

Breakdown

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Chapter 1

Breakdown

1.1 Breakdown - Public Domain

BREAKDOWN

Short Stories By Mike Richmond

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Foreword	500 words
Love is Blind	4400 words
Inebriation	600 words
Fragments	2000 words
The Morning After	300 words
Breakdown	1800 words
Rendevous	1600 words
Morning Glory	700 words

AmigaGuide/MultiView design by Andy J Campbell

A Magnetic Fiction Production in association with TQE.

1.2 Foreword by Andy J Campbell

F o r e w o r d

If you thought my fiction was bleak, wait until you cop a load of this.

Our teenage years are strange, ever-changing rollercoasters of good and bad feelings, of experimentation, depression, fantasies and fun. According to typical modern 'teenage' novels, those of us aged between fourteen and nineteen spend most of our lives ruled by mood-swings,

scoffing unhealthy food, partying, and trying to get off with the opposite sex. Either that, or we're teenage health-freaks, sort of 'quiet drop-outs', or lifeless weirdos who require pushing 'back into the stream'.

However, as Richmond's stories will tell you, things aren't quite so easy for 'out-of-the-crowders' - it's not a simple matter of somebody coming upto you and saying, "awww, you poor thing, here, let me help you get back on track" because, firstly, nobody gives a shit, and secondly, some 'out-of-the-crowders' would rather /die/ than have to mix with the mainstream.

And so it is for many of Richmond's young protagonists. "Breakdown", the title piece, and the most recent story in this collection, shows how society scrapes the sucessful from the losers, makes a clean cut between the two - and how? By luck. By chopping school at the age of sixteen and offering a basic choice - hang on to higher education or jump in at the deep-end with your useless certificates and get a low-paid, perpetual-routine job. (Hell, if you /can/.)

Later in life we meet old friends, as in "Rendezvous", and realise we've lost more than we've actually gained. Things we never thought twice about during our childhood become of magnificent importance - drinking ("Inebriation"), smoking, endless shagging - and why? Because we've lost our ability to occupy ourselves using only our imaginations; the string of life's zest has slipped out from between our fingers, crushed beneath the weight of pressure to be adult, the demand that we become yet another fish in the river, and the suffocating fists of work and responsibility.

Richmond's lucid characters are squashed beneath the soiled arses of their greedy, bullying peers; shaken into whirlwinds of depression ("Fragments"), confusion and chaos ("The Morning After"), and into the soul-destroying depths of obsession and perversion ("Love is Blind"). Here, in this collection, we're dragged through social vomit, nose first - sometimes at the sacrifice of continuity, layout, and punctuation - and the nails of our wrongness are hammered in, hard, with no mercy. We grow up, and we lose it. We grow up, and we lose it. We grow up and we lose /everything/, and we /know/ it. We know it we know it we know it.

Mike Richmond, with his vivid, honest and disturbing fiction, has every right to rub this in.

- Andy J Campbell
November 1996

1.3 Love is Blind

L o v e i s B l i n d

I never knew love until I laid eyes on her, and I never even knew her name until I fell in love with her. Sadie Benton: thirty-two years old; divorced; no children; long, black hair; brown eyes. The woman of my dreams, and I hoped I would be the man of hers.

I first met her when I was a trainee in the bank, back in the nineties - doesn't that sound really long ago now? Just think, we can say "back in the /twentieth/ century", or even "back in the /second/ millennium" now.

Back in the fifties there were literally hundreds of comics floating around that said "by the nineteen-eighties we'll have this thing" and

"by the year 2000 we'll have such and such" and it was all bollocks. Well okay, most of it. Some things: moon landings; a computer in every home; computers you can fit in your pocket; wrist-watches with memo facilities and all the other modern stuff like that /did/ happen, but all the shit about moon /bases/, a robot in every home, /intelligent/ computers, wrist-watches with communicators in them never happened. Or if they did they never filtered down into everyday society.

The kiss of death for any technology is Tomorrow's World. I mean, have you /ever/ seen anything that has been featured on Tomorrow's world again? It's a subliminal way of intervention by the Government - if somebody invented perpetual motion then it would just go on Tomorrow's World and never be seen again. Free energy isn't taxable, you see. That's why cigarettes and alcohol aren't illegal, and that's why the world's Governments spend millions of pounds on busting drug dealers so they can make twice as much selling the shit back to the kids on the streets.

Just think, if Tomorrow's World had been around in the forties we could have so easily prevented nuclear weapons. It would have been far more effective than a bunch of moaning hippies with honorary life-membership of CND.

Tomorrow's World has done /some/ good, I admit. If some of these futuristic appliances had arrived for use by the public, it would have only made us even lazier than we already are. We've already turned into virtual robots, and we all want everything at the push of a button - entertainment, shopping, even communication. The human contact has gone, all because machines do it more efficiently. Which, of course, is better, according to the Conservative theory.

As you can probably tell, I'm not a fan of technology - so far as I can see all we are concerned in doing is inventing more and more ever more comprehensive ways of killing each other. Who needs fancy gadgets to do that? It's all too impersonal. Like banking. Maybe it was just as well I got out of that dead-end occupation when I did.

Anyway, the day Sadie Benton walked into my life was the day she decided to open an account with the bank I was working in. As she pensively filled in the probing form I stared and smiled at her. Eventually she turned away.

She asked me, politely, what was the problem and I said "I was looking at you", which sort of annoyed her. After a couple of minutes she decided she had had enough and she walked out of the bank, and out of my life.

I lost my job the next month, as the result of a "merger". Mergers are to make business more efficient. Efficiency requires streamlining. Streamlining increases profits. Profits means redundancies.

Aren't there a lot of synonyms in the English language. Streamlining is used as a euphemism for "redundancies" which is, to me a far better word. At least it gets straight to the point. I hate all this Latinate flowery shit and all that Politically Correct beating around the bush bollocks that's it's so fashionable to use these days.

Political Correctness, to me, as immeasurably patronising. It's not as though the terminology /has/ to be in complicated language - it just makes the twats at the top feel better about themselves.

