


NIGHTCLUBBING

A Novel

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DECLARATION

I declare that this is my own work, except for the acknowledged supervision and referenced citations. It is being submitted for a Master of Arts (coursework) degree in the Faculty of Human Sciences, at the University of Natal, Durban.


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1. WARRIORS

I don't know why I decided to go to London. I suppose it was because I wanted to travel and London seemed the safest option. I had friends there so I had a place to stay and a possible job lined up.

I hadn't seen Jake in years. When he came to greet me at Heathrow Airport he looked completely different. His head was shaven and he had a piercing through the middle part of his nose and one between his eyes: a septum and an Earl, Jake later brought me up to date on the terminology.

Jake and I were friends at University. We weren't particularly close, but were in the same circle of friends.

I had a hundred suitcases, bags and packets: full of clothes, books, and things from home. "Jesus. Did you bring the whole of South Africa?" Jake asked.

"Just the essentials", I said.

"Essentials huh?" he said as he hung a backpack across his shoulder and picked up the two heaviest suitcases.

We took the Victoria line to Walthamstow. On the tube to my soon-to-be-home, Jake didn't speak a word to me but just read his *Boyz* magazine.

It was only when we arrived at our stop that he asked in his best put-on English accent, "I'm going to Warriors tonight. Do you wanna come along, yeah?"

"Sounds like fun", I said and smiled.

Warriors. In my mind I imagined this crazy camp disco where everyone was dressed in colourful shirts and pants.

We walked to the cab office, slowed down by numerous bags and suitcases. We took a cab to the house. It was in Dunton Road, near the Baker's Arms. Our street was mainly a row of attached double-storey red brick houses and there were no trees to be seen. It was a friendly neighbourhood – a woman smiled at me as I got out the cab. I found out a few days later that she was our neighbour. She told me that she'd moved here from Jamaica a few years ago.

Opposite our house was a large deserted warehouse, which they tore down eventually, just before I left. In front of this warehouse there would always be a different piece of

furniture that one of the tenants in our street had discarded. On my arrival it was an old mattress. It soon became my favourite pastime, as well as a topic of conversation in our house, to discover what the latest piece of abandoned furniture was.

Jake had to leave, but told me where to meet him that evening. He quickly drew a map – he was very organised that way. We were going to meet at the Edge, a gay bar next to Soho Square, and then make our way to Warriors. He also told me what to wear and explained that Warriors has a very strict dress code and they would not let me in unless I had the correct clothing on. He paused after saying this either for effect or so I could remember it.

“You mean like smart casual?” I asked, trying to mock him.

“No, fetish.”

I realised that we were not going to the fabulous gay disco I had imagined but somewhere very, very different.

Apparently it was a fetish club for gay men. The doormen were infamous for turning people away who did not wear the correct clothing. No one was allowed into the club if they wore trainers. If you had long hair you had to tie it back.

Warriors’ management only let women in if they were accompanied by a member of the club and apparently there was a quota of women allowed in. Luckily Jake’s boyfriend, Nick, was a member and he would get me in. However, women were not admitted if they wore make-up or dresses, even if they were accompanied by a member.

“In other words, Kate, be sure you’re wearing the right clothes”, Jake said. And with a cheerful “Bye luv”, he was out the door.

My other two housemates, Ewan and Weston, both rolled their eyes heavenwards.

“What?” I wanted to know.

“Nothing”, Ewan shrugged.

“What?” I insisted.

“Jake, he’s just... Oh I don’t know. He goes clubbing a lot and he’s started doing a lot of drugs”, Weston said, the corners of his mouth turned down disapprovingly.

“He’s just become kind of odd”, Ewan said.

“Odd?”

“Like the other day: his aunt came over for tea and he played her hard house with the volume turned right up. She just sat there sipping her tea and looking like a trapped springbok in headlights”, Ewan said.

“Oh.”

We spent the rest of the afternoon chatting about old times and when it was time for me to meet Jake I was feeling exhausted, mostly from not having slept on the plane. I was in no mood for some fetish club that had quotas for women so I decided to meet Jake at the Edge as arranged and then make my apologies, something like “I’m absolutely exhausted. We’ll make it some other night okay?”

So I set off to the Edge, eager to see the city centre and meet some of the locals. The air was cool and crisp and for a moment I forgot I was tired. I floated into the Edge, wearing a long flowing linen dress, in a dazed sleep-deprived state. It was a three-storey building with wrought iron furniture and silver bar counters. I found Jake on the third floor sitting at a table with a few people.

Jake took one look at me and said, “You’ll never get in like that”.

“Yes, well I’m not going anymore”, I replied.

“Oh”, he said.

I draped myself on the chair next to Jake. He introduced me to his boyfriend, Nick, and his friend, Ian.

“Jake, I’m really exhausted”. I yawned for effect. “We’ll make it another time okay?”

Besides, the last thing I feel like now is a bunch of manic ravers dosing themselves with drugs and acting stupid.”

Jake looked at me for a while before saying, “Why don’t you try it before you form an opinion?”

I shrugged.

“Are you’re going to do e with us then?” Jake asked.

“E? Who said anything about e?”

“Well you can’t go to Warriors and not do e. Come on, Kate. It will be fun. I promise you once you take it you won’t be tired anymore.”

“Oh, and what will I feel instead?”

“You’ll just feel really, really good. It’s so amazing. Come on try it”, he smiled.

“Well it’s too late. I’m not dressed properly and they’ll never let me in looking like this.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll get you in.”

“I’m not sure I want to do e”.

“Why not?” Jake asked.

“I haven’t done hard drugs before and I just wonder what will happen, considering the extent of my paranoia and *angst* when I’m normal.”

“Nothing will happen to you. Besides you’re going with me and I will take care of you. Just try it once and then if you don’t like it, at least you’ll know what it’s about. You’ll just feel really, really good and you’ll love everybody and everything”.

“Sounds like concentrated Prozac”, I said.

“So you’re in?”

“Yeah, why not.”

I had been on Prozac for two years and this stuff couldn’t be worse. Serotonin levels are serotonin levels and if my psychiatrist could mess around with them so intrepidly then why not me? Besides, you should try everything at least once.

I accompanied Jake, Nick and Ian to Warriors. We took a black cab to the club, the three of them laughing and joking about some incident that happened at Warriors a week ago.

We arrived at the club and it was decided that Nick should get me in as he was a member. Jake and Ian joined the back of the queue while Nick and I passed the queue of men in fetish gear and walked up to the doorman who was dressed as a gimp. He wore a black leather body suit and a black mask, a zip revealing his mouth and two holes revealing his eyes.

Before Nick could flash his membership card, the gimp said, “She’s not coming in here!” He was looking me up and down with utter disgust. I politely avoided eye contact and let Nick do the talking.

Nick explained to the gimp, as best he could in his New Zealand accent, that I had just arrived in London, that they collected me from the airport only moments ago and that I did not realise we were going out, hence this strange-looking outfit.

The gimp glared at me for another minute or so and then said, “Okay, just this once. Next time she won’t get in.”

Nick and I quickly rushed inside in case he changed his mind. We walked down the stairs. It was completely dark with only a few luminous paintings on the walls to guide our way. I put my hand out to help myself along and felt the cool smooth walls slide under my hands.

At the bottom of the stairs we were at the mouth of a large entrance hall with a gothic balustrade on our left and an entrance to a room on our right. I was in another world. There were a few men scattered here and there, most without their shirts and wearing leather or PVC trousers.

“Let’s get a drink while we wait for the others”, Nick said.

He started climbing the stairs on our left and we spiralled upwards toward a room with a bar counter. Men in fetish gear were standing around, talking, drinking and smoking. They all had several body parts pierced and tattooed. I had never seen so much metal and ink in one room before.

Nick bought me a bottle of water and started telling me how in love he was with Jake.

“Every time I see him, I want to rape him”, he said.

I was clearly out of my depth. What did I know about sadomasochism and the pleasures of rape? I started to wish Jake would join us.

After what seemed like hours, Jake and Ian arrived. It was good to have Jake, someone familiar, near me. He took everyone’s orders and money and proceeded to the dealer, leaving me alone with Ian and Nick.

The room was starting to fill up. Thick clouds of cigarette smoke hung in the air while people were talking louder in order to hear one another over the noise.

After what seemed like hours Jake returned and said to me, “Well, since this is your first time I think you should do only half. I’ll keep the other half for you. Maybe you’ll want it later.”

He bit the pill in half.

“Here”, he said and handed it to me.

I looked at half a blue pill lying in my palm.

“It’s not strong so don’t worry”, Jake said.

I watched Jake, Nick and Ian swallow their pills and I stood there nervously trying to find the courage to take mine.

Ian saw my hesitation and said, “It’s fine. Everybody here takes it”, and gestured to the people standing around in the club.

Jake, who had been talking to Nick, turned to me and said, “Come on, down the hatch it goes”.

Trying not to spill water on myself whilst shaking violently I put the pill in my mouth and washed it down with water. I realised with some alarm that the pill was stuck half way down my throat. I calmly had another sip, knowing that I was being watched. The pill went down and I was relieved that the problem was solved without any gasping, choking or shaking people violently for assistance.

“Right”, Jake said, “let’s go dance so you don’t feel that you’ve come up quite so much”.

“What exactly do you mean ‘come up’?”

Jake turned to me suddenly, “It’s fine, you don’t have to worry about a thing. I’ll take care of you. Just make sure you don’t go off by yourself. If you have to then let me know where you’re going.”

We made our way down the stairs and past the entrance where we came in. We walked into an opening of a large room: the dance floor. It was packed. The decor of the club was incredible. I had been in the hall and the bar upstairs but now I followed Jake through the rest of the club. I marvelled at the big pangolin-ish bar counters and sections of the walls that were studded and spiked with pieces of metal.

We reached the dance floor and a wave of heat washed over me, generated by the dancing mass of bodies in front of me. We took position in front of a giant wall of speakers and listened to the sounds of hard house. The volume was deafening.

I felt self-conscious dancing in a well-known fetish club wearing a blue linen dress. At home I was always a bit wayward which gave me a certain edge. I had no edge here.

We had been dancing for a while when Jake leaned over and yelled in my ear, “How are you feeling?”

“Fine”, I said.

He looked at his watch.

“How long has it been?” I asked.

“About thirty minutes.”

He looked at me questioningly.

“I don’t feel particularly different.”

“Take the other half then”, he said and handed me my other half.

“Okay.”

I took the other half, this time without spilling any water on me. I had a lot more courage, now that the first half had apparently no effect on me.

We continued dancing when I suddenly felt the rush, my first rush. Tiny electricity bolts were shooting through my entire body. They started in my feet, moved up my legs and through my spine, and then down my arms and into my fingers. I felt amazing. I couldn’t stop smiling. I was filled with an overwhelming feeling of love. Not a specific love, directed towards something or someone, but an undefined, general love that possessed my entire being.

Jake noticed and asked me, “How are you feeling now?”

“Incredible”, I replied.

He smiled broadly and said, “I know. The first time is always amazing. What I wouldn’t give to have my first time again. And what I wouldn’t give to have it in London.”

“Where did you have your first trip then?”

“South Africa. It was alright I suppose, but nothing compared to here.”

I suddenly became aware of the music. It sounded completely different now and I could hear each and every sound clearly. The music pulsed through me; it excited me and made me move faster than I ever thought possible. It made me feel so euphoric that I leapt over to Jake and hugged him.

He laughed and looked at me knowingly. He understood exactly how I felt and in turn I felt completely connected to him.

Jake took me by the shoulders and turned me around. He directed my attention to the lasers, the most beautiful arrangement of light I had ever seen. The colours were so clear and vivid, and it was as if I saw colour for the first time in my life. I don’t know how long I stared at them, because the next thing I remember was Nick asking, “Are you okay?”

“Yes, why?”

“Just wondering.”

“No, I’m fine”, I said, and started to dance again.

There was one bright green laser that had me mesmerised. I'm not sure whether it was just due to my fortunate position on the dance-floor or whether I was so loved-up that I imagined it all, but the laser light had a life of its own. It would move down and then open up to form a tunnel of light that isolated me from all the other people on the dance-floor. It was through this tunnel that I was transported to another dimension. A dimension where I was shown an alternative way of being. A gift, if you will, from that powerful source of life that sometimes makes itself known to us.

I was given an experience. I felt complete and utter bliss, exalted euphoria, sublime ecstasy. The e opened up my heart and I could feel an infinite amount of love pouring into it and out of it. I was shown what life could be like, what the human race was capable of.

I was astounded. I did not know that I was capable of so much love.

The laser tunnel then disappeared and once again I was among my fellow dancers. I wanted to share my experience with them so from my heart I directed the love towards them. I was swimming in the watery depths of collective feeling. The boundaries separating us had dissolved and in that moment we all transmogrified into something greater than ourselves. We were all part of the same energy force, a beautiful synergy of ecstasy and love.

I noticed that I wasn't really dancing, rather just waving my arms slightly to the beat of the music. I felt completely airy and I wasn't sure if my feet were touching the ground or not.

The laser tunnel kept appearing and disappearing and I was constantly interchanging total isolation and euphoria with social interaction and feeling connected to my fellow dancers. Jake had disappeared a while ago, but he suddenly reappeared in front of me. I could see he was very excited about something.

"God just gave me a subliminal message", he announced.

"What was it?" I asked curiously.

"Jake, don't forget to buy mothballs. Don't forget to buy mothballs."

I mulled this over for a while and then decided to continue my dancing. It didn't really seem all that important to me, subliminal or not.

After a while, Jake touched my arm and said, "Let's go sit down for a while."

“How long have we been dancing for?” I asked.

“Four hours.”

“No way”, I gasped.

It felt like five minutes. On this journey time did not exist.

We walked up the stairway to the bar. My legs felt very light. I felt like I was floating. We reached the upstairs bar and sat down on the floor, the only empty place we could find.

Jake sat down behind me and put his arms around me. I felt incredibly close to him even though this was the first time I’d seen him in years. I saw that the guy sitting next to me was smiling at us.

Jake said to him, “It’s her first time on e.”

He smiled and nodded knowingly.

I was the only woman in the bar.

The men all looked pale and skinny. Most of them had some sort of piercing: pierced eyebrow, nose, ear, nipple and then the hidden piercing that one couldn’t see. As my gaze moved across the room, I saw a short little guy standing at the bar counter. He was wearing PVC trousers, and his penis was sticking out of a designer hole cut right in the middle of his crotch. He had a Prince Albert piercing on a very large penis. Attached to the piercing were two silver chains. Each of these chains was attached to a piercing in each nipple, pulling his penis up and leaving him with what appeared like a permanent erection.

I looked at all the men standing around: smiling, flirting, talking. And then it finally dawned on me, I was one of them. Of course I wasn’t a man or into fetish gear but I still felt connected to them. We were all out to have a good time. If only everyone could take e once and realise we’re all the same. We’re all cells making up one body.

“Let’s go dance”, Jake said and got up.

I followed him to the top of the stairway and announced that I had to go to the toilet.

“Me too”, he said, “I’ll go with you.”

Jake went to the men’s toilet while I went to the women’s, not that the toilets were specifically allocated to any particular gender. Both men and women use the women’s toilets but only certain men use the men’s toilets. Those men that don’t mind going in a

urinal while others are watching, those who don't get stage fright. Not only that but there is a lot of sexual propositioning and sexual action happening there which some men are not always in the mood for. Jake of course, was always in the mood for that kind of thing and disappeared into the men's toilet.

I walked into the women's toilet and stood at the back of the queue. In front of the mirror was a beautiful man talking to someone. He was quite tall and his head was shaved. On the top of his head and then meandering down the back of his neck and onto his left shoulder blade was a line of hologram scales that glistened under the fluorescent light. When he moved the scales changed colour. He had a spike through each cheek, a piercing in his left eyebrow, lots of earrings, and then two shiny silver blades somehow attached to his cheek bones, forming a half moon across his face and ending by just piercing the skin of his nose on either side. I was hypnotised by his ornate beauty.

"You're next", I heard a voice behind me say and I went into the open cubicle.

I walked into the cubicle. The floor was a complete mess. The entire surface was covered in a watery mud. In the one corner lay bloodstained faeces and in the other corner the only roll of toilet paper completely soaked in mud. The toilet seat had muddy footprints on it. There was a strong smell of urine and vomit.

It did not upset me. I did what I came to do and left. I felt wonderful and loved the world.

When I came out of the toilet I saw myself in the mirror. My pupils were dilated, opened up to see the world without a filter, without preconceptions. I looked at myself and smiled. I could see more, understand more, accept more. My eyes were beautiful.

I met up with Jake who was waiting for me outside the toilets and we returned to the dance-floor for our second set of dancing. I was feeling less spaced out and became aware of how much energy I had. I danced far harder this time. The laser lights still fascinated me and I would sporadically jump up and attempt to grab or bite them.

I had no concept of time and only realised it was time to leave when the lights were turned on and Jake told me that it was the last song. With the lights on I could see how strange the people were dancing with arms waving madly in the air, skipping around the dance-floor and pulling unusual faces. I guess I didn't bother to tone it down either. There were no inhibitions here.

We left Warriors and took a cab home as the tube station wasn't open yet and we didn't feel like waiting around until it did. We decided to have the chill-out at Jake's and my place. I left with Nick and his flatmate, Amy, who had appeared from nowhere and whom I had not seen before. Jake and Ian took another cab.

I was looking out the window at industrial London flying past, when I heard a crash and felt our cab being flung to the side. The cab driver struggled to get the car under control. When the car finally came to a standstill he leapt out and ran towards a car that had stopped on the side of the road. I presumed it was the car that collided with ours. We got out. We were all a bit shaken but Nick particularly so.

"Is he okay?" I asked Amy so Nick couldn't hear.

"He's petrified of riding in cars because he's afraid he might be in a car crash", she said. Nick was looking at the cab driver. He was smoking a cigarette, his hand shaking as he brought it towards his mouth.

I wasn't in shock. In fact, I seemed completely unaffected by the whole ordeal. I just felt very relaxed and peaceful. No outside stimuli could affect my wondrous mood and for the first time in my life I felt incredibly powerful. Nothing could affect me unless I allowed it to.

I looked at the cab driver. He was talking animatedly and writing on a piece of paper at the same time. After a few minutes he jogged towards us, looking left and right as he crossed the road.

He asked Nick for his address and telephone number and jotted down the details. Nick paid him and declined his offer to drive us the rest of the way. We were only five minutes from my house but even if we were an hour away I got the feeling that Nick would not get into another car today.

"It's a pity", Nick said, "it's not his fault."

"Yeah", said Amy, "There's nothing you can do Nick."

"What's a pity?" I asked.

"I had to make up an address and telephone number. I'm here illegally. If I go to court, they'll call the Home Office. I'm not going back."

"Why not?"

"The money here is better."

He quickened his pace and I understood that he did not want to discuss the matter.

We arrived at my house. I quietly unlocked the door and we went to the lounge, closing the door behind us so as not to wake up Ewan and Weston. A little while later Jake arrived with Ian and a serious supply of beer and snacks.

We sat in the lounge, listening to music and drinking beer. I felt quite tired and my eyes were heavy.

Nick, who had gone to the toilet, entered the lounge again and came to sit down next to me.

"It's this small", he whispered to me and with his thumb and index finger indicated approximately 2 inches.

"What is?" I whispered back.

"My dick."

I thought about this for a while and wondered what the appropriate thing to say was.

"Why, what happened to it?" I asked, hoping that he was giving me this information because it was out of the ordinary and not because he needed reassurance; something like "it's not what you've got but what you do with it".

"It's the speed", he replied. "It makes your dick small."

"That's terrible", I sympathised.

"I'm not going to take speed again. It's shit!" he replied vehemently.

I nodded and couldn't think of anything else to say. I didn't feel talkative at all and it was a strain to think, let alone think of something relevant. It felt like there was a thick syrup poured into my head that made any attempt at conversation futile. My thoughts were far from sweet though. I decided to withdraw to my room and left the rest of them in the lounge listening to music and talking.

I fell asleep almost immediately after I lay down on my bed. I was back at the club dancing again. After three hours of this I woke up, feeling completely bewildered. It was the most vivid dream I had ever had. It almost seemed more real than reality and I was filled with a sadness that I could not explain. I felt completely alone and the love I felt for everyone at the club now seemed like a distant memory.

I went back to the lounge and joined the others who were still drinking beer and talking.

Jake suddenly leapt up and yelled, "I love this track".

He violently shook his fist in the air and started to dance when the beat kicked in.

“Come on”, he shouted at me and I got up to join him.

I danced for a little while and then surprisingly felt a slight rush. The e kicked in again and although not as intense as when I took it, I felt saturated with energy. I felt energised but it was not the same pure experience of love I had in the club.

Jake sang “Let’s dance.”

We danced in the corridor, the music blasting away. The more we danced, the more I could feel my e returning and before long we were both perspiring. I felt free and wanted to hold on to that feeling as long as possible.

But our guests were getting tired now and first Ian left, and soon after Nick and Amy.

Jake and I sat in the lounge for a while. He told me about the music he liked and played me little snippets from his collection to demonstrate the subtle differences in genre.

I tried to pay as much attention to him as I could but my mind kept drifting to the events of the previous evening.

A lot had happened. There was a lot to think about.

2. TORTURE GARDEN

A few weeks had passed since my arrival and I was starting to settle into my new surroundings quite comfortably. I found a job and did not have to worry about money too much. Home life was great; I got on well with Ewan and Weston. It seemed as if we picked up our friendships where we left them back in South Africa.

As for Jake, well he lived a completely hedonistic life-style and that fascinated me. He often invited me to his room for a spliff and a chat. It was there that he seduced me into my next adventure: Torture Garden, London's infamous sadomasochistic club.

Jake suggested that we buy our tickets for TG in advance, as the event was popular and tickets usually sold out long before the night.

According to Jake the low-down on TG was that it went underground four years ago. The police received a tip-off that TG nights just turn into huge orgies and decided to make an appearance. When they arrived they found this information to be true of course, and made several arrests. TG then went underground and it was not until recently that they re-surfaced.

There was a lot of planning to be done for the evening and in the remaining days before the night, Jake, Nick, Amy and I drew up a plan: where to meet, what to wear and where to get the drugs (there were no dealers at TG). Jake volunteered to get us sorted as he had several connections.

The club had a very strict dress code: admittance to only those wearing leather, PVC, rubber, bondage gear, fetish wear or nothing at all. Amy volunteered to make an outfit for me. She had studied fashion design for an unknown time (she became rather evasive when asked the duration of her study) and was interested in futuristic styles. Using a white crocheted curtain and a crocheted tablecloth she managed to make me a dress. Actually it wasn't much of a dress because it was very short and had more holes than matter. I had to wear black underwear and in the end I looked like someone from a post-apocalyptic science fiction film.

Jake decided to wear his rubber one-piece that looked like a swimming suit from the 1920's. Nick, not big on dressing up, decided on his rubber trousers and a plain shirt. Amy decided on a short leather skirt, unevenly cut, a black bra and her long boots.

I met Amy and Nick at the Intrepid Fox on Friday night according to plan but with a severe case of flu. I was seriously considering not going to TG, as I felt dreadful.

When I told them I was sick, Amy and Nick started arguing about the best remedy for flu.

Nick said that I should take some paracetamol for my fever and headache.

“Are you mad, Nick? She can’t take any pills with e”, was Amy’s reply.

“So what should she take then?” Nick asked rather annoyed.

“The best thing for flu is pure Vodka and lime.” She turned to me, “When my mother used to get flu, she’d just have one Vodka and lime and she’d be fine”, waving her fist in the air while explaining.

Nick later told me that Amy’s mother is actually an alcoholic who would tell her child that she needed alcohol to improve her flu. How often she really did have flu, only she knows.

I decided to have a Vodka and lime. It didn’t help so I had another and another and another. Four Vodka and limes later, I was feeling pretty shitty, and very drunk.

Nick was feeling hungry so we decided to go to Burger King, the closest one being in Leicester Square. It was a twenty-minute walk and the further we got, the worse I felt. When we finally arrived at Burger King, I realised there was no way I would make it to TG.

Lying with my head on the table, the fluorescent light burning away my last remaining vitamins that I so desperately needed for my recovery, I heard Amy say, “Do you want to do half now?”

My head jerked up and I heard myself say, “Okay”.

Nick started to dig in his jacket pockets. He took out the baggy with drugs and started to break them up on his lap, looking up sporadically to see if anyone was watching him.

After a few moments, he reached across the table, touching my hand and said, “I love you”.

I turned my hand over, palm facing up and he dropped the half in my hand. He did this with Amy as well and we swallowed our pills.

When Nick was finished with his value meal we started walking to Bar-a-cuda where we were to meet Jake and have a drink with Ewan and Weston.

I still felt terrible but it didn't matter now because I knew in a few minutes I would come up and I would be feeling wonderful. Amy was not doing too well, though. The pill had already hit her when we arrived at the bar and she was rushing badly. Ewan and Weston were trying in vain to have a conversation with her. Her eyelids were growing heavy and she struggled to keep them open.

Nick and Jake had disappeared and I assumed they were probably upstairs chatting to Jake's barman friend who lived on top of the bar. So I chatted to Ewan and Weston for a while until I started to rush as well. It was a sudden surge of energy that forced its way through my body.

Jake and Nick arrived, and I announced, "I'm going upstairs to have a shower and get dressed."

My rush reached a climax while I was in the shower. Every drop of water that fell on my skin sent an electric current through my entire body. I was filled with complete euphoria. I don't remember how long I was in the shower for, but when I came out, everyone was in the barman's room, already dressed. My flu had miraculously disappeared and I was feeling marvellous. Amy was still rushing and busy doing a rather bad job of applying her make-up. She was smiling at herself in the dressing table mirror.

After I finally managed to get dressed, our little gang exited the bar with the intention of waving down a cab. But it was a Friday night and we were in central London so finding a cab was not so easy.

We had no option but to walk to the venue, this time held at the Leisure Lounge. I noticed a few people stared at us as they walked past.

We finally arrived and entered the club without any problem. The first room was a bar area where a few bizarrely-clad individuals were having a drink. There was a man in a snake-print cat suit, only no allowance was made for arms in the outfit. It looked as if a giant sock was pulled over his body with only one hole cut out for his face.

The snake-man was obviously not having a drink, unless they could find a straw for him somewhere.

A man standing in the corner wearing a hi-tech eyepiece was staring across the room. He had a black shirt on with a silver planet constructed out of an electronic circuit board on

the front. I followed his gaze which rested on a beautiful dominatrix, wearing a leather outfit and larger-than-life hair.

I walked over to the bar to get some water and noticed the peculiar accessories of the woman in front of me. She had two rows of ring piercings on her back, one on either side of her spine. Through these silver rings she had a black silk ribbon woven through in a criss-cross manner. It looked bizarrely beautiful.

I was still loved-up but it was quite clear to me that Nick, Amy, Jake, and I were the only ones. I felt incredibly conspicuous. There was a different energy in this club, a different interest. I did not feel connected to anyone here. I did not belong.

I started to feel sick again. My hands were clammy and the fever was returning. I decided to do the other half of the e and got it from Nick.

“Am I completely paranoid or are we the only one’s on e?” I asked Jake.

“You’re not paranoid. Most of the people here do alcohol and maybe some speed.”

“Oh”, I said.

“Let’s go. The fashion show is about to start.”

I followed Jake to the walkway where a crowd of people were gathered around. Nick and Amy came and stood next to us.

The lights were dimmed and the smoke machine switched on, the sign that something big was about to happen. The first few outfits that the models wore, were standard S&M gear. Lots of straps, studs, whips, collars, spikes and chains.

The last model was unable to walk on to the runway. There was an iron bar that ran right above the walkway and in the distance a black shape appeared in mid-air. As it came closer I could see it was a black leather bag with a man inside. He was completely scrunched up in the bag with only his head sticking out the top.

I couldn’t help giggling and elbowed Jake in the ribs. He turned to me with a questioning expression but I just shrugged. If he didn’t see the humour in a man being pulleyed on and off a stage, I certainly wasn’t going to explain it to him.

After the fashion show, the performance started.

A woman walked on the walkway. She wore an outfit made out of metal plates; one on her torso, one on each thigh and one on her back. She lay down on the wooden bunker that appeared on the stage after the smoke had settled down.

Then a man entered with a massive angle grinder. He switched it on and screeching noises filled the air. He held the grinder above his head and his biceps flexed under the weight of the machine.

He walked over to the woman who was lying on her back, propped up by her elbows with one leg pulled up. He slowly lowered the grinder onto the metal plate on her torso and sparks started flying in a perfect half moon through the air. The woman recoiled with pleasure and a man right in front of me grabbed the ass right in front of him.

Back on stage the man pulled his grinder away with a quick jerk and held it above his head again. He moved in again, this time using the grinder on the plate on her thigh. Sparks went flying. She placed her hand on her stomach and slowly moved it down towards the razor sharp blade grinding away into the iron plates. Her face was contorted in a blend of absolute pleasure and fear. Just as her hand was about to make contact with the blade, the man pulled the grinder away.

I started to rush from the second half of e I had taken. It hit me much harder this time. I felt a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach and could feel all my energy pouring out of me and into the floor. I felt dizzy and grabbed on to the first thing I could find: Amy's arm.

She looked at me and said, "I know exactly how you are feeling. I had the same feeling when I took my first half. Just relax, it goes away quickly."

I nodded. Even if I wanted to I did not have the energy to speak. I just stared into space. I was brought back to reality when there was a round of applause and the two performers left the stage.

The next show started. A man walked on the walkway wearing only PVC trousers and carrying a small first aid suitcase. He placed the suitcase on a chair and opened it, took out a razor blade and started to make cuts of about three inches long on his chest. Blood oozed down his torso. When he caught sight of the blood, he raised his arms above his head and shouted loudly, like a rabid animal beyond the point of caring. He made even longer, deeper cuts with his blade and it wasn't long before he was covered in blood.

The crowd loved it and someone shouted right behind me. It took me by surprise and I look around bewildered. There was too much emotion for me to handle in my present state. The e had opened my heart but there was no love around me, just carnal lust.

The man on stage took out a hypodermic needle from his first aid kit and continued to pierce himself; first his ears, then his eyebrows, then his nose and finally his nipples. The blood was running down his chest and stomach. Dark streaks of blood were running down his trousers. Again he reached inside his suitcase and produced a silver spike, approximately one inch in diameter. He raised this above his head. Then in one quick movement he jammed the spike through his cheek until it passed through his mouth and out the other cheek.

The crowd shouted wildly but I couldn't hear what they were saying. I couldn't be sure that they were speaking English.

I was e-ing off my face. I stood there watching the blood pouring down from the performer and the crowd loving every second of it. I was e-ing intensely and the inability to connect with anyone made me feel dreadful. I wanted to run away but the rush had paralysed me.

The crowd wanted more. There was blood everywhere, not only on stage but also on the audience. The performer once again moved towards his first aid kit but was dragged off the stage by two men dressed in black who had appeared from nowhere. He shouted and struggled but the men had a firm grip of him and soon he was carried off the stage.

The DJ started spinning again and the crowd resumed their dancing. I stood frozen.

"What did you think?" Jake smiled.

"Each to their own", I said.

I had a vortex in my stomach. I felt completely isolated and that made me feel anxious.

"Come along, let's go sit down in the playroom for a while."

I needed to sit down so I followed Jake.

The playroom was in the next room. I had hoped to get away from all the blood and gore for a while but apparently it was not in the cards. When I walked into the playroom I saw a man being tied to a large crucifix in the centre of the room by two dominatrixes. I took a seat, afraid of being asked to help. When he was tied up, the women unrolled their whips and took turns in whipping him violently.

The crowd of people sitting in the playroom seemed unperturbed by the whipping that was taking place. Every now and then someone would look up with feigned interest and then return to what they were doing before. The whipping lasted about ten lashes and

then the women would pause for a cigarette, a chat or a stroll around the room. They soon returned and resumed their whipping with renewed delight.

The crucified man would cry out when the whip lashed him and soon had blood trickling down his back.

My rush had subsided by now and I was feeling better. I relaxed and remembered to just enjoy the tingles that I was feeling. I smiled.

Nick brought two of his friends to meet me. They were a middle-aged couple, the man in surfer shorts and a T-shirt and the woman in a plain black dress. They were very friendly and made the usual small talk.

After a while, the woman asked me, "Do you want to come home with us after?"

"No thanks", I said, taken aback.

I had forgotten where I was for a moment.

The man nodded and the two of them wandered off.

Nick went to buy some water and when he came back he gave me a bottle. Jake told me that Nick has lots of money because there is a magic till at the restaurant where he works. What do you mean a magic till, I had asked him. Well where do you think Nick gets all the money for drugs and clothes from? From the magic till at work, he had said.

Nick started talking to me about how aroused he got at the sight of blood and I wondered what he and Jake got up to.

I saw the couple who propositioned me a few moments ago walk across the room and strike up a conversation with a beautiful girl in bondage gear. She wore leather straps that crossed over each other on her chest, forming a large X between her exposed breasts. The woman leaned over to ask her something and she nodded in agreement.

The man and woman each got hold of a breast and like two wolves devouring their prey, started biting and pulling her nipple with their teeth. The girl threw her head back in utter sexual pleasure and it was only after several minutes that the wave of arousal diminished. The couple thanked her and left.

"Tie her up!" I heard a voice on my left.

A man was standing next to me, offering me a rope and pointing to a woman sitting next to me.

I obliged. The e had made me very suggestible and co-operative. I remember reading an

article about the apartheid government back home in South Africa. Apparently some university had experimented with e and found that it makes people very docile and calm. They were even thinking of putting some of the powder in the cigarettes of the black people so that they would not resist the white supremacist government.

“Sure”, I said, docile as a cow in a pasture.

I was tying her hands to the armrests as best I could when Jake arrived. I knew very well that the idea was actually to hurt her but however much I tried, I could not do it. When I had finished I stepped back and indicated to the man that I was done.

“Amateur”, he said and looked at me with disgust.

He untied her and said, “Now pay attention. This is how you do it!”

He forcefully tied her hands to the armrest, pulling the rope tight around her wrists. She moaned with pleasure as her wrists turned white under the pressure from the rope.

“That’s how you do it”, he said.

He untied her again and handed me the rope.

I had no desire to tie her up again. I had no desire to hurt her either. I was still e-ing and just wanted to smile and hug people. I felt like a candy raver in a Goth club. I tied her up again as the man demonstrated.

When I pulled the rope back, the man yelled, “Tighter! Tighter!”

I pulled the rope tighter but my heart wasn’t in it. I didn’t want to hurt her and there was no way I could bring myself to do it.

The woman looked up and stared into my eyes for a while. She knew I didn’t belong here.

“Tighter!” the man yelled irritated.

“Leave it”, she said to the man, “she won’t do.”

He grabbed the rope from me. I went to sit next to Jake and watched the man tie the woman forcefully to the armrest for the second time.

“It looks like you prefer to watch”, Jake said to me.

“I do here”, I said.

There was no judgement in my words, nor in my thoughts. I no longer felt the need to analyse and assess every experience I had. I felt light. I knew I didn’t belong here, there was no resonance inside me here but I no longer needed an explanation why. I no longer

needed to find a flaw or weakness in order to justify my indifference. I no longer had to hate in order to dismiss something. I could just let it go.

I had to go to the toilet and joined the back of the queue. It took me 45 minutes to make it to the front. S&M gear might look good but it's a bitch when you have to go to the loo, I thought. I could just imagine the amount of buckles and zips that needed undoing before one is able to answer the call of nature. I suppose that in itself is a form of torture. When I arrived back in the playroom and took my seat again, I noticed a man in the corner pouring water from his water bottle onto a seat. A woman wearing only a black g-string and black boots was watching him. When he was finished he gestured her to sit down on the chair. She did that and much more. As she felt the cool water against her skin, she moved her buttocks from side to side, smiling from ear to ear. The man then proceeded to assist several other scantily clothed people in watering their seats.

"How about a nice wet spot, Jake?" I asked jokingly.

He turned around to see what I was talking about and then replied, "Not really any point, is there luv? I am wearing rubber."

The effects of the e were wearing thin and I started to feel sick again. This time it was much worse than before and I could feel that I had a very high temperature.

"What's the matter?" Jake asked.

"I feel like death", I said.

He put his hand on my forehead.

"Let's get you home", he said.

When we got outside Jake waved down a cab and we went home. Nick and Amy wanted to stay for longer so they stayed at the club.

Jake put me in bed and I fell asleep immediately. I vaguely remember him waking me up from time to time and feeding me soup. When I finally woke up, it was dark again outside.

"How long have I been sleeping for?" I asked.

"Forty eight hours".

"Good grief. How is that possible?"

"Flu, I guess. Rather do speed when you're sick. E fucks up your body temperature and it's actually quite dangerous to take it when you have flu."

“Okay”, I mumbled and half-asleep set my alarm for 8 o’clock the next morning before I went back to sleep.

3. RENAISSANCE

After the events at Torture Garden I felt a need to enjoy a gentler club. Jake was going to Warriors on the weekend and I did not feel like hardcore clubbing. I decided on Renaissance, a club I read about in the paper. It played serious epic house with some tribal sounds here and there. I invited Ruby along, a friend of mine from South Africa who also lived in London, and on Saturday night we made our way to Renaissance.

I first saw Astral on the dance floor, dancing with her friend Dave whom she introduced me to later on. Astral and Dave were crazy dancers. Their movements were bigger, more flamboyant and more staccato which stood out against the flowing swaying movements of the rest of the club. Wherever they were from, I could tell that they had lots of space available. They would not stand in one place and dance like the London clubbers do; being used to dancing in a confined humid space where everyone is sweating on each other. No, in the place they were from they could move around, they could even dance around each other like Astral was trying to dance around Dave in this overcrowded club.

She was wearing various layers of clothes on top of each other: a silver knee-length skirt covered with a black lace skirt with rose motifs, a tight short-sleeve PVC top covered with a short-sleeve chiffon shirt that laced up at the back, fishnet stockings and serious platform boots. Her curly auburn hair was worn loose down to her shoulders with a pronounced fringe cut only two inches short. She wore loads of make-up: glitter gel on her eyes and glitter lip-gloss that would sparkle in the light when she moved. Her nose and belly button were pierced and she had at least four studs in each ear. She wore a plastic blue ring that had a flashing light inside which I couldn't help staring at. She wore black retro-Sixties glasses, a shiny bhindy covering her third eye, and a black feather boa around her neck. She was a beacon in the club, glowing amidst the greyish mass of people, a glowing shimmering star in the dark clubbing universe. She perfected kitsch in every sense. I was loved-up and smiling.

I walked over to her and said, "I love your ring."

"Thanks", she said in what sounded like an American accent.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

“Vancouver, Canada.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Astral.”

“That’s an unusual name.”

“Yeah, I know. My parents are your typical hippies turned productive members of society. Anyway when I was born they named me Astral because my mother is convinced she met me in the astral plane before I was born.”

She spoke very quickly, as if she was on speed.

“Are you on speed?” I asked.

“No, but it just happens to be my favourite drug. I’m gonna dance. Do you want to come?” she asked.

We danced with Astral and Dave for a while and then Ruby and I went outside for some fresh air. We each had the remaining half of our pills and Ruby went off to speak to a cute guy that she had spotted.

I remained leaning against the wall. When I started to feel the rush, it was quite intense and I had to sit down on the floor. Astral came over and sat down next to me. I was off my face and became very nervous when she tried to engage me in conversation.

“So are you from London?” she asked.

“No”, I replied.

“Where are you from?”

I tried to remember, but everything was a blur.

“South Africa”, I said finally.

She smiled.

“What did you take tonight?” she asked.

“I’ve just taken my second half of e. And you?”

“Just one but it’s not very good. I’ve been in London a month already and I haven’t had one good pill yet. It’s fucking annoying. Where do you get your drugs from?”

“My friend.”

“Yeah. I’d like to get mine from people I know rather than some sketchy dealer.”

“Sketchy?”

“You know, dodgy.”

I knew dodgy. I knew it well.

“Yeah you get some really scary shit from the dealers. A friend of mine bought an e at a club and when he tried to bite it in half he couldn’t. It turned out to be a watch battery”, I said. It wasn’t really a friend of mine but it sounded so much more credible than “someone told me once they heard of this guy...”

“Jesus Christ, that’s terrible!” she yelled.

That startled me and I forgot where I was for a second.

“So what clubs have you been to?” she asked.

It seemed she had a limitless supply of questions to ask me.

“Warriors and Torture Garden.”

“Not really my scene. Too hardcore if you know what I mean.”

“Not mine either but they’re good for a laugh. And they play really good music.”

“What kind of music do you like?” she asked.

“Hard house. Are you sure you’re not on speed?”

“No, I told you. But I love speed. Do you know where I can get some?”

“I’ve got a friend...”

“I’ll get his number from you later”, she interrupted. “I like funky house but my passion is breakbeats. Do you like funky house and breakbeats?”

“I can’t say I enjoy either. Hard house is great though.”

