

The Free

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Act One

Chapter One

Smashing my Aquarium

-‘*A big, wet, pouting, splash of a kiss..*’-

Linda

I should’ve known what he was up to all right but I hadn’t a clue. It was easy enough to see what he fancied in her. That Janice was a real beauty. Besides being a stuck up bitch.

She used to have fellas queuing up to go out with her. I suppose we were a bit jealous. But sooner or later she’d tell all of them to drop dead. Which only spurred them on more, men being what they are. There were a whole gang of them in our school had their eye on Janice. Like a pack of randy dogs sniffing after her.

But my dad wasn’t one of them. When he took a fancy to Janice he swept her off her feet. You wouldn’t believe the nerve of the old bastard, and him married with four kids. Of which I, Linda, was the oldest, being about fifteen at the time.

Maybe I loved and feared him so much I was blind to his faults. But this time I couldn’t close my eyes.

It all began one day I was walking back to school after the dinner break. It’s a big wide road and windy, and the rain was beginning again. Rubbish and dust blowing. A few old cars and air-vans whizzing by, and the wide road as grey as the sky.

Well, didn’t I come by the corner shop. There were a crowd of girls milling about and inside sheltering. It was half dark in there, the electricity was cut off again.

And there was stuck up Janice herself coming out. And she done up to the nines.

Looking down her snooty nose at our tatty uniforms.

Just because she worked in a fancy hairdresser’s.

Just at that moment didn’t a car pull in by the shop.

Pulls up. And in hops Janice.

-‘*Hey look at Janice going off with your dad!*’- said Fiona from my class.

-‘*You’re asking for a slapping!*’- I warned.

There were girls pushing out of the shop. And I staring.

-‘*I wonder does he pay her.*’- said Beatrice, loudly. -‘*Look look!*’-

-‘*Shut your gob my father never would...*’-

My dad and Janice were embracing.

It couldn't be. But it was.
Hot flushes started rushing up my body but I couldn't stop staring.

And just before that air car hissed away,
didn't she slip her elegant hands up his saggy cheeks,
a brown arm gliding snakelike round his stringy neck.

As she kissed him on the mouth..
Rolling her big eyes back at us girls.
A big, wet, pouting, splash of a kiss in the mouth. And him responding.

She knew we were watching of course. And she was laughing!
The girls started squealing and cheering.
But I was ashamed and shocked. Hiding my scarlet face in my long fair hair.
Then they started to hoot and laugh at me.
So I took to my heels, and ran off down the street.
As the thunder clapped and it began to rain.

I'd never hear the end of it, I was mortified. It may not seem much to you, but such scandal would zoom round and round our area. Like a bee in a jar. I was in a state of shock, running the wrong way down that road.

I had the idea that my father was great. It's true he *did* shout and roar and get drunk. But I was his own big girl.

It's also true that he *would* always cuddle and pet me, and my mum would go mad. I used to hide my face in my hair and blush. Getting waves of panic if he didn't stop.

Like what happened when Pado tried to dance touching me at the Clan Disco and I nearly choked.

But I still believed my dada was the best. For me he'd always been the bee's knees. And I didn't dare doubt it

Now with just one jokey kiss, Janice had smashed the nice aquarium I lived in.

When I thought about my marvelous father now I felt quite queasy. So I stopped running and I walked. And I walked right round the block. Because I was afraid of arriving back at school early, of getting jeered and laughed at by the others.

I took it hard, my father getting off with Janice. And the whole of my youth took on a different light in a flash. I arrived at the school gates before I knew it. And stopped. Afraid to go in and afraid to be late.

I hated that school, and I hated the gossiping girls. And for the first time I began to hate my dad.

One thing I was *very* good at was hating. I was a bad girl, a menace, and a mischief maker and I screamed and fought back since I was a baby. My brother was bad as well. If I got in a panic I would do anything. The worse the better! And as for my folks.. My mum and dad got on like an almighty riot.

I hated that Sister Bernadette and she hated me. I'd have to bite my tongue when she gave out stink, to stop myself getting up and throttling her!

Well my feet carried me through them big black gates all right. But I felt sick and it seemed like my life was crashing down, like the thunder grumbling behind me. There was a big lump hurting my throat, and I was muttering to stop myself blubbing

When I got to the class it had already started, and the lights had come back on. I didn't even bother knocking and walked straight in.

It was cold and grotty up there and it smelt bad. There were ninety six girls and boys in our class, in theory. But lots were absent, or off doing Clan projects. The State couldn't pay the teachers, and Sister Bernie had come back as a marvelous selfless volunteer.....

-*'Excuse me please.'*- I shouted aggressively, heading for my seat.

Sister Bernadette glanced me daggers, flashing her ratlike eyes. She had Trishia Connors up reciting poetry at the time. That woman spotted that I was in bits from right up front, and she seized her chance.