I'm sorry, we haven't been properly introduced, have we? My name is Wally Taylor. I'm thirty-five (I was only twenty at the time), five-ten and twelve stone.

Aren't numbers wonderful. Your entire life can be recorded as a

list of numbers. Everything is a number. If you ever get interested in computers you'll find out that everything is either a "one" or a "zero". That's it. With two numbers - well, one number and nothing - you can describe anything you like. Anything from a piece of music to a painting to a story to a game to a word processor to a nuclear power plant is /all/ made up of a list of numbers.

I've always been good with numbers - that's the reason that I went into banking. I bet I could have been a divisional manager now, if it weren't for the merger. The /fucking/ merger, God bless our poor souls. Just twenty years old and in a few short months I lost everything as I went from a promising career in banking to...

*

...wanking in a tree. That's what it came to, if you'll excuse the double entendre. She lived in a house facing the woods. Well "rearing" the woods at least. I found her address in the telephone book. She'd only got so far as to writing her full name on the application form when the bitch walked out of the bank. I looked up all the Bentons, ripped out the page - there were only three-and-a-half columns - and crossed out their names one by one as I rang them and asked for her. Hers was the last name I tried, because the phone was still in her ex-husband's name. Terry.

I pretended to be a sales-person, safe in the assumption that nobody /ever/ buys anything via telesales.

Quite who came up with the idea that people might positively respond to some out-of-work actor offering them a "once in a lifetime" opportunity to purchase double glazing "at a discount price, especially for /you/, but only if you reply within seven days" is beyond me. Seems like a waste of time and money, to me, but at least it provides jobs. Not that you couldn't make a computer that would do the job a hundred times more efficiently.

I wrote her letters, up to seven a day. She never replied. I signed each one with a declaration of love but she did not seem to care. I just could not understand how I could be so in love with her while she hated me. I felt compelled to tell her how I felt, and that I did, as often as I could, and I intended to do so for as long as it took. I never got nasty. Not at first. I was just a shy soul searching out for something, anything. A rock to grab on to keep me from my own emotional whirlpool.

*

I eventually decided to make a kind of tree house in the woods, the ones backing onto her house. I dragged loads of branches through the woods late at night over a period of about a week, and I stacked them in a criss cross pattern on a suitable nearby tree. It was shaped like an upside down spider, which was useful 'cause it kept all the logs in place. I kept my binoculars up there. I kept a flask up there. Most importantly I kept a King Size box of Kleenex up there and used it up within a week. Then I moved onto pages from books, leaves, my clothes, anything.

Once, when she was on holiday I went into her house and wanked in her bedroom. In her bed. I had to keep away for a few weeks because the police kept hanging around the house. Rumour has it she thought the house-breaker was her ex-husband trying to find her divorce documents.

I'd convinced myself I was an author by that time - I've got "A" level English Language, you know, whatever /that's/ worth.

"A" level English Language, at least at the time /I/ took it was essentially in two sections. The first dealt with such exciting subjects as grammar, semantics, phonology, graphology and about ten other Greek or Latin words - I don't know which. This was basically about studying what writers were trying to say in their text and what it was about. Personally, I think that a piece of writing is about what /you/ think it's about. What it means to whoever is reading a "text" is infinitely more important than what some university-based academic /tells/ you it means.

The other part of the course was about the even /more/ exciting subjects of the history of the language and the way children learn to speak. /Gripping/ stuff, I'm sure you'll agree, and a disappointment to all of the students who expected to be able write Science Fiction stories all day.

I often took a notebook up in the tree house with me and scribbled down notes for my novel. I never finished it. I've still got all my notes and all my drafts but I doubt I'll ever look at it again.

The last night in the "tree-house" was the best night of all. She came out of the shower at nine-thirty, as usual, but this time she didn't close the curtains. She ran to answer the phone - or maybe to make a call - and sat there in her bedroom with only a towel around her for maybe ten minutes. I clenched my teeth and slowed my rhythm to delay the climax, to heighten the excitement, and was rewarded when she started to get changed in front of my very eyes. I dropped the binoculars in the rush and vaguely heard them smashing twenty-feet down as I released my breath in a gasp, red faced and sweaty. I burst my seams in a rippling orgasm and left a sticky DNA sample all over the tree. And all over my fucking sandwiches.

I ate them anyway.

*

The Fair came to town the next day - the autumn had come late so it was still quite warm. It was then that I decided that it was time to make my move. I waited for three hours in a phonebox across the road from her house in case she decided to go. I was rewarded when she stepped out of the house with a friend, both of them giggling and chattering at each other like teenagers as their heels clicked down the street. I followed in the shadows, ducking into the hedgerows as they turned round to make sure they weren't being followed.

Because she didn't live far from the Fairground she walked all the way. It was a good job - I'd missed my Giro that week and didn't have any money for a bus fare.

The Fair was the same as always. Full of laughter, smiles and screaming. Lots of screaming. I like to scream. Sometimes, when I'm alone I scream and scream until I feel dizzy. Sometimes I do it when I aren't alone. I like feeling dizzy. It reminds me of the climactic moments immediately before an ejaculation.

I lost Sadie for almost an hour. She disappeared into the crowd and I got really frantic, desperately looking for her. The bitch. No consideration for others. For /me/. I had to talk to her, I /had/ to tell her how I felt, I /had/ to make her love me. Shit, I must have asked a hundred people if they'd seen anybody matching her description (and her description /did/ match half the women /there/ but no fucker ever helps you when you're desperate)

When I was about nine or ten I went on a walk with my cousins to the Country Park. They went up a steep hill and I lost them because I couldn't keep up with them. I cried for ages, and I asked loads of tourists if they'd seen them. Nobody took a blind bit of notice of me. So I tried to leave them a message in the rocks near the entrance - stupid, I know, but at the time I was reading a lot of Combat and Survival type mags and I honestly thought it would help. I saw loads of passers-by laughing at me, pointing at me, and in the end somebody kicked the stones away while I was arranging them. Not a teenage boy, as I would have expected, shit, not even a child at all. It was just an ordinary bloke, out with what must have been his wife, or at least a long term partner.

