleri. “Don’t listen to this toxic troll.”

“Thank you for the opportunity,” Eleri whispered as she slunk away feeling like a character in a Mamet play. The children were more quick-witted than her. She could think of no counter arguments to their objections.

Her sales technique needed work. She needed help and Robert was the only one who could give it to her. They arranged to meet the next day at the Hello Leisure café.

“Your body is your billboard,” he told her as he sipped a can of No Carb Company’s Branch Chain Amino Acids. He had not offered Eleri a drink. Extra fluids, even calorie-free, were not on her meal plan. “The better you look; the more people buy.”

“Do I look better?” she asked, pushing back her chair and standing up for inspection.

“Getting there,” he said. She felt him appraising her as if she were an imitation antique on a market-trader’s stall. “There’s still a lot of work to do.”

It was a crumb of recognition and Eleri gobbled it down.

“Look, if you want to sell VerdantVitality, you’ve got to sell yourself,” he continued, his eyes drifting across the café.

It was early afternoon and the centre was quiet. The seats around them were empty, their voices echoing from the walls. They had just finished an intense session in the gym, though not together. As much as he liked her, he said, he would not workout with anyone who wasn't paying for the privilege. Eleri understood. She appreciated the nod of recognition he gave her as she cast longing glances towards the free weights area from her inclined treadmill. It was pathetic, she acknowledged, how little he had to do to make her feel special, but like all things that caused her concern, she chose not to think about it.

"If I lost more weight, would I make more money?" she asked, her eyes fixed upon him as he scrolled through his Instagram feed.

"Absolutely," Robert replied. His attention was taken up with double-tapping and SEO optimisation. He looked up after several minutes. "Social media is a great way to get the word out. Take some before and after photos of yourself." He paused. "Edited, obviously. Maybe put on some makeup and do your hair for the 'afters'."

Eleri took notes on her napkin.

"People buy from people," he continued. "Right now, you're not marketable. You're not aspirational. No one wants to be you."

"Ow, my feelings," she muttered.

"You asked for my help," Robert shrugged. "It's not every day you get the number one VerdantVitality salesman in South Wales taking you under his wing. I know what I'm talking about."

"You're right," she nodded. "I'll do whatever you say."

"Good." Robert leaned back in his seat with a benign smile. "Now, I need your help with some urgent VerdantVitality business."

"Yeah?" Eleri was flattered that she was being taken into the company's inner-circle so quickly.

"It's Jamie. Owain's worried about him," Robert explained. "He's asked if we could perform a 'Wellness Check'."

Eleri was impressed by Owain's sense of corporate responsibility. She had to admit that when her mother first introduced them, she thought he was a scumbag. Whether it was middle-class elitism that turned her against a man who wore shell-suits and Reebok classics to four-star restaurants, or the cigar-smoke he blew in the bow-tied waiter's face as he served them champagne on the mezzanine, she had not taken to him. Maybe he deserved a second chance.

"Jamie's kind of a mess, huh?"

"He's been kind of MIA the last few weeks," Robert said. "Owain wants us to check in and make sure he's okay."

"Anything to help," Eleri agreed.

"Good." Robert flashed her a winning grin. "Put this in your bag, will you?"

He reached across the table, handing her a pillowcase with no explanation. She took it without question. It was useless to ask for exposition.

They agreed to walk the three-mile vertical ascent to the hospital. It was, Eleri realised when she collected her payslip, mid-November. The rain had set in. The weathermen were predicting one hundred days of amber alerts, the isles battered by the tail-end of hurricanes until the New Year. The temperatures plummeted further and Eleri's winter coat was unable to keep out the cold that chilled her to the bones. She was exhausted after her morning run against sleet and hailstone. She secretly hoped Robert would call Mrs Polizzi for a ride, but she knew he would be disgusted if she asked.

The Princess Diana Memorial Hospital was a vast red-brick construction on the outskirts of town. The institutional architecture was softened by a series of pavilions beneath pitched rooves and a spray-painted mural of Lady Diana Spencer in the style of the Virgin Mary. It was notable only for several medical negligence scandals and the filming of a 2007 episode of *Trinny and Susannah Undress the Nation* where the duo harangued the cafeteria workers for their unflattering uniforms.

"I need caffeine if we're going to do this," Robert told her before darting through the automatic doors into the reception area in search of a coffee machine.

Eleri waited outside. The carpark was empty for a Saturday, but it was still early. Once the pubs shut at 11pm the fights would start. It was the only entertainment around when the slot machines were locked away for the night. It was late afternoon, but the sky was already as black as the leather-bound Bible on her grandmother's bedside table. She leant against the wall, wondering how long it would be before Robert found a barista.

An old woman with an oxygen tank attached to her wheelchair pulled up beside her.

"Got a light?" she wheezed, tapping a carton of Parliaments against her knee.

Eleri shook her head 'no' and the woman moved on.

Robert reappeared a moment later, his Barbour jacket zipped to the throat, fingers clawed around a Costa cup.

"I shouldn't be drinking this," he said as he took a sip. "They don't even have almond milk in there. Barbarians. I had to get –" he glanced around before whispering, "soy."

"Is that bad?" Eleri asked, hopping from foot to foot.

Robert had not allowed her an Americano. He told her there was no need to waste sixteen calories when she could snort a bump of VerdantVitality from her keys for free. It was the quickest way to get the substance into her bloodstream, he assured her, but it was making her feel a little twitchy.

"It's full of oestrogen." Robert swilled the liquid in his mouth, unable to swallow. "This is going to fuck up my hormonal balance."

Eleri shared his concern. He normally took his coffee black. On 'cheat days' he allowed himself 15ml of sugar-free vanilla syrup, but not without commenting, "I'm being so *bad* today!" There must be something terribly wrong for him to order *au lait*.

"How's the novel going?" he asked, staring down at his paper cup, eyes filling with tears. Eleri suspected he did not care for her answer. The question was only a distraction from the maelstrom of self-abuse in his mind.

“It’s pretty good,” she said, unwilling to admit that, despite the initial rush of creativity inspired by VerdantVitality, she had not thought of writing in weeks. With feigned enthusiasm, she unzipped her backpack to reveal the loose leaves of the manuscript she carried with her in case the muse returned.

“Wanna see?” She offered her work without knowing what she was presenting. It was twenty pages, give or take, and she could not remember writing any of it. She was not inclined to remind herself by reading it.

Robert peered into the open bag. A long finger flicked through the papers, his eyes narrowing as they caught the odd, and oddly incomprehensible, sentence.

“What’s it about?”

“I can’t explain it in words.” She spoke with the authority of an intellectual, though the work was evidence that she was not. “I could draw you a diagram?”

“Don’t books have words?” Robert took a tentative sip from his coffee cup. Eleri sensed his testosterone levels plummeting with each drop of soy. He examined another page. “This just says ‘smffadflkjdsf kjlsad maybe ghosts????’”

“That’s a typo. I’ll fix it in the edit.” Eleri snatched the paper from his hands. She did not want advice, just unqualified praise. “I want to focus on getting in shape first. You know what they say: healthy body, healthy mind.”

“Yes,” Robert said doubtfully. “They do say that.”

“I feel like VerdantVitality is going to change my life,” Eleri continued. This was something she could believe in, something she would die for. It was more important than some silly story. Attaining the perfect body was tantamount to sainthood in her eyes. There was no goal nor ambition more exalted than her own weight loss.

“Shit yourself yet?” Robert gave her a look that suggested she was lying if she denied it.

Eleri did not reply. There had been a few unfortunate incidents, but she had gotten used to it.

“No shame in it,” Robert said, unlidding his cup and looking inside. “It really clears you out.”

When Eleri remained unwilling to discuss her bowel movements, Robert yawned and sank onto the curb. “Where is that ginger twat? I told Nick I’d be back in time for tea.”

“Why don’t you text him?” Eleri suggested, sitting next to him. She let her knee graze his, peering up at him through her lashes with a coquettish smile.

“What part of ambush eludes you?” Robert inched further up the pavement.

“Doesn’t he know we’re coming?” Eleri was confused. “I thought we were checking in on his welfare?”

“Yeah, but he doesn’t know that.” Robert rolled his eyes.

Lips half-parted as if to speak, her mouth forming a sticky pink ‘O’, Eleri stared at him.

“Jamie, you prick!” Robert yelled, springing up.

Jamie was emerging from the entrance lobby, oversized sunglasses covering his face, the hood of his jacket pulled over his head. He glanced up, startled. Despite professing a passion for juice cleanses and ‘wellness’ on his LinkedIn bio, Jamie did not look well. His skin had graduated from jaundiced to the mottled grey of the mortuary slab. He had lost weight in the last few weeks. His scrubs hung from him like drapery, the outline of his bones visible through the thin material. Eleri felt a stab of jealousy.

“Hey, shithead!” She scrambled to her feet, snatching Robert’s half-empty cup from his hand and launching it at Jamie’s head. She expected him to duck, to have some instinct for self-preservation, but he didn’t flinch. He remained motionless, allowing the container to hit him at full force.

“What did you do that for?” Robert seemed more concerned about the wasted coffee than Jamie.

“Tough love?” Eleri shrugged her answer.

“Look, Jay-Jay, mate, you’ve got to come with us,” Robert simpered, sounding almost apologetic. “Owain needs to talk to you.”



“Can’t we Skype?” Jamie pleaded. He looked even more pathetic with his hair highlighted by cappuccino foam.

“Don’t make this difficult, butty,” Robert crooned as though coaxing a wild animal from its cage.

The two men stood, staring each other down, waiting to see who would make the first move. Jamie feinted to the right his eyes fixed upon Robert who mirrored his movements. With a pivot of his heel, he leapt to the left and tried to bolt past his abductors, his car keys clutched in his hand, thumb frantically clicking the unlock button. Robert reacted instantly. He caught Jamie in a headlock and forced him to the ground, digging his knees into Jamie’s spine.

It was obvious that Robert had the advantage, both in physicality and spirit. Eleri imagined a youth spent watching *WWF Wrestling* on Saturday mornings, cereal bowl balanced in his lap as he pumped his fists, had given him an artisanal appreciation of aggression. Jamie, on the other hand, looked as though he’d gotten halfway through Norman Mailer’s *The Fight* and given up. In wrestling terms, it was a squash job.

“Eleri, get the pillowcase,” Robert demanded, tightening his grip as Jamie went limp.

“Oh, that’s what it’s for!” Eleri’s eyes widened as she realised the linen Robert had packed into her rucksack was not for a sleepover. Kneeling before the two men, she slipped the embroidered coverlet over Jamie’s head, securing it with a knot at the side.

“Can he breathe?” she asked Robert.

“I can’t breathe,” Jamie answered, his voice muffled but clear. Eleri decided it would be easier if she chose not to understand him.

“He’s fine,” Robert reassured them both. “Come on, mate, let’s go,” he said, hooking his elbows beneath Jamie’s armpits and levering him to his feet. Jamie faltered, leaning against Robert’s chest for support.

“Does he have a boner?” Eleri squinted at the crotch of Jamie’s scrubs.

“This is a very confusing situation for me,” Jamie stifled a sob.

Robert heaved Jamie over his shoulder with an ease that would have been more impressive if he were not so slender. “Did you check the bus times?” he asked, turning to Eleri as Jamie lay draped around his neck like a mink stole.

“There’s one in forty minutes.” Eleri consulted the crumpled timetable she’d printed off earlier. Phone signal was patchy at the best of times, but up here she was almost off grid. “But then we have to walk ten minutes to the next bus stop and wait another twenty minutes. Then, it’s another bus ride and a fifteen-minute walk. Google Maps says it takes three hours.”

“It’s six miles away, how can it take three hours?”

She shrugged. “Blame Welsh Labour, not me.”

“We can take my car,” Jamie offered.

“You must be rich if you can afford hospital parking,” Eleri retorted.

Three bus rides, three hours, and one strongly worded e-mail to the Sennedd about poor public transport links later, the gang arrived at the edge of the coastal trail where Crazy Owain’s Caravan Park perched on the edge of a clifftop overlooking the Bristol Channel. Their presence did not go unnoticed. Groups of tourists – optimistically overdressed for a big night out, unaware that the hottest spot in town was the Harvester – did double takes as Eleri and Robert strong-armed Jamie along like Guantanamo guards. Robert winked at the pillowcase knotted at Jamie’s throat as he mouthed the words ‘stag night’. The phrase excused everything.

“Are you coming?” Robert asked as Eleri lingered at the hedge-rowed entrance to the camp site. Her eyes were fixed upon the swinging sign printed with a photograph of Owain wearing a cowboy hat and looping a lasso. There was something that did not sit right with her, but it was too late to leave. She took a deep breath and followed him up the gravel pathway.

In the centre of the site was a static caravan that had seen better days. Rust stubbled its chassis and the half-shut window shades made it look as though it were emerging, swollen-eyed, from a six-day bender. Eleri did not blame it. She’d take to drinking if she had to live here.

Owain was outside, stretched out on a deckchair beneath a corrugated iron awning, the latest issue of *Practical Motorhome* magazine lying open on his chest.

Robert grinned with inordinate pride as he pulled the pillowcase from Jamie's head. Jamie blinked, his eyes adjusting to the dim glow of the Tiki torches that lit the pathway.

In his white safari jacket, surveying his captive with an imperious air, Owain looked like the last colonel of a Colonial outpost. Uncrossing his legs, he rose to his feet and walked towards them, his movements laboured as though his guests were not worth the effort.

"Please, no," Jamie murmured as Robert pushed him to his knees. Grabbing a fistful of red hair, Robert forced Jamie to look at the man advancing upon him, but he could not keep him from shutting his eyes as the crotch of Owain's tattered motorcycle leathers drew level with his face.

"You've been dodging my calls," Owain sounded almost hurt as he crouched beside him.

"Owain," Jamie's eyes flickered open. His breath was a ragged gasp. Eleri followed his gaze to the white hands that rested on Owain's knees. She had never seen these hands before, not really. They were too delicate for the man they belonged to. They lay, alabaster and unmarked, like white feathers fallen to earth. Their beauty did not negate their menace. She could not imagine what these hands had done, what they had commanded others to do.

Owain rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, his face inches from Jamie's.

"Where've you been, lovely boy?" he whispered into Jamie's ear, fingernails scraping the nape of his neck.

"I want out." The words seemed to come forth unsummoned. Jamie looked startled by his own audacity. "I thought my life was going to be like *Scrubs* and instead I got *Breaking Bad*. I'm no Superman, dammit."

"Is the last time you watched television in 2013?" Eleri was unable to hide her disdain. "Because neither of those shows are on air anymore."

“I can’t eat, I can’t sleep,” Jamie wept. “I can’t lift heavy. I’m only performing at 30% of my one rep maximum.”

Robert let out a low whistle. Eleri winced. Even she knew that was bad.

A gust of wind rattled the sign at the end of the drive. Eleri shivered, pulling the hood of her coat over her head as it began to rain again. She looked up at the storm clouds gathering in the dark sky. The pathetic fallacy was troubling.

“Bring him inside,” Owain ordered, snapping his fingers like pincers.

Robert stooped to help Jamie to his feet with a tenderness that seemed ill-suited to the situation. He held him in his arms, carrying him into the caravan like a bride.

“Wait here,” Owain instructed as he passed Robert on the steps up to the mobile home. Robert nodded, shutting the door behind his boss. It swung open immediately, revealing Jamie spread-eagled upon the linoleum flooring, Owain’s boot upon his skull. “He’ll be fine,” Robert assured Eleri as he secured the door with the resistance band he carried in his back pocket in case of workout emergencies.

Eleri settled herself into the deckchair beneath the awning. The rain pounded against the metal sheet, punctuated only by Jamie’s cries from inside the caravan.

“Are you cold?” Robert asked. Without waiting for her response, he took off his P.E Nation bomber jacket and draped it over her shoulders.

Eleri’s skin was goose-pimpled, but not from the chill. She felt an unfamiliar sensation creep over her; a sort of moral itchiness, as if she’d pulled on a scratchy jumper. She wondered if this was what people meant by a ‘guilty conscience.’

“He’s not going to hurt him, is he?” she turned to Robert, unsure whether she wanted an answer.

“What? No!” Robert wrapped his arms around his bare shoulders, a brief flash of regret at his chivalry flickering across his features. “This isn’t the first time Jamie’s gone off the rails. He just needs a bit of tough love to get back on track.”

Eleri was unconvinced as Robert patted her on the head and told her not to worry. She wanted to trust him, but she was struggling to suspend her disbelief.

Usually she possessed an inordinate capacity to shut her eyes to inconvenient truths, but it was not just herself she had to worry about. She may not have liked her mother, but she did not want her to get murdered.

“My mam –” she stuttered. “He wouldn’t hurt her, would he?”

“You’re looking great,” Robert knelt beside her. “I can tell you’ve really been working hard. Twenty more pounds and you’ll be perfect.”

“Yeah?” Eleri sat up in her seat, focused. “I kind of feel like I’m plateauing. Maybe I need a cheat day to boost my metabolism?”

“Cheat on your boyfriend, not your diet,” Robert scolded her, his knuckles brushing her thigh. She winced at the indentation they left. He was right, she was still too soft, too fleshy

He would not lie to her. It would not be easy. If it was easy, he said, everyone would do it. Physical perfection required the asceticism of a saint. “We need to get you lifting heavy to offset the catabolic effects of diet and endurance training.”

“Catabolic?” Eleri repeated uncertainly.

“It’s just a turn of phrase,” Robert dismissed her concern. “If you want results, we need to put you in an extreme calorie deficit.”

“Isn’t VerdantVitality supposed to make me lose weight without trying?”

“No,” Robert shook his head vehemently. “It’s like steroids. They can help you get jacked but you’ve still got to get your ass to the gym.”

“Wait, am I on steroids?” Eleri’s fingers skimmed her upper lip, wondering if her moustache was fuller than a few weeks ago, whether her voice had dropped an octave.

“It’s not steroids.” Robert refused to elaborate.

“Is it worth it?” she asked, for the first time questioning her mission statement. The whole endeavour was beginning to seem like an exercise in egoism. “Will I feel better?”

“I mean, I guess?” Robert shrugged.

“I just –” Eleri searched for a way to explain herself. “I feel better. But I don’t feel *better*.”

“You’re not at your goal weight,” Robert said simply.

“Will I be okay then?” she asked, knowing it was unreasonable to ask a personal trainer to cure her of her existential anguish.

“I can’t promise you it will fill the void.” Robert chose his words with the deliberation of a man being cross-examined in court. “But what else is there? Confront the vast meaningless of human existence? No thanks!”

“Isn’t narcissism a form nihilism?”

She realised Robert was staring at her. His frozen facial muscles were straining to show their displeasure but could only manage minute twitches.

“Sorry,” she apologised. Her sickness unto death was not sexy. She should stop talking. “Thinking is dumb. I shouldn’t do it so much.”

“It’s best not to,” Robert sounded relieved. “If you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gives you wrinkles. Positive vibes only. No one likes a neggy Nietzschean.”

They sat in silence. Eleri did not want to be alone with her thoughts, but there was nothing left to say.

There was a loud thud and the caravan door swung open, the resistance band stretched to breaking point. Owain loomed above them, his face flushed from exertion. Jamie leant against the door frame, his smile beatific, despite missing two front teeth.

“I’ll drive you back,” Owain offered, an unwanted hand resting on Eleri’s shoulder.

She checked the time on her phone. She was reluctant to climb into an enclosed space with a man whom she suspected was a sociopath, but it was getting late and she wanted to get home for her Peloton power ride.

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It was past nine o'clock when Owain dropped her at the end of her driveway. She could sense that something was wrong as soon as she opened the front door.

"Eleri?" her mother's voice called from the living room.

Eleri stood frozen in a strange tableau, one foot over the threshold, the other outside. There was still time to make a run for it.

"Could you come in here? Your father and I have something we need to discuss with you."

The formality of her phrasing suggested it was serious. Eleri sighed as she dropped her backpack in the porch and followed her mother's voice into the front room. Mr and Mrs Hayward were on opposite sides, their eyes following her entrance.

"Darling," her mother entreated from her position by the window, stretching her arms towards her daughter. The endearment made Eleri feel on edge. In their family, pet names preceded threats. Sweet nothings were impounded in evidence lockers.

"Are you getting back together?" Eleri felt eight years old again, sat at her parents' feet and wondering if all families fought this way.

"Good God, no," Celyn rejected the idea with her entire physical being. "Never."

Eleri turned to her father, seeking a second opinion. The prognosis did not look good. Ian lay motionless upon the hardwood floor, his arms crossed over his chest as if lain to rest.

"We are never, ever, getting back together," Celyn sang in a chilling echo of the Taylor Swift song that had played in Owain's car as he drove Eleri home. "In fact, we're getting divorced."

"What? Why?" Eleri's eyes followed the twitch of her father's fingers towards the stack of legal papers at his side.

“Poppet, I know this is hard to understand.” Celyn made no move towards her daughter, her raised voice a replacement for proximity. “We haven’t been happy for a long time.”

“You’re marrying Owain, aren’t you?”

A mournful sob emanated from her father; a disembodied sound that echoed around the empty space. It was all the confirmation Eleri needed.

“Jesus, mum. Anyone but him.”

“He’s a wonderful man.”

“He’s not,” Eleri said, unsure whether to tell her mother what she had just witnessed.

“It’s not up for discussion. You might not approve, but I expect you to be an adult about this and respect my decision.”

She was gone before Eleri could argue that she was not an adult. Disappearing with the swish of her silk scarf, she left Eleri and Ian to listen as the front door slammed shut and her heels clicked down the cobbled path. The only proof that she had been there at all was the lingering scent of Chanel No.5 and the divorce papers at Ian’s side.

“You can’t let this happen.” Eleri turned to her father, expecting to find him on his feet, ready to chase after his woman.

“It’s already happened. It happened thirty-five years ago. She stopped loving me the day she married me.”

“That’s not – no, come on.” Eleri sensed that it was true, but her father had chosen the worst moment to give up on his marriage. He had spent all year clinging to the hope of reconciliation. How could he allow a little thing like legal proceedings to crush his dreams?

“It’s too late,” Ian said ruefully. “At my time of life. With my lower back pains. Your mother is better off starting over with someone else.”

“Maybe,” Eleri conceded. “But not Owain.”

“Why not him?” Ian sighed.



Eleri did not want to admit to her involvement with Owain. She thought of his catalogue of crimes – aggravated assault, dodgy dealings, awful dress sense. She could not accuse him of these without incriminating herself.

“He’s the worst!”

“Let it be, kid. Let it be.”

Eleri said nothing more. She knew she could not let it be. She was an accomplice to something criminal, though she did not know what. The violence inflicted upon Jamie was undeniable. Casting a final glance over her shoulder at the man with whom she swore she shared nothing but DNA, Eleri promised herself she would not end up like him. She would save her mother, even if he would not.

As she shut the door to her bedroom, she could hear the opening chords of Fleetwood Mac’s ‘Go Your Own Way’ striking up from the record player downstairs.

## Chapter Eight

The wedding announcement was placed in the back pages of the *Gwent Gazette* – between the obituaries and exam results – and circulated amongst friends and family members who might have missed the social media posts, the emails, and ‘save the date’ cards. A notable exception was made in the case of Nana Price who was under no circumstances to be told of her daughter’s upcoming nuptials. It was easy enough to keep the news from a confirmed shut-in. All it took was the cutting of a telephone cord and the cancellation of the newspaper subscription and Celyn was in the clear.

It occurred to Eleri that the marriage could be prevented if she paid a visit to the nursing home and let Nana know everything. She did not entertain the idea for long. The fallout would be too far-reaching. Nana would go into cardiac arrest if she knew of her daughter’s adultery and Celyn would never forgive Eleri for the betrayal. Besides, Eleri had no idea what Owain was capable of and no evidence with which to convict him.

She tried to talk to her mother about her suspicions but in the absence of proof the case was not convincing. She listened to enough True Crime podcasts to know that she would have to do some digging.

Sitting on her father’s Peloton bike, laptop balanced on the handlebars, she began to investigate. She started with Google. Internet research lacked the glamour of trench-coats with popped collars and hiding in smoke-filled cafés behind newspapers with cut-out eye holes, but it was more time effective. Within minutes Eleri had access to a wealth of incriminating information regarding Mr Jenkins.

The first result that appeared on screen was a 2013 article from the *South Wales Argos* headlined ‘Wolf of Wind Street Scammer Sinks to New Lows.’ Eleri clicked on the link to find Owain glaring at her from the steps of Swansea Crown Court dressed in a powder blue tuxedo and polished spats. The photographer had waited for an unflattering moment to capture his portrait; a gust of wind swept his hair awry, uncovering a once carefully concealed bald patch. Caught mid-stride, his arms stretched as wide as a wingspan, he swooped down the staircase like a scavenger bird.

She did not have time for full paragraphs. Her eyes flitted across the screen, singling out sentences that supported her suit. The words 'notorious conman' and 'sickening scam' were submitted in evidence, while 'alleged' and 'unproven' were deemed inadmissible. She gathered that Owain and his cronies had been operating a cold-call centre with the intention of fleecing Swansea's substantial retirement community out of their life savings. She read reports of lavish spending; champagne cocktails in strip-clubs, board meetings on massage parlour beds, designer dresses for women who were expected to peel them off within minutes, not to mention the thousands on diamond apologies to their wives and girlfriends when these indiscretions were discovered.

Eleri noticed the retraction at the end of the piece. A sentence that informed her that Owain Jenkins had been cleared of all charges and given a formal apology by the Lord Mayor for the false accusations that cast shadows upon his good character. She did not delve deeper. The details were unimportant. She was convinced of his guilt.

"The bastard," Eleri cursed as clicked back to the search results. Owain had gone dark between the years 2016 and 2018, emerging only at the start of 2019 with his new business venture 'VerdantVitality'. It was a small-scale operation, not listed on Companies House, and, so far, had avoided embroiling itself in any scandals that would interest the local press. Eleri was about to give up when she stumbled across the Facebook group 'Scumbags of South Wales.'

The page was the 21<sup>st</sup> Century equivalent of the medieval stocks with townsfolk pelting one another with slander in place of rotten vegetables. Of late it had grown more conspiratorial. Instead of slagging off the Spar's checkout girl for her bad attitude, a growing faction were trading theories about the English government's diversion of Welsh water supplies for their parliamentary hot tub parties. Marcus was a frequent commenter on these posts.

Eleri did not think there was much to be gained from engaging with these hysterical illiterates, but something at the bottom of the screen caught her eye. 'Scam Watch Alert: Don't Be Conned by VerdantVitality Weight Loss Claims.' It was written by a man with a blank space for an avatar and the username

'AssangeAsylumSeeker1982'. There was no elaboration beyond the headline, but Eleri's interest was piqued.

AssangeAsylumSeeker1982 was more forthcoming in his e-mails. He replied to Eleri's request for information by asking her height, waist-to-hip ratio, and bra size. He did not ask her weight, he told her, because that would be ungentlemanly. Overcoming her initial repulsion, Eleri persevered. She humoured him through countless diatribes about the price discrepancy of the W.H Smith in the town and the W.H Smith in the train station. She accepted the correlation between the increased litter on the streets of Cardiff city centre and a recent influx of Hungarian immigrants. "They don't even have bins over in Eastern Europe," he typed. "Except the Germans. A very clean people. They've got the right idea."

In the end her patience ran as dry as the Welsh water supply.

"Listen, mate," Eleri texted, feeling braver behind her screen than she would in real life. "Are you going to give me the dirt on VerdantVitality or are you wasting my time?"

"Are you going to show me your tits, or are you wasting my time?" came the instant response. Before Eleri had time to block him, he followed up with a series of winking emojis and cry-laugh faces. "JK! It's not safe to talk here. Data encryption only goes so far. Meet IRL?"

It occurred to Eleri that agreeing to meet this man was almost the same as consenting to be raped and murdered.

"Tonight. Hello Leisure multi-storey carpark. No weapons."

"I'll be packing, but it ain't a firearm."

"Gross."

"I've got something sharp and deadly for you, darling."

"#metoo."

\*

Eleri did not want to rouse suspicion. She'd seen what had happened to Jamie when he tried to cross Owain and there was no doubt in her mind that Robert would deliver her into The Boss' hands with the same lack of compunction he'd shown that night in the caravan park. If she wanted to bring down VerdantVitality she needed to remain in the inner circle. With that in mind, she shut her laptop, laced up her Nike's, and made her way to the leisure centre for the daily Double V exercise class.

Owain had instituted the group workouts as a way of ensuring that his acolytes practiced what they preached. It was a sixty-minute session – extended indefinitely if Robert had gone over his macros for the day – held in the heat of the building's boiler room where the participants were drenched in sweat before the warmup began. In the first week, every VerdantVitality Vision Guide had been present and correct. The numbers dwindled as the days progressed until only Eleri, Nick, Jamie, Helen and two other women whose names Eleri hadn't bothered to learn, were left standing.

They gathered now, straining to hear Robert over the noise of the water tanks.

"Are we ready?" he asked, pumping his fist in the air with the vigour of a hospice care patient. He did not look ready. His skin was stretched paper thin over swollen muscles, his fake tan fading with fatigue.

"Are you? You look like death." Eleri's insult was well-intended, but she should have known that to a man like Robert it was ruthless. He stared at her, unable to summon a response. Nick rushed like a paramedic to the crash site, attending to the psychic wound administered to his friend.

"Not being funny, but have you looked in the mirror lately?" he said with an attack dog snarl.

It was true. None of the VerdantVitality sales team had the glowing skin and glossy hair of the stock-image models in their marketing brochures. Eleri looked around her. Jamie was leaning against the boiler, his tight-fit joggers sagging at the knees. Despite the dim lighting he insisted on keeping his sunglasses on,

complaining the brightness hurt his eyes. The two women beside him hopped from foot to foot, their pupils dilated and darting around the room. Eleri suspected that these new recruits were still experiencing the highs of VerdantVitality. Their skin was grey and mottled, but their chapped lips wore the wide smiles of true believers. Helen stood near the exit, one Lycra-clad leg out the door.

Nick, who proudly declared that his abuse of pharmaceuticals was purely recreational, was the only member of the Double V family who did not resemble a junkie. He preferred marijuana and Molly to weight loss drugs and refused to touch anything that might harsh his buzz. A slender man, Eleri resented him for never struggling with his weight, despite sloth-like levels of inactivity and a diet foraged from McDonald's drive-thrus.

"I'm on competition prep for the IFBB Welsh National." Robert recovered himself. "I'm working out thirty hours a week and I can only eat egg whites."

"Is that – healthy?" she arched an eyebrow.

"Of course not," he snapped. "None of this is. It doesn't matter. It's not about your insides, it's about your outsides."

"Doesn't looking good make you feel good?" one of the women asked, flipping through a VerdantVitality pamphlet for confirmation.

"It makes you feel terrible." Robert cradled his head in his hands. "Everything is terrible."

"Then why do you do it?" The woman asked, taking several steps towards the fire exit, edging Helen out of the way. Robert's head jerked up, his stare arresting her escape.

"For the sponsorship deals. If I place first in my category, I'll have Gymshark, MyProtein, Grenade, all sliding into my DMs, begging me to do paid-for-posts. Do you know how much money you can make as a fitness influencer?"

"I don't even know what the Welsh National is," the woman admitted.

"God, Karen, you're so stupid." Robert rolled his eyes. "It's a bodybuilding competition."

“What’s your category?” Eleri asked, sensing an opportunity for one-upmanship.

“Men’s Physique.” He sounded annoyed that his physique could not be classified at a glance.

Eleri nodded as though she knew what he meant. At best she imagined it involved men, possibly on a stage, showing off their physiques.

“Enough chit-chat – let’s get physical,” he said, adopting the persona of an enthusiastic exercise instructor.

The group exchanged glances. There was no way to prepare for the torture they were about to endure. It was best not to think about it, to disconnect the mind from the body. It was not unusual for participants of Coach Rob’s ‘Killer Cardio’ sessions to report out of body experiences. Souls sought escape from their torment, prising open their owners’ mouths and floating through the ceiling to safety. There were a few cases in which they never returned, though Robert was reticent to discuss his classes’ fatality rates.

For the next sixty minutes, Eleri sweated and grunted her way through a series of deadlifts, torture twists and suicide sprints. Thrash metal that sounded like static screeched through the speaker system as Robert yelled, “suffering is the sole origin of consciousness!” One by one the group gave way to heat exhaustion and muscle fatigue, but Eleri would not give up. Though her faith in VerdantVitality wavered, her dedication to weight loss would not. If she made it through the workout, she would remain on the righteous path, with or without VerdantVitality.

At the end of the hour, her heart dancing a dangerous tarantella, acid reflux stinging her oesophagus, she was rewarded with a nod of recognition from Robert. He stood, surveying the casualties strewn across the studio floor. Eleri was on her knees, but she was the only one left semi-perpendicular.

“Good job, El,” he said.

“So fun!” she wheezed. “Can’t wait to do it all again tomorrow.”

The others groaned at the reminder of the Sisyphean task that awaited them each day. The end came only with the closing of a casket. Death was an eternal rest

day, the afterlife an almighty cheat meal. The stringent diets and exercise routines designed to prolong their lives were not worth the living hell they created, but it was blasphemy to say so. Still, Eleri knew they all longed for the release of that gentle good night more than they feared it.

Outside the Leisure Centre, the gang emerged, freshly showered and clutching cups of VerdantVitality Detox Tea. It was the only form of sustenance allowed after their workouts.

“Your metabolism is in hyperdrive right now,” Robert addressed his followers. “Why waste that fire burning off a Mars bar? Let your body feast on the plentiful fat supplies you’re lugging around.”

Their skin glowed white beneath the streetlights as they nodded, shuffling their feet, waiting to be dismissed. The sliding doors behind them opened and shut, letting out gym-goers with flushed complexions and animated voices. It amazed Eleri that anyone could have that much energy after exercise. They skipped to their cars, chatting about what they were going to have for tea, what was on the telly. She envied them, those pretty girls with swishy ponytails, high on endorphins, the right side of plump and happy enough about it. They had never met Robert and she prayed they never would.

“Do you need a lift?” Robert’s hand was on her arm. He looked into her eyes and she shut them instinctively. It felt as though he were shining a spotlight into the darkest corners of her mind, illuminating her uncertainties, her doubts. “You worked hard this evening.”

“I’ll walk,” Eleri shook her head. “I sat down for thirty minutes today, so I’ve filled my quota.”

“Atta girl,” he ruffled her hair. Eleri wondered if this was her reward for passing his test. He called to his flock who were disappearing into the darkness, “remember, guys, sitting is worse for you than smoking. We sit down for no more than thirty minutes a day, and no more than five minutes at a time.”

“Sitting is quitting,” the group chanted the mantra as they hobbled away.



Eleri waved as Robert tipped his baseball cap to her and followed Nick towards Mrs Polizzi's car. She waited for the reassuring slam of the back doors and the rev of the engine before turning to Jamie.

"Jamie, mun," she hissed.

Jamie was propped against a drainpipe, his eyes flickering open and shut as he struggled to stay awake. Eleri had noticed his increasing reliance upon the support of walls, lampposts, and telephone poles to keep him upright. When forced to stand on his own two feet for more than a minute, his legs would begin to shake, his knees buckle. She wondered if she should be worried.

"I need your help," she told him in a stage whisper.

She checked her FitBit for the time. She had arranged to meet her 'Deep Throat' at 7pm and it was already quarter past.

"I'm going to bring Owain down." She moved closer to Jamie, lowering her voice until it was no louder than the rustle of dead leaves sweeping across the carpark. "There's something dodgy going on and I'm going to get to the bottom of it, but I can't do this alone."

"Woah, man." Jamie blinked rapidly, his eyes sending semaphores of distress to some unknown agent. "No way. You haven't been around that long. I've been here since the start. I've seen what happens to people who make themselves Fair Game."

"What's that mean?"

"It means the gloves are off. If you go after Owain, he won't fight back under Queensberry rules," he warned, performing an inelegant backwards foxtrot towards his parked car. His departure was halted by the curved wall of the flower bed behind him. He landed with a thud in the wet soil, legs windmilling in the air as he failed to regain his balance. Defeated, he curled up in the crest of a concrete wave and refused to resurface. Eleri crept closer with the intention of checking to see whether he was still breathing. It was only polite, though she had no idea what to do if she found he'd perished amongst the pogonias.

"Eleri Hayward?" a voice called out from the gloom.

Eleri crouched low to the ground, frozen mid-creep. She had never heard the man speak, but she knew this was her Deep Throat. She pulled the hood of her jacket low over her eyes, pivoting on her heels to face him.

“How do you know my name?” she asked, hands flying to cover her face. This was not how she’d imagined the encounter. She’d anticipated headlights and cigar smoke, a modulated voice, the unclear outline of a stranger’s face. She pictured something more cinematic, though she’d never seen *All the President’s Men* and had confused it with the pornographic movie *Deep Throat*.

“We met on Facebook,” the voice laughed, stepping into the light to allow Eleri a closer look at its owner. The man’s stomach preceded him. It swelled from the shadows, announcing its presence like a shark fin skimming the surface of the sea. Eleri could not take her eyes off it. It hung beneath the hem of a T-shirt that should have been burnt several BMI classifications ago. “I’ve seen every photograph of you dating back to 2007. I know your date of birth, what primary school you went to, and your favourite snack. Put on a bit of weight since your student days, haven’t you?”

Eleri bit her tongue. She studied the man’s face to keep herself from responding to this slight. He was only a few years older than her, but those years had not been kind. There was no dignity, no refinement, in the rapid acceleration of the ageing process that had overtaken his face. His skin hung in crepe paper folds, the bunting for a birthday party no one wanted to attend. The downy hair of his beard had caught his morning’s cornflakes and kept them for a late-night snack.

“Don’t come any closer,” she cautioned. “I’ve got back up.”

“Where?” he asked, jowls swaying as he glanced from side to side. “I thought we said no funny business. I came unarmed.” He held his hands to his chest to demonstrate that he was defenceless. “Unless you count the gun show I’m packing,” he grinned, kissing his gelatinous biceps in turn.

Eleri did not dare tell him that her bodyguard was asleep in the flowerbed.

“Tell me everything you know,” she demanded.

“Get out your notebook,” he told her. “There’s more than anyone could imagine.”

“It’s 2019, who writes in a notebook?” Eleri raised an eyebrow. For a man who claimed to have advanced technological skills, the idea was archaic. “Just tell me. I’ll remember.”

“Where do I start?”

He stroked his chin. The sliding doors of the leisure centre opened as a small child ran into the carpark, followed by a woman who looked exhausted enough to be his mother. Eleri and her informant fell silent as the woman barged past them, chasing after her son. It occurred to her that a busy recreation centre might be too public a forum for the discussion of state secrets. But perhaps her Deep Throat knew best. They were hiding in plain sight, just like *The Thomas Crowne Affair* – another movie she’d never seen.

“How do you know Owain?” she asked when they were alone.

“I’m high up in VerdantVitality,” the man said with such confidence that it convinced her. “I’m Owain’s go-to tech guy.”

“Okay,” Eleri nodded. She considered herself part of the inner-sanctum, but she knew there were areas of operation that were still off-limits to her – she just hadn’t thought it would be the IT support team. “Why are you narcing?”

Deep Throat took a sharp intake of breath. “That is an offensive term. I am a whistle-blower.”

He waited a moment before he spoke again. Eleri wondered if she was meant to fill the silence with an apology.

“VerdantVitality is not an all-natural supplement,” he continued, frowning as she checked the time on her phone. “It’s a mixture of medical grade laxatives, amphetamines, and out-of-date thyroid medication.”

“Fuckin’ hell.”

Eleri’s mind drifted to the packages of VerdantVitality in her backpack, the ones she’d not wanted to sell because she needed them for herself. It was terrifying to have become so dependent on a substance she knew nothing about. She thought of all the people she’d try to shill her products to. Her only consolation was that she

was awful at her job. She'd missed every target she'd been set and swallowed more than she'd sold.

"How do you know that?" she asked, hoping he was wrong.

"That carrot-top fag spilt his guts to me," her informant answered with a sibilant lisp to emphasise his disdain. Eleri winced at the slur, but Jamie held his tongue amongst the rhododendrons. "I'm doing my doctoral thesis on chemo-enzymatic synthesis and the potential applications of novel heterocyclic alkaloids." He paused a moment, allowing Eleri time to be awestruck. She widened her eyes and opened her mouth. It was not enough. She let out an unenthusiastic 'aah!' He appeared satisfied and resumed speaking. "So, I snuck a sample of VerdantVitality into the lab and performed a chemical analysis. Turns out that Nantyglo fairy was right. I've got the results right here if you want to see."

"I believe you," Eleri murmured, her legs giving way beneath her. She felt herself sliding down onto the pavement, her back pressed against the redbrick wall of the flowerbed.

"Here." He reached into the pocket of his Jonathan Creek duffle coat and took out a heavily indexed copy of Owain's autobiography. He held it out to her. When she did not respond, he placed it on her lap. Her eyes flickered down to meet Owain's stare. "You want to take him down? You need to know who you're dealing with."

"Why me?" she asked plaintively. "Can't you do it?"

"I'm in too deep." He began buttoning his coat. "I've got a family to think about."

"You're married?" Eleri asked, unable to believe that this greying elephant seal could have procreated with a human woman. "With kids?"

"My mam," he clarified. "She'd be devastated if anything happened to me. I'm her world. She'd go spare if she didn't have my laundry to do, dinners to cook."

Eleri suspected that his mother might welcome his demise, but she said nothing. She knew he was right. He was not the only one with a family to think of.

Though Celyn Hayward was never much of a mother, she did not deserve to be made the unwitting accomplice to the dissemination of methamphetamines.

She watched, unblinking, as her whistle-blower boarded his motorised scooter and sped off into the night without looking back.

“Jamie,” she called, leaping to her feet. “Holy shit.”

She peered into the flowerbed. Jamie’s body was imprinted in the soil like a policeman’s chalk outline, but the man was gone. He had known all along that VerdantVitality breached advertising standards, yet he said nothing. She should have been outraged, but if there was one sin Eleri could forgive it was cowardice. Her own spine was soft and supple, leached of calcium from years of denying she had a backbone – but now, the truth was her back brace and the osteopath of virtue was working on her musco-skeletal frame. She would save her mother, save the town, save herself.

## Chapter Nine

Eleri returned home with a renewed sense of purpose. She ignored her father calls from the living room to join him in a *digestif* of White Russians with whipped cream and maraschino cherries. There was no time for pleasantries, and she was not convinced that his high fat diet was working. Ian Hayward was 'bullet-proof' only because his blubber would absorb the bullet before it reached any vital organs.

Her father's entreaties echoing in her ears, she rushed upstairs to the bathroom and slammed the door shut behind her. It was the only place that he would not interrupt. Sinking to the floor, she unzipped her backpack and looked at the boxes of VerdantVitality inside.

She had no idea what to do with them. Her first impulse was to flush the remainder of her stash – but maybe she was being hasty. It would be unwise to dispose of vital evidence. The police might need a sample for analysis. Besides, she couldn't go cold turkey at this critical moment. She needed her wits about her if she was going to outsmart Owain. If she spent the next week sweating, shaking, hallucinating, what would she achieve? It would be better to decrease her dosage by increments so small her body would not even notice.

Firm in her resolve, she popped open a new blister-pack of VerdantVitality and swallowed several. She would take a couple now and hide the rest beneath the floorboards for safekeeping. Downstairs she could hear her father lift the needle on the record player as it skipped and scratched the grooves of Fleetwood Mac's 'Landslide'. She did not need to hear Stevie Nicks' heart breaking again. Running the shower, she allowed the cascade of water to drown out her father's unhappiness as she settled down to read Owain's autobiography. If she was going to defeat him, she needed to know more about him. She opened the hardback copy to the first chapter, skimming the acknowledgements pages in which he thanked only himself.

## My Struggle: The Owain Jenkins Story

### Chapter One: A Self-Made Man

Ask anyone about Owain Jenkins and they'll tell you, "Owain? He's a self-made man. Handsome, too." I don't believe in playing with the cards you're dealt. At the roulette table of life, I roll the dice. If I don't like the outcome, I keep rolling until I do.

I won't start this book off with a sob story about how hard I had it growing up. I did have it bloody hard, but there's no point pissing and moaning about it now. I was born in the small Welsh village of Nantyglo, Blaenau Gwent. My old man gave his best to the local colliery and there weren't much left over for his fourteen kids. I'm not going to say I blame my *tad* for everything. I do blame him, but I'm thankful for my early years because they made me hard as nails. I can trace my many achievements back to that miserable terraced house on Gwaun Delyn Close and the linen cupboard I slept in with eight brothers who knew nothing of boundaries. I owe my success to the failings of my father.

Mal Jenkins was once a proud man but by the time I came along all he wanted out of life was to get by. His legs were bowed by a childhood bout of rickets and his spine was curved in the shape of the mine-shaft ceiling. In his stockinged feet he stood at 5"2 and his deformity attracted the attention of the local children who chased him down the cobbled streets, pelting him with rotten fruit. His commitment to the colliery was remarked upon throughout the village, but it brought him no respect.

The mine was all Mal knew. He was sent below ground at the age of eight by a husbandless mother who felt no qualms in forging official documents declaring that her son was not a day under eighteen. Life above ground became unbearable for my old man. His body was acclimatised to the damp confines of the coal pit. The sun, even hidden behind low-hanging clouds, blistered the skin beneath his rough-hewn sports jacket. The hush of the village green terrified him – he was unused to hearing his own thoughts above the roar of industry. Unaccustomed to daylight hours outdoors, he would stand stock-still on our doorstep whenever us lads tried to get him to kick a ball around the garden with us. At night, he turned off all the lights and

hugged himself tight against the walls, afraid of having so much room to move around in.

If Mal Jenkins had his way, he would have remained in that mine shaft long after the last workers clocked their timecards and headed home to their wives. Surface time was wasted time, as my *tad* always said. He loved them mines, but the only thing they ever gave him was the black lung. They didn't even give him a fucking carriage clock when he took early retirement because of his ill health.

Having Pops at home was hard. We could hear him rattling around the house, breathing out the coal dust that clung to his chest. Unable to work and facing destitution, Mal swallowed his pride and allowed Mam to take in laundry from the local brothel to make ends meet. They both took to drink – which I can't blame them for – but my father was not a man to limit himself to once vice. He was often seen at the races, frittering away what little money we had on against-the-odds-bets and prostitutes whose bedsheets my Ma would later launder.

At the age of twelve, I decided to strike out on my own. My parents were doing me bloody nut in and I wanted to know what the wide world had to offer. Without a penny in my pocket and just a bindle on my back, I left home without a clue where I was going. My family saw me off at the garden gate; eight brothers, six sisters, and a couple of illegitimate rug-rats that ran around our backyard. I never was sure if they were ours or not. My father was incapacitated by a nasty bout of polio and it took four of us to wheel his iron lung to the front porch so's he could say his farewells. I remember looking at my family, tears rolling down their hollow cheeks, and swearing on my father's life that they would never go hungry again.

Pa died a month later and I never went back to Nantyglo.

With no formal qualifications and nowhere to hang my hat, I knew things would be tough. I decided to chance my luck and ask for a job in the city room of *The Gwent Gazette*. The newspaper's editor, a salt-of-the-earth bloke, whose name escapes me, let me know that there was only one room in the office and there weren't no jobs in it, especially not for a minor. I mistook his meaning and let him know that what my father did for a living was none of his concern.



“I like the cut of your jib, kid,” he told me later, pressing a raw steak against the black eye I’d given him. “But I still don’t have a job for you.”

I was a right plucky so-and-so back in the day, green as a leaf, with no fucking know-how, but I wasn’t going to take ‘no’ for an answer. For the next few weeks I was a permanent fixture on the steps of the *Gazette*. Men with rolled shirts and press passes tucked into their hat bands tripped over me, spilling coffee and spare change everywhere. I never budged an inch. During the day I hung around the office taking sandwich orders and racing bets for sloshed journos. I skimmed a little off the top of the money they gave me – a 40% service charge. They never noticed. At night, I searched the wastepaper bins for scraps – an uneaten pickle from a deli sub if I was lucky, a cigarette stub if I wasn’t – before returning to my stoop to sleep beneath the stars.

Things were different back then. You didn’t need a university education or a grammar school accent to get ahead. A man was not judged on the strength of his C.V, but the tenacity he displayed in sitting on your doorstep for six weeks straight.

Mr Whats-His-Name was impressed. A fortnight later a vacancy opened when the Features Editor, Alvah Fitzgerald, who was also the janitor, was laid off with gout. It was funny because I’d been dosing the newsroom’s whiskey decanter with trace amounts of mercury in the hopes that someone would kick it and make way for me, but old Alvah was a port man through and through and never touched the stuff. Sometimes the universe just delivers.

This was it, I told myself, I was moving up to the big leagues. When the Editor-in-Chief called me into the office he shared with the cleaning supplies, I was beaming like a brat on Christmas morn. Not that I ever had a Christmas morning. My father filled our stockings with coal – and that was only if we were good.

“Hear me now, boyo,” the editor motioned for me to take a seat in a cushioned armchair beside the liquor cabinet. After weeks of sitting on concrete, you can’t imagine what a delight that was for my ass cheeks. I thought it was a sign of things to come. “You make a cracking cup of tea, no doubt about it, but your illiteracy is a stumbling block for a newspaper man. I can’t offer you the job.”

I was gutted. I'd had my low times before, but I didn't think I'd recover from that blow. Turns out, fate had something else in store for Owain Jenkins. The next day the *Gazette* building burnt down in a blazing fire that killed three men and left the rest with life-altering injuries. I remember standing across the street, watching the flames consume the cladding, thinking, "there but for the grace of God go I."

I took a job at the Ebbw Vale Steel Works after that. The hours were long, the pay was shit, and the work was backbreaking. I toiled away, driving the steel piles, insulating the pipelines. Not gonna lie though, I did skive a fair bit. I was a big drinker back then and after a few bevvies with the boys I would disappear for days to roll around the boudoirs of Blaenau Gwent without so much as a by-your-leave to the boss man. No one had a bad word to say about me, though. Even if I only worked two shifts out of seven, I got more done than the other men. I was a bloody hard worker when I could be bothered.

The Steel Works were alright, like, but I knew I was meant for more. I was destined for something, even when the whole world made me feel like less than nothing. The money was regular though, and that's how they get you. I spent twenty-two years at the plant, settling into a life of working-class drudgery, punching my timecard and counting down the days until retirement. It was an industrial accident that saved my life.

Now, I'm not going to rehash how it all happened. I did enough of that in the courtroom. I'll just say, through gross corporate negligence and no fault of my own, I lost three of my left toes to a smelting iron. I was livid. I sued for damages and the judge, who happened to be a mate of mine, found in my favour. There were whispers that I was hamming it up for the jury when I turned up in a full body cast, but only God can judge me. The Steel Works were ordered to compensate me a large sum of money which I invested into the finest local sex workers and the caravan park that would make my fortune.

Now that I had capital behind me, I knew it was time to leave the valleys and make my way in the big city. Swansea City. Within weeks I'd ingratiated myself with the Tafia – the Welsh speaking elite who pull the strings behind the scenes. I was worlds away from the steel works. I knew I'd made it when Colin Charvis invited me over for iced tea on his veranda and asked my advice on starting up his carpet-laying

company. Soon all the big names were lining up for a piece of Owain Jenkins. I had the Lord Mayor on speed-dial and Carwyn Jones eating out the palm of my hand – although I later found out that this was a sexual peccadillo that he asked all his guests to indulge. I often thought of my old man as I sipped Sidecars on the terrace of Langland Golf Club, watching the sun set on the green with Mal Pope – who was always asking me how to improve his over-par. “If you could see me now,” I said to my dead old dad. “You fucking cunt. I fucking made it, you piece of shit.”

I’d had a taste of the good life and I wanted more. I got greedy. Like Icarus, I flew too close to the sun – which is not something we see much of down this way. Now, don’t get me wrong, in the words of my hero, Gordon Gecko, “greed is good.” But I got sloppy. I thought I was untouchable. Turns out, it was my time to be touched.

Most of it wasn’t my fault. Yes, I made a series of ill-advised speculations on a Las Vegas roulette wheel, but I could have recouped those losses if the croupier hadn’t accused me of playing with forged dollar bills and banned me for life. I still dispute those claims, but if the money was fake it must have been the bloody Bureau de Change. Never trust the French.

The second bit of bad luck was out of my hands. It was the fucking recession, weren’t it? People tightened their belts and there was a sharp downturn in the popularity of mobile-home holidays in the South Wales valleys. You can’t make people spend two weeks in a caravan if they don’t want to. I learned that the hard way. I was given a few months in the slammer for my strong-arm tactics and it made me a better man, I’ll tell you that. It was in Her Maj’s prison, Cardiff, that I discovered transcendental meditation and now whenever I’m tamping, I take a trip through the Cosmos using the power of my mind. That and a cuppa always sets me right.

When I was released from the clink, I was destitute. It was a humiliating experience watching the bailiffs pack up my twelve-bedroom villa in the gated community I shared with many of Wales’ power players. Bonnie Tyler, Catherine Zeta and David Hasslehoff were always over at my pad when I was on the upswing, but when the tides turned, they didn’t want to know. I traded the personalised plates of my brand-new Subaru for a Ford Focus with a flat tyre and waved goodbye to the

life I'd loved. Michael Douglas was nosing from the window of Bonnie's mansion as I made the drive from the Hollywood of Mumbles to a bed-sit in Birdwater.

I'd love to say that when life knocked me down, I got right back up. I didn't. I spent the next twelve months on the sofa eating my feelings and watching Jeremy Kyle in my skivvies. What hurt most was that none of my fair-weather friends were there to see me off. When the chips are down, you realise who your real mates are – and they aren't Bonnie Tyler, David Hasslehoff, or Catherine Zeta Jones, mind my words.

## Chapter Ten

When Eleri awoke the next morning, she was amazed she had slept at all. The bump of VerdantVitality snorted from the control panel of her father's spin bike at midnight had not helped. She was going to quit, she swore, but she could not think straight while it sat beneath the floorboards. Her intention was to strap herself to the elliptical machine, like Odysseus to the ship's mast, but the workout felt harder without chemical assistance. She reasoned with herself – another hit couldn't hurt.

The night passed by in a blur of frenetic motion. She lunged from one piece of exercise equipment to another. There was an awful energy inside of her that could not be contained. The movement overtook all other concerns. The pounding bass of Robert's curated workout playlist interrupted the frequency of her thoughts. All that mattered was the L.E.D flash of her calorie expenditure as it ticked up and up like stocks on Wall Street.

She could hear the local pub letting out at 11pm, the men rowdy as they stumbled beneath her window. At midnight she heard foxes screaming in the cemetery across the street. By 3am it was silent. The town slept as her legs spun.

At five she found herself slumped over the spin bike, the pedals freewheeling beneath her. The pigtailed instructor's screamed instructions went unheeded on screen. Eleri's phone buzzed on the dashboard, vibrating against her cheek. One eye open, the other screwed tight, she regarded it with a sleepy disinterest. The number was withheld. Half-conscious, she was vaguely aware that the call could be important. It might be Jamie, on a comedown and overcome with remorse, ready to take her side.

"Wake up loser, we've got work to do."

It was Robert, his telephone manner a little too brusque before breakfast.

She peeled herself from the bike as her vertebrae cracked into place one by one. "What work is worth doing at butt o'clock in the morning?"

"The Lord's work!" Robert replied with more enthusiasm than a man should muster before dawn. Eleri could hear his laboured breathing, his footsteps pounding

the pavement, and suspected his cheer came from the pre-workout he was chugging on the way to the gym. "I'm teaching Aqua Aerobics at six," he continued, his pace increasing as the caffeine kicked in. "I need you to meet me at the park at seven."

"Huh?"

"I've been hitting up this group on Mumsnet. New mothers. Desperate to shed the baby weight but too exhausted to do anything about it. We're making a shit-ton off them."