-*'Next, Linda Moon.'*- she announced happily.

Now one thing I was proud of was my memory, and I never forgot anything. That is if I bothered to look at it at all. But this day I stopped short. And my mind went blank with fright. It was stupid really, like everything in school. We learned off all this poetry without understanding a word of it.

Now instead of a line of lofty poetry I got flashes of my father spanking me. Sister Bernie prompted me. I said a line.

But I couldn't come up with the next.

She used to come down with a ruler, and whack with the edge on the knuckles. They weren't allowed to hit us of course, but wonderful Sister Bernie had come out of retirement to save our souls,

and she was doing *three* classes in one. It was a rare treat for her to catch me and down she came. -*'Whack, whack.'*- and me stammering and starting to cry.

-*'Again, again from the start.'*-

And I had to start again, it was groaning brutal.

Well, I was a lovely big girl for my age, as my dad used to say. And Sister Bernie was a short shriveled woman. I made two of her.

And me coughing and sniveling and stopping, while the others were enjoying my terror. And now I was feeling sick. But I didn't dare say it.

Then it happened, I can see it now. What a shocking horror.

I gasped and I felt it coming and I couldn't stop it. And she ..*whack*.. underneath.

I coughed once and ..*whoosh*.. like a bleeding yellow volcano.

I puked on poor Sister Bernie, on her hair and down her habit.

And a bit on Rosaleen and all over the desk. I was only after eating my dinner.

But why didn't I just turn my head and miss her? I'm still not sure *sure* that I didn't vomit on her on purpose.

Sister Bernie squawked and Rosaleen screeched and ran for the door. I was still sobbing and choking.

She had to half drag me out of the class. Even the big bad Clanners were dumb with horror.
I thought she might explode. Her face went purple red.
Bits of meat and potato in her hair and down her neck.
It was only after that I saw anything funny in it. But all the rest, excepting Rosaleen, thought it was brilliant. They used to jeer and sneer at - *'Sister Barf'* - behind her back.
My cruel classmates put the mockers on her.

Sometimes I still feel guilty for vomiting on my teacher. And when I'm really bad I still need to be punished for it.
A wretched sinner who spewed vile puke on a retired nun.
They always have their hooks inside your head.

She marched me down the corridors to the sick room, I was shaking with shock, and she with fury. She sat me down in a chair, and began to clean herself off with paper towels. Giving me a roasting all the time.

- *'Get up off that chair Linda Moon.'* - says she. But I wasn't listening. - *'Get up you dirty little brat!'* -

She went to give me a slap. But I turned my head at the same instant. And she hit me smack in the eye.
- *'Go to hell!'* - I yelled, half blinded.
- *'Now we hear it'* - she said - *'Now we hear the filth coming out.'* - She was spreading vomit down her face with a paper towel.
- *'You touch me again'* - I said. - *'And I'll break your horrible neck.'* -
- *'You'll suffer for this,'* - she spluttered. - *'You and your thieving brother and your stupid whoring father. And get that idiot grin off your face, I'll...'* -

She was going to slap me again. But I lifted my arm. I had risen out of the chair before I knew it, brushing her blow aside.

She stepped back. Her face suddenly white, as I let fly a punch to her face. Hurting my hand on her solid bony nose.

I was hopping with pain - *'ow ow'* - as I watched her totter.
Sister Bernadette fell back on her bottom.
I stood there staring, paralyzed and sucking my knuckles. And just watched, as she half crawled, half ran out of the room.
Gibbering threats and clutching her bleeding nose
Oh my god.. Maybe I'd killed a saint!

I'm sorry I hit her. At least I'm sorry I hit her to defend the family name. Especially as she was telling the truth.

I did it because I'm bad down deep inside.

* * *

As I say, I just watched her go, dead calm, like in a dream, and I watched myself walk to the basin. Splash cold water on my face and my sore fist. Dabbing at a blotch on my skirt with a wet towel. Then walking through the open door. Down the dark paneled corridor. Out the front door, past the big board listing Head Students.

My feet went crunch crunch down the graveled drive, like a zombie late for lunch. That's how I react when I do something shocking. I never turned my head and no one followed. . Just as I was

coming to the door, hoping it would be open, I noticed that the entire iron gates had disappeared.

I heard this shout from behind me.

-*Linda Moon come back here!*- The Headmistress yelled.

But I didn't turn a hair, just kept walking... -*Crunch, crunch.*'-. down the drive. Then again.

-*Come back here this minute!*- She commanded. -*Right now. Or you'll be expelled from The School.*'-

I felt the eyes of half the school, gawking down from the classrooms at my back. And I knew those kids were dying to giggle with glee.

Then a rush of joy flushed through me, thinking I'd done something good after all.