From that day on I've never taken anyone at face value. The most ordinary looking people can be complete /wankers/, and most of the time they are. The people who I can find solace in tend to be those who don't take everything for granted: the "weirdos", the homeless and so on. Society in general just takes everything for granted. We /expect/ to be able to watch television whenever we choose, we /expect/ teenagers to nick cars and turn into junkies, we /expect/ everybody to want to do certain things with their life: by your thirties, if you haven't got a mortgage, a Ford Mondeo in the drive and two point four children you are considered abnormal. People will start making rumours about you: you're shagging a married woman; you're gay; anything except the truth which is that you want something /different/ out of your life to what they're getting.

Back to the Funfair: Eventually a dark-skinned bloke with a baseball cap on pointed her out to me. Silly me - she was right there at the toffee apple stall, barely a hundred meters away. We must have been psychically linked - she could never get away from me. I would always, /always/, be there for her, following her. Watching her.

She began to apprehensively lick at her toffee-apple: cautiously at first, then she sank her teeth deep inside it with an almost-audible squelch, her tongue licking and probing its every ridge and trough. She closed her lips around the semi-consumed core right up to the stick and closed her eyes, breathing in its taste. I imagined the toffee-apple was my cock and soon I had to close my eyes too.

I crept around the back of the toffee-apple stall where it was suspiciously quiet. There were no people there, just a dog, tethered with a leather rope and loads of thick, black criss-crossed wires. The only sound was the stacatto jingling and thumping of distant dance music. I could just see her legs - they were exposed to the soft wind, and propping up her short-skirt. My greedy eyes followed them down to the painted toes peeping through her sandals at one end then up, up to her arse at the other. Before I could stop myself my pants had filled with a hot, sticky pleasure.

Of course I could hardly go and proposition her, as I had intended, with an unsightly, but pleasantly warm, damp patch on the crotch of my jeans so I reluctantly decided to go home and wait until the morning.

I scribbled a note on my pad, and put it through her door on my way home. I told her what I had done. Everything I had done. I said I was sorry, and begged her to let me into her life.

I even gave her my telephone number and asked her to ring me as soon as she got home, knowing she would not. I expected to wait forever for her to love me but I just wasn't sure I could wait that long...

...and I couldn't. I rang her at midnight, giving her plenty of time to get home. As always I made sure to dial 141 before her number so she couldn't ring 1471 to find my number, even though there was no need anymore, because I'd left my name and number on the note.

She answered the phone in a faint but distinctly slurred voice - she must have been out drinking after she had been to the Fair. I told her I loved her. She told me she didn't know what I was talking about.

Normally she slammed the 'phone down right away. Sometimes I rang late at night and I didn't say anything, letting myself be comforted by the sexy huskiness of her night-voice.

Sometimes I wanked while I was ringing her, but I always tried not to make it obvious or she'd just call the police again. The last time I had to tell the pigs that I intended to ring my girlfriend and I inadvertently rang the wrong number, and the stupid bastards believed me! I guess it was the suit and tie I was wearing that made them more inclined to believe me instead of her. Good job I didn't burn all my suits after the banker-bastards sacked me. I almost did. I had a bonfire prepared in the woods and everything. I was going to burn myself as well. I covered everything with petrol but I chickened out at the last minute.

I might still do it, though. I thought about doing it when I broke into Sadie's house. I was going to slash my wrists in her bath and write her a note in my own blood, but I felt better by the time I had reached the bathroom.

On the phone I told her that we were destined to be together: she told me that she didn't know who the fuck I was so why on earth would she want to have a relationship with me. I told her that I would kill myself if she didn't want me. She said she'd kill me if she ever set eyes on me, after she'd read what I had done. I told her that if there was life after death I would wait for her until she died, and then she would love me. She told me to fuck off. I told her I would kill her and then kill myself so we could be together in heaven. She said I was going to hell. She told me to shut up, told me she would rather go blind than fuck me, then she told me to fuck off again and slammed the telephone down.

For a couple of minutes I seriously thought about going to her house and raping her, then murdering her, then killing myself. I always carry a knife around with me, and I always keep it sharp. The thought went temporarily out of my head when I found myself rolling up my sleeve and carving her name into my forearm with the flashing blade. Then I drank a bottle of whisky and watched TV until the sun rose again. I was unable to prevent myself from thinking about her, the way she said she'd rather go blind than fuck me. The bitch. The fucking bitch.

While Jobfinder silently mocked me from the corner of my living room I tore down all the pictures that I had caringly plastered all over my walls in a red rage - the pictures of her, most of them taken using a telephoto lens (I borrowed the camera off an ex-workmate. He's moved to Bristol now) and some that I took from the personal collection in her bedroom. I put them all in a bin-bag and left them outside for the dustmen. I was absolutely fucking /livid/, and this time my disappointment didn't wane in the daylight.

*

So I went to her house as soon as GMTV started. I couldn't take that bastard Eammon Holmes with his scripted wit and the plastic-faced

tedium of Anthea Turner's grin any more.

I had dark glasses on, and a black woolly hat that covered up my hair. I also had my thick leather driving gloves on - the same ones I'd worn when I broke into her house. Not much use for them since my car had been repossessed.

I knocked on her door so hard my knuckles cracked and as soon as she opened the door and peeped through a slim vertical crack I pushed inside and slammed the door behind me.

She started screaming so I put my hand around her mouth, then she bit me so I turned her around and pushed her against the wall, gritting my teeth and telling her if she didn't stop yelling I'd fucking kill her. I told her not to fucking look at me, and then I tore off her clothes and fucked the bitch. Then, as she laid crying on the floor I told her that she'd said she'd rather go blind than fuck me and now she was fucking getting both.

And then I stuck the knife into both of her eyes in turn, her frothy mouthed protestations cutting off as her terror hit a peak and continued to escalate.

Finally, I tied her up and emptied all of the bins in her house until I found my letter, which I slipped into my inside pocket. I thought it fair to assume the bitch wouldn't have kept the rest of my letters, but they didn't have any identifiable features anyway.