Eleri knew the type of women he meant. Young mothers neglected by husbands who had not realised that parenthood would be so hard, or that the hard work would be expected of them too. Husbands who hid in their offices, afraid of their wives' unrecognisable bodies, stretched and scarred by childbirth and sewn back together with threads they feared would unstitch at their touch. These women had been told, long before labour, that their lives would be returned to them, unchanged, as soon as they got back to their pre-pregnancy weight. It did not surprise Eleri that Robert wanted to capitalise on their suffering.

"Why do I have to be there?" she asked, moving towards the window to pull the black-out curtain aside. It was still dark out, the streetlights casting reflections on the tarmac. The paper-man trundled his newspaper trolley up the hill, hood pulled over his head. She could hear the slap of his flip-flops against wet tarmac. Opposite her, Number 11 was twitching behind her bedroom blinds. Eleri followed her gaze towards Number 12 who was dragging a large duffle bag towards the boot of his car. Eleri caught his attention and waved. He pulled his baseball cap over his eyes and did not wave back. She wondered if he was going on a trip.

"Jamie."

"You what?" Eleri returned her focus to the telephone call, shutting the curtains on the street below.

"He's acting weird," Robert clarified. "We need to keep an eye on him. I need you to sound him out, find out what's up."

Eleri held her breath. If Jamie was suspected of defection, did Owain know of her own thought crimes?

“Okay,” she replied after some consideration. It might be the only chance she would get to speak to Jamie. He was dodging her calls, leaving her texts on read. “Does he know I’m coming?”

“Nah,” Robert assured her. “He’d bail if he did. He’s not your biggest fan. But I think he’ll open up to you.”

“Wait – he doesn’t like me?” Eleri was hurt. The evidence was overwhelming – the eyerolling, the ignored messages, the refused friend requests – but it still stung.

Robert’s response was blasé. “He hates you.”

“What did he say about me?” she demanded, unsure whether she wanted to know.

“Not much. He just mentioned a few times he thinks you’re weird and annoying and not to invite you out with us anymore.”

Eleri took a moment to recover from this unexpected blow. Collecting herself, she asked, “why would he talk to me then?”

“He trusts you,” Robert said. “He may not like you, but he trusts you.”

“Why?” Eleri could think of no reason for Jamie to place any faith in her.

“Uh –” Robert hesitated. “No offence – he meant it in the nicest way possible – but he said you’re too dumb to be duplicitous. I think the phrase he used was ‘trusty retard’.”

“God!” Eleri snorted her indignation. “It’s 2019! You can’t say that. I mean, not that I have anything against retards. Retards are valid. I’m not offended that he thinks I’m a retard, I’m offended that he thinks ‘retard’ is an insult.”

“Talk to him,” Robert cut her off. “Tell him you’re thinking of getting out. See what he says.”

Eleri raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Her mind raced with possibilities. Was this a trap? Had Owain discovered her fraternisation with Deep Throat? He may have been a whistle-blower, but he was not a brave man. When it came down to it, he would sell Eleri out in a second to save his own skin.

An adolescence ensconced in the tradition of great American mafia movies had prepared Eleri for all possibilities. Snitches got stitches, but she suspected she would not make it to the hospital. She gulped, praying that her paranoia was nothing more than the teeth-grinding amounts of speed she'd unwittingly been imbibing.

"I'll be there."

"Awesome! We can go for pancakes after," Robert smiled through the telephone line. "I mean, we won't eat them. We'll get a booth at the greasy spoon, drink black coffee, and smell everything those fat cunts on mobility scooters order."

\*

Eleri was dressed in minutes. She needed to move before she lost her nerve. She pulled on her Nike Flyknits, called goodbye to her father, perhaps for the last time, and ran out the front door, not stopping until she reached the playpark beside the leisure centre.

The rusted gate swung shut behind her, the wind clinking its jailer's key against the railings. The round-a-bout groaned for WD40. The zip-wire rattled against the rain its rhythm made frantic with each gust of wind. Benches offered in memory of long-forgotten loved ones stood sentry along the outskirts. Jamie was sitting on a swing-set, the breeze rocking him back and forth like the ghost of a childhood memory.

Eleri imagined he had not spent much time playing in this park as a child. His family never left the takeaway counter. The chip shop grind was gruelling. She remembered Mr Lupinetti volunteering to speak at their Sixth-Form careers fair. None of the other parents were there. He took it upon himself to appear in hairnet and tabard amongst the army recruitment officers and higher education advisors. She remembered the excitement with which he spoke of his daily routine. The pre-dawn potato peeling. The four am fish market trips. From sunrise to sunset he



stooped over the deep fat fryer, feeding it with oil, watching it hiss and spit its thanks. The lecture made Eleri appreciate the effort that went into her chippy tea, but it did not convince her that fried fish was her vocation. Now, she wondered whether Jamie would have been happier if he had followed in his father's footsteps. It was dangerous to dream of more than the life they'd been given. She saw that now.

"Alright?" Eleri addressed herself to the pale figure on the swing. He glanced up, a haunted look in his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" He scrambled to his feet. "Get lost."

"We need to talk about last night."

"I don't know what you're talking about." He folded his arms over his chest, eyes fixed upon the laces of his Fred Perry plimsols.

"I think you do." Eleri was unwilling to elaborate. For all she knew, Jamie was wearing a wire. She worried her words were being transmitted straight back to a white van filled with recording equipment. "I think you know exactly what I'm talking about."

"What are you on about, you mad cunt?" Jamie's eyes widened, sweat trickling down the slope of his forehead. He tugged at the collar of his shirt, suddenly too warm in his woollen coat.

"Hey, that's no way to talk to a lady."

Eleri flinched at the sound of Robert's voice. It was no more than a whisper, but it rattled around her skull like a scream. He appeared at her side as though summoned from the underworld, manifesting in a swirl of smoke. He held a black umbrella overhead, his silhouette unsettling with this ominous accessory.

Jamie gave Eleri a look that suggested she was no lady.

"Are we ready?" Robert asked, stubbing a cigarette beneath the heel of his weightlifting shoes. He glanced over his shoulder towards a group of women in their early thirties. They sat around a picnic bench at the edge of the playground, shielded from the elements by a floral-print parasol.

The women sat with postures perfected by Pilates and personal trainers. They kept themselves like exhibits in an art gallery – to be admired from afar. Up close, Eleri could see the brush strokes. Their cracks were filled in with concealer and pressed powder. The flaws in the façade could not be covered with expensive cosmetics. Fingernails bitten down to the quick tapped against the wooden slats of the table. Red-veined eyes stared into the distance. Downy hair furred their thin wrists, catching in their Pandora bracelets.

“Ladies, you all look fantastic!” Robert told them. “The VerdantVitality lifestyle is really working wonders for you.”

The women smiled wanly. Eleri took in their poured concrete complexions, the thinning of their salon honeyed hair. They looked like they were on a hospice outing, Eleri thought, not without envy. Her own fingers circled her wrist, reassuring herself that finger and thumb could still touch.

“Cerys,” Robert’s voice interrupted Eleri’s thoughts. “Either that’s an unflattering coat, or you’ve gained a few.”

A woman in a Sweaty Betty bodywarmer refused to meet his eyes.

“I –” she glanced down at the gap between her thighs. “I’ve not been feeling well. I just thought I’d cut down on the supplements a bit. Eat a few more carbs. My husband is worried about me. I don’t want to set a bad example for my children.”

Robert’s mood turned like the weather. The bright sunlight of his attention was hidden behind a gathering storm cloud. They all sensed the change in climate and hastened to find shelter before the lightning struck.

“If you had a life-threatening infection,” Robert snarled. “Would you stop taking your antibiotics?”

“Well – it’s not quite the same.”

“Obesity is a disease!” Robert’s umbrella twirled above him like a weathervane. “Don’t make excuses, make results.”

“She’s not obese –” Eleri wanted to interrupt but was stopped short by Robert’s Medusa-stare.

“Enough chit-chat.” He clapped his hands together. Eleri and Jamie sprang into action. Eleri reached for the backpack at her feet, realising too late Jamie’s intent to beat her to it. They butted heads like rams in rutting season, each reeling back and clutching their skulls in exaggerated agonies.

“Motherfucker,” cursed Eleri, blinking as she tried to regain her balance. Jamie recovered faster than she could, scrambling on his hands and knees towards the bag and gathering it in his arms.

Robert did not allow his showman smile to falter as he watched his associates writhing on the wood-chipped ground. She knew he was making a mental note of the disciplinary measures their unprofessional conduct would bring; laps around the park until dark, pull ups from the monkey bars, squat jumps onto the see-saws.

“Thank you, Jamie,” Robert said through gritted teeth as Jamie began to take the women’s orders. “Remember, girls, minimum purchases are going up. I’ll be emailing your new meal plans and supplement dosages this evening. It’s nearly party season and you do not want to be the only one at your husband’s office party that can’t fit into body-con.”

“Actually,” a lady with a deflated blow-out raised her hand. “This season it’s all about loose draping. We’re still going with sparkles for parties, but it’s a more relaxed, classical vibe.”

“Shut up,” Robert instructed. Eleri knew he would never entertain the idea of dresses that did not require weeks of preparation to slip into. “You want to be the girl in the moo-moo, fine. But don’t come crying to me when Patrick doesn’t get a pay raise.”

The women bowed their heads, cowed into submission. Eleri imagined they had given up their own ambitions to support their husbands. In their new roles as wives and mothers they were meant to make it all look effortless. If their unflattering outfits jeopardised their partner’s job prospects, they had failed in their work.

The women hardly seemed to notice as Jamie crept around their feet, prising rubber-banded rolls of fifty-pound notes from their hands and replacing them with VerdantVitality packages. Eleri watched, an uneasy sensation settling in the pit of

her stomach. She knew you could hang yourself with enough hope, but for these women the noose was a Hermès scarf.

“Be good this week, girls,” Robert called as the yummy mummies collected their Kate Spade handbags and dispersed from the picnic bench, leaving behind half-drunk lattes and untouched tubs of overnight oats. “No stuffing your faces with your kids’ leftovers,” he added, his eyes narrowing as Cerys shuffled past.

Eleri and Jamie waved their half-hearted goodbyes. Robert’s smile faded as the gate swung shut behind the last young mother. He leant upon the handle of his umbrella, its tip speared into the ground, massaging the aching muscles of his cheeks. An air of solemn reflection had settled upon him like the fine drizzling of rain. Eleri sensed this was their chance to talk. She was sure he did not know the extent of what he was involved in. He was too handsome to harbour ill intent. When you were that beautiful the world opened itself up like an oyster to you, raw and aching, begging to be taken. Robert’s only crime was kindness. He wanted to save the genetically damned. Jesus Christ, with a face like that, it was hard not to believe in salvation.

“Rob, can we –” she placed a hand upon his shoulder. Her sentence was still born when she saw the way he looked at her fleshy fingers. “Talk?”

Robert gave a slight nod of his head. He looked as though this was the last thing he wanted, but Eleri pressed on.

“Is VerdantVitality –” she paused, wishing she could stop speaking in ellipses. “Is it legit?”

“What do you mean?” She felt his shoulder tense beneath her touch. He cast a backwards glance at Jamie who was slumped over the picnic bench, his face hidden behind Tupperware containers and coffee cups.

“I’ve heard rumours,” Eleri continued as though she were crossing shark infested waters over steppingstones. “There are people saying that VerdantVitality isn’t an all-natural supplement.”

“Haters going to hate.”

“They’re saying it’s – amphetamines.”

“Ridiculous.”

“That Owain has a criminal past,” Eleri pushed on. “That he’s been involved in some seriously shady shit.”

“Poppycock and nonsense,” Robert replied with a twirl of his umbrella. Eleri was not sure why these accusations had transformed him into a turn-of-the-century dandy, but she was determined to find out how much he really knew.

“Rob, I know you’re not involved in any of that,” she assured him. “But, is it possible Owain isn’t telling us everything?”

“I trust Owain with my life,” Robert looked her dead in the eyes, his conviction undermined by the tremor in his voice.

Eleri opened her mouth to speak, but before she could navigate the stormy seas of their conversation, Robert wrested the tiller from her control.

“We don’t spend enough time together,” he told her. “Outside of work.”

Eleri was surprised that their daily workouts – not together, but in the same vicinity – were not enough for him.

“We should hang out sometime.”

“Like a date?” The words limbo-ed between Eleri’s lips before she could stop them. She heard Jamie snort with laughter disguised as a snore. Inwardly she died a thousand deaths but retained her composure. It was ridiculous to dream that a man like Robert could see past her plainness. That only happened to Victoria’s Secret models who fell in love with tech billionaires. Eleri’s personality was no better than her looks and her bank account looked like a love letter from Liam Byrne – she was afraid there was no money.

“Yeah, a date,” Robert was grinning at her.

“For real?” Eleri’s palms were sweating. She wiped her hands on her jacket and gazed up at him. She knew he despised non-exercise induced perspiration.

“For real.”

The rain began to pour down. Robert opened his umbrella and invited Eleri beneath it. He held the gate open for her and led her past the lake where, as a little

girl, she had spent Sunday afternoons tossing chunks of bread into the rippling water. She glanced at the mothers clutching bags of frozen peas at the water's edge, their children more interested in games of Angry Birds on their iPads than the ducks that waddled by dreaming of the feasts of their ancestors.

Jamie was abandoned. Her mission aborted. She had not forgotten about him, she simply ceased to care.

"So, can I squire you about town sometime?" Robert asked, stopping at the wooden fencing where nature met its match in the poured concrete carpark.

"I'd fucking love that!" Eleri shrieked. Then she remembered a *Cosmopolitan* article she had read in her orthodontist's waiting room. "If I can find the time. I've got a heap of Tinder matches to fuck my way through, if you know what I mean."

"That wasn't a euphemism," Robert muttered, taking long strides towards Mrs Polizzi's car and away from Eleri. "So, yeah. I know what you mean."

"Call me!" she yelled after him, wondering why he hadn't offered her a lift home.

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Eleri did not mind walking. The rain had cleared. The sun peered out from its fortress of clouds. She was too excited to go home, and the exercise would help her focus. The calendar declared that today was her monthly rest day, but the fitness tracker strapped to her wrist neither knew nor cared. It buzzed its outrage at her minimal energy expenditure, expecting its arbitrary quota to be met regardless of her body's protestations.

She did not know how far she'd walked when she found herself blinking beneath flickering strip lights. She looked around, trying to orient herself in unfamiliar surroundings. As she came to her senses, the place became at once recognizable. It

was the run-down old Kwiksave that she used to go to with her mother after her weekly piano lessons with the loathsome Mrs Tibbett. She recalled Celyn plying her with sweet treats and ice slushies to keep her from crying as she rubbed cold cream onto ruler spanked knuckles – the old lady’s revenge for one too many mangled arpeggios. Eleri remembered driving miles to get to her lessons and could not understand how she had ended up there now, so far from home.

She paced the narrow aisles, her eyes roving over dusty shelves filled with treats not seen since childhood. There was something comforting about these recalled products, despite their danger.

Mr Chichikov, the owner, sat behind a single checkout. He was an island in a sea of expired groceries. A photograph hung on the wall behind him of the day the store opened. His hands were clasped in the mayor’s, a grin upon his face that Eleri had never seen in real life. He looked young, or at least younger. Eleri imagined that an adolescence spent burying babies in the backyards of rural Russia – one brother kicked to death by a horse, another fallen victim to a friendly game of William Tell – had taken its toll on the man.

In the photograph, she could sense his excitement. He had just bought into a franchise he believed would make his fortune, only to end up thirty years later as the sole vanguard of the KwikSave concession – the last man in a forgotten outpost, holding on to an averted past, not knowing the world moved on without him.

“Eleri?”

She was staring at the deep grooves of Mr Chichikov’s forehead when the voice called her name. She looked to his lips. They had not moved. The voice tried again, louder this time. It was not coming from the Russian.

“Marcus?” she turned to face him with a smile that stretched the circumference of her face.

They hadn’t seen each other since the breakup. He looked the same, though she hardly knew him anymore.

“How are you?” he asked after a moment of silence held in respect for the pieces of them that lay scattered across the battlefield of their relationship.

“Feelin’ fine!” Eleri said, aching from the effort of acting naturally. “Real good!”

“That’s good.” The rhythm of Marcus’ nodding head matched the frantic pace of her own.

“Better than good. More human than human.” She let out an unsettling laugh and pointed to his *Blade Runner* T-shirt. There was a certain sadness in knowing she could never watch that movie again.

“Shit, I always knew you were a replicant.” He echoed her laughter. It spoke in place of words best left unsaid.

“How about you?” she asked.

She did not want to know. Her mind wandered as his lips moved. She was pissed off that he was seeing her like this. She wanted to devastate him with a big reveal, like Sandy in *Grease* or Carrie in the Stephen King novel. She imagined herself strutting through the town centre, oiled abdominals and rock-hard thighs showcased in a high-waisted bikini, her hair – which had grown several yards and achieved an enviable lustre – blowing behind her. Instead, her unmade face was as grey and unsettled as the skies. She was dressed to keep out the cold that settled in her bones and would not thaw. She’d worn her father’s ski-jacket – a memento from a summer spent instructing on the Alps – and a pair of thermal fleece leggings safety-pinned to her underwear to keep them from slipping down to her knees.

“Are you okay?” Marcus snapped his fingers in front of her face, the temperature dropping a centigrade as his gaze flickered over her. “What’s with the VerdantVitality merch?” He indicated the green baseball cap perched atop the snarl of her unwashed hair. “You haven’t joined that pyramid scheme, have you? The women at work keep conning me into pity-buying those protein shakes off them.”

“It’s not a pyramid scheme,” Eleri chanted the company motto. “It’s not a scam.”

“It’s still profiting from women’s insecurities and propagating diet culture. And it makes you shit yourself.”

Eleri glared at him. She took in his oversized military fatigues and the badges pinned to his lapel declaring ‘UP THE IRA’ and ‘MERTHYR RISING’. Her eyes



skimmed the uncut curls and 70s sideburns. She remembered why she'd left him. Or, at least, why she'd allow him to leave.

"As a feminist, you should respect my right to do whatever I please with my body."

"We both know there's no such thing as choice feminism," Marcus countered.

"VerdantVitality empowers women to be the best version of themselves," Eleri repeated the words she'd been taught.

"Do you believe that?"

"Of course." She spoke with a certainty she did not possess. It was easy for Robert. He seemed to deliver such lines without a second of doubt. He believed human flourishing came from physical perfection and intellect was an obstacle to be surmounted in its attainment. She believed it when she was with him, but the doubt crept in on her own.

"Okay, well, good luck then."

They stood in sullen silence, listening to Natalie Imbruglia whining through the speakers. Diplomatic negotiations were at an impasse and there was no *entente cordiale* to take home to their embassies.

"Did you get the ice cream, honey?"

Marcus' fiancée emerged from behind the potatoes. Noticing Eleri, she wrapped her little hands around Marcus' arm and rested her cheek upon his shoulder.

"Who's this, sweetie?" she asked in a voice as cloying as clotted cream.

Eleri stared at them, outraged that her usurper did not recognise her.

"This is Eleri," Marcus reminded Bronwen, planting a gentle kiss upon her forehead.

"Yo," Eleri said, folding her arms across her chest.

Bronwen's eyes widened. "Eleri." She uttered the name as if she knew her intimately. Eleri worried that she did.

She imagined long nights in which the couple lay in bed together creating a catalogue of Eleri's failings. "She was awful in the sack," he would say. "She never showered, and she still thinks Chuck Palahniuk has something valid to say." "How embarrassing!" Bronwen would squeal, nestling her face against his bare chest. "You're so much better off without that loser." Marcus would agree. Then they would make the kind of passionate love Eleri was incapable of.

She flushed at the thought. Bronwen held her gaze for a moment, a suppressed smirk twitching at the corners of her lips.

"We should go." Marcus turned to Bronwen, his hand resting upon the swell of her stomach. Eleri's eyes followed Bronwen's fingers as they entwined themselves with Marcus', patting the bump beneath her maxi-dress. "The ice-cream is going to melt."

"Congratulations," Eleri whispered.

Marcus' eyebrows arched into question marks.

"On the baby," she elaborated, pointing to Bronwen's belly. "Bold move. I respect your decision to bring more children into this plastic-choked wasteland."

The couple said nothing. Eleri took in the new softness of Bronwen's once angular face, the fleshy folds beneath her armpits, the curve of skin beneath her chin.

"I'm not pregnant," Bronwen corrected her with a distinct chill in her voice that had nothing to do with the freezer aisle. "I've gained a little love chub, that's all." She smiled up at Marcus who was cupping her buttocks. He gave them an appreciative squeeze, oblivious to Eleri's pained expression.

"You look beautiful," Marcus whispered into her ear, his teeth nibbling at the lobe.

"Shit, sorry," Eleri mumbled, turning on her heel and heading towards the exit. "I should go."

She was a woman used to making social faux pas. It was not embarrassment that sent her flying, but sheer terror. She was appalled that the girl whose lithe legs she'd envied, whose flat stomach sent her into paroxysms of anguish, could have let

herself go so completely. Two calendar months of Marcus' love had destroyed her body. She was monstrous, bloated beyond recognition by ten pounds of relaxation.

"Aren't you going to buy those?" Bronwen called as Eleri fled, motioning to the chocolate bars melting in her clenched fists. Eleri glanced down, unable to recall picking them from the shelves.

"No," she shook her head, flinging the confectionary at Bronwen in horror at what she'd almost done. She could not eat that. She'd seen the ravages that unrestricted eating wrought on Bronwen's once beautiful body. She would not allow the same fate to befall her.

As she stepped out onto the street, she felt her intestines knotting themselves into a noose. Any sadness she felt at seeing Marcus was drowned out by the screaming drill-sergeant in her head. She needed to text Robert, to get to the gym, to focus on her meal plan, her macros, her goals. She would not become like Bronwen, she swore. If that was the cost of happiness, Eleri would retreat to the toll-booth free safety of misery.

## Chapter Eleven

Eleri returned home with a renewed sense of determination. Marcus' dismissal of VerdantVitality strengthened her faith in it. She began to doubt Deep Throat. She trusted Robert. Jamie probably deserved that beating and Owain wasn't so bad. It was classic self-sabotage the psychologist she no longer saw would say. She was finally getting everything she wanted – the banging body, the hot guy – but she could not allow herself to enjoy it. She needed to forget her suspicions and celebrate her success. Besides, she had a date to get ready for.

A week passed and she heard nothing from Robert. They saw each other at the gym where he acknowledged her with a curt nod and a brusque hello, but there was no invitation. She didn't mind. The longer he made her wait, the more weight she would lose. She would be worthy of him when he wanted her.

A week later, Robert's summons arrived in the form of a shirtless selfie and a text that said, "what are you wearing?" It was followed by a blushing emoji and the retraction of his previous statement. "Wrong number." Eleri seized upon this mistake to open a conversation, inviting herself along to the church fête that Sunday. She knew he would be competing in the Mr Most Muscular contest and offered to accompany him – for moral support.

"It's a date," she signed off with a flurry of kisses.

"I guess," Robert replied with less enthusiasm.

On Sunday morning, Eleri's vain preparations began. She wanted to be beautiful for Robert, even if he would not acknowledge it. She woke early to light candles and listen to Lana Del Rey as she waxed and tweezed before the mirrored wall of her father's workout room.

She was not the sort of girl to linger over her appearance. She knew other women relished the pageantry of 'getting ready'. They draped their shea-buttered bodies across chaise-lounges and waited for their nails to dry, their hair to curl, their makeup to set. They sat in silk kimonos and sipped from champagne flutes, admiring their girlfriends' décolletage and lamenting their own flat chests. This ritual was as

shrouded in mystery to Eleri as it was to the men who admired it. She recoiled from the hot wand scorching her earlobes, the wax strips reddening her upper lip. No man was worth it – until Robert.

She had always stumbled into relationships. They happened to her, not because of her. Marcus' courtship had taken place over MSN messenger and in the booths of fast-food franchises. She only realised they were a couple after it was too late to be otherwise. It was different with Robert. His interest was an accomplishment. He could have any woman he wanted and for this one afternoon he wanted Eleri. Or he was willing to put up with her, at least.

Making herself gorgeous was more difficult than she'd imagined. She rifled through her suitcase, her despair increasing with each discarded item. Between the novelty slogan T-shirts and the not-opaque-enough leggings, there was nothing in her wardrobe that should be worn to impress a man. She was yet to make any money off VerdantVitality – in fact she had lost hundreds of her father's carefully rolled bank notes – and so buying a new outfit was out of the question.

She was about to call Robert and cancel when she remembered her mother's abandoned bedroom at the end of the hall. The boudoir retained her feminine effects like sacred relics. There was something profane in Eleri's invasion of this sanctified space. The scent of Chanel No.5 still perfumed the air, lingering like the ghost of the woman Celyn had once been.

In her mother's old makeup bag were tubes of half-used Clinique foundations in varying shades, the tops left off and the contents dried. Eleri's face became an artist's palette as she blended the remnants into a singular hue, her complexion mottled beyond recognition. She dusted a sparkling powder across her forehead and chin which made the skin shine with the lustre of overactive sebaceous glands. From a YouTube tutorial she learnt how to sweep kohl pencil across her eyelids until they glittered as black as the coal her town was built on.

Eleri's appearance needed to reflect Robert's success. She chose a satin gown in a deep claret from her mother's wardrobe. Celyn had worn it only once to a Mayoral Ball in 2004, after a patristic tapeworm whittled her down to a size eight for the first time since Eleri's mewling arrival into the world. As she slipped it over her head, Eleri was surprised to find the material hung from her like tarpaulin. She stood

before the full-length mirror, clutching the ruched bodice to her sunken breasts, her hip bones as sharp as hunting knives beneath the thick fabric. She shrugged. It was nothing a few safety pins and a well-placed belt could not fix.

As she was duct-taping herself into place, the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it!” she shrieked from the landing. She could hear Ian, roused from his depression nap, stumbling towards the door. It would not do to have Robert, waiting with car service and corsage, to meet her unwashed-for-weeks father.

She sprinted down the stairs in her stilettos, skidding to a halt before the front door. She took a deep breath, brushed the creases from her dress, before greeting her suitor.

“The fuck you wearing?” Nick asked, leaning against the doorframe, lips curled into a sneer at the sight of her.

“My thoughts exactly,” Ian concurred, peering over the porch’s swing gate.

“Where’s Rob?” Eleri asked. She gazed over Nick’s shoulder, hoping to find Robert holding open the door of a stretch limousine.

Nick stepped aside to allow her a clear view of Mrs Polizzi’s newly purchased S.U.V idling in the driveway. Through the dark-tinted windshield Eleri caught a glance of Robert hunched in the front seat, his hood up, sunglasses covering his eyes.

“Is he okay?” she asked. “Is he sick?”

“He’s in the best shape of his life,” Nick snapped. “Do not tell him he looks sick. Do not psyche him out before the contest.”

Eleri nodded in awe of Nick’s authoritative tone. Gone were the colloquialisms and casual curse words. In their place were the decisive directions of a man who knew how to get shit done.

“Before we get in the car,” he continued, stretching an arm across the entranceway. “There are some ground rules. We have a packed itinerary today and I need you on board.”

She looked at the laminated schedule that Nick held in front of her. The day was planned to the split second – from the application of Robert’s competition tan to the one drop of Smart Water (chosen for its low sodium content) to be applied to his cracked lips by a medical-grade glass dropper ninety-five minutes before he took to the stage.

“I’ve written your name in blue next to the tasks you’ve been assigned.” Nick’s index finger tapped its way across the page where Eleri discovered her name no less than twenty-three times. “Do not speak to him,” he hissed as he hooked his arm around hers and ushered her towards the car. “He’s doing his positive visualisation exercises.”

Eleri’s eyes met Mrs Polizzi’s in the rear-view mirror as she slid into the backseat. Her Ian Rankin audiobook played over the muffled beat of gangster rap from Robert’s headphones. They drove in silence, Ross Kemp talking for them, his Edinburgh accent abandoned.

“My old man always told me; when things are looking up, you’d better look over your shoulder. There were no leads in the investigation, and I looked like a right prick for fingering the wrong guy – then again, you always look like a prick when you’ve got a hard-on for a criminal that ain’t committed a crime. But in my experience – you always trust your prick. And that guy was a right prick.”

“I show no love to homo thugs,” DMX warned.

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The church fête took place every July. This year was notable for the event being postponed until the end of November. The organisational committee had cited “artistic differences” for the delay. As Mrs Polizzi pulled into the gravelled carpark of St Leonard’s church, Eleri wondered if it would not have been better to cancel altogether. The mid-morning downpour had flooded the glebe fields and storm

clouds were reconvening overhead. Parishioners trudged past in wellingtons and raincoats, clutching the hands of children who sank to their waists in the mud.

"I'll just wait here," Mrs Polizzi announced, turning around in her seat to seek her son's approval.

"Mam," Nick rolled his eyes. "Mrs Morgan is in the Seychelles. She isn't entering the Best Preserves competition this year."

"I don't care," Mrs Polizzi shook her head, swallowing rapidly as though drinking her own tears. "That woman has won five years in a row and it's not because her marmalade is any good." She turned to Eleri and added in a theatrical aside, "she's sleeping with the head judge. Everyone knows."

"He's her husband, so she probably isn't sleeping with him," Nick snorted.

"I won't enter my damson *marc de champagne* jam into a fixed event. I won't cast my pearls before swine. You hear me, Nicholas? I have the family pride to think of."

There wasn't time to argue the point. With a glance in the rear-view mirror, his sunglasses slipping to the tip of his nose, Robert let Nick know that the only contest that mattered was his. He attempted to clear his throat, but Eleri knew that days of severe fluid restriction and a night spent in the sauna had left him unable to summon the saliva to make a sound. It did not matter. Nick understood without words. The gang tumbled out of the car, racing towards the fields with their coats over their heads to hide from the rain, leaving Mrs Polizzi to listen to the last hours of her audiobook in peace.

Eleri had not attended the town's annual event since her primary school days. Her parents were not interested in local tradition or civic duties and before Eleri was old enough to tire of the tombola stands and coconut shies, they stopped taking her. Seeing it now, she could see why. It was a charmless, parochial affair. The bunting, hand-stitched by the arthritic hands of the W.I, waved like flags of surrender from collapsed tenting. The wind shook the white marquees, making them into Halloween ghouls who clanked their manacles and howled at the townsfolk. Eleri flinched as she read the signs above the stands. "Pin the Hat on the China Man." "Win Your Own Gollywog." "Hit the Hottentot Venus."



Robert trailed behind, stopping every few steps to hoist the waistband of his tracksuit up as it threatened to slip from his hips. Eleri watched as his eyes darted over tables laden with local produce; stone baked Welsh cakes dusted with cinnamon sugar, candied apples dipped in still warm caramel, fresh-from-the-oven fruit pies with lattices that glistened like the gates of Heaven.

“C’mon,” Nick instructed, circling his fingers around Robert’s wrist. “You can eat whatever you want once you win.”

Robert shuffled onwards, manacled to Nick by a loose grip. There was no fight left in him, no competitive edge. Eleri wondered if he would make it onstage.

“There you fucking are.”

Owain Jenkins had volunteered to take charge of the fair’s Dunk Tank and was delighting in his duties. He was reclining on a fold-out deck chair outside a candy-striped tent, a megaphone resting on his lap. He brought the speaker to his lips and clicked the trigger, repeating his statement.

“You’re fucking late,” he lowered the megaphone as he rose from his seat, his yellow raincoat rustling beneath his grass skirt and coconut bra. Eleri smiled. There was nothing menacing about a man in such a ridiculous outfit.

“Hello, poppet!”

Eleri’s mother was peering from the tent’s entrance, a trail of raffle tickets held in her hands. One arm was raised in greeting, her tennis bracelet slipping down her once plump wrist. The costume jewellery that cut off the circulation to her hands now hung from around her elbow. Eleri hadn’t seen her mother since the announcement of her upcoming nuptials, weeks ago. She did not look well. Perhaps it was the stress of planning a wedding whilst married to a man who had no intention of divorcing her, but Celyn had lost the weight that softened her features and obscured her age. She looked older now, her skin thin and crinkled like tissue paper.

“Fancy a go?” Celyn asked, her animated voice at odds with her appearance. “It’s for a good cause.”

Eleri could hear a mechanical lever being pulled inside the tent, the pulleys and cranks groaning into life. A man’s voice gasped, “oh God, oh Jesus Christ.” Eleri

flinched at the thud of flesh hitting ice cold water. Owain snorted with glee and Celyn clapped her hands together.

“That was old Neville Sedley from the town council,” Owain whispered conspiratorially. “I’ve been wanting to dunk that bastard since he vetoed my extension plans on the caravan park.”

“He’s ninety-three, darling.” Celyn swatted her paramour with the palm of her hand. “You’re so naughty.”

“She loves it,” Owain announced into the megaphone as he snaked an arm around her hips. “If you know what I mean.”

“Why are you wearing my Mayoral ball gown?” Celyn asked, turning to Eleri to hide her blushes.

Eleri shrugged. She did not need to explain herself to a woman whose sexual predilections had just been exposed to the entire congregation.

“Alright. Enough fannying about.” Owain clapped his hands together. The thunderclouds over head seemed to have dampened the brief pleasure he had taken in the dunking of the nonagenarian who dared cross him. “I greased a few palms to get the VerdantVitality booth next to some prime real estate. Rob, boyo, don’t forget to give us a plug while you’re up on stage.”

Robert managed a nod before collapsing into Nick’s open arms. Owain did not seem concerned.

“Remember – sell, sell, sell. We can make a shit-ton today if we play our cards right.” He dismissed the gang with a wave of his hand. “Nick – you’re in charge. Can you handle that?”

The weight of responsibility seemed to lay heavy upon Nick’s narrow shoulders as the gang marched towards the Events Stage. His brow, un-creased by a lifetime of coddling, began to furrow. He cast desperate glances at the laminated itinerary in his shaking hands. The stage was situated in the centre of the green, surrounded by speakers that loomed like monoliths above the churchyard. Eleri had read an article that morning on *Wales Online* about the plucky parish priest and the civic-minded councillor who took charge of the platform’s construction after cuts to

the council's budget meant they could not afford the contractors. The tradies turned up for the job, but their wages stretched as far as making snide comments on the shoddy workmanship and dipping biscuits into their builder's tea. The stage, though sloping to the left, passed the health and safety inspection after bearing up beneath the weight of the local radio breakfast show host – a man whose broadcasts came from a different greasy spoon across the county each morning in his search for the best bacon bap.

“We'll be kicking off the main event in a few short hours,” the DJ announced across the P.A system. “It's what you're all here to see.” Eleri smiled encouragingly at Robert. He was standing beside the stage, head lolling against Nick's shoulder as he struggled to stay conscious. “The Annual Fish and Chip Eating Contest, kindly sponsored by Tino Lupinetti, founder of our village's finest fried eating establishment.” The D.J patted the expansive gut that hung beneath his polo shirt. “I know I can't wait! But first, we've got this Most Muscular contest to get out the way.”

“I'm going to apply Rob's competition tan,” Nick said, turning to Eleri. “Help Jamie out with the booth.”

Adjacent to the stage was a fold-out Formica table draped in a VerdantVitality branded tablecloth. Jamie stood behind the counter, struggling to unfurl a six-foot banner. He was wearing his forest-green scrubs, unwashed and stained with blood. He was even more dishevelled than the last time she'd seen him, his pale face the canvas for an artist's experimental phase – broad brushstrokes of blues and greys beneath his eyes, stucco swirls of reds and purples at his temples.

“Sell, sell, sell,” Robert croaked his final battle-cry as Nick led him away with the tenderness of a nurse attending to an invalided soldier.

The fundraising effort for the fête had fallen short that year and the largest marquee served the dual purpose of a changing area for the bodybuilding contestants and the venue for the Great Welsh Bake Off. Eleri watched as the tarpaulin performed a tantalising striptease in the breeze, flashing glimpses of three-tiered chiffon cakes, towers of cream-filled *croquembouche* and trays of delicately iced sugar biscuits. She salivated as her eyes flickered over the forbidden delights. Beside the dainty pastries and pretty fancies, Nick peeled Robert's sweatshirt over his head, exposing abdominal muscles more hallowed than Christ on the cross.

Eleri's gaze followed the sensual movements of Nick's palms across Robert's chest as he massaged the deep mahogany oil into his skin. The eroticism of the moment was not enough to interest her. Her attention returned to the food.

"Stop perving and start working." Jamie waved a hand in front of her face. She noticed his eyes roving over Robert's body, taking it in with the same lust that she felt for the butter crust pecan pie.

"Nice to see you, mate," Eleri lied. "You're looking well."

"You look like a Victorian cocktail waitress at a hooker's funeral," Jamie retorted.

Eleri ignored him. She looked to the opposite end of the churchyard. Next to the anarchist collective's taco truck – where the operatives could not agree who was in charge – Marcus was setting up his Leftist book stall. This, she thought, was her chance to unveil her Revenge Body with the fury of Clytemnestra plunging a dagger into Agamemnon's sleeping form.

Bronwen was next to him. Her weight gain did nothing to diminish her beauty. Her auburn hair twirled in the breeze, the wind making an Ophelia of her. She giggled, fingers flying to her forehead to keep the curls from her face. Marcus' hands could not keep themselves from her waist, her hips, her thighs. There was no one perusing the array of Marxist tracts and out-of-print A.K Press editions on their table, but they didn't care. Their joy sent Eleri into paroxysms of misery.

She could not understand why she felt this way. She was here with Robert. He was perfect, she told herself, watching as he fussed with the sequins on his posing pouch. She was getting everything she wanted. She should be happy.

"You okay, hun?" Jamie asked without concern. His focus was on the pager clipped to the loose waistband of his scrubs. "I'm on call," he explained. "I should be at the hospital. There was a multi-car pileup on the M4 and I'm getting beeped every five minutes."

"You should go," Eleri managed to say. "I can cover."

"I can't," Jamie shook his head. "Owain would kill me."

Eleri wanted to say that Owain was a reasonable man, that he would understand, but they both knew he would not.

“Let’s just try and get through today,” she said with a sigh as she sat down on an uncomfortable plastic chair and began arranging black and white photocopies of the VerdantVitality treatise on the table before her.

The VerdantVitality stand was in a prime location. Equidistant between all the major food vendors, it was impossible to enjoy a hot-dog-on-a-stick without being silently rebuked. The fête was the perfect place to recruit repentant dieters. In a council-sanctioned stay of execution, citizens indulged themselves with Bacchic frenzy, their last meals lingered over all afternoon and into the night until the rising sun brought with it punishing consequences. “This is the last time,” they swore to themselves as they crammed cream cakes and custard tarts into their fat maws. “Diabetes be damned,” they howled. “The diet starts tomorrow!” VerdantVitality would do its best trade at the close of day, doling out indulgences to shamefaced sinners.

Eleri could not bring herself to hate them. She recognised her former self in their reckless abandon. She gripped the tablecloth, her palms sweating. She knew she was not so far removed from them as she would like to believe. She was never safe from her voracious appetite, the obscene wants and needs of her body. With trembling hands, she reached into her backpack for another VerdantVitality capsule.

“Alright lads,” the radio DJ called out across the green. “Mr Most Muscular is about to kick off. Come over and show your support. These boyos have been working hard in the gym, eating their rice and broccoli, but once it’s all over they’ll be glad to get some of Mr Lupinetti’s world famous chunky chips down their necks.”

Eleri looked around at the empty church field. The crowds were gathered inside the Bake Off tent, sheltering from the rain as they inspected Mrs Williams’ lavender shortbread Sistine Chapel.

She watched Robert ascend the steps to the stage, clutching the guard rail for support as he joined the other contestants. There were only two other men in the competition. A man in his mid-forties stood beside Robert, his body a mockery of the event. He twirled and caprioled in a lime green mankini, shaking his sagging

buttocks at an imagined audience. Eleri observed him with the air of an art critic pacing the parameters of a sculpture. The planes of reference were all wrong, the perspective off. Beside him lingered a pale youth who wore his banana hammock like a hair shirt. Shame hung his head low, his eyes focused on the outline of his penis against the thin material.

Robert was a mahogany God. He stood at the forefront of the dais, the cumulative fatigue from months of overtraining shed with his Fila tracksuit. He stood erect – muscles tensed for presentation. He looked down his nose at the panel of judges before him, daring them to consider anyone else a contender.

“Looking good!” Owain announced his arrival with a slap on Eleri’s back. “He’s got a real shot at winning this thing.”

“I’d like to take a moment to introduce our judges.” The host moved centre stage, obscuring Robert from their eyeline. “All the way from Auckland, New Zealand, our celebrity judge – Wolf from *Gladiators!* The youngsters might not remember him, but I don’t know a man over fifty who didn’t jack it to Panther in that hot pink bodysuit.” He gave the panel a knowing wink. “Did you ever hit that, Wolfman?”

There was no comment from Wolf.

The DJ raised his arms to summon applause from the empty field. Eleri and Owain exchanged glances. She knew he was furious that Paul Hollywood’s announcement of the ‘Best Bake’ winner was taking place as the Most Muscular men were taking to the podium.

“Then we’ve got Rhodri, our local Assembly Member,” the DJ continued, gesturing to a pale man in a grey suit. “And Gethin, the Mayor, if you can’t tell from the big bloody chain,” he rushed his words, glad to get the introductions over and done with. The Mayor rose from his chair and bowed, his enormous bulk dwarfing the men beside him. “Let’s get on with it then,” the DJ shouted as the sound system began to play ‘*Despacito*’.

The two other men in contention for the trophy were not treating the title of ‘Mr Most Muscular’ with the respect it deserved. They hovered at the edge of the stage,

the older man making wisecracks that had the younger quivering with suppressed laughter. Eleri focused her attention on Robert as he gurned agonisingly through his 90 second routine. He was beautiful beneath the floodlights. He opened himself up like an oyster to the uncaring audience, shucking himself from his shell to reveal each striation of his engorged biceps, each undulation of his abdominals, before spinning on his heel to reveal the cresting wave of his latissimus dorsi. His movements were reminiscent of a young Nijinsky – if the great ballet dancer had worn canary yellow Speedos and pirouetted to Papa Roach's 'Last Resort'.

Eleri was transfixed. She never wanted the performance to end, but it could not last. A moment was all she could expect from perfection. The music faded and Robert retreated into himself once more. He clutched the railings as he staggered down the steps. Behind him the middle-aged man had taken centre stage and was flossing a feather boa between his legs, the movement showcasing no hint of musculature.

"You were amazing," Eleri gasped as she tripped after him.

Robert halted his shuffling approach. His head jerked upwards with a sickening crunch. He reached for Eleri, raised veins ensnaring his arms like vines.

"Water," he begged.

"You must be so thirsty!"

Eleri reached into her backpack and uncapped a bottle of Smart Water, raising it to his lips. Robert crouched before her taking grateful gulps of liquid as she poured it into his open mouth. Over his bowed form, Eleri could see Bronwen and Marcus at their empty book stand. Bronwen hadn't noticed her, but Marcus' eyes were fixed on hers. She flashed him a lipstick stained smile. Khloé Kardashian was right. Revenge was a dish best served with cauliflower rice. The water cascaded over Robert in rivulets, his tongue lapping at the stream. Eleri placed her hand on her hip, arching her back in the same pose she had seen from Instagram influencers shilling buttock-enhancing night creams. With a toss of her clipped ponytail, she winked at Marcus, unaware of Robert's spluttering beneath the torrent of water.

"Sorry!" she yelled as he batted the bottle from her hand.

“Hurghhhh,” he groaned, his words swept away by the tidal wave in his lungs. Eleri apologised again, patting him dry with the hem of her dress. When she turned back, Marcus was gone. She fixed her smile and returned her attention to the man all her efforts should have been for.

“You were fantastic up there,” she told him as he twitched and groaned at her feet.

“You did it!” Nick came running towards them. “Baby, you were perfect. You *Black Swan*-ed that shit!”

“Don’t get too cocky,” Owain followed behind. “Scrub that coal tar off your face and get back behind the booth. Jamie’s been called into the hospital. Minor accident on the M4, but he’s making a big hullabaloo about his Hippocratic Oath. If you ask me, the patients have more chance of surviving if he stays away.”

Over the speakers, Eleri heard the DJ announce an interval for the judges to discuss their scores. She looked to Robert, hoping that they might have a chance to stroll around the fair together before he collected his trophy.

“Oh my God,” Robert gasped, his eyes widening as he stared over Eleri’s head.

“What?” she spun around, alarmed.

There was no time to answer. Robert had already sprinted across the green with an alacrity unheard of in a man who hadn’t eaten solid food in seven days. Eleri caught a flash of silver hair, a tight shirt stretched across a broad back. When she saw the man’s piercing blue eyes there was no mistaking who it was.

“Paul Hollywood! Oh. My. God!” Robert squealed as he kissed an *enchanté* onto the hirsute knuckles of his idol. “I fucking love *City Bakes*.”

“Nice one, mate,” Paul said, his penetrating gaze following the outline of Bronwen’s ass cheeks as they swished past in her linen maxi-dress.

With a sigh, Eleri returned to the VerdantVitality stand. Nick sat alone behind the table, the last bastion of restraint in the Dionysian revelry of the fairground. He watched as Robert bowed before the celebrity baker. His features were softened.



There was a sadness that had not been there before. Eleri recognised that look. It was the way everyone looked at Robert, eventually.

She was about to reach out to him, to say something consoling, when she noticed Owain a few feet away, leaning over the judges' table. With a sly tap of his nose, he produced a small bag of white powder from the breast pocket of his yellow mackintosh. Eleri blinked, sure she was seeing things. Owain glanced from left to right before extracting a much larger bag from his back pocket and sliding it towards the Assembly Member.

Though Eleri rubbed her eyes, there was no denying what she'd seen. Owain Jenkins was bribing public officials and 90s television stars with illicit substances. She looked around, amazed that no one else had noticed the dodgy dealings going on in plain sight.

"Alright ladies and gents," the radio DJ lumbered on stage once more. "It's almost the moment you've been waiting for – Mr Lupinetti's annual Fish & Chip eating competition!"

His announcement was drowned out by the roar of the gathering crowd as Mr Lupinetti waved from behind the deep-fat fryer. The contestants were already taking their places behind the wipe-clean plastic table. They nodded at the audience as their entourages tied cotton bibs embroidered with sponsors' logos around their necks. The amateurs clenched their cutlery in anticipation. The professionals knew better than to waste time with knives and forks.

"But first – let's get this out the way. This year's Mr Most Muscular is –" the DJ left a Pinter pause to create tension. It did nothing when there was no interest in the answer. "Robert Fuller."

Eleri pumped her fist in the air, screaming at the top of her lungs to drown out the silence that surrounded her. Robert was not called to the stage. His trophy – they were later told – would be ready for collection from the municipal offices the following week. There was no victory lap, no congratulatory handshake from the Mayor, no words of wisdom from Wolf. Had the weeks of preparation been worth it? Eleri was not sure. She looked around, hoping to see Robert enjoying his success.

He was not among the audience but was taking his seat in the centre of the eating competitors. With a quick signature on the health and safety waiver a meek assistant held over his shoulder, he turned his baseball cap backwards and began to eat. The stopwatch had not started. The timer on the countdown clock was not recording his attempt. He did not seem to care. He tore chunks of battered cod apart with his hands, dunking it into the pint glass of Pepsi Max at his elbow, softening the sharp edges so it could slip down his gullet. Eleri had never seen him so focused. Headphones in, head down, he ate like an automaton, eyes never leaving his plate. By the time the men and women around the table realised they were late off the blocks, Robert was already calling for seconds.

The crowd pressed around the stage, chanting Robert's name. The adoration did not distract him. He showed no sign of recognition as they yelled and whooped and threw their underwear at his feet. Eleri knew that all that existed to him was the food to be gotten through. Half afraid, half aroused, she turned away, unable to watch.

"Ells Bells," Celyn called out, catching Eleri by the arm as she stumbled past the dunking tent, her heels sinking into the mud. "I saved you some of Paul's marvellous creation. He makes bread and butter pudding with croissants! Can you believe it?" Eleri stared blankly at her mother. "You don't want to know what I had to do to get it," she said, casting a sidelong glance at Paul Hollywood who had taken to the stage and was holding Robert's arm aloft as the newly crowned fish and chip eating champion vomited into a mixing bowl.

"Of course, I'm on the Wedding Diet so I couldn't possibly indulge," she looked wistfully at the moist dessert. "But you must, darling. Look how skinny you've gotten. You deserve a little reward."

Eleri waved away the paper plate her mother was wafting beneath her nose.

"Me and your Mam are off." Owain appeared in a swirl of vape smoke. "Very nice, ta," he said, plucking the unwanted cake from its plate and popping it into his mouth. "Lupinetti's stolen the show. We won't get any more takers tonight."

"We're taking Wolf out to dinner," Celyn said excitedly. "Someone's got to take care of the talent and Neville's been sent home with hypothermia."

“Bloody Gethin’s invited himself along though,” Owain nodded towards the Mayor who was emerging from the marquee, his chin stubbled with crumbs. “If I’d known that fat cunt was coming, I wouldn’t have offered to foot the bill. Anyway –” he clapped his hands together as though announcing a new order of business. “Eleri, bach, I want you to pack up the stall.” He took a set of car keys from his acid wash jeans and flung them towards her. “The van is parked around the back. One of my boys will pop by later to drive it to the campsite.”

“I can’t carry all that,” she said, eyeing the boxes of protein powder and VerdantVitality paperweights.

“Well, the lads are a bit busy, so you’ll have to.”

Eleri searched the church field for the men who should have helped her. Robert was seated on the steps of the stage, his head between his knees as he dry-heaved. Nick was draping a foil blanket over his shoulders and rubbing his back with slow, circular motions. It was a moment she knew better than to interrupt. Turning away, ashamed to have intruded on such intimacy, she realised Owain and her mother had already gone.

“Fucks sake,” she muttered as she began to cart the boxes into the parked white van. She told herself that she was grateful for the opportunity to burn extra calories. Though she’d eaten nothing all day, she feared the air was polluted with particles of deep-fried dough and melted butter. She’d wanted to give in, almost felt herself slipping, her fingers reaching for a slice of sourdough bread spread with Marmite butter, but she had stayed strong. She could be proud of that.

“Do you need a hand?” Marcus’ fingers brushed hers as he sprinted to take the heavy box from her hands. “You shouldn’t be doing this by yourself.”

“Won’t your girlfriend mind?” Eleri straightened up, brushing her polyester hair from her eyes.

“Bron asked me to help you,” he motioned towards Bronwen who was waving from behind the book stand.

Eleri’s eyes narrowed.

“I’m fine,” she snarled, snatching the box from Marcus.

She felt his eyes on her as she staggered towards the van, but she refused to look back. She loaded the cargo into the open boot and then crawled in beside it, shutting the doors behind her. She could hear Marcus' footsteps fade away as she pinched the soft skin between her index finger and thumb and willed herself not to cry.

She did not want to admit she was upset – but what other word was there for it? She had been stupid enough to believe that a vain, capricious creature like Robert could shine the glorious sunlight of his attention upon her for more than a few minutes. She laughed to herself. How foolish she had been to diminish herself for a man. Had she not read Betty Friedan? Devoured Andrea Dworkin? And still – she searched outside herself for happiness.

With trembling hands and quickening pulse, she reached into an open box at her feet. She could not see in the darkness, but she was sure somewhere in the van was a year's supply of protein bars that she could devour. There was an aching hunger inside of her. She was ravenous in a way she'd never felt before. It could not be dismissed with a mug of hot tea or a picture of Emily Rajatowski in a bikini pinned to her fridge. This was primal, urgent, and could not wait to be satiated.

Eating had become an abstraction. She no longer remembered the rudimentary mechanics of chewing and swallowing, but she trusted her instincts would take over. She reached deeper, her fist closing around the first thing it found. She raised it to the light of her iPhone for inspection, annoyed to find it was only a zip-lock bag of protein powder. Spider-scrawled in Sharpie pen across the cardboard aperture was the label 'DRUGS'. Eleri looked around. The label was replicated across all the containers.

"Oh heck," she gasped, fumbling to open the camera function on her phone. Deep Throat was right. Here, at last, was incontrovertible evidence of Owain's misdeeds. She snapped photograph after photograph, the sound of the shutter echoing like a thunderstorm in the confined space.

"I don't think you want to do that."

Light flooded the minivan as the doors flew open. Eleri squinted, shielding her eyes against the brightness. She could make out a shadowy figure looming above

her, the sound of metal hitting flesh. Her vision focused. Robert stood before her, gripping a crowbar. He slapped the rusted iron against his palm.

She squawked, dropping her phone in alarm. Her fingers searched the floor as she smiled weakly at Robert. Her hand brushed a small rectangular object and she seized upon it.

“You don’t want to eat that.” Robert nodded towards the VerdantVitality flapjack in Eleri’s fist. “The nutritionals are awful. It’s all refined sugar and high fructose corn syrup,” he informed her with the air of a man who had not just been awarded a first-place trophy for gluttony.

“I –” Eleri looked down at the meal replacement bar. She did not allow her face to fall. “You’re right,” she nodded. With an enormous effort of will, she placed the bar back in its box, hitched the hem of her prom dress to her knees and stepped down from the van’s ramp with the dignity of a Duchess avoiding an unfortunate upskirt incident with the awaiting paparazzi.

“You’re welcome,” Robert said, helping her down. He looked handsome in the half-light, his sunken eyes animated, his hollow cheekbones re-inflated by an afternoon’s indulgence. He would be appalled by his appearance, she knew, but to Eleri he never looked more beautiful than when he was retaining water.

“Thank you,” she snatched her hand from his. “I’ve had a lovely day.”

“It’s been wonderful,” Robert said softly. His fingertips brushed a curl from her forehead, his expression faltering as it came away in his hand.

“I should go,” Eleri said, grabbing the fake hair he offered her. She was beginning to feel like Cinderella in a horror movie remake.

“We should do this again.” Robert leant in close, his breath hot against her neck. He smelt of the sea, of salt, of vinegar. Eleri inhaled his scent, her eyes flickering shut, teeth tearing at the soft skin of her bottom lip.

“Totz!” she agreed, shimmying free from his hands on her hips before she could be swept away by the rip tide of his affection.

She did not look back as she plucked the train of her gown between finger and thumb and pitched herself forward, her heels impeding her speed. It was only on

track that athletes wore spikes, she thought, cursing her poor choice of footwear. She stumbled past the dismantled Bake Off tent, her throat constricting as she choked back the perfume of freshly risen dough and sweetened pastries.

“Call me?” Robert shouted after her.

She kept moving. She waded past Marcus’ bookstall, the mud up to her ankles as she watched him sweep Bronwen off her feet and carry her over the puddles. She ran through the churchyard, past Mrs Polizzi in her S.U.V, knuckles glowing bright white against the steering wheel as her procedural thriller reached its climax. Eleri wanted to run until there was nowhere left to go, until she reached the edge of the world. She heard Ross Kemp calling to her across the carpark.

“You were right all along Rebus,’ the sarge said, putting a shot glass down on my desk.

‘I know you bloody cunt,’ I said, downing the whiskey in one. ‘I’m Rebus. I’m always fucking right.’

Question was – what was I going to do about it?”

## Chapter Twelve

The next morning Eleri awoke from a fitful sleep to the sunlight filtering through the gap in her curtains. For a moment she thought yesterday had been a dream. She sprung from her bed when she realised it was not. Rebus' words echoed in her ears. She did not know exactly what she was going to do, but she knew where to start.

Wrapped in her winter coat, scarf tied around her throat, she stormed down the street, blinking as she noticed Number 12's boarded up windows and the 'For Sale' sign on Number 11's lawn. The paper-man greeted her as she skidded down the icy hill towards the town centre. There was no time for pleasantries. Her trainers pounded the pavement as she passed the police station and ran through the high street. The Christmas lights were flashing, sleigh bells ringing, turkey and stuffing scenting the air. She turned the corner onto Coach Road and headed towards Mr Lupinetti's Fried Fish and Fine Dining restaurant.