So I stooped and snatched up a bunch of the first precious yellow daffodils, which grew there under an oak tree by the gates which weren't there. I turned around.

Dancing and whirling, waving the flowers at the old grey building.

Till I was *sure* my yellow knickers showed.

White faces gaping at the windows..The head right out the door.

Then a hop and a skip, and around the corner laughing.

* * *

The black clouds were hanging, lower and heavier, and the hills had vanished.

My jacket was back in the school but why should I care.

I had the conviction right then that I'd left that school forever. Maybe I was right.

See I was born just too soon to go to the De-School, I'd never get to learn like the Clanners, doing projects they chose for themselves. ***[glossary and ref 10 deschooling]***

That school didn't work. Even the teachers knew it. They were just putting in the hours and hadn't been paid in months. Upset and all irate because their retirement scheme had crashed. That school might close down soon at any rate.

It just didn't click for most of us girls. And for messed up kids like me it was worst of all.

If they didn't throw me out they'd have to drag me back roaring.

I stuffed the flowers in the bus stop bin, what a waste, and walked quickly up the road.

Glancing behind me and obsessing with my father.

Then I thought maybe I was wrong about him,

Wasn't he always chatting up girls, and he was just giving Janice a lift, and what harm really. Of course. *He was great.* And she had just kissed and cuddled him to start more nasty gossip.

And I swore revenge.

But I thought I might as well check up, Crafty bitch that I am. So I went into Devenney's shop and looked up the Bottle Factory and Maxine's Hair Salon in their phone book. They let me use the phone coz I said I was sick, and I tapped out the first number

-*No, its Miss Martin's afternoon off.*-

Then I rang the factory and, sure enough,

-*Sorry Mr. Moon takes a half day off on Tuesdays.*-

Well that was proof enough for me. But funny enough I felt better then, and pleased with myself. Thinking how I could trip him up and all, not that I would ever dare.

I pulled some leaves off a garden hedge and threw them up into the wind.

I'd like to say I couldn't care two drops of diarrhea what he done. But that would be a sinful lie.

I thought I loved him then. He had me in his power, like a mouse being toyed with by a tom cat. Okay I was a bit paranoid. Often imagining him behind me, and glancing back to check. .

And the nun, the girls, my brother, my mother, Those skinhead Hoods.. All chanting in my head that I was bad. Bad and guilty as sin.

I never dared think before that, about *why* I was so scared. Only now, walking glumly from that school, did the questions come.

Why did I have to provoke my dad? Why was I bad? Why was it me got caught copying? When everybody did it. Why did they have to pick on me? Like a flock of hens, pecking an injured chick.

They'd reported me to my mother, who blackmailed me and finally sneaked to my dad anyway.

And why did my father enjoy so much punishing me? Slapping my bare bottom till it stung.

I was crossing the nearly deserted Bayford Road where you're not allowed. The traffic lights were dead anyway, so why walk round?..

About the short skirts scandal, here's the truth. Some Clanner girls changed our yukky medieval uniform.

They would pull up their skirts at the waist, under their regulation blue woollies. So they rode up high, round their sexy thighs. Instead of just drooping under their boring knees.

Provoking a ferocious scandal and a shocking rumpus in the school.

Of course who but Linda Moon was branded behind my back as a raging pervert. Contaminating *pure girls*, god help me, with thoughts of *fornication*.. Just coz they thought I was laughing at them. I never even had a boyfriend

Killian Bate had said I was a slut, and *he* was the *Supremo* of the Young Hoods.

Through the flats and into our nice little street. I was arriving home at the wrong time and quite mixed up.

I had adored and feared my dad, if you know what I mean. I had to believe in him.

Because the sun and the moon and all of the stars shone out of his arsehole.

I was lying to myself, that's all, it was obvious now.

I'd done it for years but Janice changed all that.

With one big sexy kiss she gave my dad.

* * *

Chapter Two

Linda leaves home.

-‘Don’t be naughty, little darling, don’t be bad.’-

Linda

I was thinking bad stuff. When I got home any good humour had long gone. In I went by the side door. Just a bit wet and heading for my bed.

But there was me Ma in the spotless little kitchen feeding the baby. And there was Mrs. Geraty from down the road drinking tea.

If anyone thinks I got any sympathy from my mother they’re much mistaken. Such a mean faced back biting hypocrite was never seen in the street before nor since. We fought like cats and dogs, me and her. Though you’d have to pity her sometimes.

-‘Linda. What are you doing out of school?’- she demanded as I came in the door.

-‘Nothing mum, Sister Bernadette sent me home sick.’-

-‘Sick!’- She glanced triumphantly at Mrs. G. *-‘Sick! You’re no more sick than the Devil himself! Where did you get that red face child and don’t be telling me lies.’-*

*-‘I **am** sick.’-* I protested, sitting down and starting to cry.