And then I walked away - just walked away - out of her back door, past my deserted tree-house and the smashed binoculars still lying below it and away, away, away.

*

I must have had a nervous breakdown or something after that. Well I /did/ have a nervous breakdown: I'd probably had one long before that as well.

That night, and every night afterwards for the next few months I contemplated suicide by every possible method, always changing my mind at the last minute. In the end I just walked out of my house one night with nothing on except a bright yellow flasher's mac and my shell suit bottoms and jumped off the little stone bridge by the telephone box, right into the river. Unfortunately for me it was a dry year and it had only just started raining a week or so earlier and so I just splatted embarrassingly onto the mud, which prevented any serious physical injury.

I just laid there for two nights, laughing and crying at the same time until, by way of chance, a passing rambler spotted the yellow of my coat through the mud.

I was taken straight into hospital, where they cleaned me up, treated me for exposure, dehydration, malnourishment and fuck knows what else. It was then that I was labelled "mentally unstable" - more fucking PC bollocks - and institutionalised "for my own benefit".

In time I told the doctors /everything/, but they didn't seem to care. One day I read the notes from the interviewing doctor's clipboard. Reading upside down is one of the first things you learn. It said "Delusional manic-depressive paranoid-schizophrenic". I didn't know if that was a description of me or just a list of every possible psychiatric complaint it was possible to suffer from, which they would tick off for each patient like their lottery numbers. Probably both.

I impressed the doctors by my swift "recovery" - I always was a good actor - and I never thought of Sadie again, until a frightened-looking

blind woman claiming to be a voluntary Social Worker came to visit me during my last week in "care". /Care/, Christ, it sounds as if they're /helping/ you. I never met a single bastard in there who /cared/. All of them, every last one, was just a patronising pile of shit.

But back to my "visually impaired" visitor: She said she had once been obsessively stalked and seriously assaulted by what the police thought was an escaped psychiatric patient, and that if I was going to be released was I sure that I wasn't going to to her what he had done to me. I looked at her long, black hair and smiled to myself as I told her I would never even /think/ of doing such a thing.

That seemed to convince them that I was sane enough to be released back into the real world, which was great because I really thought they'd keep me there forever. You see madness isn't a scalar quantity - madness and sanity are balanced very finely with each other. In fact, I would say that the very act of institutionalising a man /drives/ him mad in the end.

You see, asylums, as we aren't allowed to call them any more, aren't to protect the mad from themselves, nor to protect the public from them. They are there to protect the "mentally challenged", as they are pompously known by so called "normal" citizens, from /society/.

Most of the inmates - sorry, /patients/ - weren't actually raving-lunatic mad. They just thought differently to most people. Sometimes innovative thinkers are labelled "geniuses" - it depends whether their radical ideas are accepted or not.

If they had suffered from a physical handicap rather than a medical one they'd be pandered and helped an loved but mental problems just don't win votes so nobody cares.

Little children in wars, amputees making a new life for themselves - /that/ is what the political parties wants to be seen to be supporting.

People with mental illnesses, and I mean /illnesses/, I'm not going all PC on you, are seen by the public as being perverted child sex-killers who are a danger to the public. Okay, some of them /are/, fair enough, but so are millions of other people. In no other situation can you punish innocent people for the crimes that others with the same affliction have committed in the past.

Imagine if it was proven that 90% of criminals had beards: would every man with a beard be criminalised? Would every /man/ be criminalised just because he had the capability of growing a beard? It sounds ridiculous and unlikely, but this kind of discriminatory generalisation is /rife/ in the world, it's just that most of us manage to turn a blind eye to it.

*

Shit! Is that the time? I'm afraid I'll have to be off now, the wife gets worried when I'm late home. She doesn't like being alone - she says she feels unsafe when I'm not there protecting her.

Her name? Oh, she's called Sadie.

1.4 Inebriation

I n e b r i a t i o n

The moment their lips touched Paul turned away in embarrassment and jealousy, their open display of intimacy disturbing and depressing him. But everywhere he looked was a seething mass of checked shirts and nubile flesh, locked together inseparably. To him it was not beautiful or affectionate, but a collection of hideous siamese twins leering at him from their conjoined faces. The numbers on his watch did not seem familiar and they rotated along with the hands when he tried to read the time, so he asked Chris instead. Emptying his bottle he passed it to Chris who dropped it into the bin for him. He closed his eyes but experienced a rushing motion. His eyes failed to focus properly when he cautiously opened them and an aching feeling soared through his veins, starting at his stomach and rushing outwards. He loosened his belt and leaned against a wall. Slowly sliding downwards he realised Tony and Maria had finished touching each other up and were staring at him with some fascination. He tried to speak but his mouth would not move so instead he gazed into the distance, at the one point where he could not catch the eye of anybody wanting to pick a fight. For no particular reason he let his head drop into his hands. He decided he wanted a knife. He asked for one. Nobody replied. He was met by a strange glance when he asked for a rope, then he ran his hands through his hair and closed his eyes again. Maria had stood up. She walked up to him and waved her hand in front of his face. He continued to gaze straight ahead. "Is he alright?" asked Tony but she did not answer immediately. She repeated her gesture then answered Tony. "We'll soon see," she whispered, not realising Paul had heard, then to Paul directly she said "Hiya!". He ignored her, her greeting not initially registering in his mind. By the time he had mentally prepared himself to answer the time had passed and he realised she was now sitting next to him, also leaning against the wall. Rob and Andrew had disappeared, and had been missing for over half an hour. He was just about to ask where they were when Dave came back and announced that Rob was "getting off with a really hot lass." "What eloquence" thought Paul, but today he did not feel like saying it out loud. He pushed himself up a bit, not wanting to be mistaken by the bouncers for a drunk, and continued to look straight ahead. Tony was talking to somebody who he didn't recognise. Chris and Steve stood up "We're off for a piss. Anyone coming?". Tony grinned at them. "Not today, I'm already taken.". And then they were gone, and Maria leant over to Paul and planted a wet, drunken kiss on his cheek, in full view of Tony. Although he was grinning his eyes contained a hint of jealousy. Paul still did not react, although he was tempted. Very tempted. For a moment he considered leaning back and returning the favour but immediately changed his mind, deciding that kissing his mates' girlfriends would be metaphorically equivalent to screwing them so he slid back down the wall and painfully remembered a time when none of this would have really concerned him at all.