“I don’t really like hard house, to be honest.”

“Have you ever been to a club where they play really good hard house?”

“No, I don’t really know anyone in London who’s into that type of music.”

“It’s really, really good” I said, the e starting to work its magic. “Next time I go, I’ll give you a call.”

“That’ll be great. I’ll get your number afterwards. Are you staying ‘til the end?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too. I’m always the last to leave. It’s so embarrassing. They literally have to throw me out”, she laughed.

Her enthusiasm was infectious. It made me feel manic, as if I had an infinite amount of energy.

“You’ve got a lot of energy”, I said.

“Yeah, I know. I’m crazy. You should see me and Dave together. We’re out of control! It must seem doubly so to you, being so calm?”

My rush had reached its peak and I felt the music calling. It was a desperate feeling. If I didn’t go to dance right that minute I would explode. I was also finding it increasingly strenuous to keep up the appearance of being coherent at this stage.

“I have to go dance”, I said, self-conscious of the state I was in.

I left as quickly as I could and ran to the dance-floor. I could feel my heart beating madly and I wanted to move faster than my limited body was able. Then something bizarre happened. The music sounded like it was all jumbled-up, I couldn’t make out the notes nor the beat. It didn’t sound like noise, in fact it sounded quite beautiful but it was as if my mind suddenly could not understand it, like hearing a foreign language. I stood motionless on the dance floor, not knowing how to move to the sounds. My fellow clubbers were dancing excruciatingly slowly. It was as if the whole world had just started to function in slow motion. I was confused but had a sinking sensation in my solar plexus. What if I stayed like this for the rest of my life? I decided to get some fresh air as there was no point in standing on the dance-floor with a blank stare.

The air sobered me up and I noticed that my breathing had become shallow. I took a few deep breaths and felt better.

Ruby came over and asked, “How are you feeling?”

“I just had the most unbelievable rush on the dance-floor.”

“I know, the energy is quite intense in there. It intensifies what you’re feeling.”

I was feeling a lot more aware of my surroundings so Ruby and I went to dance once more. I sensed someone looking at me and looked in that direction. It was Astral and when she saw me looking at her she quickly looked away. I waited to catch her gaze and then gestured her to join us.

“I’m sorry about earlier. I was off my face when you came to talk to me”, I said to Astral, when she was standing next to me.

“Don’t worry”, she said and gave a beaming smile.

I noticed her glasses didn’t have any lenses in them.

“Why are you staring at me?” Astral asked.

“Sorry”, I said. “How do you get your lenses so clean? I can hardly see them.”

She laughed and said, "Very funny. I had to take the lenses out because they fog up when I dance."

We danced until the lights came on and the music stopped. Astral and Dave disappeared, and Ruby and I saw them again in the coat check queue.

When we finally got our bags and coats, Ruby and I went outside. It was cloudy yet surprisingly bright. I put on my sunglasses and sat down on one of the benches just outside the club. There was a large van parked outside selling coffee and tea, and Ruby went over to buy us some. It was six o'clock and we had to kill an hour before the tubes started running again and we could go home.

Astral and Dave were speaking to a group of people, writing their telephone numbers down. I watched her as she spoke and laughed. She glanced my way and had a puzzled expression on her face. I could sense that she was not quite sure whether I was looking at her or not, the sunglasses hiding my eyes. I didn't look away.

She walked over and said, "Let me give you my number so you can call me next you go out."

I wrote down her number.

"Give me yours as well", she said.

I wrote my number down on a piece of paper and gave it to her. Ruby had arrived in the meantime and handed me my tea.

"Speak to you soon", she said while walking away.

Ruby smiled and said with schoolgirl confidentiality, "She's nice."

"Yes, I suppose she is."

4. FIERCE DUCK

A few weeks later Jake called and invited me to Fierce Duck on Saturday. I called Astral but she couldn't make it as she was working that Sunday. I was supposed to meet Jake in front of the Metropolitan at 12 p.m. but he was late as usual.

I hadn't seen Jake since he had moved a few weeks before. He wanted to be closer to his work in Central London. I suspected he moved because Ewan and Weston had started complaining about the loud music and the chill -out parties early on Sunday mornings. So he packed all his stuff in a small hired van and he was off.

I was standing outside the Metropolitan when his friend Stuart arrived, a skinny fellow with sunken cheeks and a longish nose. He introduced himself and we talked casually about the clubbing scene whilst smoking cigarettes.

Jake finally arrived and we caught a cab to Fierce Duck, this time held in a gay sauna and tanning salon in Soho. Jake told us about the time he was standing in the tanning salon wearing only his protective eye-gear when he smelt something burning. It was the hair on his leg. So he quickly grabbed his towel and ran through the salon yelling, "Fire! Fire!" The personnel shooed everybody outside and so Jake found himself in the middle of Soho's red light district, wearing only a towel and protective eye-gear.

Inside the club we met up with Jake's new flatmate Gordon, a short stocky guy with a strong face and jaw. Jake introduced us.

"Where's Nick tonight?" I suddenly remembered.

"Oh, we broke up about a week ago", Jake said.

"I'm sorry", I said but Jake did not look in the least bit upset about the break-up.

"Don't be", Jake said casually, "it hasn't been going well for a while now."

I was still thinking of something appropriate to say when Jake and Stuart disappeared to organise the drugs and left me with Gordon who was chatting to a shirtless man sitting next to him on the couch. Although Gordon smiled at me every now and then, and he had the most beautiful dimples when he did, it was clear that he was very much occupied with the shirtless man and couldn't talk to me.

I felt very out of place, standing in the middle of the floor staring at everyone. I decided to dance. I was completely sober yet hearing the music brought back the memory of the e

my body had retained, and I was enjoying dancing. It was extremely hot as there was no air-conditioning in the place, it being a sauna after all, and within minutes I was perspiring heavily.

Jake returned and looked quite surprised to see me on the dance-floor completely sober. He handed me my pill and as usual I only took half. I realised that I just have a very sensitive system compared to other people and cannot handle a whole pill at once. Jake was quite envious of this and always told me how lucky I was that I could go out and have fun without spending too much money.

He had taken an e and was waiting for it to kick in. I couldn't help watching him. He looked a bit annoyed with the fact that he had to wait come up, not knowing at all what to do with himself in the meantime.

I knew he hadn't come up yet because he wasn't making eye contact with me and looked quite demure. His dance style was self-conscious to say the least: he would beat the air with his fists, moulding and controlling it. I knew it would only be a few minutes before he would relax.

Then I saw the grin and I knew he was up. He pulled one of his bizarre faces at me and danced faster. Soon, I was rushing too and completely removed from everyday reality. Everything seemed wonderful and nothing bothered me at all: not the heat, not the music jumping from the dancing feet on the wooden floor, nothing.

Stuart seemed to be having a smashing time and had quite a peculiar expression on his face. I think it was a mix of fear (his eyes were quite large) and pleasure (as he was smiling). Gordon was presumably still chatting to the shirtless man, or doing more interesting things with the shirtless man.

The DJ finished at about 3:30 and we left for the next club, Renegades, one of Jake's regular hangouts. Gordon was nowhere to be found and Jake speculated that he had probably picked someone up and had gone back to their place.

Renegades was quite a simple venue with a few Giger-ish prints on large pieces of black cloth hanging neatly down from the roof, separating the dance-floor from the rest of the club.

When Jake called earlier in the week he had confided in me that he was quite confused about his friend, Caelan. Being gay, he could not understand his attraction to Caelan.

She was the first woman he had ever been attracted to and he did not sound at all sure of himself when he spoke about her. Not only that, his friends and potential one-night-stands were quite amused by the fact that Jake and Caelan spent the last few Saturdays at Renegades snogging in a dark corner and they did not miss an opportunity to tease him about it.

“Where’s Caelan tonight, Jake?” I asked.

“I don’t know if she’s coming. Last week she said she might go to Spain or somewhere.”

“Why?” I asked.

“We’ve decided we need a break from each other. Things are just getting too weird”, he frowned.

Too weird, I thought to myself. This is the same Jake who had sex with five people at a chill-out party as entertainment for his guests and the same Jake who leaves his sex toys out on the coffee table as ornaments. Everyone has his limit I suppose.

But Caelan did arrive. It turned out that she didn’t have enough money and the trip to Spain was cancelled.

I first noticed her when she was standing right next to me, speaking to Jake. She was beautiful: tall and slender with a black bob haircut and mischievous brown eyes. But her real beauty was the graceful way she carried herself, a regal presence.

Jake introduced us.

She leaned over and said, “Hi Kate, Jake’s told me so much about you.”

“Likewise”, I replied.

Her accent was distinctly Irish.

She introduced me to her boyfriend Brent, a tall skinny guy who shook my hand rather animatedly.

Jake mentioned that Brent and Caelan had an agreement: they were allowed to sleep with same sex partners only. This lessened the chances of Caelan and Jake ever having a go at it, I thought, but Jake assured me that it didn’t really seem to bother Brent who was probably flattered that Caelan had such a power over a gay man.

Brent went to dance and Jake and Caelan disappeared to talk privately. I amused myself in the meantime by dancing with Stuart. His dancing made me laugh, arms raised to eye level and bouncing around in semi-circles.

I met up with Jake again in the chill-out room. It was just an empty area with a bar and a few pool tables covered with wood so people could sit down.

“How did it go?” I asked.

“We’ve decided that we just took too many drugs which made us end up snogging each other.”

Jake’s eyes looked foreign in the ultra-violet light and it was difficult to read his expression.

“Then why aren’t we snogging if it’s just the drugs?”

Jake ignored this question and said, “It’s too weird. Oh my God, she said to me ‘Jake, if you ever decide to try it with a woman, please come to me’”.

“I think you have to try everything at least once.”

“No, I couldn’t. I mean I’m attracted to Caelan but I’m gay, Kate.”

“I’m not saying you’re not, but don’t you think you’re limiting yourself with these rules you set yourself?”

“Who cares”, he said dismissively. “Come on”, he said and did a little head jiggle, “let’s go dance”.

“No you go, I want to sit here for a while.”

“Okay”, he shrugged and he was off again.

I was sitting listening to music when I saw Caelan coming towards me.

She sat down on the seat next to me and asked, “Are you having fun?”

“Yes thanks.”

After a long silence I leaned over and jokingly said, “I’m quite upset you know. How could you confuse my friend like that?”

Perhaps the music was too loud and she didn’t hear my mocking tone. She explained herself immediately, “I would never want to hurt Jake. He is such a beautiful person. It’s just, you know, sometimes people want to try something different, just to see what it’s like. It doesn’t mean they’re straight or whatever. I mean I’ve gone home with women that are straight. They just wanted to try sex with a woman, just to see what it’s like. It doesn’t mean they’re lesbian.”

“I’m just joking”, I smiled and she relaxed.

I decided to stick to neutral topics such as work and Spain. I chatted to her for a while

until I had come up on the e and heard the music calling me. I got up to dance and she followed, joining her group of friends on the dance floor.

I loved the club and the people. I smiled at a bulky man dressed in bondage gear who was dancing towards me. He smiled and held out his hand. When I took it, he swirled me around the dance floor. In a circular motion he pulled me to him and I ended up with my back towards him. That's when I felt it. An object prodding my lower back, which I instantly knew was his erect penis. Viagra had become the new recreational drug for gay men. Or perhaps he wasn't gay at all.

I went to dance with Jake until the club closed. Jake took too long to say goodbye to all his friends so I decided to wait for him upstairs. When I stepped through the door, I was blinded by the bright sunlight and stood with my back against the wall, eyes closed. The feeble sunrays felt warm on my face and I couldn't help smiling.

I felt quite self-conscious, as one does after e. People coming out of the club would look at me as they stood around being harassed by cab drivers and I tried my best to keep it together, having all kinds of paranoid thoughts of what was so wrong with me that they would spend so much time inspecting me.

Jake arrived with a few friends. Apparently a guy called Robert invited everyone around for a chill-out at his place, and according to Jake I could go as well.

Robert was quite attractive: he had short hair, a well-defined body and strong facial features. I immediately sensed he didn't like me as he did not make any eye contact or even acknowledge my presence.

So off we went to Robert's flat: Jake, Stuart, Robert, Robert's boyfriend, a very interesting looking guy called Owen, and I. Owen, Jake told me, was a model and quite a successful one. He had olive skin and a shaven head. He had various tribal tattoos on his arms and lots of facial piercings: two long spikes on either side of his mouth, two shorter ones on his top lip and two on his bottom lip. His left eyebrow had a ring through it and his right ear had a spike through the lobe. He had the most soulful green eyes and a very friendly smile that made me like him instantly.

We arrived at the flat and settled down in our various positions. Robert put on a hardhouse tape and Stuart complained that we wouldn't be able to relax with it on.

"Yeah, at least we won't be flying through the roof with this fucking music on", Jake

agreed.

Stuart took out a tiny glass cylinder filled with white powder. He started cutting three lines on a small mirror he had pulled out of his pocket. He rolled a bank note, snorted one of the lines very quickly and handed the note to Jake. Jake thanked him and snorted the second line. Stuart passed the note to me and gestured to the remaining line on the mirror. I looked at Jake, uncertain what to do. He smiled at me and gestured to the line.

“No thanks”, I said and smiled at Stuart, handing him the note.

Stuart shrugged and had the last line.

“Why don’t you have some?” Jake asked me so no one else could hear.

“Isn’t it very addictive?”

“Don’t be so melodramatic Kate. We’re not heroin or crack addicts who’ll end up in some sordid flat lying around on soiled mattresses.”

He paused.

“Just have some. You’re very down at the moment, you’re sitting there not saying a word. The e has made you very, very ...” Jake looked away in search for the word, “it’s made you go into yourself. The coke will bring you out.”

“And how will it make me feel?” I asked.

“It just makes you very talkative, very confident, extroverted.”

These sounded like good things to be so I said, “Okay.”

I realised that Stuart had listened to the entire conversation because as soon as I said okay, he looked at me, nodded his head and started cutting another three lines. He had the first one and then Jake had one. Inhaling deeply through his nose, Jake handed me the note. I inserted the note into my right nostril and inhaled the white powder. Moving the note along the line I could see the white powder disappearing and felt it stinging as it went up into my nostril.

“Thanks”, I said to Stuart.

He smiled.

After a few minutes I could feel the effects quite dramatically, as anyone who takes coke for the first time does. It’s the body’s first experience of the drug and there are no stored memories it has to live up to.

I felt the e mist cloud that had gathered around my body disappear, the hazy lens I was

seeing the world through was removed. My eyes opened and I saw my surroundings with a heightened clarity. I was alert and sharp and became aware of all the little subtexts in the room; my new hypersensitivity enabled me to understand the subtle power struggles, the flirtations and the undercurrents. I felt very self-assured and joined in the conversation, at times having some profound insights, yet realising that these would probably not be understood by some of the people in the room.

I had a renewed energy and when one of the songs they played at the club came on, I started dancing in front of the hi-fi, in front of people I've never met before and not giving a damn what they thought. Coke is a bladder stimulant however and I constantly had to interrupt my dancing with visits to the toilet.

I was really getting into the music when I noticed that Jake was laughing at me and Stuart was smiling. I suppose I must have been quite entertaining, having only one baby-line and then going off my head like that. I was not in the least self-conscious though, and just pulled a face at Jake.

I spent most of the afternoon dancing in the lounge, interrupted by visits to the loo and visits to the coffee table for yet another line. Stuart kept on giving me lines, I suppose because I was entertaining. As I said, I've always been quite sensitive to drugs.

After a few hours I was wired and couldn't stop dancing.

Without any warning Robert said, irritated, "For God's sake Kate, would you stop bouncing around like that!"

"Sorry, is it bothering you?" I asked.

I didn't know why he hadn't asked me to stop before if it was irritating him so much.

He ignored me and since it was his flat I decided to sit down. I was offered yet another line which I accepted.

When Stuart did his line I started singing, "What are you putting up your nose, is that where all your money goes?"

Stuart was dumb-founded and stared at me blankly.

"What the fuck do you care, you're not paying for it. You can just be thankful you're getting free coke", Jake reprimanded.

"Sorry", I apologised to Stuart.

Stuart smiled. He understood the arrogance that usually went with doing coke. I started

to explain one of my theories on e to Jake. I felt very cool, sitting there talking and smoking my cigarette. Jake said something in response and I nodded in comprehension, acting the interested listener: my head tilted to the side and my hand resting on the crown of my head.

Jake stopped talking and smiled quite broadly at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing”, he said softly and continued smiling.

I smelt something burning, something like burning hair, and raised my head.

“Hey, do you smell something burning?” I asked.

But Jake didn’t say a word and just kept smiling.

My head started to feel warm, and as I slowly raised my hand to investigate the source of the heat, I realised with some alarm that I was on fire.

I yelped and started slapping my head rather violently.

By this stage Jake was hysterical and Stuart was laughing.

I grabbed a glass of water standing on the coffee table and emptied it on my head, avoiding a potentially unpleasant experience.

We were all still sitting around, laughing at what had happened when Robert said, “Jake, put your shoes on.”

“Why?” Jake asked, pretty wired himself.

“Because you’re going home”, Robert replied.

Jake looked at him for a while and then put his shoes on. He was quite amused by Robert’s rudeness and probably quite used to it as well. Jake, Stuart, and I got ready and left, leaving Robert and his boyfriend alone in their flat. Owen had left earlier as he had a photo shoot the next morning and had to get some beauty sleep.

Jake and I said goodbye to Stuart outside as he was walking in the opposite direction. I thanked him for his generosity and wonderful conversation.

“I had such a lovely time, Mike. Thank you so much”, and kissed him on the cheek.

Jake walked me to the bus station, looking down at his boots marching across the pavement.

“What’s up with Robert?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

I reminded him of the comment he made about me “bouncing around.”

“Oh, never mind that”, he said, “he told me to put on my shoes! How rude is that?” Jake asked with amusement.

“I don’t think he likes me very much.”

“Yeah, Robert is a bit funny. He takes too much acid and he can’t handle it. Some people can take a lot and they’re fine but he gets really bitchy! His boyfriend said to me at the chill-out, ‘Don’t give Robert any more trips because he’s had too many already’ and then Owen gave him some without realising the consequences. He’s such a bastard on acid. He was fine today though. You should have seen him last week, he was fucking horrific!”

I was struck by Jake’s coherence considering the amount of drugs he had taken that evening.

“Well at least he spoke to you. He didn’t say a single word to me apart from the bouncing-around comment.”

“Robert has a problem with women. Do you know you were the first woman who’s ever been in that flat?”

“How long has he been living there?”

“Two years”, Jake laughed.

“Unbelievable.”

“He only has one woman friend and the only reason they’re friends is because they went to school together and he’s known her all his life. He’s such a bastard”, Jake announced.

“A few months ago she borrowed money from Robert for an abortion and when she didn’t pay him back, he called her parents and told them he wanted his money.”

“Did he tell them why she needed it in the first place?”

“Yeah”, Jake smiled. “So now she’s not speaking to him anymore and he has no female friends. Not that it bothers him in the slightest, I’m sure.”

We reached the bus stop and joked around a while. My bus came and we said our goodbyes.

When it was time to go to sleep I wasn’t tired at all. My mind was overactive and I kept on thinking about the most mundane things. I couldn’t stop and eventually I called Jake.

“Hello”, he answered.

“Jake, I can’t sleep. It’s three in the morning and I have to go to work tomorrow. It’s all your fault”, I yelled.

He laughed.

“Yeah, it’s quite difficult to sleep on coke”, he said and then explained to someone in the background the predicament I was in.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“It’s Liam”, he said. “I’ve already told him everything you were up to at the chill-out. God you were funny.”

“Was I?” I asked, surprised.

“Yeah. Have you tried lying down yet?” Jake asked.

“No, what’s the point in lying down when I’m not tired.”

“Well just lie down and close your eyes. You’ll fall asleep pretty soon, if not immediately.”

“Come on, Jake. I said I’m not tired.”

“No just try it. Remember you haven’t slept for the last 48 hours and you’ve been dancing quite a lot. So your body is completely exhausted and you’ll probably find that when you lie down you’ll fall asleep instantly.”

“I suppose it’s worth a try.”

“Hey, I was thinking maybe next weekend we can all go out and you can meet Liam.”

“Who’s this guy, Jake? Did you pick him up this afternoon?”

“No! I told you about Liam, my new boyfriend.”

I vaguely recalled Jake mentioning him at the chill-out.

“Okay, that sounds great. Give me a call during the week. I’ll speak to you later, yeah?”

“Bye bye. Sweet dreams.”

I went to lie down and just as Jake said, I fell asleep immediately. That night I had the most vivid dreams I have ever had and the next morning my eyes just popped open and I felt great. No comedown, no grogginess, no depression. Just me getting ready for work and thinking it’s great to be alive.

Coke’s fabulous, I thought.

5. TRADE

Jake gave me a call on Wednesday and invited me to an evening of clubbing: Renegades followed by Trade, London's most famous gay hard house club. I was supposed to meet Jake at Bar-code at 10:30 p.m. but realised when I was already on the bus that I had forgotten my drugs at home and had to go all the way back. By the time I got into town, there was no time to meet Jake as I had arranged to meet Astral at Tottenham Court Road Tube Station at 11 p.m. I had called her a few days ago to invite her along and she was very excited about going to Trade.

At Tottenham Court Road I got off the tube and made my way to the escalator. I hadn't seen Astral since Renaissance but we had spoken on the phone since then.

I hoped the tube station wouldn't be too crowded because I didn't remember exactly what she looked like. I was, after all, off my face when I met her. Luckily there weren't many people loitering around the ticket machines where we agreed to meet, so it was easy to recognise her.

I pushed my ticket through the automatic ticket check machine and walked towards her. She hugged me hello. When she asked me on the phone what to wear I was very clear about the dress code of hard house clubs, making her understand that she would not be admitted if she dressed too flashy. I suppose I exaggerated the strictness of the dress code to compensate for her love of glitter and sparkles and everything that shimmers in the light, reasoning that the two extremes would probably balance each other out and she would be dressed appropriately. When I saw her, however, I realised that my exaggeration might have been a bit too severe. She was wearing dark blue flared jeans and a black top. No make-up, no jewellery – in fact nothing shone. At least she won't have a problem getting in tonight, I thought.

"Shall we go?" I asked and gestured towards the exit.

She nodded and we walked towards Renegades. We finally arrived at the club at 11:30 p.m. and after we handed in our coats we walked through the club. Jake was nowhere to be found.

A woman that I did not recognise walked up to me and said, "You're Kate, right?"

"Yeah? How do you know?"

“Hi, I’m Haley, Jake’s friend. He told me what you looked like. We waited for you at Bar-code and then came here.”

I could see she was wasted on me as her pupils were dilated and her eyelids were heavy, half closed.

“I’m so sorry, I was running late.”

“Don’t worry”, she slurred without any expression. “Jake’s gone back to look for you.”

“Oh shit”, I said, “I’d better go look for him.”

I was walking towards the door, Astral following close behind, when a short attractive guy stopped me.

“Hi, are you Kate?” he asked.

“Yeah?” I said, not knowing whether I should read this recurring question as an incentive to re-evaluate my own identity.

“Hi, I’m Liam. Jake’s gone to look for you.”

“I heard”, I replied. “I’m just on my way to go look for him.”

“No, no, no, he said you must wait for him. Under no circumstances must I let you go look for him. He’ll be back in a bit.”

“Oh. Well anyway, it’s very nice to meet you finally”, I said.

We went to the chill-out area and spoke for a while. Jake arrived soon afterwards and I apologised profusely. But he wasn’t upset and just told me not to worry about it.

We popped some pills and went to dance.

I saw Stuart dancing his ‘bird-flapping-its-wings’ dance and walked towards him to say hello. When he saw me, however, his eyes grew large and shaking his head and waving his arms in a negating manner, he gestured that I should go away.

Someone’s done way too many drugs, I thought. I smiled at him and then returned to my spot to dance.

When the music hit my system I grew tired. I didn’t have the energy I was anticipating. Astral was enjoying dancing so I went to the chill-out area by myself. I saw Caelan chatting to someone and when she saw me she came over.

Oh no, I thought. I can’t talk to her now, I’m far too wasted. She stood in front of me where I was sitting on one of the tables having a cigarette.

“Hi”, she said and kissed me on both cheeks, pausing a while when her lips touched my

skin. I could see she was out of it.

“Where’s Brent?” I asked.

“Chatting to some guy over there, I think”, she said and gestured to the bar area.

“Do you have a cigarette for me?” she asked.

I gave her one and as she lit it she watched me closely, smiling at me as she gave the lighter back.

“Jake’s dancing if you’re looking for him”, I said.

“No, I saw him earlier.”

“So how are things between you now?”

“Fine. Yeah we’ve decided we’re just friends. We love each other very much but he’s gay and I’m with Brent so things are rather complicated.”

“Oh”, I said.

I knew it wasn’t Caelan’s decision as much as Jake’s. After all, she did say that if he ever changed his mind about being with her he must just let her know. I was annoyed with Jake for turning her down, an experience that could only be wonderful. I wanted to tell her how stupid Jake was, how we were giving up the chance of a life-time but the words were spinning around in my head, resisting all my attempts in being uttered.

Instead I said, “You’ve met Liam, haven’t you?”

“Oh Liam, he’s such a sweet guy. He’s so small and cute”, she said and indicated with her hand how short he was.

“We always end up on the dance-floor dancing so sexually, just as a joke. He’s such fun”, she said.

I smiled.

“Where’s Brent?” she said to herself looking around and resting her hand on my arm to keep her balance. “So who’s the girl you’re with?”

“Oh, it’s Astral. I met her three weeks ago at Renaissance.”

She raised her eyebrows provocatively and smiled.

It seemed like she was flirting with me but I couldn’t be sure. I was still rushing from the e and not quite objective where matters of desire were concerned. I was starting to feel uncomfortable about leaving Astral for so long. She did not know anyone here and as her guide to tonight’s entertainment I felt I should at least check on her every now and then.

“I’m going to go dance”, I said.

She followed me to the dance-floor and started dancing with a group of friends. I couldn’t help watching her, she was magnificent. She used her entire body to dance, combining sensuality with energy perfectly.

She smiled when she saw me watching her and I quickly turned away.

I went to stand on the side of the dance-floor and noticed a woman with a shaven head and dressed in a long black dress slowly walking up to Caelan. Facing Caelan’s back, the woman started kissing the back of her neck. Caelan gently placed her hand on the back of the woman’s neck and they continued swaying slowly to the hard-pumping music.

I watched for a while, fascinated. From the side I watched as the woman slid her hand down Caelan’s naked back, around the curves of her butt and between her legs. Caelan didn’t flinch but slowly moved around, obstructing further access.

Astral wanted to go sit down and I followed her to the chill-out area.

“Thank you so much for inviting me”, she said.

“It’s my pleasure.”

“No, honestly. I can’t believe how nice you and Jake are to me.”

“Hardly.”

“So tell me”, I asked “are you straight?”

“No.”

“Are you gay?”

“No.”

“So then you’re bisexual, right?”

“No.”

“So how would you describe your sexuality?”

“I don’t know. If I meet someone special then it doesn’t matter what or who they are.”

“Sounds like bisexual to me.”

“I don’t like to be labelled.”

I looked at her staring into space.

“Why do you look so sad?” I asked.

“I’m just thinking of something sad.”

“What?”

“I had a bad experience just over two years ago.”

I knew exactly what happened without her saying a word. But I asked her anyway because I could feel she needed to say it.

“What happened?”

“I was raped.”

I hugged her and pressed my cheek against hers.

“And how are you doing now?”

“I’m dealing with it. I had a breakthrough a while ago. I decided I wasn’t going to be a victim anymore and let it affect me any longer. It’s bad enough that it affected me for so long.”

“That’s a very healthy way of looking at it.”

I felt like I knew her and everything about her. There was an unexplained familiarity between us that made me feel comfortable in her presence. Like we were slices of bread from the same loaf.

We sat in silence for a while and then went to dance again.

When it was time to go, Liam, Haley, Astral and I waited for Jake outside. Caelan was standing on the pavement speaking to the woman from earlier. She was writing down her telephone number on a piece of paper and I overheard her saying to the woman that she’d call.

She came and stood with us and said something about how weird some people are.

Brent joined us and said to Caelan, “Why didn’t you go home with her?”

Caelan just glared at him.

“I don’t mind, you know.”

“Just shut up Brent.”

Jake arrived and announced that we were all going back to his place for a chill-out. He started walking down the road, followed by Liam and Haley.

“Are you coming?” I asked Caelan.

She looked at me, then at Jake walking along the road and shrugged.

Jake stopped walking and turned around.

“Come on, get a move on”, he yelled at me.

“Can Caelan come?” I yelled back.

He nodded and continued walking.

Caelan started walking and gestured to Brent, "Let's go."

Brent did not look at all pleased with the arrangement and shook his head. Caelan walked back and spoke to him briefly.

"What's going on?" Astral asked.

"Well, the way I read it is that Brent feels threatened by Jake because Caelan is incredibly attracted to him."

"I thought Jake was gay."

"He is."

"Oh", she replied.

Caelan left Brent standing on the pavement with a rather blank expression on his face and joined Astral and I. Brent caught up with us and the four of us walked to the flat, basking in the morning sun, slowed up from the after-effects of the e.

When we arrived, everybody took a seat in the lounge while Jake and I were trying to get their drink orders and supply them with their requests.

The amount of sugar and the absence and presence of milk confused me. I did not know who wanted what. I decided to start with boiling the kettle as Jake seemed in control of the whole situation.

"Milk, we'll need milk", I said aloud and made my way to the fridge.

Stuck to the fridge was a picture of Jake: his feet tied behind his back, his hands tied down, a gag in his mouth and completely naked.

"When was this taken?" I asked.

"Oh, I asked Gordon to take it the other day. It's for my ad in *Boyz*."

"What ad in *Boyz*?"

"Didn't I tell you? I'm going to put my ad in *Boyz* for some extra money."

"An ad for what exactly?"

"I've decided to become a rent boy", Jake said as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

"Rent boy?"

"Yes darling, a prostitute. A whore."

"Oh", I said.

I was speechless. Sexual freedom was one thing, but prostitution quite another.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It seems like fun. I’ve spoken to lots of rent boys at the clubs and they all said it’s such easy money.”

“Yeah but isn’t it going to affect you emotionally? Mentally?”

Not that I have anything against sex workers, but I have not heard of one prostitute saying that it doesn’t affect them in some negative way. It did seem exciting hearing him speak about it however. And what did I care what he did for a living as long as he was happy. I had to warn him about the dangers and long-term effects but somehow they didn’t seem that bad. My best friend had decided to become a prostitute and I was fine with it.

“Yeah but Kate, I have sex anyway so why not get paid for it? Besides men feel differently about sex than women, we don’t really care how just as long as we get it!”

“What about your job at the restaurant?” my rational side spoke again.

“I quit. I wasn’t enjoying it anymore. You see, I’ve figured it out. I need to have sex at least 5 times a day. £60 a time makes it £300 a week, which is more than enough money to live on. And I don’t work the insane hours I did at the restaurant. If you think about it my career change makes a lot of sense.”

“What about your emotional well-being?”

“I don’t see that being a problem. I enjoy being dominated and what better way than being paid for sex.”

In a way I admired his freedom. The fact that he seemed to be so unaffected by what is considered to be socially inappropriate. That he did what he wanted and seemed not to care about the consequences.

Jake took the coffee out. Everybody seemed happy with their coffee which was a relief.

I called Caelan to the kitchen to show her the picture of Jake that he had put up on the fridge.

“Caelan, have you seen the picture of Jake naked?” I said.

Brent shook his head at me and mouthed “No”.

I looked at him and said, “What? It’s just a picture.”

He glared at me but it was already too late and Caelan was standing next to me. I took

her into the kitchen and showed her the picture of Jake.

“Oh my God, it’s fucking huge”, she said and pointed at his penis.

“I suppose it is”, I said.

She looked at the picture for a while and then turned away.

“I couldn’t deal with that”, she concluded. “Who took the photo?”

“Gordon. It’s for Jake’s ad in *Boyz*. He’s quit his job to become a rent boy.”

“You’re fucking joking!”

“No, really”, I said and called Jake from the lounge.

“What?” Jake asked as he came around the corner.

“Caelan doesn’t believe me that you’re a rent boy now.”

“Yeah”, he said, looking at Caelan.

“You’re joking”, Caelan said.

“No really”, he laughed.

We returned to the lounge and I noticed that Brent was glaring at me. I ignored him and took a seat next to Astral who was looking a bit bewildered.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah yeah, I’m fine.”

“It must be overwhelming to find yourself in room full of freaks you don’t even know.”

She smiled and looked relieved. “That’s exactly it!”

“Don’t worry, we’re not staying long.”

“Okay.”

“So are we going to Trade? Yay!” I shouted to inspire both Jake and Liam who were looking a bit tired.

“Yeah”, Jake said, but Liam did not look so sure.

“Do you rather want to go another time?” I asked Liam.

“No, I said I’d take you to Trade. It’s fine.”

Liam was a member so if we went with him we would have no problem getting in.

It was time to go. Caelan and Brent went home as they were not up for Trade. Jake, Liam, Astral and I made our way to Liam’s car and drove to Trade. When we got out the car I put my bag in the boot and Liam accidentally slammed the boot down on my hand.

“Eh, Liam! My hand”, I said calmly, indicating that my hand was stuck.

I was still e-ing and didn't feel a thing.

"Oh sorry", he said.

I watched my hand swell a bit. I felt no pain.

There was hardly a queue when we got there. Not that it mattered because if you had membership, you walked right in.

We handed in our coats and bags at the coat check. I loved coat checks. You could check in all your belongings: bag, wallet, tube ticket. For the rest of the evening you could be anonymous with no form of identification on you. You could check in all your thoughts and beliefs and for the rest of the evening live only in the moment.

None of us had any drugs left but at Trade that was never a problem. We set off to the dealers.

Astral and I followed Jake and Liam into a large room with a bar. It was packed and we had to swim through the sea of people. Jake and Liam came to a standstill behind a big muscular guy with a recycle tattoo on the back of his neck.

"What now?" I asked Jake.

"There's a queue."

We were standing at the back of a meandering queue that made its way to three men standing with their backs against the wall. They were dealing quite openly and I was amazed at all the people buying drugs on a Sunday morning.

The queue moved quickly though and when it was my turn to buy, I walked up to the dealer. He was wearing a baseball cap, the peak had a fold mark down the centre. He had several gold chains round his neck.

I leaned over to him and said, "What do you have?"

He listed about ten different types of e that he had and I placed my order.

We gently pushed our way onto the dance floor. We walked up a few stairs and walked along the raised level to the back of the dance floor that was now on our left. There were two rows of shirtless dancing Muscle Mary's facing each other and we had to walk in between the two rows. Their shaven chests gave me stubble burn as I brushed past them which stung when it mixed with their salty sweat.

The music was incredible and Jake, Liam, Astral and I spent the entire morning dancing. Jake and I kept pulling faces at each other and tried to outdance each other. He danced

amazingly hard and I struggled to keep up. I was glad when he interrupted his dancing to snog men in the near vicinity and used the opportunity to have a rest. When he resumed his dancing stance we stood side by side, pumping our fists to the hard beat of the music. I started feeling tired. I was still e-ing but I had no energy left to dance. I went to sit down at the side of the dance floor. Astral joined me and I could see she was tired as well.

Jake came over and sat down next to me.

“So what do you think of Trade?” he asked.

“It’s amazing.”

We had a cigarette and then Jake said, “Come, let’s go dance.”

“In a minute.”

“Are you feeling a bit tired?”

“Yeah.”

He reached into his pocket and got out a little bag with white powder.

“Have some of this”, he said and handed me the bag.

“What is it?”

“Speed.”

I didn’t hesitate. At that moment I had no reservations. I finally got it. Everyone was just out to have a good time, it was as simple as that.

“What do I do?” I asked.

“Lick your finger, stick it in the bag and rub it on your gums. Just have a little bit because it’s fucking strong. It’s uncut.”

I did what he said and then he gestured me to offer some to Astral.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Speed.”

“Speed? Speed? Oh my god, you’re kidding! I love speed!” she said with a possessed look in her eyes.

Jake went to dance and Astral and I stayed seated for a while. It took about 20 minutes before I could feel the speed working through me. My eyes popped open and I felt alert and awake. I had loads of energy and got up to dance. Thoughts were racing through my head at an incredible pace and I kept jumping from subject to subject.

Let's go dance. Eh, where's Jake? Oh there he is, I'll go dance with him. He's such a mad bastard. No I need to dance by myself, he's distracting me with all his antics. Where is Astral? Oh there she is. Wow, look at her go. She's dancing like a maniac. Where's Liam? He's not here. Jake will know.

"Hey, where's Liam?" I scream into Jake's ear.

"Toilet."

Toilet. He's gone to the toilet. My mind is overactive. What's going on? Must be the speed! The speed, the speed, the speed. I can't stop dancing. I love this track.

"Hey, I fucking love this track", I yelled to Jake.

"Ah, it's fucking brilliant!"

Brilliant indeed. The DJ is a fucking god! What an incredible mix. Wow this build-up is too much. I'm gonna explode.

"Poppers?" Jake asks.

"Why the fuck not?" I yell.

Jake hands me the poppers and I inhale deeply. I hand it back to him and feel light-headed almost immediately. I love poppers. And so does Spike. Look at him go, the host of Trade. I wonder how much he gets paid? Jake says he's here every Sunday, blowing his whistle and getting the crowd going. He looks like a devil in that outfit: red g-string and red studded braces. Hardcore! Inhaling poppers for at least a minute at a time while the crowd cheers, he's fucking mad.

The morning was over in a flash. Time had flown past. Jake and I were quite annoyed as we still had loads of energy and wanted to dance.

Astral and I waited outside for Jake who had gone to get our bags and he came up with Liam and his friend, Sarah.

"It's Sarah's birthday today", he announced.

"Happy birthday Sarah", I said and kissed her on the cheek.

"I'm having a few drinks for my birthday at Escape. Do you guys want to come along?" she asked Jake.

"That sounds like fun", he said. "We'll meet you there, yeah?"

On the way to Escape we stopped by a porn shop to buy Sarah a present. Jake decided on a rather cheesy-looking lesbian porn book.

Sarah was already at Escape when we arrived and she ordered a few bottles of champagne for us. We had a few glasses to calm ourselves down.

When they changed the music to hard house, Jake leapt up and started dancing by himself on the small dance floor, slightly to the left of our table. We were the only people in the bar and Jake got a few glances from the two barmen on duty.

The music was too good to let it go to waste so I got up and joined him.

Jake and I immediately continued our competition and glaring at each other, started dancing harder and faster. I lost my breath every now and then. It pissed me off a great deal as I had to stand still for a few seconds. I was determined to outdance Jake though and refused to give up. My heart was beating very irregularly from the speed and I was coughing a bit but nothing could deter me.

Jake slowed down and was heading to the table.

"I knew it! I knew it!" I yelled. "I knew I'd win!"

He stopped dead in his tracks. He slowly turned towards me, opened his mouth, stuck his tongue out and extinguished his burning cigarette on his tongue. He spat the saliva-ash in my face and with a demonic expression shouted, "Dance, bitch!"

I burst out laughing and we spent the rest of the afternoon, glaring at each other while dancing wildly, not taking a moment to rest.

Liam had to drag Jake and I off the dance floor when he wanted to go and we vowed to continue the battle some other time.

At Jake's place, Liam had a shower to prepare for the S&M pub he and Jake were planning to go to that evening. Astral fell asleep on the couch.

I made some coffee while Jake rolled a joint.

"So what do you think of Liam?" Jake asked me when I came to sit down.

"He's a lovely guy. I like him very much."

"Yeah he's great", Jake said.

"How long have you been seeing him?"

"About two months."

He paused and then said, "Yeah, he's great. Which is why I feel so bad about having to break up with him."

"Why, what's wrong?"

"I just don't like him that way. He's such a nice guy and we're really good friends but I just don't want him as a boyfriend. Do you know we've never had sex?"

"What? Are you serious? Why not?"

This was unheard of for Jake because he had quite a high libido. This is one of the reasons he always had to have an open relationship where he could have sex with anyone anytime he wanted.

"We like different types of sex. I like it a bit rough, no inhibitions. Just do whatever you want to."

"And what kind of sex does Liam like?"

"Normal sex."

Liam came out of the bathroom and Jake left to get dressed. When he came out he was wearing shorts, a Diesel shirt and a dog collar with studs.

"Ready?" he asked Liam.

"Yeah."

I remembered when Jake and I went to go and buy the dog collar. We were walking around the Marble Arch area, just chatting about this and that, when Jake suddenly stopped in front of a pet shop.

"I need to go in here for a sec", he said.

I was a bit puzzled but followed him into the shop. He was looking at all the dog collars when a dear old lady offered her assistance.

"What type of dog is it for?" she asked.

"Ehm... I'm not sure", Jake replied and continued paging through the collars hanging from the silver rail.