In all her years of patronage, she could not remember seeing Jamie at his parents' restaurant, but it was where she was hoping to find him. If she was going to bring VerdantVitality down, she needed help. It was her word against Owain's and there could not have been a more unreliable narrator than Eleri Hayward. In her wayward youth she had dabbled in graffiti artistry, small acts of larceny and the occasional tryst with pyromania. Her greatest crime, however, was that she always got caught. Her antisocial behaviour was catalogued in police reports, Parish Council meeting minutes, and local newspaper clippings. She was not the sort of witness any lawyer would build their case around. That was why she needed Jamie. He knew where the bodies were buried, and his testimony was worth more than her own. Jamie was a doctor. Not a good one, but in a court of law his profession would convince any jury. If she could track him down.

There was a distinct correlation between Eleri's insistence on seeing Jamie and the extent to which he could not be found. His mobile phone rang straight to voicemail and his WhatsApp profile was set to 'busy'. In desperation, she called the concierge of his building. He'd informed her that he rented a lavish apartment on the

top floor of the newly built Cardiff Pointe complex overlooking Tiger Bay. Eleri had stalked the property on RightMove when Jamie let slip – with a disingenuous “oops” – the postcode. The buildings were beautiful; sandstone and slate soaring into the sky, the sharp lines and sloping grooves softened in the reflection of the rippling water below. It was the sort of place where captains of industry installed their wives in penthouse suites and their mistresses on the ground floor. Eleri had no idea what Jamie was doing there.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” the operator informed her, unapologetically. “No one of that name lives here.”

“Look again. He definitely lives there.”

The concierge assured her that he did not.

Jamie was not at the hospital, nor his hairdresser’s salon. She could not find him on FourSquare or Snapchat. His Instagram feed was empty, his social media profiles dark.

There was only one place left to look.

Eleri pressed her palm against the glass door of the chip shop, pausing for a moment to reflect on how many weeks it had been since her last fish supper. Stepping over the threshold felt like coming home. She felt the never-quite-clean linoleum stick to the soles of her shoes, afraid to let her go again. She breathed in the tangle of salt and oil caught in a fisherman’s net. She took in the plastic chandeliers twinkling above the vinyl booths, giving the joint, in her opinion, an air of class and sophistication.

The chime of the bell brought the Lupinetti family to attention. They were in full force, preparing for the day’s trade. Mr Lupinetti stood behind the fryer; his starched white apron pristine despite the spit-balls lobbed at him by the sizzling oil. Mrs Lupinetti barked orders at her children as she wiped down the surfaces. The younger generation did not share their parents’ enthusiasm. The five sisters lounged against the counter, exchanging brutalising remarks in the offhand way that only teenage girls could. Two brothers, outnumbered by oestrogen, hauled crates of potatoes into the back kitchen.



“Eleri-Rhymes-With-Celery!” Mrs Lupinetti called after the lapse of a moment.

“Hi, Mrs Lupinetti.”

“Are you here for breakfast? We’ve missed you!” Mrs Lupinetti wailed like a widow. “You’re too skinny. We need to feed you up. What are you having? Tino, fry up some scampi for the girl! She’s famished! What, you got a tape worm or something?”

“I’m looking for Jamie,” Eleri said, hoping to divert Mrs Lupinetti’s attention from her digestive system. “It’s really important. I can’t get hold of him. Is he here?”

“At least come upstairs and have a cuppa and a biccie,” Mrs Lupinetti spoke over her. There was no use arguing. The woman was intent on feeding her. Resigned, Eleri allowed herself to be ushered through a side door at the back of the restaurant and up two flights of beige-carpeted stairs.

The small living room above the shop was made smaller by the imposition of chintz prints. The overstuffed sofa was upholstered in the same floral pattern as the wallpaper. The brocade of the draped curtains matched the armchairs. The sting of bleach and the scent of pine fresh polish hung in the air, but there was something dirty about the drab décor.

It struck Eleri as strange that the family should live like this. The business was thriving. Mr Lupinetti had successful branches of his chip shop across the county and, as Eleri had read in the latest issue of *Around Town* magazine, he was in the process of franchising operations. There were even plans to branch out into sushi in the more affluent areas. He’d been named the town’s Entrepreneur of the Year for a decade running and was lauded as a provincial Lord Sugar. He was even asked to appear as a judge on S4C’s Welsh language version of *The Apprentice*, but he disdained to take the name of business in vain. Eleri imagined he was reassured in his judgement when he watched the pilot episode of the short-lived show and saw his rival Owain Jenkins trying to sell tanning oil beneath a clouded sky.

“Take a load off,” Mrs Lupinetti motioned towards the settee. It was already occupied by an elderly woman who did not glance up from her knitting to greet the unexpected guest. “I’ll pop into the kitchen and get the kettle on. Let me make you a quick snack while I’m at it. I’ve got Nonna’s freshly baked *cannolis* or I can rustle you

up some *sanguinaccio* or a *capozzelli di angello* if you don't mind waiting while I nip into Asda?"

"I'm fine, honestly. Don't go to any trouble." Eleri did not want to offend her host but a cursory glance at GoogleTranslate informed her that at least one of the recipes required a full lamb's head.

"It's no bother!"

"Honestly, I'm not hungry."

Mrs Lupinetti stiffened.

"Well then." She regarded Eleri with an icy stare, the warmth of her hospitality cooled by her guest's ingratitude. "You'd better sit down. Jamie will be home in a minute, now."

"Home?" Eleri's ears pricked up. "Jamie lives here?"

"Only for thirty-one years!" His mother threw her hands in the air. "God bless him. Not that I want him out of the nest. We're all just praying he sees sense and gives up that silly hospital job. The family business needs him. Tino and I want to retire someday, you know!"

"Aren't you proud of him?" Eleri raised an eyebrow. She was not one to assign value to people based on their profession, but most parents dreamt of their children becoming doctors.

"For what?" Mrs Lupinetti untied the strings of her apron, balling the cloth in her fists as she stared her visitor down. "He could earn more here in a week than he does in a month up there. He could have a real career, learn how to run a business, take over when his father – Heaven forbid – passes over."

Mrs Lupinetti performed a hurried sign of the cross lest her words hasten her husband's demise.

"But –" Eleri sensed she was missing something. "He's a doctor. That's pretty good as far as careers go."

"Doctor?!" Jamie's mother shrieked. "My little dullard? Dew, dew, dew. Oh cariad, bless your heart, you've given me a good laugh. Wait till I tell his father."

“Doesn’t he work in the hospital?” Eleri asked. She was becoming desensitised to the almost daily revelations of untruths and cover-ups. There was only so much outrage she could muster.

“As the night porter!” Mrs Lupinetti guffawed, slapping Nana Lupinetti on the back with a force that seemed too powerful to administer to the spine of a ninety-seven-year old woman. “What has he been telling you?”

The revelation was too absurd to have any effect. Eleri was unmoved. Mrs Lupinetti, interpreting her silence as the shock of betrayal, threw her hands to her mouth, trying too late to catch her treacherous tongue.

“He just wanted to impress you, love.” She moved towards Eleri, taking her hands in her own, seeking forgiveness for the sins of her son. “Don’t give up on him. He just needs a good woman to show him the way. I don’t know why he never mentioned he was courting. He’s always so secretive about his love life. But I couldn’t be happier about it, cariad. You’ll make such lovely grandbabies.”

“We’re not –” Eleri stopped herself. It had never occurred to her before that Jamie’s sexuality should be a secret, but the stigma of his sexual preference held fast in their little town. The metropolitan may have awoken, but the regions slept on.

“They’ll have Jamie’s delicate features, but none of his funny turns,” she continued, splicing their genetics in the petri dish of her mind. “The Haywards are from sturdy peasant stock.” Her glasses slipped down her nose as she inspected Eleri with the air of a eugenicist. “I can tell from your bone structure. All your lot have those strong child-bearing hips. And a hearty appetite if you and your father are anything to go by.” Her expression faltered as she took in Eleri’s appearance. “Although, you’re not looking well, love. You sure I can’t tempt you with a tiramisu?”

Eleri shook her head. She was saved from the threat of dessert by the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

“Jamie, is that you?” Mrs Lupinetti called. Her expression was grim with expectation. “You’ve got a visitor.”

The steps paused on the landing – the low groan of the floorboards the only tell that someone was there.

“What are you doing here?” Jamie appeared in the doorway, eyeing Eleri with suspicion.

“I need to talk to you,” Eleri spoke over Mrs Lupinetti’s howls as she rushed to her son, dabbing the just-licked cloth of her apron across his forehead.

“What have they been doing to you up there?” she moaned, fingertips grazing the cuts and bruises that coloured his pale face.

“Rough night, Mam,” he said gruffly, pushing her aside.

“Well, you two need to talk,” Mrs Lupinetti acknowledged. She made no move to leave, hoping the lover’s reconciliation would take place before her. When Eleri and Jamie remained silent, she admitted defeat. “Let me give you some privacy,” she said, placing her hand on the small of Eleri’s back and shepherding her down a narrow corridor.

“Boys!” She shouted, stopping outside the open door of the bedroom Jamie appeared to share with his brothers. She snapped her fingers and the men draped around the bedroom jerked to attention. Jamie’s youngest brother swung upside down from a pull-up bar above the doorframe, hissing like a vampire at the silver cross around his mother’s neck. Jamie’s eldest sibling – a forty-nine-year-old byproduct of his father’s first failed marriage – looked up from the beanbag positioned before a monolithic computer screen.

“Out,” Mrs Lupinetti motioned over her shoulder.

“Lads, gotta go like,” the middle-aged brother whispered into his headset, disappointing the players of his Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game. “Mam’s having one of her fits.”

“Now!” Mrs Lupinetti snapped.

Eleri watched as the brothers shuffled into the hallway, leaving the unhappy couple alone.

“What can I get you?” their mother asked, turning to Jamie. “You must be starving. I’ll get your father to batter you a chipolata.”

“Mum,” Jamie said. The word alone was enough to let her know she was not wanted.

“Well, I’ll be down the hall if you need any –”

“What are you doing here?” Jamie turned to Eleri, slamming the door shut before his mother could unclaw her fingers from the wooden frame.

Jamie’s quarters were sectioned off from the chaos of his siblings by a velvet rope. The small space stood in stark contrast to the careless décor surrounding it. His brothers had tacked posters of punk bands and half-dressed elves over Mrs Lupinetti’s flocked wallpaper. Empty cans of Mountain Dew and crinkled KitKat wrappers were strewn across the shag carpeting. Jamie had painted his walls with a whisper of snowfall and embraced a minimalism so nihilistic it negated the need for furnishings. His clothes hung from a runway rack; grey and black cashmere sweaters with the labels popped to let everyone know they were expensive. It was as sparse as the Gucci store that inspired it. Eleri suspected her mother would be impressed.

The price tags of the few belongings Jamie displayed outstripped his own earning potential. Eleri did not know how he could afford them. VerdantVitality was a loss-making venture for anyone without Robert’s ruthless approach to lead-generation, and Jamie’s sales figures were worse than her own.

“Can I come in?” she asked, unsure whether an invitation was required.

“If you tell me what the fuck you’re playing at.” Jamie lifted the rope, his eyes flickering over her as if he were a bouncer guarding the V.I.P area of the Rainbow Room. He watched as she settled herself on his bed.

“Niiice,” she let out a low whistle, her fingertips playing with the tassels of the Versace coverlet.

“How dare you invade my privacy like this.” The affectless tone of his voice did not echo the outrage of his words. He sounded tired, bored, inconvenienced. It was as if he’d been waiting for this moment for weeks and was only annoyed it had not come sooner. “What makes you think you can just turn up here unannounced?”

Eleri held her hands up in self-defence against this round of blanks. “I’m not the one with a fake medical degree. Want to explain that one?”

“Only God can judge me.” Jamie made the sign of the cross.

“You need to tell me everything.”

“Where do I start?” Jamie strode stage left with a dramatic sigh. “I’m not a real doctor.”

Eleri was glad that he had not chosen the picaresque route and began to regale her with the accident of his birth, his difficult school years, his sexual awakening. It was better to start in *media res*, but she’d already had this exposition.

“Medical school was tough for me. My parents never wanted me to become a doctor. They were so disappointed when I told them. I told myself that things would be easier once I was qualified, that my parents would have to accept my choice then.”

He paused as if expecting an interruption.

“I didn’t get that far,” he continued when Eleri refused to heckle. “I was asked to leave after my first term. My supervisor said I wasn’t – ‘touch wood’ – the next Harold Shipman, but my lackadaisical approach to patient care and lack of empathy meant that, morally, they couldn’t allow me to continue.”

Eleri stifled a laugh at his pained expression.

“I was devastated. So what if I took a couple of selfies with the corpses in the mortuary? They were dead. Who cares?”

“Who indeed?”

“Well – the families,” Jamie conceded. “They lodged a formal complaint after they found the photographs on my Insta.”

Eleri adjusted her expression to echo his. He was contemplative but showed no remorse.

“After I left medical school,” Jamie said, revising the narrative to make his expulsion a choice. “I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t tell my family. I knew how happy it would make them. I still wanted to work in medicine, and I decided I would just reapply in a year’s time. Take another stab at it.” Eleri winced at his unfortunate phrasing. “I took a job as a night porter at the hospital. At first my parents were

suspicious. They wanted to know why I was sleeping all day instead of going to lectures. I told them all my classes had been moved from mornings to midnight to calibrate the students' Circadian rhythms for the gruelling realities of shift work. They didn't ask any more questions after that."

He took a deep breath.

"I was in a bad place. The stress of my double life, my parents' desperation to see me fail – it all took its toll. I spent my shifts crying in the cleaning cupboard with a roll of medical gauze wrapped around my neck."

"Like a scarf?" Eleri asked, reasoning that NHS cuts had left the hospital inadequately heated.

"No –" Jamie pivoted to face her. "Like a noose."

"Oh. Dark!"

"I needed something to take the pain away. One night I noticed that the anaesthetist measured the wrong dosage of Propofol. I saw him chucking the leftovers into the medical waste bin and, later, I went back and pocketed it. I got a syringe from the supply cupboard and injected it in the staff room when no one was around. It was the best feeling I've ever had."

His eyes shone fever-bright, his skin flushed. It must have been good shit if he was getting high off the memory alone.

"You don't understand the pressure I was under." Jamie turned his back to her. Eleri rearranged her expression to appear less judgemental. "It made me feel calm for the first time in years. Nothing mattered – my mother's nagging, my father's expectations, my failed career. I didn't know how to feel okay without it. I thought I had it under control. You've read Bulgakov's 'Morphine'?"

"Of course."

"Then you know you can't fuck with medical grade sedatives and expect to live happily ever after." He exhaled as though his breath had been held too long, his body shuddering with relief. "When I couldn't get it from the hospital, I substituted with street drugs. Once I got started on Ketamine, the QVC addiction set in. That shit is worse than crack. I own so many porcelain Toby jugs, and I don't even need one."

Eleri noticed the row of ornaments standing sentry on the windowsill.

“They watch me when I can’t sleep,” he whispered. “Taunting me with my poor life choices.”

Jamie’s eyes were fixed on the collection of jugs that stared back with withering indifference.

“Things kept getting worse, but no one noticed – or they just didn’t care. In the end it was the Tobies that made me realise I’d hit rock bottom. I woke up to a delivery of ninety collector’s edition Stalin jugs. Why the fuck did I need ninety?”

The question was rhetorical, but he looked at Eleri as though expecting an answer.

“My QVC debts were out of control. I needed help. I started going to Narcotics Anonymous meetings. I liked the first step – admitting I was powerless. The others were stumbling blocks. Once I’d admitted I had no power over my addiction it was carte blanche to keep using.”

Eleri nodded, though she was losing interest. The Tempur memory foam mattress moulded itself into her shape. The down comforter was soft against her cheek. The lavender perfume of Jamie’s electric reed diffuser was lulling her to sleep.

“It’s where I met Owain.”

Eleri snapped to attention.

“He was nice, for a while. Took me under his wing, offered to be my sponsor. Wrestled the remote control out of my hands when I needed it.”

Jamie cleared his throat with a delicate cough. He seemed unused to speaking for long stretches.

“Would you like a coffee?” he asked, introducing the Nespresso machine on his bedside table with the wave of a game-show girl. “Maple spice latte? White chocolate hazelnut mocha? Salted cinder toffee macchiato? This is the exact same model that George Clooney uses in the advert.”



Delicious as the drinks menu sounded, Eleri reminded herself that she was not there for a series of caffeinated beverages. She wanted answers and no fluid could quench her thirst for truth.

“How did you get caught up with Owain?” she urged his story towards a denouement. “What does he want with you?”

Jamie slipped a Guatemalan roast coffee pod into the multifunction coffee machine.

“I told the N.A group everything. All the incriminating details, the humiliating specifics. I thought it was a safe space.” His eyes fixed on Eleri. “There is no safe space when Owain’s around.”

“He was going to turn you in to the police?”

“Worse – he was going to tell my Mam.”

Eleri understood. There was nothing more terrifying than a mother’s disappointment.

“That’s when I got involved in VerdantVitality.”

Eleri had no further questions for the witness. The case rested; court was adjourned. The truth was so obvious it did not need to be admitted. Owain Jenkins was forcing Jamie to smuggle drugs from the hospital and into VerdantVitality. It was a brilliant business plan – Owain’s profit margins were astronomical when the production costs were covered by the NHS. Eleri was almost impressed.

“We have to take him down,” Eleri wheezed as she freed herself from the quicksand of memory foam, falling to the floor with a thud that caused Mrs Lupinetti to gasp audibly from outside the door. “I can’t do this on my own. If I go to the police, they won’t believe me. But you’re an eyewitness. You have to tell them everything.”

“I’m also an accomplice,” Jamie yelled. “I could face real jail time. I’ve watched *60 Days In* – I wouldn’t survive the night. Besides, we don’t have any proof.”

“I – uh – did.” Eleri looked sheepish. “I don’t have it anymore.”

“You lost it?”

“I didn’t lose it,” Eleri said defensively, neglecting to mention that she refused the first piece of evidence offered to her by Deep Throat and the second was on the phone she’d dropped in the back of Owain’s van. She cursed herself for not setting up her iCloud storage settings when prompted. “There was a series of unfortunate events that were completely unavoidable and in no way my fault.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Jamie pursed his lips. “Even with evidence, you don’t want to take on Owain Jenkins.”

“He’s just a guy in a caravan park,” Eleri said, hoping it was true.

“You don’t understand how deep this goes. He’s got the Parish Council in his back pocket. He’s best mates with Carwyn Jones. He’s the reason the Police Crime Commissioner is in office – do you think she wants to launch an investigation into the man that got her elected?”

“That’s not how justice works,” Eleri cried, her fist hammering against her palm like a judge’s gavel. “The police are for the people. They’re here to protect us.”

“You’re wearing an ‘All Cops Are Bastards’ badge.” Jamie pointed to the inflammatory slogan pinioned to the pocket of her dungarees.

“I won’t wear it to the station, obviously.”

She hoisted her backpack onto her shoulders and strode towards the door. Jamie’s eyes widened with the realization that she was serious.

“Wai!” He cried, slamming his teacup down on the credenza, forgetting to use a coaster in his haste to stop her. “I’m warning you – do not mess with Owain. This is going to end badly for all of us. Once you’re in, the only way out is in a body bag.”

“He’s not the mafia,” Eleri said with an assurance she did not feel.

“He’s worse,” he corrected her.

She lingered on the threshold. His fear was contagious. She was losing her nerve.

“Stay here. Have a gimlet,” Jamie said as if he wanted nothing more. She hesitated. He turned his back, bending down to retrieve a crystal decanter and two rose gold coupé glasses from the sideboard. “Now where did I put those limes?”

Eleri heard the distant clink of a kiss between the carafe's lips and the sugared rim of the glass as she fled down the corridor, past the family gathered in the living room with their ears cupped, and down the narrow flight of stairs.

"Eleri!" Mrs Lupinetti called, tripping down the steps in her slippers. "Wait!"

Eleri paused on the street outside the fish and chip shop.

"Don't forget your snacks," Mrs Lupinetti said breathlessly, handing Eleri a stack of Tupperware. "You've got your calamaris, your scampis, your haddocks, your saveloys. I couldn't remember your favourite, you had so many."

Eleri murmured her thanks, clutching the warm containers to her chest as she walked away. Her stomach growled as she glanced down at the Tupperware, but she could not eat until justice was done. When Owain Jenkins was defeated, she told herself, sliding the plastic tubs into the bin outside the off-licence, then she would feast.

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The central police station was an imposing institution, its scale outstripping the requirements of its population. The Gothic construction loomed over the town, a silent threat in a once lawless outpost. As Eleri stood beneath its windowless façade, observing the sinister gargoyle perched atop the stone pediment, she felt her resolve fade. She had never reported a crime before and did not know the procedure. A brief search on WikiHow proved unenlightening. She waited by the entrance ramp, the automatic doors shutting and closing as she danced her indecision. She told herself that this task was too important to be scuppered by social anxiety. Gritting her teeth, she marched inside.

The magnitude of the building's exterior gave way to a declension as she stepped through the sliding glass doors. The reception area was no different from a

hospital waiting room. The fluorescent strip lights buzzed overhead, the unnatural light jaundicing the complexions of people slouched in stackable chairs. Eleri sidled past a man in a knock-off Ralph Lauren polo-shirt flicking through the latest issue of *Outrageous Yachts* magazine and made her way to the front desk.

The reception was partitioned by plexiglass. Two bored young men in their mid-twenties staffed the station, their attention divided between their computer screens and coffee cups.

“I’d like to report some serious law breaking,” Eleri said, leaning against the counter with an air of authority. “Please. If that’s okay?”

“Whassa problem, love?” asked one of the officers, refusing to look up.

They were the sort of men Eleri was used to being ignored by – hair slicked back with Bryllcreem, *Love Island* tans glowing tangerine in the light of their iPhone screens.

“I –” she began, stopped short by a sudden stab of horror as she saw the VerdantVitality protein shaker next to a stack of unfiled police reports. Blinking rapidly, she told herself to get a grip. The lads had probably picked it up from the VerdantVitality stand at the church fête. It was possible to be partial to a freebie without being bound by brand loyalty.

“You alright?” the officer asked, unpeeling the wrapper from a VerdantVitality protein bar and sliding it, whole, into his mouth.

It was then that Eleri noticed the sheer amount of Owain Jenkins endorsed merchandise around the police station. The receptionists wore VerdantVitality green T-shirts beneath their button-down shirts. Owain stared down from the wall mounted leaflet stand, giving her the thumbs up amongst pamphlets on coercive control and domestic abuse. Double V posters were pinned over victim support hotline numbers. Owain was everywhere.

Eleri rapped against the glass with her knuckles. “I am here to report crimes. Big crimes. The best of crimes, the worst of crimes.”

“Oh shit,” the policemen chimed in unison. “Rape?”

“Sort of,” Eleri furrowed her brow. The non-consensual drugging of an entire town was certainly a violation, sexual or not. “I, Eleri Anastasia Hayward, have been the unwitting accomplice to the mass dissemination of methamphetamines.”

The officers’ wandering attention was caught.

“VerdantVitality is not just a shady pyramid scheme. It’s not an ‘all-natural’ supplement. Owain Jenkins is stealing drugs from the hospital and passing them off as diet pills. He is a criminal mastermind. He’s doing crimes. All the crimes. You want crime? Find Owain and he’ll be doing at least one. Extortion, drug-smuggling, blackmail, corruption –” she began counting his offences on her fingers, but the testimony was arrested by the appearance of a woman in a beige suit stepping out from behind the front desk.

“That’s a serious accusation to make, young lady,” she said, placing a firm hand on Eleri’s shoulder.

The woman was in her late forties and of formidable stature. The padded shoulders of her power suit accentuated her line-backer’s physique and Eleri braced herself for the tackle.

“It is,” Eleri agreed. “But it’s the truth.”

“Do you have any evidence?” the woman inquired.

Eleri took in the clipped back ponytail, the minimal makeup, the permanent crease between her eyebrows. This was a woman who took herself and her work seriously, at the expense of her appearance. Eleri felt a rush of relief. She was safe in the hands of this capable, unattractive, career woman.

“My word is my bond,” she said solemnly.

The woman did not blink.

“You do know that wasting police time is a criminal offence?”

“I’m not –” Eleri was silenced by a raised finger.

“Owain Jenkins is a pillar of the community. He’s a small business owner who gives back to the people. He’s the face of this month’s issue of *Around Town*.” She lifted a copy of the magazine from the reception counter and held it up for Eleri to

see. Owain smirked at her as he reclined on a chaise-lounge. "Do you think *Around Town* magazine would put a criminal on the front cover?"

"Yes," Eleri nodded. "They have." She pressed the pad of her finger against Owain's face. "There he is."

"We're going to have to ask you to leave, ma'am," one of the young officers said.

"Aren't you going to give me a crime reference?" Eleri asked, feeling that her first time as an informant was not going well. "Don't you need to write this down? Or interview me?"

"We'll be in touch," the woman said, her back turned.

"How will you contact me? You don't have my number."

"Oh, we've got your number."

"That –" Eleri cast her eyes over the officers who stood glowering at her with their arms folded across their chests. "Does not sound reassuring."

"It wasn't meant to be," the woman hissed. "Now get out and don't repeat those ridiculous allegations to anyone else or you'll be in real trouble."

"You're all rotten," Eleri yelled once she was outside, around the corner, down the street and a safe distance from the police station. "The whole fucking system's corrupt."

### Chapter Thirteen

Eleri began to unravel. The events of the last few months pulled at her loose threads until she was undone. Without a needle and string to stitch her together again, she came apart at the seams.

Returning home from the police station, she locked herself in the bathroom and sat fully clothed beneath the shower. Whether the water was hot or cold she could not say. It ran over her body in rivulets, but she did not feel it. She had no idea how long she sat there, staring at the mildewed tiles. Her father knocked on the door, complaining that his guts were giving him gyp. Eleri turned off the taps and opened the door. She staggered past, soaking wet, her footprints trailing down the corridor. In her bedroom she collapsed onto the deflated airbed. The effort exhausted her. She shivered as she lay in damp clothes, unable to dry herself. "This is it," she thought as her eyes circled the stucco-swirls of the ceiling. "This is how it all ends."

She had emptied the last of her VerdantVitality stash into the river on the way home, swearing she would never touch the stuff again, but it did not occur to her that she was on an almighty comedown.

Life went on without her as she lay, motionless, on her inflatable mattress. The rising and setting of the sun outside her window was the only marker of time, but she drew the blackout blinds against it. All was lost. The bad guys had won. She could rest easy in her defeat.

Exhaustion was not the only side-effect of quitting VerdantVitality cold turkey. She wanted to believe that it was will-power alone that allowed her to survive on starvation rations, but Eleri's will – it turned out – was as weak as her body. Amphetamines were one hell of an appetite suppressant and without them she was defenceless against her hunger. For months, it had lain in wait, biding its time. It did not rush. It did not need to. It was vast, infinite, insatiable. It knew she could not resist.

Her days were divided between the airbed and the kitchen. She awoke from fevered dreams to stand in the cool comfort of the refrigerator light. Being around food was reassuring, but she could not control herself. She sliced loaves of bread

with her teeth. She spread margarine with bare hands. There was no time to wait for cheesecakes to defrost, microwave meals to cook. The feeding frenzy refused to be interrupted by instructions or serving suggestions. She ate in a panic – quickly, before she could stop herself. She tasted nothing in her quest to consume everything. There was no time to savour the exquisite flavourings of her father’s Sunday roast or the tart sweetness of his homemade apple pie. She didn’t care what was shoved down her gullet, so long as it filled the aching hole in her stomach.

During her abstinence from earthly sustenance she had eaten with her eyes. She scrolled Instagram for pictures of other people’s meals. She skipped breakfast in favour of a stranger’s brunch. She dined out on snapshots of scrambled eggs garnished with sprigs of cilantro. She took her lunch of oak-smoked salmon and avocado butter on sourdough toast sitting on a sunlit balcony overlooking the Mediterranean. A photograph was all it took to fill her up. Now nothing could satisfy her.

“Fuck my life,” she groaned, hand resting on the summit of her stomach.

The weight gain was undeniable. In lucid moments, filled with onion rings and remorse, she tried to reassure herself that a few days indulgence would not undo all her hard work. The evidence was otherwise. She looked down at her belly, expecting to see a gap between her skin and the cotton of her underwear. There was an avalanche of flesh where the material once tented on the twin poles of her hip bones.

She was repulsed by her body and with herself for caring about it.

“Can I come in?”

There was a sharp rap on the door. Eleri did not respond.

“Hello?”

There was another knock. An exploratory footstep crossed the threshold, followed by a sharp intake of breath and a rapid retreat.

The room was as dark as a tomb. Only Eleri knew the horror within. She had dozed off mid-binge and awoken wearing a crown of Dorito’s, ascending to the throne of the Garbage Queen in her sleep. Her fortress was built from pizza boxes



and defended by a moat of shining silver chocolate bar wrappers. Brandy snap soldiers stood sentry at the gates, armed with dirty knives and forks.

“Eleri?” a voice called. “You in there, mate?”

The footsteps grew bolder, almost delighting in the creak of the floorboards beneath. They stopped at the side of her bed and Eleri saw through the narrows of her eyes the intrusive sneakers that staked out their claim of Manifest Destiny on her ancestral lands.

“Are you awake?”

The voice and the footwear were unmistakably Robert’s, but it was impossible that he was in her room. Her citadel was impenetrable. Her father patrolled its perimeters like a guard dog, keeping the outside world at bay. Robert was an unwelcome reminder of the life outside those four walls. It was a reminder of the town that stretched beyond her driveway and the people who lived in it. Her mother. Marcus. The Lupinettis. In abandoning the fight against Owain, she had abandoned them, too.

Robert knelt beside her, hand hovering above her forehead as if he were a faith healer summoning the demons from her Mission Bed. “Are you sick? You’ve been M.I.A for the last couple of weeks.”

“I am a ghost, I am a ghost,” she whispered the mantra to herself, hopefully.

“You’ve been ghosting us, but you’re not a ghost,” he reassured her. “You do smell like a dead person though. Jesus, when was the last time you showered?”

Eleri was not in the mood to be lectured on personal hygiene. She grew defiant against Robert’s disdain. She did not care what he thought of her. It was his advice that had gotten her into this fine mess in the first place.

“I know what you’ve been doing,” she hissed, her serpent’s tongue flickering across the scales of her lips.

Robert appeared disconcerted by the vagueness of her accusation.

“What do you think you know?” His tone was even, but his eyes glistened with apprehension. He followed her beckoning finger and leant closer, his expression souring as he took in the odour of stale sweat and morning breath.

“I –” she stopped short. It struck her that she did not really know Robert. She had no idea what he was capable of. Exhaling deeply, she whispered the one word she knew would terrify him. “*Everything.*”

“Ei, you’re not in your right mind,” he told her. “You’re being paranoid.”

“Doesn’t mean they’re not after me.”

Eleri gazed up at him. His impassive features altered. The change was almost imperceptible, but she’d studied his face as if it were a work of art. She knew the textures, the colours, the brushstrokes. Any alteration to the canvas was immediate to her. There was a shadow of a furrow between his freshly threaded eyebrows.

“Owain is a good guy,” Robert said after some deliberation. “His practices may not be totally kosher, but – that’s business!”

“How can you say that?” she was appalled. He was no better than Owain. He was exactly like him. “How can you pretend you’ve done nothing wrong?”

Robert’s eyes sought forgiveness while his words admitted nothing. “You don’t understand how expensive competitive bodybuilding is. I spend £200 a week on chicken breasts and protein shakes. I take twenty different supplements a day. I get spray-tanned every fortnight – more in winter. I pay my coach through the nose and the cost of posing classes is enough to feed a family of six for a month. I can’t get out of the Double V game right now. I owe Owain too much money. As soon as my sponsorship deals come through, I’ll go legit. I’ll start my own sportswear company.”

“You’re delusional if you think you’re going to become a social media influencer off the back of winning a blue ribbon at a church fête,” Eleri snorted, flipping onto her stomach to escape his gaze. She would not allow herself to get lost in his eyes, to be lured into dreaming his dreams.

Robert allowed her a benign smile, a twitch of the lips which told her he was not insulted. It was a symptom of madness to question the sanity of others. He lowered his tone to a deathbed hush.

“I’m worried about you,” he placed a hand on her bare shoulder, his skin chill against her hot flesh. “So is Owain.”

“Owain.” The name gurgled in her oesophagus like acid reflux. “He’s only worried I’m going to narc.”

“That’s not true. He cares about you. He cares about all of us.” Robert repeated the lie with the blankness of a reluctantly rescued cult member. “He’s not a bad person. He’s just unconventional.”

Eleri pulled the bed sheet over her head and groaned like a bargain basement banshee.

“Come to the caravan park,” he instructed her. As an afterthought he added, “once you’ve had a wash.”

“No fucking way. I’m out. The jig is up. The game is done. The fat lady has sung.”

“You’re not *that* fat,” Robert said in tones as soothing as a root canal when the anaesthetic hasn’t taken. “Let Owain explain everything. We should be together at a time like this. We’re a family.”

“Time like what?” Eleri latched onto the incongruous phrase. “What time is it?”

“You know – everything with Jamie.” Robert bowed his head.

“What about Jamie?” She tore the veil from her face. “What happened to him?”

“You don’t know?”

“What don’t I know?”

The bedsheet was balled in her fist.

“Nothing.” Robert struggled to his feet. “Don’t worry! I’ve got to go. Just come over when you’re feeling better. We miss you. Owain even said he’ll waive your

monthly minimum order until you're back on your feet. Well – he's got to charge you 60% interest on it, but – that was nice of him, right?"

He was out the door before Eleri could answer. She heard his footsteps thudding down the corridor, skidding down the staircase and landing with a punctuating 'thump' at the foot of the stairs. She imagined he'd run into her father in the hallway, drinking straight from a bottle of Magic Shell chocolate sauce – the newest addition to the Bulletproof Coffee he refused to give up on. There was a muttered apology, a raised voice, then the slam of the front door.

A pessimist by nature, Eleri's mind leapt to the worst-case scenario with the ease of an Olympic pole-vaulter. "They killed Jamie," she muttered. "Those bastards."

Seized by a manic energy, she kicked the bedsheets from her feet and scrambled down the landing. She needed to find out what had happened to Jamie, but it would not be easy. Convinced that Owain was tracking her movements through her electronic devices' location services, she had destroyed every appliance in the house aside from the Nespresso machine. There was no question of asking to borrow her father's computer – Ian Hayward was a Luddite who was still suspicious of the loom and feared the singularity of the landline. She was left with only old-school research methods.

On her father's desk, beside a half-eaten grilled cheese panini, sat a stack of yellowing newspapers, their edges curling upwards in search of sunlight behind the drawn curtains. The paper boy delivered each day's edition of *The Gwent Gazette* to the greeting of "about time", leading him to believe that Ian was a man with a formidable appetite for local news. In truth, he had no interest in anything outside his own front door. The newspapers lay, unread, in an impossible heap. Eleri, for the first time, was thankful for her father's eccentricities.

Settling herself in a leather armchair beside a broken banker's lamp, she began to flick through the obituaries. It was time consuming, she admitted, but the ink on her fingers made her feel like she was doing something tangible. She was connected to the information in a way she would not have been with a quick Google search – even if it took hours instead of seconds.

Jamie's name was found in Monday's edition of the *Gazette*, amongst the exam results and birthday wishes. It was a funeral notice in the clipped tones of a copywriter who had never known him. Three lines were enough to cover a lifetime. All that remained was his name, the date on which he had died, and the time and place he would be buried. The funeral would be taking place at St. Mary's Church in less than an hour.

"Dad, I need a lift," she cried, racing to the front door.

"I'm afraid I may be a little – impaired." Ian appeared beside her. Abashed, he toyed with the cord of his dressing gown, his slippers tracing circles on the ground. "I've had a few too many of the chocolate liquors we were saving for Christmas." He indicated the three empty boxes of bottle-shaped chocolates in the porch's recycling bin, avoiding Eleri's gaze.

"This is important!" Eleri shook him by the shoulders. "Owain Jenkins is a bad man. He's hurt someone I –" she stopped. She could not bring herself to say 'loved'. It would make her motivation more dramatic, but it was untrue. What was Jamie to her? The word 'colleague' was on the tip of her tongue, but it created too much distance between them. "I can't explain it all right now. There's somewhere I need to be. But – it's a Sunday, the buses aren't running."

Ian and Eleri looked at one another, the memory of five failed driving tests passing between them.

"Please," she looked beseechingly at her father – the only man she could rely on.

Within minutes her father was dressed and driving up the vertiginous valley roads to the churchyard on the outskirts of town. The liquor did not impair his motor-skills. He was no worse than usual as Eleri clung to the passenger rail, watching him with an approximation of affection. Ian Hayward, pathetic as he was, had come through for his daughter, fearlessly breaking several laws and violating every article of the Highway Code in the name of love.

He swerved sharply at the turn off to the churchyard. She nodded at him, swinging open the passenger door and rolling out. The momentum hurtled her down the gravel driveway and onto the sloping grass verge of the graveyard. She flexed

her feet as she slammed into a towering oak tree, hoping her sneakers would absorb the impact. She felt a jolt of electricity shiver down her spine, the certainty that something had broken. There was no time to focus on the pain. She dragged her bruised body behind the tree trunk before the mourners could see her. Ian's car screeched to an abrupt halt in the distance, the tyres spinning as Ian's head hit the steering wheel. He gave his daughter a thumbs up as he disappeared into the rapidly inflating airbag. She returned the gesture, wincing with the effort.

The funeral procession wound its way from the little stone church towards the cemetery. The family were black shadows on a bright sunny day, following behind the priest's violet vestments. They stopped before a tombstone, the inscription too far away for Eleri to read. Mrs Lupinetti dabbed at the corners of her eyes beneath a lace veil. Her grief echoed around the empty space. Her stockinged knees knocked together with the effort of keeping herself upright. Her husband's arms around her waist appeared to be all that kept her from slipping into the soil beside her son. Mr Lupinetti wore his Sunday best, his hair brushed and parted, moustache neatly waxed. His expression betrayed nothing of his loss. He stood, grave-eyed amongst the gravestones, adjusting his cufflinks before a six-foot glimpse of the afterlife.

The funeral was not well attended. His mother and father were the only ones to grieve him. Eleri knew he was not well-liked, but she was surprised that his brothers and sisters had not shown up.

With a hurried sign of the cross, she rose from her hiding place and crawled towards her father's car. She had all the confirmation she needed. Jamie was dead and buried. Owain was a murderer. Robert – at the very least – was an accomplice.

"Can you give me a lift to mum's?" she asked, sliding into the passenger side and buckling her seatbelt.

"Everything alright?" Ian asked, rummaging through the glove compartment for something to suture the wound on his temple.

"She's not safe with Owain. I need to talk to her before it's too late."

Ian betrayed no emotion. He turned the key in the ignition and reversed onto the main road, allowing the whirl of the wheels and the flash of missed stop signs to speak in his place.

"I'll wait here," he announced, pulling into a parking space in the street behind Owain's bungalow.

"You should go home. I can take it from here." Eleri opened the car door and slid out. "Thanks, Dad."

They looked at one another for a moment, Ian's eyes sparkling with a sentiment he could not express. Eleri waved from the pavement as he retreated down the lane, the opening chords of 'So Long, Marianne' echoing against the wound-up windows.

"It's not a good time," Celyn announced as she answered the door to her daughter, her voice raised over the sound of clinking glasses and coven cackles. "My girlfriends are over to sample the wedding menu. Of course, I can't eat a thing, but they tell me everything is delicious."

"There's food?" Eleri was determined to come inside. Ignoring her mother's protestations, she limbo-ed beneath the turnstile of Celyn's outstretched arms and into the warmth of the front porch. "When did you get girlfriends, anyway?"

She was not surprised she'd been excluded from the event, merely that there was one. She'd never known her mother to have friends. Ian and Celyn had always operated as a single unit. Weekday evenings were spent on the sofa, dozing in front of old episodes of *Frasier* with a glass of supermarket-special wine and a 'dine-in-for-two' microwaveable meal deal. On weekends, Celyn went antiquing for items she could not afford, and Ian would watch *Top Gear* re-runs in his boxer shorts. As far as Eleri knew, they were either together or apart, but never with anyone else.

"You don't have friends," Eleri reminded her, in case she'd forgotten and accidentally invited a crowd of strangers into her home. "You're not a friendly person. The Haywards are not 'party' people."

"Darling, I'm not a Hayward anymore," Celyn said with a flip of her newly honeyed hair. "Thank God. Leaving your father was the best thing I've ever done. I've met so many wonderful new people through Owain. Do you know what he said to me the other day – it was so insightful I wrote it down – 'life starts outside your comfort zone.'"

“What’s wrong with being comfy?” Eleri asked.

“You’ve certainly been getting comfy,” Celyn retorted, pursing her lips as she took the measure of Eleri’s hips. “Filled out a little since I last saw you. Is your bridesmaid’s dress still going to fit?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“Oh God,” she sighed, ushering Eleri inside. “Well, all I can say is thank Christ the seamstress is here. With any luck we’ll get the dress altered in time for the big day. Just try and stay the same size until I’ve walked down the aisle.”

Eleri promised nothing.

Her mother led her into the living room where the wedding preparations were taking place in a flurry of taffeta and lace. Eleri was unused to crowds. The raucous howls of her mother’s friends threatened to overwhelm her. Terrified, she took a seat on the leather settee, cowering before the bacchanal of bridesmaids who were spilling sparkling wine over fabric swatches and fussing with flower arrangements.

In the corner of the room was a man as tall and slender as the standing lamp he stood next to. Celyn introduced him as Mr Schrödinger of ‘Schrödinger’s Cakes’. He smiled unctuously at the ladies gathered around him before informing them that he’d spent thirty years in the undertaker’s trade before moving into occasion catering. Eleri was not surprised. He was a grey man in a dark suit who would have been more at ease with the dead than the living.

Eleri looked at the women that flocked to his table. She had never seen any of them before. They poked their fingers into the swirled buttercream of his semi-naked spiced apple cake and licked frosting from their manicured nails with a delicacy that belied the indignity of the act. Eleri eyed the exhibitionism of the *croquembouche*, the choux pastry almost pornographic as it flashed glimpses of its clotted cream and strawberry jam filling. Her stomach groaned, reminding her she was long overdue on a snack.

“Try some,” a lady dressed in shades of Parma Violet urged her with an Estuary twang. “It’s fackin’ crackin’, laaav.”



“You remember Debs, don’t you, darling?” Celyn prompted Eleri to politeness with a nudge to the ribcage. The purple lady smiled with sugar-glazed lips.

“Uh –” Eleri gulped down a lavender macaroon. She squinted at Debs, taking in the electric blue eyeshadow and the short and spiky haircut favoured by trendy grandmas. She did not know this woman and she didn’t want to.

“Dirty Debs,” Celyn tried again. “She was the sponsor at your confirmation.”

Eleri remained blank, remembering nothing of that day besides the buffet.

“She’s my maid of honour. She was with us at the dress fitting a few weeks ago.”

“Yes,” Eleri said slowly, unable to recall anything of the obscene apparition before her. “Of course. Deborah. How are you?”

“Alright, lav,” Debs shrugged. “Be better when the stripper gets here.”

She laughed uproariously as Eleri reached for a caramel pecan cupcake.

“Mum,” Eleri called with renewed urgency. Debs may have been joking, but she didn’t want to take that risk. “We need to talk.”

Celyn had drifted into a crowd of recently acquired friends. They circled her, inspecting the seven-carat diamond ring on her finger with jewellers’ eyes, gushing about the cut, the clarity, the colour, before dismissing it as ‘tacky’ behind her back.

“What?” her mother frowned at the sticky hands tugging at her white shawl.

“There are some things you need to know before you commit yourself to a lifetime with a man who is literally the devil.”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Celyn dismissed her daughter with a flick of her banged wrist. “You’ve made your opinion on Owain very clear. That’s why I didn’t invite you tonight. If you can’t be happy for me, at least be quiet.”

“Mam –” Eleri tried again, but there was no time to finish her sentence. She froze as the front door slammed shut and heavy boots thudded down the corridor. Her mother’s name echoed across the tiled walls.

“Babes!” Celyn squealed, rushing into Owain’s arms.

“To what do we owe the pleasure of your company, young lady?” Owain asked grimly as Celyn buried her face in his chest.

“She was just leaving,” Celyn explained, planting a peck on his cheek.

“Give ‘im a propah pash,” Debs called as she uncorked the champagne bottle clenched between her thighs. Mr Schrödinger stood beside her, his grey face blushing purple at the slap administered to his buttocks.

Celyn needed no encouragement. Taking her fiancé’s face between her hands she let the tip of her tongue trace the curve of his lips before nudging his teeth apart and disappearing inside the cavern of his mouth. Eleri shuddered. This sexually charged kiss was intended to make her uncomfortable. She no longer wanted to save her mother. She wanted her to suffer an eternity of misery betrothed to a man she was no better than.

“Fine,” Eleri said, picking up the paper plate she’d filled with *petit fours*. “I can take a hint.”

“Good,” her mother hissed as Eleri stormed from the living room towards the front door.

“I’ll walk you out, bach,” Owain offered. “Bit of a rough area, it is, love. Can’t have you hanging around on street corners after dark up ‘ere. Never know what might happen to you.”

Shutting the door on the shrieking women behind him, he placed a firm hand on Eleri’s shoulder and guided her towards the porch.

“I know what you did to Jamie,” she snarled as her future stepfather frogmarched her down the driveway.

It was only 6 o’clock but the sky was tar-black above them. The council had announced further budget cuts that year in the guise of a ‘green policy’ on street lighting. Once the bulbs had blown, they would not be replaced. The cul-de-sac was engulfed by darkness.

“We’re all upset,” Owain sighed, neither confirming nor denying the accusation. “He’s in a better place now.”

“There’s no way I’m letting this wedding go ahead.” Eleri shimmied free from Owain’s clawed fingers around her arm. “I’ve got enough dirt to bring you down.”

“You’ll break her heart,” Owain warned.

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Eleri laughed. “She’s already super disappointed in me.”

They stood for a moment, facing one another at the end of the driveway, the open front door swinging in the breeze behind them. A Taylor Swift song that sounded like tinnitus was playing inside the house. There was a clattering of high heels across the lacquered flooring, brays of laughter and the crash of crockery.

“Clear out of town,” Eleri told him, using a line she’d learned from television. “Or I’ll tell her everything.”

“You what?”

“You heard me, buddy. You’ve got twenty-four hours.”

“You’re ‘avin a laugh.” Owain shook his head in disbelief. “How the bloody hell am I supposed to arrange van removal this time on a Sunday?”

“That’s – not my problem.” Eleri frowned. She’d never realised how much advance warning criminals needed to clear out.

“What about the cat?” Owain continued, more outraged than Eleri had ever seen him. “I’m supposed to leave an arthritic, partially-sighted, nineteen-year-old Russian Blue on the streets? He’d be livid.”

“Forget about the cat.” Eleri felt the same level of exasperation as she did when standing in line at Starbucks watching a barista experiment with various spellings of her name on a diminishing paper cup canvas.

“Are you going to look after her?” Owain jabbed a finger at Eleri’s chest.

“Not with my allergies,” Eleri conceded. “Look – you don’t have to leave town, just stay away from my family.”

“In a fortnight’s time,” Owain’s upper lip snarled upwards, flashing the sharp tips of his teeth as he loomed towards her with vampiric intent. “We’ll all be family.”

“Over my dead body!” Eleri shouted as she fled from his grasping hands.

“We’ll see about that,” Owain called after her as she stumbled down the street.

“No, we won’t!” she screamed into the night, determined to have the last word.  
“The wedding is never going to happen. I won’t let it.”

## Chapter Fourteen

The wedding was wonderful, all the guests agreed. The bride was beautiful – though a little too old for a neckline that plunged to her navel. The service took place in a twelfth century Norman priory where pheasants and deer ambled amongst the partygoers on acres of manicured lawns. Vows were exchanged beneath an ivy-twined pergola in a stone dovecote with hundreds of white pigeons cooing their congratulations. The congregation gathered beneath umbrellas outside, refusing to let the torrential downpour dampen their spirits.

Few in attendance had witnessed a Welsh Catholic Thelemic ceremony before and it was remarked that the observance of the traditional mass was enlivened by the smashing of the leek beneath the groom's feet. Aunty Gwen was particularly taken with the ritual disembowelment of the black ram performed by the bride with such ease that she looked as if she were cutting the wedding cake. On the minibus en route to the reception she insisted to Eleri that, despite the blood stains on her light blue skirt, it was a lovely touch.

The Wedding Breakfast was held in a medieval castle perched upon a towering clifftop. Eleri heard the ungenerous whispering of guests who thought that the celebrations were a little over-the-top for a second marriage. Celyn and Owain, if they heard the grumbles of discontent, did not care. They seemed to delight in the opulence of their surroundings. The day was intended to reflect the beautiful life they were building together, even if – as Eleri suspected – it was bought on credit with an astronomical APR.

Owain walked friends and family around the Grade I listed building as if it were his own. With flourishes as dramatic as the architecture, he pointed to the original wooden portcullis of the gatehouse, the dry moat circling the estate, and the terracotta medallions decorating the sandstone walls.

Eleri had slipped away from the guided tour to gather her thoughts in the rain soaked Tudor garden. Shivering in the elaborate tulle and lace columned dress that threatened to trip her with every step, she began to worry that she'd let things go too far. She'd certainly planned to put an end to it all before the marriage register was

signed – but stopping a wedding was not as easy as it seemed on daytime T.V. Though she sought advice from *The Graduate* and studied Julia Roberts' *Runaway Bride*, she could not come up with an action plan. There was no good way to tell someone they were making a mistake. Whenever she broached the subject with her mother, she was shut down by a glare that warned of an almighty wrath if she did not hold her tongue.

When the wedding day arrived, Eleri was sure the words would too. She soon discovered that waiting for the perfect moment meant letting it pass you by. On the morning of the nuptials, conversation was occluded by a lace veil. Bridesmaids circled Celyn like satellites. Their hands were in her hair, on the hem of her dress. Eleri tried to speak over the sweep of a bronzer brush on an already overdone face but was choked by a spritz of setting spray. When she opened her mouth, the maid-of-honour crammed it with a canape. There was no time to talk during the classic car ride to the church where the driver wore white gloves and listened to Radio 5 Live. When the registrar demanded that she speak now or forever hold her peace, she chose silence over cliché. Now – it was too late.

She wore her bridesmaid's dress like a sackcloth – for her sins. The jewelled bodice was tight around her swollen breasts, the design chosen when she displayed more chest bones than cleavage. The dressmaker had let out the seams several times in the last few weeks, unable to keep pace with Eleri's changing shape. She'd allowed herself to be pinned and prodded, her body 'tssked' and 'tuttet' at, but she would not stop eating. The dress that draped perfectly a few days ago now piled and clung.

Across the courtyard, a voice called her name.

She glanced up, startled. The terrace was quiet. The last vanguard of cigarette smokers stood beneath the parasols, protecting their satin gowns and suede shoes from the late December drizzle. Her eyes roamed the garden, searching for the source.

"Fuck's sake," Eleri muttered.

Robert stood at the other end of the lawn, arms waving like a white flag. There was no time to escape before he was beside her, placing a half-empty champagne flute in her hand and clinking it against his own full glass.

“Cheers to the happy couple,” he flashed her a smile more sparkling than the wine.

“Cheers,” she echoed, flatly.

“How have you been?”

“Meh.”

He looked dapper in his dove grey morning suit with a gardenia pinned to the buttonhole, his skin scrubbed clean of fake tan and sweat. It was hard to hate someone so handsome. She began to soften towards him. He may have done bad things, but he was not a bad person. It was possible that he – like her – was caught up in something much bigger than himself.

“You look great.” It was a lie that would have convinced her if he wasn’t looking over her shoulder as he said it. “I’ve missed you. Can we talk?”

Eleri wanted to believe him. She let his fingers curl around hers as she searched for some sign of sincerity. He had the sort of beauty that made her want to trust him.

The ringing of the dinner bell was the death knell of her hopes and dreams.

“Oh shit! The buffet’s open!” He let go of her hands. “I’m starving. Catch you later.”

He was already halfway up the stone steps before she could summon a response. She watched as he paused beneath the archway, turning around to offer her a shrugged apology before disappearing inside.

With a sigh, she hitched up the hem of her dress and joined the crowd of latecomers making their way to the party.

“There you are.” Her mother appeared in the entrance hall with arms outstretched. “It’s time for the speeches, hurry up.”

Eleri found herself swept along on the train of her mother's wedding gown as she tried to keep pace with the clattering heels of the bridal delegation ushering her into the ballroom where the guests were taking their seats. Despite the hall's magnificence, it was not a large room. The venue coordinator had specified that it was more suited for intimate occasions, but Celyn and Owain assured him that five hundred of their closest friends and family could be comfortably accommodated with a well-designed seating plan.

The space was filled with circular tables draped in dusky pink silk which left no room for manoeuvre. The guests sat, pressed against one another, unable to cut their steaks or raise their wine glasses without finding their elbows in their neighbours' dinners. The ice sculpture centrepieces monopolised the space, and the conversation, as diners complained about the melting swans watering down the gravy boats.

Plucking a mimosa from a passing silver tray, Eleri allowed the maid-of-honour to manhandle her onto the stage and into a seat at the end of the linen-swathed top table. The honourable matron settled herself beside the best man, her hand disappearing beneath the tablecloth with a wicked laugh. Eleri took a sip of her drink and looked out at the crowd below.

There were only a few people in attendance that she recognised. Robert and Nick were seated at a table reserved for Owain's business associates. Nick was wearing a pin-striped blazer over a black Anal Cunt T-shirt. His fingertips kept finding reasons to brush against Robert's as he reached for the salt, passed the butter, and poured the gravy. It was if he could not see anything except his best friend as he peppered drinks and spooned mint sauce onto napkins. Eleri knew how he felt.

The Lord Mayor and the Local Assembly Member were seated at the same table, engaged in conversation over the obstruction of Wolf from *Gladiators* who gnawed chicken off the bone between them. Deep Throat – who she was relieved to see alive – was taking up three seats beside an elderly woman in a peacock feather fascinator that Eleri assumed was his mother but could have been his date.

Her father was at the back of the room, propping up the bar he believed to be free – a notion Eleri knew he would be disabused of when presented with his tab at the end of the evening. He had not been invited to the wedding but was there all the



same. It had seemed cruel to turn him away when he arrived in the same powder blue tuxedo and ruffled dress shirt he'd worn to his own wedding, the soles of his polished shoes holding memories of first dance steps and last goodbyes.

Beside him stood a woman at 6"2 in stockinged feet, the straps of her Lucite heels hanging from her pinkie finger as she sipped a strawberry daquiri. She'd been introduced to Eleri only as 'Svetlana' and it was unclear whether she was a sex-worker or a sweetheart. Eleri was not going to interfere. If her father was happy, that was all that mattered – no matter whether 'the girlfriend experience' was charged per hour or per annum.

Eleri raised a glass to Ian. He echoed the gesture, his head resting in Svetlana's ample bosom. An accord had been struck between father and daughter in the last few weeks. There was no tangible change – most days they still haunted the same spaces in silence – but she was no longer embarrassed by him; he was no longer disappointed in her. They could exist, together but apart, two parallel lines that loved one another.

The clink of a spoon against the rim of a crystal glass was a delicate way to announce the commencement of the wedding speeches. Dirty Debs was not a delicate woman. Rising from her seat, hands coated in a pearlescent sheen, she slammed her fist on the table and shouted, "oi! It's the fucking speeches. There's no such thing as a free lunch, you cunts, so listen up."