1.5 Fragments

F r a g m e n t s

And after an eternity of falling he finally hit the water with a deafening yet silent splash. His ears filled with water and he lost all sense of direction. He squeezed his eyes shut until he saw just the redness of his eyelids and he had held his breath for so long his chest felt ready to implode. Down, down, he continued to plunge, longing to be able to gasp for breath. Able to hold his breath no longer, his mouth fell open, and as he took in his first lungful of salt water the dream ended.

*

"...and the answer is clearly two root two multiplied by six Pi plus two, all squared," drones the teacher, clearly trying to hide an orgasmic feeling of superiority as the entire class rest their heads on their elbows, baffled, trying not to fall asleep.

The bell rings at half past three, startling the bright kids almost as much as the dozing half-wits and gradually the whole building springs to life in a frenzy of swinging bags, endless footsteps and violent jostling.

Four boys leave the Maths room later than the others, belatedly giggling at a joke one of them made earlier in the day. A brown haired, small-framed boy says a swear word and they once again fall into hysterics as an in-joke is repeated for the millionth time.

As they leave the building into the hot summer sun, the screams of four hundred school-children hit their ears. In the distance, seven boys on bicycles chase a thin blonde boy, shouting indistinguishable obscenities at him as he runs for his life, terrified that they will re-enact the threats they had made earlier in the day.

Two streets later, the small boy says goodbye to his friend and turns into a near-deserted road. A tall, fat boy with a shaved head is half way down the street ahead. The small boy mutters a swear word under his breath and slows down his walk, trying to hide himself behind cars and trees.

The fat boy turns around, and spots a small boy with glasses walking slowly down the street. He has seen this boy before. He has shouted names at him as he has ridden past on his bike. He has thrown eggs at him as he was walking back to school after dinnertime. The small boy is often alone, his friends seem to disappear after school. He stands still, staring at him.

The small boy's heart beats faster - the fat boy is waiting for him. He thinks about turning round and running, but that would fuel the fat boy's hatred even more. He crosses the street and walks, faster than before, hoping that the fat boy is waiting for somebody.

The fat boy picks up a stick and half-jogs across the road, until he is blocking the small boy's progress.

"Oy, little shit," he shouts to the small boy, who ignores him and tries to walk around him. The fat boy grabs his coat and pushes him into a hedge.

"Are you deaf, you little cunt? Eh?"

The small boy sees the fat boy tapping his stick in his left palm.

"You're in the sixth-form, aren't you?", says the fat boy.

"Yeah..." spits the small boy, in a weak voice. His throat is swelling and he is barely choking back tears. He brings his hands down to his side, remembering the still-throbbing cuts he made the night before.

"You're a fucking little shit, aren't you," laughs the fat boy, "Are you the one we were throwing eggs at last week?"

The small boy shakes his head, gritting his teeth in anger. He wishes he had the courage to retaliate, but the last time he tried to do that he ended up in casualty.

"Don't fucking lie to me, you little wanker," growls the fat boy, in a high pitched, pre-pubescent voice. He hits the small boy across the back of the head with his stick, then fumbles around in his hip pocket, eventually producing a cheap gas lighter. He flicks it on and lets the boy watch the angry flame for a few seconds, which seem to him like eternity.

The small boy starts to cry, and shouts "Fuck off!" to the fat boy, who eventually wanders away from him, grinning. The small boy walks down the street towards his home, barely managing to avoid running. If he runs the fat boy will chase him and hurt him again.

*

After falling forever, he opened his eyes and realised he was bearing down on the ground and he closed his eyes again and prayed for his life. A voice in his head told him to give up, and he gradually accepted his inevitable death. The world blurred through a wall of tears; he waited for his head to hit the water.

*

A door distantly slams, shaking the whole house. The boy contemplates turning up his music but stops, hand outstretched as he hears another piercing shout and a louder slam. Shouting voices make his heart beat faster; make his throat go dry. He leaps onto the bed as heavy footsteps climb the stairs and stares, teary eyed at the faded whiteness of his firmly closed door.

"...bastard..."

"...why don't you just listen to what..."

"...shut your bloody mouth..."

"...I mean it this time...."

"...goodbye..."

Several minutes pass as he tries to put actions to the noises he can hear; clunking, slamming, crying. His heart beats out of his chest and his mind races through a thousand terrifying possibilities.

He chokes back a final phlegmy mouthful of tears as the front door slams.

*

Outside, a strong breeze was blowing. He looked down and the world momentarily span. Rushing adrenalin made him feel tenser than usual. He glanced behind himself. His bedroom didn't feel right, but he could sense nothing wrong with it. He suddenly tripped and fell impossibly backwards out of the window. He didn't want to fall, but it felt natural. He wondered what sound it would make when his body hit the river softly flowing below the window.

*

The small boy swings his football in a bright yellow bag. He doesn't really like playing football but all of his friends do, and he'd rather be with them than left alone with his thoughts. He is wearing a jumper even though the sun is blazing and is sweating horribly beneath his goalpost-coat.

In the distance he sees two hazy figures, and for a moment considers changing direction to avoid them, as he normally does. But as he draws closer he realises they can be no older than twelve or thirteen, a good four years younger than him. He assumes they'll just walk past and carries on to meet his friend, whose house is just around the corner. As he approaches his friend's street, the two boys cross in front of him.

"Excuse me, kid," says the smaller of the two. His face is like a rat and he and his friend are grinning and nudging one another in anticipation, "Have you got ten pee I can lend?"

"Sorry, no," says the boy, now becoming suspicious.

"Yes you fucking have. Give us it now or we'll have to rough you up a bit, if you know what I mean..."

The small boy tries to hide a grin - as if these two little kids are going to rough him up. He mentally prepares to flatten one of them. He tells the rat-boy to fuck off.