"Well, how big is your dog?" the lady insisted.

"Eh... a bullmastiff", Jake said.

"I see", the lady replied. "Here, try this one."

Jake took the collar from her and tied it around his neck.

"Are you also looking for a collar dear", she asked me and then quickly added "for your dog."

"No, I don't have a dog", I replied.

“Ah.”

“This one seems fine”, Jake said. “I’ll take it.”

Jake paid and left with his dog collar in a brown paper bag.

I woke Astral up and she was so disorientated from her deep drug sleep that it took her a good couple of minutes to realise where she was and who I was. She looked fucking scary, as everyone does really when you don’t let them sleep off their drug hangover.

Jake picked up his dog leash from the table and attached it to his collar. He handed the end to Liam and said, “Right, we’re off.”

We walked downstairs and Jake snarled at me as I said goodbye. Liam quickly pulled him back and Astral and I watched Liam leading Jake to the car.

We waved goodbye and made our way to the tube station.

“What time is it?” Astral asked.

“Six o’clock.”

We walked in silence the rest of the way, both of us too tired to attempt conversation. At the tube station we said goodbye and promised to go out again soon. I was incredibly tired when I finally got home. I forced myself to eat something as Jake recommended and had every intention of going for a bath. I woke up the next morning, however, in my clubbing clothes with my towel still flung over my shoulder.

6. SERIOUS

Astral and I decided to go to Serious on the weekend. It was a decent club and we agreed that a change from the fetish clubs might do us a world of good.

It was held every third Saturday night at The Cross near King's Cross Station. The doorman was an old school chum of mine and promised to get us in for free.

The music at Serious was brilliant, serious hard house that took you so high you thought you'd died and gone to heaven. When we arrived my school chum escorted us past the cashier and we were in. It was quite a small club that was always too full due to the greedy owners' nervous desperation to make a few more pounds.

The e we took was really good and in no time at all we were pretty loved-up. My trip started with the usual tingles and the ecstatic feeling where nothing seems to be able to touch you.

I was dancing when I suddenly stopped dead in my tracks. The music sounded completely different, I could hear every level of sound perfectly: the bass, the beats, the melody. But apart from that I could also hear the people in the club with perfect clarity. I could hear every word people were saying, regardless of how loud they were speaking or how far they were from me.

I saw a girl on the dance floor, probably seven feet from me, yell into her friend's ear and heard her say, "I love this song. It's so good."

People were mostly commenting on the music with such exclamations as "This is my favourite song!" "Let's go outside for a while", and "How are you feeling?"

I heard Astral dancing next to me say, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I'm fine", I said and smiled. "Why?"

"You're not dancing."

"Oh."

I started dancing again and saw a guy standing a few feet away on my right looking very concerned.

I heard him mumble, "Oh shit, I forgot to turn the stove off."

It occurred to me that I could possibly just be imagining my superhearing so I decided to verify my new super power.

I walked over to him and repeated what he said, "Oh shit, I forgot to turn the stove off."

I was about to ask him if that was what he had said but he looked at me with a surprised look on his face and fled.

"Would you do me a favour?" I asked Astral when I returned to the dance floor.

"What?"

"Go stand over there and say something. Don't shout, just say it like you would normally."

"Why?"

"I'm trying to see if I have superhearing or whether I just think I do."

"Okay", she said and she walked to the place I indicated.

There were now three people dancing between us and under normal circumstances I knew I wouldn't be able to hear her.

"My name is Astral", I heard her say perfectly clearly.

I walked over to her and repeated what she had said to me. She looked impressed.

"But that was too easy", I said. "It's the first thing people say when asked to say something. Do something more difficult and this time turn your back towards me."

I walked back to my original position and listened carefully for her next line.

"The dog flies over the ship at midnight", I heard her say.

Again, I walked over and repeated what I had heard. It was confirmed. I did indeed have superhearing and the guy did in fact forget to turn the stove off. He's probably gone home to correct that oversight, I thought.

I was quite taken with my new skill and listened to the words that drifted to me from the crowd of people in the club. I was quite disappointed with what I heard, mostly just a lot of shouting when someone recognised a song they liked.

But then I heard very softly the words "Help me", coming from somewhere behind me. I turned around and saw a couple kissing behind me. Behind them was a wall.

Again I heard "Help me", and realised the couple didn't say these words. I told Astral I was going to sit down and walked through the opening in the wall to the chill-out area where the words were coming from.

Sitting on the floor I saw a big muscular guy. He couldn't have been older than nineteen.

I leant over and asked, "Did you just say 'Help me'?"

He nodded.

He looked very lost and I sat down next to him, my back propped up against the wall behind me.

“Can you just talk to me for a while? I feel a bit strange”, he said to me.

“What’s the matter, friend?” I asked and took his hand in mine.

“I’ve just taken three e’s and I feel bad.”

“Do you feel sick?”

“No I just feel strange. I don’t know how I’m feeling. All I know it’s not good.”

“Just relax. You’re rushing. It will go away in a few minutes.” I looked on my watch and said, “Just give it five minutes and you’ll be fine.”

He nodded in agreement and moved closer to me, resting his hand on my thigh.

He was grinding his jaw and I could feel the muscles in his arm that was resting against me go into spasms. I massaged his back and could feel the muscles twitch under my fingers.

“Just relax”, I said.

My massaging wasn’t helping at all so I moved my hands down his muscles in forceful strokes. His muscles stopped twitching and I told him to breathe deeply.

I stayed with him, talking him through his hallucinations and paranoia. I convinced him that no one wanted to kill him, that it was just the drugs and most importantly that everything would return to normal as soon as the drugs had worn off. I kept telling him it will be over in five minutes and so he did not realise that he had been rushing for three hours.

Astral came to look for me and sat down next to me.

“Where have you been?”

“Right here. This guy is having a fucking mind-bending trip and I’ve got to help him.”

“Well you could at least have told me where you were.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry but I couldn’t leave him.”

“What you couldn’t have left him for one minute to come and tell me where you were? I was looking for you for the last two hours. I was worried!”

“Sorry”, I said flippantly.

“I’m going to dance. Are you coming?” she asked.

“In a little while. I just want to make sure he’s alright.”

She sighed and got up. I knew she sighed because I still had my superhearing.

My friend eventually stopped rushing and thanked me for a good few minutes for being so helpful.

“Don’t worry”, I said. “I know exactly how you feel.”

“I hope you don’t mind me touching you. I promise it’s not sexual at all. I’m not coming on to you or anything, I just have to touch someone”, he said.

“I know”, I said.

“Can I ask you a favour”, he said.

“Sure”, I said.

“You see my girlfriend doesn’t like oral sex. She says I hurt her. Can you perhaps tell me exactly what to do or maybe just give me a few pointers?”

“Sure”, I said.

I constructed the external female genitalia on his jeans, reconstructing the folds in his jeans into a clitoris and labia. Pointing to the various parts I first explained how it worked and then talked him through, step by step, the various stages of oral sex.

He asked questions that I answered to the best of my ability. At the end he seemed quite confident that he would be able to perform the act a lot better than he had done in the past.

We sat in silence for a while and then he asked, “Are you an angel?”

“No”, I said.

“I think you are”, he smiled.

I leaned over and kissed him. I was totally immersed in the moment. That is all I knew.

I got up and smiled. He mouthed ‘thank you’.

I said goodbye and joined Astral on the dance floor. We did a few lines of speed in the toilets which soon showed in our dancing. I was dancing hard and enjoying the incredible music the DJ was playing. I had lost my superhearing. I couldn’t decide whether I was upset because I no longer had my power or relieved that I was back to normal.

I decided not to give it too much thought and submerged myself in the wavy depths of collective bliss.

7. RAW CABBAGED

It was Gay Pride. This meant a march through town and then a huge piss-up afterwards. I slept off a drug hangover and only got up to meet Astral at her work at 5 o'clock. I saw her walking towards me. She looked down.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Nothing", she replied, the annoyance clearly noticeable in her voice.

"Tell me, maybe you'll feel better once you've talked about it."

"I'm just tired all the time. I can't work there anymore, I'm on my feet all day. It's just getting to me."

"So maybe look around for another job."

"When?" she yelled as if it was my fault she didn't have any free time.

"What's the matter with you?"

"I'm sorry. It's the speed. It makes me so irritable the day after."

"You'll feel better tomorrow."

She shrugged.

We took a tube to Covent Garden and met up with Dave. They were very close. She told me that when they went to Brighton for the weekend she had to sleep on top of Dave as they only took one sleeping bag. He was nice enough; hyperactive though.

Astral thought he was the most amazing person she had ever met. My presence was by-the-way whenever Dave was near. The closest way to define their relationship is to say they were in love, only they didn't have sex. Astral had this thing for effeminate gay men. She was forever falling in love with them. She once went out with a gay man for about three months. How she managed that God only knows. Apparently the only way they had sex was when Astral fucked him up the arse with a dildo.

Astral told me that she and Dave had a very special relationship that even *they* themselves did not understand. How then could she possibly explain it to me?

After we met up with Dave we walked up towards Soho and through Rupert Street. The streets had changed into living organisms as people wriggled and pushed past each other to reach their destination. There were crowds of people standing outside the pubs, drinking their pints and enjoying the hot summer air.

We decided to have a drink in a pub that did not look too crowded. Astral and Dave were laughing at their own private jokes dating back as far as three years ago. I had a few pints of lager and watched the people laughing and flirting, still feeling groggy.

It was time to leave as Astral and I still had to get ready for the house party Jake had invited us to. It was going to be held in a flat near Old Street and called Raw Cabbaged.

We went home quickly and changed.

Astral assured me that in Vancouver everyone dressed like her, but I had my doubts. As for London, she definitely stood out and all that was queeny would be drawn to her, hypnotised by the glitter and shine Astral so proudly wore when she went out.

We met Jake at the agreed bus station at 11:25 p.m. The flat was in a building that used to be an old toy factory, with steel staircases on the outside of the building leading to the top floors. Raw Cabbaged was held on the top floor. People were sitting on the stairs talking and Jake, Astral and I had to serpentine our way to the top.

The flat was emptied of all furniture. There were a lot of people crammed into the first room, which was the designated dance floor. The DJ was playing really good hard house and the crowd was dancing in unison, their feet stamping off the beats on the hollow-sounding wooden floor. There was no air-conditioning inside and most of the men were bare-chested.

The three of us went to look for the coat check and found a small walk-in closet in the hall where jackets and bags were piled on top of each other. We threw our stuff on top and made our way to the dance floor. Jake and Astral each had a pill while I had a half and we started dancing.

The pills were strong and Astral and I went to sit on the stairs to get some fresh air. We were rushing and sat in silence while we waited for it to pass. The rush lasted for some time and it was only an hour later that we managed to go to the dance floor again.

Jake was talking to an unusual looking guy. He made me feel really weird. In fact, he gave me the creeps.

Jake introduced him to us as Mike.

I asked Jake discreetly if Mike was business or pleasure.

“Pleasure”, he answered.

But I knew that for Jake business was also pleasure so there really was no way of telling.

Mike shook my hand and looked at me; it was the most invasive look I have ever had from someone. I realised that I was under the influence and therefore prone to paranoid thoughts. Mike had an unusual appearance: aquiline features – a narrow nose, thin lips and a narrow face. He seemed very delicate. Not Jake's type at all.

Everything about him was strange: the way he spoke, the way he carried himself, the way he attempted to make conversation. He did not seem foreign, in fact his accent was English, but there was just something odd about him, something I couldn't quite place.

"Could you please stop staring at Mike", Jake said to me when we were alone.

"Am I staring?" I asked.

"Yes!"

"Okay."

I tried to put the whole thing out of my mind but every time I saw Mike, all sorts of paranoid thoughts entered my head again. And the creepiest thing of all was that when Mike saw I was looking at him, he would just give me an incredibly insincere smile.

"Astral, do you notice anything weird about Mike?"

"No."

"Don't you think he's a bit odd?"

"What do you mean odd?"

"I don't know, like he doesn't belong here."

"No, not really. He just looks like a regular guy."

"I don't know, there's something very strange about him. Maybe he was in a mental institution and he's only got out a week ago. You know, that kind of look."

"What look? What are you talking about?"

"I'm telling you, there's something weird about this guy. I just know it."

"You've got such an imagination, Kate. Just let it go."

I tried to let it go, I tried to guide my mind into thinking of other things but my mind wanted to think of Mike. He was a mystery that had to be unravelled even if it took the rest of my life.

I popped another half a pill and went to dance. The rush was intense and I had to sit down again. Jake and Astral found me on the stairs and told me that we were leaving. We spent forever trying to find our coats and bags in the chaos of the cloakroom.

Jake invited Mike along to a chill-out at his place. I thought it would be the perfect setting to figure out what Mike was all about. So the four of us walked down the stairs and out into the street in search of a cab.

Perhaps Mike was really a mental patient. No, he seemed quite calm and unperturbed by anything at all. Jake, Astral and I, probably classified as sane, had seemingly more insecurities than he had. But if he wasn't a mental patient, then what? What could possibly explain his weirdness?

I asked Astral again what she thought.

"Dunno", was all she could say and I knew I wouldn't get any answers from her.

We made our way to the nearest cab station and walked through a dark alley with overturned trashcans lying in the street. A cat was poised on top of a trashcan and when we walked passed, it started hissing at us.

We followed Jake through the maze of alleys as he led us to the main road. Ahead I saw another cat that hissed at us as we walked past.

"I wonder what's got into the cats tonight?" I asked.

"It's me", Mike said. "Cats don't like me for some reason."

This was another clue but what did it mean?

I was following the three of them through the alleyways. I kept some distance between me and them because I needed to think. Mike turned his head and looked at me. He smiled. He fell back to speak to me.

"Do you have anything on you?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Any drugs. I've taken all mine."

It finally dawned on me that Mike was an undercover cop. He wanted to know who was taking drugs and arrest them. That was his master plan.

"I'm sorry. I don't do drugs", I said.

He looked at me for a while and then walked faster to join Jake and Astral ahead.

We finally arrived at the cab station and took a cab back to Jake's place for a chill-out. Astral and Jake were oblivious to the fact that Mike was a cop. I wanted to tell them but I had to get some proof first.

At Jake's flat I offered to make coffee. Mike, Jake and Astral sat down in the lounge

while I went into the kitchen. When I brought them their coffee, Mike was leaning forward to flick his cigarette ash in the ashtray on the coffee table.

“A fucking undercover cop in our midst”, I whispered.

“Sorry”, Mike said.

“Nothing”, I said.

Mike knew I was on to him now. He started to shift around on the couch and didn’t make eye contact.

He was probably onto Jake. He saw him at the club selling e’s to his friends and now thought Jake was a dealer. Astral and I are obviously accomplices and were going down with him. I had to expose him. I had to outsmart him.

“So Mike what do you do?” I asked.

“I’m kinda in between jobs at the moment.”

“I see.”

Pause.

“Well what did you do before?”

“I worked at the RSPCA.”

“Doing what exactly?”

“This and that.”

“Meaning?”

“Oh, you know the usual. I cleaned kennels and fed the animals.”

“I see. Do you honestly expect us to believe that you worked at the RSPCA even though on the way here you admitted that cats hate you?”

“Eh...”

“Well?”

Jake interjected, “Kate what the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Nothing. I just want to know what he does for a living.”

“He just told you.”

“Come on Jake, are you really that naïve?”

“Why would he lie?” Astral asked.

“That’s what I would like to know.”

“Look, I worked at the RSPCA because I couldn’t get a proper job. But I got fired

because the cats went ballistic whenever I came near them.”

I thought about this for a while. This guy was smooth.

“And what did you do before that?” I asked.

“For God’s sake Kate, have you gone mad?” Jake wanted to know.

“Okay, let me speak plainly. Are you a cop? Because if you are you have to tell us.”

“Are you serious?” Mike wanted to know.

“Completely. Just say ‘I’m not a cop’”.

“I’m not a cop.”

I thought about that for a while. Maybe that’s only in America where they have to admit that they are cops. Maybe it doesn’t apply to England cops.

“So why don’t cats like you?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“It’s odd though, you must admit.”

“It is quite.”

“Kate”, Jake said, “what’s got into you?”

“Nothing, I just want him to admit he’s a cop.”

“He’s not a cop.”

“How would you know?”

“He just said so!”

Jake looked at Astral and shrugged.

“Kate, you’re just being paranoid”, Astral said.

“Why is everyone looking at me as if I’m crazy?” I asked.

Mike was looking very uncomfortable in the corner. It occurred to me that there was indeed a possibility that he was not a cop at all.

“Anyway, cop or not, I think I should be getting home”, I announced.

“Me too”, Astral said, relieved that we were leaving.

We said goodbye and as we left Mike said to me, “I’m not a cop, I promise.”

“Whatever”, I shrugged.

Astral and I walked to the tube station.

“Do you really think he is a cop?” Astral asked.

“I don’t know. I just got a weird vibe from him”, I said.

After a long silence I said, "You know, there's a thin line between intuition and paranoia. If I could distinguish between them my life would be so much easier."

"I know what you mean", Astral said.

"I mean how do you distinguish between truth and illusion? Not through reason I am sure, because if the mind can be tricked so easily then it is not such a good tool to use."

"It's just the drugs, they make you paranoid", she said.

And I suppose she was right. I just had a bad trip. These things happen.

8. RENEGADES

When Jake arrived at our house party with a big bag full of drugs I should have known there would be trouble. He had everything: e's, speed, poppers, trips and hash. Jake waved his bag of drugs in front of my face but I refused the offer.

I felt very uncomfortable taking drugs in front of my housemates, Weston and Ewan. Maybe because they didn't take any themselves but I think more likely because every time I would come home from clubbing they had conversations with me an inch away from my face to see my dilated pupils or would try to take photographs of them.

Jake was already pretty high when he arrived and immediately proceeded to the lounge to dance. I was fairly drunk and decided to join him.

"Poppers?" he asked me, with a mischievous smile.

"No, Jake", I said, trying to keep him in check but knowing full well that it would be impossible with that glint in his eyes.

Jake added an excitement to life that made it impossible to refuse his requests.

"Where's Astral?" he asked.

"She's gone out with Dave tonight."

"Why couldn't she come here first?"

"I don't know. It's his birthday and she wants to spend it with him. They've gone to watch a show and then to this new club that's opening tonight. Breakbeats or something."

"Sounds dreadful."

I didn't like breakbeats, especially not if that is all they played the entire evening.

Jake inhaled a liberal amount of poppers, by anyone's standards, and turned to me with his mouth closed and two lungs full of poppers. I opened my mouth allowing him to force the poppers air into my lungs. I felt light-headed within seconds and we starting dancing very hard to the handbag house that was playing.

Jake disappeared and I saw him in the kitchen a bit later. He was trying to convince Weston to take half an e. Weston, as usual, had way too much to drink and in this state was easily convinced.

"Come on Weston, you should try everything at least once", Jake said.

“What will happen to me?”

“You’ll just feel really good and happy. Just take a half, then it won’t be so strong.”

Weston hesitated for a while and it took another few minutes of convincing before he eventually agreed and swallowed his half.

At that moment Lee entered and asked, “What’s going on?”

“I just took half an e”, Weston cried jovially, waving his arms in the air in a camp, flamboyant manner.

The low-down on Lee was that he was the world’s biggest closet case but didn’t even know it. He claimed he was heterosexual but all his friends had their suspicions.

Anyway, Lee heard that Weston took half an e and then proceeded to get onto his little soapbox.

“Weston, how could you take drugs? Do you realise what you’ve done?”

Weston panicked, “What’s going to happen me?”

Jake quickly stepped in and said, “Lee just fuck off! Weston, you’re going to feel really good, just relax.”

“No you’re not!” Lee interrupted, “you’re going to feel terrible and you’re going to go on a trip.”

“Oh for God’s sake Lee, you have never even taken e and now you want to tell Weston what it’s like.”

But it was too late and Weston was scared.

“I don’t want it anymore, I don’t want it, I don’t want it”, he yelled.

Jake took Weston by the arm and turned to me, saying "Come, let’s go”.

He frog-marched Weston into the back garden.

“Weston, are you sure you don’t want it?” I asked.

“Yes, I don’t want it. What am I going to do?”

Without warning Jake quickly turned him around and facing Weston’s back, he bent him over. With one quick movement he stuck two fingers down Weston’s throat and within seconds the pill was lying in a pile of vomit on the grass - situation solved.

Weston ran away and I didn’t see him for the rest of the evening. Ewan said he wasn’t feeling well and was lying down.

I went to dance again and it wasn’t long before Ewan came into the lounge and

announced, whilst fainting rather dramatically on the couch, “Oooohh, I just had some poppers, I feel dizzy!”

What does Jake think he’s doing, I thought. I went to look for him and found him lying on the grass in the garden with Steven, a friend of Ewan’s. Jake had taken off his shirt and Steven was pouring hot wax from a blue candle onto his chest.

“Jake, what the fuck are you doing?” I asked.

Jake lifted his head and peering at me through one eye, the other eye shut, asking innocently, “Why whatever do you mean?”

“Jake, you know these people don’t do drugs. Someone’s going to get sick or something.”

“I can’t make anyone do anything they don’t want to do”, Jake replied.

“They’re drunk Jake, of course they’re going to say yes. And you of all people should know better. Do you know how dangerous it is to give someone e when they’ve been drinking all day? For God’s sake, you were so anal when I took e for the first time.”

“Oh just relax. Come sit down and chat to me and Steven”, Jake said.

I knew I couldn’t reason with him. When he was straight, he was already difficult to convince but on e and God knows what else it was impossible.

“Come on, Kate, come sit down”, he said and patted the grass next to him.

I knew all resistance was futile. I sat down and we chatted for a while. Jake was off his face and smiling from ear to ear.

“I feel so good, it’s incredible”, Jake said, almost crying.

He then took out his drug bag and pulled out two pills.

“Do you want some e, Kate?” Jake asked.

“No Jake, I’m not going to take anything in front of all these people. Ewan’s boss is here, you know.”

“Come on, Kate, just take half. Half won’t even have an effect on you.”

It’s not that I couldn’t say not to Jake, it’s that I didn’t want to. It was exciting just being around him. He had an air of excitement around him. He could make something as mundane as someone cutting in front of him at the supermarket sound like the most thrilling and exciting thing on earth.

He broke the pill in half, held it in front of my mouth and said, “Just take it. Stop

thinking so much, it's your biggest downfall in life you know."

And with that I swallowed half a pill.

I decided to just go with whatever should happen, completely surrendering to what the night might have instore for me.

Ewan was talking to me when I came up.

"Did you snog Jake earlier?" he asked, rather horrified and confused.

"No, he just gave me some poppers."

I tried in vain to discourage Ewan's talkativeness with monosyllabic answers but he was so drunk he didn't even care whether I was listening or not.

Finally I couldn't take it anymore. I just wanted to get into a club and dance. I had butterflies in my stomach and even though I tried to control the situation by forcing them to fly in a circle, they would have none of it and flew wherever the hell they wanted. My palms were sweaty and I got up to go look for Jake so that we could leave.

I found him sprawled across the floor in the passage, Steven busy giving him a blow-job with some people staring at them while others stepped over them on their way to the kitchen or lounge.

I couldn't help laughing.

"Jake, what's going on?" I asked, still laughing.

Jake looked at me blankly.

Ewan arrived on the scene, armed with his digital camera to capture the moment. By this time quite a crowd had gathered around Jake lying on the floor with his trousers around his ankles and Steven lying next to him with a sheepish grin.

Ewan was snapping away at Jake's penis while the crowd was shouting things like, "Oh my God, what a big dick", and "Hey Jake, how come you don't have an erection?"

It was the last comment that evoked the largest response from the crowd and voices were egging Steven on to try to get Jake's penis erect.

Steven didn't need much convincing but even with the piercing in his tongue he was powerless against the effects of the speed Jake had snorted a while ago.

Jake was enjoying the attention immensely, and laughing uncontrollably now.

Ewan said that if the penis wasn't erect the photos would look staged and it was imperative that we should get it right.

Jake held his penis up with his hand but this still looked staged according to Ewan.

“Try some string”, a voice called out from the crowd.

“Some invisible string”, was the response to that, “so that it doesn’t show on the photo.”

“String! String! Does anyone have some string?”

No one had string. What to do now?

Not to worry because Steven had a brilliant idea. We could use Jake’s shoelace!

The crowd loved that idea and pretty soon Jake’s shoelace was freed and handed to Jake as no one else offered to do the tying.

Jake suddenly remembered that he usually gets an erection if his balls are squeezed and tying the shoelace around them, he pulled the string tight. After several minutes of this, Jake’s balls turned from normal to red to blue, yet no erection.

So finally Jake just hooked the shoelace through his Prince Albert piercing, pulling his penis erect as this was the best that could be done under the circumstances.

After sufficient photos were taken, Jake pulled his trousers up.

“Jake, are you ready to go?”

“Yeah”, Jake said laughing.

“Okay, I’ll go call a cab.”

“Are you coming Steven?” Jake asked.

“Whereto?”

“Renegades.”

“Yeah, why not.”

The cab finally arrived and after a lot of yelling, pleading and threatening I got Jake and Steven in the cab and off we went. Jake was sitting in front while Steven and I were in the back. Steven was totally loved-up and was stroking my arm.

“Sorry, I just have to touch someone”, he apologised.

“No problem”, I said and put my head on his shoulder, completely loving the way my body was tingling.

Jake turned around and when he saw us, he smiled a beautiful smile that brought my butterflies back with a vengeance.

Steven reached out and started massaging Jake’s shoulder with his free hand.

I felt such a warmth moving through me and announced, “I love you boys so much.”

“Kate, please sing a song for Steven”, Jake said.

“Okay. Which one?” I asked.

There was a moment of silence as everyone tried to think of a song.

“Steven, you’re from Australia aren’t you? I know the perfect song”, I said and started singing “Over the Rainbow” from the *Wizard of Oz*. I smiled when my voice wavered as the taxi went over a bump in the road.

While I was singing, we kept on touching each other. I felt totally connected to them, an unbreakable bond of love forged between us.

When my song was finished, Steven looked me in the eyes and said with utter sincerity, “That was so beautiful.”

Jake turned around and said, “Kate, you have no idea what that did for me.”

He held my hand and we drove a while in silence.

“Can you stop at an ATM?” Jake asked the cab driver.

“Sure”, he said, seemingly quite relaxed about all the love in the car.

When the cab stopped, Jake got out and Steven followed while I remained seated in the car. I looked around and saw we were double-parked in Tottenham Court Road. It was Saturday night and the city was at its busiest; the streets were alive with tourists looking around, men in suits staggering home after a night at the pub, ravers impatiently walking to the club of their choice. I felt completely peaceful, so totally at ease in that moment that all sense of time melted away.

I was called back to reality by the cab driver when he said, “You know, I really can’t wait very long. I’m double-parked.”

The cab driver seemed a bit nervous and I couldn’t quite understand why. I assumed we had been waiting for quite a while.

“I don’t know what’s taking so long”, I said.

I rolled the window down and stared in the direction of the ATM. In the distance I could see one area where passers-by would slow down quite considerably to stare at a figure standing against the wall. Through the sea of people I finally saw that it was Jake standing against the wall with Steven giving him a blow-job.

“Jake! Steven! Get in the fucking car!” I screamed as loud and as intimidatingly as I could but I was still rushing and couldn’t help smiling at the whole idea that Jake was

getting a blow-job in the middle of Tottenham Court Road.

“I’m terribly sorry”, I apologised to the cab driver “I don’t know what’s gotten into them.”

I saw Jake and Steven running towards the car with their heads turned to one side, keeping an eye on the oncoming traffic.

“Not to worry”, the cab driver said, a lot more relaxed now.

Jake and Steven got in the car and we were off again. Jake turned around and looked at me with his big heart-warming smile with just a hint of mischief. I just shook my head and smiled back at him.

We stopped at a set of traffic lights and Jake said, “This is fine, we’ll get out here.”

He fumbled through his pockets for some money while Steven and I were still hugging each other.

We were like three little children, liberated from mundane reality, completely connected to each other. We took turns dealing with life’s little practicalities, like paying the cab driver and getting to where we wanted to be, without discussing it yet knowing exactly when to take over from each other. These practicalities were mere interruptions on our journey and had to be temporarily endured for the sake of a greater good, namely getting to the club as quick as possible.

We walked through Soho on our way to the club, holding hands and laughing. I was telling the boys a story when I noticed they weren’t walking with me anymore. I turned around and saw Jake giving Steven a blow-job this time.

“For fuck’s sake! Not again. Jake, can we please just get to the club first”, I shouted, but both of them were oblivious to everything except what they were doing and feeling.

“Can I drink your piss?” I heard Jake say.

“Why?” Steven asked.

“I really like it. Please?”

So there we were in a little side street in Soho: Jake with Steven’s penis in his mouth, drinking his urine and me waiting impatiently, eager for us to get to the club.

When Steven had no more urine left, Jake got up and wiping his mouth said, “You’re delicious.”

“He is so fucking gorgeous, don’t you think Kate?” Jake asked.

“Yeah he is”, I agreed and smiled at Steven. “But can we please just get to the club.”

We finally arrived at Renegades after what seemed like an eternity. Jake snogged the cashier and got in for free. He walked on ahead and when Steven and I entered we saw him doing his rounds, walking through the club, stopping briefly to say hi to his friends.

I excused myself and immediately moved onto the dance floor while Steven went to get something to drink. The music was magical and I lost myself in it completely. Jake joined me after some time and put another pill in my mouth. He took two himself and left again.

I don't know how long I danced for, but when I looked on my watch again I couldn't read the face. I decided to go for a stroll and went to the chill-out area which was right next to the dance floor. I had sat for a while when Caelan came up to me and kissed me hello. I was pleased to see her and hugged her for a while.

Jake joined us and I got up and stood next to him against the wall. He was completely out of it and couldn't stop smiling.

“Jesus Jake, how many did you take?” I asked.

He looked at me blankly and said, “I have no idea.”

I laughed.

“Have another one”, he said and the pill was already in front of my mouth.

“No Jake, please. No more”, I said, realising that in my present state it was a very bad idea.

“Come on, down it goes”, he said and I swallowed yet another pill.

We stood there for a while and then Jake asked, “Don't you want to do me a favour?”

“Sure”, I said.

“Next time you go for a piss, don't you want to take this and fill it up with your piss?” he said gesturing to his half-full water bottle.

“Why, do you want to recycle the e?”

“No, I've just always wondered what women's piss tastes like. I've tasted men's but never any women's.”

“Yeah, why not?” I said.

“Thanks a lot.”

So I chatted to Caelan for a while and when I needed the toilet, I took the bottle from

Jake and went to the toilet. In the cubicle I filled the bottle with my urine with some difficulty as I was pretty much out of it myself. In the end I managed to fill half the bottle and gave it to Jake who was still in the chill-out area.

He unscrewed the lid and took a small sip. It was quite different to the sexual vigour with which he drank Steven's piss and he was genuinely interested in the taste. He washed the liquid around in his mouth for a while, swallowed quickly and then leaned over to me, "It tastes completely different."

"Different, how?" I asked.

He took another small sip, pondered on the question for a while and then said, "It tastes more salty."

"Oh."

And with that he left and walked to a rather large bald guy a few metres away. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but he was one of Jake's friends. Jake said something to him and waited while the bald guy looked at the bottle in Jake's hand. He then nodded and Jake gave him the bottle. The bald guy took a sip of my urine and after washing it around in his mouth said something to Jake. The discussion continued for a while and then Jake moved on to the next guy.

"That fucker! I can't believe Jake", I said to Caelan and told her the what was happening. She laughed and said, "Talk about taking the piss!"

"He's mad! Good for him I'm e-ing otherwise I would have been seriously pissed off."

We both laughed at our piss jokes.

I started rushing badly and my head started to grow heavy. I sat down on the pool table and put my head in my hands. My vision was blurred and I couldn't focus on anything so I closed my eyes. I could feel the electric currents move through my body, it was intense and where the butterflies usually are was just a cold empty hole.

"Are you okay?" Caelan asked.

"I'm fine", I lied.

She knew I wasn't.

She leaned against the table, facing me, and pushed my head onto her shoulder. I was fucked. She gently stroked my head and the back of my neck and as if in a slow reflex movement I put my arms around and held on. I felt completely helpless and the loud

music and flashing lights weren't helping.

She turned her head and I could sense she was gesturing to someone behind her, shaking her head in disapproval. I opened my eyes and looked in the same direction. It was Jake and I saw him smiling, a naughty schoolboy who played an innocent prank.

Caelan saw I was looking at Jake in my semi-conscious state and asked me, "How many did Jake give you?"

"I don't know", I muttered and looked into her beautiful dark brown eyes.

She was gorgeous, that was the only thing I was certain about. I smiled.

She slowly leaned forward and very softly kissed me on my forehead, moving down towards my cheek and then my mouth. She paused and then kissed me again.

In that moment I freed myself from any consequences and inhibitions. I returned her kiss, giving myself to her completely, losing myself in my senses: the touch of her soft lips on mine, her warm hands resting on my face, the hardness of her tongue-piercing touching my tongue. My hands started to move down her back and I felt the curves of her butt under my hands.

I rested my head on her shoulder and waited for my rush to pass. She refused offers of poppers on my behalf, stroking my hair gently in a vain attempt to bring me down from my frightening flight towards the ultimate high.

She sat down next to me on the pool table and ran the spike that protruded from her silver ring down the soft inside of my right arm. I watched the ring move down my arm again and again, leaving a thin red line every time it did and I felt the most pleasurable tingles I have ever felt all over my body. It was so good it was almost painful.

The monotonous music had me in a hypnotic state beyond movement and physicality. Holding onto her was the only connection I still had with reality.

She followed the spiral of my ear with her tongue and when she reached the centre I felt nothing at all, only silence and stillness.

"Kate! Kate!" she shouted and shook my shoulders firmly.

My eyes couldn't focus anymore and her face was swimming in front of me. I felt fucking amazing.

From somewhere far away I heard Caelan say, "Her eyes are rolling back, Jake!"

The next thing I felt was ice cold water on my face and I gasped to catch my breath. I

saw Caelan in front of me, looking a bit worried and Jake smiling at me saying, "Are you back?"

I laughed feebly and felt my head growing heavy and slowly inching backwards.

"Here have some speed", I heard Caelan say and felt her rubbing the rough powder on my top gum.

My eyes were closed again and I ran the tip of my tongue across my top gum, feeling the rough granules scraping against my flesh.

After what seemed like a short flash, my eyes popped open and I saw Caelan and Jake staring at me. The empty feeling was gone and in its place was pure concentrated energy.

"Let's go dance", I said and hopped off the table.

"You're a fucking bastard", I heard Caelan say to Jake and then she followed me to the dance floor.

The speed had now kicked in, overriding my e rush and I was dancing like someone possessed. The build-ups in the music were unbelievable and I started jumping up and down, waving my fist in the air. I was dancing incredibly hard and within minutes sweat was pouring down my face. I took off my shirt and then continued dancing with even more enthusiasm wearing only a bra. Steven came up to me and I was so happy to see him I gave him a big hug.

"Where have you been?" I asked.

"I was chatting to this guy. I've got a date for Monday night."

"Lovely."

"Do you want some poppers?"

"Yeah", I said and inhaled deeply when he gave me the bottle.

The rush came back almost immediately but on the speed I was still able to dance. Caelan had some too and came to dance right behind me. She put her hands on my hips and we danced: sweating flesh against sweating flesh, her hands around my body, her mouth pressed against my neck. I didn't want the moment to end.

But the moment did pass and soon it was time to go and the lights were switched on. We decided to go for a chill-out at Finn and Zoe's, friends that Jake had made that evening.

We stopped by the off-license on the way and armed with fruit juice, cigarettes and Jake's baggy of drugs we set off to Finn and Zoe's flat. Steven announced that he was

going home when we walked past a tube station. I tried to convince him to come along but he had had enough. And I didn't blame him. Jake seemed far more interested in Finn now and did not even speak to or look at Steven.

The connection the three of us had had dissolved. I felt disappointed that I had let myself be tricked so easily. It was all just an illusion.

We finally reached their block of flats and followed Finn and Zoe up the stairs to the first floor. As soon as we sat down, Jake took out his baggy and said, "Right, who wants what?"

Finn and Zoe each bought one and took it. They made a few lines of coke on the table and were happily snorting away.

"Kate, Caelan, what are you having?" Jake asked.

"No more drugs! No more drugs!" Caelan cried, jokingly.

So Jake broke an e in half once again and offered it to me in his hand, saying, "Here, have half."

I was still feeling very energetic from the speed, almost invincible. I was the first to take one half from Jake's palm and Caelan followed suit. Jake popped two and just smiled when he saw me shaking my head at him. He and Finn each had two trips as well.

We listened to music for a while and chatted and then I started rushing again.

I leaned over to Caelan and said, "Oh no, what have I done."

"I know exactly how you feel", Caelan said and put her arms around me where I was sitting next to her on the couch.

Jake and Finn were dancing in the lounge.

Suddenly there was a loud knock at the door. I jumped. Finn went to see who it was. It was the neighbour complaining about the loud music at 7 o'clock on a Sunday morning. Finn turned it down a fraction and continued to dance with Jake. Their faces were bright yellow.

But I had barely made this observation when Caelan exclaimed, "Ha ha! Your faces are bright yellow."

Jake and Finn were tripping hard and looked frightened at this comment.

"What?" Jake asked slowly, nervously.

I turned to Caelan and whispered, "Don't say anything. They're tripping, they're going

to freak out.”

Caelan luckily saw the logic and said, “Nothing. I’m just a bit fucked, that’s all.”

I closed my eyes and leaned back into Caelan’s embrace, trying to relax and just go with the ride. It wasn’t working and even though I had only taken a half, I felt terrible. I was extremely paranoid with all the e rushing through me and thought that I didn’t want to be around these people who just take drugs all day. I couldn’t relate to them anymore, I wasn’t like them. I felt very scared and alienated.

A sudden coldness possessed my entire body and I shuddered. What am I doing? Positive thinking, that’s all this is about. Positive visualisation. I’m walking in the meadows, tra la tra la tra la. I see beautiful flowers dotted along the way, there’s a pleasant breeze in the air, tra la tra la tra la. I’m just walking and smiling. Fuck! What have I done?

I turned to the only person I still felt comfortable with, Jake. He was sitting on the couch and I went to sit at his feet. He was staring into space, eyes half closed, with his smile that now looked plain stupid.

“Jake! Jake!” I whispered several times before he heard me.

He leaned forward.

“Jake, I don’t feel well”, I said.

It took him a while to respond and he spoke very slowly.

“What’s wrong?” he smiled scarily.

“I don’t feel well, Jake.”

“You’re fine”, he said.

That was all the consoling he was capable of. In clear daylight things looked very different to the way they had in the club. I was extremely paranoid and didn’t trust anyone in the room. Caelan had after all broken up with her boyfriend, Brent, earlier that evening. She had told me just before we had arrived. So why did she then kiss me? She was up to something, but what? She wants Jake. She’s using me to make Jake jealous so they can get it together. And I just fell in the trap. I’m such a stupid idiot.

Caelan saw me looking at her and smiled.

I looked away, saw Jake and said, “What do you think I should do?”

I had to ask the question two more times before he responded.

“Just relax and enjoy the feeling. Don’t you feel good?”

“No I feel terrible”, I said a bit too loudly and became aware that Finn, Zoe, and Caelan were looking at me.

This did not help the paranoia and I stared at Jake’s feet in front of me for a while. I have to do something, I thought. Maybe I can just go home? No, bad idea! I can’t deal with Ewan and Weston now. They’ll freak me out even more. I don’t want to be alone either and I can’t bear being around these people. Beer usually helps! Maybe I should have some beer? But there wasn’t any beer on the table and I was too paranoid to ask anyone. I’m so tired, I thought. Maybe I should sleep? But what would these people think if I ask to sleep in their bed? They wouldn’t let me, they all think I’m weird.

Finally I couldn’t take it anymore and I asked Jake to ask Finn if I could sleep somewhere. But Jake just shrugged and I realised he couldn’t talk or perhaps couldn’t understand me.

I asked Finn and he showed me to the bedroom, saying he didn’t mind at all if I slept. As soon as I lay down I felt much better and knew that my paranoia was largely due to sleep deprivation.

I immediately fell into a coma, which I constantly moved in and out of. I would wake up without moving, hear the voices in the room next door and then move into a deep sleep again. I woke up when someone lay down behind me and put their arm around my waist but I fell asleep again and didn’t know who it was. I just remember feeling very safe for a moment when I felt human contact again, an arm sheltering me and I felt protected.

I don’t know how long I slept but it was dark outside when Jake came in and said that we were leaving. I felt like a self-conscious schoolgirl and was unable to look anyone in the eyes. I avoided eye contact with Caelan completely. My emotions were in a shambles; I felt jealous that Caelan really fancied Jake and not me. She had just used me.