The room fell silent. Eleri shuffled her notes in her lap as the best man rose to take the stand. Celyn had demanded that each of her twenty bridesmaids prepare a heart-felt and flattering speech in her honour, and Eleri was up next. She had not thought the wedding would get this far. She'd seen no need to write her speech the night before, nor in the bridal suite that morning. Her cue cards were hastily scribbled on the back of her manuscript on the ride to the reception. This, Eleri feared, was her last 'speak now' moment. It was too late to stop the ceremony, but if she could prevent the marriage being consummated then there was still the option for an annulment.

"Mam," Eleri took the microphone shoved beneath her nose by the maid-of-honour. The room quietened. She rose to her feet and made her way to the centre of the stage. "What can I say?"

She glanced over her shoulder at her mother whose rictus grin was held as tightly as her wine glass.

“You have made the biggest mistake of your life by marrying this man.” She motioned towards Owain, unsure whether her audience would know who she meant. “Owain Jenkins is not the man you think he is. He is a drug dealer. A murderer. An all-round bad egg.”

The guests began to murmur behind their hands. A thousand pairs of eyes flickered from Owain to Eleri to Celyn.

Eleri strode to the edge of the stage, her showmanship increasing as she grew in confidence. “VerdantVitality is not an ‘all natural’ herbal supplement. Owain has been drugging the entire village with methamphetamines disguised as weight loss supplements.”

There was a collective intake of breath.

“Well, if it works, it works,” came a heckle from the cheap seats.

Eleri pretended not to hear this remark over the sound of her microphone dropping to the ground.

“Mam,” she turned to Celyn who flushed as red as the wine she was slugging. Eleri held out her hand. “Let’s get out of here. You can move back in with me and dad. Things can go back to how they used to be.”

“The fuck is wrong with you, bach?”

Owain advanced upon her, his wingtip shoes squeaking against the polished floorboards. The Jenkins’ family tartan cilt billowed around his sinewy thighs, his sporran slapped against his crotch. Eleri’s eyes fixed upon the decorative knife at his waist as his fingers twitched towards it.

“Mam!” Eleri shrieked, sure that Owain could murder her in front of hundreds of eyewitnesses and maintain his innocence. “Mam! Help!”

“How could you do this?” Dirty Debs hissed, gathering Celyn to her chest as mascara bled down the weeping bride’s cheeks. “On your mum’s big day.”

“She’s so selfish,” Celyn sobbed, an orange imprint left on the bodice of her friend’s dress as she raised her head to cast her *j’accuse*. “She never thinks about anyone but herself.”

“Mam!”

“You could have saved your breakdown for later,” Debs snarled as she ushered Celyn offstage in a swish of silk and stifled sobs.

“Ewart, sort this will you?” Owain clicked his fingers, losing patience with the support act. Eleri had seen from the printed programme cards that Bonnie Tyler was due to take the stage for a sixty-minute medley of her greatest hits. She could not be permitted to upstage the entertainment.

The crowd parted like the red sea as Ewart, summoned by Owain’s incantation, lumbered forwards. It was a miracle that the man had found enough material to cover the amount of muscle he was hauling around. Eleri could only imagine that the slightest twitch would unstitch the seams of his suit.

“Oh my fucking God!” Robert let out a high-pitched squeal as he sprung from his seat. “Mr Wales?! Mr Wales 1994?”

“1994, 1995, and 1997,” came the gruff correction.

“You were robbed in ’96. No one had definition like you.” Robert bowed before the great man.

“Seriously?” Eleri looked incredulously around the Great Hall. “Is no one going to stand with me against the tides of injustice?”

She searched for an ally amongst the assemblage. Her father had disappeared into the disabled toilets with Svetlana. Nick was retreating to the smoking area with his vape-pen. Deep Throat – who she was no longer pleased to see alive – was piling his mother’s empty wheelchair full of plates from the buffet.

There was no one.

“C’mon love” Ewart said, his voice softer than Eleri expected as he hooked his arms around her waist and hoisted her over his shoulder.

“Unhand me!” she yelled, slipping free from his grip and falling to the floor with a thud. The adrenaline acted as an anaesthetic. She felt no pain as she scrambled to her feet and hotfooted it to the fire exit, tossing the train of her dress over her shoulder. Shoving her shoulder hard against the heavy door, she ignored the shrill of the fire alarm and the yelps of surprise as it swung open, activating the sprinkler system. There was no time to think about where she was going as she tumbled outside onto the verge.

“What are you playing at, bach?”

Eleri stood on the cliff's edge. She cast a desperate glance around. There was nowhere to go but down. She could see Owain approaching. Robert and Nick lurked in the open doorway, wide eyed as she backed towards the brink.

“You’ve got the wrong end of the stick,” Owain moved towards her as if she were a wild animal, careful not to startle her. “Let me explain.”

“Get away from me!” Eleri yelled as she saw his hand move towards his waist, unhooking the knife from his belt.

“It’s okay,” Owain soothed, raising his hands above his head, letting the knife fall silently to the soft ground beneath his feet. “I’m not going to hurt you, love.”

Eleri narrowed her eyes. She did not believe him. For all she knew, he was harbouring a handgun in his sporran.

“Why should I trust you? All you’ve done is lie since the day I met you.”

“VerdantVitality is not an all-natural supplement,” Owain admitted with a grimace. She could see that this honesty hurt him. “It’s a scam. Okay – there you have it – I’ll hold my hands up to it. But it’s not what you think. I’m not running a bloody meth lab. There is no active ingredient. It’s a fibrous bulking agent cut with Dulcolax. It fills you up and it makes you shit yourself. That’s the magic formula. It’s not the most ethical product, but we’re not harming anyone.”

Eleri halted her slow backwards shuffle. She stood against the wind, arms outstretched, her dress swelling like the sea behind her. She could hear the waves lapping the shoreline below.

“What about Jamie? Why did you make him steal drugs from the hospital?”

"I didn't," Owain replied.

Eleri had not expected such a succinct defence.

"Then why did you abduct him and beat the shit out of him?"

"Tough love," Owain answered with a shrug. "I was Jamie's N.A sponsor. I wanted to help him."

"Bullshit! You fucking murdered him," Eleri spat back.

Owain's blank expression was that of an innocent man, but she knew better.

"You wha'?" he scratched his head, looking back at Robert and Nick. Their dumbstruck expressions echoed his disbelief.

"You took him out. You thought he was going to narc so you got rid of him."

"Jamie isn't dead," Robert moved forward. He seemed frightened, but she could not tell if it was Owain he was afraid of, or her.

"I went to his funeral," Eleri stomped her foot into the wet grass. She knew she was right. These men were trying to make her think she was crazy, that she'd made the whole thing up. She was not going to let herself be gaslighted. "I was at the graveyard. I saw the soil hitting his coffin. I was there when they buried him six-feet-fucking-under."

Robert and Nick exchanged glances. She noticed the tremulous smiles on their faces, the suppressed laughter as they turned to face her.

"That was his grandfather's funeral," Robert explained. "Jamie Lupinetti Senior."

"Yeah," Nick backed him up. "He was a Nazi, so I don't think many people went."

Eleri shook her head. It was true that she'd been too far away to hear the priest's eulogy, that she'd skimmed the obituary. Was it possible she'd leapt to the wrong conclusion?

Owain cleared his throat. Eleri's ears pricked up.

“Jamie is currently undergoing drug and alcohol rehabilitation treatment at an all-expenses-paid ashram in India. VerdantVitality takes care of its own. I was happy to use the company dime to help a promising young man get back on his feet.”

Eleri’s lips were half-parted, her tongue lolling uselessly in her mouth. She could not let herself believe the rational explanations for her wild accusations. If Owain was telling the truth, it meant that something was incredibly wrong with her.

“Wait, what about the drugs in the back of the van?” She punched the air in triumph. She couldn’t wait to see them talk their way out of that one.

“I –” Robert stood, abashed, the tip of his Oxford brogue tracing a circle in the mud. “This is embarrassing. It was lemon sherbet. Sugar is my crack, okay. I was going to binge on it after the competition. I was just so ashamed when you found it that I didn’t know what to say.”

Eleri blinked rapidly. She felt her grasp on reality loosening. Was it possible that – while she neglected her novel – she had written her own life into a work of fiction?

“I can’t –” she gasped, clutching her chest with clawed fingers. She could not breathe. She bent double against the impact of the revelation.

“Ei,” Robert called, reaching for her. “Get away from the edge. It’s not safe.”

“You’re lying,” she stuttered, arms windmilling around her. “You’re lying liars!”

She felt the hem of her dress tangle around her ankles. Her legs slipped from underneath her. She braced herself for impact, could not understand why it would not come. There was nothing solid beneath her anymore. She felt the rush of air against her body, the world moving far too fast while she remained motionless. In the distance she heard a scream.

Then, with a sickening crunch, she hit the ground.

## Epilogue

Eleri lay swaddled in stiff white sheets, her head propped up by pillows as she stared at the panelled ceiling above her. She had slept sitting up for weeks and the feeling of the bed beneath her back was unbearable. The loose springs, the lumpy mattress, the thin blanket across her legs – she had never known luxury like it. A single tear rolled down her cheek. It was too much. She did not deserve it.

Her pale face blended into the bandages circling her skull. Everything around her was whiter than the waiting room before the gates of Heaven. There was no delineation between up and down, left and right. Her compass spun, but she could not find her bearings.

The room was always in motion. She felt the whirl of companionship against her static body. She smelt fresh cut flowers and fruit. She heard the sipping of coffee from polystyrene cups, the clearing of throats. These distant sounds were clearer than her own thoughts. The medication stilled her mind. Everything was muffled, her head filled with fibreglass. She was safe in the comforting quiet of prochlorperazine.

The body she lay in was no longer her own. She was not connected to the heart that beat, the lungs that breathed, the blood that flowed. The biological demands that had driven her half-mad were no longer her concern. They were taken care of by machines, by pharmacy, by angels in blue uniforms.

She had woken up in the Intensive Care Unit of the Princess of Wales hospital several weeks after the accident, unaware that she'd missed Christmas and New Year. Pigs in blankets and renewing her subscription to Jillian Michael's workout app were not high on her 'to do list' when she found herself surrounded by clicking machines and plastic veins that snaked inside her body and around her bed. At first, she was afraid to see herself octopussed amongst all this medical equipment. The tube in her throat kept her silent, but her eyes blinked rapid S.O.S signals. She was alone. Every bed was empty but hers. She let out a stifled scream, fingers scratching at the I.V drip puncturing her skin.

When the nurses rushed in to plunge a hypodermic needle into her hip, things got better.

“Darling, you could have died,” were her mother’s first words when Eleri reawakened.

Celyn was the Florence Nightingale of the orthopaedics ward. No one was as attentive to their invalid as Mrs Jenkins. She spooned tapioca pudding into the patient’s mouth. She plumped her pillows and smoothed her sheets. She read aloud from magazines and Jackie Collins novels when Eleri wanted to watch television. She slept pretzelled in an uncomfortable plastic chair without complaint. She chased doctors down corridors and made impossible demands during ward rounds.

“My baby, my poor little baby bird.”

Eleri chirped happily as her mother regurgitated this newfound affection into her child’s open mouth. It was the nutrition she’d been missing, and she gulped it down greedily.

Eleri had never felt so loved. Her father and Svetlana visited every day. Nick sent her a beautiful bouquet of white lilies tied with black silk and a note that said, “feel better, clumsy bitch.” Marcus and Bronwyn bought her boxes of chocolates and books she did not want to read about the systemic dismantling of the NHS under New Labour.

Robert kept his distance. Her weight gain was bad press for his business. She understood. Who would hire a personal trainer whose clients ended up fatter following his diet plan? In the intervening weeks, she’d gained more weight than she’d lost. She did not chastise herself for this. The hospital food was too good to resist, and how could she exercise when she was still forced to use a bedpan?

Owain was at the hospital more than her mother. He was as attentive as a lover as he sat at her side, stroking her hair and feeding her grapes. He took turns with Celyn to stay up all night. He made sure his wife slept, showered, ate. He made sure Eleri was entertained, well fed and rested. She began to feel bad about the accusations she’d made against him.

The local newspaper reported her fall as a suicide attempt. Owain Jenkins was lauded as a local hero, scrambling down the cliff-face to scoop up the broken bundle of limbs and French lace that lay on the jagged shoreline. Robert was quoted as saying, “yeah, he really tried to talk her down. She was a right state. Always been



a bit of a headcase, that one.” Her mother told the reporter that if it weren’t for her husband her daughter would be dead. Owain refused to comment. He had done what anyone else would do. He was an ordinary man made extraordinary by the powerful love he felt for his stepchild.

Was it true? Eleri could not remember. She supposed it must be. Owain would not lie to her, she knew that now.

She had not spoken since the fall. There was no need. Other voices spoke for her.

The physical injuries she sustained were minor. She was lucky – oh so lucky – everyone said. Clipped to her bedframe was a list of all the broken bits of her: hairline fracture to the skull, shattered pelvis, cracked ribs, broken legs, collapsed lungs, a punctured spleen. These were a small price to pay for the second chance she’d been given.

Marcus used to tell her that she was too caught up in the details of life to live it. Hurling from a great height altered how she saw the world. It was as if part of her was still suspended in space, seeing everything from a bird’s-eye-perspective. She was amazed by little things. She awoke each morning filled with gratitude that the nurse had emptied her colostomy bag, that there were spoonfuls of soggy Weetabix piloted into her mouth by a fed-up Health Care Assistant, and a cold cup of de-caff coffee on her table-tray. She counted her blessings – one, two, three – as she blinked back tears.

Eleri enjoyed being bedridden. She had finally found something she was good at. Lesser women would have been daunted by all the empty hours to fill with nothing but Netflix and biscuits, but Eleri relished her idleness. The weight of expectation that she should do something – *anything* – with her life had been lifted and she felt lightheaded with happiness. From now on she would never do anything for herself again.

Her physical injuries were healing well, the doctors said – it was her mind they feared for. The hospital psychiatrist, gleaming what he could from her milk-eyed stares and lolling tongue, gave a grim prognosis. The delusions she’d experienced before the accident were the result of an acute psychosis brought on by severe

dehydration and starvation. She was prescribed olanzapine, risperidone, quetiapine, clozapine, but none of them loosened her tongue. Her mouth only opened to eat. The doctors cycled drug after drug, unable to gauge their effects. There wasn't much more they could do and the bed she lay on was costing taxpayers' valuable money.

"We've got the spare room ready for you, love," Celyn crooned, her fingers unfurling Eleri's frizzed curls as she planted a kiss on her forehead. "Owain's been nesting. He can't wait for you to come home."

Owain smiled down at her from the foot of the bed. Eleri beamed back, blithely, imaging herself wrapped in blankets like a new-born in the pale pink nursery of her mother's spare room.

"We'll pick you up tomorrow, lovely one." Celyn rose from her seat, her touch lingering on her daughter's skin. Eleri wanted to reach out and clasp her hand, to never be apart from her again. "Try and get a good night's sleep."

She moved towards the doorway. Owain remained in place.

"You go ahead and get the car," he instructed. "I'll just make sure she's comfortable."

Celyn nodded, blowing Eleri one last kiss as she disappeared down the corridor.

"Let me just –" Owain glanced around the hallway before shutting the door behind his wife. "That's better." He smiled at Eleri again. She smiled back.

She watched as he leant over her bedside. He was so kind, she thought, as he pulled the pillow sharply from beneath her, her head hitting the hard mattress. He grinned down, plumping the pillow inches above her face. She gazed up as it moved closer and closer, her eyes blinking rapidly. Her arms flailed. The pillow hovered above her open mouth. She waited for him to place it under her head.

"Sleep tight," he whispered.

A DEFENCE OF THE ENGLISH LITERATURE CANON IN AN ERA OF  
HYPERTEXTUAL ABUNDANCE.

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Introduction

The Frankfurt School of thought is often maligned for legitimising the study of popular culture as a valid academic practice. The school was established in 1923 as the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt by a group of leading German intellectuals with the aim of providing an interdisciplinary theory of society based on Marxist and Hegelian philosophy.<sup>9</sup> The leading luminaries in the movement were Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse who initially focused on a Marxist analysis of economic forces.<sup>10</sup> In 1933, with the rise to power of Adolf Hitler, the Institute's academicians relocated to New York. It was in exile that they began to apply their Critical Theory – a mixture of psychoanalysis and Marxist critique – to the American popular culture they observed around them. Contrary to the notion that the Frankfurt school elevated 'Mass Culture' to an art form, the School applied its "criticism as an act of resistance, prefiguring work outside the market system."<sup>11</sup> Critical Theory encouraged the study of mass cultural artefacts as a challenge to the power structures that surround them and which they help to maintain. As Herbert Marcuse states

the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry [the culture industry] carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter, to the whole. The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood . . . it becomes a way of life. It is a good way of life – much better than before – and as a good way of life, it militates against qualitative change. Thus emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behaviour in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, (London: Routledge, 2015), 66.

<sup>10</sup> Arnold Schuetz, "The Frankfurt School and Popular Culture," *Studies in Popular Culture* 12, no. 1 (1989): 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23414449>.

<sup>11</sup> Clay Steinman, "Reception of Theory: Film/Television Studies and the Frankfurt School," *Journal of Film and Video* 40, no.2 (1988): 5, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20687817>.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (London: Sphere, 1968), 26-27, quoted in Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, 67.

The School, rather than glorifying popular culture, saw it as a means of propping up capitalist power structures. In contrast, they believed ‘High Culture’ embodied “ideals denied by capitalism... [and] offers an implicit critique of capitalist society.”<sup>13</sup>

Inspired by the Frankfurt School, literary criticism began to be applied widely to forms of popular culture such as radio, film, television and magazines, affording these mediums the same status as canonical works. This worrying trend has reached its apogee in the theoretic field of Fan Studies scholars who propose that fanfiction – the fan-based practice of creating derivative pieces of writing using original characters and settings found in novels, film and television – should be considered a valid sub-genre of literature. Sheenah Pugh, in her treatise arguing for such a treatment of fanfiction, states that her intent is to “consider fan fiction from a literary point of view, as one might any other highly successful, popular genre.”<sup>14</sup> In this thesis I propose to argue that the legitimisation of fanfiction as a sub-genre of literature contributes to an already steady decline in the standards of English literature in our society. The English literary canon is the last bastion of ‘High Culture’ in an era where mass-commodification of cultural products has seen audiences shift into the role of consumer. The cultural cost of this trend is enormous. If we continue to afford academic attention to illegitimate forms of art, we degrade the standards of true literature and risk the steady erosion of the English literary canon.

Chapter One examines the history of fanfiction and its origins in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries with admirers of Jane Austen and Sherlock Holmes creating their own ‘fanfiction’ based on these works to read aloud at book groups and Sherlock Holmes society meetings. The historical precedence for fanfiction speaks to the human impulse to ‘borrow’ original creations and I argue that, while fanfiction itself cannot degrade the literary landscape, serious critical attention to it can.

Chapter Two investigates theories of authorship, beginning in the medieval period with Bernard of Chartres’ belief that contemporary writers were merely “dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants”<sup>15</sup> whose work was indebted to that of the

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<sup>13</sup> Storey, “*Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*,” 67.

<sup>14</sup> Sheenah Pugh, *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context*, (Bridgend: Seren Press, 2005), 11.

<sup>15</sup> John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury: A Twelfth-Century Defense of the Verbal and Logical Arts of the Trivium*, trans. Daniel D. McGarry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), Bk III, 167, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015008932611&view=image&seq=9&size=125>. (Scan of original copy from University of Michigan, digitized by Google.)

Ancients, through to the Romantic conception of the Author, and Roland Barthes' death of the author. Using such theories of authorship, it is possible to distinguish true literature from fanfiction and to defend the English literary canon on these grounds.

Chapter Three posits the idea that fanfiction is a form of ephemeral and inconsequential marginalia as opposed to the theories of Fan Studies scholars such as Henry Jenkins who see fanfiction as a form of literary criticism written by marginalised and outsider groups as a way of reclaiming control over their own narratives from the margins of society. Though this idea is an intriguing one, it is easily refuted when we closely examine the content of most fanfiction available online. Instead of deconstructing harmful power structures, I argue that fanfiction often serves to bolster patriarchal notions of gender and sexuality and further marginalises women within their own narratives.

In Chapter Four, I discuss the intersection between technology and fanfiction. Using Marshall McLuhan's theory of mass communications, I examine the impact of digital technology on reading approaches in both adults and younger generations, and what this means for the future of English literature.

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## Chapter One

### The History of Modern Fanfiction

In order to understand contemporary fanfiction and its attitudes to authorship we must investigate its origins. These 'derivative' works are inextricably entwined with the history of storytelling, but this chapter will focus on fanfiction's recent past in order to investigate its current day incarnation. The history of fanfiction is one of privilege. In direct contradiction to the arguments of fanfiction theorists such as Sheenah Pugh and Henry Jenkins, the earliest forms of fanfiction were restricted to those with the means, education and leisure time to access it. Through exploring the antecedents of modern-day fanfiction, we can see that there is nothing intrinsically democratic in the medium.

Fanfiction may seem an entirely modern phenomenon made possible through the ubiquity of word processing technologies and internet access, but there is historical precedence for the existence of such 'derivative' works dating back to the nineteenth century. The beginnings of modern fanfiction can be traced back to the Victorian era and the establishment of Jane Austen societies and Sherlock Holmes' fan clubs set up by wealthy admirers of these literary works.<sup>16</sup> The societies, initially intended as a forum for further discussion of the authors' works, soon developed into an inchoate form of the online fanfiction communities we see today. Participants were encouraged to pen continuations of the adventures of Holmes and Watson and these fan-works would be read aloud at social gatherings or circulated amongst members of the community through written correspondence. It is interesting to note that this burgeoning form of fanfiction was not solely an oral or print medium, but a delicate balance of both. Fanfiction shares many commonalities with oral storytelling culture, as explored further in Chapter Two. Both forms rely on communal writing and the input of other voices to shape the narrative and it is difficult to attribute authorship to a single source. The nascent genre of fanfiction reflected this in its amalgamation of both print and oral forms.

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<sup>16</sup> Pugh, *Democratic Genre*, 18.

Advocates of contemporary fanfiction cite the democratizing nature of the medium in its defence, however, fanfiction's origins are rooted exclusively in the domain of the bourgeoisie and upper classes. Members of Jane Austen and Sherlock Holmes 'appreciation societies' would have belonged to the ranks of the Victorian era's rising middle classes – those in professions ranging from clerks to doctors – who would have been in possession of the means, literacy levels and leisure time, needed to participate in such diversions.

Although the activity was limited to the middle and upper classes, the need to possess and play within an established fictional universe is not a modern impulse. Throughout history people have formed emotional attachments to fictional characters and narratives which can lead to a sense of 'ownership' over the work. The word 'fan' is a pejorative term, shortened from the word 'fanatic' and imbued with unpleasant connotations. Fans often face criticism for their unrestrained passion and the overabundant enthusiasm they display for their chosen 'fandom' – emotions which can seem distasteful to outsiders. Henry Jenkins, noted Fan Studies scholar, has argued that "the fans' transgressions of bourgeois taste and disruption of dominant cultural hierarchies ensures that their preferences are seen as abnormal and threatening by those who have an interest in maintaining those standards."<sup>17</sup>

Fannish behaviour has long been portrayed as pathological in popular culture, from "the screaming, weeping teen at the airport glimpsing a Rockstar"<sup>18</sup> to the hysterical *Twilight* fan, Emma Clark, who went viral after posting a YouTube video chastising the actress Kristen Stewart for cheating on her co-star Robert Pattison.<sup>19</sup> These fannish displays of excitement contravene bourgeois standards of decorum and self-restraint and have been a source of anxiety for cultural commentators since the birth of rock n' roll in the '50s and the height of Beatlemania in the 1960s, with many voicing concerns that an adoring audience could easily become a frenzied

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<sup>17</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participation Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1992), 17.

<sup>18</sup> Joli Jensen, "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization" in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis, (London: Routledge, 1992), 12.

<sup>19</sup> "'Twilight' Fan Crying Over Kristen Stewart, Emma Clark, Explains Herself," *Huffington Post*, August 5, 2012, accessed 6 December 2019, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/twilight-fan-crying-emma-clark\\_n\\_1744600?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAALarWYaEiYoETN\\_vQwJnFdbNd3kx9\\_3unImaNx1LRABWNjgxJmw-sT6UGD13DwjyKzjCUZYaljcjdewwJHGsgKf0xvfvNcz2JkC5-7AfAfCZ9demPQSNa6Rp\\_BfeYShNLODz0qo3YyA6n-vw2Ux6xSBYP3t2c9lwJMGKHU-MJDL](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/twilight-fan-crying-emma-clark_n_1744600?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAALarWYaEiYoETN_vQwJnFdbNd3kx9_3unImaNx1LRABWNjgxJmw-sT6UGD13DwjyKzjCUZYaljcjdewwJHGsgKf0xvfvNcz2JkC5-7AfAfCZ9demPQSNa6Rp_BfeYShNLODz0qo3YyA6n-vw2Ux6xSBYP3t2c9lwJMGKHU-MJDL).



mob.<sup>20</sup> It can be argued that society's fear of the 'deranged fan' stems, in part, from the idea that acclaimed sociologist Pierre Bourdieu posited, that "the most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated."<sup>21</sup>

The human tendency to overinvest in fictional characters is a universal trait not restricted to the modern fan. This can be seen in the parallel between contemporary fans turning to WikiHow for bereavement advice after the death of a beloved character<sup>22</sup> and the reaction of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's nineteenth century audience to the end of the Sherlock Holmes series. In December 1893 Doyle sparked public outrage with the publication of his short story, "The Adventure of the Final Problem", which saw the famous detective fall to his death from the Reichenbach Falls. In an unexpected outpouring of grief, 20,000 fans cancelled their subscriptions to *Strand* magazine where the adventures were serialised, and other Sherlockians donned mourning bands to pay their respects to the late hero.<sup>23</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle even became the target of a vitriolic hate mail campaign, with one correspondent derogating him as a "brute."<sup>24</sup> He was quoted as saying, "if I had killed a real man I could not have received more vindictive letters."<sup>25</sup>

Fan Studies theorists posit the idea that readers are compelled to write fanfiction because they either want "more *of*" or "more *from*"<sup>26</sup> their chosen fandom. In the case of Sherlock Holmes, it seems to have been a case of 'more *of*'. Though Doyle had grown disinterested in his characters, his audience was far from satiated. While some fans produced unofficial content to amuse themselves and their friends with no thought of monetary gain, others saw commercial interest in the quest to satisfy a built-in audiences' demands.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective was so popular that he became the subject of pastiche – some with Doyle's blessing, others without. In 1893, the *Peter Pan*

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<sup>20</sup> Jenson, "Fandom as Pathology," 12.

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (London: Routledge, 1986), 57.

<sup>22</sup> "How To Get Over the Death of a Fictional Character," Wikihow.com, accessed 14 December 2017, <https://wikihow.com/Get-Over-the-Death-of-a-Fictional-Character>.

<sup>23</sup> Pugh, *Democratic Genre*, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Booth, *The Doctor, The Detective & Arthur Conan Doyle*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), 190, quoted in Pugh, *Democratic Genre*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Booth quoted in Pugh, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Pugh, 18.

author J.M Barrie collaborated with Doyle on a comic-opera entitled *Jane Annie, or the Good Conduct Prize*, which was a commercial failure, closing after only seven weeks. In 1924, Barrie poked fun at the two men's disaster by publishing a Sherlock Holmes 'fanfiction' entitled 'The Adventure of the Two Collaborators', which saw Barrie employ Holmes' services to discover why no one would attend their opera.

The last words of great men are often noteworthy. These were the last words of Sherlock Holmes. 'Fool, Fool! I have kept you in luxury for years. By my help, you have ridden extensively in cabs, where no author was ever seen before. Henceforth, you will ride in buses!'<sup>27</sup>

The piece amused Doyle so much that he included it in his memoir, *Memories and Adventures*. Other historical writers of Sherlock Holmes fanfiction did not intend their work to be read widely. A surviving example of fanfiction intended for private circulation exists in Vincent Starrett's 'The Unique Hamlet: A Hitherto Unchronicled Adventure of Mr. Sherlock Holmes.' The piece was privately printed "for the friends of Vincent Starrett"<sup>28</sup> in a print run of 110 copies, with two variants. Starrett, though not intending to make his work public, did send a copy to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle with the inscription "I am wondering whether, by sending you this impertinence in print, I may not be adding insult to injury!... I admire Holmes and so perhaps you will smile at this dubious tribute."<sup>29</sup> The work tells the tale of a rare book collector who comes to Holmes' with the mystery of a missing Shakespearean manuscript.

His eyes gleamed and he rubbed his hands together in profound satisfaction. I could not but hope that Holmes' conjecture was correct, for he had had little to occupy his mind for some weeks, and I lived in constant fear that he would seek that stimulation his active brain required in the long-tabooed cocaine bottle.

As Holmes finished speaking the man's ring at the doorbell echoed through the apartment; hurried feet sounded upon the stairs, while the wailing voice of Mrs. Hudson,

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<sup>27</sup> Martin Booth, *The Doctor, The Detective and Arthur Conan Doyle*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997) 174.

<sup>28</sup> Randall Stock, "The Unique Hamlet by Vincent Starrett: A First Edition Census," Bestofsherlock.com (website), August 2, 2013, accessed June 29, 2020, <http://www.bestofsherlock.com/unique-hamlet.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> Stock, "The Unique Hamlet".

raised in agonized protest, could only have been occasioned by the frustration of her coveted privilege of bearing his card to us.<sup>30</sup>

The demarcation between fan-work and authentic manuscript can be seen to blur in the case of devoted Sherlockian, Arthur Whitaker. In 1948, the American publication *Cosmopolitan* printed a 'lost' Sherlock Holmes manuscript. The short story was found by Doyle's son amongst his materials in 1942. Upon its publication, the manuscript's author, the architect Arthur Whitaker, recognised it as his own work. In 1911, he had sent Doyle a copy of his Sherlock Holmes 'fanfiction', "The Case of the Man Who Was Wanted," with a view to seeking a collaboration. Doyle refused the collaboration on the mercenary grounds that he would not make enough money from it but encouraged Whitaker to "try to get it published yourself. Of course, you could not use the names of my characters."<sup>31</sup> He also offered to buy the plot idea from Whitaker for £10, an offer which Whitaker accepted, though Doyle never made use of it.

The work, though competent, does not read as an authentic Sherlock Holmes adventure. Jack Tracy, introducing the piece in his collection of Sherlock Holmes apocrypha, claims "the tale is well crafted and in general, its tone rings true, but the diction, especially in the dialogue is nothing like Doyle's. It's progression, too, its 'procedural detail' is subtly off colour."<sup>32</sup>

Holmes pulled out two or three of the cushions from the pile he was lying on and threw them across into the armchair. "Sit down, Watson, and make yourself comfortable; you'll find cigarettes in a box behind the clock."

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<sup>30</sup> Vincent Sterratt, *The Unique Hamlet: A Hitherto Unchronicled Adventure of Mr Sherlock Holmes*. (Chicago: Private printing, 1920), accessed June 28, 2020, <http://ia800702.us.archive.org/1/items/uniquehamlethith00starrich/uniquehamlethith00starrich.pdf>, (Scanned copy of original from University of California, digitized by Internet Archive.), 9-10.

<sup>31</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle quoted in *The Further Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, ed. Richard Lancelyn Green (London: Penguin Books, 1985). Cited in Anne Jamison, "The Early Adventures of the Apocryphal Sherlock Holmes," in *Fic, Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World*, ed. Anne Jamison, (Dallas: Smart Pop, 2013) 59.

<sup>32</sup> Jack Tracy, "The Discovery," in *Sherlock Holmes, The Published Apocrypha: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle & Associated Hands*, ed. Jack Tracy, (Boston: Houghton & Mifflin Company, 1980) 300.

As I proceeded to comply, Holmes glanced whimsically across at me. "I'm afraid I shall have to disappoint you, my boy," he said. "I had a wire only half an hour ago which will prevent me from joining in any little trip you may have been about to propose."

"Really, Holmes," I said, "don't you think this is going *too far*? I begin to fear you are a fraud and pretend to discover things by observation, when all the time you really do it by pure out-and-out clairvoyance!"<sup>33</sup>

The difficulty in demarcating the unauthorised and non-commercial work of fans and the officially sanctioned novelisations of professional writers is best illustrated in the case of William Gillette. In 1899 Gillette purchased the rights to an unfinished Sherlock Holmes work written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The work was initially intended for the stage but was abandoned by the author before completion. Gillette, sensing a lucrative market for further Sherlock Holmes stories, undertook an extensive rewriting of Doyle's original piece. It is interesting to note here that the idea of a 'shared commons' amongst fans – an idea I will explore in further depth when I investigate the phenomenon of modern fanfiction – can be seen in its developmental stages here. Gillette's work, published and widely circulated, can be seen to have had a tangible influence on Arthur Whitaker's unpublished story. In Gillette's play, the stage direction dictates that "HOLMES, *seated in arm chair among the cushions, regards MADGE and LARABEE with a peculiar whimsical look.*"<sup>34</sup> The same cushions and 'whimsical' look are observed in Whitaker's prose, illustrating the shared language and tropes that become common amongst fanfiction writers.

Despite Gillette's ownership of the source material, he felt it necessary to seek the permission of Holmes' original master when he deemed it necessary for the detective to take a wife. Doyle, who felt that he had ceded creative control of his creation with the sale of the play's rights, replied tersely, "marry him or murder him or do whatever you like with him."<sup>35</sup> This episode raises pertinent questions regarding the moral, ethical, and legal frameworks surrounding the creation and dissemination of fan works. Is there a distinguishable difference between Gillette's rewriting of

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<sup>33</sup> Arthur Whitaker, "The Case of the Wanted Man," in Tracy, *Sherlock Holmes, The Published Apocrypha*, 304.

<sup>34</sup> William Gillette, "Sherlock Holmes: A Drama In Four Acts," in *Sherlock Holmes, The Published Apocrypha: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle & Associated Hands*, ed. Jack Tracy, (Boston: Houghton & Mifflin Company, 1980) 88.

<sup>35</sup> Booth quoted in Pugh, *Democratic Genre*, 18.

Doyle's theatre piece and that of an enthusiastic fan penning a continuation of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes for the entertainment of his friends and companions?

Professional fanfiction occupies murky territory. Fanfiction by its very nature is non-commercial, produced by amateurs for a select audience. In this schema, it is difficult to see where a 'professional fanwriter' such as Gillette fits. Gillette can be seen in a purely professional context, in line with a Hollywood screenwriter called in by the studio to rewrite a colleague's work when the initial treatment failed to impress test audiences. Equally, it can be argued that the only difference between Gillette and the Sherlock Holmes society writers was the monetisation of his product and the express permission he obtained from the author to play within his fictional 'sandpit'<sup>36</sup>.

I posit the idea that the distinguishing boundaries between fanfiction and professional writing are quality, permission and profit. I argue that all three of these factors must be in play in order to demarcate a work of literature from that of fanfiction. Gillette, as a professional writer, may have produced a greater quality of work than a fan writing for pleasure, not profit, but this is not always the case – indeed there are instances of non-commercial works being produced on fanfiction forums which are of a higher standard than many professionally published novels. If it is solely permission that designates Gillette's adaptation from fanfiction, then this seems an arbitrary distinction, hinging on ethical and legal precedents which are irrelevant when discussing the taxonomy of literature. The publication of a work, for which the author receives payment, differentiates it from the effort of an amateur, unpublished writer. Once the work is published and in the public realm it becomes subject to copyright and intellectual property laws which protect the author and his imaginative labour. The features that discern Gillette's work from fanfiction are the author's express permission for the use of his characters and settings, the element of commercial interest, and the quality and standard of the work. Within this framework we can be led to believe that the only distinction between fanfiction and professional writing is the crudely commercial. This is not without truth, but before we accept fanfiction as a sub-genre of literature, we must remember the vast gulf between the mainstream airport novel and a canonical work of literary genius.

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<sup>36</sup> Pugh, *Democratic Genre*, 127.

Literature, specifically the canonical, is notorious for its evasion of definition. The question ‘what is literature?’ has haunted academic debates for centuries. Despite fevered discourse on the matter, literature only seems capable of being defined by what it stands in opposition to. In the eighteenth century, the term ‘literature’ was used to “refer to a knowledge of books rather than to their production,”<sup>37</sup> with the English ‘man of literature’ and French ‘*hommes de lettres*’ denoting the knowledge possessed by well-read men, rather than the books themselves. Written works were divided into two categories – ‘*bonnes lettres*’ and ‘*belle lettres*’, “a specification that distinguished writing with no immediate utilitarian intent from its more strictly practical applications.”<sup>38</sup> Yet, as in the Classical view of art as ‘*dulce et utile*’, *belle-lettres* were not merely stylistically pleasing works, but instructional.

While finding a precise definition of literature is impossible, there are common characteristics that all great works share. Derek Atteridge sees canonical literature as possessing three features; the first is the inventiveness of the text – its innovation regarding style, form or subject; the second is “singularity” – the text must possess something unique which establishes it from its contemporaries; the third is the “alterity” of the work – its ‘otherness’ as an artefact.<sup>39</sup> In Atteridge’s model of literature, the canonical work must break with tradition and defy what has gone before it in order to be a worthy contribution to the English literary canon. The idea that literature is in constant opposition with its past is an idea echoed by Sartre who claimed, “each writer writes against all the literature that has gone before, as well as against the situation of the literature of his own time.”<sup>40</sup>

Literature then, in perpetual conflict with itself, must possess an aesthetic and an instructional quality, but must “transgress, to depart, interestingly and revealingly, from the accepted ways of such artefacts.”<sup>41</sup> In essence, literature illuminates and enriches our lives but also challenges received wisdom and societal norms. Under

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<sup>37</sup> Ann Jefferson, *Biography and the Question of Literature in France*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.

<sup>38</sup> Jefferson, *Biography and the Question*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Derek Atteridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), 2.

<sup>40</sup> Jefferson, *Biography and the Question*, 286.

<sup>41</sup> Sir Frank Kermode, “Pleasure, Change, and the Canon,” lecture, *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, (Berkeley, CA: The University of California, November 6 and 7, 2001), transcript, accessed January 3, 2017, [https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/\\_documents/a-to-z/k/kermode\\_2001.pdf](https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/k/kermode_2001.pdf).

this definition of literature, it is clear to see why we must defend the canon as the last bastion of literary merit.

Moving beyond questions of definition, the use of Doyle's characters by Guilleroy raises issues which remain relevant in our digital age – namely, can there ever be a single omniscient author who retains complete creative control over their text, or is that control necessarily abdicated to the reader when the work becomes public property?

The history of fanfiction did not end with the demise of Sherlock Holmes. In the 1930s Science Fiction fanatics with the resources to launch their own publications became the inadvertent creators of the first 'fanzines'. The term is a contraction of 'fan magazine' and the medium would later become the main form of communication and contact for the fan communities of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. These fanzines catered to fans of the short stories published in Sci-Fi magazines such as *Amazing Stories*. The unauthorised 'zines were created by fans to fill the time between new issues of their favourite publications. The well-respected Science Fiction author Frederik Pohl, while denouncing the quality of the 'zines material, conceded that the magazines proved to be a fertile training ground for many young Sci-Fi writers of the era who "got their start that way"<sup>42</sup>, including a young Ray Bradbury.

Fanfiction was not a democratised medium in its developmental stages. Only those with the knowledge, time and wealth to gain access to a printing press could produce fanzines, and only those with literacy skills and leisure time could enjoy them. In this era fanfiction was strictly a pursuit of the educated middle to upper classes. Still, the genre continued to increase in popularity and reach throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, but it was not until the 1960s that fanfiction came into its own.

The catalyst for fanfiction's exponential growth can be traced back to the long-running Sci-Fi television series *Star Trek*. Audience interest was not satisfied by the

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<sup>42</sup> Frederik Pohl, "The Publishing of Science Fiction," in *Science Fiction, Today and Tomorrow*, ed. Reginald Bretnor (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 167, quoted in Francesca Coppa, "A Brief History of Media Fandom," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 43.

30-minute episodes broadcast weekly into households across America. In a case of wanting both 'more of' and 'more from' the television show fanzines exploring the inner lives and interpersonal relationships of the *Starship Enterprise* crew began to circulate rapidly. The ability of these fans to access print presses was easier than it would have been in the 1930s, but it was still limited to those with the income to fund such expenditure and the education to make it possible. Once again, fanfiction was limited to the bourgeois – though their appetites contravened Bourdieu's ideas of middle-class taste.

The Sci-Fi soap opera *Star Trek* – and the mainly female fan community that supported it – was a decisive factor in the development of fanfiction. Fans of the show were keen not only to discuss the series with like-minded individuals, but to share their creative responses to it. As in the case of *Sherlock Holmes*, the fans felt personally invested in the adventures of Captain Kirk and Mr Spock. Their reactions to the show were emotionally charged and felt on an almost visceral level. Perhaps, in a bid to contain the overwhelming feelings aroused in them, fans turned to forms of artistic expression as a form of psychological containment. The works, however, were not meant solely for the producers' delectation. Fanzines were a form of shared communication among fans – a collective group therapy – and the vast array of publications of this era is testament to the artistic outpouring of fannish anxiety.

The predominant producers and consumers of the *Star Trek* fanzines were women. These female fans were often highly educated and held jobs in scientific fields themselves. It is interesting to note that, during this time, *Star Trek* was often dismissed by 'hardcore' Science Fiction aficionados – the majority of whom were male – as Sci-Fi for people who knew nothing of 'real' Sci-Fi.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, these women were made to feel so uncomfortable at Science-Fiction conventions dominated by men and their 'Hard Sci-Fi' that large factions of female fans splintered off to establish their own conventions devoted solely to *Star Trek*. These gatherings were female-friendly spaces for women to discuss their favourite show, share their creative endeavours and find like-minded friends, safe from the patriarchal notions of acceptable forms of fandom that governed other conventions.

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<sup>43</sup> Francesca Coppa, "A Brief History of Media Fandom," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 45.



The fanzines created by *Star Trek*'s female fanbase reflect the communal nature of fan creation. Fans were not charged submission fees and the 'zine's editors would edit the manuscripts until they were fit for publication without cost to either party. The 'zines were circulated for free at Science-Fiction conventions or mailed out to subscribers who only had to pay the cost of postage and packaging. Though it is easy to disparage the quality of their content, the fanzines of this era were truly a labour of love for the women who created them. Editors worked with their amateur writers to ensure qualitative editorial standards were upheld and spent their weekends mailing out subscriptions or attending conventions to circulate the magazines. The fanzines offered these women no commercial gain, yet they carried out their duties alongside working full-time jobs in prestigious industries and juggling the demands of child-care and family life. In this regard, it is clear to see that the impulses of the fan community do not stem from a desire to profit from another creator's hard work.

Though fanfiction gained its greatest traction through audience interest in Science Fiction television shows, it was not limited to the Sci-Fi fandom in the '60s and '70s. Literary fanfiction continued to thrive, though authors of the original works were often less than impressed by the results. In 1966, J.R.R Tolkien received the manuscript of a proposed continuation of his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy from an "impertinent"<sup>44</sup> reader. Tolkien, appalled at the liberty taken with his intellectual property, wrote to his publishers immediately, declaring, "I do not know what the legal position is, I suppose that since one cannot claim property in inventing proper names, that there is no legal obstacle to this young ass publishing his sequel, if he could find any publisher, either respectable or disreputable, who would accept such tripe."<sup>45</sup>

Tolkien's reaction to the unauthorised use of his creations raises questions regarding the legality of fanfiction and the intellectual property rights of authors once their work is in the public domain. Rebecca Tushnet, an expert in entertainment law, argues that "texts invite interpretation... making a text available to the public

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<sup>44</sup> Megan B. Abrahamson, "J.R.R Tolkien, Fanfiction, and the Freedom of the Reader," *Journal of Mythlore* 32, no.1 (2013): 55, <https://dc.swosu.edu/bitmythlore/vol32/iss1/5>.

<sup>45</sup> Abrahamson, "J.R.R Tolkien, Fanfiction," 55.

necessarily cedes some control over it.”<sup>46</sup> In this regard, fanfiction and its relation to copyright law is somewhat nebulous. The non-commercial nature of fanfiction and the staggering volume of such works makes it a complicated domain to police. There are authors and entertainment companies who see the genre as a harmless form of free promotion for their product, while others believe it to be detrimental to their carefully controlled image. Under section 107 of the Copyright Act, “fair use”<sup>47</sup> of copyrighted materials is permitted. Tushnet advocates that

fan fiction should fall under the fair use exception to copyright restrictions because fan fiction involves the productive addition of creative labour to a copyright holder’s characters, it is non-commercial, and it does not act as an economic substitute for the original copyrighted work.<sup>48</sup>

Litigation against fanfiction writers rarely makes it to the courts for the simple reason that few of these writers have any financial capital worth pursuing. Fanfiction is protected by the legal system under the same strictures which govern satire and parody. In the legal cases against commercial artists, performers or companies who have used another’s intellectual property in their own work, the “transformative use” of the source material to “add new insights or meaning to the original work”<sup>49</sup> is often grounds to dismiss the case.

While J.R.R Tolkien took exception to the ‘transformative use’ of his material, his own extensive knowledge of mythology and his consequent use of it in his original fiction has been argued by Fan Studies theorists to be a form of fanfiction in itself. In evidence, Megan Abrahamson submits a re-working of the Finnish myth cycle ‘The Kalaevaala’ by a 22-year old Tolkien entitled ‘The Story of Kullervo’.<sup>50</sup> Though Tolkien’s oeuvre displays this same ‘transformative use’ of Nordic mythologies, his contribution to the field of English Literature is markedly different from that of a fanfiction writer. Tolkien’s work has been granted its place in the

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<sup>46</sup> Rebecca Tushnet, “Copyright Law, Fan Practices, and the Right of the Author,” in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* ed. Jonathan Gray, C. Lee Harrington, and Cornell Sandvoss (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 67.

<sup>47</sup> Tushnet, “Copyright Law, Fan Practices,” 61.

<sup>48</sup> Tushnet, 61.

<sup>49</sup> Abrahamson, “J.R.R Tolkien, Fanfiction,” 61.

<sup>50</sup> Abrahamson, 62.

literary canon because it displays the hallmarks of authentic literature – it innovates, surprises and breaks with tradition. Immersion in Anglo-Saxon folklore may have informed Tolkien’s work, but the innovation of form, style and content, establishes his work as literary rather than derivative.

Literary fanfiction continued to be written in the latter half of the twentieth century, but it was television shows that garnered the most attention from fans. In the late 1970s, the emergence of the ‘buddy’ genre in series’ such as the American cop show *Starsky & Hutch* (1975-79) and the British crime-drama *The Professionals* (1977-85) entranced a new generation of female audiences who brought with them a flurry of fannish activity. Statistically, women were the foremost purveyors of such fan responses and there was often a sexual undercurrent to their creations – sometimes explicitly so. In a period of liberated sexual attitudes, fanfiction echoed societal trends. Fanfiction evolved from a means of extending well-loved stories, often aping the style and intent of the original author, into a means of exploring the interpersonal relationships, power dynamics and sexual proclivities of characters who could never act in such a way in their original mediums. Perhaps the meteoric rise of the fanfiction sub-genre ‘slash’ is the most telling illustration of this point. Francesca Coppa, noted Fan Studies scholar, argues that “the fact that these shows were set in an era of tight jeans and unbuttoned shirts, and of those loosening of formerly strict standards of acceptable male behaviour, only provided additional evidence for a homoerotic interpretation.”<sup>51</sup>

The nomenclature of ‘slash’ derives from the ‘/’ placed between male characters’ names to signify that the work features a homosexual relationship. For example, ‘Kirk/Spock’ in the author’s description of a fanfiction informs the reader that the story involves a romantic, often sexual, connection between Captain Kirk and Mr Spock. The genre increased in popularity amongst fannish communities during the 1960s and 1970s and its appeal endures today. ‘Slash’ is considered the most widely written and read sub-genre in fanfiction communities. Indeed, in 1978 a ‘zine was created to cater to the vast appetite for these stories within the female *Star Trek* fan community. Subtly entitled *The Naked Times*, its creator declared that, “while *Naked Times* did not start out as primarily a K/S zine, that’s certainly the way

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<sup>51</sup> Coppa, “Brief History of Media Fandom,” 49.

this first issue turned out, mainly due to the fact that that's the majority of material I received."<sup>52</sup>

Technological advances have always driven the creation and consumption of fanfiction throughout its history by allowing greater ease of communication between fans. In the age of print media, fanfiction was an underground pursuit for a select subculture – particularly for those within the 'slash' community – but the advent of Internet technologies brought fanfiction to a far larger audience than ever before. The move away from conventions and mail circulation as the primary method of transmitting fanfictions began in the late 1980s with advances in personal computing and Internet access. The new technologies enabled the small-scale, often regional, fanfiction communities to operate on a global scale. The move was slow at first. Web access was limited to those with the education and income to access such technologies. The demographics of web-savvy fanfiction writers were white, middle to upper class, and female. As mentioned previously, these women often worked in scientific fields, or were university students with access to the Internet through their institutions' computer labs.<sup>53</sup> It is pertinent to note here that fanfiction still could not be seen as a democratised, nor intersectional, medium at this time. The ability to access the means of fannish production and consumption was still an insurmountable barrier for lower classes and ethnic minorities – the very populations that Fan Scholars believe have been liberated by the democratic nature of the medium. The print 'zine remained the favoured method of communication for fans during this period as it was the most readily accessible and available form of disseminating fanworks, but the growth of the Internet runs parallel to the explosion of current day fanfiction.

With the arrival of home computing technologies geared towards the mass market from the late 1990s to early 2000s the opportunity to create, access and consume fanfiction online was introduced to a wider subsection of society. Fans colonised websites such as 'Usenet'<sup>54</sup> – a forum often seen as the precursor to the internet message boards that would come to dominate the fan communities' Internet infrastructures – and exploited their newfound ability to communicate on a worldwide

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<sup>52</sup> Coppa, 53-54.

<sup>53</sup> Coppa, 53-54.

<sup>54</sup> Coppa, "Brief History of Media Fandom," 41.

scale with an audience far exceeding the reach of previous postal mailing lists or hotel lobby conventions.

The development of web technology meant that, ultimately, fanfiction would find its home almost exclusively online. Female fanfiction writers were vital in paving the way for the online fandom communities we see today with many creating intricate programmes and methods through which fan texts were circulated. The first recorded online fanfiction mailing list was set up on 9<sup>th</sup> December 1992 by Jean Prior to service the needs of the *Forever Knight* fan base<sup>55</sup> and became the primary method of communication for fanfiction writers of the late '90s. Francesca Coppa, in her article 'A Brief History of Media Fandom', argues that "the fannish list administrators, moderators, archivists and web hosts were drawn from the ranks of the most technologically savvy fans... [and] depended on a core group of highly educated, science-orientated women"<sup>56</sup> and may also account for the high prevalence of fanfiction within the Science Fiction community.

By the dawn of the new Millennium surfing the web was no longer the pursuit of an exclusive few. Most homes were equipped with a Personal Computer and a dial-up Internet connection. Anyone interested in a certain television show, novel, or movie, could engage with a community of like-minded fans at the click of a mouse. If the fan was not aware of fanfiction, they would soon find it on the message boards and forums of their chosen fandom and with a quick Internet search could gain access to an infinite library of fan texts.

By the mid-2000s the rudimentary mailing lists of the early years were phased out in favour of dedicated archives such as Fanfiction.net and blogging platforms such as Livejournal.com. These sites not only housed a plethora of fanworks but allowed users to give and receive instant feedback – an advance that revolutionised communications between author and audience and would later come to shape the way fan texts were written. The development of the means to transmit information globally and instantaneously was a decisive moment in the history of fanfiction. Fanfiction became an accelerated medium, growing exponentially in this era. The Internet gave fans access to a hyperabundance of texts and the means to upload

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<sup>55</sup> Coppa, 53.

<sup>56</sup> Coppa, 53.

their own works into this borderless library. The existence of these texts in a digital sphere impeded the possibility of curation. Spell-checking and proofreading were no longer a pre-requisite for publication. Editorial standards, once upheld by the editors of fanzines, were abandoned in the advent of the e-text.

In this dissertation, I intend to posit the argument that the rise of fanfiction runs parallel to a general decline in literary standards. While publishing houses were once the gatekeepers of the codex, the Internet has unleashed a free for all of the written word. The multiplicity of available texts has led to an inevitable decline in quality. The failure to curate literary works leads to the submerging of the canonical by an influx of the inferior. In this manner, the advancement of fanfiction is synonymous with the dismantling of the English literary canon.

Ahuvia Kahane, a Fan Studies scholar, posits the theory that in an era of over-abundance, the canon must now be seen “as a practice of containment in response to inherent states of surplus.”<sup>57</sup> This state of surplus threatens to overwhelm the canonical. Fanfiction itself cannot degrade the literary landscape but the regard it is given by Media scholars and Fan Studies academicians as a sub-genre of literature threatens to provide it with a legitimacy it cannot be afforded if the standards of English literature are to survive.

While technologies have transmogrified the production and consumption of fanfiction, the underlying impulse to ‘play’ with the creations of others remains immutable throughout human history. This desire stretches further back than the origins of modern-day fanfiction to a primal, collectivist instinct that overrides the idea of the solitary ‘Author’ and the drive for individual acclaim. In Chapter Two I will investigate theories of authorship, examining the predominance of oral and communal storytelling seen in pre-literate cultures in order to explain the not altogether modern phenomenon of online fanfiction communities.

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<sup>57</sup> Ahuvia Kahane, “Fan Fiction, Early Greece and the Historicity of the Canon,” *Journal of Transformative Works and Cultures* 21, (2016): [0.1], <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2016.0681>.

## Chapter Two

### Theories of Reading and Authorship

The idea of reading and writing as solitary pursuits is a relatively modern one. In preliterate cultures stories were performed for the community as a means of transmitting the society's values and beliefs to the tribe. In the absence of intellectual property rights and copyright laws performers would draw upon – what the poet Philip Larkin termed 'The Myth Kitty' – a communal 'bank' of stories, characters and scenarios from popular mythology and folklore. In oral cultures, it was the storytelling and the performance that was venerated, rather than the narrative craft itself. The concept of the 'Author' was entirely alien to such cultures where storytellers drew upon the myths and legends of their region, using well known characters and situations whose origins were never accredited to a single source. Variation, adaptation and reinvention would occur with each retelling. The myth remained in a constant state of flux, retooled and repurposed to suit the needs of the storyteller and his community.

The dawn of literate societies did not herald the end of communal storytelling. When, in the Ancient Greek and Roman era, mythologies were formalised into verse by Homer and Virgil, these works still borrowed from the 'Myth Kitty' and would have been enjoyed in groups rather than in isolation. Solitary reading was an almost unheard-of occurrence in Roman society. Pupils of the burgeoning education system learnt prose and verse by rote and were required to recite these works to their classmates. Roman citizens were warned not to read silently for fear it could prove detrimental to their health – the noted physician Antyllus (2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D) claimed that "people who never learnt verses by heart but resorted to reading them in books occasionally [experienced] painful bowel movements because of excessive perspiration."<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, in 384 A.D, St. Augustine of Hippo was dismayed to find his teacher St. Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, reading alone in a garden. Augustine noted that "when he was reading, he drew his eyes along over the leaves, and his heart

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Steven Roger Fischer, *A History of Reading*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2003), 77.

searched into the sense, but his voice and tongue were silent.”<sup>59</sup> The act of solitary and silent reading was therefore a past-time so exceptional that even an accomplished scholar such as Augustine remarked upon it.