"Hey, there's no need to swear!", shouts the rat boy, his friend turning away to suppress a giggle. The small boy tries to push his way past. His friend lives less than two hundred metres away. He'll go and ring his doorbell and the two smaller boys will leave him alone. He notices his heart beating faster as both of the boys grab him and push him away.

"What's in the bag?" asks the rat boy. His friend says "It's a football,". The small boy wonders if they are going to steal his ball. How will he explain that to his friends, who are expecting a game of football.

The rat-boy pats the small boy's pockets, and the small boy thanks God that he has put his wallet safely in his coat pocket. Then his hopes are shattered as the rat-boy dips into his pocket. He pulls out a hard plastic case, missing the small boy's wallet by inches.

"What's in this?" he asks.

"It's for my glasses, knobhead," says the small boy, shame and fear breaking up his voice. What if his friends find out he has been mugged by two little kids?

The rat-boy opens the case and removes its contents. A couple of scraps of paper and a pen. He mutters something to his friend: "What a fucking strange thing to keep in a glasses case," then hurls it all to the floor and the small boy runs past him towards his friends house, clumsily bending to grab his glasses case from a shimmering puddle on the way.

"Hey, kid, you forgot your pen," laughs the rat boy. The small boy carries on running until he reaches his friends door. He rings the bell four times, heart knocking against his ribs.

His friend comes to the door.

"What's up with you, you look like you've seen a ghost!" he laughs.

The small boy looks to the floor.

"Something like that..." he whispers. His friend would only laugh and tell everybody else if he told him about what had just happened.

When he walks past the spot a moment later, he notices his pen and scraps of paper are gone from the flooded gutter, and he forgets to breathe for half a second. His friend begins to talk about who is coming to play football today.

*

He had woken up with a start, and after the world had swum back into focus he realised that there was smoke coming from beneath his door. He leapt out of bed and ran to the window. The river that ran beside his house was there, even though he lived over a mile away from the nearest stretch of water.

Vague memories of childhood came back to him - his mother telling him to keep away from the end of the garden where the "drain" ran - an open stretch of muddy water in a sharp mini-valley, making a border between the residential area and the ship-yard.

He tried to breathe but knew that the smoke ought to stop him breathing. He opened the window, and a breeze tugged it out his hands, cracking it against the outside wall. He remembered that he was supposed to throw down something soft, but then realized that the water was still there. He wished he could wake up.

*

The small boy sits, the room illuminated only by the sixty watt dimness of a bedside lamp. His left hand lies palm up in front of him covered with two or three dark horizontal lines. In his right hand he clutches a half-sharp penknife.

His parents have been annoying him for weeks - taking out their angers on him and each other. He is sick of being picked on by people far younger than himself. He wishes he could be normal. He wishes he didn't look like a bully's dream come true. He wishes he could tell somebody. He wishes somebody could love him.

And he wishes the dreams would stop - the dreams in which all of his terrors come true: fire; falling; drowning. He wishes the voices in his head would shut up and leave him alone. He wishes he could be as important as he feels in his "other" life.

And in a white frenzy of hate and terror he drags the knife sharply across his wrist again, causing a white scratch to appear. For a moment he realises what he is doing, but then he repeats the action, pressing a little harder. This time the white line turns red at the ends. He cuts again and again and again and again and again and again and again. Then he holds the knife in his left hand and carries on until both of his wrists are a mass of red scratches and bleeding. Then he turns off the light and cries until his eyes run dry, terrified to sleep and terrified of what tomorrow will bring.

*

Peace. Maybe everything was going to be alright, he wondered to himself. Fleeting colours formed images of heaven in the back of his mind's eye and a single, soft kiss made him feel wanted for the first time in his life. But something gravelly and ashen was hitting his nostrils and the mental images were becoming blurred and contorted. He tried to prise open his eyes with sheer mental willpower and missed a heartbeat as thick smoke rushed into his lungs.

1.6 The Morning After

T h e M o r n i n g A f t e r

Picking at his flaking fingertips he puts down the guitar and vaguely recalls the dream. Sitting down, he flicks a switch and his Other life bursts into place. Self respect is gained and he begins to talk to the machine, fingers stinging with the dull throbbing of his heart.

----***----

Why you? So it was you and not

me

that won the pathetic race to open your trousers to the world?

(jealous? yes, of course. wouldn't you be?)
 (and aren't I the weak one?)
 (who hides beneath)
 (the weak facade)
 (of lies...)
 (why?)
 (why?)
 (why?)

Is it better to have done it and regretted it
 or never

t o

have done it at all?

Did you kiss her that way because you /love/ her?

Or is it the /idea/ of being in love that

a p p e a l s

to your carnal instincts so much?

What was in that letter?

What did she say to you?

Did she reveal an embarrassing recoil against her alcohol induced
 passion? Did she say "I'm sorry but I was pissed", as though drug-
 induced stupor is an acceptable excuse for excessive behaviour - no
 longer are we inhibited against @@#SeX%\$£ and

v i o l e n c e

and

whenwhenwhenwhenwhenwhenwhen

willitbemyturnto"love"andkissandfuckandemerge from the curtain of
 sarcasm and bullSHIT...

----***----

Then he turns off the machine, and lies on his bed, dreaming of dying.

1.7 Breakdown

B r e a k d o w n

He signed the small slip of paper to inform the DSS that he had been
 out of work and actively seeking work on each of the days since he last
 signed. His Unemployment Benefit book was passed back to him, and he
 quickly slipped it into his inside pocket as he stood up and left the
 office with a confident stride. The carpets were new and springy and
 the whole place seemed bright and lively. Hordes of people were
 queuing outside the Job Centre, that bright oasis in the concrete
 desert.

He walked past the drug addicts and dossers, the ex-businessmen with briefcases. A dozen young unshaven men across the road stared him straight in the eye as he opened the double doors to the outside world. He didn't turn away - he wasn't afraid any more - and in time they carried on their loud conversation, standing by a wall in their circular exclusion zone, where nobody came within two hundred metres of them unless absolutely necessary. And even then they stared constantly, watching for sudden movements, watching for that familiar face that next week would be breaking into their garden shed or dumping bags of glue over their back wall or running away down the street as they opened their curtains in the dead of night to check on their car.