When we left I barely managed to thank Finn and Zoe for their hospitality and raced downstairs, waiting for Jake and Caelan. The two of them were going to a pub but I announced without looking at them directly that I was going home.

“No, Kate”, Jake said, “come have a drink with us. It will be fun.”

But this time I was determined and I went home.

Caelan called the next evening to hear if I was okay. By this stage my paranoia had left and I saw matters a lot more clearly. I did not doubt the bond between Caelan and me anymore. The fact that she cared for Jake had nothing to do with it. That was another matter. How could I have been so stupid to even suspect she was using me?

"How are you feeling?" Caelan asked.

"Fine", I said, pretending that nothing had happened.

"I was just concerned because you seemed so lost when you left on Sunday."

"Lost? I don't recall feeling lost", I lied.

"Come on, Kate. You couldn't even look me in the eyes."

"Well, I was just paranoid from the drugs."

"What were you paranoid about?"

"Can't remember. Anyway, how are you doing?"

"Still recovering."

"How was the pub?"

"Oh, it was great fun. Jake and I had a few pints and had a nice comedown."

"So are you still living with Brent?"

"No, I've moved downstairs. I'm staying with his flatmate, Neil. We get on really well."

"Isn't that a bit awkward living with your ex-boyfriend's flatmate?"

"No, we're just good friends."

"I mean living in the same space as your ex-boyfriend?"

"No."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"I'm glad you called", I said.

"You didn't think I would?"

"No."

"Do you think I do this kind of thing every weekend?"

"I guess."

"Well I don't. Anyway, do you want to go for a drink sometime?"

"Yeah. Shall I give you a call?"

"Okay. See you then."

"Bye."

But I knew I wouldn't call.

I called Jake. I had to speak to someone about this.

"Hullo?" he answered.

"Hi. Do you mind that I kissed Caelan?"

I knew he didn't mind at all. I just wanted someone to tell me it was okay.

"No. Why should I?"

"I don't know. Because you liked her."

"Don't be stupid Kate. What's really bugging you?"

"I'm not sure."

"I don't see what you have to be upset about", he continued, "all you did was kiss someone. I have somehow, in the space of twenty four hours, taken or given people 58 pills."

"What?"

"That's right. These were all pills I needed to sell for rent and food. Now I have to somehow find twice as many clients as I usually do."

"You couldn't possibly have taken 58 pills."

"No, I took most of them but the rest I gave away like they were candy."

"Well let me at least pay for mine."

"No it's fine, Kate. I don't want your money. I had such a fabulous evening, it was worth it. Now I'll probably be evicted and starve to death. Oh my God", he laughed.

Jake could always be light-hearted under the most dire circumstances.

"I had a good time too. Just got a little paranoid towards the end."

"A little? You were practically certifiable!"

"I suppose."

"Anyway I got to go. I'm seeing a client in an hour and I still have to take a shower."

"Jake, one last thing before you go. Thanks for lying down next to me while I was sleeping."

"Huh?"

"You know at Finn's."

"That wasn't me. That was probably Caelan. She was tired and went to go lie down. The rest of us stayed in the lounge."

“Oh”, I said.

“Anyway, I’ll give you a call later yeah?”

“Bye.”

I put the phone back on the receiver. What was upsetting me so much about what happened? I flopped back on my bed and decided to figure it out later.

9. HEAVEN

We decided to go to Heaven, Astral's favourite club. I didn't particularly care for the music but I needed to slow down a bit. When we arrived at the club we immediately proceeded to the funky house room upstairs, where they played the funky tunes that Astral loved.

She loved dressing up and was a queen magnet. Wherever we went, she would have several gay men come up to her and say "I love your hair, girl!" or "Where did you buy your sparkles?"

It was quite amusing to watch and I often told Astral she was a gay man trapped in a woman's body. She loved that idea.

Not only would she strike up a lengthy conversation with her new-found friend, but they would compliment each other on their dancing abilities, so egging each other on. Before long they would be dancing quite animatedly, intensely aware that the other dancers in the near vicinity were staring at them. These dancers seemed as if they were dancing in slow-motion as they were so engrossed in what they were watching. For a while they would forget where they were and what they were doing, only to remember moments later and then their dancing speed would return to normal.

"You're dancing is out of control!" she would tell her new friend and he would smile at her, their bond forged for life.

Astral and I couldn't wait to get on to the dance-floor, having done way too many lines of speed while getting dressed at her place. When we finally hit that dance-floor, there was no stopping us. My dancing wasn't as flamboyant as hers but I still had the speed rushing through me, and try as I might I couldn't tone it down.

Astral momentarily interrupted her dancing when a girl with long brown hair approached her and started speaking to her. She held her hand in front of her mouth in amazement and stood back, looking at the girl.

She called me over and said, "It's Dave!"

"No way", I said and investigated the girl wearing a little black number.

"Oh my God, Dave. I can't believe it's you!" she exclaimed. "You look so good!"

"Thanks", Dave said shyly but loudly.

Astral was still looking at him in amazement, hand on her hip and smoking her cigarette very elegantly.

I would never have guessed he would look so good in a dress.

We danced for a while and I went to sit down when I could feel the speed wearing off.

Astral and Dave continued their dancing.

It's quite strange the way you feel your drugs wearing off when you're not really into the music. When I am at a hard house club, it makes no difference whether the drugs have worn off or not, I just need them to take me to that certain state of mind. But once I am there I have learnt the secret of how to stay there without any extras. And I guess this is what Astral felt now, as she danced crazier than ever when her favourite song came on.

She ran towards me, yelling, "I love this song!" and then ran back to the dancing space she had cleared for herself opposite Dave.

When the club closed, Astral and I said goodbye to Dave and he left for the tube station.

"I wonder why Jake didn't show up", I said when he had left.

"I didn't think he'd come in the first place", Astral said.

"So what are we going to do about the pills?" I asked.

"I don't know. But my flatmates need them for tomorrow night. I kind of told them I'd organise the drugs so we have to get them today."

"Well Jake could be anywhere. What time is it?"

"Seven o'clock."

"He said he was going to Renegades but they close at six. Do you want to go home first and then pick them up this afternoon?"

"No, if I go home now, I'm won't leave again before tomorrow. I know myself."

"So we better try to get them now then. Let's take a chance and see if he's at home."

We walked to the nearest call box and I called Jake. I was surprised when he answered.

"You're home. Where were you tonight?"

"At Heaven. Where were you?"

"We were there. Were you in the funky house room?"

"I was in the funky house room, the main room, the R&B room, the entire fucking club."

"Did you look for us next to the speaker where we told you?"

"Kate, I looked for you next to every fucking speaker in that club."

“How strange.”

Astral looked at me and mouthed, “What?”

“He was there”, I told her.

“So what did you do?” I asked.

“I danced for a while and then came home.”

“Sorry, did I wake you up? Are you sleeping?”

“No.”

“What are you doing then?”

“I’m having sex.”

“Sorry.”

“No it’s fine. You want your pills yeah?”

“Yeah, did you get them?”

“Yes. Do you want to pick them up now?”

“No don’t worry, we’ll get them later.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re busy.”

“No, it’s fine. Get them now if you’re in town.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s fine Kate, I’ll see you just now.”

“Thanks, candyman.”

“Bye luv.”

“What did he say?” asked Astral.

I repeated the entire conversation word for word. Astral had a very annoying yet endearing way of asking you a thousand questions. It made no difference whether I repeated the conversation to her exactly as it happened, she could still find a hundred more questions to ask about it. How did he sound, was he upset, what did the other guy say, etc. So we walked to his place, discussing the conversation for the entire duration of the journey.

We buzzed and he let us in. When we walked into the flat we found him in bed with a guy. Jake got up, completely naked, and walked to the toilet while introducing us.

That is, if you can call “Sorry, what was your name again?” introducing.

I heard Jake urinate in the toilet and asked Peter, "So what did you think of Heaven?" thinking that's where Jake picked him up.

"No, I wasn't at Heaven."

"So where did Jake pick your ass up?" I asked jokingly.

"Play nicely, Kate!" Jake shouted from the toilet, having heard the question due to the interruption in his urine flow.

"What? I was making a joke", I defended.

"He came into the room again and said, "What?"

I repeated what I said.

"I picked Peter up in Soho Square, on a bench actually."

He walked over to the bed, got in and gave me the baggy of pills lying on his bedside table.

"Thanks so much, Jake", Astral said.

"You're welcome", replied Jake in his happy voice, the one where he would sing the words he spoke.

"How was Heaven?" Peter asked.

"Great", I said.

"Yeah, the music was so good tonight, hey Kate?" Astral said. "But I'm running low on speed. Can I buy some off you?"

"Here, it's on the house", he said and handed Astral a gram of speed from his wallet.

"Are you sure?" Astral said, looking hopeful.

"Yeah, take it", he said and held it in front of her.

"Thanks Jake, that's so sweet."

"So where are you going now?" Jake asked.

"Home, I guess", I said.

"You can stay here if you want?"

The idea of staying was extremely appealing. I did not have the energy to face the trip home with sober people on the tube staring at me in my paranoid state.

"Are you sure you don't mind?"

"No. I wouldn't have offered if I did. You can just stay in the lounge and have a chill-out."

“Thank you, thank you, thank you”, I chanted and kissed him on the forehead.

Astral I went to the lounge and had some juice. We were still very wired from the speed and smoked joint after joint without feeling any effect. After several hours of chatting and smoking a substantial amount of hash joints, Jake and Peter came into the room.

Jake had a bite mark in his neck. Astral kept staring at it despite my attempts to distract her with witty comments.

Peter left in search of some croissants and Jake went to the kitchen to make some coffee.

“Did you see the mark on his neck?” Astral whispered, quite freaked out.

“Yeah. I told you Jake’s into a bit of S&M, didn’t I?”

“Yes you did. It’s scary”, she said horrified.

I gave her a reassuring look and told her not to worry.

Peter came back after a while and made us breakfast. We were still eating when Jake’s mobile rang and he went into the room to answer it.

He came back visibly annoyed.

“Who was that?” I asked.

“A client. He’s coming over in half an hour.”

Since Jake became a prostitute, he would get calls at the strangest times and then disappear for a few hours.

He had quite a few freaks calling him. I remember him telling me that he’d got a call from a man asking him if he did S&M. Jake said he could do that. Apparently the guy wanted him to cut him with a razor on his body, more specifically his scrotum. Jake was a bit reluctant but said he could probably do that. Then he told Jake that they would have to have a long-term working relationship and he was looking to progress to eventually having his balls cut off. Jake then said he really didn’t think he could work with him and put the phone down.

“The guy asked me if I have a problem with short people?” Jake said. “So I said how short are we talking about? Oooh, about four foot.”

“Four foot, how short is that”, I asked and held my hand out in front of me to measure the guy’s height.

“He’s a dwarf”, Jake said candidly. “Fuck, I don’t know what I’m going to do. I don’t know if I’ll be able to have sex with him.”

“Well, you can always say you can’t work with him”, I said.

“No, I need the money.” He paused and then laughed, “Oh my God, what am I going to do? I guess I won’t be that bad, he’s the perfect height and will take me about here”, Jake said pointing to his groin.

“Oh shit, the linen”, he gasped. “Kate, can you help me change the sheets on the bed?”

“Sure”, I said and got up.

Astral and Peter followed me to the bedroom and the three of us changed the bed sheets while Jake had a shower. It felt like the most normal thing to do, making the bed in anticipation for Jake’s client.

Despite Jake’s requests for us to stay in the lounge ‘til after his job was over so we could all go out for a pint, Astral and I left. Peter decided to stay.

10. SUMMER RITES

It was the day of Summer Rites, the non-political Pride where everyone gets as wasted as humanly possible. I was waiting to meet Astral and Dave in front of Brixton tube station as we had arranged the night before. It seemed as if the rest of London also decided to meet in the same place and I was getting claustrophobic from all the people crowding around me.

It was overcast but every now and then a ray of sunlight would break through the thick cloud blanket in the sky, like club lights that get switched on after a long build-up of a good tune while you're surrounded in total darkness.

There was a little stage constructed on the already crowded side-walk. A man was on stage yelling Praise the Lord, Hallelujah-stuff at the crowd gathered in front who would in turn respond with a few "Amens!" every now and then. It was no coincidence that the preacher found himself in front of Brixton tube station on the same day as Summer Rites. The orator started off preaching about the evil of extra-marital sex, then moved on to substance abuse and finally came to homosexuality.

The gay crowd were too excited about the day to take any notice of the preacher. A few glanced his way and would utter a cutting yet humorous remark to their friends, but the majority of the crowd just gave a collective invisible shrug.

Astral and Dave finally arrived. Astral was wearing rainbow eye lashes with her normal amount of layers of clothes. Dave had a top hat and a blue feather boa around his neck.

"Shall we?" Dave said gesturing towards the direction of Brockwell Park with one end of his boa.

We zig-zagged our way through the crowd of people and waited in line at the bus stop. There was huge confusion as to where the line began and where it ended as we settled in what we thought to be the end of the queue.

The bus finally arrived and the three of us all crammed onto it with several other passengers. We got off at our stop and followed the flow of the crowd through the park and towards the entrance.

It was overcast again and the colours seemed brighter and more brilliant. There were large tents everywhere and colourful lights from the fun fair. We had arranged to meet

Jake in the Trade tent and looked on the map we got at the entrance. We walked towards the tent and could hear the hard house beats getting louder as we got closer.

The tent was huge but we managed to find Jake at one of the entrances, as we had agreed.

"How's it going here then?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm off my fucking face", Jake replied.

And indeed, he looked very much off his face.

He got straight to the point, "You want your drugs then?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Come along then."

I followed Jake to the conglomeration of speakers stacked up against the tent wall. He reached behind them and took out his bag.

"Six grams of speed", he said and counted off six baggies.

"And twenty pills."

He handed the drugs over. There was no threat of being caught out here, no security, no undercover cops, nothing. This day is known as the drug orgy of the year, and as a once-off event every year I suppose it was tolerated by the authorities.

So with my bulk supply of drugs, I set off back to Astral and gave her share to her. It was cheaper to buy in bulk and this supply would probably last us two months of clubbing.

"Fabulous", Astral whispered with a possessed look in her eye as I handed her the speed.

I had half a pill, while Astral and Dave decided to do the speed first.

The c hit me hard and when I came up, I was rushing violently.

My eyes grew heavy and I lost control of all my limbs. I sat down for a while. I watched Astral and Dave fly around the tent. Their speed was kicking in, it seemed.

Jake came sat down next to me.

"These pills are fucking strong", Jake mumbled.

"Tell me about it."

I got out my baggy of speed from my trouser pocket and offered it to Jake. Relieved, he dipped his finger into the bag and rubbed the powder on his gums. I did the same.

"A friend of mine tests drugs and he said these pills are the strongest he's ever had", Jake said.

“What do you mean he tests drugs?”

“You know, he tests drugs. He use to be a medic at Trade and now tests new drugs for the dealers.”

“How could one possibly test drugs?”

I was very sceptical and wasn't sure if Jake was taking the piss or not.

“You know, he goes home, sits in his room, pops a pill and then monitors his heart rate, his blood pressure and shit like that. Then he tells the dealers if they're any good or not.”

“Oh”, I said. “What a job!”

“He he he”, laughed Jake.

“So why does Trade need a medic?” I asked.

“Well if someone dies in a club they shut you down. And considering the amount of drugs that get consumed at Trade it's a surprise there haven't been any fatalities.”

The speed was working and I felt a lot livelier. Astral and Dave came skipping over.

“Let's go on the rides! Let's go on the rides!” she yelled.

She was referring to the fun fair.

Astral, Dave, Jake, and I made our way to the fun fair. It was raining so I took my umbrella from my backpack. Astral huddled with me under the umbrella. We bought our tickets for the ride guaranteed to produce the most adrenaline in our systems and waited in line.

Astral was speeding off her face and ran to her seat when the ride operator gestured us to go through. Dave got on the seat next to her, while Jake and I got in on the two seats in front of them.

The ride started and Astral and Dave uttered a few excited “Wooh's!”

“Poppers! Poppers! Let's do some poppers!” Astral yelled.

“Yeah”, Dave replied.

I heard the sniffing noises behind me as they both inhaled poppers.

The cart was shaking now and my heart was beating in my chest. Every time our cart made a turn my stomach followed suit and I wasn't feeling well at all.

I looked at Jake without being able to turn my head due to the G-force. He was smiling and enjoying the ride.

Astral did not sound too good. I could hear her vomiting.

“If you throw up on me, I’ll kill you”, Jake yelled. He was after all sitting right in front of her.

But she was merely dry-heaving. Jake was in no danger.

“Are you okay?” Dave asked.

Some more dry-heaving sounds followed.

The ride was reaching a climax. I closed my eyes and wished for it to be over, for my sake as well as Astral’s. I was feeling nauseous and my head was spinning.

The ride finally died down and with unsteady steps the four of us got out of the cart. Astral was ghostly white. She stumbled towards the exit. I caught up with her and put my arm around her waist, helping her across the grass. We sat down a few metres from the ride we’d just been on. It had stopped raining but the grass was damp.

“Are you okay?” I asked Astral.

“I’m fine. I’m fine”, she said, irritably.

I guessed that she wanted to be left alone for the moment.

Jake was talking to two men at the exit of the ride, while Dave was sheepishly hanging around. After a while Dave came to join us while Jake walked back to the tent with his two new friends, gesturing to me as he passed that he was going to dance.

“I’ve got to go meet someone now. Do you want to come?” Dave asked.

“Okay”, Astral said. “Where?”

“At the line dancing tent.”

“There’s a line dancing tent?” Astral asked.

“For sure.”

We walked to the line dancing tent to look for Dave’s friend. Several couples were trying to line dance, watching the instructor in front of the class carefully. It seemed like fun.

“I’ve got to go”, Astral said.

“What’s wrong?”

“I took some e and I have to leave right now.”

We took leave of Dave and started walking across the field away from the crowd of people.

“This e is so strong.”

“Yeah I know.”

“I’ve got to sit down”, she said and sat down on the grass.

It started to rain again so I got my umbrella out. We sat underneath the umbrella, the rain drizzling around us, Astral with her head on my shoulder. We didn’t speak. We were both just content being there, in that moment.

“You are so good, Kate”, she said. “Being with you makes me feel so inadequate, like I’m such a mean person.”

She was loved-up now.

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?” I asked, trying not to let the conversation get too heavy.

“I’m not capable of niceties now, only the truth. And that’s the truth.”

“Well, maybe you should ask yourself why you think you are a mean person.”

“I’m rushing. I can’t deal with this now. I don’t know why I take e, I don’t even like it.”

Once again there was silence. We looked out over the field, with tents dotted everywhere. It started raining more heavily now, and the field was almost empty except for a few people who were running for cover with bowed heads. Astral shivered from the cold and I put my arm around her.

“You’re a beautiful person”, I said.

She looked at me and smiled sadly. She did not like e at all as it opened up her heart. There were no barriers on e, she had to face her emotions. I could understand why she wanted to avoid this; there was a lot of pain and suffering there.

We decided to go back to the Trade tent. Astral was feeling better and in the mood for dancing. We finally reached the tent and joined Jake in the dancing area near the exit. Once we started dancing we lost all track of time and when I looked outside again, it was already dark.

I showed Astral the time on my watch.

“Fuck! We’ve got to go. I want to get to Heaven early because there’s going to be a major fucking queue tonight”, she said.

Astral, Dave, and I set off for the bus stop. Jake came along as he wanted to go home to get more drugs to sell.

We walked along the walkway through the park and reached the bus stop. There was a

crowd gathered in front of the bus stop. A bus finally came and we managed to get seats upstairs as we were in front of the queue. The bus was completely overcrowded with Summer Rites patrons.

My backpack was still on my back. There was no space to take it off with people squashed against each other. I noticed with alarm, that I was stuck to the seat. My umbrella handle had hooked on the railing of the backrest and I fervently tried to free myself. The umbrella was just out of reach and I was starting to panic.

“Help me!” I yelled and looked at Jake sitting next to me.

He laughed.

“Let’s just leave her here”, he said to Astral and Dave, sitting behind us.

There was no space to move, there were people everywhere. I did see the humour in the situation but did not like being stuck.

“Get me loose now or I’m going to freak!” I yelled at Jake.

He freed me with a smile and I violently shook my backpack off.

Astral, Dave, and I got off at the tube station and took the tube to Charing Cross, leaving Jake on the bus.

Dave changed his trousers in the tube as the ones he wore were covered in mud. Astral held her jacket in front of him so that he had some privacy from the onlookers.

We arrived at Heaven and waited in the queue. The only problem was that Astral had had three grams of speed and nine pills, having taken the tenth pill. As for me, I had the same amount of illegal pharmaceuticals on my person. We decided to hide these in our shoes as there was a thorough search at the door.

We finally made it into the club and after a stop at the coat check we immediately proceeded to the main dance floor.

Dave and Astral went ballistic. The speed was racing through their veins and they were in their favourite club.

There was no way I would make it through this evening sober. I was already getting tired and the truth was this music was not doing much for me. I swallowed another half and went to dance.

11. STAMINA

Renegades and then Trade; this was now my routine on the weekend. Fourteen hours of non-stop dancing and taking loads of drugs was becoming second nature to me. It was Saturday night and time for Renegades again. Astral came over and we did a few lines of speed off a CD cover while we were getting ready.

We couldn't wait to get to the dance floor and walked as quickly as we could from the tube station to the club. We paid our entrance fee and waited impatiently for the cashier to stamp our wrists.

"Fly my children, fly", the cashier yelled as we zooted through the corridor and into the club.

Jake was already there. He was standing in the corner next to the dance floor, chatting to a guy and looking very serious. He fumbled through his pocket and handed something to the guy who in turn gave him some money and was off again.

I walked over to say hi.

"I didn't know you were dealing", I said.

Jake often supplied drugs to his friends as a favour but had never sold in clubs.

"Yeah well, being a rent boy isn't as profitable as I first anticipated. Do you know I have to pay fucking VAT on my earnings now? Jesus!"

"So why don't you get your old job back?"

"Because this is so much more fun," he said, singing the last word.

I bought a few pills from him.

"Kate, you must try these pills. They're fucking brilliant", Jake said. "They contain a shitload of MDMA. I had three the other night and I have never felt that good before in my entire life. I couldn't believe it."

"Only three, Jake? My God, what's happening to you?"

"No, you won't believe how good they are!"

"Better than the previous ones?"

"Much better. The strongest I've ever had."

"Fabulous! So tell me, how is the selling of your body going?"

"You know, Kate, there are some pretty weird people in this here town. I got a call the

other day from a guy asking me if I would be able to watch. I said sure, I'd be able to do that. Then he asks if I would be interested in watching him fuck his dog. I calmly said no but I know about a certain organisation called the RSPCA who might be."

"So what did he say?"

"Nothing, he just put the phone down", Jake laughed.

"Anyway Jake, I'll see you later. I'm going to do some dancing", I said.

I was starting to know the music pretty well by this stage. Even before the e would kick in, my body knew exactly how to reach that feeling of absolute bliss. Sometimes, I would sit alone in my room at home, and when I heard the music I would automatically get up and dance in the dark.

I started to rush, the most unbelievable rush that I have ever had. Suddenly the music sounded ten times faster and the people on the dance floor were dancing ten times slower than usual. I went off and did things with my body I didn't know were possible.

The rush was intense. I suddenly felt sick and could feel the texture of the saliva in my mouth changing. I rushed to the bathroom, leaving Astral dancing happily, and vomited for a good fifteen minutes. I hadn't eaten that day, as I had had several lines of speed the night before. I felt weak and frankly a bit concerned that I had just puked green bile. After the vomiting stopped, I washed my face and staggered to the chill-out area. I sat down on the floor next to the wall and rested my head on my hands. I was still rushing but it was the normal rush I was used to, the floaty feeling when you feel very light and airy.

"How are you doing?" I heard Jake say next to me.

"I just threw up."

Jake looked concerned.

"When?"

"A few minutes ago", I said.

I had no concept of time.

"No, I mean how long after you took the pill did you throw up?"

"Fifteen minutes."

"That means you lost your pill. Here, have another."

And before I knew it, Jake popped another pill into my mouth. In my docile state I was

unable to stop him and swallowed obediently.

He held my hand for a while and then excused himself. He had to go sell drugs or his body, I wasn't too sure which.

I sat there for a while, knowing very well that I wouldn't make it through this trip. My body was too sensitive for this e and I was still rushing from what I absorbed from the first one. I took out some speed and rubbed it on my gums. It was the only way for me to get through this. After a few minutes I felt fine and went to dance again, finding Astral still on the dance floor.

"This e is very strong, hey?"

I nodded.

When the club closed Jake, Astral and I caught a cab to Trade. We bought some more e's from him, which proved to be quite difficult in his state. He couldn't find the pills in his pockets and eventually emptied the contents onto his lap. Since he couldn't do any cognitive calculations, I had to count the pills and his money. Despite the fact that I repeated the amounts several times, he still had no concept of what I was saying.

"Oh dear", Jake said, "things are getting very strange indeed."

When we finally reached the front of the queue it took Jake several minutes to convince the doorman that he would get membership that evening before he let us in. Jake told me that this happened whenever he went to Trade and he always had to go through the same conversation.

"What did I tell you last time?" the doorman would ask Jake.

Jake stared at him blankly because memory is a luxury that one has to sacrifice when you're high as a kite.

"I told you that that was the last time I'd let you in without membership", the doorman answered his own question, aware of the futility of waiting for Jake to answer.

"Yeah, but I didn't have money on me."

"If I let you in, will you get membership?"

"Yeah."

"You're sure? I can come in with you and watch you get your membership?"

"Yeah."

But the doorman never accompanied Jake and he never did get his membership and the

next time he went to Trade, he had to go through the whole process again.

“Why don’t you just get membership, Jake?” I asked.

“I couldn’t be arsed”, he said.

“Well you should seriously consider it. They’re worse than fucking customs at the airport! I thought they were going to ask me if I had a visa.”

We entered the club, paid and handed in our coats at the coat check. There was something liberating about coat checks; the way you handed over all your possessions and didn’t have to worry about them for the rest of the evening. I guess it was the way it made you anonymous.

The music was brilliant as always. We made our way to our regular spot on the dance floor. Astral and I were still e-ing from the amazing pills Jake had given us which seemed to last forever.

“Do you wanna do some acid?” Astral asked.

I was already having serious problems clutching onto reality and did not think it was wise to experiment with a completely new drug at that particular moment. Especially not one known for its hallucinatory qualities.

She saw my apprehension and said, “Come on Kate, you have to try it. You’ll like it.”

On the other hand, I thought, fuck it!

“Why not”, I said and took the trip from Astral.

She instructed me to chew the paper and handed one to Jake who put it in his mouth straight away.

“How long am I suppose to chew it for?” I asked.

“About thirty minutes and then swallow it.”

This seemed impossible to do because I read somewhere that one could only chew something a hundred times before it disappeared in one’s saliva. But I humoured Astral and chewed the paper. It is rather annoying having to chew acid because it keeps disappearing. You wonder where it went when your tongue finds it several minutes later stuck on the side of a tooth. After about forty minutes, as I chewed for an extra ten minutes to make up for the acid’s temporary disappearance behind a tooth, I swallowed the paper.

I was dancing when it kicked in. I didn’t even notice that I was feeling different, except I

was hysterical with laughter. Everything was funny and Bugs Bunny cartoons that I had seen as a child kept popping into my head.

Then the image of the hunchback of Notre Dame appeared in my mind and I started dancing in an improvised hunchback fashion. Why shouldn't the hunchback of Notre Dame also be able to enjoy himself, I thought. Stuck in that silly tower, day in and day out. He needs to have some fun.

And so I continued dancing like the hunchback, one shoulder pushed forward, hands contorted in claws and jumping on one leg.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Astral asked.

"I'm Quasimodo. Can't you see?"

"Who?"

"The hunch-back of Notre Dame."

"Well, could you please stop. You look like a freak."

This made me laugh even more and I couldn't believe how seriously everybody took themselves in the club.

I was having so much fun and had no intention of stopping. As soon as Astral turned away, I would be back in character, dancing to the hard beats of the music like my friend the hunchback. Astral would then look at me again and give a reprimanding look. I would dance normally for as long as she had her eye on me and revert to the hunchback. Later on, she realised I was beyond reason and reproachful looks and left me alone.

I noticed a guy standing next to the staircase near us, one arm resting on the railing and the other on his side. He was looking at me dancing. He reached his hand into his pocket and retrieved a small black cylinder. He extended it into an enormous telescope and looked at me through it, waving at me with his unoccupied hand.

I responded with vigour, waving both my hands wildly above my head. In a flash he switched back to the guy with his hand on the railing, looking at me with a rather confused expression on his face.

This made me laugh even more. He was fucking with me, pretending that everything was normal and that he had not only seconds ago looked at me through a telescope. Silly sailor, I thought to myself.

I continued dancing, looking at him out of the corner of my eye so he wouldn't notice.

The same thing happened again and I politely and wholeheartedly waved back. I must have been waving at him for quite a while because I noticed that a crowd of dancers were looking at me and then in the direction I was waving, pretending not to see the sailor waving at me and looking at me through a telescope. Very funny, guys, I thought to myself.

Astral walked over and said, "Who are you waving at?"

"That sailor over there looking at me through the telescope", I said and pointed at him.

She looked at him and said, "What guy with a telescope?"

"The guy standing next to the stairs with the telescope", I said.

"Oh", she said and went away again.

I decided to go for a walk and asked Jake if he wanted to join me. He was dancing in the corner, looking very serious.

"I can't stop dancing", he said, "I have to dance! I have to dance!"

"So you can dance later."

"If I leave now, this whole club is going to stop. It's a machine, Kate! It's a huge fucking machine and we all have to keep dancing to keep it going. Come on Kate, dance! Dance!"

"Man, I'm tired of dancing. I'm going to go for a walk!" I said and left him to deal with his problem on his own.

"Astral, I'm going to go for a walk. Do you want to come?" I asked.

"No, I want to dance. I'm a blue octopus creature in a glass cage and I have to dance like one. I have to dance like one!" she yelled.

Well I guess they're also feeling the acid, I thought. These people are taking this dancing thing way too seriously. I walked through the club and noticed that the large paintings of fruit were changing into giant multi-coloured birds that escaped from their paintings and flew around the club. I wonder who's going to sort this shit out when the club closes, I thought.

I walked past the bar and was stopped by a giant peacock. He was fanning himself with a large fan to alleviate the heat.

"Do you have some e for me, darling?" he asked and preened himself against the fluorescent light, the eyes on his feathers glowing so brightly that they almost blinded me.

“Did you just escape from that painting?” I said, shielding my eyes with my hand and pointing to a painting that had been a giant slice of watermelon only moments before.

He looked at me blankly, not knowing what to say. It occurred to me that he wasn’t a real peacock at all. I didn’t want to embarrass him so I didn’t expose him in front of everyone at the club as an impostor.

“I don’t think so, dear” he finally answered.

I moved in closer and looked at him suspiciously, my eyes about an inch from his.

“I’m just here for a good time”, he said.

With these words I knew he was okay, peacock or no peacock. He was one of us, out to have a good time and it was my duty to help him in whatever way I could.

After a few moments he said, “Do you have some e for me?”

“No, but I can take you to the dealer.”

“No, they’ve left already. I’ve just come from there.”

“What? They’ve left? What the hell is going on here?” I asked, looking around in order to detect some more irregular behaviour.

“Fuck, I don’t know. It’s appalling, the things we have to endure.”

“Come along, I think I know someone who might be able to help you”, I said and led him by the arm back to where Jake was dancing.

Jake was still dancing in the same place, but his movements were short and jerky now.

“Hey Jake, what’s happened to the machine?” I asked.

“It’s a big fucking mess, Kate. I think it needs oil, it’s not running smoothly. Not smoothly at all”, he said.

“Jake thinks that the club is a machine”, I said to the peacock and laughed.

The peacock found this funny and slapped me on the back with his wing.

“Jake, this peacock wants some e. Do you have any left?”

Jake nodded and took out his bag of drugs. They had a brief discussion, presumably about quantity and price, and the deal was concluded.

“Thank you so much”, the peacock said and kissed me on both cheeks.

“My pleasure”, I said, thinking how well-mannered peacocks were these days.

The peacock left, and I decided to dance again. Astral was still dancing in her blue octopus fashion and though I couldn’t see an extra pair of arms and legs, I knew they

were there somewhere.

Some guy dancing next to me handed me two pills and said, "Enjoy."

I thanked him, gave one to Astral and swallowed the other.

When I came up on the e, I felt absolutely invincible. Nothing and no one could touch me and I was the only one in the world who knew what was really going on. I noticed how seriously everyone took themselves, looking at their expressions while they danced. Don't they know you have to remain light in order to have fun, I thought. I was off my face. I was floating in the air, my feet unable to touch the ground and I felt so good that the tears welled up in my eyes. I wondered whether I would ever come down and be normal again. Then I realised I didn't really care. I was way past caring.

The guy who handed me the e was leaning against the wall and not looking well at all.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm fine. I'm fine" he lied.

"What did you take?"

"I just took four e's", he said, trying desperately to stop the convulsions brought on by the nausea.

I was about to tell him to sit down for a while when he threw up on my shoes.

"Fuck!" he yelled. "I just lost my pills."

He sat down on his haunches and inspected the pile of vomit. I was involved in this, whether I liked it or not, since most of the vomit was on my shoes. I sat down on my haunches as well and we started to look for his missing pills in the vomit. He found two on the floor and I managed to find the other two lying on my left shoe. I picked the semi-digested pills up and handed them to him.

"Here you go", I said.

"Thank you so much. I really appreciate it."

"No problem."

He picked up his water bottle from the floor and swallowed all four recovered pills once more.

"Right", he said, "this time I'm ready."

I smiled at him reassuringly and continued dancing. When I looked behind me again, he was gone.

The lights were switched on and it was time to go. Jake, Astral and I were still very high and looked at each other, uncertain what to do under the circumstances. After some intense concentration we got our bags and coats and made our way outside. We were in no state to go home.

Jake checked his messages on his mobile.

“Are you expecting an important call?” I asked.

“No, I’m just checking if anyone called for sex.”

“Holy fuck, don’t tell me you are capable of having sex now. You couldn’t even find the coat check!”

“I can have sex anytime!” he said with a smile. “Besides having sex on acid is really enjoyable. It feels as if your bodies merge into one and then you don’t know whether you’re kissing yourself or the other guy.”

I burst out laughing. Some strange images of Jake had popped into my head.

“Oh fuck!” Jake said quite panicked.

“What’s the matter?” Astral asked.

“My flatmate left a message saying I must under no circumstances come home. He’s picked someone up and is having sex. So we can’t go to my place.”

“Well, we can’t go to mine. Ewan and Weston are probably watching television and will not appreciate a chill-out”, I said.

“Astral, yours?”

“Eh... eh... sure, but my housemates will be there”, she said.

“Why don’t we go to a pub?” Jake suggested.

“We probably shouldn’t be drinking”, I said.

“Why not?” Jake wanted to know.

“We just won’t pull it off”, I replied.

We looked at each other in silence. There was no doubt about it; we were fucked.

Someone shoved a flyer in my hands. It was Matthew, a guy I met at some club. I had no idea which club or when.

“What’s this?” I asked Matthew.

“It’s an after-party. Why don’t you come?”

“What kind of music do they play?” Jake asked.

“Hard house. Kate, you must come. I’m spinning and I need the support.”

It was settled and after Matthew repeated the directions on how to get there a few times, we set off to Stamina. It was now two o’clock on a Sunday afternoon and there were quite a few people about on their Sunday afternoon stroll.

I followed the directions as best I could and after we walked for an hour, I realised we were lost. Matthew said that it was a fifteen minute walk and very easy to find. He obviously did not take into consideration the state we were in.

I was about to enlighten Astral and Jake about our predicament, as they trustfully followed me down yet another road that looked exactly like the one before when Jake said, “Hey, isn’t that Trade on the left?”

Sure enough there was Trade and I realised I had just led my merry friends in circles for who knows how long. They took it very well and we spent the next few minutes sitting on the sidewalk, hysterical with laughter.

“Okay”, I said finally. “Now I know where I am, I know where to go.”

Once again we set off to find Stamina and I followed Matthew’s directions that had by this stage become quite hazy in my mind. When I realised I did not know how to get there I stopped a man walking, what looked to me like, a sheep.

“Excuse me, do you know where Cranbourne Road is?” I asked.

He gave me the directions, waving his hand in the air to indicate when I had to go left and when I had to go right. Confidently, head held high, I led my two friends to Stamina in a third attempt. But my confidence did not make up for my lack of skill and pretty soon I was lost again.

“Hang on”, I said and stopped walking. “Where was I standing when I asked for directions? Was I facing this way”, I said and then turned around to face the opposite direction “or was I facing this way? We have to go back to where I got the directions!”

“What does that matter?” Jake wanted to know.

“Because, Jake, if I know which way I was facing, I’d know if this was left”, I said while pointing to the side street on my left. “Or whether this was left”, I said and pointed to the side street on my right.

“It doesn’t matter!” Jake yelled.

“What do you mean it doesn’t matter? It matters if we want to get to Stamina, I can tell

you that!”

“It doesn’t matter where you were standing, because you would still approach the street from the same direction.”

This made absolutely no sense to me.

Jake tried to explain his theory to me for another couple of minutes until Astral interrupted, “Can we please discuss this later. Let’s just get to the club first!”

“Look”, Jake said, “just repeat to me what the guy said.”

“Fine!” I yelled and repeated the elderly man’s directions as best I could.

Jake took the side street on the left and shortly afterwards we finally reached our destination, two hours after we left Trade.

Stamina was pretty hardcore; the music was even harder than Trade.

“This is the story of my life”, Astral said looking around, “Me in a room with a bunch of freaks!”

There were some strange looking people in the club. One guy had a T-shirt on with a built-in clock on the front. The digits would count off seconds, 0-99 and then start from the beginning. Every time the clock would reach 99, I’d look around anxiously, expecting something important to happen.

There were several cyberpunks dancing like vultures, wings extended to a wingspan of more or less two metres, their multi-coloured dreadlocks bouncing around their heads.

Matthew was busy spinning and we spent his entire set on the dance floor, dancing like freaks and doing poppers every couple of minutes.

“I’ve just been to the toilet”, Astral said when she came back from the loo. “Have you been in there yet?” she asked.

“No, not yet. Why?”

“There’s some weird patterns in there. I rested my hand on the wall and it disappeared into the wall.” She paused and then calmly stated, “I’m pretty fucked up.”

I continued dancing but she insisted I should go have a look.

The toilets seemed pretty normal to me and so did the walls. There was a very intricate pattern on the wall that hurt one’s eyes but other than that, nothing out of the ordinary.

I was just about to leave when a woman entered. She looked up and when she saw me she staggered backwards looking frightened.

I look at her, puzzled.

“Jesus!” she said, “you gave me such a fright. Your eyes, they’re bright purple!”

“No they’re not!” I dismissed her hallucination.

“Yes, they are. Take a look in the mirror.”

I did as she said. My eyes weren’t purple, they were black. The pupils had dilated to the extent that no sign of the iris was visible. My heart skipped a beat.

“I have never seen eyes that colour before.”

She was starting to scare me. If she had never seen eyes my colour, were my eyes indeed real?

“I’ve got to go”, I said, and left as quickly as I could.

I joined Astral and Jake and we danced until the club closed.

“Well, I guess it’s time to go home”, I said when we were outside.

I looked at my watch. It was now 9 o’clock on Sunday evening and we had been dancing for the last twenty-four hours.

“Home? Home?” Jake said, a little bit too loud for my liking. “The night is still young.”

“Are you crazy?” Astral said. “I’ve got to work tomorrow.”

“Go home then. I need a beer! Kate, are you coming?”

“Eh, Jake, it’s getting late.”

“Don’t be such a bitch! Come have one beer with me.”

He grabbed me by the arm and starting dragging me down the road. I looked back at Astral who had folded her hands across her chest and glared at us.

“Come Astral. We’ll have one beer.”

Astral stood frozen for another couple of seconds and then followed us down the road.

Jake waved down a cab and announced to the driver “Rupert Street”.

Jake took a banky of speed out of his pocket and with the corner of his credit card spooned some of it out. He carefully raised the credit card to his right nostril and inhaled deeply.

“There! Much better” he said.

He offered the packet to Astral who licked her finger and dipped it into the banky. She rubbed the powder onto her gums.

“Where did you get it?” Astral asked.

“At Trade. I couldn’t get any base so this will just have to do.”

“Kate?” he offered.

I opted for the credit card. I dipped it into the banky and inhaled the powder with a short, deep inhalation.

The cab stopped and we all got out. Jake paid the driver and started walking towards Bar-Code. The bar was packed with gay men, pissed but looking a damn sight more respectable than I felt.

Jake bought us draughts and came over to the table where we were sitting. He took a pill out of his pocket and swallowed it with a huge gulp of beer. I sipped my beer and immediately felt the relief that alcohol brings to a body full of chemicals.