In an era before mass produced literature, the average Roman citizen would have seen books as prized possessions, more akin to works of art than instruction manuals. Manuscripts were rare and costly and very few people were able to afford such luxuries. In this instance, it makes sense that literature was often read aloud amongst a group, rather than something enjoyed in solitude. At the start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C there appeared a new trend for reading circles and public recitals. Steven Fischer, in his *A History of Reading*, claims that “all good writers anticipated constructive criticism at a public reading. Hearing this, they would then refine their work to accommodate the public taste.”<sup>60</sup> Rather than reading a completed work to an audience whose only expected input was applause, Roman writers saw the writing process as collaborative and were willing to take on board the critiques of their listeners and alter their writing to align with the prevailing tastes of the public. In many ways, we can see fanfiction forums as a contemporary parallel to this collaborative Roman approach, but we must be reticent to call it a form of ‘democratised’ writing. Roman society was, of course, patriarchal and hierarchical. The arena of public readings was not open to all – women, slaves, and plebeians would not have had access to such public forums and it cannot be seen as the Utopian collaborative process that many Fan Studies scholars envision in their defence of ‘collectivist creation’.

It is, however, undeniable that the idea of originality, so valued in Western literature, is a relatively new development. In Ancient Greece, dramatists and playwrights were not prized for the originality of their work. Ancient Greek and Roman plays, poems and prose are populated with a cast of ready-made characters, drawn from the culture’s mythologies and folklore. Sheenah Pugh, in her book on the democratic nature of fanfiction, *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context*, argues that there are parallels between contemporary fan writers and the Ancients’ approach to literature. She claims, regarding the fan’s chosen novels or television shows, that “most fanfic writers are convinced they could improve on

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<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Fischer, *History of Reading*, 73.

<sup>60</sup> Fischer, *A History of Reading*, 73.



something about it; that is why many of them write.”<sup>61</sup> Fan Studies scholars posit the notion that fans write to correct injustices and to highlight the racism and misogyny that pervades our culture and, therefore, the subtext of their favourite works. The fan is portrayed as belonging to a marginalised social group, either through socio-economic disadvantage, gender or race, and is able, through fiction, to write themselves into white, male, privileged spaces. Pugh draws on this idea in her comparison between Ancient writers and fan authors, arguing that, as in fanfiction, Ancient playwrights repurposed and repackaged mythologies to propagate their own agendas to a ready-made audience, often using “minor characters, whose personalities and opinions are not so well established in the canon or known to your readers, to convey your own agenda, saying what might not sit easily in the mouths of your heroes.”<sup>62</sup>

This idea is echoed by Abigail Derecho in her essay ‘Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History and Several Theories of Fanfiction’. Derecho states that derivative writing, in which she includes fanfiction, has long been a tool of the underclasses to voice political, social and cultural criticism of the dominant culture, creating what John Fiske has termed “the culture of the subordinate.”<sup>63</sup> Derecho argues that Euripides’ *Medea* is a prime example of the use of ‘derivative’ literature and the politicisation of established mythologies to critique a patriarchal, xenophobic and misogynistic social structure. This argument, however, falsely attributes modern attitudes to Ancient works. Art is often imprinted with the indelible mark of its time, but it is all too easy for contemporary audiences to project their own prejudices, sympathies and alliances onto a work that is not of our era. Ancient audiences would have seen the play’s action as a reinforcement of the existing power structures. Euripides’ *Medea* was less of a social critique than a stark warning of the havoc that outsiders could wreak upon Greek society. Rather than addressing injustices within Greek society, the Ancient audience would have seen their fears and biases

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<sup>61</sup> Pugh, *Democratic Genre*, 67.

<sup>62</sup> Pugh, 69.

<sup>63</sup> Abigail Derecho, “Archontic Literature: A Definition, A History and Several Theories of Fanfiction,” in *New Essays: Fanfiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 61-78, 66.

validated in the events unfolding on stage, leading to a buttressing of these beliefs rather than a deconstruction.

Medea, a 'barbarian' woman who is betrayed by her husband Jason when he chooses to take for his new bride a civilised Greek woman, cuts a sympathetic figure at first, but soon becomes monstrous, even to current day audiences, as her punishment for Jason's callous actions far exceeds his crime. Phillip Vellacott, introducing his translation of Euripides' *Medea*, urges us to "be careful not to prejudge Jason. He was a man of entirely respectable ambitions; and to these ambitions Medea presented two fatal obstacles: she had involved him in a murder before he ever came to Corinth; and as a non-Greek she could never be recognized by Greeks as his wife."<sup>64</sup> Hellenic culture regarded restraint and proportionality in all things as its highest virtues. For an Ancient audience, Medea's excessive response to her husband's behaviour contravened the principles that governed Greek society and would have been abhorrent to their sense of cultural identity which was prefixed upon presenting itself as the antithesis to the uncontrolled and savage barbarians. Ultimately, the moral of Medea is that "the universe is not on the side of civilisation; and that a life combining order with happiness is something men must win for themselves in a continual struggle with an unsympathetic environment."<sup>65</sup> Art is open to interpretation by those who receive it, but we must remain aware of the producer's original intention and meaning while adding our own. Derecho's interpretation of *Medea*, and her extrapolation of these ideas to the practice of fanfiction, is itself an example of the reader adding values to a text which were not intended by its original author.

There is a tendency within the field of Fan Studies to valorise the pre-literate past where characters and creations were accessible to anyone who wished to use them. Sheenah Pugh argues that, "the idea that there is some intrinsic value in using an 'original' character or story would have puzzled most ancient or medieval writers... they plundered the vast resources of myth and history... However individualised by each successive poet who used them, they were still... part of a

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<sup>64</sup> Phillip Vellacott, "Introduction," in *Euripides: Medea and other plays*, trans. Phillip Vellacott (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 8.

<sup>65</sup> Vellacott, "Introduction," 9.

resource that belonged to us all.”<sup>66</sup> This, however, is a fallacy. Anthropologist Grant McCracken throws aspersion on the idea that preliterate cultures were a paradigm of collectivist creation when he states that “Ancient heroes did not belong to everyone, they did not serve everyone, they were not for everyone to do with what they would. These commons were never very common.”<sup>67</sup>

Moving beyond the Ancient era, it is true that the concept of the author was ill-defined in the scribal culture of the medieval and Early Modern period. Sheenah Pugh cites the idea of ‘authorial modesty’, wherein authors would conceal their own work under the guise of having ‘discovered’ a previously unknown manuscript from an Ancient authority. Pugh uses the example of Robert Henryson in her defence of fanfiction as a form of ‘authorial modesty’. Henryson, the 15<sup>th</sup> century Scottish poet, uses a framing device in his *The Testament of Cresseid* wherein the narrator claims to have found a sequel to Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* “writtin be worthie Chaucer glorious”.<sup>68</sup> In her argument, Pugh fails to realise that Henryson’s framing device is a fictional part of the poem and it is the voice of the narrator, not Henryson, who makes this claim. Henryson’s reference to Chaucer plays with the mythology surrounding Troilus who was not himself an original Chaucerian creation. Despite the narrator’s eschewing of authorship, the text, when received by its 15<sup>th</sup> century audience would unmistakably have been the work of Robert Henryson, with his name attached to the manuscript and authorship correctly ascribed to him.

Pugh also neglects to acknowledge the parallel between the narrative framing device of the ‘found manuscript’ and the convention within fanfiction communities to post a ‘disclaimer’ at the start of a story. Ostensibly, the fanfiction disclaimer serves as a defence against litigious copyright holders, but, as in the case of the ‘found manuscript’ device, the author makes their work more tangible to the reader by grounding the fictive in reality and demonstrating their dominance over the text. By invoking the original source material from which the story is derived, the fanfiction writer does not demure their authorial powers, but instead asserts control over their own version of the narrative. Through summoning the spectre of the ‘Author’, the

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<sup>66</sup> Pugh, *Democratic Genre*, 69.

<sup>67</sup> Grant McCracken, “The Disney TM Danger,” in *Plenitude* (self-published, 1988), 5, quoted in Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 133.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Henryson, *Robert Henryson: Poems*, ed. Charles Elliott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).

fanfiction writer seeks to dethrone him. In showing real or imagined deference to the original source material, the fanfiction writer declares that the author's creations "are not necessarily hers to keep and the canon author's designs are abandoned."<sup>69</sup> In doing so, the fan-writer declares their "authority to provide lines of interpretation for the audience that they fiercely refuse to accept from the [canon] and its producers."<sup>70</sup>

The concept of the 'author' in medieval and Early Modern times was not in common parlance, but the idea of the *auctore* was beginning to take hold, evidenced by the esteem that Ancient writers were held in and the authority with which their descendants endowed them. Indeed, Bernard of Chartres famously remarked that his contemporaries were merely "dwarfs perched upon the shoulders of giants",<sup>71</sup> their contributions to Western thought only possible because of the work of the Ancients before them. It is true that thinkers and writers of the era were not imbued with the stature and authority of their Ancient counterparts and that the ability to recite the wisdom of philosophers such as Aristotle and physicians such as Galen was valued above original thought. Yet, Gilbert Highet, renowned Literary historian, classes the prevailing attitude towards the author as a contentious battle "between originality and authority."<sup>72</sup> This ambivalence can be seen in twelfth century thinker John of Salisbury's tentative proposal that, while he remained deferential to the scholars of Antiquity, "these opinions of the ancients are admitted simply because of their antiquity, while the far more probable and correct opinions of our contemporaries are, on the other hand, rejected merely because they have been proposed by men of our time."<sup>73</sup>

In the Renaissance period, the complicated relationship between *auctore* and copyist was articulated by Robert Burton in the introduction to his renowned work *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Burton issues an apology for his extensive 'borrowing'

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<sup>69</sup> Maria Lindgren Leavenworth, "The Paratext of Fan Fiction," *Narrative* 23, no. 1 (January 2015): 51, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2015.0004>.

<sup>70</sup> Leavenworth, "Paratext of Fan Fiction," 51.

<sup>71</sup> Jacqueline T. Miller, *Poetic Licence: Authority and Authorship in Medieval and Renaissance Contexts*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 9.

<sup>72</sup> Miller, *Poetic Licence*, 9.

<sup>73</sup> John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury: A Twelfth-Century Defense of the Verbal and Logical Arts of the Trivium*, trans. Daniel D. McGarry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), Bk. III, 145, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015008932611&view=image&seq=9&size=125>. (Scanned copy of original copy from University of Michigan, digitized by Google.)

of his predecessors' ideas, claiming that beneath the authority of these luminous figures, nothing new can be said. He then goes on to contradict himself by arguing that, while he relies heavily upon the work of those who went before him, his collation of their ideas has created "a new bundle."<sup>74</sup> In her extensive investigation into authorship and authority in medieval and Renaissance contexts, Jacqueline T. Miller presents a nuanced definition of authorship in this era. She argues that in his apology-cum-defence, Burton "wavers between claiming his work consists of and is authorized completely by the works of others (and that no alternative exists), and claiming that there is something 'new' and distinctive in his work that is to be attributed to him as author."<sup>75</sup>

Harold Bloom, who declared in his influential work *The Anxiety of Influence* that "influence is influenza"<sup>76</sup>, dates authorial anxieties over originality as stemming from the Romantic era, however, there is evidence to show that the nascent seeds of doubt were being sown throughout the history of Western Literature. The principle of 'literary imitation' has been a contentious issue since the codification of storytelling began. Writers of medieval and Renaissance works were keen to acknowledge the debt they owed to the 'Authorities' whose knowledge they drew upon in their own creations, but simply 'copying' these texts was not acceptable to serious scholars. The consensus of the era was that scholars should absorb the accepted and institutionalised wisdom of their forbears whilst adding their own original thoughts to create new and innovative works. In a letter to Boccaccio, the Italian poet Petrarch expounded upon his own notions of literary imitation, telling his friend that

a proper imitator should take care that what he writes resembles the original without reproducing it. The resemblance should not be that of a portrait to the sitter – in that case the closer the likeness is the better – but it should be the resemblance of a son to his father... As soon as we see the son, he should recall the father to us, although if we should measure

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<sup>74</sup> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (London: Dent, 1932), 25, quoted in Jacqueline T. Miller, *Poetic Licence: Authority and Authorship in Medieval and Renaissance Contexts*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 17.

<sup>75</sup> Jacqueline Miller, *Poetic Licence: Authority and Authorship in Medieval and Renaissance Contexts*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 17.

<sup>76</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 95.

every feature we should find them all different. But there is a mysterious something there that has this power.<sup>77</sup>

Influence was not the primary concern for medieval and Early Modern writers, but there was a palpable fear of 'imitation' which pervaded European discourse. *Auctores* could not simply ape the Ancients. They were expected to produce works that – while not directly challenging the status quo – tilled the fertile soil of Ancient ideas with modern methods to produce original concepts.

Indeed, the scepticism surrounding fanfiction and derivative works has historical precedence in this anxiety of 'imitation'. Baldassare Castiglione, the Italian courtier and Renaissance writer, reported the sentiments of Ludovico III, Marquis of Mantua, who remarked at the court of Urbino that, "they are quite unable to explain to me... why things which are taken from Homer or from someone else are so proper in Virgil as to seem enhanced rather than imitated."<sup>78</sup> The Renaissance idea of 'imitation', surmised Jacqueline T. Miller, was "a form of copying that transforms the model text (or texts) into one new and separate identity"<sup>79</sup>, which is equivalent to the 'transformative use' of copyrighted materials seen today. The term 'transformative use' is often invoked by fanfiction writers in their defence of the use of copyrighted materials, and is defined by the Supreme Court in the *Campbell v. Acuff-Rose Music, Inc.*, case as "[adding] something new, with a further purpose or different character, altering the first with new expression, meaning, or message."<sup>80</sup>

Intent is one of the markers of a work of literary merit. Fan studies scholars have provided extensive and empathetic research into reasons fans have for rewriting their favourite books, television shows and films, most of which are grounded in psychological theory rather than literary. This may give fanfiction worth in the field of psycho-social studies, but it does not explain why it should be regarded as something to be studied seriously through the lens of literature. Fan writers can, and do, 'transform' texts through their rewriting, but there is also a tendency to

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<sup>77</sup> Petrarch, *Familiare*, 23.19, trans. Morris Bishop, *Letters from Petrarch* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966) 198-99.

<sup>78</sup> Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Charles Singleton (New York: Anchor, 1959) Bk. I, 63-4.

<sup>79</sup> Miller, *Poetic Licence*, 129.

<sup>80</sup> Rebecca Tushnet, "Legal Fictions: Copyright, Fan Fiction and a New Common Law," *Los Angeles Entertainment Law Review* 17, (1997): 662, <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/elr/vol17/iss3/8>.

simply reproduce the original. This is seen more often in the case of literary fanfiction, perhaps because each author's distinct style is responsible for bringing the characters and their world to life for the reader. For example, it would be disconcerting to read the adventures of Anne of Green Gables in stream-of-consciousness prose as it would not fit either the historicity or intent of Lucy Maud Montgomery's original work, and would challenge the reader's ability to suspend his or her disbelief amidst this jarring discrepancy between the original and the rewrite.

The Jane Austen fan site 'The Republic of Pemberley' hosts an archive entitled 'Bits of Ivory' comprising fanworks written by admirers of Austen's stories and style. The archive no longer accepts submissions but when active enforced stringent guidelines for its contributors:

The stories at Bits of Ivory are intended to present Jane Austen's characters behaving as she wrote them in scenes we might wish she had an opportunity to write herself... Your story must be about Austen characters and must present them in a manner faithful to their original conception. "What if" stories are acceptable if the premise is plausible within the world created by Jane Austen...<sup>81</sup>

The archive places itself in the category of fans who want 'more *of*' rather than 'more *from*' Jane Austen. The fanfiction writer who successfully mimics Austen's style, adheres to her characterisations and refrains from radical textual reinvention, will gain the most accolades at The Republic of Pemberley. This parallels the idea of 'literary imitation' that troubled the thinkers of the medieval and Early Modern period, but in the case of The Republic of Pemberley has been subsumed into a passive acceptance and encouragement of writers imitating Austen's work.

The mistake of the fan scholar is to define a strict demarcation between a creative and collaborative approach to storytelling in the pre-literate era and the restrictive and litigious epoch of the 'Author'. This fallacy is presented by many Aca-Fans – a term coined by Henry Jenkins to categorise the "hybrid creature which is

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<sup>81</sup> "Bits Of Ivory Guidelines," The Republic of Pemberley, last updated July 22, 2003, accessed 25th December 2019. <https://pemberley.com/derby/guidenew.html>.

part fan and part academic”<sup>82</sup> – in defence of fanfiction writers. Mafalda Stasi, in her essay “The Toy Soldier from Leeds: The Slash Palimpsest”, uses the concept of the medieval palimpsest to equate the pre-Authorial period with modern-day fanfiction communities. The palimpsest was a piece of parchment used by medieval monks who, because parchment was not readily available, would erase the original text in order to write over it. Stasi argues that this egalitarian approach to texts, regardless of quality or content, indicated “a non-hierarchical, rich layering of genres, more or less partially erased and resurfacing, and a rich and complex continuum of themes, techniques, voices, moods and registers,”<sup>83</sup> which she claims is akin to the way contemporary fan-writers approach texts.

Stasi valorises the destruction of hierarchy within literature and champions the promotion of fanfiction as a “valid literary practice”<sup>84</sup> which moves “beyond a binary, hierarchical view of texts, towards a systemic, intertextual one.”<sup>85</sup> Though Stasi’s argument is impassioned, it is untenable. Under the ‘palimpsest’ system there is no way of knowing what great works might be lost to us forever beneath the false assumption that all texts are equal. By dismissing the idea of hierarchy as elitist and assigning each text identical worth we risk losing sight of a simple truth – not all art is equal. While art is subjective, there are clear criteria which allows us to ascertain whether a text is worthy of merit. In Stasi’s process of constant erasure and re-creation, we would risk losing the *Mona Lisa* beneath the finger-painting of a precocious five-year-old. Stasi presents us with only a false syllogism. Through the suppressed tautology of her premise, she invalidates her own argument by essentially claiming that ‘*all art is equal because all art is equally capable of being erased*’ – a principle that does not bear up under scrutiny.

While Fan Studies academics may posit the medieval palimpsest as a Utopian prototype for the Web 2.0 – a form of open source collaboration where individuals work together for a common creative good – we must be wary of romanticising the past and shaping it to suit our own arguments. There is a tendency

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<sup>82</sup> Henry Jenkins, “Who The %x is Henry Jenkins?” HenryJenkins (website), accessed February 10, 2018, <https://henryjenkins.org/aboutmehtml/>

<sup>83</sup> Mafalda Stasi, “The Toy Soldier from Leeds: The Slash Palimpsest,” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 119.

<sup>84</sup> Stasi, “Toy Solider From Leeds,” 119.

<sup>85</sup> Stasi, 118.



among Aca-Fans to conjure a mythical past of cooperation amongst creatives where the ebb and flow of knowledge was unrestricted by artistic ego or self-interest. We must, however, remember that in the medieval era the Church imposed strict restrictions on acceptable teachings within the Christian framework and were responsible for the suppression of many texts deemed contrary to their principles. In the pre-Gutenberg era the Church was one of the sole producers of academic texts and literature and had almost complete control over the knowledge economy. Beyond the strict limitations on the dissemination of knowledge imposed by the Church, medieval society was itself un-egalitarian. Basic literacy was restricted to a privileged minority and excluded vast swathes of the population who did not have the ability to access or comprehend these texts. The Fan Studies scholars, in pursuing their own arguments, have failed to consider the incredibly hierarchical and unequal nature of society during these times. There has never been a 'mythic past' in which creative collaboration was open to all, regardless of race, creed or gender.

Questions of authorship and the authority of the writer over a text were answered in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries when the Romantic poets propagated the idea of single authorship and championed the 'Author' as an inspired genius. The notion of the 'Author' as sole originator of their work was advanced as both an aesthetic theory and a legal imperative. Kristina Busse argues that the conception of the 'Author' was driven primarily by economic incentives. In the Romantic period there was a shift from the security afforded to an artist by the patronage system to a more perilous free market where writers were offered little protection under the law from those who would claim a text as their own. Busse claims that "with changing market economies and a rapidly rising middle-class readership, the eighteenth-century writer increasingly started living off his works and thus demanded legal protection of his writing."<sup>86</sup>

This demand for protection was met in the 1710 Statute of Anne, the first British copyright law to recognise the legal rights of authors over their own work. Before the statute, copyright law existed primarily to protect the interests of booksellers and printers, and, while the act does not fully divest these agents of their far greater rights, it can still be seen as the origin of the modern-day concept of the

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<sup>86</sup> Kristina Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 21.

'Author' enshrined both in law and society. The statute acknowledges the precarious economic situation that 18<sup>th</sup> century writers faced when they had no recourse to law to protect themselves.

Printers, booksellers, and other persons have of late frequently taken the liberty of printing, reprinting and publishing, or causing to be printed, reprinted and published, books and other writings, without the consent of the authors or proprietors of such books and writings to their very great detriment, and too often to the ruin of them and their families.<sup>87</sup>

The act afforded authors sole printing rights to any works published after the statute for a term of fourteen years and then another fourteen years if the author was still living after the expiry of the first term, "for the encouragement of learned men to compose and write useful books."<sup>88</sup>

Busse argues that "in an era that foregrounded the individual and his rights and abilities, these two ideas – original genius and intellectual copyright – came to the fore."<sup>89</sup> In dovetailing the economic imperative behind copyright law with the rise of the author as sole originator of a text, Busse claims that ideas are treated as commodities and creation is stifled in the name of mercenary gain. While the introduction of copyright laws may have imposed restrictions on artists it also allowed men to earn a comfortable living from their writing, giving them the freedom to devote their time and energy to artistic endeavours. Busse's idealism, while admirable, is antithetical to the society in which we live. The demand that art should be 'free' for all and part of the public commons prohibits its production. For great works to be produced, the writer must be reimbursed to support his efforts and copyright laws are essential in enforcing this principle.

Busse, in attributing the birth of the 'Author' to economic forces, dismisses the aesthetic theory purely because of its interaction with the prosaicism of the legal system. If art is to flourish, the artist must be protected by the law. Indeed, in the

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<sup>87</sup> "Statute of Anne," Case Western Reserve University, accessed December 26, 2019, <https://case.edu/affil/sce/authorship/statueofanne.pdf>.

<sup>88</sup> "Statute of Anne," Case Western Reserve University, accessed December 26, 2019, <https://case.edu/affil/sce/authorship/statueofanne.pdf>.

<sup>89</sup> Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction*, 22.

1800s William Wordsworth – a leading proponent of the ‘Author’ theory, who declared that genius was “the introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe”<sup>90</sup> – worked alongside the M.P Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd to extend copyright protection beyond the author’s death.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Literary Criticism was focused on a biographical approach to texts and the practice of close reading to fully understand the author’s intent. There was, however, a subtle shift away from this style of analysis in the 1920s, indicated by T.S Eliot’s 1921 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in which he argued “no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone.”<sup>91</sup> This argument does not necessitate the removal of the author from literary analysis, but instead grounds the writer in his time and place, allowing for an investigation into the cultural and social forces which have shaped the man who creates the work. Indeed, in a passage pertinent to fanfiction, Eliot states that although the poet is influenced by what has come before him, “to conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new and would therefore not be a work of art.”<sup>92</sup>

In 1946, William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley wrote “The Intentional Fallacy” with the aim of removing the poet from poetic analysis. Their work was the precursor to the deconstructionist movement of the 1960s which found its apex in Roland Barthes’ infamous 1967 essay “The Death of the Author” in which he posited an end to the ‘tyranny’ of the author and a restoration of readers to their rightful place of power over the text. Barthes’ argues that the reader’s interpretation usurps the author’s intention. He claims that the author should be altogether disregarded when examining a text, advocating a closed circuit of analysis between the reader and the work.<sup>93</sup> Dismissing the Romantic notion of the ‘Author’, Barthes’ decries that “in

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<sup>90</sup> William Wordsworth, “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface (1815),” in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 659.

<sup>91</sup> T.S Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Poetry Foundation, accessed December 26, 2019. (Originally published in *Egoist* 6/4 (September 1919), 54-5.) <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69400/tradition-and-the-individual-talent>.

<sup>92</sup> T.S Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

<sup>93</sup> Roland Barthes, “Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Harper Collins, 1977).

literature... the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology... [there is] attached the greatest importance to the 'person' of the author."<sup>94</sup>

At the heart of Barthes' argument is the idea of intertextuality. He claims that "the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture", yet these 'quotations' are undeniably filtered through the text's author, creating a unique and individual work. This follows the Renaissance tradition of 'literary imitation', where writers absorbed the literature around them in a way that allowed them to imbue their own work with the ideas of others without simply imitating it – texts were filtered through their own imaginations and thought processes and resulted in new innovations in their own writings. These *auctores* did not feel the anxiety of influence, but nor were they slaves to it. Just as culture and society shapes the individual, so do the texts that we read. The thoughts and ideas of the Ancients assimilated themselves into the individual identity of these authors and became present in their own writing, but in the same way that an Impressionist painter interprets a landscape – through the lens of their own vision.

The life of a writer is an inextricable part of the text. Despite Barthes' protestations, authors are products of their eras and their works are suffused with their biography, whether the reader is aware of it or not. Fanfiction scholars are quick to cite Barthes' in defence of what is, essentially a form of plagiarism, but they invalidate their own arguments when they claim that fanfiction is also a discursive forum for marginalised voices to write themselves into mainstream culture. This is an idea I will explore in depth in later chapters, but it is important to note here that if the author is incidental to the text then we cannot decry the domination of white, male authors over the English canon because we negate their influence over the text, and thus erase their authorship. Representation in the English canon is unimportant in Barthes' championing of reader interpretation because the author's own life experiences do not inform the text. In choosing Barthes' aesthetic theory as the grounds for fanfiction's literary merit, Aca Fans are at risk of invalidating their own premises.

Fanfiction writers are conscious of their decision to use existing characters and creations. An unspoken rule in the fanfiction community is that the fan should

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<sup>94</sup> Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," 143.

never stray so far from the fandom's 'canon' – defined by Pugh as “the source property used as material by fanfic writers”<sup>95</sup> – that the audience cannot recognise the original novel, television show or film in the text. Fan works that do not receive the uncritical praise that pervades fanfiction forums are those that have abandoned the canon in favour of their own version of events. Stories in which Harry Potter or Elizabeth Bennett behave grossly out of character or encounter scenarios too removed from the fictive world they should be grounded in are often dismissed by fan-readers who want their fanfiction to resemble the original author's creations.

Michael Sandvoss, a prominent fan studies researcher, claims that “with few exceptions, studies of fan audiences have challenged the idea of ‘correct’ or even dominant readings. Hence, fan studies with their critical attention to the power of meaning construction not only underline Barthes’ pronouncement of the terminal state of the modern author, but also inherit its ideological stance.”<sup>96</sup> This ‘ideological stance’, however, starts from an a priori assumption which Barthes elaborates upon, yet never proves. If the fans have inherited a faulty ideology, this does little to legitimise their claims.

Indeed, some fan scholars have gone so far as to propose that fanfiction is itself a form of literary criticism. Sandvoss states that “[fans] reconcile their object of fandom with their expectation, beliefs, and sense of self... the fan’s semiotic power extends beyond the bridging of textual episodes. Fan readers exclude those textual episodes that impede the normalisation of the text and fail to correspond with their horizon of expectation.”<sup>97</sup>

The fan-as-critic hypothesis has taken staunch hold within Fan Studies circles. Henry Jenkins, a leading theorist in the field, has suggested that fans are akin to rogue scholars, choosing the Internet over the academy as their institute of learning. Fandom communities, he claims, are “semi-structured”<sup>98</sup> discursive spaces. Though the fan-critic lacks the formal training of the scholar, their interrogation of texts follows the conventions of academia through “a set of shared assumptions,

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<sup>95</sup> Pugh, *Democratic Genre*, 243.

<sup>96</sup> Cornel Sandvoss, “The Death of the Reader? Literary Theory and the Study of Texts in Popular Culture,” in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C.L. Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 27.

<sup>97</sup> Sandvoss, “The Death of the Reader?,” 30.

<sup>98</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), 86.

interpretative and rhetorical strategies, inferential moves, semantic fields and metaphors, [which] must exist as preconditions for meaningful debate over specific interpretations.”<sup>99</sup>

Jenkins’ argument, though interesting, does not stand up to scrutiny. Surveying the vast quantity of fanfiction available online, it is clear to see most of these works do not adhere to standards of academic rigour. Fandom, as a leisure pursuit, does not ask the fan to engage their critical faculties. While many intelligent people engage in fandom, that does not mean that they exercise the critical capacities – honed in other areas of their intellectual lives – when taking part in fannish activities. Indeed, fanfiction community conventions dictate a “culture of leaving primarily supportive comments” because, as Twitter user Gavia Baker-Whitelaw notes, “writers are not interested in criticism from readers.”<sup>100</sup> An example of this uncritical approach to fanfiction can be seen in the comment left by A03 (Archive of Our Own) user, ‘Gaylock’, who declared, “bloody hell, this is amazing! I am completely in love with this”<sup>101</sup> on a story based on E.M Forster’s *Howard’s End*. Another commenter on the same story exclaims that it was “better than E.M F’s version. This story is perfect as it is.”<sup>102</sup> While this high praise may be beneficial to the fan-author’s ego, it does not provide any constructive criticism that may lead to the writer’s improvement and is more sycophantic than the most laudatory literary review would dare to be.

Bernard Sharratt has argued that this populist expertise, such as fans claim over their chosen fandom, is a form of ‘pseudo-knowledge’. Writing on the relationship between the working classes and their intimate connection to popular culture in the mid-twentieth century, Sharratt makes the case that “the expertise and intimacy seem to be, to a large extent, forms of self-pretence or semi-fantasy. Yet they both seem, in various ways, constitutive of the pleasure of much popular

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<sup>99</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 89.

<sup>100</sup> Gavia Baker-Whitelaw, “What Not to Do When Teaching a Class about Fanfiction,” Daily Dot (February 23, 2015), accessed December 26, 2019, <https://www.dailydot.com/irl/berkeley-fanfiction-class-backlash/>.

<sup>101</sup> Mara Anderson, October 18, 2016, 9:22 p.m, comment on Pattern\_Against\_War, “Only Connect,” Archive of Our Own, accessed December 26, 2019, [https://archiveofourown.org/works/4349009?show\\_comments=true&view\\_full\\_work=true#comments\\_](https://archiveofourown.org/works/4349009?show_comments=true&view_full_work=true#comments_)

<sup>102</sup> GratiaPlena, March 18, 2016, 2:39 a.m, comment on Pattern\_Against\_War, “Only Connect,” Archive of Our Own, accessed December 26, 2019, [https://archiveofourown.org/works/4349009?show\\_comments=true&view\\_full\\_work=true#comments\\_](https://archiveofourown.org/works/4349009?show_comments=true&view_full_work=true#comments_).

entertainment.”<sup>103</sup> Sharratt details the peculiar relationship that many people have with celebrity. Members of the public acquire extensive knowledge – real or imagined – of their idols’ lives through gossip magazines and their own inferences, equating this “pretended knowledge” to a “real, and fantasised acquaintanceship.”<sup>104</sup> This notion can be applied to fanfiction and fan communities, particularly the Real Person fandoms – a subject which I will investigate further in Chapter Three. Real Person fandoms focus on celebrities, movie stars or pop singers, and share the same conventions of the fandoms surrounding books or television shows, despite being shunned by these communities for the ethical implications inherent in writing fanfiction about living people. Sharratt’s theory of ‘knowledge’ and ‘intimacy’ is amplified within these communities, particularly within ‘bandom’ – a fandom centred around a core of mid-00s ‘emo’ rock groups such as Fall Out Boy, My Chemical Romance and Panic! At the Disco. The possessive nature of this fandom is illustrated aptly by Dreamwidth.com user Lierdumoa in her blog post entitled “A Brief, Yet Thorough, Introduction to Fall Out Boy RPS [Real Person Slash]” as she explains the community to the neutral outsider:

Fall Out Boy is a band. All its members are full of whimsy. Patrick is the lead vocalist. He also writes the music and plays guitar. Occasionally Patrick is smoking hot... where his face is compelling and expressive and he sounds like he spent the half hour before curtain call sucking cock (or, you know, like he has a cold, but I like my version better.) For the most part, though, he is adorable and soft in the middle. Too many pancakes on tour, methinks. Verdammen das waffelhausen. Anyway, Pete still loves him.<sup>105</sup>

Her language is familiar, implying an intimacy with the band that she does not possess. She knows, for instance, that Patrick is partial to pancakes, but that the band’s bass player Pete Wentz still love him, despite his ‘softness’. Lierdumoa

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<sup>103</sup> Bernard Sharratt, “The Politics of the Popular? From Melodrama to Television,” in *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama*, ed. David Bardby, Louis James and Bernard Sharatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 281.

<sup>104</sup> Sharratt, “Politics of the Popular?,” 282.

<sup>105</sup> Lierdumoa, “A Brief, Yet Thorough Introduction to Fall Out Boy RPS [Real Person Slash],” Dreamwidth (hosting website), April 10, 2016, accessed December 26, 2019, <https://lierdumoa.dreamwidth.org/260517.html>.

presents these 'facts' to the reader with an authority that makes it difficult for the uninitiated to question, despite being, as Sharratt suggests, a "semi-fantasy".<sup>106</sup> Her 'intimacy' with the band is based on an extensive knowledge of their music, but as demonstrated by the excerpt above, she applies no critical examination to their oeuvre, nor does she examine the reasons for her own interest in its members.

The idea of the 'fan as scholar' is appealing to Aca-Fans because it justifies the inordinate amount of time and energy that fans give to their chosen fandoms, whether this is through extensive background research, reading and watching the 'canon' multiple times to pick up every last detail, or creating fanfiction and fanart. In refuting Jenkins' idea of the fan-as-critic, I submit instead the argument that the primary motivator for fannish behaviour is not a desire to critique their chosen fandom, but a need to exert control over both the text and the community that surrounds it.

The fan, in constructing an identity contingent on an external product, seeks to accumulate "cultural, social and symbolic capital."<sup>107</sup> Anastasia Seregina and John W. Schouten argue that in an era of weakened traditional cultural institutions, people find the construction of their own social identity an increasingly complex task. As a society, the traditional cultural institutions which were once a source of social identity construction no longer serve that purpose. Instead, younger generations are turning towards commercial consumption as a means of deriving an identity. The 'fan' identity appeals to "young individuals that lack a sense of belonging and connection in their contexts of primary socialisation."<sup>108</sup> To be a 'fan' is to claim an extrinsic identity based around a cultural product. Fans of the BBC television series *Sherlock* describe themselves as 'Sherlockians' and often purchase official merchandise and clothing to advertise their allegiance to the *Sherlock* brand. Seregina and Schouten claim that "brands are chief conveyances of meaning in consumption-oriented culture"<sup>109</sup>. This is demonstrated in fans' consumption patterns through either official

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<sup>106</sup> Sharratt, "Politics of the Popular?," 281.

<sup>107</sup> Anastasia Seregina and John W. Schouten, "Resolving Identity Ambiguity Through Transcending Fandom," *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 20, no. 2 (2017): 107, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.brunel.ac.uk/10.1080/10253866.2016.1189417>.

<sup>108</sup> Seregina and Schouten, "Resolving Identity Ambiguity," 107.

<sup>109</sup> Seregina and Schouten, 108.



or unofficial channels, be it the consumption of authorised merchandise, or unsanctioned fanfiction and fan-videos.

The ‘fan’ identity is often constructed when the individual feels he or she lacks the cultural capital and “an embodied understanding of the rules by which a society operates”<sup>110</sup> that would allow them to navigate their society successfully. Alienated from the mainstream, the fan seeks to gain cultural capital in a field outside the dominant culture. Pierre Bourdieu raised the distinction between the ‘cultural capital’ which operates in mainstream society and ‘field cultural capital’ which is earned through extensive knowledge of a specialised subject.<sup>111</sup> Unable to construct an identity through normal cultural channels and lacking cultural capital in mainstream society, the fan instead seeks subcultural capital. Through accumulating an extensive knowledge of their chosen fandom, the fan is provided with a status and validity that they cannot establish elsewhere. This desire to construct a meaningful identity attached to their knowledge of an external product links back to Sharratt’s idea of fans claiming intimacy and dominance over celebrities as a way of compensating for a lack of knowledge, or access to the means of educating themselves about, other, perhaps more important, subjects.

What is perhaps being displayed, or compensated for, here is a relative lack of kinds of knowledge elsewhere. Since the people who actually control our society are not known personally to many of us, and since the systematic nature of that control is itself difficult to grasp, it may become important to assert an expertise and quasi-acquaintanceship in areas which at least masquerade as important. If all we ‘know’ is what we actually know then most of us would have to acknowledge our almost complete ignorance and impotence as individuals in those areas of economic and political decision making that we uneasily know are ‘beyond our ken’.<sup>112</sup>

Fans claim both expertise of and intimacy with their chosen fandoms. They speak both knowledgably and possessively about their favourite characters, steeping themselves in the fandom’s official ‘canon’ and creating their own appendixes to the

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<sup>110</sup> Seregina and Schouten, 109.

<sup>111</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (London: Routledge, 1986).

<sup>112</sup> Sharratt, “Politics of the Popular?,” 283.

original text. Fandom is an “extremely affect-laden form of investment”<sup>113</sup> but it affords the fan a means of easing the anxiety they feel over their inability to construct a meaningful social identity through the cultural channels sanctioned by mainstream society. Identity politics, particularly in the online sphere, have risen concurrently with the growth of fanfiction communities, an issue I will explore in depth in Chapter Three. It is pertinent to note here, however, that the identity anxiety experienced by many fans is essential to understanding the reasons for the creation and dissemination of fanfiction.

As suggested by Sharratt, the fan’s ‘pseudo-knowledge’ creates a sense of ownership over their chosen cultural product. Within these fanfiction communities, the author is not, as Barthes’ proclaimed, dead, but merely absent. The spectre of both the original author and the fan-writer are continually invoked throughout fanfiction in the prefacing disclaimer, the interjected author’s notes, and the closing statements that are established conventions of fanfiction writing. The disclaimer is placed at the start of the work, serving ostensibly to protect the fan from litigious copyright holders by acknowledging the original author’s ownership of all characters and creations featured within the story and disavowing themselves of any commercial interest. In making this concession to the text’s creator, the fan does not demure their status and accept their work as subordinate to the original but, instead, seeks to usurp the author. The invocation of the original author is a direct challenge to their authority. The fan-writer, in acknowledging their source material, covertly suggests that the ‘canon’ text is a rudimentary prototype upon which they will build their own correct narrative, erasing the mistakes of the original author and creating their own definitive version of the text.

*Pokémon* fan Cori Falls is a prime example of this overthrow of the author. In a fanfiction she wrote to address the faults she found in an episode of the *Pokémon* television series she dismisses the writers’ intentions and goes on to detail her own, far greater understanding of the show’s characters.

As you've probably noticed, this installment [*sic*] of the story is my WRH of "Hatching a Plan" and "Dues and Don'ts." I seriously hated both of these eps -- the former because it followed

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<sup>113</sup> Seregina and Schouten, “Resolving Identity Ambiguity,” 109.

the tired old formula of Ash doing something stupid to make his pokemon hate him and then patching things over with his pokemon by getting it to help him commit acts of violence against Team Rocket (the whole "elephant hatching from an egg" deal was pretty damned disturbing, too), and the latter because...well, where do I even begin on what an abomination "Dues and Don'ts" was? ... If the writers are serious about it, then they're idiots... if the dues thing is just a scam by Wendy and the old broad with the Delibird, then having J, J & M fall for it is completely out of character -- they'd be able to see right through a two-bit con like that! Either way, there was no excuse for the writers to turn that lame plot into a running gag the way they did... I wish the writers would give it a rest, already!... Thus the reason I wrote this WRH.<sup>114</sup>

The convention of 'author's notes' within fanfiction is a means of exerting control over a text that authors of traditional printed codices are unable to. This continual reaffirmation of the writer's voice directs and diverts the reader's interpretation of the work, ensuring it does not stray far from the fan-writer's original intention. The fan-writer continually reminds the reader of his or her authorship through sub-heading author's notes, repeated interjections into the narrative text, and conclusionary notes, preventing the reader from forming an interpretation of the work that is not heavily influenced by the writer. The fan's desire to dismiss the original author is seen most notably in the case of Francisca Solar, a Chilean student, who, at the age of 21, became a global sensation for her 756 page long rewrite of J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Solar began her correction of Rowling's text after being "so disappointed"<sup>115</sup> by the fifth instalment in the best-selling Harry Potter franchise. She claimed that, "I'm a very critical reader, and I'm a huge fan, so the expectation of this fifth book was great. I took the principal characters, and I did a story that is richer than Rowling's story because you have access to all the thoughts and feelings of all the characters."<sup>116</sup> Solar's insistence that her text is superior to J.K Rowling's is direct evidence of the refusal of the fan to subordinate themselves to the 'father-text'. For the fanfiction writer, his or her text is not merely an appendix to the codex, but something intended to usurp and replace the original.

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<sup>114</sup>Cori Falls, "A White Today (Part 1)," accessed December 27, 2019, <http://sarajaye.superbusnet.com/Fanfics/Corific/Split%20From%20Canon/whitetoday.html>.

<sup>115</sup> Miriam Segall, *Career Building Through Fan Fiction Writing: New Work Based on Favorite Fiction*, (New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2008), 18.

<sup>116</sup> Segall, *Career Building*, 18.

Indeed, the fan-writer, contrary to established Fan Studies theories, is the antithesis of Barthes' celebration of the reader as the sole constructor of a text's meaning. Fanfiction derogates the status of the reader. The fan-reader comes to the work with a preconceived notion of the 'canon'. The difficult work of world-creation through the establishment of setting and character building has been done by the text's original author, allowing fan-writers a short-cut into their stories. Fan-readers, steeped in 'canon' knowledge, immediately understand the fan-writer's shorthand and references to events of the original text, and as such, their critical interpretation of the text is not based on the author's narrative craft, but merely the text's convergence with, or divergence from, the original. Stasi argues that this style of reading is akin to the medieval tradition of 'textual fruition' as proposed by Dante's *Convivio*, Book II, where he describes a "shared allegorical code"<sup>117</sup> which allows the reader to experience "textual fruition."<sup>118</sup> The 'allegorical code' consists of four levels of shared knowledge; literal, moral, allegorical and anagogical. Medieval scholars, well-versed in Biblical allusions and the work of the Ancients, would rely on this intertextual knowledge to decipher a text. This is a compelling argument, but it is characteristic of Stasi's refusal to accept a "binary, hierarchical view of texts".<sup>119</sup> She dismisses the non-egalitarian idea that some texts are intrinsically better than others and argues that the pop-culture canon has as much merit as that of English Literature. This insidious ideology was described by Terry Eagleton as "out to liquidate meaning, destroy standards, replace Beowulf with the Beano Annual and compose a syllabus consisting of nothing but Geordie folk-songs and gay graffiti."<sup>120</sup> The English Literature canon is fast becoming "a practice of containment in response to inherent states of surplus."<sup>121</sup> In the era of the Worldwide Web, the superabundance of texts means that the canon should be protected, now more than ever. Kahane argues that

fanfiction Web sites create what appears to be a surplus of material on a scale exponentially greater than ever before, a surplus that is increasing rapidly—arguably to such a degree that

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<sup>117</sup> Stasi, "Toy Soldier," 123.

<sup>118</sup> Stasi, 123.

<sup>119</sup> Stasi, 118.

<sup>120</sup> Terry Eagleton, "The Crisis of Contemporary Culture," in *The Eagleton Reader* ed. Stephen Regan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

<sup>121</sup> Kahane, "Fan Fiction, Early Greece," [0.1].

it affects not a quantitative but rather fundamental ontological or phenomenological changes to what constitutes the work.<sup>122</sup>

This superabundance of texts means that, now more than ever, the canon must be protected. The pernicious idea that all texts possess the same worth erodes the value of literature and leads to a dismantling of literary standards. Sheenah Pugh has argued that the students she sees in her seminars are not “less intelligent than those of former generations, nor even less well-informed in general. Rather, they live in an age overloaded with information, and with more varied sources of it. They draw far more of their information from mass media... and they are less steeped in the traditional canons of myth, religion, and history.”<sup>123</sup> While Pugh believes this is simply a societal shift in the emphasis we place on valued texts, it is still essential for students of English Literature to be conversant with the canon which they propose to study. Indeed, this idea harks back to Eagleton’s stark warning that the syllabus’ standards are being eroded by a populist view of education. Rather than negating the idea that white male authors should no longer be allowed to dominate literary discourse, the argument for upholding literary standards simply asks us to apply the same strict criteria for new admissions to the canon.

The fan-writer dominates the reader through the practice of fanfiction, asserting that her interpretation of the original text is unequivocally correct. Many authors dislike fanfiction for this very reason. The novelist Anne Rice has begged her fans not to write stories using her characters and settings. In an impassioned plea on her website she says

I do not allow fan fiction. The characters are copyrighted. It upsets me terribly to even think about fan fiction with my characters. I advise my readers to write your own original stories with your own characters. It is absolutely essential that you respect my wishes.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Kahane, [5.3].

<sup>123</sup> Pugh, *Democratic Genre*, 35.

<sup>124</sup> Anne Rice, “Important Message from Anne on ‘Fan Fiction’,” *Anne’s Messages to Fans*, Anne Rice: The Official Site, accessed December 18, 2017. <http://annerice.com/ReaderInteraction-MessagesToFans.html>.

The plethora of fanfiction featuring characters from Rice's *Blood Chronicles* series found on archives such as A03 and Fanfiction.net is a testament to the fans' disregard for the author. Indeed, an extreme example of the fans' desire to usurp the author can be seen in the case of Marion Zimmer Bradley, the feminist Science Fiction writer who encouraged fanfiction based on her *Darkover* books. Bradley was an active participant in the fan community surrounding the series and even contributed to its unofficial fanzines. She personally interacted with the writers of *Darkover* fanfiction, reading their work and leaving positive reviews. This led to an incident in 1992 where Bradley was accused of plagiarising large sections of a fan's story in her own novel. In an issue of *Writer's Digest*, Bradley was quoted as saying

one of the fans... wrote a story, using my world and my characters, that overlapped the setting I was using for my next *Darkover* novel. Since she had sent me a copy of her fanzine, and I had read it, my publisher will not publish my novel set during that time period, and I am now out several years' work, as well as the cost and inconvenience of having a lawyer deal with this matter.<sup>125</sup>

This is an extreme example of the fan's dominance over the author, but it sets a worrying precedent. The financial, emotional and legal ramifications of this incident are clear. The fan's usurping of the author is not just an academic hypothesis but has real world implications, evidenced by the case of Bradley.

In discussing theories of authorship and how they pertain to fanfiction, it is clear to see that the arguments advanced by fanfiction scholars using the framework of established literary theorists may be easily dismantled. In the next chapter I will go on to discuss the Fan Studies theory that fanfiction is a discursive forum for marginalised voices and a way for unrepresented groups to write themselves into a canon they believe to be exclusionary.

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<sup>125</sup> Jim C. Hines, "Marion Zimmer Bradley vs. Fan Fiction," JimChines.com, accessed December 27, 2019, <https://www.jimchines.com/2010/05/mzb-vs-fanfiction/>.

### Chapter Three

#### Writing in the Margins: Fanfiction as a Space for Unheard Voices

The practice of marginalia is a longstanding literary tradition; from the scribbles of children in the corner of their school textbooks to Herman Melville's hastily pencilled footnotes to the poems of Matthew Arnold<sup>126</sup> or in his editions of Hawthorne.<sup>127</sup> The human impulse to actively engage with texts rather than passively consume them is encapsulated in the history of marginalia. Indeed, American painter William Morris Hunt noted in 1890 that

the child's scribbling on the margin of his school-books is really worth more to him than all he gets out of them. To him the margin is the best part of all books, and he finds in it the soothing influence of a clear sky in a landscape.<sup>128</sup>

Fanfiction is a modern form of marginalia, albeit in a public forum, accelerated and expanded by technological innovations, but the same urge can be seen throughout literature. The first record of a reader re-writing a text from the margins can be seen in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when Lucy Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, penned a continuation to Sir Phillip Sidney's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* on the back pages of her 1590 edition of the prose romance.<sup>129</sup> The fan-writer continues this tradition of writing in the margins, but with the potential of reaching a worldwide audience.

There is a widely held belief in Fan Studies circles that the public marginalia of fanfictions are discursive forums for social groups traditionally ignored or looked down upon by mainstream society, allowing them to write themselves into the cultural products which so often exclude them. Fandom communities are

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<sup>126</sup> Steven Olsen-Smith, Peter Norberg and Dennis C. Marmon, *Melville's Marginalia Online*, accessed December 29, 2019, <http://melvillemarginalia.org/>.

<sup>127</sup> Walker Cowen, "Melville's Marginalia: Hawthorne," *Studies in the American Renaissance*, (1978), 279-302, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30227450>.

<sup>128</sup> William Morris Hunt, *Talks About Art*, (London: Macmillan, 1890), 85.

<sup>129</sup> Derecho, "Archontic Literature", 67.

stereotypically portrayed as being dominated by white, heterosexual males. This idea stands in sharp contrast to the demographics which show that producers and consumers of fanfiction are disproportionately female. Statistical evidence is difficult to gather, but in a 2013 census conducted by Tumblr user Centrumlumina on a sample of 10,0005 readers and writers on Archive of Our Own (A03) 80% of users identified as female, 6% as genderqueer and only 4% as male.<sup>130</sup> If this is the case, it is pertinent to examine whether these women are driven to rewrite their favourite films, television shows and literature from a desire to refashion the often male-dominated and orientated source material in their own image.

It was in the 1960s, with the rise of male-centric action-packed television shows such as *Star Trek* and *Starsky & Hutch*, that fanfiction gained its greatest traction. These television shows were fast-paced and plot-driven, leaving little space for the exploration of complex character psychology or interpersonal relationships. Women were secondary characters, under-written and under-developed by male staff writers. They lacked agency and their narratives served only to advance those of the male characters. These were hardly the role-models that a generation of young girls seeking to break free from the staid traditional gender roles of their parents could look up to. In 1994, while investigating the female dominated *Star Trek* fan community, Camille Bacon-Smith noted that the impetus for female fanfiction stemmed from a perceived lack of favourable representation on-screen. Bacon-Smith saw that, despite the galactic setting, *Star Trek* reinforced the social norms and hegemonic heteronormativity of mainstream Western society, and that, “part of the problem may be intrinsic to the product. *Star Trek* promotes the belief that the system works for everyone but shows few examples of women acting with strength and independence.”<sup>131</sup>

If we are to examine the female impetus to rewrite masculine narratives, we must address the issue of gendered approaches to reading. In 1979, Professor David Bleich, a leading proponent of the reader-response theory, conducted a survey on the students in his graduate seminar class at Indiana University with the

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<sup>130</sup> Centrumlumina, “Categories,” *The Slow Dance of the Infinite Stars* (blog), Tumblr, October 1, 2013 (5:22PM), <https://centrumlumina.tumblr.com/post/62816996032/gender>.

<sup>131</sup> Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 11.



aim of examining “comparative literary response patterns of men and women.”<sup>132</sup> In the course of Bleich’s study it became clear that there were marked differences in the way the men and women approached the texts. Bleich determined that men read for ‘authorial meaning’, whereas women “experienced the narrative as a world, without a particularly strong sense that this world was narrated into existence.”<sup>133</sup> A telling example of this can be seen in the case of Mr C, a student who, when the group were asked to read Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, “read a biography of Emily Brontë... and looked forward to applying that new knowledge of the author in the attempt to understand [the text] precisely.”<sup>134</sup> This response is symptomatic of the approach to reading that Bleich identified within his male graduate cohort. Men approached the text with a deference to the author’s authority. They entrusted the narrative to the author and were less likely to infer their own meaning. When asked to retell the story, the men were primarily concerned with “getting the ‘facts’ of the story straight”<sup>135</sup>, whereas the female participants “tended to present the narrative more often by including judgements on its atmosphere or experiential effect. They seemed more ready to draw inferences without as strict a regard for the literal text, but with more regard... for the affective sense of the human relationships in the story.”<sup>136</sup>

The difference in male and female approaches to reading is evident in Bleich’s students’ responses to the opening paragraph of William Faulkner’s *Barn Burning*. The male students retold the story as a direct chain of events, focusing on facts and outcomes, rather than emotions. They offered little of their own interpretation, representing the text literally rather than thematically. The women, however, recounted the ‘atmosphere’ of the story rather than a direct chain-of-events account. They were more likely to infer meaning from the author’s words and were more interested in the affective sense of the story, rather than a chronological retelling. This is illustrated in the difference between Mr B’s account – “[the courtroom] smelled of cheese and meat to the boy”<sup>137</sup> – and that of Ms A who

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<sup>132</sup> David Bleich, *The Double Perspective: Language, Literacy & Social Relations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 127.

<sup>133</sup> Bleich, *Double Perspective*, 128-9.

<sup>134</sup> Bleich, 144.

<sup>135</sup> Bleich, 144.

<sup>136</sup> Bleich, 144.

<sup>137</sup> Bleich, 148.

concluded that Faulkner's inclusion of the odour of meat and cheese signified that "the boy must be hungry because the smell of cheese and some kind of fish are capturing his attention."<sup>138</sup>

In the context of male and female approaches to fandom, this study is particularly pertinent. While these gendered approaches to reading are, of course, socially constructed, it can be used to explain the marked difference in male and female fan responses to literature, books, and television shows. Female fans of *Star Trek* did not see the text as the ultimate authority on the show's universe in the same way that male fans did. For the male fans, each episode was an unalterable encyclopaedia of *Star Trek* information officially sanctioned by the show's writers. For female fans, it was a jumping off point. Camille Bacon-Smith has argued that "the television episodes themselves are the principal source of relationship, or male-bonding, stories. The women fans of action-adventure television view the weekly plots as proving grounds, meaningful only to the extent they test the relationships and personal integrity of the ongoing characters."<sup>139</sup>

Henry Jenkins, in his 1992 work *Textual Poachers*, contrasts the different forms of textual engagement displayed by the predominantly male fans of David Lynch's 1980s television series *Twin Peaks* with that of the largely female *Star Trek* fanbase. *Twin Peaks* fans debated the show's minutiae on dedicated Usenet forums to get the "facts straight"<sup>140</sup>. Fans parsed over minute details of character interaction, not to gain insight into their psychological motivation as the *Star Trek* community did, but as "clues for resolving syntagmatic questions."<sup>141</sup> The show's complex plot appealed to a male audience when they believed that its creator was in complete control of the narrative. Male fans sought answers outside of the text and appealed to Lynch as the ultimate source of authority, whereas female *Star Trek* fans sought and inferred meaning from inside the text. Indeed, when *Twin Peaks* appeared to be losing its way during the second season, male fans began to lose faith in the show and feared that Lynch's grasp on the narrative reigns was loosening. One concerned Usenet poster asked his fellow fans

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<sup>138</sup> Bleich, *Double Perspective*, 148.

<sup>139</sup> Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 145.

<sup>140</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 111.

<sup>141</sup> Jenkins, 110.

am I the only one experiencing a crisis of faith? I awaken in the middle of the night in a cold sweat imagining a world in which no one knows who killed Laura Palmer. I imagine Lynch and Frost just making it up as they go along.<sup>142</sup>

These gendered approaches to reading are not innate but socially constructed. They are instilled into individuals from early childhood as part of the construction of their gender identity and shape the way they view the world, not just the narratives they consume. Elizabeth Segel notes that “the publisher commissioning paperback romances for girls and marketing science fiction for boys... are part of a powerful system that operates to channel books to, or away, from children according to their gender.”<sup>143</sup> The educational strategy, Segel argues, assumes that girls are happy to read literature featuring male protagonists, but that boys are unable to enjoy books that follow a female lead. The result of this has been to teach girls “to make sense of male-centred narratives while boys were only taught to devalue female-centred stories.”<sup>144</sup>

Here we must ask ourselves whether fanfiction is a specifically feminine approach to textual engagement or a way for women to reclaim their identity from the margins of a text that derogates their status to that of ‘love interest’ or plot device. As Bacon-Smith has stated, the writers of *Star Trek* fanfiction write primarily about the principal male characters, rather than the women left on the side-lines. If, as Aca-Fans posit, fanfiction is a way for female fans to write themselves into the narrative, we must wonder why these women continue to focus on male characters at the expense of creating their own original narratives featuring women with agency, intellect and adventures of their own.