He walked past the shops. Half of them were boarded up now, the public no longer needing their overpriced goods and the old fashioned values of friendliness or service. Instead the middle class wives took their husbands' cars out of town to discount wholesalers to buy baked beans for three pence a tin. Outside each shop another group of youths gathered - nothing to do, nowhere to go and no intention of doing anything else for the rest of their lives.

At the end of the pedestrianised zone the people disappeared away in cloud-like dribs and drabs and the strains of conversation faded away into the distance, replaced by the man made sounds of cars and trains, all of them heading away. Away from the slums, away from the city, into the countryside so they could demolish the farms and spew a sea of asphalt over the fields. Leaving the towns and all they stood for only to repeat their mistakes over and over again, forever.

After a while he was approaching the coast. He looked out upon the waves and saw the floating tyres and the washed up bodies of sea birds and fish. He watched the smoke slowly rise from oil rigs in the far distance, and the oily barges sliding past and underneath the bridge. He climbed up the embankment towards that great steel and concrete megalith and eventually reached a walkway - a quarter of a mile long and begging to be traversed.

He walked halfway across the bridge, reading the graffiti written by the countless nameless, jobless, hopeless teenagers and felt for the first time that he belonged. The silent majority, the underdogs of society. All he had worked for, all his qualifications were just pieces of paper floating by on the wind. For now he was just the same as the junkies in the park, and the single mothers and the thieves and the underclass. And he vowed never to return.

1.8 Rendezvous

R e n d e z v o u s

"It's been a long time," said Dan, after a lengthy silence. Each of us studied each of the others. Taking in every last detail, half remembering the good times of the past. I wondered if we still knew each other.

Ten years is a long time to go without seeing somebody. Friends become strangers as strangers replace your friends. Looking at the three of us now, compared to the three of us then, I could no longer pinpoint what made us click.

"So where have you all been?" asked Pete. Neither Dan or myself replied immediately. As always, each of us were waiting for the

others to answer. I always thought friends should know when to speak and when to be silent but we never did. Had ever really been friends at all or just three emotionally repressed individuals clinging to each other as we tried to climb the slippery slope to adulthood?

Dan had never been a decision maker so it was me who spoke first - I remembered only too well the times we'd planned to go out and he'd spent the days beforehand checking and double-checking the time and place. I often wondered how he would fit into "University life". He'd always seen "University" as being something that assured you of a well-paid job, a family and a nice car. He'd never looked beyond that, but why should he?

"I've been around," I said, inexplicably avoiding expressing myself. I felt that I had a "mystique" to keep up. God knows why. "What happened to you?"

"I'm married now," Dan said. I knew that - Pete had been his best man. I hadn't been invited to the wedding. It was just a simple register office affair about five years ago. Not long before that we'd all lost touch. Or at least I had.

"And I'm working as an Analytical Engineer.", he continued.

Analytical Engineer. Everything I'd expected him to be, everything I'd spent my life not wanting to become. I turned to Pete.

"I've just got another job as a record producer. I've got a couple of hot projects coming up!" he enthused.

I'd often envied Pete. Despite his perceived immaturity at school he'd always had ambition. He'd failed to get into University the first time round, but instead took a year out. In that year he matured immensely and became self-motivated and in charge of his future. Me, I'd decided by the age of fifteen I wasn't going to waste my life on exams and learning. I didn't see the point any more. I'd half-expected to be dead by eighteen, anyway.

"That's good, well done, guys," I said, forcing the words from my mouth. My mind had already decided that I should have done what Pete did and it was punishing me for it. Why? The damage had already been done.

I pondered that that was how I'd spent my whole life. Waiting for somebody else to take my opportunities then immediately regretting it. Envy never did me any good but I still let it take me over.

It suddenly struck me that Pete and Dan weren't such strangers as I'd assumed. They'd probably been in touch with each other all this time. I had only bumped into them by chance: wandering around a now unfamiliar part of town looking for something to take my mind off the world. They were just /there/, standing by the bar in a near deserted pub on a rainy Monday lunchtime.

I hadn't recognised them at first. They'd recognised me. I thought it was an act of God, a twist of fate making us all meet for the first time since we were teenagers. Now we were all in our late twenties and rushing headlong into middle age. Or at least I was. They were both doing just fine, as always. I wondered if Pete had tied the knot with his childhood sweetheart yet. I made a bet with myself that he had.

"So are you still screwing Janet then, Pete?"

He coughed, and reddened slightly. "Yeah. We're engaged."

/Quelle Surprise!/ Trust Dan to still have some element of "normality" left. What was I going to do now? All my one-time friends were pairing off and becoming upwardly mobile bores. I noticed a mobile phone in Pete's inside pocket. He'd probably left it hanging out to attract attention to it. Dan's wedding ring

latched itself onto my eyes and I couldn't stop looking at it for a long while.

"Did you see Paul on TV the other day?" asked Pete. I shook my head, remembering Paul's numerous failed attempts at breaking into the art world. Undoubtedly he was a TV presenter or something, earning six-figure sums of money for doing bugger all. I didn't watch TV any more.

I wasn't far from the truth. Pete told me how Paul had just sold a painting for twenty-thousand pounds. I almost passed out.

Once I had been paranoid and nearly destroyed everything I'd been working towards. The only person who nearly got to the root of the problem was Pete. We wandered around a deserted park for an hour, both of us trying to escape the tedium of sixth form life. Both of us rejecting the "party and study" atmosphere and swearing to do neither. Yet both of us succumbed in the end. He often half-heartedly talked of the pointlessness of existence not knowing I had first hand experience of it. For a fleeting second I had considered telling him everything, validating the advice I was giving him but the moment had passed and still nobody knew my darkest secrets. Besides, I didn't want him to think I was just an idocentric moaner.