Jake was looking around the pub.

“Do you think he’s ignoring us?” Astral asked.

“Probably just looking for a shag”, I said.

“What?” Jake asked but looked away before I could answer.

Jake dipped his hand into his pocket and retrieved the banky of speed. He licked his finger.

“Take it easy, Jake!” I said.

He patted me on the back.

“There, there Kate. I can take care of myself”, he smiled his angelic smile.

I had drunk three quarters of my beer when I noticed Jake’s colour changing. He looked translucent and was perspiring.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

He didn’t hear me.

“Jake, are you okay?”

The beer glass fell out of his hand, hit the floor and shattered. The beer slopped and foamed over shattered glass and wooden floorboards. I didn’t see Jake fall but I saw him lying on the floor, convulsing. His arms and legs were jerking wildly, as if he was dancing.

“Jake?” I said.

I saw the barman jump over the counter and rush towards us. He had a teaspoon in his hand and forced it in between Jake’s teeth.

“What did he have?” the barman asked, looking at me.

What didn’t he have, would have been a far easier question to answer.

“Some pills and some speed”, I said.

I paused.

“And some acid. And some poppers”, I added.

“How much?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

I looked at the floor. Jake was still convulsing. The barman stood up and gestured to his fellow barman behind the counter to make a telephone call.

A couple of minutes later Jake had stopped convulsing. The barman pushed him onto his side: into the recovery position. He got hold of a couple of barstools and packed them around Jake, to give him some breathing space. Astral and I stood outside the circle, and watched.

“That was pretty intense”, Astral said.

“Yeah.”

I don’t know how long we stood there, just watching Jake. I was relieved when he stirred and scratched his arm. He opened his eyes, spat out the teaspoon and sat up.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“In Bar-code. You had a seizure”, I said.

He looked around and saw a few people looking at him, watching him.

“What do you mean I had a seizure?”

“A seizure. A fit.”

“Let’s get out of here.”

“I think they called an ambulance.”

The barman made his way over and moved through the circle of barstools towards Jake.

“How are you feeling?”

“Fine”, Jake said as if he had just recovered from a cold.

“Better stay here. The ambulance is on its way.”

“No need for that”, Jake said and got up. “Just had a bit of a rough night.”

“I really think it would be better if you waited.”

“Thanks, but I’ve got to get home.”

Jake casually pushed a barstool out of the way and made his way to the door, smiling at the people who cleared the way for him as he approached.

Astral and I followed.

When we got outside, Jake was already halfway down the road and I ran to catch up with him. Astral was following close behind.

"Jake, are you okay?" I asked when I finally caught up with him.

"Yeah, but I think I better get some sleep. See ya" he said, smiled and kissed me on the cheek.

I watched him walk away.

"Is he going to be okay?" Astral asked, looking at Jake as he walked away.

"I hope so."

"Let's go home, Kate."

"Okay."

When we got off the tube we very slowly walked the ten-minute walk to the house. We hadn't eaten in the last two days, having gone out on Friday night and then of course Saturday night through to Sunday night.

When we finally made it home, I boiled some rice, the only thing we could face. I knew that if we didn't eat we probably wouldn't get up the next day and I had to go to work. I forced the food down, chewing each rice grain for a good few minutes before swallowing and then waited as the grain slowly made its way down my oesophagus with great difficulty. We drank some vitamin supplements with juice.

"It feels like a horse kicked me in the back of my neck", I announced when I felt that the grain of rice was far enough in the digestive process for me to speak again.

"It's probably the strychnine in the acid. I heard that it sometimes has that effect", Astral offered an explanation.

I went to the bathroom to have a bath. I leaned over to open the taps of the tub and started coughing. Only the coughing didn't stop. My chest started contracting in an attempt to reject the toxic matter in my lungs. My eyes started tearing. I buckled over from the spasms. I wanted to call for help but was coughing too violently. I fell to my knees, unable to do anything else but cough. I looked up and saw myself in the full-length mirror. My eyes were red and tears were running down my face.

What the fuck am I doing to my body, I thought.

Astral came in and looked worried. She rushed out again and came back with a glass of water.

I had a sip but it only brought temporary relief. I had to wait it out. I coughed for a good while longer and then, finally, it stopped.

I laid on the cold bathroom floor, exhausted. When I felt a bit stronger Astral helped me to the bedroom and I fell asleep almost immediately.

12. KLUB KALI

When I arrived at the Yard Jake was already there, talking to two guys whom he introduced to me as Dean and Mark. Apparently Jake had picked them up a few weeks ago. During their threesome they got on so well that they decided to meet up for a pint the following evening.

"It's more than sex, Kate", Jake said, "because I really enjoy their company. We go to movies and go out for dinner and have great fun. It's more like a relationship."

I went to the bar to buy a pint and when I returned Lee was chatting to Jake. The last time I had seen him was on that debauched night when Jake gave Weston some e and Lee had a hissy fit. Now he was here at the Yard, a gay pub, mixing with the enemy.

"Hi Kate", he said and gave me a hug.

"Hi", I said coldly.

"I just decided to have a drink after work. Lucky I should run into you lot."

I forced a smile. I didn't want Lee around to spoil the fun again and wished he would go away.

Jake introduced him to his two friends. They attempted to lure him with seductive glances, but Lee remained unaffected.

"Do you think she's attractive, Kate?" Lee asked me loud enough so that Jake, Dean, and Mark could hear.

"Who?" I asked.

"That woman over there", he said and pointed to a woman standing at the bar.

"I guess", I said.

I sensed that he was not asking me because he was interested in my opinion. Instead it seemed as if he wanted everyone to know at this gay bar in Soho that he was in fact straight and very much interested in women.

"I like women with blonde hair", he continued.

I zoned out as he was boring me to tears.

"Is Lee gay?" Dean asked me when Lee left to go to the bathroom.

"No, he's straight", I said.

Dean raised his eyebrows, but I just shrugged.

Jake was getting drunk and very talkative.

"Kate, I was so embarrassed last night."

"Embarrassed? You? What happened?" I asked.

"I went to a pub and then to Renegades. The rest is all very hazy but I do remember picking someone up and bringing him home. Anyway, we got to my place and were in the process of having sex, when the guy I picked up, I forgot his name, says to me, 'What's that on your cock?' I looked and saw the Renegades entry stamp on my you-know-whatsy. And the thing is, I have no recollection of how it got there at all."

I laughed.

"And you know it's one of those stamps you have to push down, not the ones that you can just touch the skin to make a print."

"And you don't remember a thing?"

"Not a thing. I had loads of e so maybe that explains my temporary loss of memory."

"It does for me."

In the meantime, Lee had returned from the bathroom and was deeply involved in conversation with Dean. Mark was very interested in their conversation and doing a rather bad job of looking the opposite. For one, he was constantly looking their way. But then he would check himself and casually take another sip of his beer.

Dean suggested that we go to Klub Kali. It was somewhere in North London. I had never been there before. None of us felt like staying at the Yard so we got a cab from the cab station around the corner.

Klub Kali was rather plain looking, just a big dance floor with a bar counter on either side. We sat down at one of the tables next to the bar. There was a plate on the table with peeled litchis that had seen better days. The music was pumping Asian house.

Dean offered me some e. I thanked him and swallowed it. Jake did the same.

"Aren't you having?" I asked Mark.

"No, I don't do drugs", he said and smiled.

"No thanks", Lee said.

Dean was not going to take no for an answer. He was as persistent as Lee was drunk and before long Lee had swallowed the e.

I couldn't believe my eyes. I prodded Jake in the ribs with my elbow but he seemed

oblivious to Lee's sudden change of beliefs.

Was this not the same Lee, the prophet of doom, who announced to Weston that he was unequivocally going to have a bad trip at the house party? And here he was popping a pill like he was a regular raver. I wanted to say something but Jake gestured for us to go to the dance floor.

Across the dance floor I saw a drag queen in a sari with a bindhy on her forehead. She danced exquisitely, moving her arms in beautiful flowing movements like an actress in a Bollywood film.

She reminded me of the women I had seen on the bus the day before. I went home early, just after midday so the bus was relatively empty. I had sat downstairs on the red double-decker bus and watched the women in their colourful saris, chattering and laughing excitedly. It reminded me of Durban, my home, and I smiled at them warmly.

A man, small in stature, sitting a few benches in front of me suddenly turned around and screamed, "Why don' you Paki's just go back to your own fuckin' country and make a noise there!"

The women fell silent.

I couldn't believe that such a little man could produce so much negative energy – it filled the entire bus and hung like a dark black fog in the air.

Besides the driver, I was the only other person on the bus. One of the women made eye contact with me and I just rolled my eyes heavenward. She smiled, somewhat relieved. Perhaps she thought I was English and that at least one person wanted her in the country. After a while, Mark joined us on the dance floor.

"So do you still think Lee is straight?", he asked me and jerked his head in the direction of the table we were sitting at.

I looked back and saw that Lee was now sitting on Dean's lap. I was rushing from the e and smiled. Lee had found love, even if it was only for tonight. What did it matter if Lee was straight or gay?

I looked at Mark.

"Don't worry", he said. "If anyone can make Lee come out, it's Dean."

Mark showed a certain amount of pride in the fact that it was *his* boyfriend who actually managed to open Lee's closet door. I pretended to be amazed, hoping that would satisfy

Mark so that he would leave me to dance in peace.

Mark started to irritate me. He danced next to me, not taking his eyes off Lee and Dean and then commenting on what they were doing. I suppose he expected me to be shocked and have immense respect for Dean's power of persuasion.

"Look at your friend now", he said for the umpteenth time.

I looked around, irritated but still intent on being polite. Dean and Lee were kissing passionately.

Mark raised his eyebrows at me in a need-I-say-anymore fashion.

"Wow", I said indifferently.

I wanted to forget everything and just dance. I wanted to feel that overpowering love possess my entire being. I tried to get into the music.

Mark pulled on my arm and gestured to Lee and Dean.

I forced a smile and nodded.

He tried to say something to me, his beer breath suffocating me. I pushed him off and waving my hand across my face I indicated that I was too high to understand.

He grabbed my wrist. With a quick Kung Fu twist of my wrist I freed myself.

"I fucking hate drunks!" I said to Jake. "How the fuck do I get rid of this guy?"

Jake gestured me to follow him and we walked to the opposite side of the dance-floor. Finally I was free. No more vulgar trivialities to bring me down from my trip. There was just the e and me.

The e wore off quickly. We went to sit down at the table next to Dean and Mark.

"Where's Lee?" I asked Dean.

Mark looked even drunker than when I saw him last.

"He's over there", Dean said, and pointed to the table next to ours.

Lee was sitting by himself. I assumed that the e must have worn off on Lee too, bringing his inhibitions back into consciousness.

He could not bring his experience back to everyday reality. It was stuck there, somewhere deep in his centre. Only the e could show him the way there. When you come down from your trip you've got to hold on tightly, otherwise whatever you discovered on the other side is lost along the way.

I became aware of how tired I was. I probably shouldn't have had those drinks before I

took the e. I decided to go home and said my goodbyes. There was no point in staying since I didn't have any e on me.

13. SHERBET

I was relaxing at home after work when the phone rang. It was Caelan. She wanted to know whether I wanted to come to Sherbet. She caught me off guard as I hadn't heard from her since Renegades and I didn't expect her to call.

She said she wanted me to meet the new man in her life, Neil. It sounded safe enough. I would not be tempted to kiss her if she was there with someone, and so I accepted her invitation.

"So where did you meet Neil? I asked. Don't tell me it's Brent's flatmate, Neil?"

Jake had told me about Neil.

"Yeah".

"Where are you staying now?"

"With Neil."

"So let me get this straight. You broke up with Brent and then moved into his flatmate's room downstairs. And now you're having a scene with him."

"Yeah."

I laughed.

"And how does Brent feel about this?" I asked.

"Fine. He has a new girlfriend now too."

"Oh. Well I guess that helps."

"So, are you coming?"

"Yeah, Sherbet sounds like a good idea. Shall I bring Jake along?"

"Yeah, please do. I haven't seen him in ages."

"All right then."

"Great. Bye bye, Kate."

Jake and I arrived at Sherbet at midnight. We found Caelan and Neil sitting at a table near the bar. I sat down next to Neil and after the introductions I had a pill.

Neil was a tall, skinny guy. He had a two-day beard and greasy hair. His eyes looked lifeless.

He was talking about the mass production of house music and how shit everything had become. We were sitting right next to a speaker so I only heard every third word. I

understood the energy with which he was saying it perfectly.

I started to rush and the constant stream of negativity flowing from him was bringing me down. I excused myself and went to dance.

Caelan followed me.

The chemistry between Caelan and I had not diminished since we saw each other last. The energy rushed through me as she stood behind me, her arms wrapped around me. We danced together, body against body.

I felt good; the music was phenomenal. Caelan moved away and went to dance with someone else. I felt a deep sense of longing for her, a strange sadness filled me. I was aware of her every move, whether I was looking at her or not.

She was magnificent the way she moved. As she danced from one side of the dance floor to the other, her energy would touch all those around her. I would see how dancers would dance more animatedly when she was close to them. She had enough energy for the entire club.

When I returned to our table, Jake had disappeared.

"Where's Jake?" I asked.

Neil shrugged, looking as bored as possible.

I found Jake sitting in a corner in the chill-out area upstairs. I sat down next to him but he did not register a thing. He was drooling and in a bad state.

"Hey Jake, how's it hanging?" I asked.

"Fucking good", he said with some difficulty.

"Are you aware that you're drooling?"

"No."

We're down to monosyllabic answers now, I thought.

"What did you take?"

"Special K", he mumbled, hardly audible.

"What? Breakfast cereal?"

"Ketamine."

"How much?"

"A lot."

He had made quite a few friends who were all sitting in a row next to him. The guy next

to him handed him a biro pen with the ink cartridge removed and a huge baggy filled with powder. Jake stared at the pen for a few minutes and then his brain registered what was happening.

“Thanks”, he said and shoved the pen up his nose, snorting the powder in the bag.

When he was finished, he handed the pen and baggy to me.

“Here, have some k”, Jake said and laughed fiendishly.

It occurred to me to refuse. Ketamine never seemed appealing to me as I did not find being paralysed and drooling out the side of your mouth very romantic. But sometimes you just want to do things because you know you shouldn’t. You want to test the boundaries. You want to stop saying no.

So I took the biro and baggy from Jake and snorted some ketamine.

After a few minutes I couldn’t feel my body anymore, I was completely anaesthetised. When the k-biro came around again, my brain sent messages to my body but the latter did not respond.

“Hu”, was all I could say when Jake held the pen in front of me.

Jake chuckled, or at least he tried to. It was more a gurgling sound coming from his throat.

He shoved the biro in my nose and slurred, “Snort! Snort!”

I attempted a feeble snort but somehow I exhaled. I sounded like a horse and thought, that’s what you get for taking a horse tranquilliser.

Jake laughed and decided it would be best to remove the biro from my nose.

I sat there for quite a while. The music sounded good but there was no way I could get up, let alone move rhythmically to the beat. I picked up my pack of cigarettes from the floor but I had no control over my hands. It felt like I was wearing gloves and the pack kept falling out of my hand.

Jake was laughing at me, or maybe he didn’t even realise he was laughing.

He slurred, “Light me one while you’re at it.”

But I just stared at the pack lying in front of me.

We sat there until the club closed and it was time to go. Jake stood up, clawing his way up the wall behind him. When he was standing, he let go of the wall and fell on the floor with a loud thump.

“Fuckin’ hell”, he said.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

He didn’t answer but remained seated. I don’t know how long I sat there. It must have been a while because Caelan arrived and said something about looking for us for ages. I was feeling more in control of my body again and got up with great effort yet some dignity.

“Come on man, the club’s closed. It’s time to go”, she said and laughed at Jake’s expression.

“I’ll meet you downstairs”, Caelan said and left.

I realised that he had no idea what she had just said. I helped Jake on his feet and got hold of his arm to support him. We walked down the stairs, clutching onto the railing for dear life and moving very slowly.

We met Caelan and Neil at the bar.

“What the fuck happened to you?” she asked Jake.

He looked at her blankly.

“He’s had a bit too much ketamine. Can you help me get him home?” I asked.

“Sure”, Caelan said.

Neil and Caelan helped me get Jake into a cab and I invited them to my place for a chill-out. Neil was feeling tired and decided to go home.

When the cab stopped at my house, Jake was feeling a bit better and staggered on his own to the front door. My flatmates had gone away for the weekend so we were thankfully alone.

Caelan and I managed to get Jake upstairs and into bed.

He had difficulty speaking and we barely understood him when he slurred “thanks” as we left him to get some sleep.

I made some coffee and Caelan and I went to the living room.

“So what do you think of Neil?” she asked.

“He seems nice. A bit dark maybe.”

“Yeah. He suffers from depression but he started taking medication for it again. We get on really well, we understand each other perfectly.”

“What medication?”

“Anti-depressants. The only problem with anti-depressants is that they tend to suppress your libido. But it’s fine because at the moment I can’t sleep with men at all.”

I didn’t know what to say so I said, “Umph.”

“I’m really exhausted”, she said. “Do you mind if I sleep here for a while?”

“Sure, my room is upstairs.”

I walked up the stairs to my room, Caelan following. Caelan got into bed and since there was nothing else for me to do, so did I.

She turned me towards her and kissed me. I pulled away.

“I’m sorry. I can’t”, I said.

“It’s okay”, she replied and smiled.

It’s one thing to kiss a girl at a club when you’re loved-up; it’s quite another to have a gorgeous woman in your bed.

Caelan did not have the reservations I seemed to be burdened with. She was quite comfortable with expressing her love whenever she felt it and for whomever she felt it. I admired her for it, but safely, from a distance.

I fell asleep in her arms.

14. FISH

Ruby called me on Thursday evening and said that she wanted to go out. She hadn't been clubbing since Renaissance and frankly it was getting to her. She didn't often get the opportunity to go out clubbing. She was a carer for an elderly woman and had to be available most evenings. I suggested we meet on Friday evening at El Casbah for a few drinks and a hookah. Ruby admitted it sounded like an excellent idea.

El Casbah was a rather overpriced restaurant in the centre of Hampstead with a lounge-bar area in the basement. We walked down the stairs and sat down on one of the sofas, covered with a Moroccan cloth. There were a few large copper plates supported by wooden structures that served as coffee tables and Moroccan artefacts mounted on the walls.

Ruby told me about Mrs Solomon's latest escapade, her mad red hair falling about her face as she spoke animatedly. I listened attentively, inhaling the sweet mixed fruit flavour of my hookah. Mrs Solomon, Ruby said, was constantly asking for her cat. But the cat had died a few years ago and old age had made Mrs Solomon reluctant to confront the truth. Ruby bought her a cat toy as some sort of compensation but Mrs Solomon did not realise that it wasn't real. She would sit with the cat on her lap and talk to it constantly, or whenever she had a visitor she would insist that they stroke the cat.

We were deep in conversation when a man introducing himself as Ryan joined us uninvited. It soon became evident that he was the owner of the restaurant as waiters would sporadically appear at his side and ask him questions that he would then answer in an abrupt manner. It also became evident that he had taken a fancy to me.

"Do you want to go for dinner some time?" he asked me out of the blue.

"Actually, I'm lesbian", I lied, hoping he'd go away.

"Really?" he said. "You mean you like women?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean."

Ruby chuckled.

"And is this your lesbian lover?"

"No this is my lesbian friend", I said "and she doesn't want to go to dinner with you either."

I knew Ruby's type and he certainly wasn't it.

"So tell me, I've always wondered how do women do it? How do you have sex?", he asked.

"What do you mean how do we have sex? Surely you know, don't you read?" I asked him.

He ignored my response completely and said, "I broke up with my girlfriend about six months ago. I mean I like sex but she was very hairy."

Ruby leaned over to me and whispered, "Why is he telling us this?"

I shrugged.

Ryan continued, "I asked her, 'Why don't you fucking shave your legs, you're hairier than I am', but she just refused, so I had to break up with her."

He looked at us, waiting patiently for a response.

There was none.

"So I'm single now. I just want a nice girlfriend. But you don't look like a lesbian, you're very pretty", he said. "So how do you lesbians have sex, I really want to know? What do you do, you give each other blow jobs and that?"

"Blow jobs? Blow jobs?" I asked. "Man, no wonder you're single. You probably meet a nice girl and then try to give her a blow job and then she refuses to see you again."

Ruby fell about with laughter.

"No I don't mean blow jobs. You know what I mean."

But I was in no mood to discuss sex with him. I was just about to explain to him where to go when a belly dancer came down the spiral staircase. We heard the bells tied around her ankles and hips ringing as she carefully made her way down the stairs.

"Oh, do you have belly dancers here?" Ruby asked unnecessarily.

"Yeah. On Friday and Saturday nights they dance upstairs in the restaurant", Ryan replied.

Ruby excused herself to talk to the belly dancer who was having a drink at the bar, leaving me with Ryan. He continued his questioning on the art of lesbian love-making; I continued being evasive.

Feigning interest in what Ryan was telling me, I watched the belly dancer teach Ruby how to dance. The dancer moved in behind Ruby and placed her hands on Ruby's hips.

She guided Ruby's hips, demonstrating how they were supposed to be moved. Watching her I realised how much I needed to dance. It was time to go and we left for Fish, the club I decided to take Ruby to.

It was quite late so we took a cab to Charing Cross British Rail Station. We walked through the walkway to the other side of the station. When we had passed the last crowd of people and there was no one ahead of us, I took out my bag of drugs to see whether we needed to buy some more inside the club. I saw with some relief that my supply was still substantial. Holding the bag I looked up to the street light. I saw to my horror that a CCTV video camera straight ahead was pointed directly at me, filming my every move.

"Oh shit", I said and quickly stuffed the bag back in my pocket.

"What's wrong?" Ruby asked.

When we were out of sight of the camera I told her what had happened.

"This fucking big-brother-is-watching-you syndrome is really starting to piss me off", I concluded.

"Oh well, I'm sure they can't prove anything with that clip", she said. "What type of club is this anyway? Is it gay?"

"No, it's mixed. The music is good so I think you'll enjoy it."

When we got inside we took our pills.

"I got them from Jake. They're very strong, so just be careful", I said.

Ruby nodded.

The club was quite small and divided into two parts. One part was the dance floor with a very high ceiling, and the other consisted of two levels – the bar on the ground with the chill-out area on top of it. Standing in the chill-out area you could look onto the dance floor below as there was no wall to separate it, only a railing to stop loved-up dancers falling on the dance floor.

We danced for a few hours and then made our way to the chill-out area. The pills were incredibly strong and seemed to last forever. It had been three hours since we took them and we still had not come down.

"These pills are incredible", Ruby said.

"I know, they're weird huh? They're not like the other pills. I mean I don't feel tingly or particular loved-up. And as I sit here talking to you now, I feel removed from myself.

It's like I'm watching myself having a conversation with you, as if I'm functioning on two levels. Don't you find?"

"I don't know, I feel tingly all over", she said and rubbed her hands together.

We sat in silence for a while and then Ruby started chatting to the guy on her left.

I was quite happy sitting there by myself. I watched the people around me, frantically chewing their gum, massaging each other, touching each other, dancing animatedly. I wasn't one of them now, I was on a completely different trip. I felt separate from everybody else in the club, even myself. I was watching myself listening to music, looking at people, doing all the things one usually does in a club.

I saw myself get up and dance with a crowd of people in the chill-out area. I saw myself looking at Ruby to check if she was okay. She was now kissing the guy on her left and had her hand on the knee of the one sitting on her right.

I saw myself smile at Ruby and knew that she was experiencing the normal effects of e. Why was my trip so different? We took exactly the same e and we were in exactly the same surroundings. Had I taken so much e that my body was now storing it somewhere? Had it accumulated into this bizarre trip?

I was no longer the dancing talking clubber. I was merely an actor doing all the things that a clubber did. I was pure awareness, pure consciousness.

Ruby got up and told me she was going to dance with her new friend, the guy she had kissed.

She walked down the spiral staircase, followed by her new friend and I decided to keep an eye on her from the first floor where I remained.

She was dancing seductively, moving her hips as the belly dancer had showed her at El Casbah. This aroused her companion who pressed himself up against her. I watched helplessly as he put another e in her mouth on the dance floor, realising the futility in trying to run down and stop him. Ruby wasn't used to taking so many drugs and it was my responsibility to look after her. I got nervous.

Ruby continued her hip-swaying and her companion clasped his hands over her breasts. My rush had passed and I was body-conscious again. I watched over Ruby nervously as the effects of the second e took a hold of her and lifted her higher and higher. She was no longer dancing down to the earth like she usually did, but dancing upward, her wrists

turned towards the ceiling.

It was time to leave. I had to get Ruby out of there.

I walked down the stairs and asked her if she was ready to go.

The guy said something to her and she turned to me and said, "No, I'm going with him."

"No you're not!" I said and took her firmly by the arm.

I knew she was totally docile and would do anything anyone told her to do. She was in no state to make decisions and I led her outside.

"Kate", she said quite sheepishly, "why won't you let me go with him?"

"You'll thank me later", I said. "Just trust me."

"I feel so strange. How am I going to make it home?"

Ruby was still e-ing and looked very lost as she looked up at the tall buildings towering over us.

"You're going to take the tube to Hampstead and then walk home", I said.

"Please don't leave me Kate. Please. I'll never make it home on my own."

She was right. She couldn't even walk let alone complete difficult tasks such as purchasing a tube ticket and catching the correct tube.

"Please come with me. You can sleep on my bed, I'll sleep on the floor."

Ruby was desperate and I couldn't help being a bit amused. She was like a little child.

I decided to go with her. I was still e-ing myself and had to concentrate to organise our journey home. We decided to take the bus instead and while waiting for our bus to arrive, we were revitalised by the crisp morning air.

"Well I don't even have to ask if you had a good time tonight", I said.

"I know. I had such a lovely time with all those gay men."

"What gay men?"

"You know, that one gay guy I was talking to all night."

"Ruby, if he was gay, why did he kiss you?"

"I don't know, it was probably just a friendly gay kiss."

Ah, good old e logic, I thought.

"What made you think he was gay?" I asked.

"You told me it was a gay club."

"When? When? I said it was a mixed club. A mixed club means there are straight and

gay people there.”

“Oh. I wonder why I thought he was gay?”

“I have no idea. What I want to know is why you wanted to go home with him.”

“Oh my God. I can’t believe I almost went home with him. Thank you, Kate. Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“No problem.”

“What was I thinking?”

“Anyway, I kind of knew it would be a bad idea if you went.”

“Definitely.”

Our bus arrived and we were on our way to Hampstead, feeling quite fragile and tired. We got off at our stop. It was a pleasant walk to Ruby’s house, with lots of trees and beautiful houses. It was early and the suburban streets were deserted. We walked past the grave-yard and the mist lay low on the ground.

Ruby quickened her pace and said, “I hate walking past this grave-yard. It gives me the creeps.”

We sneaked in the house as quietly as we could, but were met in the hall by a very upset Mrs Goldstein, who was Mrs Solomon’s daughter and married to Mr Goldstein. She was in tears and put her arms around Ruby.

“Ruby, I’m so glad you’re back. I’ve got some terrible news. My mother just passed away”, Mrs Goldstein said, her voice trembling.

Ruby started to cry.

I could feel Mrs Goldstein and Ruby’s sadness wash over me like waves in a limitless ocean of despair. This was not the best time for Ruby to hear the news. It opens your heart like it opens your pupils, expanding them to receive any emotion and impulse that is directed towards them. There is no gatekeeper, no censor.

I don’t remember how long we stood in the hall, Ruby and Mrs Goldstein crying and me forgotten for the moment. Mrs Goldstein was the first to stir and stepped back, her eyes fixed on the floor.

“Ruby, it would be a great help if you could watch my mom for a while. Esther has been watching her for the last hour and I think she’s quite tired by now.”

“Of course, Mrs Goldstein”, Ruby said.

Mrs Goldstein retired to the lounge and Ruby and I went upstairs. When we were safely in Ruby's room, she closed the door behind us.

"Who's Esther?" I asked.

"Mrs Goldstein's daughter."

"Oh."

"I can't believe she's dead. I don't believe it", Ruby said.

"What did Mrs Goldstein mean when she asked if you could watch her mom?" I asked Ruby.

Ruby explained that it is a tradition in the Jewish faith that when someone dies the body is not to be left alone. There has to be someone watching it day and night until it is buried.

"Kate, please. I won't be able to watch the body on my own. You have to help me. Please", Ruby pleaded and I could see that she was desperate.

Watching a body during my come down would not have been my first choice of what to do for a chill-out, but I couldn't let Ruby down. She needed some support. She was Mrs Solomon's carer and I could only imagine that watching the shell of the woman she so often spoke about would not be a very pleasant experience in her present state.

"Sure Ruby, of course I'll help."

Ruby quickly had a shower and put on some clean clothes. We were chatting when Mrs Goldstein came to ask us to come through.

I followed Ruby to the bedroom and as I walked in, I became acutely aware of the silence there existed within the confines of the four walls which enclosed us. Even the humming in my ears brought on by the loud music of the club had stopped.

Esther was sitting in a chair next to the window and looked up as we entered. She smiled at Ruby and they whispered a few words of condolence to each other.

Mrs Solomon was lying on the bed, her eyes closed. Her face was white and a brightly coloured blanket was pulled up to her chin.

Esther left the room and Ruby and I stared in silence at Mrs Solomon lying on her bed.

"Well we'd better sit down. I don't know how long we have to stay here for", Ruby finally said.

We remained standing.

The silence was broken when Ruby started to cry.

I put my hand on Ruby's arm in consolation.

I looked at Mrs Solomon. I felt sure that it was her time to go and that it was a beautiful departure as there was just a hint of a smile around the corners of her mouth.

We sat down and watched the body in silence.

15. NYMPH

Astral and I decided to go to Nymph and as always got ready at my place, doing our usual lines of speed off a CD cover.

Astral was wearing a rather unusual outfit. She was dressed as a fairy, all in white and complete with a magic wand and fairy wings attached to her back.

She was putting on my make-up, as she loved to do. She lightly brushed my eyes with her shiny sparkly fairy dust and, enchanted, I opened them.

“Done”, she said and stood back to inspect her work.

Nymph was held in an old church in Brixton, an area renowned for bad drug deals. I bought some hash there once which turned out to be a piece of liquorice wrapped in cling wrap. I was seriously pissed off. Astral told me that a friend of hers bought some speed there and after he snorted it all in an evening of clubbing, he had a rash on the entire left side of his face. There were also rumours going around that a man was selling what he claimed to be ketamine but was in fact pig hormones. No one realised that it was not ketamine and some clients even went back for seconds. Apparently the dealer made a small fortune.

So we made sure we had enough drugs on us to avoid having to buy locally.

At the club we took some fairy cakes and smiled at each other while we waited for the rush.

It was a strange place. The uplifting trance sounds were quite hypnotic and the monotonous beats transformed my brain waves from beta into alpha in no time.

When we started feeling the rush we quickly moved onto the dance floor. Astral had done way too much speed and was a bit aggressive.

“You’re bending my wing, you fucking asshole!” I heard her yell at the guy dancing too close to her.

He raised his hands in the air apologetically and moved out of her way.

We each had a trip and chewed to the beat of the music.

When the acid kicked in we decided to sit down as everything was getting a bit freaky.

“Can you get some water, Kate?” Astral asked.

“I don’t know if I can get up.”

“You can do it! Just believe in yourself.”

“I don’t know, Astral. It looks a bit scary out there.”

“It will be fine. Just ignore the things you see. They’re just hallucinations. Focus on getting the water and there should be no problem.”

I saw out of the corner of my eye a large fan next to me turn into a huge fly. I jumped. It flew across the dance floor and spiralled down into the crowd.

“Did you see that!”

“See what?” Astral asked.

“That fan that just turned into a giant fly and flew off.”

“No”, she said.

She pretended to choke and yelled, “Water! Water! I need water!”

“God, Astral, I guess you’re not going to let this go, are you?”

“Nope.”

Okay, I thought, tiny steps. Just get up and then see what happens.

I got up and nothing happened. I stood there for a while, getting used to the newness of my position. The cleaner of the club walked towards me. Or rather something pretending to be the cleaner of the club. He was in fact a large troll with gigantic arms and hands and opened an invisible door next to me and then disappeared. I sat down again.

“What’s wrong now?” Astral asked.

I knew I was tripping because when Astral said the “s” in “What’s”, it had a lot more treble than it was supposed to have. That was always a sure sign for me.

“There are some pretty scary creatures here tonight.”

“I saw him too. He’s just a friendly troll. Go on, water! Water!” she yelled.

I inched my way to the bar counter, stepping aside quickly when giant rocks fell out of the sky and missed me by a few inches. I looked back at Astral and she gave me an encouraging thumbs-up, followed by gesturing hand movements to complete the mission.

A giant walked past me with a tiny head. Does he really have a small head, I wondered, or does it just look small because it’s so high up? I noticed I wasn’t moving anymore and continued to inch my way towards the bar.

After what seemed like an hour, I reached the counter. I was greeted by another troll who

looked at me questioningly. At least I thought he was looking at me. I couldn't tell because he was squint.

Why was I here at the bar counter trying to communicate with a troll, I wondered. I looked back at Astral and reading my mind she mimed taking a drink from a bottle of water. That's right, water, I thought.

I turned to face the troll again and he said, "Uthy wragee thithee ne?"

I started laughing and because I didn't want him to think I was laughing at him, I looked down at the bar counter. The counter was a display cabinet with a glass cover. Underneath the cover, there were several gnomes. They were dancing and drinking cider from small mugs. Most of them had pointy hats that they would push back from time to time.

"Krear kiri swer?" the troll said a bit louder.

I turned around for some support from Astral. I shrugged, indicating the hopelessness of my mission.

The troll was getting annoyed now and said threateningly, "Shema hjuy kela kria!"

I turned around.

"Water", I said.

"Grer rtieer jruk! Grer rtieer jruk!"

I didn't know how to deal with the situation. I blinked at him and noticed that every time I did he would change his position and expression, and once even had his leg in the air after a blink.

The troll slammed his fist down on the counter in front of me and said, "Kerth smagoree sinuee?"

I decided to stay calm.

"W-a-t-e-r", I sounded the word out slowly.

He shook his head and got a bottle of water from the glass fridge behind him, slamming the door shut and looking irritated.

"T-h-a-n-k y-o-u", I said.

I turned around, confident that there was nothing more I could have done to understand him. I felt a hand on my shoulder and when I looked it was a troll hand, large with lots of hair and sharp yellow nails.

I turned around and raised my eyebrows in a get-your-hand-off-my-shoulder-or-else manner.

“Mareg! Mareg!” he yelled.

I looked at him confused.

He was miming something but I couldn’t quite understand what he was trying to say. He pointed to the cash register and it finally dawned on me that he wanted me to pay. I handed him a note from my pocket and left, inching my way back to Astral.

“Got the water”, I said.

Astral was falling about with laughter.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“The barman thought you were going over to pick him up.”

“No, he didn’t.”

“Yes, he did.”

“No, he didn’t.”

“Yes, he did. When you turned around to look at me and I gave you a thumbs-up, he saw me and thought I was encouraging you to go talk to him. It was so funny.”

“Well he can dream on. He doesn’t even speak English.”

Astral was still laughing.

“Oh my god, it was so funny.”

The club was noticeably fuller now. There were several nymphs amongst the crowd, jumping and skipping through the club.

“Wow, did you see that?” Astral asked, waving her magic wand wildly in the direction of the dance floor and almost hitting me in the face with it.

“What?” I asked.

“I just saw Pan.”

“Who?”

“Pan.”

“What the hell is he doing here?”

“I don’t know. We’d better hide.”

“What for?”

“Because it’s Pan! It’s Pan!” she yelled.

She wasn't laughing anymore and suddenly our trip had taken a nasty turn. I could see that she was terrified.

We ran up the stairs. I could hear the nymphs' panic-stricken screams as we quickly ran to hide, their infectious shrieking filling me with fear.

"He's going to find us! He's going to find us!" Astral said.

Upstairs we found a chill-out area with tables and chairs. I took Astral by the hand and we hid under an unoccupied table.

"Great. Pan will never find us here", Astral said.

We didn't speak and just sat under the table for a while.

A woman peered under the table and asked, "Are you okay?"

"We're fine", I said, not sure whether she could be trusted.

"Why are you sitting under the table?" she asked.

"Oh, the music is a bit loud", I said, not knowing what else to say.

She looked at me rather puzzled and then disappeared.

"Are we still tripping?" Astral asked.

Her question jerked me back to reality.

"Well I don't know, Astral. We're sitting under a table, hiding from Pan", I said sarcastically.

"I guess we're still tripping then."

We realised how ridiculous we looked and started laughing. Slowly, we climbed out from under the table and onto the chairs.

"I can't believe you told that girl the music was too loud", Astral said.

"Well, would you have preferred if I'd told her we were hiding from Pan?"

"I guess not", Astral laughed.

"God, we're such freaks!" she said.

But the trip was far from over and we watched the trolls, giants and nymphs walk past us for a while.

"That's Pan! That's Pan!" Astral suddenly yelled.

Her fear had returned and I tried as best I could to stay calm for her sake.

A huge guy was walking through the chill-out area. He had two flashing red horns on his head, red eyes, and a large nose ring through the middle part of his nose. He was wearing

black hot-pants and no shirt, showing several tattoos on his torso and arms.

We ducked under the table again.

“Why don’t you like Pan?” I asked Astral.

“I don’t want to talk about it now!” she said.

She was close to tears.

“Well don’t panic!” I said.

I laughed hysterically, realising that the word “panic” is derived from “Pan”.

Astral did not find this amusing and stared at me. She was really scared.

“You do realise it’s not really Pan”, I said, attempting to bring her back to reality.

“Just shut up, will you. Let’s talk about something else.”

Reality had no impact on her so I tried to talk to her in terms of her fantasy.

“Well, you are in absolutely no danger. Pan only ever chased nymphs and raped them. Never fairies!”

“He raped them? He raped them?” she yelled and gave me such a fright that I hit my head on the table top.

“It’s just mythology. It’s just...”

“Just shut up! I don’t want to talk about it, I don’t want to hear about it. I don’t even want to think about it.”

She was angry now and I didn’t know what to say – too afraid of saying the wrong thing again. She wasn’t ready to confront any of her fears or her past experiences. I felt completely helpless.

We sat in silence for a while. I checked to see if Pan had left yet. He had.

Astral’s wing had got stuck in the top of the table and I had to free her before we could take our places on the chairs again.

We sat there for the rest of the evening. I would sporadically try to start up a conversation with Astral but to no avail. She was too upset.

So mostly we kept ourselves occupied with our own thoughts, tripping too hard to do anything else.

I was relieved when it was time to go home. There wasn’t anything I could do for her now, not if she didn’t want to talk about it.

And there was no point in staying. Neither of us was enjoying the trip.

“I’m going. You coming?” I asked.

She looked at me for a while.

“Okay”, she said.

The tube was empty except for three lads in our car. They were either drunk or stoned, and made an awful lot of noise that scared me in my vulnerable state. All three of them had small parcels wrapped in newspaper on their laps.

“What do you think they’ve got in there?” I asked Astral.

Astral was staring catatonically in front of her and without looking up said, “Dunno”.

The tube shook forward and the lads were laughing and joking. One of the lads opened his parcel and lifted up the content: a dead fish. A mackerel I guessed. The other two lads did the same and they started throwing dead fish at one another. I wasn’t sure if I was imagining it or if it was really happening.

“Astral, can you see the fish?”

But Astral didn’t even look up. She was lost in a world of her own.

The lads soon got tired of throwing their fish around and one decided to smoke it. He put the tail of the fish in his mouth and then tried to light the head with his lighter for quite some time.

We got off the tube and waited for the bus at the bus stop.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“No. I don’t think I’ll ever be okay again.”

She didn’t look at me.

“I’m sorry if I upset you.”

“That’s okay.”

“You’ll find peace some day.”

“Maybe.”

The bus came and we got on. We rode to our stop in silence.

16. MELT

It was Sunday and we had to work the next day. Jake, Astral and I felt like clubbing though, and convinced ourselves that we could go clubbing all night and then go to work the next day without having slept. We decided on Melt.

Astral and I met Jake at the tube station and set off to the club. There was, surprisingly, quite a line-up and we waited in the queue for a while.

When we got inside, we dropped off our bags at the coat check and got sorted with some e from the dealer we saw in the corner. We swallowed our pills.

Jake took out three trips and gave Astral and I one each.

“These trips are incredible”, Jake explained. “They’re Dr Hoffmans. They’ve been double and triple soaked and they’re fucking insane. It’s a limited edition and very difficult to get hold of.”

“Happy trip”, Jake said to me as I put the acid in my mouth.

We chewed the acid and made our way to the dance floor.