The majority of fanfiction is assigned to the sub-category of ‘slash’ and focuses upon gay sexual relationships between canonically heterosexual male characters. Slash fanfiction may be a way for women to stake a claim to genres such

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<sup>142</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 111.

<sup>143</sup> Elizabeth Segel, “As The Twig Is Bent: Gender and Childhood Reading,” in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts* ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and P.P Schweickart (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), 165-85.

<sup>144</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 114.

as action and adventure from which they are traditionally excluded, shaping the narrative for feminine tastes, but this is not a valid argument in favour of fanfiction. In recognising the psychological drivers behind the creation of fanfiction, we must also admit that these women would be better served creating original works that centre around strong female characters rather than attempting to mould existing heteronormative texts to their needs. The female fan's refusal to rescue her fictional sisters from the side-lines only serves to perpetuate male-dominated narratives both in the mainstream media and the sub-culture of fandom. Indeed, literature and television shows featuring strong female leads do not tend to spark the imagination of fanfiction writers. There is little evidence of fanfiction attempting to redress the gender imbalances inherent in entertainment geared towards a male audience. Indeed, in the *Supernatural* fandom – the largest community on A03 which boasts over 178,122 fanworks – 62% of the archived works focused on male/male pairings, with only 3% exploring female/female relationships.

Segel concludes her analysis of the impact of gendered approaches to reading with the sombre warning that “every trespass onto masculine fictional terrain by girls must have reinforced the awareness of their own inferiority in society's view”<sup>145</sup>. This inferiority can be seen writ large in fanfiction where, despite ostensibly reclaiming their narrative from the margins, women serve to reinforce the inequalities and prejudices that face them in everyday society.

Indeed, the issue of internalised misogyny is prevalent within the fanfiction community. Female fan-writers not only miss the opportunity to create strong female characters within their fiction, but often end up representing women in a far poorer light than the original text, if they represent them at all. Fanlore.org user Laura Jacques-Valentine has noted this streak of misogyny within the predominantly female fanfiction community, drawing attention to a problem she believes is “widespread enough that one can characterize the form that it takes.”<sup>146</sup> Jacques-Valentine categorises the forms misogyny takes in fanfiction as thus:

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<sup>145</sup> Segel, “As the Twig is Bent,” 165-85.

<sup>146</sup> “Misogyny in Fanfiction,” Fanlore (website), accessed December 29, 2019. [https://fanlore.org/wiki/Misogyny\\_in\\_Fandom](https://fanlore.org/wiki/Misogyny_in_Fandom)

- Routine portrayals of ex-wives or ex-girlfriends as crazy bitches or neurotic freaks.
- Routine dismissal of canon female characters as unimportant, even when the reverse is clearly true.
- Not un-common discussions of how much better sex is with a man than with a woman.<sup>147</sup>

Jacques-Valentine illustrates her point with the case of fanfiction writer Francesca who wrote a series of stories based around the American television series *The Sentinel*. In one instalment of her *Nature* series, Jim and Blair, the show's male leads, declare their love for one another but must contend with the wrath of Jim's ex-wife, Carolyn. Jacques-Valentine contends that, despite Carolyn's justifiably hurt feelings, Francesca's portrayal of one of the show's few female characters is incredibly unflattering, as evidenced in the following passage.

"All those medals – but you could never perform for me, could you?" Carolyn laughed harshly and Blair flinched; she turned to stare at him. "Is he any good for you?" she asked meanly. "Or does it even matter? He has so much more to offer, doesn't he...?"<sup>148</sup>

Carolyn continues to lash out in vindictive and petty ways throughout Francesca's series and it is implied that this behaviour is not the result of a woman grieving the end of her marriage but typical of her treatment of Jim throughout their relationship.

"Don't take this wrong, man," Blair said, looking up at him, "but now I see why you got divorced."

Jim shrugged. "It wasn't all like that."

"Oh no?" Blair asked skeptically.

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<sup>147</sup> "Misogyny in Fanfiction."

<sup>148</sup> Francesca, "Nature's Outing," Francesca's Sentinel Fiction, Trickster (website), accessed December 29, 2019. <http://www.trickster.org/francesca/Natouting.html>.

"Nah," Jim said, shaking his head as if to clear it. "We had a really good week back in September of 1992."<sup>149</sup>

Jacques-Valentine highlights this particular example because the characterisation of Carolyn as bitter and spiteful is not 'canonical', instead it is the invention of a female fan-writer who, instead of highlighting a female character on a male-driven show, has chosen to denigrate her. The undercurrent of misogyny is prevalent in many female-written fan texts and I will go on to discuss this in greater depth in this chapter, but it is germane to mention it here in order to cast aspersions on the idea that women use fanfiction to write themselves into the popular media which they are excluded from.

Henry Jenkins has argued that fans use fanfiction to "shift narrative attention away from the narrative centre and onto the periphery... to reclaim their own interests from the margin and thus... engage more freely in speculations that push aside the author's voice in favour of their own."<sup>150</sup> Many Fan Studies theorists claim that fan-writers use secondary characters as conduits for their own social, political or personal interests. Through re-tooling an established text, the fan-writer has a ready-made audience for their message. The fan advances secondary characters to centre-stage because they are often ill-defined and lack strong characterisation in the original text, making them a malleable conduit for the fan's message. This is an interesting but utterly false assumption. Fanfiction does 'push aside' the original author, but the voice that replaces it is often crude, with no clear agenda or respect for narrative craft. In the A03 Harry Potter community, the minor character of Draco Malfoy is the second most popular archived 'tag' with 57,339 stories out of 93,701 featuring Malfoy as a principal character.<sup>151</sup> While some fans choose to explore the psychology underpinning Draco's actions in the original series, the majority of works follow the example of A03 user memelingerie's *Draco is a Little Whore*.

Harry snarled as he began to rip apart Draco's trousers with astounding strength. Draco had tears in his eye. "Please, Harry... I'm so sorry just don't ravish me this way, I'll do anything –"

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<sup>149</sup> Francesca, "Nature's Outing."

<sup>150</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 114.

<sup>151</sup> "Fandom Stats," Fandom Stats, accessed January 2, 2020, <http://fandomstats.org/?q=harry+potter>.

“It’s too late now you mewling fuck. This is my revenge. And I’m doing it MY way.” ... Harry looked down at Draco, who was almost hyperventilating out of fear. He saw his hard cock, which was betraying the fear that he was displaying to Harry. “I bet you’re a real slut... a real whore who likes to be fucked like this.” Draco profusely shook his head ‘no’ as tears were beginning to run down his face. <sup>152</sup>

As one A03 user commented, “I honour you for being brave enough to share this with people, I highly doubt I’d ever be able to post my sleep-deprived mind-perversions online...”<sup>153</sup>

While we cannot summarily dismiss the notion of fanfiction communities creating, as John Fiske terms it, a “culture of the subordinate”<sup>154</sup>, it is necessary to question the legitimacy and value of their methods. The idea of writing from the margins is not unique to fanfiction, indeed there is a rich tradition of authors from socially disenfranchised groups using the English Literature canon to reclaim their voices in a society that seeks to suppress them. Abigail Derecho has noted that one of the first published works by a female author in the English language was a re-writing of Sir Phillip Sidney’s *Arcadia* by his niece, Lady Mary Wroth, who wrote a revision of Sidney’s work entitled *The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania* in 1621. When the critic Sir Edward Denny critiqued Wroth’s work in verse, denouncing her as a “hermophradite in show” who produced an “idell book”<sup>155</sup>, Wroth responded in kind, issuing her rebuttal in the form of a parody of Denny’s poetry.<sup>156</sup>

The repurposing of the canon to meet modern needs in a changing society can be seen in the rise of post-Colonial fiction in the 1960s, with Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* rescuing the minor character of Mr Rochester’s Barbadian wife, Antoinette, from the attic Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* kept her locked in. The novel returns Antoinette to her native Barbados and explores her life before she came to England in a sympathetic and intriguing manner. In Brontë’s version of events, Mrs

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<sup>152</sup> Memelingerie, “Draco Is A Little Whore”, Archive of Our Own, December 1, 2014, accessed December 29, 2019, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/2698382>.

<sup>153</sup> Anti-Sleeper, October 14, 2015, 10:09 p.m, comment on Memelingerie, “Draco is a Little Whore,” accessed December 29, 2019, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/2698382>

<sup>154</sup> John Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” in *The Adoring Audience* (London: Routledge, 1992), 32.

<sup>155</sup> Mary Wroth, *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, ed. Josephine Roberts, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 32-5.

<sup>156</sup> Derecho, “Archontic Literature,” 69.

Rochester is entirely 'othered', portrayed as a dangerous barbarian who haunts the fringes of the heroine's love story. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys affords Antoinette the voice that was silenced by Brontë's narrative, and in doing so calls into question the whole project of British Imperialism, which is never doubted in Brontë's universe. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a leading literary theorist and feminist critic, says of Rhys' Antoinette:

In this fictive England, she must play out her role, act out the transformation of her 'self' into that fictive Other... so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction... Rhys sees to it that her sister from the colonies is not sacrificed as an insane animal for her sister's consolidation.<sup>157</sup>

Post-Colonial writing is now considered a genre itself and many of these 'counter-discursive' fictions have been accepted into the canon of Western literature alongside the works they sought to challenge. The English literature canon is not a fixed and immutable set of texts that remain untouched by time and changing societal standards. The canon expands to encompass new works and overlooked voices and adapts to the society it serves. John Thiem, in his 2002 work on post-Colonial 'oppositional' writing commented that

ultimately, counter-discourse functions less as a mode that opposes the English canon than as a mode that subverts its practice of telling singular stories. The authority of literary modes that speaks ex cathedra through a unitary narrative voice, as it were to suggest that this is the only way the story can be told, is unsettled by a range of strategies that imply there are always multiple optics on any situation, multiple voices for telling any story.<sup>158</sup>

The canon is not something that must remain unchallenged. The canon is not immutable, yet its inhabitants are uniform in the sense that they represent the pinnacle of human achievement and intellect. Matthew Arnold argued that culture is

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<sup>157</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (Autumn, 1985): 251, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343469>.

<sup>158</sup> John Thiem, *Postcolonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon. Literature, Culture and Identity*, (London: Continuum, 2002), 173.



“a study of perfection”.<sup>159</sup> Perfection is unattainable, but culture encourages us to strive towards it. The canon is continually advancing, establishing new standards, and exploring a myriad of previously ignored perspectives. Arnold defines culture as the growth of humanity in distinguishing itself from animality. The canon acts to preserve the finest of human thought from being submerged in the multifarious array of texts available to the twenty-first century reader. As society evolves, so too does the canon, expanding to allow room for new voices and changing ideals, yet all the while maintaining its aim of ‘perfection’. Arnold acknowledges that the canon is not about the attainment of perfection, but the pursuit of it when he states that

it is in making endless additions to itself, in the endless expansion of its powers, in endless growth in wisdom and beauty, that the spirit of the human race finds its ideal. To reach this ideal, culture is an indispensable aid, and that is the true value of culture.<sup>160</sup>

Despite the modern impulse towards an egalitarian view of culture, with ‘low’ culture afforded the same academic scrutiny previously given only to the ‘high’ arts, the distinction between ‘art’ and ‘entertainment’ is a valuable one. It is difficult to argue that a product such as *Star Wars*, which is essentially a high budget toy commercial, has the same moral, spiritual and cultural significance as Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. While *Star Wars* is culturally important for its entertainment value and the work that new instalments of the series have done to represent a range of characters from women to ethnic minorities, we cannot argue that it adheres to Arnold’s ideals. It may be enriching in terms of the entertainment it provides, but it is an unchallenging, easily consumed diversion that does not challenge its viewers.

Culture begets a dissatisfaction which is of the highest possible value in stemming the common tide of men’s thoughts in a wealthy and industrial community, and which saves the future, as one may hope, from being vulgarised.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 45.

<sup>160</sup> Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 47.

<sup>161</sup> Arnold, 52.

Arnold attests that, if society ceased to value texts which challenge the reader to develop both mentally and spiritually, humanity would allow itself to focus on its basest desires – the accumulation of capital and fulfilment of hedonistic pleasures – rather than striving towards Arnold’s conception of ‘perfection’.

The act of reclaiming and repurposing narratives in order to “highlight the inequalities... in their culture by creating new versions of earlier stories and producing a contrast between the old and new tale”<sup>162</sup> is a culturally legitimate practice which falls well within the scope of literature. What distinguishes this literary practice from that of fanfiction is the intent and execution. While Fan Studies scholars believe fanfiction to be a discourse between the fan and text in the same vein as post-Colonial ‘oppositional’ literature, there are stark differences in quality, content and the writer’s conscious ambitions in rewriting an established text that cannot be overlooked.

There is a tendency within fanfiction communities for fan-authors’ supplementation to the text to become accepted as part of the canonical version of events within the fandom. ‘Head-canon’ is the practice of a fan-author altering canonical events to their preference, disregarding the official version of events presented in the television series or novel. The practice of ‘head-canon’ is ubiquitous throughout fanfiction, with many fan-writers adhering to their own version of the canon in their fanfictions without acknowledging accepted canonical events. While ‘head-canon’ is an individual practice, there are times when a non-canonical invention by a fan-writer is adopted by the entire community as an established fact.<sup>163</sup> The acceptance of ‘head-canon’ by an entire community is an organic process, but a fascinating one. In the *Transformers* fandom an entire lexicon of agreed upon terms has been established to describe the machines and their various components. There are several dictionaries dedicated to housing the key words that are essential for the *Transformers* erotic fan-author to write a sex scene between the machines that will be believable for the community.<sup>164</sup> In some cases, the ‘fanonical’

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<sup>162</sup> Derecho, “Archontic Literature,” 69.

<sup>163</sup> Bronwen Thomas, “What is Fanfiction and Why are People Saying Such Nice Things About it?,” *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 3, (2011): 1-24, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/storyworlds.3.2011.0001>.

<sup>164</sup> Vovid, “Transformers Dictionary,” Fanfiction.net, May 11, 2015, accessed December 30, 2019,

narrative is so entrenched within the fandom that fans are outraged when the original text challenges this shared assumption. In the BBC *Sherlock* fandom, fanfiction writers almost universally accept that Sherlock Holmes and John Watson are in a romantic, if not sexual, relationship, to the point where fans launched a virulent campaign of online abuse and death threats targeting the actress who was cast as Watson's love interest.<sup>165</sup>

Catherine Driscoll, in an essay examining the intersection between Romance fiction and pornography in the sub-genre of 'slash' fanfiction, claims that 'fanon' is "a fantasy based on the needs of the individual."<sup>166</sup> If fanfiction serves individual needs, with each work catering to a unique desire, this delegitimises the claims of Fan Studies academics who argue that fanfiction serves a community of marginalised voices. Rather than a communal quest for representation, fanfiction is the individualistic pursuit of self-gratification. In this respect, fanfiction is distinct from literature which serves society through the betterment of its understanding and values.

If fanfiction is not a challenge to mainstream societal conventions, we must ask ourselves whether it is instead a device for fans to explore their own personal psychologies. This hypothesis is evidenced in the plethora of fanfictions in which fans project their own personal issues onto their favourite television shows, books, and bands. There is a wide range of fanfictions written about television characters or literary heroes who, though it is never mentioned in the original text, suffer from depression, anxiety or other mental health problems. It could be argued that fans feel on-screen or literary representations of mental illness do not reflect their own experiences and believe that through rewriting the narrative they can address the issues and highlight them to a wider audience. This, however, does not bear up when we analyse the fanfiction. The majority of fanworks follow the format of personal fantasy-fulfilment, with a starving Sherlock being rushed to hospital, only to

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<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/11242501/3/Transformers-Dictionary>.

<sup>165</sup> Aja Romana, "'Sherlock' Fans Lash Out Over Sunken JohnLock Ship," Daily Dot, last modified February 2, 2017, accessed March 10, 2018, <https://www.dailydot.com/parsec/fandom/sherlock-fandom-johnlock-ship/>.

<sup>166</sup> Catherine Driscoll, "One True Pairing: The Romance of Pornography and the Pornography of Romance," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 90.

be nursed back to health by the love and support of John Watson, as seen in A03 Solrosan's *Eating Us Alive, Again*.

John felt punched in the gut. For how many dark nights had Sherlock been alone with his demons, unable to sleep?

How could he have missed it? In a vain attempt to ignore the guilt and the tears pressing down on his chest, John held Sherlock closer. As if it would make everything all right. As if it would make all the hurt go away.

If it would, he'd never let him go.<sup>167</sup>

The story is not an attempt at narrative re-evaluation but rather a forum for writers to tease out their own psychological problems. The fan-author has used the Sherlock character as a cipher for herself – perhaps because she identifies with him or feels an emotional attachment to the character – and the *Sherlock* universe as a stage on which to play out a psychodrama in which she is unconditionally loved and her needs always met. This impulse is seen again in the *Supernatural* fandom, when A03 fanwriter Indigo\_Carter wrote a story using the following prompt from a fellow user:

Prompt: so i have a request, in honor of my second anniversary of being clean from an eating disorder, if you could do a fem reader with Dean, Sam, or Cas (I'm not particular), and they're celebrating her recovery and victory over bulimia and then it becomes really sweet, fluffy smut? I love love love your writing and I really hope you write this one! thank you!!<sup>168</sup>

Though writing in response to a prompt, the fan-author explains in her notes that

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<sup>167</sup> Solrosan, "Eating Us Alive, Again...", Archive of Our Own, April 11, 2012, accessed December 30, 2019, <https://archiveofourown.org/series/16835>

<sup>168</sup> Indigo\_carter, "Forgetting," Archive of Our Own, May 28, 2015, accessed December 30, 2019, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/4027153>.

ok, this one was personal to write, even though it was a request. This is largely based on my own experiences of struggling with and recovering from depression, EDNOS and other mental health issues. I really hope I did it justice, as it was kind of cathartic to write.<sup>169</sup>

This contravenes the notion that fanfiction writers are the logical heirs to Barthes' assumption of the 'death' of the author. In Barthes' theory, the author's personal history would have no bearing upon the text, yet in fanfiction the personal suffuses every element of the work. Sara Gwenllian Jones argues that for fanfiction writers, "major characters function as points of entry...as avatars... that are animated and psychically inhabited by fans' projected imaginations."<sup>170</sup> When the personal is so present in the fan-author's work, there is often a lack of the emotional regulation and critical distance needed to transform the work into a piece of art, crafted with the intention of educating, informing and transporting the reader. Fanfiction, though read by others, is a self-serving medium, written in a state of heightened emotion – be that sexual or psychological – and often provides cathartic relief for its author, as evidenced in the examples above. While this is not to say that other readers cannot gain from the work – either as entertainment or an emotional emetic – we must distinguish the inward looking and individualistic impulses of fanfiction from that of true art.

Jean Paul Sartre argues that one of the defining features of literature is the freedom it affords the reader, but that "freedom is alienated in the state of passion; it is abruptly engaged in partial enterprises... the book is no longer anything but a means for feeding hate or desire. The writer should not seek to overwhelm."<sup>171</sup> In contrast, Driscoll reveals that the highest form of praise on fanfiction forums is for a reader to declare 'it moved me', suggesting the emotional effect is more important than style or content.<sup>172</sup> There are a multitude of sub-genres within fanfiction which serve to illicit extreme emotional responses from both the text's author and its reader, such as 'hurt/comfort' which focuses upon a character being emotionally or physically traumatised and then comforted. The sub-genre of 'angst' follows the

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<sup>169</sup> Indigo\_carter, "Forgetting."

<sup>170</sup> Sara Gwenllian-Jones, "The Sex Lives of Cult Television Characters," *Screen* 43, no. 1 (Spring, 2002): 85, <http://screen.oxfordjournals.org/content/43/1/79.full.pdf>.

<sup>171</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Routledge, 2001), 37.

<sup>172</sup> Driscoll, "One True Pairing," 88.

same narrative pattern, but with the caveat that there will be no happy ending. These stories are often overwrought, focusing on heightened emotion rather than a subtle exploration of what it might mean to be in such a situation. The text is a conduit for emotional release, not intellectual stimulation.

Driscoll, stopping short of conceding that fanfiction can be considered a form of online group therapy, admits that fanfiction generally takes the form of “naïve writing styles and is opposed to stylistic sophistication, demonstrating that fanon is less about strict canonical content than about the spectre of fantasy.”<sup>173</sup> If fanfiction is not a space for marginalised voices to reclaim their narrative from an exclusionary mainstream media, nor a form of legitimate literature in its own right, we must ask ourselves what function fanfiction does serve. As Driscoll asserts, the ‘spectre of fantasy’ looms large over fanfiction and it is difficult to separate the fanwriter’s fantasy fulfilment from the work itself. Indeed, in arguing that fanfiction is not a form of literature, nor a political stance, we need look no further than the phenomenon of ‘slash’ fanfiction. Despite being considered a sub-genre, ‘slash’ comprises the majority of fanfiction content with 89.7% of A03 users claiming it was their favourite type of story.<sup>174</sup>

‘Slash’ fanfiction can be traced back to the female dominated *Star Trek* fan communities of the 1960s where, amongst the initially non-sexual ‘general’ fanfiction circulated in fanzines and at conventions, a subset of women on the fringes of the community began to create, disseminate and consume explicitly sexual stories regarding Captain Kirk and Mr Spock. ‘Slash’ fanfiction was considered a transgressive act at this time. Many kept their activities a secret, keen to demarcate the space between their ‘real lives’, in which they were wives, mothers and workers, and the erotic fantasy life they shared with like-minded fans.

The standard practice of using pseudonyms in online fanfiction forums began with the burgeoning ‘slash’ community of the 1960s who used *nom de plumes* to hide their identities. Although the current day fanfiction writer remains anonymous behind their username, this assumed name is also part of “the construction of an alternative identity, a simultaneous revelation and masking of the name of the

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<sup>173</sup> Driscoll, “One True Pairing,” 90.

<sup>174</sup> Centrumlumina, “Categories,” *The Slow Dance of the Infinite Stars* (blog), Tumblr, October 3, 2013, (3.50pm), accessed December 30, 2019, <https://centrumlumina.tumblr.com/post/62996687070/categories>.

author"<sup>175</sup>. The fan-author, hidden behind their computer screen, can construct an identity that plays into their fantasy, concealing the mundane or distasteful aspects of their lives, fashioning themselves as the person they wish to be, while the illicit secret gives their real lives an erotic frisson. The furtive nature of the creation and consumption of 'slash' fanfiction and its transgression of traditional heteronormative female behaviour is part of its appeal.

In the taxonomy of fanfiction, 'slash' is a sub-genre which branches into sub-categories such as 'angst' which are used as 'tags' by authors to allow interested readers to search for this specific style of story. The 'hurt/comfort' genre, as discussed earlier and described by Sheenah Pugh as a "genre in which one character is given a hard time physically, emotionally or both before being consoled/rehabilitated by another"<sup>176</sup>, is believed by Henry Jenkins to be a form of "emotional intensification".<sup>177</sup> Jenkins argues that through "emotional or physical pain [there] is a catharsis; these traumatic moments provoke a renewal of the commitment between partners" and allows the female fan-writer to explore "the heart of our culture's patriarchal conception of the hero as a man of emotional constraint and personal autonomy."<sup>178</sup>

Jenkins' conception of the fanfiction writer as gender theorist is an intriguing one but it does not stand up to scrutiny. The female desire to examine male characters in distressing situations is perhaps a way to deal with traumatic events such as rape or domestic violence at a safe distance. The use of a male cypher prevents the female fan from identifying too closely with the situation, the gender boundary providing a buffer between her and an uncomfortable subject. In a society where women are routinely judged on their physical appearance and subjected to unwanted sexual advances, the female fanfiction community's focus on male/male relationships may be a product of the systematic misogyny that pervades our societal structures. One fanfiction reader suggests that, despite her feminist ideology, she can only feel pleasure when she reads male/male (m/m) fanfiction:

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<sup>175</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 201.

<sup>176</sup> Pugh, *Democratic Genre*, 243.

<sup>177</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 174.

<sup>178</sup> Jenkins, 174.

Certain characters, experiences, and pleasures are inaccessible to me because of how misogyny affects me in real life. Just thought that it was neat that misogyny not only over values men, but makes female spaces feel unsafe when it comes to my own pleasure.<sup>179</sup>

Fan Studies theorists claim that fanfiction is a discursive forum which transgresses mainstream assumptions of heteronormativity by deliberately queering heterosexual and masculine spaces. In investigating the motivations behind fans' rewriting of their favourite texts it is clear to see that there is no conscious attempt to reclaim a narrative for queer voices from the margins. As previously cited, in a census of A03 fanfiction writers and readers, 80% of respondents were female, 76% were white, and the majority defined themselves as heterosexual.<sup>180</sup> Archive of Our Own is the largest online fanfiction archive and this data can be extrapolated to the wider fanfiction community without fear of misrepresenting the demographics. From the census conducted by Centrumlumina, we can conclude that fanfiction is a white, heterosexual, female space.

If the female drive to write and read 'slash' fanfiction is a form of subverting patriarchal gender imbalances, it is a poorly realised one. Fanfiction writers continue to malign and marginalise their fictional counterparts, refusing to allow them the voice that mainstream media outlets are beginning to recognize. If female fan-writers hope to challenge damaging gender roles and patriarchal assumptions through fanfiction they would be better served by creating their own original fictions featuring strong female characters who act with autonomy, agency and intelligence in their own narratives.

The writing of 'slash' fanfiction is not a conscious act of rebellion, but a symptom of the harm done to women's psyches in patriarchal societies. The female motivation for engaging with 'slash' stems from four primary drivers. The first is an idealisation of male relationships, the second is their own sexual desire, the third a fetishization of male homosexuality and the fourth is a deep and internalised misogyny which causes these fan-writers to see female characters and stories as 'lesser than'. These factors are not mutually exclusive and there is often a

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<sup>179</sup>Centrumlumina, "Why M/M?," *The Slow Dance of the Infinite Stars* (blog), Tumblr, October 10, 2013 (11:01 PM). <https://centrumlumina.tumblr.com/post/63676643147/why-mm>.

<sup>180</sup> Centrumlumina, "Why M/M?"



complicated interplay between female sexual desire and female self-worth present in all.

One explanation of the female fan-writer's drive to read and write 'slash' fanfiction may be an idealisation of male/male relationships within the fanfiction community. Joan Martin, a fan writer interviewed by Henry Jenkins for his 1992 work *Textual Poachers*, is quoted as saying that 'slash' fanfiction

offers detailed and loving descriptions of beautiful men making love, lovingly. It presents love as entailing mutual respect and possible only between equals; sex as a mutually undertaken, freely chosen, fully conscious interaction.<sup>181</sup>

This explanation presents 'slash' as less of a challenge to heteronormativity and more of a female fantasy projected onto male bodies. Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith believe that slash allows women to explore a partnership between equals which cannot exist between men and women in a patriarchal society.<sup>182</sup> Lamb and Veith present the idea that 'slash' fanfiction plays with androgyny to create a fluidity of gender which is not present in the original source material. This, however, is not the case. 'Slash' fanfiction is ostensibly about male relationships, yet the fan-writer often conforms to heteronormative gender norms, relying on the trope of assigning one man as the 'masculine' and dominant partner and the other as 'feminine' and submissive. While these writers may literally 'queer' masculine characters, their representations only serve to reinforce the stereotypes of gay men seen in the mainstream media. This buttressing of preconceived notions of masculinity and sexuality does nothing to provide marginalised queer voices with a new narrative but provides the fan with sexual pleasure believed to be forbidden to her.

The female desire to read 'slash' emerges from a belief that men and women cannot enjoy the status of equal partners in an unequal society, leading to a subjugation of heterosexual relationships to the chimerical idea that male/male

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<sup>181</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 188.

<sup>182</sup> Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith, "The Romantic Myth and Transcendence: A Feminist Interpretation of the Kirk/Spock Bond," in *Erotic Universe: Sexuality and Fantastic Literature*, ed. Donald Palumbo, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 236-55.

partnerships are more fulfilling because of the intrinsic power imbalance present between men and women. Indeed, the source material often supports this notion with shows such as *Stargate & Hutch* portraying the two male characters as engaged in an intense and committed (albeit platonic) relationship with one another while their heterosexual encounters are shown to be short-lived and unsatisfying.

The fan's impulse to focus on male homosexual relationships, rather than create narratives where men and women are equal in their encounters, speaks to the undercurrent of female sexual desire that underpins most fanfiction and indeed to the fetishization of homosexuality within these communities. Joanna Russ, a feminist critic and Science Fiction writer, argued that women find in 'slash' the intimacy lacking in pornography. 'Slash', unlike pornography which caters to male sexual appetites, places its focus on intimacy and sensuality. In 'slash' fanfiction, the exploration of characters is often as important as the sexual aspect of the work. This stands in stark contrast to the depersonalised, almost mechanical, sexual titillation offered to men through the lens of pornography. Rather than being a conscious attempt to dismantle patriarchal constructions of gender, fanfiction seems to be more of a safe space for women to explore their sexuality in a society that seeks to delimit and constrain female sexual appetites.<sup>183</sup>

Constance Penley maintains that fans are fascinated by their favourite characters on both an intellectual and sexual level. Penley argues that "if in the psychoanalytic account of fantasy, its two poles are *being* and *having*, this fantasy has it all, and all at once."<sup>184</sup> The fantasy allows women to enjoy the experience of being both the possessor and the possessed, yet remain at a safe distance, their gender identity prohibiting them from identifying too strongly with either partner. A defining trope of 'slash' fanfiction is that the two male characters engaged in an intimate relationship with one another rarely define themselves as homosexual. The fan-writer is often explicit that the characters are predominantly heterosexual, but their love for their partner transcends the boundaries of sex and gender. In the case of *Star Trek* 'slashers', Kirk and Spock's sexual attraction can be explained through

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<sup>183</sup> Joana Russ, "Pornography by Women for Women, With Love," in *The Fanfiction Studies Reader*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 75-82.

<sup>184</sup> Constance Penley, "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture," in *Cultural Studies Now and in the Future*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Gary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 491.

situational homosexuality, or as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick terms it “homosocial desire”.<sup>185</sup> This is the same ‘gay for the stay’ mentality that pervades prisons and boarding schools where a lack of female sexual objects of desire leads heterosexual men – or at least men who define themselves as such – to engage in same-sex relations they would not pursue in the outside world.

The fanfiction writer’s desire to imagine male characters engaged in sexual relationships while retaining a heterosexual identity is an intrinsic part of the fantasy fulfilment offered by ‘slash’. By keeping the male characters sexually fluid the fan is not precluded from becoming a possible partner. Male ‘slash’ characters repeatedly state that they have never engaged in homosexual relations before, nor felt sexual desire for another man. This is evidenced in the popular ‘First Time’ sub-genre in which a male character struggles with hidden feelings for his same-sex friend. The element of transgression and taboo creates an erotic frisson throughout the fiction which reaches its climax when both partners acknowledge their mutual attraction and consummate their love. Camille Bacon-Smith notes that

women who read and write [slash] do so because it is sexually exciting... They can share in the fantasy of sexual relationships with both of the male screen characters with whom they already maintain an imaginary relationship. The fan can imagine giving and receiving both physical and emotional love from the point of view of one or both of the characters. The tendency to identify with more than one position is so strong that some of the less experienced writers lose control of their point of view in sex scenes, as they simultaneously identify with all of the characters in the scene.<sup>186</sup>

‘Slash’ fanfiction is less about the craft of writing than it is about desire. Catherine Driscoll, in her essay “One True Pairing: The Romance of Pornography and the Pornography of Romance”, considers the intersection between pornography and romance fiction and the parallels both genres have with ‘slash’ fanfiction.

The reading habits of women have always been scrutinised by society. When women’s literacy developed apace with the popular novel there was widespread

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<sup>185</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1985) 137.

<sup>186</sup> Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 239.

public concern that women's moral characters would be degraded by the "immoral and unhealthy stimulation" and "improper fantasies"<sup>187</sup> encouraged by such books. Just as the Internet revolutionised pornography, the advent of the online era heralded marked changes in the creation and dissemination of 'slash' fanfiction. Women were no longer limited to exchanging 'slash' fanzines beneath the tables at conventions and hiding them beneath their beds, afraid that if they were found out they would "look foolish or aberrant."<sup>188</sup> The anonymity of the Internet liberated women's erotic fanfiction, making it a private space where one does not have to reveal one's identity or even leave the house to engage with the community but, at the same time is incredibly public and accessible to anyone capable of operating an Internet search engine. While fandom likes to consider itself a 'closed universe', impenetrable to the uninitiated, the fact that most fannish activity takes place in the public forum of online message boards and websites means that fan activities are less covert than ever. Materials meant for the consumption of like-minded individuals are now available to anyone. This is evidenced by the Fall Out Boy fanfiction debacle of 2015. While promoting their latest album, the band announced they would be holding a live reading on a local radio show of RPS (Real Person Slash) written about them. This caused outrage amongst fans who saw the public reading of their 'private' fantasies as a grave violation. For the band members to read about themselves in this context was an unwelcome trespass into a fandom where, although built around them, they did not belong. One Tumblr user posted on her blog that

I heard that Fall Out Boy will be going on a radio show to mockingly read FOB fanfiction. It's disappointing because in the past they've shown a clear understanding that fanfic isn't for them and they've also treated their fans with a degree of respect and empathy that's, sadly, relatively rare in the music business (particularly when it comes to women who are music fans.) This radio show... is a real change in the way they treat their fans and particularly problematic given the way it focuses on the idea that women's desire is something ridiculous and to be mocked.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Driscoll, "One True Pairing," 80.

<sup>188</sup> Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 244.

<sup>189</sup> Fabusina, "Girlpearl uses a tag 'fandom is the best/worst'," January 5, 2015, accessed January 1, 2020, archived URL

The band were forced to cancel the event and publicly apologise to their outraged fans, but this has not stopped the growing popularity of public readings of fanfiction, often by those who are featured in it; in 2013, Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman caused upset amongst the Sherlock fan community when they read aloud from an erotic Sherlock fanfiction at a Q&A session at the BFI.<sup>190</sup>

The fanfiction community's reaction to these incidents encapsulates the sense of ownership that fans feel over 'their' characters. The canonical characters, or in the case of RPS, the actual people, are disregarded in favour of an idealised version created by the fan. In their quest to usurp the author, the fan sees their reinvention of the text as the definitive version. The encroachment of outside forces, be it actors or authors, into their textual domain is a direct challenge to their power over the text and an unwelcome reminder that the characters are not theirs to control.

While fandom relies on public displays of emotional and financial investment in a book, band, or product, the fanfiction community operates on a more covert level. The fanfiction writer is a fan, and as such will exhibit the insignia of fandom proudly to the outside world, but when it comes to their fan-writing there is often a strict demarcation between the fan-author's 'real life' and 'online life'. Camille Bacon-Smith, when researching 'slash' fanfiction in the 1990s was warned by one fan that, "this is private stuff, and taking it out [to the public] is not going to get you very well liked."<sup>191</sup>

Driscoll suggests that 'slash' fanfiction is a form of 'romance pornography' in the tradition of similarly derided Mills & Boons novels and Harlequin Romances. Pornography and romance find their intersection in the sub-genre of 'slash' fanfiction. Writers detail graphic and explicit sexual encounters but pay equal attention to plot and characterisation. Pornography relies upon the viewer compartmentalising their emotions. Maximum pleasure is achieved when the woman on-screen is completely

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<http://web.archive.org/web/20150105062901/http://fabusina.tumblr.com/post/107006187895/girlpearl-uses-a-tag-fandom-is-the-best-worst>.

<sup>190</sup> Brooke Magnanti, "Sherlock, Benedict Cumberbatch and Fanfic: Don't Mess with these Women (and Men)," *Telegraph*, Dec 16, 2013, accessed December 31, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/10521131/Sherlock-Benedict-Cumberbatch-and-fanfic-dont-mess-with-these-women-and-men.html>.

<sup>191</sup> Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 243.

anonymous and the voyeur knows nothing of her life, hopes, or dreams. ‘Slash’ fanfiction, conversely, is dependent upon emotional investment in both the characters and the story. Driscoll argues that “fanfic inherits the most criticized elements of both romance fiction and pornography as modes of popular culture, and where it does enter the public sphere it is mostly seen as aesthetically inferior, morally dubious, or at best a curiosity.”<sup>192</sup>

It is pertinent to note here the phenomenon of E.L James’ Fifty Shades of Grey trilogy, which, while it does not fall under the category of ‘slash’ fanfiction, is the most successful fanfiction of all time and a prime example of the intersection between romance and pornography found in the form. James’ novels began life as an Alternate Universe erotic fanfiction series based on Stephanie Meyer’s popular vampire Twilight franchise. James’ rewriting stripped the original of its supernatural elements and transposed the characters from the small town of Forks, Washington to Seattle. The story was originally entitled Master of the Universe and serialised on websites such as Fanfiction.net and Twilighted.com. Fifty Shades of Grey encapsulates the intersection between romance and pornography found in fanfiction. The sex is graphic, detailed and focuses heavily on anatomical descriptions, but the reader’s investment in the characters is essential to their enjoyment of the piece. The fanfiction writer and reader, however, are given a short cut to this emotional development through the use of established and well-known characters. The fan-author is granted a lexicon that is universally understood within the fandom and, as such, does not need to work on the craft of character development. This is, perhaps, the appeal of fanfiction. The fan-writer can meld their own fantasies with another author’s original creation, and, like pornography, the writer is granted an illicit thrill with little effort on their part. While James’ Fifty Shades of Grey series has been wildly successful, she is often derided for her poor writing. Her words are intended to titillate and there is no aspiration to stylistic sophistication, innovation, nor unique expression.

Here we can consider R.G Collingwood’s distinction between ‘art proper’ and forms that are commonly mistaken for art, as put forth in his 1938 treatise on aesthetics *The Principles of Art*.<sup>193</sup> Collingwood proposes four forms which are

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<sup>192</sup> Driscoll, “One True Pairing,” 95.

<sup>193</sup> R.G Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938).

mistakenly categorised as art. The first such form is 'craft', which is distinguished from art by its technicality. 'Craft' involves the execution of a plan. The less the plan is diverged from, the better – for example, a carpenter assembling pieces of wood for a chair must follow a blueprint in order to realise this plan. This differs from the creation of a poem; the poet does not list the words he will assemble into a stanza beforehand. Collingwood argues that there can be elements of 'craft' in 'art proper', but they are not the defining feature of the work.<sup>194</sup> He goes on to detail the difference between 'art proper' and art as representation which he illustrates as the relation a sitter bears to their portrait. Despite the technical skill and proficiency that goes into an artist's rendering of the subject, this does not define 'art proper'.<sup>195</sup>

Collingwood then distinguishes 'art proper' from 'art as magic', which is a ritualized representation of a useful emotion. 'Magic' is not akin to catharsis because the emotion invoked is harnessed rather than discharged. He uses the example of a tribe of warriors performing a War Dance; the warriors gain courage from the act and the dance instils fear into their enemies. Collingwood again concedes that there are overlaps with 'art proper' here, but because 'art proper' is not defined by the harnessing of useful emotions, it cannot be classified as 'magic'. The distinction is drawn between an aesthetically fine piece of religious artwork which inspires pious awe and an L.E.D crucifix which might inspire the same feeling. Collingwood locates the mistake in thought process here as the assumption that the attitude towards subject matter is the same as a purely aesthetic criticism. This can be seen in the attitude of people who have watched a play concerned with, for example, contemporary race relations. The drama may inspire its audience to think deeply about the issue, but this does not grant it status as a work of art, instead it falls into the category of 'magic' because it harnesses useful emotions for societal good.<sup>196</sup>

Collingwood's final classification is that of 'amusement', which is pertinent to the study of fanfiction. In Collingwood's theory of art, 'amusement' stimulates emotional responses through make-believe and fantasy, but unlike 'magic' the emotions are discharged rather than harnessed to achieve an end goal.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Collingwood, *Principles of Art*, 15-36.

<sup>195</sup> Collingwood, 42-52.

<sup>196</sup> Collingwood, 57-69.

<sup>197</sup> Collingwood, 78-94.

'Art proper', defined by Collingwood, is the imaginative expression of emotion. The emotion is undefinable until it is expressed. It is in the act of expression that the artist become conscious of the exact emotion he or she is experiencing. Through the act of expressing this emotion, it becomes art. Collingwood offers the example of a painter viewing a landscape and feeling unfathomable emotions about the scene. Through putting paint to canvas, the painter translates this emotion into an artistic language which can be understood by the artist and his audience. The distinction between 'art proper' and 'art as amusement' lies in the intent.<sup>198</sup> In craft the intent precedes the execution of the work in a utilitarian relationship. Craft has a use intended by the craftsman. In art proper the intent and the execution are inseparable; they are mutually inclusive and lack a preconceived purpose or use.

In Collingwood's taxonomy of art distinctions, fanfiction falls under the categorisation of 'amusement'. The fanfiction creator writes with the distinct aim of eliciting certain emotions in their readers, such as the 'angst' or 'hurt/comfort' genres which are expressly intended to invoke sadness, or the 'slash' genre which focuses on sexual titillation. Collingwood states that

if the difference between tragedy and comedy is a difference between the emotions they express, it is not a difference that can be present to the artist's mind when he is beginning to work... No artist, therefore, so far as he is an artist, can set out to write a comedy, a tragedy, an elegy, or the like... This is the truth that Socrates was heard expounding towards the dawn, among the sleeping figures in Agathon's dining room.<sup>199</sup>

The main aim of 'amusement' is pleasure, whether through pornographic stimulus or the cathartic expulsion of unwanted emotions. Art as amusement is of lesser value than 'magic'. In magic, such as a rain or fertility dance, the emotion aroused is channelled into positive practical outcomes, such as causing rain to fall, or choosing a mate. Pornography dissipates the emotion aroused and is a substitute for the object of desire. This clearly definable aim and the formulaic approach taken to

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<sup>198</sup> Collingwood, *Principles of Art*, 105-121.

<sup>199</sup> Collingwood, 116.



achieve it – such as following canonical or fanonical character blueprints and adhering to the tropes and clichés of the genre – marks fanfiction as both ‘amusement’ and ‘craft’, but not art.

If art is an expression of emotion, there must be an intrinsic hierarchy to subjects we consider ‘art proper’. While an artwork may express emotion, the depth of that emotion and its expression is contingent upon the emotional depth of the artist. The artist, then, “is one who has these experiences of consciousness more deeply than the average person, and who has mastered the practice of preserving them.”<sup>200</sup>

Collingwood’s aesthetic theory is useful in distinguishing the ‘craft’ of fanfiction from the ‘art proper’ of literature and offers a vigorous defence of the English Literature canon. In the English canon we see the best of artistic emotional expression. The canon is needed to allow humanity to delve into the depths of emotional experience, rather than surrender to the shallow enjoyments afforded to us by forms imitating art, such as fanfiction. While ‘amusement’ is essential for our wellbeing, we must allow ourselves to experience more than senseless pleasures in order to become fully realised individuals. In a society where fine feeling is blunted by the glibness of consumerism and capitalist culture, where art is seen as a commodity, we owe it to ourselves, and society at large, to engage with ‘art proper’ in order to experience the depths of our emotions, rather than succumb to the superficial, and ultimately soulless, delight afforded to us by second-rate diversions. Collingwood concludes by stating that

the artist must prophesy not in the sense that he foretells things to come, but in the sense that he tells his audience, at the risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts. His business as an artist is to speak out, to make a clean breast. But what he has to utter is not, as the individualistic theory of art would have us think, his own secrets. As a spokesman for his community, the secrets he must utter are

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<sup>200</sup> Gary Kemp, “Collingwood’s Aesthetics,” in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2016 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/collingwood-aesthetics/>.

theirs... Art is the community's medicine for the worst disease of mind, the corruption of consciousness.<sup>201</sup>

Canonical literature, then, stands in opposition to fanfiction. Fanfiction is written with the express intention of creating pleasure for both reader and writer. The instant feedback generated by comment sections guides the author who shapes the narrative to create maximum enjoyment for their audience. The canon, conversely, disrupts, challenges, and stimulates the reader, providing the antidote to a society that increasingly refuses to engage with anything but the most easily digested pleasures.

Suzanne Juhasz, though not arguing in the same metaphysical tradition as Collingwood, makes the distinction between Harlequin Romances which can be considered a 'craft' and the novels of Jane Austen which are 'art proper'. She reasons that

the difference... has more to do with psychological complexity and depth than with the outlines of the plot. We can situate other romance novels on a continuum between these extremes. They all share a basis in fantasy because they run counter to societal fact in responding to a need that cannot usually be met by the culture as it is.<sup>202</sup>

Juhasz posits the idea that both Jane Austen's 'art' and the 'craft' of Harlequin Romances stem from the same impulse, but the distinction lies in the depths of its expression. In returning to the idea of 'slash' fanfiction as 'romance pornography', we must address the issue of female desire that dominates the explanations for the creation and consumption of such works. While female desire is not something to be mocked, we must consider the ethical implications of this desire finding its fulfilment through 'slash' fanfiction. As feminist theorists, such as Andrea Dworkin, have

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<sup>201</sup> Collingwood, *Principles of Art*, 336. Collingwood means by this the suppression of emotions, the artist captures them in the moment of expression.

<sup>202</sup> Suzanne Juhasz, "Texts to Grow On: Reading Women's Romance Fiction," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 7, no. 1 (1988): 239-59. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i219879>.

considered the societal and individual ramifications of pornography that caters to the male gaze, so too must we look at the deeper consequences of such fanfiction.

‘Slash’ fanfiction is problematic because of its inherent fetishization of male homosexuality. Just as a woman would find it reprehensible to be reduced to an object of sexual desire by a strange man, so too do men who identify as homosexual find the explicit interest in their love lives by female ‘slash’ writers and readers to be unsettling and offensive. Indeed, many homosexual men have voiced their concerns regarding the genre, with one commentator describing the portrayals of gay relationships by the fanfiction community as “hurtful.”<sup>203</sup> While fanfiction writers have argued that their stories celebrate same-sex relationships, the issue remains that “women in the slash community have decided that ‘gay sex’ is always sexy, that queer is always cute, and that we can take ownership of the gay male experience by writing about it...”<sup>204</sup> Camille Bacon-Smith notes that, at the time of her ethnographic research into the Star Trek community in the early 90s, very few of the women “had a prior interest in gay male literature, and few have extended their interest beyond the community once exposed.”<sup>205</sup>

Female writers of ‘slash’ fanfiction create their stories for a female audience. While the narrative focuses ostensibly on homosexual relationships, it is written through the lens of a heterosexual female gaze and effectively excludes the queer community from their own narrative. Michelle Fogal, author of several male/male romance novels, states that these stories are often the only interaction many of these women have with the queer community and because of this, “there is kind of implicit obligation to get it right when you’re writing about groups of people and when your writing forms the bedrock of many people’s perceptions of those groups of people.”<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Kiri Van Santen, “On the Fetishisation of Gay Men by Women in the Slash Community,” *The Mary Sue*, January 17, 2015, <https://www.themarysue.com/fetishizing-slash/>.

<sup>204</sup> Van Santen, “Fetishisation of Gay Men.”

<sup>205</sup> Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 248.

<sup>206</sup> Michele Fogal, “Why are Women Writing and Reading Male/Male Romance?,” Michele Fogal (blog), February 25, 2016, <http://michelefogal.com/women-writing-reading-male-male-romance/>, quoted in Kacey Whalen, “A Consumption of Gay Men: Navigating the Shifting Boundaries of M/M Romantic Readership” (masters thesis, DePaul University, 2017), 31, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/1292/2f343fb147201a85101e21dde4582d67b225.pdf>. (The post was also accessed March 10, 2018 by the author but is no longer available on the Michele Fogal blog.)

While the 'slash' community may seem a superficially welcoming place for LGBTQ+ readers, it is dominated by straight white women whom "no one expects... to have first-hand knowledge of male/male sex."<sup>207</sup> The lack of interest in the gay community beyond their fantasies of male/male sexual activities means that these women appropriate the voice of a community they have no interaction with. One commentator has declared that

I find the m/m genre a really hostile and unsafe space for gay men... and that becomes a problem considering how huge it is and the time we have to spend trying to find our own stories among the fetishism... It's contemptuous. It's disrespectful. It's dehumanizing. And it's why I avoid the genre – it's a genre that uses me as a thing, but doesn't welcome me as a person.<sup>208</sup>

There is an intrinsic homophobia in the popular 'slash' trope of both partners identifying as heterosexual. In their refusal to identify their male characters as gay, the female writer reduces the men to their sex lives and denies them a queer identity, thus cutting them off from the gay community. When these women eroticise homosexuality yet deny the homosexual experience, they prove themselves to be anything but allies to the LGBTQ+ movement.

'Slash' fanfiction, often through unintentional ignorance, reinforces harmful stereotypes of gay men still widely held by society, such as the idea that there are 'masculine' and 'feminine' partners. Brandon Taylor, speaking about the new breed of male/male romance novels which have their origins in the 'slash' fanfiction community, believes that these novels – and by extension 'slash' fanfiction – strips the gay community of agency and depoliticises their identities.

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<sup>207</sup> Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 248.

<sup>208</sup> Fangs for the Fantasy, June 15, 2014, comment on Meoskop, "You Won't Believe What Happened When These M/M Authors Were Interviewed," Love in the Margins (blog), accessed March 17, 2018, <https://loveinthemargins.com/2014/06/14/you-wont-believe-what-happened-when-these-mm-authors-were-interviewed/>.

The sex itself has also been rendered apolitical and unqueer. The hair is in all of the right places. The femme is always hairless, lanky and nubile. He has tender lips. He kisses hungrily and opens himself up to be taken, to be fulfilled. The man, the butch, the lumberjack, pounds into this hairless, nubile entity.<sup>209</sup>

The fetishization of homosexuality and the denial of queer identities intersects with the ingrained misogyny prevalent in the 'slash' community and is symptomatic of women struggling to navigate a patriarchal society which devalues the 'feminine' and elevates the 'masculine'. Misogyny is writ large in the wider realm of fandom, with heated debates taking places online about 'fake gamer girls' and the issuing of death threats to those who question the representation of women in video games.<sup>210</sup> It is startling, however, to see this misogyny translated into the female-dominated fanfiction community and propagated by the women themselves. This internalised misogyny links back to Segel's insights into the effect of gendered reading habits. Through the consumption of materials aimed at, and celebrating, men, these women's own sense of inferiority is reinforced, and this attitude is seen throughout online fanfiction forums.

It is not just the side-lining of female characters that presents itself as problematic, but the romanticising and fetishization of rape that is often found in fanfictions tagged as 'rape' and 'non-con'. An example of this, though not in the 'slash' genre, is the fanfiction entitled *Shhh* written by Alison Parks, in which the members of teen boy band One Direction brutally rape her.

I shouldn't be enjoying this...

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<sup>209</sup>Brandon Taylor, "Gay Romance Novels are Not Queer Romance Novels," Brandon Rambles (blog), Tumblr, June 26, 2016, accessed November 28, 2018, <https://brandonrambles.tumblr.com/post/146534279006/gay-romance-novels-are-not-queer-romance-novels>.

<sup>210</sup>Jordan Erica Webber, "Anita Sarkeesian: 'It's frustrating to be known as the woman who survived #Gamergate,'" *Guardian*, October 16, 2017, accessed December 31, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/oct/16/anita-sarkeesian-its-frustrating-to-be-known-as-the-woman-who-survived-gamergate>.

The assailant's hands reach the top of my thighs and stop, he uses the lightest touch over my panties and makes me moan louder, against my will... The panties are ripped from my pussy and he stands tall...<sup>211</sup>

The attack continues and the self-inserted character is left "crying as blood pours out of me and Liam continue[s] to violate me with every stroke of energy he has."<sup>212</sup> In the author's note, the writer warns potential readers of the 'sexual' nature of the story, illustrating that in these stories, rape is dealt with only as a fantasy, not a reality.

To reiterate, Fanfiction, particularly 'slash', tends to reinforce rather than challenge gender norms. When female characters are included, they are reduced to sitting on the side-lines or acting as obstacles between male lovers. If the aim of fanfiction is for women to reclaim their voices from the margins of the mainstream, we must ask ourselves why, when given this opportunity, these fictions only serve to perpetuate misogynistic views of women and patriarchal assumptions.

Camille Bacon-Smith, when questioning women on why they chose not to feature strong female characters in their fanfictions found the following responses.

Speaker 1: I wouldn't write it, because I don't care...

Speaker 2: I wouldn't want to see them with other women. I don't want to see them with me either, I wouldn't put me in the story.

Speaker 3: I wouldn't either.

Speaker 4: There's no woman you could put in the story that would suit the ideal.<sup>213</sup>

Henry Jenkins, despite proselytising on the radical challenge fanfiction presents to gender norms and sexual dynamics, concedes that fanfiction is more of a negotiation

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<sup>211</sup> Alison Parks, *Shhh*, Wattpad.com, accessed March 11, 2018.

<https://www.wattpad.com/61299477-shhh-a-one-direction-rape-story-chapter-two>. (This story has since been deleted from the site.)

<sup>212</sup> Alison Parks, *Shhh*.

<sup>213</sup> Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 240.

than a “radical break”<sup>214</sup> from mainstream attitudes towards sex and gender. This ‘negotiation’, however, often serves to strengthen the assumption that female characters are less interesting than men, less capable of autonomy and agency, and unable to sustain a riveting narrative. Fan-writer Leslie Fish has commented that, “our culture so thoroughly denigrates the personalities of women that women can’t imagine themselves as heroic characters unless they imagine themselves as male.”<sup>215</sup> In their exclusion of women from fanfiction narratives, fanfiction writers submit to the notion that female characters are inferior. Fanfiction then, does not reclaim marginalised women’s voices, but further silences them and becomes complicit in the propagation of patriarchal assumptions.

Fanfiction has grown exponentially in our interconnected era. The evolution of the Internet has led to a rise in identity politics as previously side-lined groups have found platforms online to make their voices heard. In these instances, the Internet has been a democratising forum, bringing global attention to overlooked issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement which seeks to end police brutality against African Americans. Fan Studies scholars believe that fanfiction is a democratised forum in which marginal voices can speak out against injustice, yet close inspection of the work itself and the reasons behind its production delegitimise this viewpoint. John Fiske, in his essay “The Cultural Economy of Fandom”, argues that fandom is associated with “the cultural tastes of [the] subordinated... particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class, and race.”<sup>216</sup> This idea stands in stark contrast to the cultural conception of the ‘fan’ as a heterosexual, white, middle-income male. There are many demographics, statistics, and debates regarding the gendering of fandom, but there is scarce research into the intersection between fandom and race, a fact acknowledged by Mel Stanfill who states, “the whiteness of the culturally constituted category of ‘fan’ has yet to be considered in depth; scholars consider whiteness and fandom in the context of sports... but

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<sup>214</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 219.

<sup>215</sup> Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 240.