Once I would have been able to talk to Dan, but he and I had been growing apart for years before we lost touch. He was intent on keeping himself to himself and so was I - hardly the basis for a trusting relationship between friends. He liked his secrets. In fact, he always used to spend half of his time making sure that all but one of our "gang" didn't mention specific "things" to that person. Usually somebody who wouldn't have cared less if it hadn't warranted being kept under wraps. Usually me.

Realising my mind was rushing towards paranoia for the first time since my youth I tried to reassert myself by changing tack.

"Remember when you first took a lass to the cinema?" I asked Pete.

"Arse!" he laughed. I had taken it upon myself to wait for him to leave and embarrass him on his first date. I felt it was the least I could do as a friend.

Dan stared at me and then Pete.

"You two never changed, did you?"

We were giggling like a couple of teenagers. Dan used to be the worst offender. You only had to /mention/ a swear word and he was having raptures. Now he was a "scientist". No doubt he was still in touch with Keith, the school's "Oxford Student". I wondered if he had found life there are difficult as we had all enviously hoped he would. I bore a huge grudge against him, mainly because if I had chosen to /work/ in the sixth form instead of complaining about my own inadequacies and sitting around with a guitar in my hand hoping to become a pop star, that would have been /me/. I had once been the "top swot" at school until I had been marked down as a "gifted student". The feeling of embarrassment and patronisation at being singled out never died down. When Keith was finally "chosen" to join the "gifted students" (almost a year after me, as I had once taken pleasure in boasting) he took it as the incentive it was meant to be.

Pete took a sip of his drink. Pete, the one who used to go to parties and drink all of /two pints/ much to my amusement.

Dan, whose over-protective mother only let him out after ten O'clock when he first got a girlfriend at seventeen, was getting a pen out of his jacket.

"We'll have to keep in touch. What's your number?"

"I'm not on the telephone," I lied. He would never have rung me

anyway, except perhaps to invite me to his wedding. I could see myself sitting in a pew on my own, watching him fumble through his vows, watching Pete, his best man, grinning inanely at him, the two of them sharing a joke, undoubtedly at my expense. An unholy gathering of everyone I thought I used to know, the ones Dan assured me in the sixth form I would "really miss after a bit." The ones who he thought would miss me. Of course this wasn't true. For the next three years while they whiled away their hours on "dissertations" and cramming in last minute revision for "finals" I'd been sat at a computer, alone, writing hundreds of thousands of unpublished words, whiling away /my/ time on writing reports and studying for exams in a hundred and one "training" schemes.

As I stood up and left the pair of them for the final time I almost turned back and told them about everything that had happened to me as a teenager, while we were simultaneously friends and virtual strangers. I almost told them how I had predicted the paths of their lives almost perfectly and how I used to vow I would never take the route in life that was expected of me. But I changed my mind because the truth hurt.

We'd all ended up exactly the same in the end.

1.9 Morning Glory

M o r n i n g G l o r y

7.28 AM. Semi darkness, semi awake. His mind wanders.

"It gets you eventually. Everyone, no matter how much you kid yourself, kid others: You'll succumb in the end and you will /change/. Maybe you'll 'grow up', maybe you'll turn into a gibbering child. Maybe you'll unlock previously hidden areas of your mind. Maybe you'll lose your creative instincts altogether. You've spent your whole life wanting it, and when it stops you'll spend the rest of your life wishing you could still get it. Maybe you're better off without it, you think, but maybe you're wrong. You're dying for it and you're worried you'll be the only person in the world to die a virgin."

He turns over onto his back, trying to avoid crushing himself on the way.

"They say your testosterone levels are highest in the morning. Do you think they're right...? Well, it certainly looks like it... 'Up' early this morning, eh?"

He realises his head hurts.

"Headache? Over celebrating last night? No. Drowning your sorrows, perhaps. That was the best chance you've had and you wasted it, didn't you. Another half an hour and you'd have been in her knickers for sure."

He shakes his head, trying to get the unwanted thoughts out of his head. A record he heard yesterday is going around and around in his

head, in perfect stereo.

"Why did you have to act like such a twat? Why does shouting and swearing and laughing and singing and acting confident always have to be so important? Why do you have to hide away from yourself? Why did you walk back after bowling a strike in ecstasy, look her in the eyes then walk away and sit with your head in your hands, wondering, hoping. You've got to help yourself. No other fucker's going to waste their time on you."

The distant sound of a dog barking hits his ears, and he almost climbs out of bed. Then the voice starts to speak again.

"Of course, she wouldn't really be interested, anyway. No way. She was too attractive, too tall. Wouldn't want to provoke her boyfriend, would you. You're only acting like this because your he has beaten you to it. You don't want to accept what you are. You laugh at those who have found happiness but only to cover up your hatred. You're jealous. You're jealous and you can't take it. You can't fucking take it that you really /are/ what you think you are. You have become what you always knew you were but tried to pretend you weren't. You sad, sad, sad bastard."

Vaguely, he wonders if everyone else hears the voice, if everyone else hates themselves as much as his mind does.

"They all think you're such fun, don't they. But it backfires, doesn't it. It's so easy to hide behind a frivolous mask that your true self is lost forever. It's all very well being quick-witted, always the first to find humour in a situation, always happy to shout daft words and act like an idiot but what do you do when you're alone, other than regret it. You don't seem serious so they don't treat you as if you are. And then you wonder why they never tell you anything. Why should they - as far as they're concerned you don't give a shit. You'd probably just laugh at them. You're a fucking waste."

His arm is trapped under his body and he can't feel it properly. He moves it. The sheets move with his body, sticking to his sweat-dampened legs.

"Kill yourself. It's easy. You've got a knife hidden under your bed. Just a few cuts and it'll all be over. It didn't hurt the last time, and you only have to cut a little bit deeper and you won't feel a thing. Kill yourself. Go on, teach them a lesson."

A droning vacuum cleaner pierces the whistling silence.

"Or are you just going to lie back like that and toss yourself off, you don't want to waste a good opportunity, do you?"

Almost audibly, he tells his mindvoice to fuck off. The clock reads 7.30. He lets out a deep breath through his nose. Somebody walks into the room, climbs into his bed, kisses him softly.

At 11.30 he wakes up.
Alone.