I remembered Jake telling me a while back about a friend of his who wanted a bigger effect from her acid and so put the micro-dot under her eyelid instead of swallowing it. This way your body absorbs 80% instead of 30%. She danced the entire evening rather strangely and her friends would imitate her waving and shaking her hands in the air, assuming that she was having a good time by the stupid expression on her face. Only much later when she started hitting herself did her friend realise that all wasn’t well. It turned out that she thought she was on fire and that she was trying to extinguish the flames. She was rushed to hospital and luckily survived the ordeal without becoming psychotic.

When my acid kicked it, the kick was annihilating. It was too strong and I didn’t know what to do. There was no humour, no silly cartoons playing off in my head. Instead I became aware of a dark sinister force present in the club. The music sounded frightening: awful sounds of tearing metal and cars and trucks crashing into each other.

There were five people amongst the crowd who were similarly dressed. They all had dark clothes on and were all looking at me: five faces turned towards me while the rest were smiling and dancing. These people were not interested in connecting with the

higher power, they were very much focused on controlling the energy levels in the club.

"It's all very cloak-and-dagger, ain't it?" I said to Jake.

He looked at me blankly.

The Evil 5 were aware of my presence and attempting to read my mind.

Got to get out of here. Got to get out of here. I stumbled over dancing boots and shoes and followed the stairs to the top bar.

I don't know how long I was there for. Astral and Jake found me sitting in the corner on the floor.

I was chanting "I don't feel well" and it was difficult to hear what they were saying.

I could see Jake and Astral. Then they vanished in front of my eyes. A few minutes later they were back again and exactly the same conversation and actions took place again.

"Jake, we're caught in a time cycle", I said. "We could be here for the rest of eternity."

I was scared.

"Just relax, Kate. You're only tripping", he said.

"Jake, events keep repeating themselves", I said.

He didn't believe me. I could now read his mind. Great! As if things aren't fucked up enough already!

"Here, take this red lighter", I said. "If you still have it later, that means we're okay. If I have it then we're caught in a time cycle."

Jake took the lighter from me and put it in his trouser pocket. I watched him closely because this object would be my way out of this madness.

They went to dance for a while after I assured them that I would be fine.

Some time passed and Astral and Jake were back.

"How are you feeling?", Astral asked.

"Okay", I said. "You?"

"I'm off my face!"

Astral offered me a cigarette and I asked Jake for the lighter.

He fumbled through his pockets and couldn't find it.

I looked through my pockets and found it in my trouser pocket.

"Fuck! We're caught in a time cycle!", I yelled.

Jake and Astral looked at me in silence, while the music in the background grew louder

and louder.

I've got to get out of here! I've got to get out of here! Time never ever moves forward in clubs. It's just a cycle repeating itself constantly. It's a trick and everyone is just too fucking stupid to get it. I've got to get out of here!

No, I'm going. Leave me alone, Astral. I've got to go.

I've got to run faster or I'll get sucked back into the cycle. Out the club! Great! I'm out! But who's that guy! He's one of the Evil 5, I'd recognise his kind anywhere. He's trying to read my thoughts, fucking bastard. I won't let him. I'll think of ... I'll think of of cats! Cats and cats and cats and cats. Ginger cats! Tom cats! Black cats! Dark sinister No! No! No!

I'm walking through a beautiful meadow! It's spring. Tra la tra la tra la! Beautiful soft green grass under my feet! Tra la tra la tra la! Hey, where the fuck am I? I've never been here before. I'll just have to keep on walking. I can't stop. If I stop the Evil 5 will be on me and find out everything about me. They can read my mind and I might just slip up. Then I'll lead them to my friends and my friends will be done for. And I can't let that happen!

Fuck! Someone's following me. They're gaining on me! Down this alley! Great, I've lost them. But they might find me again. I can control my mind, I must just focus. Fuck, I forgot about my wallet. Quickly, I must throw it away before they find me. There we go, nothing they can trace to me. Cigarettes, they must go as well, the fucking red lighter, everything must go! Great, now it's only me.

The sun's coming up. I have to go home. But I can't, they'll still be following me. I have to just walk around for a little longer. I can't betray my friends, I can't be responsible for their disappearance. Who knows what the Evil 5 will do to them once they find them.

Nevermind, nevermind! It's spring. Tra la tra la tra la. It's fucking cold for spring! Tra la tra la tra la. Beautiful flowers dotted along the way. Tra la tra la tra la. It's fucking freezing! I've got to get some heat somewhere. Aha, in here. Great, this is much warmer. Why is that woman looking at me like that? *Lady, fuck off!* I'll just dash up the stairs and find a warm place to sit. All these fucking people in suits, what the hell are

they doing here? Evil 5, all of them. Wish I was home, no can't think of home, they can read my mind. In here I'll go with all the brooms. Must be a witch's den! Lock the door behind me! *Ha ha ha, you can't catch me now you fuckers!*

Now I'll just wait. They'll get tired and leave. Oh shit! There's a knock on the door. Stay calm. Stay calm. It's locked. They can't get in.

Fuck, they're threatening to call the police! What am I going to do? Wait a minute, the police could help me. I'd rather be arrested by the police than abducted by the Evil 5! *Call the fucking cops, I dare you. I fucking double dare you!*

Jesus, they're still threatening. Some people are just all talk and no action! Got to do something. The Evil 5 is probably out there trying to tell them not to call the cops. Here, I'll just throw this chair through the window like so. Wow, look at that! Isn't that pretty the way the glass just rains on the floor.

Now I just have to wait here and the cops will come and save me. The Evil 5 thought they could catch me, well fuck them!

There's the police. They couldn't have got here so quickly, it's a trick. *I'm not fucking unlocking the door, how do I know you're the police?*

They must think I'm fucking stupid. Okay, this is better. Some identification being slid under the door. Everything seems in order. *Thanks.* Okay, just unlock the door. Wow, what are all these people doing here? Where did they all come from? Fuck, the Evil 5. They're everywhere!

Let's go! The cops will sort this out, hopefully. If they don't get killed by the Evil 5 first. Oh well, occupational hazard. They're here to serve and protect, nothing I can do if they get killed.

In the car we go. Ha ha, Evil 5! Yeah, you just stand watching on the side-walk. There's nothing you can do now.

Hey, where are we going? Wow, we're going fast! Wait a second. He's wearing make up! The fucking cop is wearing make-up! He's undercover Evil 5! It's the perfect cover, ain't it! Oh shit! Stay calm, stay calm. I'll just have to play along, I can't let them know I suspect anything. But his partner is black. He can't possibly be Evil 5. They'd never let him into their secret circle.

Great, we've stopped. Where am I now? This must be the police station. Okay, take it

easy! Just play innocent, don't let on that you know you're onto them. Fuck! They can read thoughts. I must think of something else.

The meadow! The meadow! Beautiful fairies flying around my head, laughing and playing. Crisp green grass under my feet! Lovely little mushrooms, red with little white dots. Mushrooms.... am I tripping? Impossible, I didn't take any mushrooms.

Right! I'll sit down if it's so fucking important to them. Yeah yeah yeah! Ask as many questions as you like, I'm not going to say a fucking word. Not a peep from me. There's two of them. I wonder if they're going to play good cop, bad cop. And still they keep on asking questions. Don't know if they are Evil 5, they don't seem like it.

Yeah yeah yeah, I can hear you! Well if they think I'm going to tell them what's going on, they're mad! I'll no sooner have told them than I'll be lying dead on the floor. Evil 5s got eyes and ears everywhere.

Fine, leave me alone. Go discuss amongst yourselves somewhere else, it's not going to help you any. Idiots! They are so blind to what's going on.

Right we're off again. Down the corridor, out the building and into the car.

Where are you taking me now?

Hospital! Hospital! Why are they taking me to the hospital? This is getting ridiculous. Maybe they got a call from the Evil 5. That's it! That's where their headquarters are! That's why so many people supposedly die in hospital. They don't die at all, they disappear! They get taken down to the Evil 5 headquarters and then get tortured and murdered! I have been so stupid. Why didn't I realise this before? I have been asleep all this time and now I'm finally awake. I can see the truth now.

Well if I have to die today then I have to die. Nothing I can do about it, I'll just have to accept my fate. Or I could just jump out of the car right now. Too late, we've arrived. Down the corridor. God I hate hospitals. Right smack in the middle of the Evil 5 headquarters. Fuck, how did I get into this mess?

Yeah yeah yeah, I'll wait here. Where am I going to go anyway? Casualty ward! Okay, I've got to be casual. Just pretend nothing's wrong. I'll just sit here and remain calm. And what does it matter if the guy sitting opposite has blood dripping down his head. Or that guy has a piece of metal sticking out of his arm? It just doesn't matter!

They're trying to break me down before the interrogation, but I'm onto them all right!

They don't know who they're fucking dealing with here. I'm not going to crumble just because they slap me through the face, fuck that!

How did I get here? Why am I in the custody of the Evil 5, on the brink of death? It just doesn't make sense. Who am I? I am Kate. Okay, think Kate, you woke up this morning and then no I didn't wake up this morning. I never went to bed last night. Why not? Why didn't I go to bed? I was roaming the streets trying to get away from the Evil 5. And before that? Well before that I was in a club monitored by the Evil 5. But why was I in a club? I'm always in a club! So it makes sense that I was in a club last night! But why am I in a hospital? I'm never in a hospital. And why did I leave the club? Because of the Evil 5, that's right.

Jake gave me some acid. Oh fuck! I'm tripping on acid! What have I done? Oh my God! Oh shit! Oh fuck! I've taken some crazy paper and now I'm in hospital, convinced I'm at the Evil 5 headquarters. How am I going to get out of this one? I'm going to fucking kill Jake. How he could he do this to me? He knows I can't handle the strong stuff! Fucking bastard!

Okay, here's the policeman again. Should I apologise? No, no, no! Rather go with it. Otherwise they might take me back to the police station if they think I am normal. And besides, this could still be the Evil 5 headquarters. Paranoia is just a hypersensitive interpretation of reality. I could still very well be tortured and killed!

Into this cosy little room. It looks like an office. Whose office? That guy sitting behind the desk's office! Who is he, I wonder. He could be part of the Evil 5.

I'm fine, thanks.

He wants to know what's going on. What can I tell him? I don't trust him enough to tell him anything. Does he think I'm just going to blurt everything out to someone I've never met before? Who the hell does he think he is? He's fucking delusional.

At least he's asking questions. Not like that shrink I had at University who didn't say a fucking word! She just looked at me for an hour until I had had enough. I left and never went back. Psycho-dynamic therapy, I think it was called. The theory goes that if you are intelligent enough you can figure out your problems for yourself. Which I realised is true but then why do you need to go to a shrink? They've cut the rope for their own necks with that theory, fucking stupid shrinks!

He wants to know if I have a history of mental illness. Now I have to answer this carefully or else I will get committed.

Just a slight case of depression a few years ago. I'm fine now.

No medication.

He says that I was found in a solicitor's office this morning at nine o'clock by the police. I threw a chair out the window. Yeah well I was trying to get them to call the police. They were part of the Evil 5! Better not tell him that though. He'll think I'm a little weird!

Did I take anything?

Yeah. I took some acid.

What the fuck is he laughing about? I could well be seriously deranged and he's just sitting there, laughing! Fucking bastard! No wonder psychiatrists are so unpopular. They don't take anything seriously.

What fucking test does he want me to do now? I want to go home now. Simple test, he says. Well let's just get this over with then.

Take the glass of water and put it on the floor with my left hand. Oh fuck! Oh fuck! What the hell is he talking about? He's mad, absolutely fucking mad!

Take the glass of water and put it on the floor with my left hand! That doesn't make any sense. What about back to front? With my left hand put the floor in the glass of water and take it.... Ha ha ha. That's so funny! He's mad, silly git!

Okay, I'll wait in the waiting room. Ha ha ha. What else does one do in a waiting room, but wait? That's so funny.

Yeah, I have a friend I could call. His name's Jake and the number is ... his number is ... Just a second.

What is his number? Okay, don't think, just say it. The more you think about it, the less likely you are to remember.

Jake's number is ... his number is 593 3500. Can I go now?

The waiting room! Great! This is where I'll have to wait. Once you're in the waiting room, you know you are going to wait. Why else would you be there? I hate waiting. I wonder how long I have to wait here for. Waiting and waiting.

Why do I have to wait? Why can't I just go home? Do I know where I live? I can't

remember at this very moment, but that doesn't mean I don't know. It will come to me, I'm sure.

And still I wait.....

Wow, that girl looks terrible. She has a swollen lip of some sort. I wonder what the fuck happened to her? Maybe she was in a fight. Or maybe she is one of the few to escape the infamous Evil 5?

Say girl, what happened to you?

Oh there was just a fight. And she got hit accidentally. Yeah well I guess she can't tell me about the Evil 5, I could be one of them for all she knows.

What the fuck am I waiting for?

Hey there's Jake. Who is he talking to? Oh, that shrink that laughed at me, the stupid bastard! Not to worry, Jake will sort this out! He'll get me out of here. Bla bla bla! What the fuck are they talking about? They're talking about me! Of course they're talking about me! What are they saying?

Could Jake be Evil 5? No, never! He could be deep deep deep undercover! He's good! I didn't even suspect him. No, he could never be!

Great, he's coming over.

Yeah, I'm ready to go. Thank you Mr Shrink!

No, no, no! I won't do acid again. Yes, yes, yes, I know. Next time you might not be able to bring me back.

Am I back? Back where? Anyway, let's get out of here. These people are crazy.

Jake, get me out of here, quick!

Jake will help me. He knows what this is all about. He's smiling.

Hey, what's the joke?

He thinks it's funny that I threw a chair out the window of the solicitor's office.

How do you know about that?

The shrink, of course. I forgot he briefed you about my movements. Where are we going? We're outside now! Hey, there's Astral. She's running towards me. What's wrong? Oh, big hug. She must have missed me. Worried! She was worried.

Why were you worried?

I disappeared. I don't think I disappeared. People could still see me. I wonder what

she's on about. I have no idea!

Good idea! Jake says we'll talk about it later. I'm glad they're both here. I feel much better now that they are here.

Where are we going?

Jake's place. Great. I like Jake's place. It's nice and peaceful there. Jake's waving down a cab. We're taking a cab. I love cab rides!

It's a lovely day!

The sun is shining and there's a lovely breeze blowing in through the car window.

Breeeezzzzzzzz! Breeeeeezzzzzzzz! Nice coooooooool breeeeeeezzzzzzzz!

Right, we've arrived! Out the cab we get and up the stairs. I'm feeling tired.

Jake. I'm sleepy.

Yes that sounds good. I'm going to sleep now. Through to the bedroom.

No, I'm fine thanks. Just need to lie down and sleep a bit.

Sleep, sleep. Wonderful, glorious sleep. I'll just lie down for a while and sleep.

I woke up with a start. I had no idea of what day it was or what time. I found Jake and Astral in the lounge, smoking hash. It was dark outside.

"What day is it?" I asked.

Jake looked at his watch.

"It is now Monday evening, 10 p.m."

"Oh fuck! I missed work today."

"Not to worry, I called in sick for you", Jake replied.

"What did you say was wrong with me?"

"Good old stomach flu. That always works for the business world. I told them I took you to the hospital and they didn't ask any more questions. Hospital always sounds serious."

"Thanks Jake. Thank God one of us kept it together."

"What happened to you? We were worried sick about you", Astral said, not able to control herself any longer.

"I don't know really. I had a freak-out on the dance floor, which is why I left the club. Then I thought people were following me. I hid in this little room somewhere..."

“The broom closet of White and Stein Solicitors”, Jake interrupted.

“Is that where I was? Oh my God. And I threw a chair through the window. They probably thought I was mad!”

“That’s exactly what they thought and that is why they called the police to come and get you.”

“Well the police picked me up and took me to the station where they asked me all sorts of questions. In my paranoid state I refused to answer any of them. They then took me to the hospital where I was interviewed by a shrink. I finally told him I dropped some acid and he started laughing. Anyway, then he called you.”

“Who were you running from anyway?” Jake asked.

“The Evil 5.”

“Don’t you mean the Big 5?” Jake said and rolled around the floor with laughter. “I love you, Kate. Your trips are always so South African.”

“Well let me tell you about our evening”, Astral said. “When we couldn’t find you we spent the entire evening looking for you in the club. Then we finally realised that you weren’t there and we walked up and down the streets looking for you, tripping out of our minds. God, don’t ever do that again.”

“Sorry, Astral. I didn’t intend for you to be worried. I just flipped out.”

“We were so worried, Kate.”

“Anyway, we’re glad you’re back”, Jake said. “I can’t believe they took you to the hospital for evaluation. Man I wish I could have seen that”, he giggled.

“It’s your fault I was there in the first place. How could you give me that crazy acid? Are you mad? You know how sensitive I am to drugs.”

Jake laughed.

“Kate, you should have seen yourself at the hospital. You were so wasted! It was so funny.”

“I was petrified!”

“The shrink wanted to know if I was with you last night. I said yes, all serious like, and that I think you might have taken some LSD. He said that I should watch you carefully and if you have any weird behaviour, I should take you right back. So just watch your step”, Jake joked.

“You are such a bastard! I’m not doing drugs with you anymore. You can’t be trusted.”

“How was I supposed to know you were going to get all paranoid? I was worried, you know. But I knew you could take care of yourself!”

“That shrink must think I’m a real nut case.”

“No, he said it happens all the time. He usually gets about two, three cases like yours every Monday morning.”

“Serious?” Astral asked.

“Monday like clockwork, he said.”

“Anyway I’d love to stay and chit chat but I’ve got to go. Work tomorrow, you know.”

“Yeah all right”, Jake said.

I got up and left Jake and Astral in the lounge rolling yet another joint. The flat was full of smoke and I needed some fresh air.

I did not have the mental capacity for anything more at that stage.

17. FAMILY

Lauren had been begging me to take her clubbing for ages. She spent most of her free time in pubs, claiming that as an Australian she had a reputation to uphold. Despite this reputation she had a desire to try e and as I was the only person she knew who went clubbing a lot, I was nominated to take her out.

We were friends because we were the only foreigners at work. We had very little else in common. She was the blonde sporty type who spoke a lot about her hometown and her boyfriend Bill back home.

I wondered whether she would take the experience as it came or whether she would enter into it with all kinds of pre-conceptions and judgements.

“You don’t mind if we go to a gay club, do you?” I asked her.

“No. Just as long as no one hits on me”, she replied.

I decided on Family, a mixed club. I phoned Jake to invite him as well. It was a Friday night and I was surprised to find him at home.

“Hey Jake, what are you doing at home?”

“What do you mean what am I doing at home? Why did you call if you thought I wouldn’t be at home?” he asked, irritated.

He was in a particularly bad mood.

“I just wanted to leave a message on your answering machine. How are you?” I asked.

“Fucking shit!” Jake said.

“Why, what’s wrong?”

“Well the supplier I get my drugs from has just been arrested. Apparently he went to Amsterdam to get a batch of e’s and was caught by UK customs. They called all the numbers on his mobile phone, including mine. They wanted to know how I know him.”

“What did you say?”

“I said I met him clubbing.”

“So you’re fine. They can’t prove anything.”

“Yeah, but there’s a problem. When I buy my supply of drugs, I usually pay him by cheque. That way I can sell the pills and then pay the money into my account before the cheque clears. Which means there’s monthly cheques going into his account in my

name.”

“How much?”

“£2000.”

“Oh shit. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. The only thing I can think of is to say it’s for my escort services.”

Jake sounded very nervous. In fact, it was the first time I’d heard him sound nervous.

And with good reason: dealing is not viewed lightly by the law.

I was nervous too. But I tried to remain light-hearted in attempt to cheer him up.

“Mmm, £2000. You don’t come cheap”, I joked.

“Well, what else can I tell them?”

“No, I mean that’s the best thing to say really. Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not okay. I’m sitting here freaking out. Oh my god, can you imagine the shit I can get into? Fuck! I’m expecting them to burst through the door and arrest me any second now. Anyway, why did you call?”

“I wanted to know if you wanted to come to Family tonight?”

“No fucking way. The cops are watching me and I’m not about to go out and do drugs. They could be following me for all I know. They’ll probably try to buy drugs off me and then I’m fucked.”

“Are you sure you’re not being paranoid?”

“No fucking way! I’m just going to lie low for a while. You have fun.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I’m going to watch some videos or something.”

“Okay, then. Sorry about this mess.”

“Me too.”

“Bye Jake.”

I felt quite anxious for Jake. I just hoped things would blow over.

Later that evening I had a few lines of speed and left for Family. It was located in Old Street in the middle of nowhere. There was no tube station nearby so I had to take the bus. It was held in a two-storey pub with quite a varied clientele; everyone went, from your regular barflies to the hardened clubbers.

Family was started by Caelan’s ex-boyfriend Brent who bought a set of decks and taught

himself how to spin. Brent rounded up a few amateur DJ's and hired the venue.

I had arranged to meet Lauren outside the club. She was already there when I arrived, wrapped in a thick jacket and exhaling air that turned white in the freezing night. The front door was locked as it was late and we walked around the back in search of a back door. When we had come full circle and stood in front of the front door again, someone from inside opened the door. The heat and music from inside washed over me and I smiled as I blocked the closing door with my foot. I pulled it open and walked in, Lauren following close behind. We didn't have to pay as I knew most of the door personnel. Going clubbing regularly had many advantages, one being that you got to know a lot of people who could get you into clubs for free.

Inside, the club was pumping and the people were dancing frantically. I was still speeding and whizzed through the entire club in a couple of minutes, Lauren struggling to keep up. I ran into Caelan in the upstairs chill-out lounge and introduced her to Lauren.

"What are you doing here?" I asked Caelan.

"Brent's spinning tonight and Neil and I thought we'd come and have a listen", she said.

"Oh. Where is he?"

"Around."

I asked Caelan to organise some e's for us and in less than 20 minutes we were sorted and waiting to come up.

"I'm going to sit down in the VIP lounge. Do you want to come?" she asked.

"Yeah okay."

It was actually a ridiculous VIP area, with just a dirty red curtain separating it from the rest of the club. She sat down on one of the chairs and gestured Lauren and I to chairs next to her. Lauren looked a bit nervous.

"You'll probably feel something in about 30 minutes", I said.

"What will I feel?"

"Oh just incredibly good and like you love everyone and everything."

She smiled and seemed to relax.

"So how are you?" I asked Caelan.

"Fine", she said.

"What's wrong?"

She didn't respond.

"Something's wrong. What is it?" I asked again.

"I told Neil that we kissed."

"And how did he take it?"

"Not well at all."

"No?"

"No, he said it was fine. He said that he just won't be able to trust me anymore."

We sat in silence for a while. She started when she saw Neil appear from behind the curtain and smiled at him reassuringly.

Neil sat down next to her and I decided that it was time to dance.

I said to Lauren, "Come on, let's go dance so you don't feel the rush too intensely when you come up".

I suddenly remembered that those were words similar to the ones Jake said to me at Warriors when I took my first e.

When I started to feel my rush, I asked Lauren how she was feeling.

"Fine, I think", she said.

She hadn't come up yet. Your first time on e, if it actually kicks in, is never just fine. If it is fine you know you've either taken aspirin or not enough e.

"Do you want to take some more?" I asked.

She pondered the question and then said, "I think I'll give it five more minutes."

We continued dancing and after a few minutes she came up. Her eyelids were heavy and she kept pushing her jaw forward. I monitored her behaviour as inconspicuously as possible, not wanting her to notice that she was being watched and then get paranoid and self-conscious.

"I feel incredible", she said.

"Do you want to sit down for a while?" I asked, when we had been dancing for several hours.

We were in serious need of a chill-out.

"Okay", she said.

We went to sit downstairs.

"I feel tingly all over", Lauren said.

We sat down on a large couch. I made myself comfortable, my back against the arm rest and my legs pulled up in front of me. Lauren was looking around, not knowing what to do with herself. She had too much energy to contain in one body. She tried to get comfortable, leaning back against the couch and putting her feet on the table in front of her. This did not seem to work and she started moving around restlessly.

I pulled her backwards, so that she was resting against me. She stretched her legs out in front of her and she finally relaxed.

"I don't think I've ever been this comfortable", she said.

I put my arms around her.

"I'm not coming on to you, I promise", I said.

"I know."

We sat a while in silence. Caelan and Neil came and sat down next to us, Caelan smiling when she saw the two of us sitting there, all loved-up.

In that moment I knew that the bond between us was forged for life. With one e and one night out we had broken a barrier in our friendship that under normal circumstances probably would have taken years to get past.

Caelan got up and made her way through the crowd to the dance floor. She got up onto the stage next to the DJ booth where Brent was spinning and, facing the crowd, she started to dance. The crowd noticed her immediately and it wasn't long before she had them in the palm of her hand; getting them to wave their hands in the air and dancing violently when the music was building up to its climax.

Jake had told me that Caelan had danced so vehemently one night, she broke a rib and had to rest for a good few weeks afterwards.

She had a childlike energy about her, but she was by no means innocent. Her brown eyes were kind and generous.

I decided it was time to go dance and dragged Lauren to the dance-floor for the final session. After what seemed like a few minutes the music stopped and it was time to leave. Caelan invited us to a chill-out at her place. I was reluctant to go in the face of the problems I had caused between her and Neil but Caelan assured me that it would be okay. I knew she was lying but I went anyway.

There were quite a few people at their place when Lauren and I arrived. Caelan had

taken another pill and when she started rushing excused herself to go and lie down in the bedroom.

“Coming?” she asked me.

I followed her, telling Lauren to join us. Both Lauren and I had another pill and spent the morning rushing in Caelan and Neil’s room. Neil stayed in the kitchen with the rest of the crowd listening to some awful music I didn’t even know the name of.

Caelan and I were lying on the bed while Lauren had cleared a comfortable position on the floor. We spoke sporadically but for most of the time we just rushed in silence, not needing to speak to communicate.

A little while later Neil appeared and asked if I had some speed. I gave it to him and smiled.

By the afternoon Lauren left, feeling normal enough to catch the tube home. I remained in the bedroom with Caelan snuggled up against me.

“Shall we do another one?” Caelan asked.

“No Caelan, we’re totally wasted”, I said, desperately trying to apply some moderation.

“Okay, just half then”, she smiled and put half in my mouth.

We lay there, the feeble winter sun lighting up the room. When we started to rush again, we stopped speaking and just enjoyed the moment, facing each other and staring into each other’s eyes.

Caelan moved in closer and started to kiss me. I responded, without thinking of anything but her and her beauty, giving myself to her completely and the moment we were caught up in.

The e concentrated in my solar plexus and when she gently placed her hand on my stomach, the butterflies turned into a vortex. I was no longer in control of the situation, the vortex was. She rolled on top of me and continued the kiss.

“Caelan, Neil is just in the other room. We shouldn’t really be doing this”, I cautioned.

But I knew she wouldn’t pay any attention to this fact. We were way beyond caring and the fact that Neil was right next door had no effect on containing our passion.

“It’s fine”, she lied and kissed me again, moving her hand up under my shirt.

We did not care about a thing. We were so high on e and the only thing that made sense to us was the moment we were in. There was only Caelan and me and everything else

was inconsequential.

She was kissing my breasts when Neil entered. She jerked her head up and turned away, not able to look at him.

“What are you doing?” Neil asked in the tone one would ask a naughty child caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

“Just talking”, Caelan said and smiled at him.

She didn’t move away but remained on top of me, her head resting on her hand and looking him straight in the eye. Neil left with the CD he presumably came in to find and we were alone again.

Caelan moved away. Lying next to me she stared at the ceiling.

“Oops”, I said, trying to make light of the situation.

Reality had dawned on Caelan now and I could see she was struggling with her conscience.

“I know what you’re thinking”, I said and joined her in staring at the ceiling.

“Yeah? What?”

“You’re thinking, Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God.”

She smiled.

“No I’m not.”

There was a long silence and then she said, “I’m thinking, Oh Jesus! Oh Jesus! Oh Jesus!”

We laughed.

“I’m so sorry about this. The last thing I wanted was to cause problems between you and Neil. I know how much he means to you”, I said.

I felt responsible for what had happened. As always I took the blame on myself, absolving Caelan of any responsibility as I do with anyone I care about.

“Kate, don’t apologise. It was me. Anyway, it will be fine”, she tried to convince herself but I could see she was worried.

“I’d better go”, I said.

“Okay.”

We said goodbye, hugging each other for a while before I left.

I walked to the tube station. It was evening and the sun was just setting. It felt as if it got

colder by the second. With every cold breath of air I inhaled, my heart sunk further into the depths of despair. And every step I took home, was a step back to reality and the consequences of my actions.

By the time I got home I was having a panic attack. My palms were sweaty and I felt anxious. I ran up the stairs straight to my room and quickly closed the door behind me. I'll just stay here until I can figure things out, I thought.

How could I have let this happen? Did I have no morals anymore? Who was I? Of course the drugs had something to do with it. But they couldn't have made me do something I didn't want to do.

I was having a terrible comedown. I couldn't believe I kissed Caelan with Neil in the next room. Never mind the kissing, that was a really compromising position we were in. What the fuck was I thinking?

I needed to speak to Jake. I called the number but he wasn't in, unless he was in and not answering his phone. That was so typical of him. The one time I really needed him, he didn't bother to answer the phone. Fucking bastard!

What the fuck was I going to do? I needed some answers and I needed them quickly.

I was tired and decided to close my eyes for a while.

18. JAKE'S

I woke up very hazy the next morning. My recollection of the previous night was not particularly extensive. Then it all came flooding back. I remembered that Caelan and I got funky at the chill-out, and that Neil saw us, and that it was not a very nice thing to do in his room, in his bed, with his girlfriend. In fact I felt pretty shitty about what happened. I phoned Jake from work. There was no answer so I left a message for him to call me back.

He called me back in the evening.

"Where were you last night and this morning?" I asked.

"I was here, I just wasn't in the mood to answer the phone."

"Oh. I need to talk to you."

"What happened?"

"Caelan and I kissed again."

"And?"

"And that's it."

"So what do you want to talk to me about?"

"Well, Neil walked in on us."

"And?"

"He's not too happy about it."

"Am I missing something here? What's the big deal?"

"Christ Jake, I feel bad about it, okay. Can you just pretend you understand what I'm going through?"

"Okay. When do you want to come over?"

"Tonight?"

"Yeah, that's fine. I'll see you then."

I arrived at his flat that evening at around eight.

He looked well, all things considered. Better than he did when he went clubbing in fact, as he looked well-rested.

We went to sit down in the lounge. Jake put on a hard house tape.

“Who’s spinning?” I asked.

“Dr Cow. He gave it to me a few weeks ago.”

Jake knew most of the DJ’s at Renegades and they often gave him tapes of the set they played that evening free of charge. Dr Cow played hardcore house.

“Heard anything from the police?” I asked him.

“Not a word.”

“Maybe it will blow over. I mean they’ve got the guy who brought it over. Why would they care about the small-fry dealers?”

“I hope so. I’m finished dealing anyway. It just came too close this time. Now I have to look for something else to do.”

“What about the prostitution?”

“No, there’s too many of them in London. I’m not earning enough money that way. I need to get a job that pays well.”

“Do you have any ideas?”

There was a long silence.

“Oh my God, Kate. What am I doing with my life?” Jake asked.

His tone had changed now; he was upset.

“Why, what’s wrong?”

“Well, just look at me. I am a drug-dealing whore who fears that any minute the police will come knock on my door and haul my ass to jail. So now I can’t even make money from dealing anymore.”

“I don’t know why they can’t just legalise drugs. I mean what is the big deal?”

“If they legalised it, no one would be able to afford it because then the government would charge fucking VAT!”

It seemed Jake was angry with the British government too and I didn’t know what to say.

“And I’ve got the clap.”

“Oh shit!”, I said.

“For the second time!”

“Fuck man!”

“So that means I can’t have sex for a while; for money or for fun.”

Jake’s life sounded worse than mine.

"Don't worry, Jake. Things will work out."

I stared at the pile of books on the coffee table.

"Been to the library then?" I asked.

"Yeah well, I've got to do something to keep me busy."

"Well at least you're not still in your pyjamas."

"I was until an hour ago."

"Have you started looking for a job yet?"

"No. My friend is opening a restaurant in the South of London and she asked me to manage it."

"Well, that sounds great."

"Well, not that great. Firstly I'll have to move there because travelling there and back everyday wouldn't make any sense, it's quite far. Secondly, I'll only get Mondays off. Thirdly, the money is really bad."

"Maybe that's exactly what you need. Maybe you need to get away from London and the club scene."

"Yeah, I need to get away from all this madness."

Jake was the last person I ever expected would feel the effects of clubbing. He was always the one who remained positive when everyone else was having a bad trip. He always knew what to say to put you at ease.

And yet he was the one in crisis now. I suppose you can't live the way he did and not expect there to be some sort of consequence.

"So what's happening with you?" he asked.

"Not much", I said.

"Yeah, you look your happy self", he said sarcastically.

"I just feel bad for Neil and Caelan. And I feel ashamed of what I'd done."

"You just have to remember that when you take drugs, your experiences aren't real", he said.

"How can you say that? When you're on drugs everything is more real than when you are not."

"Everything is just in your head."

"Exactly! And that is all that is real."

And I guess that was the fundamental difference between Jake and me. He took drugs to escape reality, while I took them to find it.

“Anyway we’re not talking about that now. We’re talking about you kissing Caelan.”

“Alright. I’ve had crushes on girls before. But this thing with Caelan really freaks me out. I mean, am I really lesbian you think?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Caelan just has that effect on people. I mean look what she did to me. Just go with it and see where it takes you.”

“Why didn’t you just go with it?”

“Didn’t want to.”

“Do you think you could have felt the same if you hadn’t taken e?”

“I don’t know. Anyway it doesn’t matter now. I don’t think about it really.”

There was a long silence

“I’d better be going before the tube station closes”, I said.

Jake nodded and walked me to the door.

“Are you going to be okay?” I asked him, pausing at the door.

“I’ll be fine. I just need to get my head straight. How about you?”

“I’m fine. Bye then.”

I jogged to the tube station, afraid of missing the last tube.

19. SUNDISSENTIAL

It was Sunday afternoon and time for Sundissential. Astral was very excited about going as she had been talking about this club for ages. When she picked up the flyer in a bar, she immediately knew that she had to go. It was very much an Astral-club, focused on dressing up with lots of glitz and glam.

Astral bought a purple wig for the occasion and applied a liberal amount of glitter, even by her standards. I couldn't escape her artistic make-up brush. In the end we were both glammed up and ready for fun.

We took the tube to Sundissential and met up with Dave at the tube station. He was wearing a short black skirt and a tight shirt and had a short black wig on that accentuated his high cheekbones.

When we entered the club it was already quite full. The music was a mix between funky and hard house and we made our way to the dance floor.

We started dancing with great enthusiasm and managed to clear a space for ourselves in the crowd. Astral and Dave went to the toilets to do a few lines of speed. I took an e out of my pocket and swallowed it.

I was trying out some new moves I had just thought out when I noticed a large suitcase dancing next to me. The suitcase came up to about waist level and had two legs sticking out the bottom. The left leg would kick sideways every now and then, and then joined the other leg in running on the spot to the beat of the music.

"Is that a suitcase?" I heard Astral ask who had returned from the toilet.

"Oh, can you also see it?"

"Yeah. What a weird club! I love it!" Astral yelled.

At that moment a clown appeared on the empty stage in front of us and the crowd roared. She started doing flip-flops across the stage at quite a speed and then jumped down onto the dance floor. She moved through the crowd, dancing with a few people on her way.

I decided to explore and wandered through the crowd. In the middle of the dance floor, an elderly woman was sitting on a chair. Her grey hair was pulled back into a bun and I guessed her age at about seventy. She was knitting something, peering through her reading glasses and frowning as she concentrated. She seemed completely oblivious to

the animated dancing and thundering music, totally involved in her knitting.

I looked around and saw people had outrageous accessories: feather boas, head-dresses, and one guy even had a didgeridu which he would blow on from time to time. I walked back to where Astral and Dave were dancing.

“This place is so bizarre”, I said to Astral.

“I know, it’s amazing.”

Astral’s charge of positive energy entered through my heart and imploded my body. My breathing became shallow and I felt faint. I decided to sit down.

I walked to the bar and sat down on one of the stools.

“Are you okay?” I heard a voice next to me.

It was Dave.

“I’m fine. Just rushing a bit”, I said.

“Ah!”

“Have you ever had sex with a woman?” I asked.

“Actually, yes.”

“And did it freak you out?”

Dave twirled a strand of hair around his index finger.

“Not really. But it was quite strange.”

“What happened?”

“I was doing this photo shoot for Mark, this acquaintance of mine. I had to dress up in drag – don’t know what for actually because eventually I took off all my clothes anyway. And there was a lesbian there, short blonde hair and very boyish looking. We had quite a few glasses of wine. I suppose Mark wanted us to be relaxed – we had to do some pretty weird shit, it being for this S&M mag. So there we were, posing and carrying on when Mark fucks off to the off-licence for some more booze. And then the girl-boy says to me, ‘You are so beautiful. You look exactly like a girl.’ And then I said ‘You look exactly like a boy’. And before you could say ‘transvestite’ we were kissing and feeling each other up. I let her suck me off and you know, I couldn’t really tell the difference.”

He put his hand on my thigh confidentially and said, “Quite a feisty little bitch.”

“And then what happened?”

“Nothing. That was it.”

“Have you seen her since then?” I asked.

But Dave didn’t hear me. He hopped off his chair and ran to Astral on the dance-floor. They danced animatedly, with Astral circling Dave while she danced. It seemed like some strange bird mating ritual.

I decided to do a bit of dancing. I was just busy getting into my dancing when Dave came up to me and said, “Just watch the way you’re dancing.”

“Why, what’s wrong with the way I dance?” I asked.

“It’s just a bit strange.”

And with those two simple sentences, my paranoia started.

What is his fucking problem? As if he doesn’t look like a freak when he dances. He looks like a fucking wind-up doll and now he has the audacity to tell me to be mindful of how I danced. Fucking prick!

I went to sit down at one of the tables next to the bar, unable to dance anymore.

Astral came to look for me after a while and asked, “What’s wrong? Why aren’t you dancing?”

“Do you think I dance funny?” I asked.

“No. Why?”

“Dave just told me I dance strangely. That fucking bastard, he’s just ruined my entire night.”

“Please, don’t pay any attention to Dave. He’s wasted on e and doesn’t even know what he’s saying.”

“No, but you don’t tell someone on e that they dance funny. Of course they’re going to get paranoid.”

“He was probably just trying to help, thinking you don’t want to embarrass yourself. He’d expect the same courtesy from you.”

“Yeah, of course you’d defend him. There’s no point in even discussing this with you.”

Astral shrugged and went back to the dance-floor to dance with Dave.

It’s just a matter of positive thinking. I just have to guide my thoughts in a positive direction. Just snap out of it. Are you going to let another person’s opinion of you, no not even of you but of your dancing, ruin your evening? Just get up and dance. Don’t take any notice what people say.

I couldn't move and Dave's words kept repeating in my mind.

It's mind over matter. I just have to use willpower and I'll be unaffected by his negativity. What did it matter if I danced funny? I didn't care what people thought of me.

I would never see these people again, why could I not dance?

The wonderful sensation of feeling connected to everyone had changed into something dark and sinister. The watery depths of collective feeling no longer felt safe and comforting; this was its dark side.

I looked at the dancing crowd in front of me. How completely self-conscious they are. My gaze rested on Astral and when she saw that I was watching her, she danced more flamboyantly than usual.

It's just one of those things, I guess. When someone watches you, you tend to dance more animatedly and more innovatively. You feed off their energy. You dance with all your creative abilities, giving it your all only to glance their way again and see that they are no longer looking at you. And you realise you've been dancing for no one.

I did not want to feel this way. I did not want to be influenced by the collective. I wanted to be free.

When the e had worn off a few hours later I told Astral that I was leaving.

"Why what's the matter?" she asked.

"I've had enough of this place."

"Okay. I'll go with you."

We said goodbye to Dave and took a cab to Astral's house in Mortimer Road. We crept up the stairs so as not to wake up her housemates.

She closed the bedroom door behind us. I felt safe, enclosed in the room.

"Acid?" she asked.

"Okay."

It was probably 30 minutes later that the acid started to kick in. I grabbed a blanket that was lying on the bed and threw it over my head. With my body bent over I walked with big steps across the room.

After a while of doing this, I heard Astral ask, "Kate, what the hell are you doing?"

"I have no idea", I answered and sat down on my haunches, still with the blanket over my head. I stood up very slowly, waving my arms gracefully as I did so.

“Oh my God! I feel just like an octopus! “Hey Astral, come over here.”

“What for?”

“Just come over here. I want to do an experiment”, I ordered.

She obliged reluctantly.

“Sit on your haunches”, I instructed.

Astral did so and I threw the blanket over her.

“Now gently wave your arms backwards and forwards while you slowly stand up. And then tell me you don’t feel like an octopus!”

“You’re right. I can’t believe it. This is how octopi feel!”