<sup>216</sup> John Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” in *The Adoring Audience*, ed. L.A Lewis (New York: Routledge, 1992), 30.

virtually never with fans of television or film beyond an acknowledgment that the population is white.”<sup>217</sup>

Participants in online forums can obscure their identities, choosing to reveal parts of themselves they may hide in their everyday lives, or hide facts about themselves which are clearly visible in face-to-face interactions, such as ethnicity, gender, or disability. This omission of detail from forum users creates difficulties for those interested in researching the demographics of fandoms. As stated previously, the cultural stereotype of the ‘fan’ is of the white male, yet this view is supported by photographs from events such as Comic Con, where attendees blend into a homogenous group of 18-30 year old white men. It is interesting to note, however, that recent statistics show that the ratio of male to female participants in 2015 Comic Con events was almost 50:50.<sup>218</sup>

Stanfill, despite acknowledging the whiteness of the fannish community, argues that Fiske’s perception of fandom as a ‘culture of the subordinate’ is correct if we consider ‘whiteness’ in the context of Richard Dyer’s 1997 treatise on race, *White*. Applying Dyer’s theory to the fandom community, Stanfill claims that fans are ‘skin’ white rather than ‘symbolically’ white.<sup>219</sup> Stanfill argues, “though the physical appearance of the fans represented in mainstream cultural artefacts is phenotypically white, these images of fandom do not fit comfortably within the positive valuation usually attached to whiteness in dominant American culture.”<sup>220</sup> Stanfill believes that by identifying as fans, white men negate their white male privilege by engaging in activities that run counter to societal ideals of heteronormative masculinity. The idea that fans are an oppressed class is intriguing, but in actuality – despite unflattering portrayals of male fans, evidenced in *The Simpsons’* grotesque Comic Book Guy character – it is insulting to truly oppressed groups who face discrimination and disadvantages on a daily basis because of who they are. The fan identity is socially constructed and based on extrinsic sources

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<sup>217</sup> Mel Stanfill, “Doing Fandom, (Mis)doing Whiteness: Heteronormativity, Racialization, and the Discursive Construction of Fandom,” *Journal of Transformative Works and Cultures* 8, (2011), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2011.0256>.

<sup>218</sup> Rob Salkowitz, “New Eventbrite Survey Reveals Demographics, Spending Patterns,” ICv2 (website), June 28, 2015, accessed January 1, 2020, <https://icv2.com/articles/columns/view/31899/new-eventbrite-survey-reveals-convention-demographics-spending-patterns>.

<sup>219</sup> Stanfill, “Doing Fandom,” [1.2].

<sup>220</sup> Stanfill [1.2].



selected by fans themselves. It is not inherent within the person. While ‘fandom’ can be dismissed as a strange hobby, it is doubtful that fans would suffer politically, economically, or socially, because they choose to attend conventions or write fanfiction in their spare time.

We live in an era where identity politics are more important than ever. In the case of social justice movements such as #metoo and Black Lives Matter, the championing of marginalised identities is a force for great societal good. There are, however, large groups of people who feel unable to navigate mainstream society – as discussed previously in regard to Seregina and Schouten’s discourse on the fan’s identity construction through cultural products<sup>221</sup> – which leads them to align themselves, and even identify as, truly marginalised peoples. The culmination of this impulse can be found in the online ‘Otherkin’ community in which users “identify themselves as essentially non-human along a loosely defined spectrum”<sup>222</sup>. People identifying as ‘Otherkin’ may believe, as an example, that they are a turtle, trapped in the body of a human woman. While this idea is not new, as evidenced by the long history of clinical lycanthropy and the animal possession rituals of pagan cultures, the Internet affords a once private belief to become an identity which is shared globally with other like-minded members online.

While ‘Otherkin’ is an extreme example of the socially maladjusted seeking identity construction through self-marginalisation, it is still reflective of a wider online culture. Indeed, there are overlaps between the ‘Otherkin’ and fanfiction community in the ‘Factkin’ subculture. Kin Experiences Tumblr defines the group as “people who identify as real life people who either have lived or are currently living.”<sup>223</sup> ‘Factkin’ can be considered fanfiction in extremis. Fan-writers invent fictions surrounding books, television shows, and even real people, in part, because of their desire to possess and assert ownership over them, and perhaps even to become them. ‘Factkin’, then, is fanfiction with all pretence removed.

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<sup>221</sup> Anastasia Seregina and John W. Schouten, “Resolving Identity Ambiguity Through Transcending Fandom,” *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 20, no. 2 (2017): 107-130, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.brunel.ac.uk/10.1080/10253866.2016.1189417>.

<sup>222</sup> Sean O’Callaghan, “Navigating the ‘Other’ World: Cyberspace, Popular Culture and the Realm of the Otherkin,” *Culture and Religion* 16, no. 3 (2015): 253-268, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2015.1083454>.

<sup>223</sup> “What Is Factkin?” Kin-Experiences (blog), Tumblr, March 24, 2015, (6:02 a.m.), <https://kin-experiences.tumblr.com/post/114484218856/what-is-factkin>.

Adam Possamai believes that young people today use popular culture to construct their identities in an era that no longer values religious or cultural institutions. Possamai states that Millennials and younger generations

practice religion/spirituality by creatively re-using the artefacts of contemporary mass-mediated culture – e.g. images, stories, and songs from television, radio and zines – rather than following the meaning offered by religious institutions. They might view Star Wars, Star Trek: The Next Generation or Oprah religiously and share with other people fictional or quasi-fictional scenarios.<sup>224</sup>

Popular culture forms the framework for identity construction in an age where organised religion and other traditional structures are losing their dominance. The demographics for fanfiction writers and readers are unmistakably skewed towards women, as indicated previously. 78% of Fanfiction.net users in 2010 identified as female<sup>225</sup> and a 2013 census of A03 users revealed that 80% also identified as female<sup>226</sup> and 78% white.<sup>227</sup> These statistics, though self-selecting, make it difficult to argue that fanfiction is a means of reclaiming marginalised voices from the mainstream media. The prevalence of ‘slash’ within the fanfiction community and the hyper-focus female fan-writers place upon male characters contests the idea that fanfiction presents a challenge to the dominant narrative of a patriarchal society.

Fanfiction, then, is not a form of literature, but a means of identity construction and psychological exploration for people who feel out of place in mainstream culture. One ComicCon attendee explained the feeling of ‘belonging’ that fandom gave her as such, “you make me feel less weird in the world.”<sup>228</sup> Fanfiction and fandom functions as a space where individuals with low status in the outside world can form an identity and sense of self-worth from the field cultural capital accumulated through

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<sup>224</sup> Adam Possamai, *Sociology of Religion for Generations X and Y*, (London: Equinox, 2009) 27.

<sup>225</sup> “Fan Fiction Demographics in 2010: Age, Sex, Country,” Fan Fiction Statistics, FFNResearch (blog), accessed January 1, 2020, <http://ffnresearch.blogspot.com/2011/03/fan-fiction-demographics-in-2010-age.html>.

<sup>226</sup> Centrumlumina, “Gender,” The Slow Dance of the Infinite Stars (blog), Tumblr, October 1, 2013 (5:22PM). <https://centrumlumina.tumblr.com/post/62816996032/gender>.

<sup>227</sup> Centrumlumina. “Ethnicity,” The Slow Dance of the Infinite Stars (blog), Tumblr, October 1, 2013 (5:22PM). <https://centrumlumina.tumblr.com/post/62895154828/ethnicity>.

<sup>228</sup> Michelle L. McCudden, “Degrees of Fandom: Authenticity and Hierarchy in the Age of Media Convergence” (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2011), 68, accessed January 1, 2020, <http://hdl.handle.net/1808/9757>.

fandom. Writing in 1992, Jenkins details the self-esteem that women could gain from the relative 'fame' they achieved in the fanfiction community.

Women who have low prestige jobs or who are housemakers can gain national and even international recognition as fan writers and artists; fan publishing constitutes an alternative source of status, unacknowledged by the dominant social and economic systems but personally rewarding nonetheless.<sup>229</sup>

In an age of hyper-connectivity this prestige and recognition can become global, although there is still a strict demarcation between the standing these women are given in their online communities and their status in everyday life. Fan Studies readers believe that, due to the open nature of the Internet, fanfiction is a democratising force which allows readers to circulate their works with few barriers or restrictions. They also attest that the use of pseudonyms and the ability to hide their identities online allows for non-hierarchical and collectivist communities to flourish. This is a romanticised view of these forums. Despite the transposition of a community into an online sphere where markers of difference are erased, hierarchies and struggles for dominance persist.

John Fiske suggests that fandom functions as a "shadow cultural economy"<sup>230</sup>, following the same theory of capital put forth by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his 1986 essay "The Forms of Capital." Bourdieu posits the notion that within society human beings possess three types of capital, the first is economic, the second cultural, the third social. To reduce these terms to their most rudimentary forms, the three types of capital roughly correspond to 'what you're worth', 'what you know', and 'who you know'. Bourdieu also investigates the idea of 'field' cultural capital, wherein a person possessing specialist knowledge of a niche subject may gain standing in this arena, but this cannot be translated into any other form of

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<sup>229</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 159.

<sup>230</sup> Fiske, "Cultural Economy of Fandom," 30.

capital beyond his chosen field. In this regard, acquired knowledge of a given fandom is a form of 'field' or 'subcultural' capital.<sup>231</sup>

Fandom, despite its protestations, is incredibly hierarchical. The depth of a fan's canonical knowledge accords with their status within fannish society. Michelle L. McCudden, in her PhD thesis on fan hierarchies, cites her subjects as repeatedly vocalising their anxieties over the 'authenticity' of other fans. Markers of authenticity include whether the fan is wearing the right clothes, owns the correct merchandise, and possesses an extensive knowledge of the fandom. These markers are used to determine where the fan fits into the community's power structure. Those possessing less 'field cultural capital' are denigrated to the status of 'casual' fan or 'n00b'.<sup>232</sup> One of McCudden's interviewees told her that "what makes a true fan – a lot of it is tied into interaction and knowledge,"<sup>233</sup> while another concurred that "...you can tell by talking to someone if they're a casual fan or a big-time fan by how much they actually know about that particular show."<sup>234</sup>

Mainstream society sees fans as immature, lacking in sophistication, and unable to engage in the emotional regulation required of adults. Fans can be seen to transgress the traditional bourgeois ideas of good taste and decorum in their unrestrained enthusiasm for a cultural product considered by the purveyors of taste to be inferior to a work of high culture such as an opera or a symphony. Fannish reactions are seen by outsiders as volatile, emotionally dysregulated, and hysterical; a grave violation of society's accepted standards of behaviour.

I do not wish to argue that there is anything wrong with taking pleasure in 'low culture', but instead to distinguish the products that provide us with entertainment from those which enrich us, as evidenced in Collingwood's theory of aesthetics. It is fascinating, however, to observe Bourdieu's theory of taste presenting itself even in the supposedly egalitarian fan community where social stratification persists.

McCudden, when researching her thesis, took her sample of interviewees from a Comic-Con International in San Diego, an event which required a certain

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<sup>231</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986), 241-58.

<sup>232</sup> McCudden, "Degrees of Fandom," 22-25.

<sup>233</sup> McCudden, 44.

<sup>234</sup> McCudden, 50.

amount of money, effort, and time to attend, yet all participants were keen to distance themselves from the accusation of being overinvolved in their fandom. They wished to be seen as ‘authentic’ fans but wanted to keep “a buffer between me and like becoming a huge psycho fan.”<sup>235</sup> The fan’s use of language here is telling of their desire to distance themselves (‘me’) from association with the identity of a ‘psycho fan’, and is reflective of the verbiage an outsider might use when asked to describe their conception of a ‘typical’ fan. As attenders of the convention, fans have more than a casual interest in their subject, yet they find it necessary to distinguish their identity from that of the unsavoury popular conceit of the unhinged fan.

Elitism and hierarchy are omnipresent in fan communities and pervade fannish interactions, despite the myth propagated by Fan Studies theorists that fandom is a collectivist Utopia. There is a hierarchy within fandom which places ‘serious’ subjects such as *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* at the top of the pyramid, leaving franchises such as *Twilight* on the bottom rung. The gendering of fandoms is, again, undeniable. Male orientated franchises, such as *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* are given higher status and credibility than fandoms marketed towards a female audience, such as *Twilight* and *Harry Potter*. Indeed, at the peak of *Twilight*’s popularity, an ‘anti-*Twilight*’ movement was established by members of other fandoms who wished to position themselves as a “safe ‘us’ in relation to the threatening and inappropriate ‘Other’.”<sup>236</sup> Members of the *Twilight* anti-fandom believed that the trilogy’s predominantly teenaged female fans were doing a disservice to the reputation of fan communities at large by conforming to stereotypical notions of ‘fannish’ behaviour – irrationality, uncritical excess and hysterical reactions. Jacqueline M. Pinkowitz, in her essay on the Anti-*Twilight* movement, explains the elitism that pervades cross-fan interactions.

Fearful of a low ranking on the cultural hierarchy, they have created their own internal fan hierarchy that, according to cultural notions about the superiority of class, education, and the elite over the uneducated and the popular... ensures the dominance and safety of their own

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<sup>235</sup> McCudden, “Degrees of Fandom,” 55.

<sup>236</sup> Jacqueline M. Pinkowitz, “‘The Rabid Fans That Take [Twilight] Much Too Seriously’: The Construction and Rejection of Excess in Twilight AntiFandom,” *Journal of Transformative Works and Cultures* 7, (2011), [0.1], <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2011.0247>.

affected rationality over the characterized emotional and excessive behaviour of rabid 'Twilight' fans.<sup>237</sup>

This elitism is not restricted to dismissive attitudes towards other fandoms. McCudden quotes an interviewee who detailed the exclusionary attitudes he had encountered within his own fandom.

'This fandom of people who only do one thing and there isn't anything else... anything else is beneath their notice... if you were a true fan you would only do one thing... 'You're diluting yourself by not being totally focused.'<sup>238</sup>

This participant's response illustrates the all-pervading anxiety of authenticity that haunts fandom. To engage with any other fandom is seen as a lack of commitment and a dilution of the specialist knowledge required to be a 'true' fan. Depth of knowledge is perhaps the most important marker of fandom and is ultimately what assigns fans their place in the community power structure. One fan remarked that "it's not just a matter of liking a show; it's a matter of knowing everything about the show like ever – that could possibly be known."<sup>239</sup> It is not enough to be well versed in canonical knowledge – the true fan searches outside of the text, appealing to outside sources such as interviews with authors, producers, actors, etc. Fanfiction writers take this one step further, claiming their authority not just within the fandom, but over the text itself by creating their own appendices to it, staking ownership of it not just by virtue of their extensive knowledge, but by declaring their own interpretation of the text as definitive.

If the level of interaction with the text, and in turn the community surrounding it, is the benchmark of a 'true' fan, we can infer that the fanfiction writer who delves into the text, suffuses it with herself, and then shares it with the community, is a 'true' fan. Alexis, a Comic-Con attendee, told McCudden that "a super-fan is someone who will take a piece of media from its original incarnation and will bring it to another level

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<sup>237</sup> Pinkowitz, "Rabid Fans," [0.1].

<sup>238</sup> McCudden, "Degrees of Fandom," 45.

<sup>239</sup> McCudden, 48.

of media interaction.”<sup>240</sup> Fandom communities, however, often look down upon the fringe activities of fanfiction writers, believing they have crossed the thin line that separates the ‘authentic’ fan from the ‘huge psycho’ fan.

Despite the protestations of Fan Studies scholars, fandom is an incredibly hierarchical arena. One marker of ‘authenticity’ within online fandom communities is related to the length of time that a fan has been present within the community and their level of participation. Newcomers to these communities, unable to prove themselves on these grounds, are often scorned and excluded. The online forum Television Without Pity (now defunct) operated a practice of placing badges beside member’s usernames as an emblem of their place within the forum’s ranking system based on the number of posts and comments they had made. This stratification of fandom is just as prevalent in the fanfiction communities where users have clearly assigned functions within the power structure and seek to maintain the exclusivity of the community by making newcomers feel unwelcome until they have proven their worth. Even the terminology used to describe those in the upper echelons of fandom is a signifier of the prevalence of such elitist attitudes, with those at the top labelled ‘Big Name Fans’ or ‘Alpha Fans’.

The status of ‘Alpha Fan’ is granted to those possessing immense knowledge of their given fandom – be that canonical or ‘fanonical’. Those within the community will defer to ‘Alpha Fans’ on any given subject, as seen in the admission of McCudden’s interviewees who claim that, on forums and websites, “everyone refers to them so there is just some kind of authority that their name keeps coming up.”<sup>241</sup> Online forums and message boards follow a tiered power structure. New users may pose a question to the group and those in the tier above ‘newb’ may attempt to answer, but the ultimate authority of the ‘Big Name Fan’ must be appealed to. The ‘Big Name Fan’, when invoked, will act as the final arbiter, either dismissing or confirming the lower-tier members’ opinions. In an interconnected era, there is an undeniable appeal in the subcultural cache afforded to Big Name Fans whose everyday status often lacks the prestige of their online lives, just as Jenkins’ reported of his female ‘zine writers. The stark contrast between an individual’s ‘real life’ and

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<sup>240</sup> McCudden, “Degrees of Fandom,” 66.

<sup>241</sup> McCudden, 89.

their online persona is highlighted by one of McCudden's Comic-Con respondents when they admitted

20% of the people walking around Comic-Con are people whose internet names you would recognise if you were on the internet for ungodly amounts of time... everyone walking around you is two steps away from being quite famous and influential in the internet world... [but] what percentage of the population reads these blogs and cares?... but for the people at Comic-Con... those guys are going to influence so much on the internet.<sup>242</sup>

If we argue that fanfiction is a way for the fan to assume authority over a text, it is a doubly appealing pastime then when the fan can also assume authority over the community that surrounds the text. Fanfiction is not a democratising forum, nor a space for silenced voices to write their own narrative from the margins. In exploring the psychological and social factors surrounding the impulse to create fanfiction, we can see that the form has nothing to do with literature and everything to do with wish-fulfilment and power.

In the next chapter, I will explore the impact technology and our changing reading styles has on our conception of literature.

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<sup>242</sup> McCudden, "Degrees of Fandom," 39.



Chapter Four:  
Technology and Communal Writing

In the 1960s Marshall McLuhan declared that “the medium is the message.”<sup>243</sup> McLuhan’s pithy statement summarises a complex hypothesis, namely that the way in which we consume information is more important than the information itself. There is growing evidence in the field of neuroscience to suggest that the media we habitually engage with can change the way we think. McLuhan described the content of a medium as “the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind”,<sup>244</sup> while the medium itself has a far more consequential impact on “the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.”<sup>245</sup>

Nicholas Carr, in his Pulitzer Prize shortlisted work *The Shallows*, was inspired by McLuhan’s prescient pronouncements to investigate the effects of changing technologies on both the individual and society. The impetus for Carr’s research came from the realisation that he had lost the capacity to focus on a single long form piece of text for an extended period and could no longer ‘lose’ himself in the deep reading he had once so enjoyed. Carr explains his concerns as such:

I’m no longer thinking the way I used to think. I feel it most strongly when I’m reading. I used to find it easy to immerse myself in a book or a lengthy article... Now my concentration starts to drift after a page or two. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do.<sup>246</sup>

While he could have blamed his diminishing concentration on his advancing years – a common complaint amongst his middle-aged peers – Carr was not convinced. He did not feel his mental acuity dimming, nor his mind drifting absently, but instead

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<sup>243</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (California: Ginko Press, 2014), 13, ProQuest E-books.

<sup>244</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 20.

<sup>245</sup> McLuhan, 14.

<sup>246</sup> Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), 5.

actively searching for further stimuli. When Carr began his research into the subject, he found he was not alone in this feeling. Bruce Friedman, a pathologist at the University of Michigan Medical school, admitted that he has lost “the ability to read and absorb a longish article on the web or in print... I can’t read *War and Peace*... Even a blog post of more than three or four paragraphs is too much information to absorb. I skim it.”<sup>247</sup>

Carr believes that the transformations observed in his own thinking and that of his interviewees stems from changes rendered in the brain’s neural circuitry through engagement with new technologies. It is obvious that digital technology demands a different form of information processing than the focused attention required by a printed novel or long-form article. The electronic hypertext requires peripatetic thinking. When browsing the Internet or reading a text on an e-reader, we take in information in short bursts, often reading a line or two, before following the links embedded in the text to other articles or websites. There are obvious disadvantages to this, but when we spend our days absorbing information this way it becomes difficult for our brains to switch to the sustained focus necessitated by a novel or lengthy essay.

Advances in neuroscientific research affirm Carr’s supposition; the constant use of digital technologies and the sporadic attention span encouraged by this style of information processing can change the way we think. Neuropsychologist Donald Hebb postulated in 1949 that neuronal activity can have lasting effects on the neural connections within the brain. His conclusion was summarized by C.J Shatz in the memorable axiom “what fires together, wires together.”<sup>248</sup> When a neural pathway is consistently fired by an activity the brain will ‘hardwire’ this connection to become the ‘path of least resistance’, meaning the structure of the brain is altered by its environmental stimuli.

Conventional wisdom held that neural pathways were fixed and unalterable in adulthood but advances in MRI scanning have shown the brain to be an enormously plastic organ, capable of responding and adapting to outside stimuli throughout its lifespan. The theory of neuroplasticity is now being integrated into new models of

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<sup>247</sup> Carr, *Shallows*, 7.

<sup>248</sup> C.J Shatz, “The Developing Brain,” *Scientific American* 257, no. 3 (1992), 64.

treatment for addictions and has been posited as the driver behind compulsive behaviours and urges. The brain's ability to 'change' itself is a cause for celebration but it is no easy task. Once neural pathways are 'hard-wired' it takes sustained effort and continued 'opposite actions' to reroute them. It is far easier to ingrain bad habits and detrimental thought patterns into our neural circuitry than to 'hard-wire' positive pathways.

Screen-based technology by its very nature requires users to multitask. The hypertext uses links to allow us to navigate the text effectively, but also provides distractions. The clickable link is a call to action we feel immediately compelled to take, pulling our focus from the main body of the text. Despite the stereotype that women are better multitaskers than men, it appears that neither sex is well-suited to this function. Though we may rewire our brain circuitry through repeated multi-tasking, that does not mean we become adept at it, with studies showing that "in the state or habit of multi-tasking, individuals are more likely to accept conventional ideas and solutions, without considering alternatives."<sup>249</sup> When scanning information from multiple sources at once, little information is retained and we fail to exercise the critical faculties necessary to make the reasoned judgement calls required to trust or distrust what we have read. This shallow reading, wherein we skim the surface of a wide array of subjects, is useful in the development of knowledge on a wide breadth of subjects, but the intelligence we acquire is superficial, limited and fallible. Other concerns with this modern 'grasshopper' approach to reading are that

sustained attention and information retention get less likely, with short-term memories dissipating rather than engaging in the processes necessary for the formation of long-term memories. This impedes the ability to build rich schemas and understand complex patterns through concentration and contemplation, the steps that underlie the development of expertise.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Michael Landon-Murray and Ian Anderson, "Thinking in 140 Characters: The Internet, Neuroplasticity, and Intelligence Analysis," *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 76, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.6.3.7>.

<sup>250</sup> Landon-Murray and Anderson, "Thinking in 140 Characters," 76.

The focused, deep-reading skills required to engage critically with a work of literature may be lost to us if we fail to exercise them. Through continually engaging in 'Internet thinking' we disrupt the deep processing abilities of the brain which allow for "mindful knowledge acquisition, inductive analysis, critical thinking, imagination and reflection."<sup>251</sup> One of the most complained about maladies of the modern-era is 'information overload', with people complaining that they feel 'burnt out' and 'frazzled' by the hectic pace of their lives and their own minds. The domination of the best-seller charts by tomes advocating 'mindfulness' as the new religion of a secular age is emblematic of this ailment. Mindfulness is a meditation technique which encourages its practitioners to focus on the present moment rather than allowing themselves to be distracted by the erratic thoughts and impulses that are a by-product of our increasing interaction with technology. In 2017, Nielsen, the data analytics company, reported that sales of self-help and mindfulness books were up by 13.3% in volume – this in a year where the total consumer market saw a 1.6% drop in sales along the same measure.<sup>252</sup> The public demand for such advice is indicative of the ambivalence society feels towards the way that digital technologies are moulding the modern mind. This is not to argue for the revival of the Luddite rebellion or the eschewal of smartphones and e-readers in favour of papyrus scrolls. It would be churlish to dismiss the positive impact that technological advances have had on our society and the global culture, but we must be aware of how they have changed us.

The introduction of any new technology brings with it a segmentation of public debate. The expert discourse divides into factions; the enthusiastic early adopters who view sceptics as behind-the-times, and the alarmists who decry the degradation of civilization at the hands of digital technology. Neither of these positions are tenable. The arguments are nuanced and there are positives and negatives on both sides of the discourse. We must take pains to avoid moral panics or unqualified

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<sup>251</sup> Patricia M. Greenfield, "Technology and Informal Education: What is Taught, What is Learned," *Science* 323, 5910 (2009): 71, [https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/9a34/303fbd7a2456ddb4f3e7b05f3c3244c31847.pdf?\\_ga=2.119564431.646413158.1578060372-2084092564.1578060372](https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/9a34/303fbd7a2456ddb4f3e7b05f3c3244c31847.pdf?_ga=2.119564431.646413158.1578060372-2084092564.1578060372).

<sup>252</sup> Alison Flood, "Sales of Mind, Body, Spirit Books Boom in U.K Amid 'Mindfulness Mega-Trend'," *Guardian*, July 31, 2017, accessed March 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jul/31/sales-of-mind-body-spirit-books-boom-in-uk-amid-mindfulness-mega-trend>.

praise in our discussions over the changing nature of technology and our own minds. The implications for the future of literature, however, cannot be ignored.

Digital technology is the mainstay of the modern world. Indeed, in 2010 the Kaiser foundation reported that, on average, 8-18 year old American children spent 7 hours and 38 minutes per day engaged with 'entertainment media', but "because they spend so much of that time 'media multitasking' ... they actually manage to pack a total of 10 hours and 45 minutes (10:45) worth of media content into those 7 ½ hours."<sup>253</sup> These statistics are more disturbing when we take into account the World Health Organisation's recently issued guidelines limiting children's screen time to two hours per day amid fears that excessive screen use is detrimental to childhood development.<sup>254</sup> In a 2017 NHS survey of mental health in children and adolescents in England, the report concluded that 87.3% of 11-19 year olds with mental health problems were more likely to use social media every day, and of these 29.4% used it for longer than four hours.<sup>255</sup> While correlation is not causation, we must wonder whether increased screen time is having a negative impact on our younger generations who are more at risk than ever for mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and other emotional disorders. Indeed, there are increasing reports that our children's overuse of digital technology is contributing to behavioural problems, particularly disorders such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, with a 2019 study concluding that

screen-time above the two-hours threshold at 5-years was associated with an increased risk of clinically relevant externalizing morbidity and specifically inattention problems. The association between screen-time and behavioral morbidity was greater than any other risk factor including sleep, parenting stress, and socio-economic factors. Our findings indicate that

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<sup>253</sup> Rakesh Singh, "Daily Media Use Among Children and Teens Up Dramatically from Five Years Ago," Kaiser Family Foundation (website), January 20, 2010, accessed March 6, 2018, <https://www.kff.org/disparities-policy/press-release/daily-media-use-among-children-and-teens-up-dramatically-from-five-years-ago/>.

<sup>254</sup> "To Grow Up Healthy Children Need to Sit Less and Play More," World Health Organization, April 24, 2019, accessed January 3, 2020, <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/24-04-2019-to-grow-up-healthy-children-need-to-sit-less-and-play-more>.

<sup>255</sup> Katharine Sadler et al., "NHS Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2017: Summary of Key Findings," NHS Digital, November 2018, accessed January 3, 2020, <https://files.digital.nhs.uk/F6/A5706C/MHCYP%202017%20Summary.pdf>.

pre-school may be a critical period for supporting parents and families on education about limiting screen-time and supporting physical activity.<sup>256</sup>

The same research found that

in a dose-response manner, children exposed to more screen-time, at either age three and five-years, showed significantly increased behavior problems at five-years in univariate analysis. Briefly, children who watched more than 2-hours of screen-time/day had increased *externalizing, internalizing, and total* behavior problems scores compared to children who watched less than 30-minutes.<sup>257</sup>

If we take these statistics into account, it is not unfair to surmise that younger generations may fail to develop the skills of focused attention and critical thinking that are a virtue of deep reading. Children who spend most of their waking hours online are encouraged to think in the sporadic and scattered mode required of the medium. The harm comes when children only engage in this style of thinking and are not given the chance to develop the necessary skills of prolonged concentration and attention to detail stimulated by the study of literature.

Marshall McLuhan was optimistic in his predictions for the interconnected era. He saw the world becoming a 'global village', no longer divided by differences in nationality, language or culture. Instead, McLuhan saw the world united by a global identity made possible through advances in Internet technology. Despite his positive assessment of technology's impact on human relations, McLuhan noted that "all means of interchange and of human inter-association tend to improve by acceleration. Speed, in turn, accentuates problems of form and structure."<sup>258</sup> This loss of 'form' and 'structure' is visible in the declining standards of the written word. Overreliance on autocorrect, spell-check and other grammatical aids when using word-processing software means we do not have to consciously engage with the

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<sup>256</sup> S.K. Tana, et al., "Screen-time is Associated with Inattention Problems in Preschoolers: Results from the CHILD Birth Cohort Study," *PLoS One* 14, no. 4 (2019): e0213995, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0213995>.

<sup>257</sup> Tana S.K, et al. "Screen-time," 5/15.

<sup>258</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 71.

laws that govern the English language. The hyper-accelerated pace at which we write when we type, and our ability to publish instantly on the World Wide Web, encourages this loss of form and style. Perhaps the most direct expression of this degradation of standards is found in online fanfiction. The poor spelling, grammatical inconsistencies and lack of punctuation displayed by 'ZazzyGirl1995' in her story *The Love of a Metal Sonic* is indicative of the quality of most fanworks.

Metal grabbed Sonic and pinned him against [sic] the wall. "I was thinking about you. About how much I wanna fuck you." Metal droined [sic], opening his robotic mouth licking Sonic's cheek. Sonic was in shock! His greatest enemy loved him.<sup>259</sup>

Though McLuhan did not live to see his conjectures become a reality he would have been fascinated by the way accelerated technologies have shaped our society. As early as 2008, Henry Jenkins advanced the idea of the 'convergence culture' we now see dominating society today.

A single physical means – be it wires, cables or airwaves – may carry services that in the past were provided in separate ways. Conversely, a service that was provided in the past by any one medium – be it broadcasting, the press, or telephony – can now be provided in several different physical ways. So the one-to-one relationship that used to exist between a medium and its use is eroding.<sup>260</sup>

It is now possible to access a multitude of media on one device. The ubiquitous iPhone allows its users to listen to music, watch videos, make telephone calls, check messages and surf the web, all at once. Reading a novel on an e-reader which is connected to the Internet enables us to search for information on the author, definitions of words we don't understand, or reviews of the book itself. With all of this easily accessible hypertextual information swirling around the text it becomes almost impossible to engage with the text on its own terms. Digital printing and publishing

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<sup>259</sup> ZazzyGirl 1995, "The Love of a Metal Sonic," Archive of Our Own, May 24, 2010, accessed March 11, 2018, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/10992024>.

<sup>260</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 10.

technologies have changed the way we create, consume and disseminate texts, just like the Gutenberg Press before it. The rise of e-publishing is concurrent with the declining role of traditional publishing houses as the gatekeepers of literary standards and while proponents of the online publishing revolution see this as a democratisation of creativity, we must be aware of the inevitable degradation of standards that occurs when texts are instantly published online without proofreading, editing or quality checking.

Digital self-publishing platforms such as Amazon's free 'Kindle Direct Publishing' promise users that their work will "get to market fast. Publishing takes less than 5 minutes and your book appears on Kindle stores worldwide within 24-48 hours."<sup>261</sup> The royalties offered to clients are particularly generous with 70%<sup>262</sup> going to the authors of digital texts and 60%<sup>263</sup> for sales of paperback editions. Websites such as 'Unbound' disrupt the traditional publishing process by allowing writers to pitch their ideas to the public and crowd-fund the resources necessary for publication.<sup>264</sup> While Unbound.com has in-house editors who work to ensure published works are of a higher standard than the self-published and unedited works on Amazon's publishing platform, the transformation of literature into a popularity contest is a worrying trend. Works that have mass appeal are not always those that stand the test of time. In allowing the public to choose which books they wish to see published, we run the risk of forcing authors to appeal to the lowest common denominator, refusing to tackle difficult subjects or being afraid of attempting stylistic innovations for fear of alienating their audience. While, in the current climate, traditional publishing houses do appear to be bowing to these pressures and focusing their energies on safe, easy to market titles, rather than intellectual and pioneering texts, the advent of crowdfunded literature all but guarantees a 'dumbing down' of the work it produces.

Traditional publishing models follow a 'top-down' structure. Those at the head of the Big Five publishing houses act as arbiters of public taste, controlling which

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<sup>261</sup> "Self-Publish eBooks and Paperbacks for Free with Kindle Direct Publishing," Kindle Direct Publishing, accessed January 3, 2020, [https://kdp.amazon.com/en\\_US](https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US).

<sup>262</sup> "Self-Publish eBooks."

<sup>263</sup> "Paperback Royalty," Kindle Directing Publishing, accessed January 3, 2020, [https://kdp.amazon.com/en\\_US/help/topic/G201834330](https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/G201834330)

<sup>264</sup> "About Us," Unbound, accessed January 3, 2020, <https://unbound.com/about>.



texts are purchased and packaged for public consumption. Those in favour of an egalitarian model of open source publishing may argue against the elitism inherent in allowing a small number of people to control the dissemination of texts. There is, however, a worrying trend in our contemporary culture of dismissing those with specialised knowledge, as seen in Michael Gove's declaration that the public has "had enough of experts".<sup>265</sup> This rise in populist rhetoric has led to many divisive events in our country's history, such as the Brexit debacle and the election of the controversial Boris Johnson as Prime Minister. While elitism is not something to aspire to, we must not allow ourselves to dismiss the expertise of those who have devoted their lives and careers to the study of literature and have been trained to discern which texts are valuable and which are not. The general public do not have the skills necessary to perform such a function and it is therefore unwise to entrust the future of literature to those who may not understand it.

Robert Darnton, in his 1982 essay "What Is The History of Books", proposes a model of publishing which originates with the text's creators, the author and the editor, before being transmitted through various agents to its final stage; the reception of the text by its audience.<sup>266</sup> Darnton claims that, in his model of textual reception, the reader completes the circuit because he "influences the author before and after the act of publication."<sup>267</sup> Traditionally published writers may begin their work with an audience in mind, attempting to shape the story to the idea of what the readership may desire, and the publishers may wish to edit the work in line with the demands of the marketplace. This is not an ideal situation for an artist, but in an era where art has become a commodity, it is perhaps inevitable. In the digital age, however, this anxiety is far more pronounced. The analogue writer, influenced by his readership and responding to "criticisms of his previous work" or anticipating "reactions that his text will elicit" will address "implicit readers",<sup>268</sup> yet the act of creation is still a solitary one. This is no longer the case for the digital writer.

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<sup>265</sup> Henry Mance, "Britain Has Had Enough of Experts, Says Gove," *Financial Times*, June 3, 2016, accessed March 10, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c>.

<sup>266</sup> Robert Darnton, "What is the History of Books," in *Daedalus* 3, no. 111 (1982): 68, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20024803?seq=1>.

<sup>267</sup> Darnton, "History of Books," 67.

<sup>268</sup> Darnton, "History of Books," 67.

Much has changed since Darnton put forth his publishing model in the 1980s. Digital technology has revolutionised the book-trade and the ‘top-down’ structure proposed by Darnton is under threat. In the digital era, instant feedback is available to writers who interact directly with fans through social media and blog posts. Unpublished writers post extracts of their work on websites such as Wattpad or Tumblr and in doing so they involve their audience in the writing process, asking for feedback and direction on where to take the story next.

The publication of texts has always been market driven. *The Independent* declared the best-selling book of the 1990s to be Andrew Morton’s *Diana: Her True Story* – an exposé on the Princess of Wales’ troubled private life – which had sold 1.5 million copies in two editions by 1998 when Diana-fever was at its peak amongst the public.<sup>269</sup> This seems to be a case of the public appetite for Diana material leading the publishers rather than the ‘gatekeepers’ of taste dictating the desires of the public. In the digital era, however, the reader’s influence is evermore palpable, going beyond the ability to influence what is published, to the reader actively constructing and demanding texts. The most pertinent example of this can be found in E.L James’ *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy.

As discussed previously, James’ work began life as a fanfiction, moulded and shaped by her online readers. Under the pseudonym ‘Snowqueen Icedragon’, James serialised her work on Fanfiction.net and Twilighted.com. The work ran to 87 chapters with three additional ‘out-takes’. The serialisation of each chapter “allowed readers to consume and respond to the text as it was being created and, through their responses and feedback, for the author to get suggestions from readers and gain a readership following.”<sup>270</sup> The writing of James’ novel in this digital sphere made it a more collaborative process than the traditional modes of publishing allow for, with James receiving, and taking, feedback on each chapter, and ideas on how to advance with the next. A textual analysis of James’ completed *Master of the Universe* fanfiction and the *Fifty Shades of Grey* manuscript proved that the texts

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<sup>269</sup> Rachele Thackeray, “The 50 Best Selling Books of the 1990s,” *Independent*, September 25, 1998, accessed April 1, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/the-50-best-selling-books-of-the-1990s-1200522.html>.

<sup>270</sup> Jen Pecoskie and Heather Hill, “Beyond Traditional Publishing Models: An Exploration of the Relationships Between Authors, Readers and Publishers,” *Journal of Documentation* 71, no. 3 (2015): 615, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-10-2013-0133>.

contained 89% of the same material,<sup>271</sup> meaning that the input and advice of James' original readership still shape the final text.

James self-published *Fifty Shades of Grey* in May 2011 through the Writer's Coffee Shop – a website offering e-book and print-on-demand services to aspiring authors. James used the online presence she had built through interacting with readers on social media and blogging platforms to attract an even larger audience to her work than her fanfiction readership. James' genius for self-promotion was a major component in her success. After gaining a huge following online, James was able to marshal her resources into a grass-roots word-of-mouth campaign. This culminated in a book launch party organised by a group of prominent New York mothers which brought the novels to the attention of traditional publishers.

In studying this case and its impact on traditional publishing methodologies, Heather Hill and Jen Pecoskie concluded that

what is evident from this case study... emanating from the fanfiction realm is that the connection between reader and author is explicit and embedded throughout the entire creative and publishing processes in both digital and physical arenas. Readers and authors interact with one another through the creation process.<sup>272</sup>

*Fifty Shades of Grey* was a global sensation and in 2012 became the fastest adult paperback to surpass sales of one million in just eleven weeks.<sup>273</sup> By 2014, James' sales had surpassed 100 million copies worldwide<sup>274</sup> and James' publishers, Random House, posted record profits.<sup>275</sup> This success is indicative of the reader's new role as tastemaker in the era of digital publication. James' fans were crucial to

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<sup>271</sup> Pecoski and Hill, "Beyond Traditional Publishing Models," 618.

<sup>272</sup> Pecoskie and Hill, 618.

<sup>273</sup> Alison Flood, "Fifty Shades of Grey is Fastest Adult Novel to Sell One Million Paperbacks," *Guardian*, June 28, 2012, accessed January 4, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jun/28/fifty-shades-grey-one-million-paperbacks>.

<sup>274</sup> Alison Flood, "Fifty Shades of Grey Trilogy has Sold 100m Copies Worldwide," *Guardian*, February 27, 2014, accessed March 24, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/feb/27/fifty-shades-of-grey-book-100m-sales>.

<sup>275</sup> Mark Sweeney, "Fifty Shades of Grey Publisher Random House Posts Record Profits," *Guardian*, March 26, 2013, accessed January 4, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/mar/26/fifty-shades-random-house-record-profit>.

her success, but they were also integral in the construction of the text itself. Pecoskie and Hill claim that, “in this model, the socialization of the text occurs over time as it moves towards traditional publication”, but the “prominence and influence”<sup>276</sup> of the reader is more evident than ever.

To the egalitarian, this is a sign of progress. We must, however, be wary of the mass democratisation of culture. While popular entertainment is a valid and necessary diversion, it fails to provide the intellectual challenges needed for us to develop as fully rounded human beings. The shift towards populism is evident in all aspects of public life – from the election of reality T.V. show host Donald Trump to the highest office in the land, to the ‘everyman’ Nigel Farage championing Britain’s exit from the European Union. The public were led to believe that multi-billionaire Donald Trump and former investment banker Nigel Farage were ‘men of the people’, on the side of the ‘little guy’ in the fight against an autocratic and corrupt establishment. With the rise of populism dictating everything from politics to pop culture, we must look deeply at whether the popular really is *for* the people.

The American social critic Dwight MacDonald makes the crucial distinction between “Folk Art”<sup>277</sup> which “grew from below... a spontaneous autochthonous expression of the people, shaped by themselves... to suit their own needs”<sup>278</sup> and “Mass Culture”<sup>279</sup> which is created by corporations to sell mass-produced products in mass volume. ‘Mass Culture’, MacDonald argues, is “imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by business; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying.”<sup>280</sup> In the same way that politicians who know nothing of the ‘common man’ but insist on running on a platform of focus-group approved pandering to the mythic ‘White Van Man’<sup>281</sup>, ‘Mass Culture’ is assumed to be what is wanted by society at large. Since the mid-twentieth century, however, the masses have had their culture dictated to

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<sup>276</sup> Pecoskie and Hill, “Beyond Traditional Publishing Models,” 620.

<sup>277</sup> Dwight MacDonald, “A Theory of Mass Culture,” *Diogenes* 1, no. 3, (June 1953): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F039219215300100301>.

<sup>278</sup> MacDonald, “Theory of Mass Culture,” 2.

<sup>279</sup> MacDonald, 1.

<sup>280</sup> MacDonald, 3.

<sup>281</sup> “Wooing White Van Man,” *Economist*, May 2, 2015, accessed January 3, 2020 <https://www.economist.com/britain/2015/05/02/wooing-white-van-man>.

them by massive multi-conglomerate corporations. It is neither by the people nor for the people, but instead imposed upon them.

The active participation of fan communities may challenge MacDonald's notion of passive consumption, yet the fans are still consuming a corporate product. Franchises often seem subsidiary to the products they are designed to sell. The latest cinematic instalments of Disney's *Star Wars* series are produced to coincide with the Christmas market, featuring loveable characters that can be merchandised into plushies, emblazoned on T-shirts and keychains and sold to a global audience. Though fans repurpose and adapt corporate products to suit their own needs, we cannot deny that they are consuming a shoddy product. While entertainment is an important part of human life, the fans who spend an inordinate amount of time worshipping the false idols of 'Mass Culture' do themselves a disservice. The creative energy and exuberance that is channelled into fandom could be used to serve a far greater purpose. The detrimental impact upon society of a culture which by its very nature is designed to oversaturate the market and exists solely to prompt spending is self-evident. 'Mass Culture' has threatened 'High Culture' since its inception. In order to survive, 'High Culture' has learned to compete with 'Mass Culture', often degrading its own standards in the process, in the hope of attracting an audience wide enough to allow it to survive. MacDonald argued that the economic principle of Gresham's Law – "the bad stuff drives out the good"<sup>282</sup> – can also be applied to culture. 'Mass Culture' has a distinct advantage over 'High Culture' because there is so much of it readily available, easily consumed and assimilated, with no intellectual challenge to the consumer.

Arguing for the canon comes with connotations of elitism but the idea that mass-produced culture is all that the 'masses' are capable of comprehending is itself an elitist argument. While proponents of the canon, such as T.S Eliot, have defended it along class lines, arguing that the aristocracy must be the keepers of 'High Culture'<sup>283</sup>, true culture is a meritocratic system which rewards those who strive towards an appreciation and understanding of its complex subjects and styles. 'Mass Culture' does society a disservice by underestimating the public intellect. As

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<sup>282</sup> MacDonald, "Theory of Mass Culture," 4.

<sup>283</sup> T.S Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2010).

MacDonald writes, 'Mass Culture' "reveals capitalism to be an exploitative class society and not the harmonious commonwealth it is sometimes alleged to be."<sup>284</sup>

Popular culture, as created by corporations, is only interested in selling products. It is a democratising force insofar as it "absolutely refuses to discriminate against, or between, anything or anybody," even if this lack of discernment ultimately means the destruction of values, "since value-judgements imply discriminations."<sup>285</sup> The canon, by its very nature, does discriminate. It is a selection of texts which contain the greatest advances of civilisation. The canon's discernment does not mean that it cannot recognise past mistakes, nor open itself up to a wider range of voices. Detractors claim that the canon is populated by "white, heterosexual, dead males".<sup>286</sup> This criticism is not a valid detraction of the canon, but instead a society that denies minority voices the ability to produce their own literature. John Guillory, writing on the politics of canon formation, notes that it is more important to change the social structures and policies that deny minority groups a voice within society than to create token forms of representation within the canon. Guillory argues that the denial of non-white heterosexual male narratives in society is to blame for their exemption from the canon. In an equal society, the canon would naturally open itself up to a diverse range of writers and artists.

Given the only partially successful social agenda of educational democratization in the last three decades, we may conclude that it is much easier to make the canon representative than the University.<sup>287</sup>

The process of canon formation necessitates exclusion, but the canon does not inherently seek to exclude marginalised voices. It is white men who have historically wielded the greatest power throughout Western civilisation and shaped our culture. The historical exclusion of minority voices from sites of power and the education system explains why white, heterosexual, male authors account for an inordinate

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<sup>284</sup> MacDonald, "Theory of Mass Culture," 3.

<sup>285</sup> MacDonald, 5.

<sup>286</sup> Devon Black, "Reconstructing the Canon," *Harvard Political Review*, April 25, 2018, accessed January 4, 2020. <https://harvardpolitics.com/culture/thecanon/>.

<sup>287</sup> John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1993) 7.

amount of canonical literature. Put simply, the dominance of male voices in the English Literature syllabus is not the fault of the canon but the systems that surround it. Guillory believes that we must challenge the social structures that keep minorities excluded for real change to occur, rather than open the canon to 'tokenism'. He argues that including a few works from minority writers into the canon is to expect these texts to speak for the experience of all marginalised identities. Proponents of canon revisionism claim that the canon should reflect society, yet the argument can be made that it already does. The canon reflects an unequal society, but that does not mean the principles behind the canon are inherently elitist. Guillory states that the redressing of social inequalities will naturally correct imbalances within the canon. The canon is elitist in terms of merit, but if a text is worthy of inclusion the source is not a consideration, the canon will open itself to include the work.

'Mass Culture' is not intellectually stimulating and that is why it is so easily consumed and assimilated. The theory of neuroplasticity shows that we are what we repeatedly do. The brain is a malleable organ, and, as a society, we are allowing our minds to be shaped by the instant gratification of popular culture, dismissing the intellectual rigour and 'hard work' required by 'High Culture'. In choosing the path of least resistance we hard-wire the easy consumption of corporate products designed for uncomplicated delectation and risk losing the ability to appreciate true art. MacDonald, writing in 1953, warned against the disastrous impact that 'Mass Culture' could have on our ability to handle difficult or challenging works.

'Mass Culture', MacDonald writes, "predigests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a shortcut to the pleasures of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art."<sup>288</sup> Popular culture encodes the audience's reaction; they need not consider their own responses to the work because the work dictates how they respond. The film adaptation of Nicholas Sparks' *The Notebook*, for example, is notorious within the 'weepie' genre because of its pre-packaged sentiment, relying heavily on dramatic music and overwrought dialogue to elicit a preconfigured emotional response from the viewer. This cynical exploitation of audiences' emotions may seem harmless, but it has implications for society that reach beyond the aesthetic principle. Beyond the ethical ramifications of such

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<sup>288</sup> MacDonald, "Theory of Mass Culture," 4.

emotional manipulation which, innocuous in this context, could be deployed for more sinister means, there is again the argument that the repeated choice of simple pleasures over more complex, but ultimately more gratifying ones, will lead to an inability to engage with anything other than the most visceral pleasures. In this scenario, as MacDonald states, “a pin-up girl smoothly airbrushed by Petty is more sexy than a real naked woman.”<sup>289</sup>

The societal implications reach beyond the realms of entertainment. If we are trained from an early age to only enjoy what is immediately accessible, then we never learn the resilience needed to tackle other forms of adversity. MacDonald warns that ‘Mass Culture’ casts a spell of perpetual adolescence over its consumers.

This merging of child and grown-up audience means (1) infantile regression of the latter, who, unable to cope with the strains and complexities of modern life, escape via kitsch (which in turn confirms and enhances their infantilism); (2) “overstimulation” of the former, who grow up too fast.<sup>290</sup>

In defending the canon, we should not fall into the trap of arguing along class lines. There is nothing inherently superior in the higher class, white, straight men who have dominated Western literature. Their ascendancy over the English literature canon is the result of an unequal society, but that does not make the canon unfair. The canon is a meritocratic system, open to all those who have created great works. It is society that is to blame for suppressing the literary ambitions of non-white authors. The canon represents the pinnacle of human thought and endeavour and its contents should not be restricted to a select few, while the general populace is forced to content itself with inferior mass-produced products whose aim is not to enlighten but to advertise. Access to the canon should be for all, just as the pursuit of self-improvement and self-actualization should be.

Darnton argues that “books do not merely recount history; they make it”.<sup>291</sup> If the books that shape our culture are mediocre, what does that say about our

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<sup>289</sup> MacDonald, “Theory of Mass Culture,” 4.

<sup>290</sup> MacDonald, 10.

<sup>291</sup> Darnton, “History of Books,” 81.



society? Literature has a far wider reach than the ivory towers of the academy. George Orwell declaimed the state of the English language in his 1946 essay “Politics and the English Language”. Declaring our mother tongue to be in a “bad way”,<sup>292</sup> Orwell believed that his concerns were not a matter of sentimentality or archaism.

The decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in intensified form... the English language... becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible... If one gets rid of these [bad] habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive domain of the professional writer.<sup>293</sup>

Orwell’s argument echoes that of the theory of neuroplasticity – through continuous engagement with bad habits and instant gratification we wire our brains to seek immediate pleasures at the cost of our ability to function at a higher intellectual level.

It is evident that digital media has changed the way we, as a society and as individuals, approach texts. Darnton claims that “texts shape the response of readers.”<sup>294</sup> He argues that it is not only the content of a book which impacts the reader, but the presentation. Specifically, Darnton mentions the “typography as well as style and syntax” as a determinant in the way the text conveys its meaning, with “the bawdy, unruly Congreve of the early quarto editions [settling] down into the decorous, neo-classicist of the *Works* of 1709 as a consequence of book design rather than bowdlerization.”<sup>295</sup> Darnton conducted his research in the 1980s and focused on case studies of publication in 18<sup>th</sup> century France and though his model

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<sup>292</sup> George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” in *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1950), accessed April 2, 2018 [http://orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e\\_polit](http://orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit)

<sup>293</sup> Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” para. 2.

<sup>294</sup> Darnton, “History of Books,” 79.

<sup>295</sup> Darnton, 79.

may seem outdated it is still relevant to the way we read and understand texts, despite the advances of digital publication and consumption.

Pierre Levy, the Internet theorist, writes that the text has always been a “virtual object, abstract, independent of any particular substrate”.<sup>296</sup> The process of actualization begins in the text’s different printed editions, translations and bindings, and is completed when it is received by the reader. The digital text, however, exists without physical form, making our interaction with it markedly different from that of the codex.

Just as Marshall McLuhan saw each new technological advance as an attempt by man to “extend various parts of his body by a kind of autoamputation”,<sup>297</sup> Levy sees ‘intellectual technology’ as an exteriorisation of an internal, cognitive, human function. New technology has always produced public outcry. Indeed, Plato denounced the written word, fearing it would lead to a loss of memory and critical thinking.

I cannot help feeling, Phaedrus, that writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence. And the same may be said of speeches. You would imagine that they had intelligence, but if you want to know anything and put a question to one of them, the speaker always gives one unvarying answer. And when they have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves.<sup>298</sup>

While technology offers us many advantages, we must acknowledge that the digital era’s exteriorization of cognitive functions occurs at a hyper-accelerated speed which results in a reorganisation of “the intellectual economy or ecology as a whole and [modifies] in turn the cognitive functions it was intended merely to support or

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<sup>296</sup> Pierre Levy, *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age*, trans. Robert Bononno (New York: Plenum Trade, 1998), 47.

<sup>297</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 37.

<sup>298</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Internet Classics Archive, n.d.), accessed January 3, 2020, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedrus.html>.

strengthen.”<sup>299</sup> The nature of digital reading is radically different to the linear form of a printed text. The digital hyper-text is “fluid, deterritorialized, immersed in the oceanic medium of cyberspace”<sup>300</sup> in a way that the printed text cannot be. The codex is a physical object in which a definitive version of the text is bound. The codex exists in stasis, its form immutable. We may scrawl in the book’s margins, cross lines out with pencil, highlight others with marker pens, but the printed text beneath remains present and unchanged, “already fully realized.”<sup>301</sup> Digital texts do not enjoy the same concrete existence as their physical counterparts. The nature of on-screen reading means that

this extensive presence that precedes the act of reading has disappeared. Digital media...does not contain a text that can be read by a human being but a series of digital codes that will be translated by a computer into alphabetic signs intended for display. The screen is like a small window through which the reader can explore a potential storehouse of text.<sup>302</sup>

The computer screen cannot offer a definitive version of the text. The reader is instead confronted with a “matrix of potential texts”.<sup>303</sup> The nature of the hyper-text is necessarily plastic in a way which the printed text cannot be. The dialogue between reader and codex is intrinsically one-sided, but the conversation between reader and hyper-text is inexhaustible. The reader can switch from reading the text to reading reviews of the book, tweeting their reactions, and googling the author’s biography. The hyper-text positively encourages this engagement. Links are embedded into the main body of the text that direct the reader towards a universe of extra-textual information. Levy claims that “hypertextualization is the opposite of reading in the sense that it produces, from an initial text, a textual reserve and instruments of composition with which a navigator can project a multitude of other texts.”<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Levy, *Becoming Virtual*, 50.

<sup>300</sup> Levy, 51.

<sup>301</sup> Levy, 52.

<sup>302</sup> Levy, 52.

<sup>303</sup> Levy, 51.

<sup>304</sup> Levy, 52.

The ever-expanding hyper-text calls to mind Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Library of Babel" in which the universe is posited as an infinite library in which all texts exist.

When it was announced that the Library contained all books, the first reaction was unbounded joy... There was no personal problem, no world problem, whose eloquent solution did not exist... That unbridled hopefulness was succeeded, naturally enough, by a similarly disproportionate depression.<sup>305</sup>

Confronted with infinite information, man is at first hopeful that the answer to his problems exists in one of the codices, but soon grows despairing of ever finding it amidst the deluge of information. In Borges' library, though the information is infinite, the texts are neatly bound. In the hyper-textual era, "any public text accessible through the Internet is now a virtual component in an immense and ever-expanding hypertext."<sup>306</sup> The borders and the boundaries of texts are no longer delineated by hardcovers and dustjackets but a permeable membrane; the text exists in a constant state of osmosis with the information around it. This being the case, the canon seems more necessary than ever, particularly when viewed as a "practice of containment in response to inherent states of surplus."<sup>307</sup>

The nature of digital reading changes how we engage with texts and fanfiction is the perfect example of this. Fanfiction has its own "specific narratological mapping"<sup>308</sup> which distinguishes it from literature. Gerard Genette, the French literary scholar, proposed a theory of para-texts which, though focused on the traditional printed codex, is applicable to the interrogation of fanfiction's navigational functions. Genette argued that para-texts are 'liminal devices'<sup>309</sup> that act as an intermediary between the text, its author, and the reader. In the case of the codex, this includes

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<sup>305</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel," in *Labyrinths*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 82-3.

<sup>306</sup> Levy, *Becoming Virtual*, 59.

<sup>307</sup> Ahuvia Kahane, "Fan Fiction, Early Greece and the Historicity of the Canon," *Journal of Transformative Works and Cultures* 21, (2016): [0.1], <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2016.0681>.

<sup>308</sup> Maria Lindgren Leavenworth, "The Paratext of Fanfiction," *Narrative* 23, no.1 (January 2015): 42, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2015.0004>.

<sup>309</sup> Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

the words printed on the dust jacket, the author's foreword, the contents page and chapter titles. In the digital era, the fanfiction writer goes beyond the conventional use of para-texts to interact directly and immediately with their audience, receiving instant feedback and responses from their readers in a way that is impossible in print publishing. Online para-texts are the tags, titles and descriptions, which signpost the reader towards the text. Maria Lindgren Leavenworth, investigating the para-texts of fanfiction, found that the fan-writer has the unique ability to use 'peritexts' – such as author's notes at the heading of the story and reader's comments sections at the end – to create an instant "dialogic relation between fan author and reader."<sup>310</sup> This disintegration of the barriers between reader and writer means that fanfiction is an inherently collaborative medium. Authors of printed texts in the analogue era may have written with their audience in mind but, unlike the fanfiction writer who serialises each chapter and receives instant feedback which influences the next instalment, the author would have to wait for newspaper reviews and sales figures to find out how their work had been received.

Most fan-writing exists only in digital form, yet the purveyors of fanfiction overwhelmingly overlook the innovations that this form allows for. Unlike the authors of printed books, fanfiction writers are granted the ability to explore exciting new ways of telling stories through the use of audio or video clips embedded in the text and hyperlinks to pictures of places or objects described in the text. Fanfiction, however, remains a textual medium. Writers are reluctant to experiment with form, style or cross-media innovations, but the very nature of the text's existence online changes the reader's approach to it. Ellen McCracken argues that, "the medium in which the text appears is not neutral. The text's materiality changes the sense readers make of the 'same' content."<sup>311</sup> The digital fanfiction text can be consumed in many forms – we can download it as a PDF file, read it in serialised chapters on archive websites such as A03 and Fanfiction.net, access it through e-readers or smartphones, or even print the text and read it on paper.

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<sup>310</sup> Leavenworth, "Paratext of Fanfiction," 42.

<sup>311</sup> Ellen McCracken, "Expanding Genette's Epitext/Peritext Model for Transitional Electronic Literature: Centrifugal and Centripetal Vectors on Kindles and iPads," *Narrative* 21, no. 1 (January 2013): 105-124, <http://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2013.0005>.

Leavenworth states that the fanfiction writer's use of author's notes is "one of the strongest indications of how the function of the para-text has changed with new publication forms and in a cultural climate where texts are produced in close temporal proximity to their readers."<sup>312</sup> In the printed text, the author's note, or foreword, serves the purpose of authorising the text. It may include subliminal instructions on how the reader should interpret the text, but this is easily skipped over or ignored. The fanfiction author's notes appear at the top of the screen, just below the title, integrated into the text's main body in a way that is not as easy to overlook. Readers are less likely to scroll past the fan-writer's notes because the demarcation between this and the text of the story is more nebulous than in the codex. It is possible for the reader, in scrolling past the author's note, to miss the shotgun signalling the start of the story, therefore most readers will at least glance over it. Unlike the traditional novel, the fanfiction author's note often includes essential information for decoding the text. An example of this is A03 user Mutents, who uses her author's note on a *Black Butler/The Avengers* crossover fanfiction to offer a 'crash course' in *Black Butler* for those unfamiliar with anime.<sup>313</sup>

#### **Summary:**

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Tony Stark does NOT read manga, and JARVIS is one HELL of a butler.

(Features crash course in Black Butler, if needed)

#### **Notes:**

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Black Butler Crash Course:

Black Butler, or Kuroshitsuji as it is known in it's [sic] original language, is a 16 volumed manga taking place in Victorian England. It's [sic] premise is that a young boy loses both his parents and makes a deal with a demon to avenge their deaths [sic]. The demon takes a physical form of an adult butler, who will serve the orphan until he successfully avenges the loss of his parents. As every good manga character has to have a catchphrase, the demon butlers is "I am one HELL of a butler."

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<sup>312</sup> Leavenworth, "Paratext of Fanfiction," 50.

<sup>313</sup> Mutents, "Tony Stark Never Read Black Butler (Except For That One Time, Maybe)," Archive of Our Own, July 13, 2017, accessed April 13, 2018, <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/9496612/1/Tony-Stark-Never-Read-Black-Butler-Except-For-That-One-Time-Maybe>.

(See the end of the work for more notes.)<sup>314</sup>

Fanfiction author's notes may also include descriptions of original character and plot points which are not included in the text's narrative, making the text unintelligible to the reader who has skimmed the author's note. Fanfiction writers also interject their voices into the narrative, using bracketed asides to direct the reader's reaction or provide explanations for things that remain unclear in the main narrative, and assert their dominance over the text once again with concluding notes asking for comments and feedback. The use of author's notes establishes a supremacy of the writer over their reader in a way that can only occur within the para-texts of fanfiction. The scroll-down nature of the digital text allows the author's notes to blend seamlessly with the story, becoming integral to the text in a way that the firm delimitations of the printed page prohibit. The text is fluid in its digital form, forever shifting, subject to revision at any moment, continually expanding, but with the fan-writer's presence firmly embedded within it in order to "both direct and redirect her audience."<sup>315</sup>

The symbiotic relationship between fan-writer and reader is one that could only exist online. Pierre Levy has described the way that information is collected and disseminated by online communities as a form of "collective intelligence" which he sees as "a fully distributed intelligence that is continuously enhanced and synergized in real-time."<sup>316</sup> The obsessive curation and collection of specialised knowledge by fan communities is a type of 'collective intelligence', but the fanfiction community takes this one step further by not only exchanging knowledge, but creating it. The 'collective intelligence' of the fanfiction community is harnessed into a form of 'collective writing' – evidenced in the collaborative writing process that shaped E.L James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy.

Traditional media corporations take differing approaches to the 'open source' nature of their fans' online activities. There are franchises that openly encourage fan creations while others seek to control the fans' creative output, such as Disney's *Star Wars* which places stringent regulations upon those wishing to produce works based

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<sup>314</sup> Mutents, "Tony Stark Never Read Black Butler."

<sup>315</sup> Leavenworth, "Paratexts of Fanfiction," 52.

<sup>316</sup> Levy, *Becoming Virtual*, 122.

on their product. In November 2000, Lucasfilm designated their own website, AtomFilms.com, the official host for all online *Star Wars* fan-works. The website archived fan-films, songs, and short videos, but stipulated in its terms and conditions that “no ‘fanfiction’ – which attempts to expand on the *Star Wars* universe – will be accepted,”<sup>317</sup> leaving fans with limited creative scope. Lucasfilm restrictions came from the, not unfounded, fear that the company could be accused of plagiarism if any fan-produced works were to echo anything in a yet-to-be-released official movie. Lucasfilm also raised concerns that audiences might mistake high-quality fan videos for official ones, with one executive quoted as saying, “as the tools get better, there is bound to be confusion in the marketplace.”<sup>318</sup> Lucasfilm sought to exercise control over the fans’ creative energies by collecting all unofficial *Star Wars* fan-works into an officially regulated archive and, in doing so, ensure that no one would mistake an unauthorised version for the legitimate product.

While companies such as Lucasfilm encourage fan participation as a means of controlling the output, there are others who actively solicit and engage with their fans, often to their detriment. Catering to audience demands has been described as “fan service” in fannish communities. The term originated in the anime communities and has been extrapolated to the wider fan community, with Fanlore.org defining ‘fan service’ as

adding elements that are unnecessary to the storyline, but will make the fans happy. In anime, it’s used to refer to flashes of undies or cleavage. In [western television fandoms](#), a fan service moment might be a hug between two fan favorites, a scene where a hot character randomly takes his shirt off for no reason, or a geeky reference that only devoted fans would recognize.<sup>319</sup>

‘Fan service’ is often used in a derogatory manner and fans seem to be aware of the dangers of producing material solely with the intention of pleasing their fanbase. Mark Gattis, showrunner and writer of the popular BBC television shows *Doctor Who*

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<sup>317</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 159.

<sup>318</sup> Jenkins, 159.

<sup>319</sup> “Fan Service,” Fanlore (website), last modified February 27, 2019, accessed January 4, 2020. [https://fanlore.org/wiki/Fan\\_Service](https://fanlore.org/wiki/Fan_Service).



and *Sherlock*, has been the subject of much derision within the fandoms he created for paying too much ‘fan service’ and allowing fan theories and opinions to influence the direction of his work. Kelly Lawler, an entertainment blogger and former *Sherlock* fan, wrote that

while watching the premiere of the third series of *Sherlock*, I began to wonder if writer Mark Gatiss had, like so many of us, spent one too many nights in the bowel of the internet, reading theories and forecasts about his own show and staring at .gifs of Benedict Cumberbatch smiling slowly. Because how else could you explain “The Empty Hearse”, an episode so .gif-able, so ready for fan-fiction, so seemingly cribbed from the dreams of its fans?<sup>320</sup>

Lawler goes on to deride the episode for being ‘Tumblr Television’, with most of its storylines taken from the elaborate fan theories circulating on Reddit threads. Even Reddit users were upset at the direction Moffat and Gatiss had taken the show, with one user complaining that

it feels entirely like fan service. Moffat was doing *Who*, which also became fan service. It’s like he reads Tumblr and just gives what people want as blatant as possible...

They want gay jokes, they want to see Sherlock drunk, they want to see Sherlock with a sexual relationship.

The whole season feels like it was written by Tumblr.<sup>321</sup>

The fans, when they were given what they wanted, found that they did not always know best. The storylines and scenarios sourced from Tumblr did not fit the characters or serve to advance the story and succeeded only in stripping the show of the elements the fans had loved. The audience must accept the author’s authority over a text if they are to suspend their disbelief and lose themselves within the narrative, safe in the knowledge that the author is in control. In allowing the audience

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<sup>320</sup> Kelly Lawler, “Thanks for the Fan Service, But What About the Story?” NPR.org, January 23, 2014 accessed March 28, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2014/01/23/265221943/thanks-for-the-fan-service-but-what-about-the-story?t=1578161904988>.

<sup>321</sup> Esemef, (n.d.), comment on “Why Did Season 3 Get So Much Hate?” Reddit.com. Accessed January 4, 2020. [https://www.reddit.com/r/Sherlock/comments/5m7xy9/why\\_did\\_season\\_3\\_get\\_so\\_much\\_hate/dc1pweh/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Sherlock/comments/5m7xy9/why_did_season_3_get_so_much_hate/dc1pweh/).

to dictate the text, Moffatt and Gattis ceded this control and lost their credibility. The audience could no longer believe in a text whose authors had abandoned the rudder so carelessly and this dampened their enjoyment of it.

The cautionary tale of Moffatt and Gattis does not, however, prevent fans from attempting to seize control of the text. Devin Faraci, writing for the pop culture blog Birth.Movies.Death, highlights the enormous sense of entitlement and ownership that modern fans feel over the intellectual property of others. Faraci highlights this by comparing fandom in the age of the Internet to the terrifying antagonist in Stephen King's *Misery*, Annie Wilkes, who kidnaps and tortures her favourite author, demanding he writes his stories according to her demands. The Internet gives fans instant access to the authors and creators of their favoured texts. This unprecedented access means that fans often feel entitled to make their opinions heard – sometimes in the form of verbal abuse, death threats and orchestrated campaigns of harassment, such as 'doxxing' where the author's private information, including home address, telephone numbers and bank details, are leaked online.

These fans are treating stories like ordering at a restaurant – hold the pickles, please, and can I substitute kale for the lettuce? But this isn't how art works, and that shouldn't be how art lovers react to art. They shouldn't be bringing a bucket of paint to the museum to take out some of the blue from those Picasso's.<sup>322</sup>

While the author has always wrestled for control of his text with his readers, as evidenced in the incensed reactions to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's decision to kill Sherlock Holmes, the Internet has accelerated it. In the past, fans would have time to calm down and begin to think rationally before they acted on their outrage. In order to make their feelings known they would have to sit down, compose a letter, contact the relevant services to find out where to address it, and then make the trip to the closest post-box to send it. In the Internet era, the fan can send a threatening tweet at the click of a button.

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<sup>322</sup> Devin Faraci, "Fandom is Broken," Birth.Movies.Death, May 30, 2016, accessed March 26, 2018. <https://birthmoviesdeath.com/2016/05/30/fandom-is-broken>.

Faraci believes that “the corporatized nature of the stories we consume has led fans – already having a hard time understanding the idea of an artist’s vision – to assume almost total ownership of the stuff they love.”<sup>323</sup> Because the work is a ‘product’ the fan no longer sees himself as an admirer but an active consumer with the right to demand things *their* way.

Grant McCracken believes that if creatives and corporations alike hope to survive in the digital age, they must embrace this new level of active audience participation.

Corporations will allow the public to participate in the construction and representation of its creations or they will, eventually, compromise the commercial value of their properties. The new consumer will help create value or they will refuse it... Corporations have a right to keep copyright but they have an interest in releasing it. The economics of scarcity may dictate the first. The economics of plenitude dictate the second.<sup>324</sup>

While Fan Studies theorists celebrate the control consumers now have over the media they consume, they ignore the degradation of standards that occurs when the market dictates culture. As previously argued, we have seen the problems that arise when politics becomes a popularity contest and politicians run on a platform of pleasing the fans of their ‘brand’. Just as society needs to be governed by those who understand that what is popular is not always appropriate, so too does our culture. If we allow the mass market to dictate what is published and what is read, we risk losing important and challenging new works whilst simultaneously submerging the canon in an influx of inferior texts whose only value lies in their entertainment.

Fanfiction, although a form of communal writing, often operates a policy of ‘no criticism’ in the readers’ comment section. Reviewers often leave unqualified praise or suggestions for the direction the author should take the text, but few will leave constructive critiques of the work. In a 2015 study of reader comments it was found that “both identification of problems and strategies for revision were very rare... only 3% of comments implicitly identified any writing issues, and these comments were

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<sup>323</sup> Faraci, “Fandom is Broken.”

<sup>324</sup> McCracken, *Plenitude*, 85.

not detailed or specific.”<sup>325</sup> The reader, then, is not interested in the style or sophistication of the fan-writer’s prose, but the content of the work and their own role in shaping it.

In 2015 the fanfiction community was thrown into uproar when several authors reported receiving critical comments on their work, offering advice and corrections which fell outside the usual remit of the laudatory fanfiction review. In a scandal now dubbed ‘TheoryofFicGate’,<sup>326</sup> the commenters highlighted syntactical errors, poor grammar and spelling mistakes within the text, arousing suspicions within the fanfiction community. The flagrant transgression of fannish norms signalled to A03 users that these reviews had been left by outsiders to the fanfiction community who were unfamiliar with the customs and culture of fandom.

So, I got to the bottom of why I was getting such weird comments on a relatively obscure fic of mine – it’s required reading in a class being taught, and one of the assignments is to leave a comment on the required reading which is more critical than constructive so that the professors know students are “engaging” with the texts in a way that isn’t just “YAY I LIKE IT.”<sup>327</sup>

The class in question was an undergraduate ‘DeCal’ course entitled ‘The Theory of Fanfiction’ at the University of Berkeley. One class assignment instructed students to leave a review of the week’s required fanfiction reading. The students were told to leave detailed feedback and constructive criticism of the work, something which falls outside the accepted conventions of fanfiction reviews. Gavia Baker-Whitelaw, a fanfiction writer and blogger, wrote an opinion piece for the Daily Dot in which she compared these critical reviews to “heckling at a local poetry club.”<sup>328</sup> The response of Baker-Whitelaw and a multitude of affronted voices from the fanfiction community is symptomatic of the culture of ‘non-crit’ that flourishes within fandom and reveals

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<sup>325</sup> Alecia Marie Magnifico, Jen Scott Curwood and Jane C. Lammer, “Words on the Screen: Broadening Analyses of Interactions Among Fanfiction Writers and Reviewers,” *Literary Journal* 49, no. 3 (September 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12061>.

<sup>326</sup> “TheoryofFicGate,” Fanlore (website), accessed January 5, 2020, <https://fanlore.org/wiki/TheoryofFicGate>.

<sup>327</sup> Waldorph, “What’re We Calling This? TheoryofFicGate? I Like It,” Waldorph. (blog), Tumblr, February 23, 2015, accessed March 23, 2018, archived URL: <https://webcitation.org/6WYv4L4Nz>.

<sup>328</sup> Gavia Baker-Whitelaw, “What Not to Do When Teaching a Class about Fanfiction,” Daily Dot (February 23, 2015), accessed March 18, 2018, <https://www.dailydot.com/irl/berkeley-fanfiction-class-backlash/>.

the impossibility of taking fanfiction seriously as an art form. Criticism is a necessary part of the creation process. The refusal to hear painful truths about one's own work is a denial of the opportunity for personal growth and a stunting of creative development. The writer must accept that there is room for improvement if he is ever to master his craft. If fans are unable to accept criticism of work shared in a public forum then we cannot, as Sheenah Pugh has suggested, believe that fanfiction is a democratization of literature, let alone a literary sub-genre.

Fanfiction writers were not just upset by the criticism of their work, but at the intrusion of outsiders into their private sphere. One Tumblr user wrote, "I have been feeling a real sense of encroachment onto my safe spaces lately, what with the Fifty Shade stuff, and all of the attention that fandom has been getting."<sup>329</sup> The trespasses of interlopers into the closed domain of fandom has raised issues over whether stories posted online and made accessible to the public should be shared with a wider audience. Those active within the fanfiction community have argued that, despite the public nature of fanfiction, the authors intend for the work to be read solely by those engaged actively in the fan community. Kristina Busse, writing on the ethics of online privacy in academic research, claims that writers who post their works on archives such as A03 or Fanfiction.net engage in the "illusory" idea of "semi-privacy"<sup>330</sup> because they believe their work will not be widely read. Busse states that, while "effective for most users" this can be "destroyed when a highly frequented site links to a particular post."<sup>331</sup> The majority of users will not experience this and are free to operate in relative anonymity, "thus, even when the user may well know that their entries are public and viewable by everyone, they often function as if they weren't."<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> "If You Aren't Following #TheoryofFicGate," I Am Jason's Smirking Revenge (blog), Tumblr, February 23, 2015, accessed April 13, 2018, archived URL: <http://web.archive.org/web/20150223183806/http://iamjasonssmirkingrevenge.tumblr.com/post/111865803805/if-you-arent-following-theoryofficgate-you>.

<sup>330</sup> Kristina Busse, "Attention Economy, Layered Publics, and Research Ethics," *Flow Journal*, (May 29, 2017). <https://www.flowjournal.org/2009/05/attention-economy-layered-publics-and-research-ethics-kristina-busse-university-of-south-alabama/>.

<sup>331</sup> Busse, "Attention Economy."

<sup>332</sup> Busse, "Attention Economy."

Waldorph, the A03 user who drew attention to the Berkeley class, seemed less concerned that the scandal had drawn public attention to her work, but that the attention she was receiving was

completely out of step and touch with all fannish norms, and actually prompted me to write a post about concrit and feedback earlier this week. As soon as [the reviewer] explained that it was a class, and that these were fannish-outsiders, it made sense, as opposed to me assuming someone had recc'd it and I was getting way more backlash than usual on a pretty obscure fic.<sup>333</sup>

The culture of no 'con-crit' – constructive criticism – hinders the fanfiction writer from honing their skills, but this would be the untroublesome convention of a fringe community if Fan Studies scholars were not intent on introducing fanfiction into the sphere of English Literature. The right to be protected from offence goes beyond the Internet and academia and has ramifications for society as a whole, as seen by the need for 'safe spaces' on campuses and the 'no platforming' of public figures who have voiced unfavourable opinions. While these events take place in the universities, they have a wide-reaching impact on our global culture, leading to a diminishment of the freedom of speech and the ability to voice controversial opinions. In 2015, feminist writer and activist Germaine Greer was scheduled to give a talk at Cardiff University, but after making comments interpreted as 'transphobic' on an Australian chat show, students signed a petition that banned her from speaking at the event.<sup>334</sup> This has been a recurring theme in recent years with the right to remain unoffended often winning out over rational discourse and reasoned debate. Whether students agreed with Greer's views or not, there is a worrying trend to react with campaigns of public shaming and silencing of those who voice unfavourable opinions, rather than engaging in discussion with them.

While the implications of this for wider society are clear, the Academy too is falling prey to the idea that their students, now paying inordinate fees for the privilege

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<sup>333</sup> Waldorph, "What're We Calling This?"

<sup>334</sup> Lizzie Dearden, "Germaine Greer Will Not Give Cardiff University Lecture Because of Abuse Over Views on Transgender People," *Independent*, October 24, 2015, accessed March 20, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/germaine-greer-will-not-give-cardiff-university-lecture-because-of-abuse-over-views-on-transgender-a6707236.html>.

of being there, cannot be criticised or allowed to fail. This is apparent when schemes such as the National Student Survey encourage lecturers to be lenient with their charges for fear that they will be given a low rating. When the academic's career advancement depends on receiving favourable feedback from his seminar students this leads to a constriction of the educator's ability to provide clear and critical guidance. In the same way that fans see the object of their fandom as something they, as consumers who have invested capital into the product, should control, we can see the same in students' approach to academia since the 2012 rise in tuition fees. The student, now paying extortionate amounts of money for their entry into the Academy, sees their education as a commodity. When the student falls into the role of a consumer, the university becomes a corporation and the bottom line is the imperative that drives all decisions. Academia is sacrificed to the demands of commerce when lecturers are afraid to set challenging texts or materials that may not 'interest' students. The student, buying into the 'customer is always right' ethos, expects full control of the course materials they consume and, ultimately, the critical appraisal they receive.

The dismantling of the English Literature canon is part of a larger trend; a dumbing down of culture. Will Self has argued that, while 'difficult' novels such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* were never read by mass swathes of society, there was still an aspiration to do so. In our current climate, there is a dismissal of all things 'challenging' in favour of the easily understood, immediately intelligible and digestible. Indeed, people revel in the rejection of 'High Culture', derogating it as an elitist past time, and preferring instead to fashion their identities around corporate products and brands. Self argues that in the past

... what didn't obtain is the current dispensation, wherein those who reject the high arts feel not merely entitled to their opinion, but wholly justified. It goes further: the hallmark of our contemporary culture is an active resistance to difficulty in all its aesthetic manifestations, accompanied by a sense of grievance that conflates it with political elitism.<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> Will Self, "The Novel is Dead, (This Time It's for Real)," *Guardian*, May 2, 2014, accessed March 30, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction>.

This worrying new attitude towards canonical literature is evident in the treatment of English Literature as a subject in British schools. The Welsh education system has abolished English Literature as a statutory GCSE qualification and many schools submit only the subject's top-tier set of students for examination for fear that low grades may skew their standing in the educational league tables. Quoted in an article for Wales Online, one teacher argued that "the devaluing of English Literature provides schools a means by which to raise their numbers. If the fifth GCSE can be something perhaps less challenging than English Literature, it raises pass percentages."<sup>336</sup>

The devaluation of English Literature as an academic subject in British schools serves to reinforce social inequalities. If, as Bourdieu states, acquaintance with the English literary canon is a form of cultural capital, then children from deprived socio-economic backgrounds, who may grow up in households without access to books, are denied the advantages of their middle-class peers. For many working-class children their first introduction to canonical literature comes from their school's English syllabus. The education system should be a great leveller, giving children from all sections of society the tools they need to succeed in life. In denying students the opportunity to study English Literature – solely to boost exam results – there is a reinforcement of structural social inequalities.

The degradation of English Literature in education is not a new occurrence. J. Donald Adams, writing in 1945 for *The New York Times* lamented English Literature's standing in the American education system. He believed that literature held "the extraordinary power... to widen and deepen the sympathies of men."<sup>337</sup> Beyond the ability to broaden horizons and worldviews, the study of literature teaches the crucial skills of discernment and critical thinking. To deny these children such skills is to allow them to enter adulthood unable to navigate a world awash with 'fake news', populist rhetoric and sophistry. Indeed, even before the advent of digital

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<sup>336</sup> Carolyn Hitt, "Literature is Crucial and Enriches Lives - It's Hard to Believe it is No Longer Compulsory for GCSE Students," Wales Online, April 10, 2017, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/literature-crucial-enriches-lives--12872728>

<sup>337</sup> J. Donald Adams, *New York Times*, January 7, 1945 quoted in Adrienne W. Reeves, "Why Teach English?," *English Journal* 34, no. 7 (September 1945), 378. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/807672/>.



media and the deluge of information brought with it, Adams warned the post-war generation that

the tyranny of print in the modern world demands a training in discrimination if readers are to find their way through the jungle of the printed word... if democracy lives by the freedom of the press, it will ultimately survive only through some power of popular discrimination in judging what the press produces.<sup>338</sup>

The decline of English Literature as an academic subject correlates with the decreasing public appetite for 'difficult' literature and an overall decline in the standards of literacy. Technology encourages us to engage with text-based media daily, but recent literary statistics show a steep decline in the basic literacy skills of British citizens. 2014 figures showed that England was the only OECD country where young adults, those between 16 and 24 years old, displayed lower literacy skills than their parents and grandparents.<sup>339</sup> 16% of adults in England and Northern Ireland scored at the lowest level of reading and proficiency – a staggering 5.8 million people.<sup>340</sup> People no longer report having a positive relationship with reading; only 26% of 10-year olds saw reading as 'fun' and 44% of young people between 16-24 purported to have never read for pleasure.<sup>341</sup> A 2018 report on the impact of reading for pleasure on young children found that 39% of 8-19 year olds read independently on a daily basis, with the percentage falling to 16% amongst 14-17 year olds.<sup>342</sup> Children were also found to prefer screens to books, with 81% of 11-13 year old boys and 72% of girls in the same age bracket expressing this preference.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> Reeves, "Why Teach English," 378.

<sup>339</sup> OECD, "England & Northern Ireland (UK) – Country Note – Survey of Adult Skills First Results," (2013), 4, accessed January 5, <https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Country%20note%20-%20United%20Kingdom.pdf>.

<sup>340</sup> OECD, "Survey of Adult Skills," 6.

<sup>341</sup> "Reading Facts," Reading Agency (website), accessed March 4, 2018, <https://readingagency.org.uk/about/impact/002-reading-facts-1/#fn27>.

<sup>342</sup> Reading Agency, "Literature Review: The Impact of Reading for Pleasure and Empowerment," Reading Agency, London, June, 2015, accessed January 5, 2020, <https://readingagency.org.uk/news/The%20Impact%20of%20Reading%20for%20Pleasure%20and%20Empowerment.pdf>.

<sup>343</sup> Reading Agency, "Literature Review," 6.

This is a worrying trend when we consider the statistic that 1 in 6 adults in the United Kingdom struggles with reading and writing.<sup>344</sup> Childhood reading “is linked to substantial cognitive progress between the ages of 10 to 16”<sup>345</sup> and “per capita incomes are higher in countries where more adults reach the highest levels of literacy proficiency and fewer adults are at the lowest levels of literacy.”<sup>346</sup> Independent reading is considered the best way for children to learn literacy skills, outstripping the benefits of formal literacy classes.<sup>347</sup> The decline in basic literacy skills in the adult population has a devastating financial effect with low level reading and writing skills estimated to cost the global economy approximately £800 billion each year, and the cost to the U.K economy is estimated at around £81 billion in lost earnings and increased welfare spending.<sup>348</sup> Poor literacy has been linked to decreased individual economic outcomes, poor health and incidences of criminal offences.<sup>349</sup> Adults with low literacy skills “believe they have little impact on the political process, do not participate in volunteer activities and report poor health”<sup>350</sup> compared to adults with high literacy skills. The National Literacy Trust has found that 16.4% of adults, 7.1 million people, suffer from poor literacy skills and find themselves locked out of the job market because of this.<sup>351</sup> Research by the CBI indicated that 32% of employers are concerned about the literacy skills shown by their recruits, and “half see their communication skills (50%) and skills of analysis (50%) as not good enough.”<sup>352</sup> 1 in 3 employers every year reports dissatisfaction

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<sup>344</sup> Cerys Furlong, “Literacy Skills Still Lacking in Wales,” IWA.Wales (website), Institute for Welsh Affairs, Cardiff, September 21, 2015, accessed March 4, 2018, <http://www.iwa.wales/click/2015/09/literacy-skills-lacking-in-wales/>.

<sup>345</sup> Alice Sullivan and Matt Brown, “Social Inequalities in Cognitive Scores at Age 16: The Role of Reading,” CLS Working Paper Series 2013/10, Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education, University of London, London, October 2013, accessed January 5, 2020, [https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1473708/1/Sullivan\\_CLS%20WP%202013](https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1473708/1/Sullivan_CLS%20WP%202013).

<sup>346</sup> Reading Agency, “Reading Facts.”

<sup>347</sup> Sacha Hilhorst, Alan Lockey and Tom Speight, “A Society of Readers,” (London: DEMOS, 2018) 26, accessed January 5, 2020, <https://demosuk.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/A-Society-of-Readers-Formatted.pdf>.

<sup>348</sup> World Literacy Foundation, “The Economic and Social Cost of Illiteracy,” (Oxford: World Literacy Summit, 2018) 3, accessed January 5, 2020, <https://worldliteracyfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/TheEconomicSocialCostofIlliteracy-2.pdf>.

<sup>349</sup> World Literacy Foundation, “Economic and Social Cost of Illiteracy,” 3-4.

<sup>350</sup> OECD, “Survey of Adult Skills,” 3.

<sup>351</sup> “Adult Literacy,” National Literacy Trust (website), accessed January 5, 2020, <https://literacytrust.org.uk/parents-and-families/adult-literacy/>.

<sup>352</sup> CBI, “The Right Combination: CBI/Pearson Education & Skills Survey 2016,” (London: CBI, 2016) 32, accessed January 25, 2020, <http://www.makingthemoostofmasters.ac.uk/media/microsites/mmm/documents/cbi-education-and-skills-survey-2016.pdf>.

with the literacy capabilities of school and college leavers,<sup>353</sup> signifying that the study of literature has wide ranging social and economic implications.

A recent report by the thinktank Demos concluded that

books have also been shown to be beneficial in supporting mental and physical health. Reading significantly improves common symptoms of both depression and dementia. Reading keeps the mind active, which may even delay the onset of dementia. In addition, books can help us understand our own and others' conditions. For example, many public libraries and schools have a dedicated, signposted section with self-help books, memoirs and fiction to better understand conditions such as ADHD, anxiety and depression. 75 per cent of school pupils reported a better understanding of mental health after such a dedicated book collection on mental health and wellbeing was made available.

When it comes to social mobility, reading can work as a powerful boost to life chances. Reading for pleasure is one of the most important predictors of test scores at age 16, regardless of background. In fact, children from disadvantaged backgrounds who read often tend to score better than more privileged pupils who do not read at all. Reading and being read to from a young age sets some pupils up for a successful school career before they have ever entered the building, while others have to do without such cultural activities.<sup>354</sup>

Literacy is essential for healthy human development. As evidenced above, the decline in reading for pleasure amongst adults and children has a detrimental impact on individual outcomes. Despite these damning statistics there is a tendency within our culture to denigrate intellectual achievement, particularly amongst school children. In a 2015 survey, 18.6% of school boys reported that "they would be embarrassed if their friend saw them read."<sup>355</sup> This statistic is indicative of a culture that denigrates intellectual achievement. More insidious, perhaps, is another worrying trend; the glorification of sub-par literature. I will go on to discuss in depth the commodification of 'geek' culture, but it is pertinent to note the growing

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<sup>353</sup> CBI, "Education & Skills Survey 2016," 33.

<sup>354</sup> Sacha Hilhorst, Alan Lockey and Tom Speight, "Society of Readers," 8.

<sup>355</sup> Christina Clark, "Children's and Young People's Reading in 2015: Findings from the National Literacy Trust's Annual Survey 2015," (National Literacy Trust, 2016), 19, accessed January 5, 2020. [https://literacytrust.org.uk/documents/171/2015\\_01\\_01\\_free\\_research\\_-\\_young\\_peoples\\_reading\\_final.pdf\\_dCLScPc.pdf](https://literacytrust.org.uk/documents/171/2015_01_01_free_research_-_young_peoples_reading_final.pdf_dCLScPc.pdf).

subsection of individuals promoting reading as a 'cool' activity. Superficially, this may seem a positive trend, however, the books that are celebrated tend to be selected from the pantheon of children's books or Young Adult novels which do not challenge or stimulate an adult intellect.

The decline in literacy and reading rates should arguably signal a decline in the study of English Literature as an academic subject at undergraduate level. This is not the case. Overall the number of students studying English Literature at university level rose by 115% between 1996 and 2011 (though this figure may be inflated due to changes in data collection methodology in 2002) and has continued to rise by 15% each year in line with the overall growth of student numbers between 2002 and 2011.<sup>356</sup> English Literature students, however, appear to apply the same disinterest in reading as their peers in the general population.

Academics sparked outrage in 2016 after voicing concerns in a *Times Higher Education* article about the lack of enthusiasm exhibited by undergraduate students towards the course materials. Jenny Pickerill, a professor at the University of Sheffield, worried that "students struggle with set texts, saying the language or concepts are too hard... There is currently a disjuncture between the types of reading we want students to engage with and the types students feel able or willing to do."<sup>357</sup> Students were quick to defend themselves against accusations of laziness, arguing that the curriculum was "overwhelmingly white, male and indicative of a society and structures we fundamentally disagree with because they don't work for us."<sup>358</sup> While this is a valid criticism, it is also symptomatic of a societal shift towards a complete lack of engagement with difficult or challenging subjects. Students should come to school to learn and part of that process is the reading of texts that challenge their worldviews while building the critical skills necessary to construct an argument as to why these texts do not resonate with them. Dismissing texts out of hand is not

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<sup>356</sup> David Matthews, "Analysis: The Subjects Favoured and Forsaken by Students Over 15 Years," *Times Higher Education* (April 15, 2016), accessed April 1, 2018, <https://timeshighereducation.com/features/analysis-the-subjects-favoured-and-forsaken-by-students-over-15-years/2010435.article>.

<sup>357</sup> Rachel Pells, "University Students are Struggling to Read Entire Books," *Independent* (April 15, 2016), accessed March 8, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/university-students-are-struggling-to-read-entire-books-a6986361.html>.

<sup>358</sup> Pells, "University Students Are Struggling."

a reasoned approach to disagreeing with their content. Students must approach these texts in order to understand the arguments contained within and to refute them with reasoned discourse. The canon must expand to accept new ideas and voices in a changing society, but we must also expect it to challenge us and exercise our intellects. Students refusal to read course materials because they consider them too demanding or they disagree with their content is indicative of a failing education system. Academia is in dire need of diversity, but if a generation of students refuse to engage with the set texts how can they learn the skills needed to challenge or change the curriculum?

Student attitudes towards 'difficult' literature are characteristic of a society that devalues the text. The decline in aspiration towards difficult literature, however, dovetails neatly with the fetishization of books that has occurred at a time when our culture appears to be 'dumbing' itself down. In a 1996 essay, 'Books as Furniture', Nicholson Baker remarked on the use of books as ornaments in the photographs of glossy, mail-order catalogues. Baker could not help but notice that, in the pictures, beautiful models in perfectly furnished rooms pored over leather-bound hardbacks while perched around the breakfast nook or kept piles of philosophical treatises upon their bedside tables. He "counted thirty-six... books... in the Crate & Barrel catalog for the Spring of '95. The books lie open on chairs, on hammocks, on the floor."<sup>359</sup>

Baker is surprised to find, despite the dire prognosis of the novel in society, the book trade is flourishing within the pages of Pottery Barn's promotional material. An armoire, pictured in one of these catalogues, is filled with hardcover leather-bound books such as Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* and Paul Hogan's *A Citizen of New Salem*. He notes that "there isn't a self-help book or a current best-seller to be seen, because the men and women who live in the rooms of the mail-order catalogs never read best-sellers. In fact, they never read paperbacks."<sup>360</sup>

The book is an aspirational object. It signals who we want to be and who we believe we can become if we were "finally able to perform that contortional yoga exercise whereof so many have spoken, and can 'curl up with a good book.'"<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> Nicholson Baker, "Books as Furniture," in *The Size of Thoughts* (London: Random House, 1996), 190.

<sup>360</sup> Baker, "Books as Furniture," 190.

<sup>361</sup> Baker, 192.

Baker wrote his essay in the 1990s, yet we have seen this trend continue into the twenty-first century. Users of social media platforms such as Instagram and Tumblr use hashtags such as #bookstagram, #literature and #bookworm to communicate their status as intellectuals to their followers. There is one caveat – as previously mentioned – the books ostentatiously displayed on social media are markedly different to those pictured in Baker’s catalogues. Rather than the carefully curated selection of leather-bound classics, users photograph copies of action-adventure best-sellers placed carefully on lace doilies and surrounded by coloured pebbles<sup>362</sup> or candle-lit hardback copies of Harry Potter atop a tree trunk posing as a coffee table.<sup>363</sup> In the face of such shocking U.K literacy statistics, and the general distaste for reading, it would be churlish to deride anyone for finding enjoyment in such Young Adult fictions, but we must admit the incongruity of declaring oneself an ‘intellectual’ or a ‘lover of literature’ when engaging solely with books designed for those in the 12-16 year old age bracket. The growing trend for adults reading children’s books is seen in the 2004 decision of J.K Rowling’s publishers, Bloomsbury, to re-release the *Harry Potter* book series with a selection of dust-jackets marketed towards adults<sup>364</sup>, and again in 2013 with newly designed covers marketed towards an adult readership.<sup>365</sup>

The rise of the ‘kidult’ consumer – also termed ‘adulescent’ – is indicative of Dwight MacDonald’s fear that ‘Mass Culture’ prohibits adult development. In 2012 a Publisher’s Weekly survey revealed that 55% of Young Adult book sales were by adults buying for themselves, with 28% of sales accounted for by the 30-44 demographic.<sup>366</sup> This trend towards a ‘perpetual adolescence’ is seen in the 2017 statistics that adults spend £383 million a year on toys for themselves, accounting for 11% of the market, with £1 in every £9 going towards the purchase of toys for an

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<sup>362</sup> Kateshearanswed. “We finally have some sun here! Maybe I’ll be able to sneak out for a walk later today,” Instagram, January 5, 2020, accessed January 5, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B68ngDGgNqS/>.

<sup>363</sup> lea\_lost\_in\_books, “Hallo ihr Lieben!,” Instagram, January 5, 2020, accessed January 5, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B68Ucczlvee/>.

<sup>364</sup> “Harry Potter and the Adult Market,” *Scotsman* (March 27, 2004), accessed January 5, 2020, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/uk-news/harry-potter-and-the-adult-market-1-518960>.

<sup>365</sup> Andrew Sims, “Bloomsbury Unveils Vibrant New ‘Harry Potter’ Adult Edition Covers for UK Audiences,” *Hypable* (June 27, 2013), accessed January 5, 2020. <https://www.hypable.com/harry-potter-uk-adult-edition-new-covers-2013/>

<sup>366</sup> “New Study: 55% of YA Books Bought by Adults,” *Publishers Weekly* (September 13, 2012), accessed January 5, 2020, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/53937-new-study-55-of-ya-books-bought-by-adults.html>.

adult.<sup>367</sup> In an essay for Slate magazine, Ruth Graham warns that adults no longer feel embarrassed to be seen embracing children's literature. She argues that

YA books present the teenage perspective in a fundamentally uncritical way. It's not simply that YA readers are asked to immerse themselves in a character's emotional life—that's the trick of so much great fiction—but that they are asked to abandon the mature insights into that perspective that they (supposedly) have acquired as adults...Most importantly, these books consistently indulge in the kind of endings that teenagers want to see, but which adult readers ought to reject as far too simple...These endings are emblematic of the fact that the emotional and moral ambiguity of adult fiction—of the real world—is nowhere in evidence in YA fiction... I know: Live and Let Read... [but] if they are substituting maudlin teen dramas for the complexity of great adult literature, then they are missing something.<sup>368</sup>

Defenders of 'adultescent' literature cite the genre's "nostalgic lure"<sup>369</sup> as its main appeal. Adult readers of YA enjoy the genre for the sense of escape from adult responsibilities it affords them. The nostalgia factor transports the adult to a time when things were less complicated, when life was less routine. The guaranteed happy ending presents no challenge to the reader and offers a hit of instant gratification that is not as easily accessed through real literature. Rachel Doll, in defence of the genre, argues that

YA aims to be pleasurable. It's intended for people who are coming of age reading about characters who are doing the same. As such, these books have a way of cocooning their protagonists, navigating them—and by extension, the reader—to safety.<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> "'Kidults' Appetite for Toys Continues to Rise, Growing 8% in Value in 2017," NPD (website), NPD Group, April 17, 2018, accessed January 5, 2020, <https://www.npdgroup.co.uk/wps/portal/npd/uk/news/press-releases/kidults-appetite-for-toys-continues-to-rise-growing-8-in-value-in-2017/>.

<sup>368</sup> Ruth Graham, "Against YA: Read Whatever You Want But You Should be Embarrassed if What You're Reading is Written for Children," Slate.com, June 5, 2014, accessed January 5, 2020, <https://slate.com/culture/2014/06/against-ya-adults-should-be-embarrassed-to-read-childrens-books.html>.

<sup>369</sup> Jen Doll, "The Thirty-Something Teen: An Adult YA Addict Comes Clean," Vulture.com, October 6, 2012, accessed January 5, 2020, <https://www.vulture.com/2013/10/thirtysomething-teen-on-young-adult-novels.html>.

<sup>370</sup> Doll, "The Thirty-Something Teen."

This sense of 'safety' is an intrinsic part of YA's appeal to adult readerships. There is no danger of an unhappy ending, of their worldviews being questioned. The YA book is an easily consumed, uncomplicated and uncritical pleasure. To indulge in these novels is not a necessarily bad thing, but they must be precisely that – an indulgence taken in moderation for fear of ruining the appetite for finer things. Doll also claims that Young Adult fiction tends to be shorter and cheaper than comparable adult novels, and "there are YA authors who seem able to churn them out almost yearly"<sup>371</sup> which offers little in the line of defence for the genre's literary merits.

When popular culture appeals to the lowest common denominator (evidenced by the inexplicably successful *Mrs Brown's Boys* which was the most widely watched Christmas special in 2015, drawing in 9.7 million viewers and a 34.2% share of the audience)<sup>372</sup> we see a simultaneous rise in the use of literature for intellectual self-aggrandizement. The choice of reading, however, allows people to feel superior to non-readers while allowing their intellect to remain unchallenged. This trend, once again, points towards the dismantling of the English canon in favour of a system which treats all art as equal and dismisses value judgements as elitist.

Despite advances in technology, society seems to be coming full circle with elements of oral and preliterate cultures reincorporated into everyday life. Henry Edward Hardy has commented that "the written culture of the Net is much like an oral culture in the immediacy of communication... The Net is in a state much like a tribal society... with complex but often inobvious structures of influence and self-regulation."<sup>373</sup> Though the Internet is a predominantly text-based medium, we increasingly use the immediacy of visual imagery to communicate with others online. From memes to emojis, these images create a shorthand that allows us to express emotions without resorting to words. Just as the Ancient Sumerians used the pictographic script of cuneiform, could the future of human communications lie in more visual-based mediums? Indeed, experimentation with emoji-writing has already begun with internationally renowned artist Xu Bing describing her 2011 novel, *Book*

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<sup>371</sup> Doll, "The Thirty-Something Teen."

<sup>372</sup> John Plunkett, "Mrs Brown's Boys Dethrones Queen in Christmas Day TV Ratings Battle," *Guardian*, January 2, 2015, accessed March 10, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/jan/02/tv-ratings-mrs-browns-boys-dethrones-queen>.

<sup>373</sup> Henry Edward Hardy, "The History of the Net," (Masters diss., Grand Valley State University, 1993), accessed March 29, 2018, <http://www.cs.kent.edu/~javed/internetbook/nethistory/nethist.html>.



*From the Ground*, as a “book without words, recounting a day in the life of an office worker, told completely in the symbols, icons, and logos of modern life.”<sup>374</sup> While such innovation is interesting, in a time when we appear to be returning to the informality of style associated with oral storytelling, we must protect the English literature canon as the last bastion of standards.

Fanfiction is often more conversational than stylised. Writers seem to record ideas as they come with little thought for form or phrasing. Reading and writing fanfiction can be a harmless diversion – as can pop culture – but we must be aware of the dangers of indulging only in mindless pleasures and refusing to engage with challenging materials. Advances in neuroscientific research attest to the adage ‘if you don’t use it, you lose it.’ If we, as a society, fail to exercise our critical faculties and flex our intellectual muscles, it is possible that we will lose the essential skills of critical reasoning and the ability to conduct nuanced debates on important issues. Technology has brought with it changes not only in the way we consume reading material, but also changes in the material we consume. The unfocused and scattered thought processes of ‘Internet-think’ makes it difficult for us to engage in the ‘deep-reading’ necessary for the understanding of complex, long-form texts, and a willingness to dismiss as irrelevant any texts that present immediate challenges.

The ramifications of a ‘dumbed down’ society extend beyond the decline of our literary heritage. As George Orwell stated, “language is an instrument we shape for our own purposes,”<sup>375</sup> but the language we use can also shape us. If we are unwilling to interact with texts that are not immediately intelligible, choosing instant gratification over intellectual stimulation, we train ourselves to avoid adversity in all aspects of our lives. Through the avoidance of difficulty we lose the resilience and grit needed to tackle challenges, be it textual or in other fields, and we fail to build the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate the deluge of false information and practiced sophistry spun to us by politicians and media outlets.

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<sup>374</sup> Bing Xu, “Overview (of) *Book from the Ground*”, MIT Press (website), accessed January 5, 2020, <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/book-ground>.

<sup>375</sup> Orwell, “Politics and the English Language.”

Language, and literature, are the tools we use to express our common humanity, and the decline of the English literary canon is reflective of the ailments in our society at large. All is not lost, however, as Orwell reminds us

...the point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits, one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> Orwell, "Politics and the English Language."

## Conclusion

Fanfiction is not a modern occurrence. The human impulse to possess and 'play' with fictional creations is longstanding and enduring. For the modern fan, fanfiction provides a multitude of functions. It is a form of psychological wish fulfilment in which the author projects his or her own desires or problems onto a beloved character in order to reach a narrative resolution that their own lives may lack. It is a source of identity construction for those who find mainstream society difficult to navigate. It is an arena in which low status individuals can assert dominance over an online community in a way that they are unable to in their real lives. It is also a means for fans to possess and control a text with which they feel a strong affinity. It is not, however, a form of literature in the conventional understanding of the term.

Fanfiction, unlike literature proper, is not defined by what it stands in opposition to. The distinguishing features of fanfiction are in direct conflict with the aims of canonical literature. Literature, according to Atteridge, must possess these key features; inventiveness, innovation and singularity.<sup>377</sup> Literature does not bow to its past, but instead builds upon it. Canonical literature has three distinct aims; to preserve the finest human thoughts and feelings, to challenge the status quo, and provide intellectual and spiritual enrichment to a community of readers. Fanfiction, conversely, can be defined as follows; a form of derivative writing which borrows the creations of others in order to fulfil the individual fan-writers' psychological and sexual desires. In general, it is a form which serves the individual writer, unlike literature which serves to enrich communities. While the fan community are invited to read the fan-writer's text, a key difference between a fan-text and a work of literature is the intolerance of criticism and the expectation of unqualified praise which suggests that the fan-writer's work serves only the individual whose pleasure in the text is amplified by the uncritical reception of her online audience. Fanfiction defies the canon's desire to preserve the highest of human achievements and encourage further advancement, choosing instead to bask in simple pleasure, titillation, and instant gratification, with little thought beyond the immediate moment.

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<sup>377</sup> Derek Atteridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), 2.

Fanfiction, as a fringe activity, does not pose a threat to legitimate culture but, in an era of hyperabundance, paying serious critical attention to it does. According to Horkheimer, authentic culture “keep[s] alive the human desire for a better world beyond the confines of the present.”<sup>378</sup> Popular culture, conversely, portrays the present as the best possible future.

The antagonism between culture and social reality through the obliteration of the oppositional, alien and transcendent elements in the higher culture by virtue of which it constituted another dimension of reality. The liquidation of two-dimensional culture takes place not through the denial and rejection of the ‘cultural values’ but through the reproduction and display on a massive scale.<sup>379</sup>

Fanfiction, despite Aca-Fans’ assertions, is not a subversive act. As we have seen, the content of most fanfiction found online serves to bolster existing power structures by playing into patriarchal assumptions of gender and misogynistic viewpoints – often more overtly than the original product.

Fanfiction does not seek to reclaim a voice from the margins, unlike the legitimate genre of post-Colonial fiction. Fanfiction is an individualised form, serving an atomised society which seeks to serve only its own predilections and delectations. In this sense it is utilitarian, a means to an end, pandering to the lower pleasures. It is what Thomas Carlyle called the ‘pig philosophy’, reducing all pleasure to the lowest common denominator. Literature such as Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* shares with fanfiction the use of characters that are not the authors own creation, but there the similarities end. True literature seeks to disrupt, dismantle, and challenge the status quo; fanfiction, as we have seen, serves to uphold it.

The canon is a necessary practice of containment in an era of hyperabundance. Containment necessitates exclusion. This has led to accusations of elitism against the canon which cannot be denied – but it is elitist only in merit. The English Literature canon reflects the society that created it, and if it is unequal, it

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<sup>378</sup> John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, (London: Routledge, 2015), 67.

<sup>379</sup> Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 58, quoted in Storey, *Cultural Theory*, 68.

is because our society is unequal. I would argue that it is not the criteria for inclusion into the canon that need to be changed, but the power structures surrounding it.

The English literature canon is populated overwhelmingly by white, male authors. This is because, historically, white men were afforded the literacy skills, the means and the luxury to write, where other minority groups were denied both the education needed to make their voices heard, and the ability to disseminate their work. As society has grown more inclusive, making space for the voices of previously unheard groups, so too must the canon. This process of canonical inclusion for marginalised writers, however, occurs naturally as the power structures surrounding the canon change. This change can be seen in the case of post-Colonial fiction, with writers such as Jean Rhys, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Maya Angelou, being accepted into the canon. These authors have used their work to address the black experience and challenge racial prejudices, while creating works of genuine aesthetic power and beauty.

Post-Colonial fiction is also known as 'oppositional' writing, and this highlights the idea that to dismantle ideas and arguments that are disagreeable, we must engage with them. The public appetite for engaging with difficult ideas, or confronting our past, has waned, with younger generations preferring to 'cancel' or erase our past. This, however, is a dangerous approach. As the old adage warns, those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it. Post-Colonial writing confronts the past and shines a light on atrocities and dangerous ideologies, before deconstructing the arguments and beliefs that were used to justify the dehumanizing treatment of non-white people. Though post-Colonial literature is important in highlighting the horrors of the colonial legacy, the writers of this tradition are included in the canon because their work is aesthetically comparable to the greatest literature contained in our canon, and as such have rightly earned their place.

The criteria for canonical texts must be first and foremost found in its aesthetic merit, which should be judged in line with tradition. The philosopher Edmund Burke argued that traditions are established over time, with community consensus. The argument for tradition in relation to the canon is important. The traditional criteria for canonical inclusion have evolved in pace with shifts in societal attitudes and mores. As Samuel Johnson warned, "to judge rightly of an author we must transport

ourselves to his time, and examine what were the wants and needs of his contemporaries, and what were his means of supplying them.”<sup>380</sup> When examining the canon, we must be wary of appraising texts through modern eyes. It is important to acknowledge the problematic ideologies espoused in historical literature, and we must work to contextualise, rather than celebrate, ideas that are now abhorrent to us. The aesthetic merit of the text can still be acknowledged, while we deconstruct and dismantle harmful and insidious ideologies. The canon must remain an exclusive arena, but it cannot exclude authors based on sex, race, or creed. The canon is a meritocracy and we must ensure that its works are both united, yet diverse. This follows Wittgenstein’s argument of ‘family resemblance’. The works are as members of a family – they are not identical, yet they share similarities regarding the standard of excellence to which they must conform. Rather than advocate a violent overthrow of canonical literature, we must allow for a process of gradual and stable evolution. The canon is always open to those who meet its criteria, and these criteria are continually evolving alongside society, yet the aesthetic excellence is a unifying theme throughout.

In the same manner, we must not allow tokenism to stand in place of real change. The problems with tokenism are threefold. Firstly, the inclusion of one aesthetically inferior text into the canon as a practice of ‘appeasement’ places an inordinate amount of pressure on that text to speak for the experiences, opinions, and beliefs of an entire community of individuals. A work by a female writer, for example, cannot, and should not, be expected to speak to the vastly individuated experiences of women. Secondly, such tokenism devalues the work of non-white, non-male writers by implicitly suggesting that they are incapable of adhering to the standards of their white, male contemporaries. Thirdly, the inclusion of one or two texts from marginalised voices does nothing to change the power structures and institutions which uphold the exclusion of minority voices from sites of power. While representation is important in terms of aspiration, without real social and structural change, it is nothing more than an innocuous form of placation.

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<sup>380</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. G. B. Hill, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905) 197, Jacklynch.net (website), accessed June 30, 2020, <http://jacklynch.net/Texts/dryden.html>.

The canon should not be viewed as an agent of political upheaval. Literature is an aesthetic art and should not be reduced to its social usefulness, nor treated merely as a historical document. To dismiss the aesthetic importance of literary efforts in favour of their 'worthiness' is to denigrate the art of literature itself. Charles Dickens wrote movingly of the plight of the Victorian underclasses and affected social change through his work, yet there were contemporaneous writers who achieved the same effect yet did not achieve canonical status. Their writing may have been socially important, yet its aesthetic merit was inferior to that of Dickens' and that is why it has not been preserved in the great canon of English literature. The criteria for a text's inclusion into the canon go beyond its social and political import, and to the more metaphysical realm of aesthetic experience. Harold Bloom, in his treatise on reading, *How to Read and Why*, argued that reading is a solitary pursuit, rooted in self-improvement, rather than an activity that can improve communities. He warns, "*do not attempt to improve your neighbor or your neighborhood by what or how you read.*"<sup>381</sup> Bloom believed that canonical literature improved the self, not the community. I would argue, however that the improvement of the self leads to better citizens, a better sense of community, and a greater empathy for the individuals that make up our society. This does not mean, however, that reading should be seen solely as a tool for political change. The aesthetic merit of an art form is its defining feature. Works that fail to meet the standards of canonical literature, but which perform important social functions are no less important than canonical texts and it is a disservice to include them in the canon where their defects in style and form will detract from their message. Such texts should be preserved for their historical and social usefulness in canons of other areas of scholarly interest, such as sociology or political history.

The canon must evolve in step with our changing society, opening itself up to allow writers from diverse backgrounds their rightful place within its inner sanctum. We cannot, and should not, advocate a violent overthrow of the canon in favour of a non-hierarchical approach to texts. To dismiss aesthetic criteria and to propagate the myth that all texts are equal is a dangerous and pernicious view which leads to a

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<sup>381</sup> Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Touchstone, 2001) 24.

valorisation of intellectual underachievement, as evidenced by the serious critical engagement of scholars with fanfiction.

In an era of 'plenitude' where everyone has a voice, and everyone expects to be heard irrespective of whether they have something worth hearing, the exclusive nature of the canon is more necessary than ever. The Internet negates curation, but curation is essential for the survival of literature as an art form. Changing attitudes to reading and the media we use to consume texts has legitimised a lackadaisical approach to literature. Society, at large, is no longer concerned with the pursuit of intellectual self-improvement. While bookshops are filled with bestsellers offering advice on improving every area of our lives – from work productivity, the tidiness of our homes, the quality of our diet – there is no longer the same valorisation of intellect. There is no longer an aspiration to engage with challenging texts; instead we glorify the reading of children's books by adults. While entertainment and relaxation are essential, we must be aware that "this debasement of language is not merely a matter of words; it is a debasement of emotional life and the quality of living."<sup>382</sup>

In a declining literary landscape, the canon is the last bastion of aspiration. The canon exists to encapsulate the very best of human thought, but it also encourages us to strive towards greater things. Serious attention to fanfiction, going so far as to elevate the form to a sub-genre of literature, is to degrade true literature and erode the standards of canonical works.

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<sup>382</sup> F.R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 4.



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