Perhaps it was the print of the blanket, perhaps the way one waved one’s hands around, who knows. It didn’t really matter. But the chances that we would have done the same experiment completely sober was doubtful. And I guess that’s the thing about altered states of consciousness; you look at the world in a new way. The novelty of life that wore off when you were five returns.

“Look what I found”, Astral said and held a bottle of poppers in her hand.

“Poppers!”

We each had a whiff and I saw Astral’s face turn bright red.

“Your face is bright red!” I said.

“So is yours”, she said.

“And the music sounds different all of sudden.”

“Yeah, and the atmosphere in the room has changed”, she said and became catatonic.

“Well, do you think the poppers had something to do with it?” I asked.

“I don’t know. It’s quite possible.”

“Well, how will we know for sure?”

“What else could it be?”

“It could either be the poppers changing our consciousness or the acid just kicking in.”

“No, the acid kicked in long ago. Otherwise we wouldn’t have done the octopus experiment.”

I agreed with her logic.

“So it follows that it is directly related to the poppers!” I concluded.

She thought about this for a while.

“This is really starting to bug me, how will we know for sure?” Astral said.

“We have to be scientific about this if we ever want to get to the bottom of this.”

“And how do you propose we do that?”

“Well, there’s only one option really and that is to do a lab report.”

“That sounds completely logical to me.”

“Astral, do you have a pen and paper?”

She produced a pen and paper from one of her drawers and so the experiment began.

“Just the facts, Astral”, I instructed. “We don’t want the truth to be distorted with our subjective beliefs and opinions.”

We conducted the experiment.

Goal: To establish whether the poppers would change the atmosphere in the room

Definition of terms:

Establish – to conclude, formulate

Poppers – alkyl nitrites (liquid form), 1 bottle

Change – alter, affect

Atmosphere – feeling, ambience, energy

Room – four walls, floor and roof in Mortimer Road

Equipment – two people on acid, one bottle of poppers, a room in Mortimer Road, Hard house tape playing

Hypothesis – poppers change the atmosphere in the room

Execution of experiment: Well, the atmosphere seems normal. The two people sniff the poppers.

Data: Yes, the atmosphere changed. Our faces are red, the plastic potplant’s roses look redder than usual, woman in poster looks fucking freaky.

Astral’s eyes started stinging and could not continue gathering information. Therefore, unfortunately, we are forced to conduct experiment again!

Execution of experiment: Well, the atmosphere seems normal. The two people sniff the poppers.

Data: Yes, the atmosphere changed. Our faces are red, the plastic potplant’s roses look

redder than usual, woman in poster looks fucking freaky, the music sounds different, shadow of mirror looks and is moving, lighting changed, inability to focus on what's changed – talking about trivia.

Conclusion: The poppers did indeed change the atmosphere in the room.

We pondered on the implications of our conclusion. There was now no doubt about it – the poppers changed the atmosphere in the room.

I felt at peace; there was closure now and I could put the whole issue to rest.

Until Astral said, “Unless of course it was an inexplicable atmospheric change that coincided with the intake of poppers.”

“But I am sure you agree it would be too big of a coincidence.”

“Is that just the normal reaction when someone sniffs poppers or did the acid in the poppers react with the acid in the acid papers that we took?”

I was baffled.

“The only way we'll find that out”, I said “is if we conduct this experiment again when we are sober!”

And that was that.

“I just had a thought”, I said. “What if our teeth retracted into our gums when we're not hungry and emerge again from our gums when we're hungry. Almost like cats' claws when they want to fight or climb trees and aeroplanes' wheels when they come in to land.”

Astral was hysterical with laughter.

“So imagine you're sitting in a pub having a pint and the person sitting next to you's teeth start emerging. You can then lean over, prod them in the side with your elbow and say ‘Hungry, hey?’”

Our laughing and joking was getting manic.

Through her laughter, Astral said, “Can I be honest?”

“Yes”, I said, still smiling.

“You do dance a little bit funny”, she said, indicating how little with her thumb and forefinger.

“That's not funny.”

I wasn't laughing anymore.

"Don't be so sensitive. It's no big deal", she said.

"I'm going to sleep", I said and switched the light off.

"Kate, come on. I was just kidding."

But I ignored her. We lay on the bed in silence and I listened to her breathing becoming deeper, until she finally fell asleep.

I couldn't sleep and waited for the next morning so that I could catch the first tube home.

20. COOL EDDY'S

Ruby called me and said she wanted to go out. She hadn't been clubbing for ages and asked me if I wanted join her and her flatmate Emma. I hadn't seen Ruby since Mrs Solomon passed away. Ruby found another job, doing administration for some phone company, and managed to rent a flat with Emma.

On Saturday evening I went to Ruby's flat. Emma, Ruby and I had a few lines of speed and at four o'clock in the morning called a cab to take us to Trade.

When we finally reached the front of the queue the doorman asked me, "Are you gay?"

"No, not really", I said.

"Then what the fuck are you doing here? Do you know this is a gay club? You're not getting in! Go home!"

"I'm gay", Ruby said.

"Oh yeah, then prove it. Kiss your girlfriend!" he said and pointed to Emma.

"Fuck you", Ruby said.

"Go home! Go home!"

We walked away. Ruby turned around and shouted, "Fuck you" a few more times.

We got in a cab and told the driver to go anywhere.

"So this is where South Africa gets it from", Ruby said.

"Get what from?" I asked.

"This culture of exclusion."

"It doesn't matter where you go, Ruby. It's the same all over the world."

"Fucking bastards!" Ruby yelled.

Emma didn't make a sound.

"I wonder why they do that though?" Ruby said.

"Do what?"

"Deny entry to certain people?"

"Because the more people they refuse entry, the more people want to go there."

"It reminds me of that club in Durban where they only allow 10% of the club to be black. Otherwise the club is too 'black' and no one, meaning no white person, wants to go anymore."

“It’s because we’re three women. It’s a club for men, gay men, beefy gay men actually. I’ve never seen any effeminate gay men in there.”

“Well fuck them, we’ll go somewhere else”, Ruby said.

I suggested that we go to Cool Eddy’s in Tottenham Court Road. My friend Matthew was a resident DJ there and had invited me to hear him spin a few nights ago when I ran into him at a pub. He usually played hard house but lately found a greater affinity to uplifting trance. Hard house was my favourite genre but I enjoyed trance from time to time as it brings out the e in a different way; it makes you a lot more airy, your trip a lot more spacey.

Matthew had given me the following directions: in Tottenham Court Road near the tube station. As my two friends followed me up and down the street I wondered if his directions could have been any more vague. I couldn’t see a sign indicating the club’s existence, nor a line-up of people outside waiting to get in. Finally a door opened a few metres ahead of me and I could hear the music in the background. A brown door that looked more like the entrance to some council flats than the entrance to a club opened onto a set of stairs leading upwards. Cool Eddy’s, it turned out, was a small club on the first floor of a dilapidated building.

The club consisted of a small room with the dance-floor at one end and a bar on the other, serving fruit juice and water. Because no alcohol was served, the cops usually left the club alone and that made Eddy, the owner and manager, a very happy man.

There were bright murals on the walls, mostly of aliens and other planets. Right next to the DJ booth was a large brightly-coloured caricature of Eddy: he was holding a joint in his hand and had one foot on a football painted to look like the Earth.

There were rows of chairs placed on either side of the room where a few people were sitting, some having the odd joint. The club was noticeably empty. Cool Eddy’s, Matthew had told me, was seen as an after-club because of its size and the fact that it stayed open until 9 a.m.

Matthew was spinning when we arrived and he smiled at me when I walked in the room. I had a few e’s on me and after these were distributed equally between Ruby, Emma and myself we proceeded to dance for a while. It was Emma’s first time on e and I could sense her nervous excitement as she went to the toilet to take it. On Ruby’s

recommendation Emma took a whole pill, though I did voice my objection.

We came up while Matthew was playing and the trancy music made me feel completely spaced out. When he had finished he came over to say hi and I introduced him to the others.

Emma was off her face and Ruby kept taking her outside for fresh air. I could just imagine what the music was doing to her. She couldn't really dance: her eyes were closed and she waved her arms very slowly in the air. I kept watching her closely while we were dancing and making imaginary boxes in the air with our hands.

I told Ruby that there was a dealer in the club if they wanted some more drugs later. It was soon after that they asked me to get them some.

I went over to Matthew who was sitting at the bar and asked him who the dealer was.

"It's that big guy sitting in the corner with short dark hair", he replied.

I looked and saw someone fitting that description talking to a woman on his left, but looking straight ahead while he did so.

"But don't go now", Matthew said, "because Eddy's watching him".

"Surely Eddy knows there are dealers here? I mean it's a club after all."

"Eddy doesn't mind hash and grass but he doesn't want any e in his club. He's been watching the dealer for quite some time now but I don't think he's absolutely sure he's dealing."

How strange, I thought. How can anyone run a club and not expect there to be dealers inside? Why would people come if there weren't any drugs on sale?

"Doesn't Eddy know people do e in clubs?" I asked.

"Yeah he does, but he doesn't want it in his club."

"And how does he expect people to stay up for eight hours and dance?"

Matthew shrugged.

I looked around and saw Eddy standing in the corner next to the bar. He saw me looking at him and smiled. I did the same.

I got up and walked to the dealer. Turning my back towards the bar area I asked the dealer, "Can I buy some e?"

"Sure, how many?"

"Four", I said.

“Just give me a few minutes and I’ll bring them to you.”

I reached inside my cigarette box for the money.

“No don’t give the money to me now, give it to me when I bring you the e’s.”

I nodded in agreement and went to join Ruby who was sitting on one of the chairs near the dance-floor.

“Did you get sorted?” Ruby asked.

“Yeah, he’s going to bring them.”

I watched the dealer out of the corner of my eye get up and stand against the wall, hands in his pocket. His hands were moving around and I guessed he was counting off four pills, trying to look as cool as possible but in fact looking very suspicious.

After a few minutes he came over and started talking to me about the music, keeping a close eye on Eddy still standing next to the bar. After some time he handed me the pills and I glanced to look at Eddy who was engrossed in a conversation with a beautiful woman. I handed him the money and he got up again.

The four of us each took another pill and went to dance.

It wasn’t long before we lost all sense of time and space; we were only conscious of the music and how good we all felt. All except Emma who was dancing slower than ever and had her eyes shut as she waited for the rush to pass. I poured some water from my water bottle on my hand. I flicked the cold water on her face with my fingers in a vain attempt to revive her. But she could only open her eyes for a few seconds before shutting them again. I gave Ruby worried looks but she made a dismissive gesture, indicating that Emma was okay.

I was dancing quite seriously when a short skinny guy with peroxided hair tapped me on the shoulder and asked, “Where can I get some e?”

“The big guy with the dark brown hair over there”, I said, indicating the corner where the dealer was sitting last I saw him.

The skinny guy looked to where I was pointing and said, “Which one?”

The dealer was not sitting in his usual place anymore. I looked round the club and noticed that it had become quite full. I couldn’t see the dealer anywhere.

I wanted to tell the guy to wait, but he looked very uneasy and impatient. I was so loved-up that I wanted everyone to share in my joy. Why should he be unhappy when I’m

having such a good time, I thought.

“Just a second. I’ll see if I can find him. How many do you want?” I asked.

“Just one.”

“Okay, give me the money and I’ll go get you one.”

“No, get me the e first and then I’ll give you the money”, he said determinedly.

He doesn’t feel the love, I thought. Here I am, going out of my way to get him an e and he doesn’t appreciate it in the slightest. So now I have to get the e, give it to him and then take the money back to the dealer as I had no money on me to pay him. But that’s okay, because once he has a pill he will feel the love!

I walked around the entire club but couldn’t find him. I saw Matthew standing next to the DJ booth and went over.

“Where’s the dealer?” I asked.

“He left. Eddy was getting suspicious so he thought it would be better if he left.”

“Oh.”

Matthew hesitated and then said, looking at his shoes, “I can sell you some.”

“Matthew, you aren’t dealing, are you? You’re a resident DJ here. Do you know what will happen if Eddy finds out? You’ll lose your job.”

“I know I know, but Eddy won’t suspect me because I work here. Don’t worry, the dealer just asked me to help him out tonight. We have a deal going and I’m making a bit of money on the side.”

“You’re just doing this for tonight?” I asked.

“Yeah, yeah!”

I got the e from Matthew.

“I’ll bring you the money”, I said.

“No, don’t give it to me now, Eddy might get suspicious. Can you keep it for me, Kate?”

“Of course”, I said and walked back to the dance-floor.

The skinny guy was on me like white on rice and I quickly gave him the e, irritated that my dancing had to be interrupted to get a pill.

“Thanks”, he said and continued dancing next to me.

I became acutely aware that he was watching me closely. He was very suspicious of the e he had just taken and kept a close eye on me in case it didn’t work. I somehow felt

responsible, knowing that if the pill didn't kick in it would be my responsibility to get him another one. I wanted to go to the loo but thought that it would be suspicious behaviour. The skinny guy would think I was trying to ditch him because the pill was a dud, I thought.

I continued dancing and after what felt like ages, the skinny guy came up on his pill.

"It's fucking good", he said to me, eyes half closed from the rush.

I was relieved and went to the toilet. There was a queue so I started talking to the doorman who had been staring at me ever since he saw me standing in the queue next to the entrance. He was a big guy, as doormen usually are, wired on coke and very much aware of his bodily size and muscles bulging through his tight black T-shirt.

I flexed my bicep, telling him to feel it.

"That's not a muscle", he said, "feel this". He flexed his bicep for me to feel.

It was a huge bicep, I must admit, and I commented on its magnificence for a while, the doorman loving it and his affection growing for me with every word I uttered.

He interrupted our conversation when Eddy started talking to him. The girl behind me in the queue asked, "Do you know where I can get some e?"

"Yeah", I said and told her I'd go find her some after I had been to the loo.

She was very grateful and thanked me.

Back in the club I walked to Matthew and told him about the prospective client.

"Can I send her to you?" I asked.

"Eh, it's a bit difficult", he hesitated. "Eddy's been watching me like a fucking hawk the whole evening. I can't sell anything at the moment."

"Oh."

"Just tell her to wait a bit and I'll sort her out."

I was very worried about Matthew and the thought of him losing his job.

"Well, if he's watching you why don't you give the pills to me and I'll sell them for you."

"Don't be stupid, Kate. I'm not going to let you take the risk."

"What's the worst that can happen? They can throw me out, right?"

"No, it's my problem. I'm not going to have you deal."

"Don't be so melodramatic, Matthew, just give me the fucking pills!"

It took a few minutes, but in the end I convinced him. I hugged him to detract attention

and he surreptitiously placed the bag of pills in my hand. I shoved them down my bra and went off to the dance floor again.

And so I started dealing drugs in Cool Eddy's; to help out a friend, but mainly because I was e-ing off my face and had no sense of consequence. I did not think about what I was doing, all I cared about was that everybody there at the club with me must have a good time.

I hadn't even sold my first e when Matthew came up to me to say goodbye.

"Why are you going so soon?" I asked.

"Eddy's asked me to leave. Actually he said I'm fired and I should never come back again."

"Fuck, what happened?"

"He saw me dealing, I think. He must just fuck off."

"What about your pills?"

"Just give them to me later. I can't take them now, they're watching."

Matthew was visibly upset as he left. As soon as he was gone, the smile immediately returned to my face and I continued with my dancing.

I felt untouchable, invincible in fact, and sold e's at an alarming pace. I was quite subtle at first, using the dancing crowd as a shield from Eddy's gaze, making sure I knew exactly where he was standing before making the transaction, handing e's over and taking the money while I leant over and pretended to speak to the client. I would hand them the pills, keeping my hand as low as possible between the dancing crowd while looking in the opposite direction.

Later I did not care who saw me and whether I was being subtle or not, having taken another e a while ago and feeling the love move through me. I was taking e's from the bag out in the open and counting them off in my hand which I held about two inches away from my face since my vision was affected.

I don't know how Eddy didn't see me dealing. Or if he did he chose not to react. As the evening progressed and my e started wearing off, reality slowly started to filter through – like a tap on the shoulder from your lover when you're engrossed in a conversation with a beautiful man. With steadily increasing strength the implications of my behaviour made their way through to my escapist mind. I had flashes of what I would do if one of the e's

I sold was bad and someone died, if the police decided to raid and I was found carrying forty pills or if I decided to say fuck it and take the whole fucking lot.

People were circling around me like a flock of vultures; some of them looking at me distrustfully as they waited to come up and others looking at me lovingly, eternally grateful for giving them the means to reach the place they were at.

I felt angry. Angry that I had to see the way people were when they're desperate for a high. I was angry because I saw myself in them; the way you walk up to the dealer, nervous with your sweaty palms fumbling through your pockets for your money, clutching the e in your hand while falling over your feet to get some water to drink it with, desperate for that feeling that makes you forget yourself and your petty problems.

I despised myself. I don't think I've ever hated myself as much as I did then. I had become the lowest of the low, a fucking dealer. I just wanted to get out of there.

I announced to Ruby and Emma that I was leaving. They saw exactly what I did that evening but didn't say a word. They decided to leave as well and we made our way to the tube station.

I didn't feel like going anywhere. All I wanted to do was close my bedroom door behind me and withdraw from society forever. I said goodbye, unable to look either of them in the eye.

As I sat on the platform of the tube station, waiting for a tube to arrive, I felt lower than low. How had Jake managed to become a dealer so effortlessly and unplagued by guilt?

21. TRINITY

A week had passed and I had finally put the dealing incident behind me. It was done in a moment of loved-up, bliss-out joy. An education certainly, but definitely not something I would have cared to repeat.

I wanted to go out on the weekend. Astral was working the whole weekend, Jake was out of the question, being paranoid, and there was no way I could go out by myself. Who knows what I would get up to?

I called Caelan.

“What are you doing this Saturday?”

“Nothing so far.”

“Do you want to come to Trinity with me?”

“Love to.”

And that was that. I met Caelan at the tube station. She was wearing black trousers with a limitless amount of pockets and zips and a tight blue lycra shirt with the Virgin Mary printed on the front. She looked beautiful as always.

“Shall we go?” she asked, after she gave me a kiss on each cheek.

I hadn’t seen her since Family and the chill-out at her place. I decided to give her some time before I contacted her again, not wanting to cause further problems between her and Neil.

“How are things with you and Neil?” I asked.

“Fine, fine”, she said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah”, she said.

If there were any problems she certainly did not give any indication that she was worried about them.

Trinity was a large club with the dance floor making up the biggest part. Several large blocks were scattered around the floor that served as stages for those who felt the exhibitionist urge. One guy was on the stage with trance glow-sticks that he was waving around wildly.

Caelan and I popped a pill and danced for a while. When the pills had kicked in, she

moved behind me and ran her hands down my back and up my arms. I felt the energy moving through my body and a smile formed itself on my face.

She wrapped her arms around me and held me. A girl jumped down off the stage in front of us and gave us each a kiss, overcome by the affection between us that had seemingly touched her as well.

We danced for a little while longer, but the e was reacting strangely with me. My body was numb and I had no control over it. Try as I might, I couldn't move with the fast beats of the music as my body felt completely anaesthetised. I kept losing my balance and I continually had problems with a limb that did not obey the message my brain sent. Caelan was laughing at me.

"Don't worry, I have the same problem", she said.

We decided it would be best to sit down, so Caelan led me to the chill-out area.

"What the hell did they put in that e?" I asked.

"It's cut with ketamine."

"Fuck, I hate it when they do that. How are we supposed to dance?"

"We won't be dancing tonight, that I assure you. Not without some speed, anyway. We'd better just sit still for a while."

We sat down trying to look as normal as possible.

"Do you think you've changed as a person since you've started clubbing?" I asked Caelan.

"I believe so. I used to be very shy and I had no self-confidence. When I started taking e it changed my life. I could go up to strangers and talk to them and I became a lot more extroverted."

"I can't imagine you being shy."

"No, I was. I had anorexia for four years. That was when I was younger. I used to hate my body and since I started clubbing and doing drugs, my whole outlook on life has changed."

"Changed how?"

"I don't know. I guess I'm just a lot more confident now and more in touch with my body. Not now, obviously because that pill was half k."

I looked at Caelan. It was like looking at perfection that found a physical form. I

wondered how on earth she could ever have hated her body.

“I still think I’m fat sometimes”, she continued, “but it’s not a problem anymore. I have learnt to ignore that voice because I know it doesn’t help me at all. And you?”

“And me what?”

“Do you think clubbing has changed you?”

“Well, I don’t know so much about clubbing. I mean I have clubbed before you know. But taking drugs definitely has.”

“In which way?”

“I actually have an elaborate theory on that. When you take e it makes you feel love, for everything and everyone. So the drug makes your brainwaves vibrate at a different frequency.”

I looked at Caelan to see if she buying it.

“Go on”, she said.

“So you have this beautiful experience of how you could feel and how the world could be; people just loving everyone and everything. In your mind then a goal is created; you want to feel like that all the time and so consciously or subconsciously you work towards that goal even if you’re not on e. That’s what I think anyway.”

“But it’s not just about feeling good”, I continued. “It shows you what is possible, what we’re capable of. It shows you what life could be like if we didn’t spoil it all the time with our judgements and preconceptions. We can see the experience for what it is, nothing more, nothing less.”

Caelan smiled.

“But it’s not the same anymore, taking e that is”, she said.

“I know. Not like it was in the beginning.”

I looked at her. There was so much I wanted to explain to her: what she meant to me, what she represented for me. But it was so much more than that.

Sometimes words can’t convey a feeling, and you have to transmit the energy of the moment in some other way.

I placed my hand on her thigh and sent the essence of what I felt to her. She turned to me and in her eyes I saw that she understood. She placed her hand over mine and I understood what she conveyed.

There are places where words just cannot go.

We rubbed a few dabs of speed on our gums and went to dance. I stood behind Caelan and pulled her towards me. Our bodies became one and we danced in perfect unison, anticipating each other's every move. Our body was moving to every beat, every sound, every note that forced its way through to us, and inhabited each cell for a split second before it blended into the next.

And then all of sudden everything was one. It didn't become one all of sudden. I was one all along only now I finally noticed it. Caelan and me and the music and every other person in the club were all part of the same energy, one of total joy and love for another. I was in the moment, that perfect consciousness when you are living every second.

An incredible feeling of love and joy rushed through my entire body. I started crying; the experience was too powerful to be contained. Caelan turned round and frowned at me curiously.

"The music is so good", I said.

She smiled and gave me a kiss on my forehead.

"Let's go", she said.

"Okay."

We took a cab to my place. When we got home, it was still dark. I quickly had a shower and when I went back to my room, Caelan was lying on the bed, staring catatonically at my blue lava lamp.

"Do you want me to switch it on?" I asked.

"Oh, I didn't even think of that."

I took her answer as a yes and switched it on.

I layed down next to her, took the cigarette from her hand and had a drag.

"I love Chagall", Caelan said, pointing at the poster on my wall.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"He makes me dream", she said, staring at the poster.

She was hauntingly beautiful in the blue light from the lava lamp.

I kissed her.

And then I started thinking and, worse than that, I spoke.

"Caelan, you don't have to do this, you know. I know how much Neil means to you and I

don't want to be responsible for any problems between you two", I said.

Caelan raised an eyebrow when I betrayed my presumption.

I realised that we were only kissing and it would not necessarily lead to anything else.

"Not that we're doing anything. I mean we're just chatting", I joked.

She smiled, remembering what she had told Neil when he caught us in their bedroom.

"You're not causing any problems. This is my decision also, just remember that. I've decided that tonight would be the last time I would be with someone else anyway."

"Why?"

"Neil and I had a long chat after the other day. I love him. I mean, I know he's the one for me so after tonight I'll be totally committed. This thing between us started long before I met Neil. And this is what I really want."

I was about to say something else but Caelan kissed me. I couldn't believe it was finally happening. I had suppressed my longing for her for such a long time. And now, finally, I found it being fulfilled. I was moving closer to who I really was by expressing what I really wanted.

And withholding nothing and letting go of all the inhibitions I ever thought I had, I felt complete. I knew things were as they should be, this is how we were meant to be all along.

She kissed my breasts and as she made her way down my body, I voiced the last doubt I had about us being together, feebly and insincerely.

"Caelan, aren't you concerned about the consequences? About hurting Neil?"

But Caelan just smiled and instructed, "Be quiet. Look at the lava lamp."

So I did.

22. DTPM

I decided to go to DTPM. It was held on Sundays at The End, a beautiful building with large steel doors that opened onto one of the best clubbing venues in London.

Astral and I dressed up for the occasion, as the club was known for its very chic appearance.

We arrived early, and went to sit down in the chill-out area on a red art nouveau sofa. The room was eloquently decorated – Roy Lichtenstein posters on the wall and expensive carpeting. The DJ was playing loungy music and we had a few cocktails, as the mood demanded.

The two of us kept taking turns to go to the bathroom to do a line. Pretty soon we were wired on coke. We each swallowed an e and then set off to the dance floor.

The End was a unique club in that the DJ booth was situated in the middle of the dance floor. Astral loved this and I followed her to the booth. This is where we remained dancing the entire evening, Astral circling around the dance floor while I stayed in one place.

We started rushing and the rhythmic beats of the funky house songs took over.

Dave, who wasn't in drag, appeared out of nowhere with a man who he introduced to us as Thomas.

We had been dancing for a while when I noticed Thomas was staring at me. I smiled but he just kept on staring.

"Is something wrong?" I finally asked.

"Your eyes, it looked there like there was a light behind them", he said and then continued to dance as if nothing happened.

Astral came up first. I could see her dancing had changed. She leapt forward and did a few improvised kicks in the air.

Several minutes later I could feel tingles up my spine but the elation that usually came with it was not there. Instead I felt sad and alone. I took another e and continued to dance.

Thomas was staring at me again.

"Is it my eyes again?" I asked.

Yeah, it looks like there's nothing there. You know, like a cat's eyes in the dark. Soulless."

"Thanks", I said, hurt.

"I didn't mean it badly", he said.

I walked to the bathroom to look in the mirror. Inside there were a few people standing at the basins, refilling their water bottles and having a chat.

"Look at my eyes", a guy not older than 16 said.

He was looking at himself in the mirror.

"How many have you had?" I asked.

"Three", he said.

He looked at me and stretched his eyes open as far as he could for me to see his dilated pupils, while he chewed gum animatedly.

I forced a smile.

"I just pray I never win the Lotto 'cause I'd be fuckin' dead in a week!" he said.

I looked at my eyes in the mirror. The black pupils were big and round. Two big, black holes. "Eyes wide open", I mouthed to my image in the mirror.

"Wha'?" he asked.

"Nothing. Do you have a light?" I asked.

"Sure", he said and took out a red lighter.

He rolled the wheel and the spark lit the gas.

The lighter was red, no doubt about it.

"Caught in a time cycle", I said.

"Wha'?" he asked.

"Nothing", I said and lit my cigarette.

When I came up on the second e I felt worse.

I walked through the club, past the smiling happy people wearing too much cologne and hair products. I went to sit down on the Roy Lichtenstein couch.

Astral appeared with a worried look on her face.

"Are you okay, Kate?" she asked. "I was worried."

"I'm fine."

"What's going on?"

“Nothing really. It’s not fun anymore”, I said.

Astral looked at me for a while. She turned her head in the direction of the dance floor and after a few seconds rested her gaze on me again.

“What do you mean it’s not fun anymore? You’re just having a bad trip.”

“It’s not just a bad trip. I can’t remember when last I had a good trip, can you? I’ve just had enough of all of this.”

“All of what?”

“This”, I said and did a vague gesture with my hand indicating that I was talking about everything.

“Do you want me to stay with you for a while?”

I could see she was itching to get back to the dance floor.

“No, I’m fine. I’ll just sit here for a while.”

“You sure?”

“Go dance.”

The club closed at 6 a.m. and we made our way outside. It was raining and the crowds that emerged from the club all huddled together under the narrow strip of roof that protruded from the building.

“I heard about this underground party that’s starting now, if anyone wants to go”, Thomas announced.

“What’s it like?” Dave asked.

“I don’t know, I’ve never been before”, Thomas said.

“Yeah, why not. Let’s go”, Astral said.

We caught a cab to the venue, Thomas instructing the driver where to go.

“This is fine right here”, Thomas said when we stopped at a red light.

We got out of the car, turned right at the lights and walked down the road. It had stopped raining now but the air wasn’t clean. I could taste the polluted air when I breathed. We walked past men and women in business suits on their way to work, who stared at us as we went by.

Thomas turned left down an alley and we followed. There was trash lying in the streets: broken beer bottles, take-away containers, pieces of newspaper being blown around in the wind. The alley smelt like urine and vomit and we stepped over scrap metal and

overturned trashcans before we finally reached our destination.

Thomas knocked on a wooden door that needed a good coat of varnish and after a few seconds a man opened it. From his size I surmised that he was a doorman. After looking us up and down for a while, he stepped aside, allowing us to enter.

In front of us there was a small room with a staircase on the left. The door of the room was ajar and I saw two women inspecting a coat that one of them was holding up in the air. We walked up to door and handed in our coats. There were no hangers and the coats were merely placed on the cement floor and our tickets handed to us.

We walked down the staircase.

We entered a large room. The people were dressed in scary costumes, it being Halloween. They interrupted their conversations when they saw us and without any expression briefly examined us before looking away again.

The room looked like a small underground parking garage with a few red, blue, and green lights attached to the ceiling. The floor was cement and I could feel the coldness drifting up from the floor against my legs. We walked to a bench in the far corner of the room and sat down. In the corner opposite us was the DJ booth and the DJ was playing music I have never heard before. It was strange, and although appropriate for the theme of the party, it didn't do much for raising spirits and getting people to dance.

I sat closest to the wall with Astral on my left, while Dave and Thomas went to score some hash upstairs.

"What's the matter Kate? You haven't been yourself all evening" Astral asked worried.

I shrugged.

Dave and Thomas came back with the hash.

Dave held it in front of my face and said, "Have you ever seen anything so green?"

It didn't look like hash at all, more like rosemary.

Dave proceeded to roll a joint.

"Let's go see what's going on upstairs", Astral said.

"Okay."

We walked past the coat check and up a flight of stairs. At the top of the stairs there was a chill-out room with a bar, tables and chairs. It was quite crowded and we managed to find a seat in a corner near the bar.

“Let’s stay here. It’s warmer”, I said.

“I want to dance. Coming?” Astral said.

“Maybe later.”

Astral left and I wondered when the club closed so that we could go home. I had a cold empty feeling in my stomach, which had been there since DTPM.

A woman, dressed as a vampire, was sitting next to me. Her face was painted white with dark make-up around her eyes and fake blood around her mouth.

I leaned over and asked, “What time does the club close?”

She looked at me and said something to the man sitting on her right.

I tapped her on the shoulder.

“Excuse me, what time does this place close?”

She stared at me, no expression on her face. I was just about to ask someone else, when she shrugged, barely noticeably.

I had been upstairs for quite some time and decided to join Astral and the others downstairs.

I was relieved when Astral told me we were leaving. We decided to have a chill-out and caught a cab to Thomas’s flat.

Dave, Astral and I had to wait in his bedroom so that he could clean the lounge. We all assured him that in our present state we really weren’t too bothered about neatness, but he insisted.

“You can come through now”, he said.

The three of them smoked joint after joint and spoke about clubbing and music. I shook my head when I was offered a drag. I was feeling too low to smoke.

I looked out the window and watched a gentle rain drizzle onto the small patch of grass outside Thomas’s flat. So this is how it ends, I thought. Sitting in some stranger’s flat in a haze of hash smoke.

I was not enjoying clubbing anymore. When I took e now, I just became depressed. Perhaps I had messed around with my serotonin levels for too long. And then there were the comedowns which seemed to last much longer than they did before. It wasn’t fun anymore.

It was time to go home.

23. LUCA

It was time for me to leave London.

I said goodbye to all my friends. I had lunches and dinners and went out for drinks.

I said goodbye to Caelan too. I went to see her at the restaurant where she worked. They went to fetch her while I waited in the reception area.

“I just came to say goodbye”, I said, when she appeared.

“Let’s go have a cigarette outside”, she said.

We walked through the restaurant out the back entrance and stood in the alley among the trashcans. She lit two cigarettes and handed me one.

“Why are you leaving?” she said, leaning against the wall.

“Oh, it’s just time for me to go.”

“Is it because of what happened between us?”

“No. I’ve just come to say thank you.”

She smiled.

“Aren’t you going to ask me what for?” I asked.

“I know what for.”

It was my turn to smile.

“Did you tell Neil what happened?”

“No. He asked me to marry him.”

“And are you?”

“I think I will, yes.”

She stared at me for a while.

“I’d better get back to work”, she said.

She dropped her cigarette on the floor and stepped on it. She walked towards me and put her arms around me.

“Take care, Kate”, she whispered and walked back into the restaurant.

I stood in the alley, not quite sure how to get back to the main road, so I just walked away and decided to see where the road would take me.

My flight was the following evening. I decided to spend my last night with Astral and

Jake and to have dinner at his restaurant, Luca. It was quite a pleasant restaurant in Surbiton, Surrey, and recently had a good write up in the local newspaper.

So Astral and I set off for Surbiton. It was about an hour from Waterloo station by British Rail. This was a problem for Jake's social life, as he worked Tuesday to Sunday until 1 a.m. and the last train left Surbiton station at 12:15 a.m. But maybe that wasn't such a bad thing.

We followed Jake's directions to the restaurant and managed to find it quite easily. When we arrived, Jake led us through the rectangular shaped room, past several empty tables covered with brilliant white tablecloths. They were so white that my eyes teared up when I looked at them.

Jake gestured us to sit down at the table right in front of the bar. We were the only customers in the restaurant so far as it was still early. Jake ducked behind the bar and appeared again moments later. He walked over to our table smiling broadly and placed a bottle of champagne on our table with a loud thud.

"Compliments of the house", he announced.

Jake sat down at our table and had a glass with us. A customer entered and he went to greet them and show them to their table. It got quite busy after that, and he joined us for only short visits from then on. The meal was superb and by the time we made it through starters, mains, desserts and coffees it was already 11 o'clock.

The plan was for Astral and I to catch the tube and go home. I didn't want the night to end, because I knew I would probably not see either of them for a while. Jake knew that too and before we could leave, invited us to his bedroom upstairs – he had his own room on top of the restaurant.

We made our way up the steep stairs. It was the first time I'd ever been in his new place. At the one end of his room was a mattress lying on the floor next to the round window, at the other end was his hi-fi with the speakers 1.5m high. There was a large closet, and an unpainted pine desk with matching chair.

Jake put on a hard house tape. We started talking about clubbing and reminiscing about the good times we had together.

We stopped talking and listened to the build-up in the tune that was playing. I could feel a little rush pushing its way through my body and I shuddered.

“I love this music”, I said. “I get a rush just listening to it.”

“Yeah, me too”, Jake said.

“That’s the weirdest thing.”

“What?”

“The fact that listening to hard house, or just talking about clubbing brings back that feeling.”

“Yeah, I know. Last night I turned the hi-fi up full volume and I could actually feel my body start to rush.”

“I often do that too. It’s so bizarre. Just sitting here and talking about it makes me rush again. It makes me want to tell the stories of clubbing.”

I thought about this for a few moments and then continued, “I’m going to enjoy re-telling the stories to people at home. I only hope I can convey the energy of the experience with just the words.”

Jake had a sad nostalgic look on his face.

“It’s a pity we can’t do the drugs anymore”, I tried to telepathise.

“It wasn’t about the drugs. It was more about finding a place to explore some of things you wouldn’t dare to under normal circumstances”, Jake said.

“It’s about dancing”, Astral said. “It’s a spiritual thing.”

There was a long silence.

“Hey, look at the lava lamp”, Jake said.

We all stared at the lava lamp for a while.

“I wish I didn’t have to fly tomorrow”, I said.

“Can’t you postpone?” Jake asked.

“No, I’ve got one of those cheap tickets. They won’t let me. What time is it anyway?”

“Half two.”

“What?”

“Half two.”

“Holy shit! I have to go. I still have a million things to do.”

“Just sleep here tonight. There’s no point in going home now.”

“I still have to pack.”

“I’ve got the day off tomorrow, so I can help you pack.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.”

“I have to go though. Jake, can you call me a cab?” Astral said.

“Sure.”

I said goodbye to Astral when we heard the cab hoot outside. She hated saying goodbye and had told me a while before that she wouldn't be able to see me off at the airport. I hugged her for some time.

It was a beautiful morning. The cold air was crisp and clear.

When Jake and I reached my house I made coffee and we sat in the lounge. After a while we went upstairs and I tried to pack two years into one suitcase.

Jake just watched and would make useful comments such as “That will never fit!” and “There's too much stuff” every now and then.

Finally I separated my luggage in essentials and not-essentials. The latter I would send back by sea.

When I was finished I made a few phone calls. I called the airline, my bank, and a few friends.

We decided to go to the Baker's Arms, the pub around the corner, for lunch. Jake said that he couldn't send me home without a decent meal. We each had a pint of beer while we waited for our lunch.

“It's so strange. These last two years seem like a dream”, I said.

“I know”, Jake replied.

“Do you think you'll ever come back to South Africa?”

“To visit, sure.”

“Will you ever go back for good?”

“No, I don't think so. Why would I?”

“I don't know. Lots of reasons.”

“No, my home is here.”

“I can always marry you if you need a British passport, you know?”

“I know, but it's time for me to go home.”

Our food arrived and we spoke about other things.

We went back to my house and called a cab. I said goodbye to Ewan and Weston and promised to write.

Jake and I got into the cab and set off for Heathrow.

I asked the cab driver to turn on the radio and we sang along with some stupid songs the rest of the way.

We arrived at the airport and I booked in. There wasn't much time left before my flight and besides I hate hanging around in airports watching the clock while desperately thinking of something to say when you know there is nothing to say.

Jake said goodbye. He kissed me on the cheek and gave me a hug. He promised to visit me soon.

Jake feigned concern when he saw me looking morbid and said jokingly, "Don't worry. You're just having a bad come-down. It's just the drugs!"

"Thanks for everything", I said.

"Say hi to your mom for me."

"Will do. See ya", I said and walked towards Gate 23.

EPILOGUE

And so all of us had moved on. I had left my hedonistic lifestyle behind and was living a life of moderation. Jake became the manager of Luca and bade prostitution farewell. Caelan didn't get married to Neil after all. Instead she found her true love, Simon, and they're living together in Surrey in a small house, growing organic vegetables. As for Astral, well she went back to Vancouver to finish her degree.

I paged through my diary and noticed a list of the tourist attractions that I had wanted to see when I first arrived. I had written them down very neatly, in the order of my preference.

I didn't go to see a single one of them.

JOURNAL KEPT ON THE WRITING PROCESS OF THE NOVEL
***NIGHTCLUBBING* – 14 AUGUST 2001 TO 27 JUNE 2002**

Introduction

This journal will reflect on the creative writing process of *Nightclubbing* and the latter's relationship to selected reading (as indicated in the reading list). It will also document the supervision on this process and the dialogue that ensued between my supervisor, Michael Green, and myself (please see square brackets).

14 August 2001

I've decided on a topic for my novel. I'll write about clubbing, but told in a way that's not quite so melodramatic and sensationalist as most books and articles on the subject are. They're usually called something along the lines of "My drug hell", "In the clutches of the drug vice" or something similar.

I lived and worked in London for two years (1997 – 1999) on a working holiday visa. During this time I visited a number of clubs and interacted with people who were part of the dance subculture. I feel compelled to write about them. There is not a lot of contemporary fiction dealing with young South Africans in London, and I feel that in fictionalising my experiences I can not only work through an important period in my life, but also speak to many others who were interested in a similar range of experience.

13 September 2001

I don't want to write too much at this stage about the writing process. I rather just want to get as much down as possible. I'm afraid that writing about the process will inhibit the actual flow, which is something I want to avoid obviously. Suffice to say, the writing is going well. I'm writing very quickly.

27 October 2001

I presented a section of “11.Stamina” at the Graduate Conference today. I felt strange reading a piece of creative writing in an academic context. Perhaps this is because it was the first time that creative writing was ever presented at the Conference but also because the nature of creative writing is so vastly different from any of the other disciplines. In creative writing there is no obvious self-reflexivity present in the text. In other words the whole process of writing is hidden and only the final version is presented. In the other disciplines the process is made quite clear through references; theses, antitheses and syntheses; an argument that develops; and academic jargon.

[MG: I’m not sure the distinction is as clear as you make it here, or of this nature only – but if this is *your* experience ... CO: *What I meant here was that creative writing is not usually seen as ‘academic’ due to its subjectivity and use of ‘unscientific’ language. The whole basis of scientific research is that it is ‘objective’ and ‘verifiable’ (which in my opinion is debatable), something creative writing is not. So some scientists (physical or social) might see creative writing as not being academic because it does not adhere to the same criteria as other disciplines. Basically, I felt insecure about my legitimacy of reading creative writing at the Conference.]*

The experience at the Graduate Conference made me evaluate the whole rationale of the academic process and the unspoken expectations one has of an academic paper. Working as an academic and writing research articles, this made me question the legitimacy of academic processes and I realised it is just another way of telling a story. In a far more logical and cerebral way, but another way nevertheless. Or is it more logical? Perhaps enough to say traditionally seen as more logical.

I was intimidated by the academic vernacular to such an extent that I could not read my creative piece without qualifying it first with reading my abstract, couched in exactly this academic terminology and value-laden logic (see Appendix A). This abstract was

interspersed with academic concepts to justify my appearance at the Conference, with words such as “structured”, “narration”, “‘confessional mode’” and so on.

This brings me to the point of the unconscious nature of most creative writing. When writing for an academic institution self-reflexivity is ultimately what is required. The reader should be aware of the processes involved in constructing the work, such as narration, characterisation, atmosphere, setting, and so on.

How does the writer show that s/he was aware of the narrative processes when constructing a piece of creative writing? For when the writer-student is totally conscious about this process and can use it in an effective way, then surely this is ‘evidence’ that the student-writer is aware of the processes. This component of the thesis is then about foregrounding the process of writing and bringing into consciousness those techniques that might have been subconscious or even unconscious before.

[MG: Of course, metafiction finds its main rationale in just this: so much of this discussion comes down to varying fictional – and scholarly – modes of writing. Perhaps too much generalisation packed into too small a meditation on these tricky issues at this point. CO: *My point here is just that studying creative writing in an academic context influenced my writing – it became more self-reflexive. Whether this was justified, I’m not sure.*]

This new consciousness or understanding will then inevitably influence my novel. I have already noticed a tendency in my work to make self-reflective elements, already present in the novel, more pronounced.

The first example is the “telling the truth” motif. The novel starts with a “Prologue”:

I would like to be honest when I tell you what happened. Not the way some people tell stories, their golden threads they use to spin a cocoon around them. And the more they talk, the more slippery they get until at last you cannot grasp

their silky words and they are hidden under layers of sentences and paragraphs that serve to mask the truth rather than lay it bare. I would like to be honest but we all get slippery every now and then.

The narrator is clearly preoccupied with telling the truth, whatever that might be. This is taken further with the lab report scene in chapter “23.Luca”. Initially this scene was just another crazy drug experience but in retrospect I have realised that it can be read as self-reflexive. It raises questions of how we tell the ‘truth’. I have changed this scene so that these thought processes become more pronounced. I have added the following:

She produced a pen and paper from one of the drawers and so the experiment began.

“Just the facts, Astral”, I instructed. “We don’t want the truth to be distorted with our subjective beliefs and opinions.”

We conducted the experiment.

The reader then has to rethink the entire novel with this idea in mind. He/she realises that the narrator was trying to depict the truth, not a subjective value-laden prejudiced opinion of the experiences. But there is no single truth, a point that Coetzee (1992) also makes in his article “Confession and double thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky (1985)” when he critiques Tolstoy’s *Kreutzer Sonata*. Tolstoy published an afterword to this novel in which he explained what he ‘meant’ with the novel. Coetzee (1992) criticises this as too simplistic and that there are many readings of one text. Similarly, there are many ways of telling truth.

The question is: do I want to write in this self-reflexive way? And if the answer is no, is it possible to write in an academic institution without letting the self-reflexive nature influence your work? More questions than answers.

11 December 2001

I have finished the novel. I can't believe how quickly it all went. I wrote 120 pages in 4 months. Now the difficult part starts – editing. I have no idea what to keep and what to cut.

Narrator

The first problem I have with my novel is the narrator, Kate. I chose a distant narrator who doesn't reveal a lot about herself and in so doing remains intriguing to the reader. This intrigue then becomes the driving force for the reader to continue turning the page. I had the writing of Karel Schoeman in mind when conceptualising Kate, even though it might have been unconscious. Schoeman always uses the same narrator, i.e. free indirect, in his novels.

I often get the feeling that the narrator and the protagonist are the same person in Schoeman's novels and that he just uses this type of narrator to create a distance between the protagonist and the reader. The reader never really gets first-hand information about the protagonist and only makes assumptions through the subtleties and suggestions in the text implied by the narrator. The protagonist is always neutral, distant, unemotional, objective and rational. He/she never betrays how he/she is feeling and the reader has to look for these signs in other ways, often the landscape, description of body language, etc. In his novel, *Na die geliefde land* (1972), Schoeman signifies this neutrality in that the protagonist is from Switzerland, which is traditionally seen as the most neutral city in the world. Schoeman perfects the notion "show rather than tell" the reader what you want to say as an author.

I had a look at Schoeman again and although I admire the free indirect narrator, it is not suitable for my novel. Kate is describing her experiences in London, which are often quite intense due to a number of factors, one being that she's under the influence of illegal [MG: word? CO: *drugs*] substances. The nature of this experience is subjective and needs to be told in the first person.

I would still like to use the distance of narrator that Schoeman creates, only using the first person narrator. Another author who does this extremely well is Hemingway. He writes in a very factual manner, not delving into deep emotions but rather suggesting them. I need to look at some of his texts again.

Michael Green made a few interesting comments about the arrival scene, saying that Kate seemed very contained, equanimous and comfortable with herself even though she is not. This creates an interesting tension that hopefully will motivate the reader to finish [MG: well, to get caught up enough by it to want to get to the end...] the novel.

It is important to note that there must be a rationale for her reserve. In an earlier version of the first chapter I wrote the following:

I have never been fond of talking about myself. People have often thought me secretive and distant. The fact is I find other people far more interesting than myself and tend to focus on them more than is altogether healthy. In fact, some friends have noted it's almost as if I live through them in order to avoid myself. And what better place to focus your attention outside yourself than a vibrant city such as London ("1. Warriors").

This is making it too obvious though and I will rather find another way of working this theme into the text. [MG: Yes – one of our earliest points of discussion.]

The narrative point of view also has its limitations. Because the narrator is distant, often clinical in her descriptions, how does the reader remain engaged? Michael Green said there is a curious flatness to the story and my question is how will I keep the narration moving. I'm not sure. It is something I will have to work on. Initially I hoped that the character's secretiveness and the controversial subject matter will drive the story forward but I will have to reassess.

[MG: What I actually said was that I really liked the ‘flatness’ – a bad word in retrospect (I meant it positively!) - of the narrative mode as played off against the potential ‘salaciousness’ of the material dealt with – and I still do!]

It has become clear, however, that I will have to address at some stage in the novel, why the narrator is going from club to club (rationale) and why the narrator is distanced and removed.

Structure

Another problem with the novel is that it’s too formulaic in terms of structure. The chapters all have club names as titles and this could be predictable and boring to the reader. I’ve decided to rather rename them “chapter 1”, “chapter 2”, etc. In a sense I was attempting to give structure to madness. Each chapter starts with the narrator getting ready to go to a club, then going to a club and taking illegal substances, then dealing with the aftermath. The structure is very cyclical and perhaps a bit too predictable. [MG: Isn’t this what the narrator discovers about her lifestyle in London? – hopefully at about the same point the reader does. Which leaves one asking what it was all about.] I’ll have to think about that issue some more. The novel is not episodic, however, as the narrator and other characters change and develop. [MG: I like the club chapter titles. CO: *I will think about it again.*]

The other problem is that there is not really an engaging story. It’s too descriptive. The narrator goes to different clubs and explains her experiences. Is this really enough to keep the reader’s interest?

Epigraph

I’ve decided on the epigraph for my novel:

People are desperately trying to find a way of releasing themselves from this fleshy prison. They turn to you and see you escaping momentarily and they think, "How did you get out?" And it's very easy, let the language grow by itself, your

own language. You have the ability to create, through arts, tongues, a dialogue to make you travel to places more beautiful than we were ever promised (Lisa Gerrard, Interviewed in the video, *Towards the within*).

[MG: I don't like this: it brings out all Kate's weaknesses – it's when she attempts to put across some points she is at her worst as a narrator and character.]

My novel is essentially about travelling to other places and finding those all-inspiring moments of harmony and peace.

[MG: And ultimately failing! – don't forget. What your novel actually comes across as being about is what survives what ultimately comes to be seen as dross – and this is a very small and humble thing, when spelled out (camaraderie, friendship), although of real significance when left to echo back through the experiences described in the novel.]

Characterisation

Jake [MG: I preferred Jade – I like the gender ambiguity. CO: *I'd like to reserve the gender ambiguity for Caelan (the name can be either male or female) since she is the catalyst for both Kate and Jake questioning their sexuality*] is probably the most important character of the novel. The narrator is seemingly preoccupied with him to the extent that she imitates to a large degree what he does. He's similar to other characters; Gatsby in *The great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald 1925), Malone in *Dancer from the dark* (Holleran 1978), Sebastian in *Brideshead revisited* (Waugh 1951). The narrators of all three these novels are completely taken in, fascinated and intrigued with their main character. And so this preoccupation reveals more about the narrators than the characters they are describing.

This is the same effect that I want to create in my own novel. Kate's preoccupation with Jake will, to a large extent, assist in the characterisation of Kate.

16 December 2001

Epigraph

As for my decision for the epigraph on 11 December – what was I thinking? This is not at all suitable for my novel. It's not congruous with the rest of the novel. It is too clean and neat. Scrap that idea! [MG: WONDERFUL!]

Narrator

When I first conceptualised Kate, I wanted her to tell a truth. I wrote a "Prologue" for the novel which read:

I would like to be honest when I tell you what happened. Not the way some people tell stories, their words the golden threads they use to spin a cocoon around them. And the more they talk, the more slippery they get until at last you cannot grasp their silky words and they are hidden under layers of paragraphs and chapters that serve to mask the truth rather than lay it bare.

I would like to be honest, but we all get slippery every now and then.

I decided that this passage would not serve as an appropriate "Prologue" since it has a completely different tone to the rest of the novel. This passage sounds quite emotional and sentimental, whereas the rest of the novel is cerebral, clinical and distant. [MG: Or just delightfully cautious in an open sort of way – these apparent contradictions make her a fine narrative vehicle, and an interesting character.]

In my attempt to make Kate a truthful narrator, only giving the facts and therefore giving authenticity to the story, I achieved an unanticipated effect, namely that she is distanced and clinical. I wanted Kate to "tell it like it is", not indulging in the sheer decadence of the experiences but rather to make some sense of them and the only way to do that is through detachment and analysis.

I also wanted Kate to experience these occurrences with innocence, for she can be quite judgmental. When she takes drugs she loses the capacity to judge other people, situations, etc. which is quite refreshing. In this sense she discovers a chemical mysticism (for lack of better term – [MG: or a short cut to transcendence, as David Crosby once put it]) where she sees the congruence and harmony in everything, even a fetish club in downtown London. The reason that there is no commentary from the narrator is because she is just experiencing life moment by moment, as a *tabula rasa*. She stops judging experiences in terms of “good” and “bad” and loses all the social constructions she’s built up over the years. This is a strength of the narration that I would like to keep. I don’t think this comes across very strongly at the moment. I will have to think of a way to make it more pronounced.

The question then is how do I balance the narrator’s clinical detached tone with her childlike wonder for the world when she’s under the influence? Perhaps it should be a distinct changeover, like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. [MG: unlikely]

27 January 2002

I just finished reading *The buddha of suburbia* by Hanif Kureishi (1990). It’s set in London and really captures the atmosphere of the place. The narrator, Karim Amir, is half English, half Indian. I like the political tone of some of his passages:

Maybe there were similarities between what was happening to Dad, with his discovery of Eastern philosophy, and Anwar’s last stand. Perhaps it was the immigrant condition living itself out through them. For years they were both happy to live like Englishmen. Anwar even scoffed pork pies as long as Jeeta wasn’t looking...

Now, as they aged and seemed settled here, Anwar and Dad appeared to be returning internally to India, or at least to be resisting the English here. It was

puzzling; neither of them expressed any desire actually to see their origins again. (1990: 64)

Oh God, what a strange world. The immigrant is the Everyman of the twentieth century. (1990: 141)

Sweet Gene, her black lover, killed himself because every day, by a look, a remark, an attitude, the English told him they hated him; they never let him forget they thought him a nigger, a slave, a lower being. And we pursued English roses as we pursued England; by possessing these prizes, this kindness and beauty, we stared defiantly into the eye of the Empire and all its regard ... We became part of England and yet proudly stood outside it. But to be truly free we had to free ourselves of all the bitterness and resentment, too. How was this possible when bitterness and resentment were generated afresh every day? (1990: 227)

Kureishi (1990) manages to depict the tension between the English and the immigrants in London well. Kate could never be so overt about the political climate. It would seem ‘unlike’ her but I do think it’s important for the novel to point to these issues in some way.

It is significant that the narrator, Kate, comes from South Africa, previously colonised by England. The postcolonial theme is there, whether I explore it or not. For example in “1. Warriors” Kate and Jake have the following conversation:

“Where did you have your first trip then?”

“South Africa. It was alright I suppose, but nothing compared to here.”

The coloniser’s land in relation to the colonised’s land is always regarded as more sophisticated. Jake believes that his trip would have been better had it taken place in England. This cultural imperialism (see Said 1994 and Boehmer 1995) is exactly what Kate questions when she eventually abandons London to return to her home in South Africa.

At the moment there is not much social commentary in the novel. The only criticism is lodged against the exclusion of straight people into clubs ("5.Trade"). But perhaps this can be extended by the narrator in equating it with a culture of exclusion, no matter on what grounds – ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation.

One of the things that Kate is trying to escape is racial prejudice. She longs to live in a land where everyone can just be him/herself without the fear of discrimination. England is always seen as a progressive and modern country but when she gets there she slowly realises that this image of England is far from the truth. She encounters the same prejudices in this country that she experienced in her own. Like a cancer spreading through the entire world.

I'm thinking of including a scene where Kate is on the bus. An Englishman then yells at an Indian woman to go back to where they've come from and that's when Kate realises that England is not that much different from South Africa. All the racial hatred and prejudice is also present in England, and the attitudes probably originated from there in the first place. [MG: too strong]

Why does Kate go from club to club to club? Perhaps she's felt alone and sad her whole life and falls in love with the sense of belonging she experiences inside the club. [MG: again, does the story need this load?]

6 February 2002

I had a meeting with Michael Green today. He made three observations about my novel.

- 1) The 'flat' account of the narration. The more I hear the word 'flat', the worse it sounds. Why not 'elegant restraint' or 'gracious reserve'? I never intended for the narrator to sound 'flat'. It's more a case of Kate just telling the story without

judgement or prejudice. And where one would expect to hear confessions of whether a situation is 'right' or 'wrong', there is instead a calm description of what is happening. I'll have to think of another way to depict this. Perhaps something like "elegant restraint". I will have to motivate why Kate is so matter-of-fact about the salacious experiences she encounters. If Michael Green thinks it's flat then I've definitely done something wrong. [MG: this was just me putting it badly.]

- 2) The episodic, cyclical structure. Michael Green asked the question whether the reader will want to continue reading the novel if each chapter is about a different club. My answer to this is, well the title is "Nightclubbing". That should give some indication what the book will be about. The second point is that Kate is going through disturbing emotional experiences and the way she processes this is to structure them – to have them all start and end the same way. [MG: my point was a formal one, to do with the reading process: I actually think the novel itself solves the problem by 'grading' the experiences quite subtly]
- 3) The overt meditation of the novel – telling, not showing. All creative writing courses teach the "show, don't tell" mantra. This is of course a good skill. If I was a reader I would not like the narrator to say, "oh so-and-so is an asshole". I would much rather he/she showed me the character kick a dog, etc. to show that he/she is an asshole. But in terms of this novel, telling is extremely important. Kate is not very forthcoming when it comes to revealing information about herself. So the only way for the reader to get to know her is through her descriptions of other people and the different places (mostly clubs) she goes to.

I wonder whether I should include the "Prologue" and "Epilogue" again. The reason I scrapped the "Prologue" in the first place was because it does not sound like Kate. It's far too philosophical and lyrical, not like Kate at all. So it is quite separate from the rest of the book, which is not what I want. I would rather the reader discovers Kate's preoccupation with the truth through her depiction/description of various experiences.

The “Epilogue”, on the other hand, I think I should keep. Stories about drugs are portrayed so melodramatically, for example Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting* (1996). Taking drugs is almost always portrayed in a sensationalist way: it leads to addiction, prostitution, drug-dealing, or crime. And often, no distinction is made between highly addictive drugs like crack and heroine, and the less addictive drugs, like ecstasy and LSD. The “Epilogue” is essential as it provides a counter perspective – taking drugs does not always lead to a sordid end. In fact, for most people it is just a one-year or two-year experience.

Another way in which the melodrama is undercut is the matter-of-fact tone in which Kate tells of quite salacious experiences and events. Jake also shows this up in some sense because he does become a prostitute and a drug-dealer but never really acknowledges that he is completely absorbed in his situation. It is more as if he is playing a game, seeing how far he can push the boundaries that society has constructed.

I told Michael Green that what I thought was missing from my novel was the political aspect. I had a few political pointers, which I have since taken out of the manuscript. I thought that if there were references made to politics, the book would sound too prescriptive and judgmental, something I have to steer clear of as Kate is non-judgmental. An example of political pointer is:

They were all chasing the English dream of making money since there wasn’t that much money to be made back home. Back to the colonial stronghold from whence our ancestors came.

This passage is far too obvious. [MG: Yes] I do think, however, that it will be good to depict the tension between the English and those characters that are ‘foreign’. Perhaps I should explain why each character is in London and why they spend their weekends in clubs, taking copious amounts of drugs. [MG: be cautious]

28 February 2002

A friend of mine is doing a Master of Arts in Creative Writing at Sheffield University, UK. He made the following comments about my novel.

- 1) Kate needs more internal dialogue. At the moment Kate is not very forthcoming with her own opinions and thoughts. Instead she just describes what she sees and her experiences.
- 2) There seem to be gaps in the novel. Constantly skips from one moment to another. I need to fill the gaps.
- 3) Narrator tells reader what to think instead of showing them. This is what I think of this person rather than making the characters speak for themselves.

This is what I think about the comments:

- 1) I think Kate's inner dialogue is sufficient. That is one of the driving forces of this novel, Kate being 'mysterious'. The reader is compelled to read more because he/she is intrigued by Kate and interested to know what she thinks/feels.
- 2) I think it's important that time is quite disjointed, especially when the characters are on drugs. It is just so much more realistic when the time goes past very quickly. And that it seems like seconds from the time the characters enter the club to the time they leave.
- 3) This relates to the "overt meditation" that Michael Green mentioned in the meeting of 6 February. I do not think that we should blindly follow creative writing 'rules'. If telling rather than showing works, then do it. I also think that in Kate's telling she is actually showing her own character. As I said in the entry on 6 February, the reader does not have access to Kate's inner thoughts and when she describes people and situations, she is actually describing herself. Psychologists call this 'projection'.

[MG: I'm on your side on all of this – I think I myself mentioned the point that Kate's 'telling' is really a 'showing' of herself. CO: *Yes you did. And I agree with you.*]

I had a meeting with Michael Green. He gave me very useful comments about the tense in chapter “1.Warriors” and punctuation in general in the novel. These problems I will fix this weekend.

28 March 2002

I had a meeting with Michael Green. I asked him what he thought about the alien in chapter “7.Raw Cabbaged”. I have always had reservations about this chapter. The fact that there’s an alien in it just makes the whole chapter seem somewhat absurd. Which in itself is not necessarily a bad thing, I just don’t think that it works there. This is the first chapter where Kate shows signs of paranoia and to make it too humorous or light detracts attention from the intensity of the experience. I’ll have to rewrite it.

I cut the section on the Buddhist in chapter “9.Heaven”. It has no relation to the rest of the chapter, nor to the rest of the novel for that matter. I probably wrote this during my esoteric search for the meaning of life. [MG: a sideline, as it is for all of us]

I asked Michael Green whether I should include the following passage from “4.Fierce Duck”.

“Don’t be so melodramatic Kate. This isn’t *Trainspotting*. We’re not heroin or crack addicts who’ll end up in some sordid flat lying around on soiled mattresses.”

His advice was no. If I want to use intertextuality I have to be consistent, which I agree with. And also mentioning contemporary texts dates the book, which I also agree with. So I’ve changed it to:

“Don’t be so melodramatic Kate. We’re not heroin or crack addicts who’ll end up in some sordid flat lying around on soiled mattresses.”

In my elective course, Colonial and Postcolonial Writing, we’re studying *Anthills of Savannah* by Chinua Achebe (1987) at the moment. It’s a great book. It presents the neo-colonial condition of Nigeria under military dictatorship and is set in an imaginary African state called Kangan. All the characters from my novel are from the Commonwealth countries: South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada. Perhaps it would be interesting to move the characters onto an allegorical level. For example, Caelan represents the UK, Kate represents South Africa, and so on. The relationship between Caelan and Kate, as well as Caelan and Neil (her boyfriend) could have an interesting twist. Michael Green does not like this idea. I’m not so sure that it should be dismissed. I’ll have to think about it. [MG: not dismissed – just not underlined; and ‘allegory’ is FAR too strong]

25 April 2002

I’ve decided the allegorical characters would be a bad idea. [MG: Yes!] Although it would be interesting to have a political element present in the novel, I don’t think that allegory is the way to go. The problem with allegory is that the characters become only what they represent (in this case the different countries) and can never just be people. Although the political commentary should be present in the novel, I don’t think the other elements and themes should be sacrificed. This is not just a novel about the power and influence the UK has on its Commonwealth members, but also about clubbing and how to be open-minded when experiencing difference for the first time.

I had a meeting with Michael Green. He said that chapter “22.DTPM” does not work at the moment. Firstly, the two sections, upstairs and downstairs, are too disjointed. Secondly, the reader is not prepared for the supernatural element. And thirdly, the moralising end does not work. I agree with him. The vampires also make this chapter

too light-hearted. Michael Green suggested that I move the section somewhere else because it is quite humorous.

He also said Chapter “23.Luca” is too lengthy. The lab report scene is too long and seems like it should be earlier in the novel. He told me to think about the ending. The novel needs a conclusion. What is the point of the novel?

23 May 2002

Rewrote the following chapters, “7.Raw Cabbaged”, “19.Sundissential”, “22.DTPM”, and “23.Luca”.

“7.Raw Cabbaged”. I took out the alien scene as it was too light-hearted. Moved vampire scene (from “22.DTPM”) there. Jake, Astral and Kate all go to the underground club.

“22.DTPM”. I took out the vampires. Rewrote chapter so that Kate decides she’s had enough of the club scene. Nothing really holds her interest anymore. Every time she goes clubbing she feels that it’s repetitive, that she’s had the experience before. In short, she gets bored.

“19.Sundissential”. Moved lab report (from “23.Luca”) to the end of this chapter. Cut the scene where Kate gets paranoid about her dancing. This section is just too dull in my opinion and goes on for too long.

“23.Luca”. Cut the lab report. Changed the chapter so that Kate, Jake and Astral do not take drugs on their last night but rather reminisce about the good old days. The focus of this chapter becomes the nostalgia and the friendship between the three characters. [MG: Yes] I also moved the section in “18.Jake’s” to this chapter.

“The fact that listening to hard house, or just talking about clubbing brings back that feeling.”

“Yeah, I know. Last night I turned the hi-fi up full volume and I could actually feel my body start to rush.”

“I often do that too. It’s so bizarre. Just sitting here and talking about it makes me rush again. It makes me want to tell the stories of clubbing.”

“I’m going to enjoy re-telling the stories to people at home. I just hope I can convey the energy of the experience with just the words.”

Although it sounds a bit cheesy I think it will be good for the book to end with the memory of the experience. Like Karel Schoeman (1984) said, “The past is another country”. Or put another way, “A man’s experience of war never ends with the war” (Beer quoted in Michaels 1996: 1).

I also made a few other changes. In “16.Melt” I have changed the “Kabbalah 10” to the “Evil 5”. The Kabbalah 10 sounds a bit too esoteric, like that pretentious film *Pi*. Also, I don’t see what Jewish mysticism has to do with the narrative. What was I thinking?

I decided to add the extra scene to “12.Klub Kali”: the man in the bus screaming at the women from Pakistan (see 27 January 2002 entry). I wanted to depict the xenophobia that is rife in the UK (and everywhere else in the world for that matter). The fact that Kate is not recognised as foreign is important because it questions notions of race and ethnicity. The man on the bus does not see Kate as “foreign” due to her race (being white) even though her ethnicity is equally foreign as the women from Pakistan’s ethnicity. The links between xenophobia and racism are evident from this passage.

I’ve removed a lot of editorial commentary by Kate. Whenever she tries to philosophise about life and the world, it sounds contrived and clichéd. I shouldn’t let her do too much of the work but rather let the reader draw his/her own conclusions. [MG: Absolutely: Kate quickly becomes ‘twee’ when she attempts to philosophise. It’s simply not her strong point, or important to the narrative.]

I also added a scene to “19.Sundissential”. Dave, a gay man and occasional transvestite, tells Kate the story of how he had sex with a woman who looked like a boy. I added this story to make it clear that the novel questions notions of gender and sexuality. In terms of gender it is never a matter of being male or female but rather the selection and combination of numerous characteristics that constitute gender and sexuality.

6 June 2002

Michael Green didn’t like the changes I made. [MG: Not all!] In fact, he said he preferred the original versions. [MG: but still saw their weaknesses – another solution is needed]

Concerning “22.DTPM”, he said that Kate being bored is not an ending to the novel. I must think of my readers and why they shouldn’t get bored and stop reading halfway, which makes sense. Instead I should think about “Which ending is more true for you?” He also recommended that I think about who my audience is, i.e. who I’m writing for. Also, the vampire scene showed (instead of told) the potential ridiculousness of all the chapters. So that the reader has to rethink all the preceding chapters and wonders about the ridiculousness of them. If it is moved too early in the novel (for example “7.Raw Cabbaged) there is a real threat of the reader not taking any of the following chapters seriously.

As for “19.Sundissential”, the layout of the lab report is harsh on the eye. The reader is not prepared for it and nowhere else in the text does this experimentation with layout occur. He also said he missed the scene where Kate was paranoid about her dancing. It was an uncomfortable yet necessary scene for the book and it worked well. As for the lab report, he’s not so sure that it works in this chapter. It might be too soon. I’ll have to rethink that.

This made me wonder about the audience and how they would perceive this novel. It's a common experience: going to the UK to work for two years, getting away from your environment which to some extent defines you, and being able to do whatever you want. A lot of these Commonwealth holiday workers indulge in hedonism. Then, after a while, it gets too much. The physical, emotional, and mental consequences take their toll and it is impossible to sustain the chosen lifestyle. This is something the target audience will be able to relate to, rather than just being bored with the whole clubbing culture.

So which ending would be truer for them? They do not quit that extreme hedonism due to boredom but rather because they cannot maintain it indefinitely. Sooner or later they will have to deal with the consequences, like paranoia, depression, physical fatigue, loss of short-term memory, and so on. These are the issues I will have to focus on when I rewrite this chapter.

Michael Green suggested I return to the original of the chapters, "7.Raw Cabbaged", "19.Sundissential", "22.DTPM", and "23.Luca". All the work I've done on them has been in vain. He said that the only way you know when to stop editing is when you feel your latest draft is worse than the one before. [MG: Yes! – a sign, a sign.]

13 June 2002

Rewrote the offending chapters for the second time: "7.Raw Cabbaged", "19.Sundissential", "22.DTPM", and "23.Luca". I worked with the previous versions (as they were before 23 May 2002).

"7.Raw Cabbaged". I rewrote this chapter and instead of Kate suspecting Mike of being an alien, I made her suspect him of being a policeman. This works really well as Jake is starting to supply drugs to his friends in rather large quantities so the possibility of his being arrested is a real one.

“19.Sundissential”. I kept the scene where Kate gets paranoid about her dancing. And didn’t add the lab report scene.

“22.DTPM”. Instead of Kate becoming bored with the whole club scene, she just does not enjoy it anymore. Scrapped the vampires. They made this chapter seem too light-hearted and they didn’t fit anywhere else so out they go. My intention with the vampires was not to show how ridiculous the whole experience was. So if that is the effect I’m getting then I’ll have to change it. Ended the chapter as follows:

Perhaps I had messed around with my serotonin levels for too long. And then there were the comedowns, which seemed to last much longer than they did before. It wasn’t fun anymore.

It was time to go home (“22.DTPM”).

“23.Luca”. Made a few minor changes to the original version. I’m not sure I like this ending though.

I made quite a few other changes to the novel as well.

Nick from Poland becomes Nick from New Zealand in the chapters, “1.Warriors”, and “2.Torture Garden”. It’s better if all the characters are from the Commonwealth countries. Caelan is from Ireland, not Italy nor England. Neil is from England. Unlike Brent he wants to possess Caelan, and wants her to date him exclusively. If the reader wants to read that at an allegorical level then so be it. [MG: It’s unlikely, but leave it.]

I added some eye imagery in “1.Warriors”, “11.Stamina”, “14.Fish”, and “22.DTPM”. The way we see experiences is directly related to the way we write them down. The motif of the eye dilating symbolises that Kate is able to see more.

When I came out of the toilet I saw myself in the mirror. My pupils were dilated, opened up to see the world without a filter, without preconceptions. I looked at

myself and smiled. I could see more, understand more, accept more. My eyes were beautiful. (“1.Warriors”)

I looked at my eyes in the mirror. The black pupils were big and round. Two big, black holes. “Eyes wide open” I mouthed to my image in the mirror. (“22.DTPM”)

The dilation of the eye is drug-induced but gives Kate access to a world where she can just take in life without filtering it through her moral censor. She is, as it were, a *tabula rasa* that sees and experiences life as if for the first time.

I developed another motif or image, namely suitcases and luggage. When Kate arrives she has a lot of luggage. This symbolises the amount of mental preconceptions we carry around with us that weigh us down and prevent us from experiencing the new. Like the cliché says, “The lighter you travel, the further you get”.

I had hundreds of suitcases, bags and packets: full of clothes, books, and things from home.

“Jesus. Did you bring the whole of South Africa?” Jake asked.

“Just the essentials”, I said.

“Essentials huh?” he said as he hung a backpack across his shoulder and picked up the two heaviest suitcases. (“1.Warriors”)

We handed in our coats and bags at the coat check. I loved coat checks. You could check in all your belongings: bag, wallet, tube ticket. For the rest of the evening you could be anonymous with no form of identification on you. You could check in all your thoughts and beliefs and for the rest of the evening live only in the moment (“5.Trade”).

We entered the club, paid and handed in our coats at the coat check. There was something liberating about coat checks; the way you handed over all your

possessions and didn't have to worry about them for the rest of the evening. I guess it was the way it made you anonymous. ("11.Stamina")

Finally I separated my luggage in essentials and not-essentials. The latter I would send back by sea. ("23.Luca")

And of course in "16.Melt" Kate throws away her coat check ticket and all her belongings so that the Evil 5 are not able to identify her. I wrote this section before I had conceptualised the luggage motif and it fell into place quite accidentally. It's a great feeling when things start falling into place and become congruous.

I understand what Kate's, Jake's and Caelan's issues are but I still need to come to grips with Astral's issues. She is escaping from her past, that much is clear. But she does not reveal her concerns. I don't want her to have a major realisation after which she's okay, but I do need to show the reader where she's at with coming to terms with her past. I added this scene to the end of "15.Nymph":

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"No. I don't think I'll ever be okay again."

She looked at me a while.

"You'll find peace some day."

"Maybe."

I also overlooked the fact that Kate never tells Caelan she's leaving which is a huge oversight so I added a farewell scene to "23.Luca".

I've also made a decision regarding the political references. I need to balance the whole freedom inside the club with the discrimination outside the club. What's the point if inside the clubs everyone takes drugs and feels connected to everyone else, when the subaltern groups are not allowed into the club in the first place. I added a scene showing exactly this irony in "20.Cool Eddy". At first I wanted to add it to "5.Trade" but it was

too soon for Kate to come to this realisation. I already had a section in “5.Trade” where Kate criticises the discrimination of clubs.

It was a gay club, more specifically a club for gay men. If you were a woman, gay or straight, you ran a big risk of not getting in.

Most straight people acted gay and lied to get in, just to have that high only Trade can give you. I’ve heard about a lot of gay people that were turned away as well, because the doorman didn’t believe them. A lot of people got turned away when it got too full or they didn’t look “gay” enough and it is a very specific gay that I am referring to. It is the beefy guy, the pierced tattooed muscular guy that every gay man wants to fuck.

I scrapped this passage because it’s too overt. Kate is not the kind of person prone to philosophising or moralising. I decided this particular scene would be more effective if the reader was shown this conclusion rather than told what to think (see opening page of “20.Cool Eddy”).

I added another scene to “16.Melt”. Kate is suspicious of the police but realises that one of the policemen is black. She makes the assumption that he could never be part of the Evil 5 because of the racial discrimination in the UK.

But his partner is black. He can’t possibly be Evil 5. They’ll never let him into their secret circle (“16.Melt”).

I realised that this change resonates well with “7.Raw Cabbaged”. Kate gets paranoid and suspects that Mike is a cop. When Kate takes the strong acid in “16.Melt” her paranoia returns tenfold and it makes sense that she should be suspicious of the police.

I changed the nature of the relationship between Astral and Kate. I don’t think Kate and Astral’s relationship should have romantic undertones. The novel is about breaking boundaries and Kate is exploring aspects of her sexuality she could not have imagined

existed. I think it would be far more powerful an experience if her romantic affections were limited to Caelan. It adds more focus to her dilemma. Caelan also has more symbolic value this way because she is the catalyst for both Jake and Kate questioning their own sexual identities. Whereas Jake is unable to explore his feelings for Caelan beyond a certain point, Kate however is able to do so. She realises that it is possible to experience life without being weighed down by what we should, can and are supposed to do. Kate and Astral are just friends but if the reader reads more into their friendship then it would not be incorrect. I think it will make the novel more intriguing if the reader keeps guessing about the nature of Kate and Astral's relationship.

20 June 2002

I had a meeting with Michael Green. He said the rewritten chapters were fine. I told him I wasn't too happy with "19.Sundissential" and "23.Luca". He reread the previous versions (as they were after 23 May 2002). He asked me whether the lab report scene did not occur too early in the novel ("19.Sundissential"). I don't think so. The lab report does not introduce something completely new, which will affect or alter the way the text is read. Instead, it just makes the way the story is told more pronounced.

"Just the facts, Astral", I instructed. "We don't want the truth to be distorted with our subjective beliefs and opinions" ("19.Sundissential").

This way of telling has been already been suggested in the first chapter:

"Jake, I'm really exhausted". I yawned foreffect. "We'll make it another time okay?"

Besides, the last thing I feel like now is a bunch of manic ravers dosing themselves with drugs and acting stupid."

Jake looked at me for a while before saying, "Why don't you try it before you form an opinion about it?" ("1.Warriors").

Also, if the lab report scene is included in the last chapter “23.Luca”, it will detract from the whole nostalgia of clubbing and how the memories by themselves can be intoxicating enough. I don’t think the last chapter should involve any drugs. Kate and Jake have both decided that they have had enough and are choosing different things in life. It would seem odd if they both took LSD after all that has happened to them.

In the elective Masters course I did, “Colonial and Postcolonial Writing”, a lot of focus was placed on the relationship between the narrative structure of the novel and its thematic concerns. An example is the novel *Oyster* (Hospital 1997) where a character states that time is a capillary system:

I do know that time does not run in a straight line, and never has. It is a capillary system, mapped outwards from whichever pulse point the observer occupies” (1997: 47)

“stepping into a story or constructing a map are much the same thing; and both are like tossing a stone at a window: the cobwebby lines fan out from the point of impact in all directions at once” (1997: 47).

The novel then reflects this ‘way of seeing’ in the narrative structure. The story is told from a certain point in time, and fans out to various moments in the past and the future.

This made me think about the relationship between my novel’s narrative structure and its narrative concerns. I was thinking of how to end the novel and how to illustrate that Kate gets bored of the repetitive nature of clubbing. I then had a great idea. I used the red lighter symbol from “16.Melt” in “22.DTPM”. Kate sees the red lighter and it reminds her of being caught in a time cycle.

Do you have a light?” I asked.

“Sure”, he said and took out a red lighter.

He rolled the wheel and the spark lit the gas.

The lighter was red, no doubt about it.

“Caught in a time cycle”, I said.

“Wha’?” he asked.

“Nothing”, I said and lit my cigarette.

I realised after I made the changes that the ‘time cycle’ also refers to the structure of the novel. All the chapters are cyclical and start and end in the same way, i.e. going to a club and then going home. Kate realises in “22.DTPM” that every experience she has is just like the one before and that she is indeed caught in a time cycle. To break her repetitive way of life, she has to make different choices and so decides to go back to South Africa. So in this sense the narrative structure supports the thematic concern.

Another thematic concern of the book is not to enter into an experience with preconceptions. The narrator is introduced to another way of seeing, with the aid of some recreational pharmaceuticals of course. This book is an exploration of what would happen if we did not have prejudgements and preconceptions but just entered into an experience with an open mind. And this theme is reflected in the language itself. The descriptions are kept minimal, the narrator has minimal internal dialogue and her tone is quite matter-of-fact (not ‘flat’). It is left to the reader to make his/her own conclusions about the book.

Another theme is the relationship between fact and fiction. The following passage is quite interesting in this regard:

“Yeah you get some really scary shit from the dealers. A friend of mine bought an e at a club and when he tried to bite it in half he couldn’t. It turned out to be a watch battery”, I said. It wasn’t really a friend of mine but it sounded so much more credible than “someone told me once they heard of this guy...”
(“3.Renaissance”).

Kate suggests that she can not be trusted as a narrator. Did any of the experiences she described really happen or were they just all stories she had heard, something that happened to a friend? The relationship between fact and fiction is questioned. The fact that the novel is obviously a work of fiction is contradicted by the fact that all the names of the clubs do actually exist.

It is quite possible that the reader will not decode any of the thematic concerns or ideas I have encoded in this book. He/she might read it completely differently because all readers have 'agency' (the term is Gramsci's 1971 – [MG: not only, of course, but as you choose to use it here]). Perhaps the key is to include as many themes as possible and let the reader pick out the one/s, which appeals to him/her.

27 June 2002

The novel is finished! I've given it to an editor so all that needs to be done is to incorporate those changes.

How should one approach writing? I've always been wary of reading too many texts and having too many influences. There's the belief that you can't break the rules until you know what they are. Picasso would not have been Picasso had he not gone to art school and knew what the conventions were.

Can I approach the writing process like Kate approaches life? Can I be a *tabula rasa* and not have preconceptions and prejudgements about writing: what it is, which techniques are good, which techniques are bad? Ama Ata Aidoo (1977) wrote *Our sister Killjoy*, an internationally acclaimed book. Yet this book 'tells' and hardly ever 'shows'. She is not breaking western conventions or rules but is writing from an African position, making use of the techniques favoured by the oral literature tradition.

Can I, like Kate, approach writing with no baggage or luggage, with no thoughts or ideas before I start the actual writing process? Can I, like Kate, see the world with dilated pupils and be open to creative ideas without censoring them first, judging whether they would be 'good' or 'bad'?

That is the point I am making. I intuitively feel "this is what I should write", "this is the direction the story should take now", "I should add this section", "I should move this section to there." When I think about these changes I can usually come up with a reason why I did it. But the reason usually comes after the decision. Your subconscious mind always has the answer. Why spoil the mystery with analysing it to death? Leave that for the literary scholars and critics.

As Kate says in "21.Trinity":

Sometimes words can't convey a feeling, and you have to transmit the energy of the moment in some other way.

I placed my hand on her thigh and sent the essence of what I felt to her. She turned to me and in her eyes I saw that she understood. She placed her hand over mine and I understood what she conveyed.

There are places where words just cannot go.

The meaning/s of a book is/are not located in the text, nor the author, nor the reader but somewhere else. And the words and the way in which they are ordered suggest meaning, point to it but can never really capture it. And while so many scholars and critics spend their lives trying to pin down meaning, writers try to suggest a way of being beyond meaning or understanding.

[MG: or another way of meaning and understanding....]

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APPENDIX A: ABSTRACT

Graduate Conference – 27 October 2001

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Title of Paper: Reading from a fictional work in progress: *Nightclubbing*.

Abstract

When Kate arrives at Heathrow airport, her best friend Jake convinces her to go clubbing with him. And so starts her journey into London's clubbing subculture with Jake as her guide. The novel is structured around Kate's exposure to the ethos of the different clubs she visits. The narration is propelled by the tension set up between the potentially salacious material these experiences provide and the 'flat' account given of it by the narrator. Kate's reserved perspective plays off against the usual expectations one has of the 'confessional' mode. This becomes particularly telling as she recounts Jake's spinning off into increasingly destructive patterns. The reader is left to deal with the cycle of spectacle and experience presented in the work on his or her own terms.