-‘Stop that sniveling girl!’- says she. Yanking me out of the chair.

You can’t trick my mum for a millisecond. She’s quicker than a fox, and she was shaking me like a rabbit. So I had to tell her, like, that I vomited on Sister Bernadette, and hit her back and all, and ran out of the school... Oof!

When she heard that she flew off into her temper. Roaring and giving out kilometers. Such a litany of griefs! And old Mrs. G nodding away, her red nose dripping in her tea.

How all her children turned out bad and herself old with worry and us a living disgrace, and Sister Bernie a saint, and Danny and Frances caught robbing and her cross to bear...

And now me destroying the good name and four children to rear, and how she dare not show her face in the street for shame..

And little Kathy wailing all the while...

She was raging all right. Once in a while she’d snort like a stabled heifer, and give me a shake. Then off she would go again. When she got like this there was no way of stopping her, so I just lay over the table, pretending to cry. And getting madder and madder myself.

So what happens next? Oh hell, I hardly dare tell it. Didn't she start going on about my dad, you know... Him slaving away all his life to bring us up respectable, and the Sacred Heart of Jahzus, and he a real credit, having risen to Assistant Sales Manager in the Bottle Factory. Though now he was being made redundant.

And the likes of me and Danny, lying and stealing and, Lord have mercy upon us, barfing up over a nun! And - *'Wait till your dad gets back from work and hears about this.'*- and - *'To be sure he'll give you a lathering.'*- and so on and some such crap.

If she knew what I'd seen that day she'd never have started going on about my dad!

Now all this time Mrs. Geraty was sitting at the end of the table, supping her tay, and nodding a bit. And me getting more and more desperate.

Next thing her flabby jaws went tight. Her runny eyes went bright. And you could almost see her prick up her fleshy old ears.

With the baby screeching louder, if that were possible.

Because at that moment I *did* get up off the chair, and me wagging my finger over my mother. I was bigger than her even then.

- *'Don't be telling me lies about my father.'*- I menaced. - *'You know well he's not at work. And he's never at work on a Tuesday afternoon.'*-

- *'Stop that, Linda.'*- she said. Taken aback.

- *'Your precious man'*- I sneered sarcastically. - *'Went off this afternoon with the famous Janice Martin. And if you don't believe me you can ring up and check!'*-

- *'Wh what.'*- she said again, leaning on the table.

And I knew from her face it was true and had happened before. And she knew I knew. But didn't know what to say. She was stuck for words, my Ma, for the first time ever.

And so was I. It was over. We could've gone to each other and hugged and comforted each other then.

- *'Oh mama.'*- I said, sniffing.

Then Mrs. Geraty moved. My mother's head jerked sideways like a trap.

- *'Liar.'*- she bellowed. - *'Liar.'*- she shrieked. - *'Get out of my kitchen girl or I'll massacre you.'*-

Then she had lifted a glass from the table and it crashed in smithereens on the black door closing behind me.

While little Kathy nearly screamed her head off.

What a day. I ran straight up to me and Frances' room, slammed the door behind me, threw myself down on the bed and cried and cried. I don't know what my mother said to Mrs. Geraty, but I knew she was stuck in a corner.

What I said was the truth, but to say it in front of that mouth Mrs. G was something like high treason. I was sorry I said it too, and I just lay there a while feeling bad and brutal. I pulled up the blankets round me, it was freezing in that room, and thought of all that had happened and sniffled some more and half dozed off.

When I woke up I could hear my Dad's voice and plates clattering, so I knew they were having tea. But I wouldn't go down. I could hear the kids and my Mum and Dad shouting and I strained to hear. I heard my name, Linda, but I couldn't make out the words.

Then my heart jumped up in my throat and I cowered down into the bed. I could hear my dad, it had to be him.

Coming nearer, plodding louder, up and up the stairs.

I felt such a terrible attack of panic I nearly peed in the bed.

Pulling over the covers so I could just peep out. Hoping he was going to the bathroom.

But then the door banged open and in he walks.

As bold as a copper and smiling.

So I guessed with relief that my mother hadn't told him, like, that we knew about Janice.

And what about Sister Bernie? My poor mum was afraid of him an all.

- 'Hullo there me little flower.'- says he. And me pretending to sleep.

He staggered slightly, and sat down panting on the side of the bed.

Wrenching the bedclothes back off me.

He's a big man with a puffy red face, always badly shaven.

But where I used to think his jowls were manly, they now looked disgusting. And where I used to think his thinning hair distinguished. It now looked greasy and rotting.

- 'Are y'all right luv.'- he went on. His sweaty hand caressing my face.

- 'I'm sick.'- I said. *- 'Leave me alone.'*-

- 'Did you have a bad day at school.'- he cooed pathetically.

Hauling me up like sack and examining my red cheek in the half light. Blowing stale beery breath in my face. I was still terrified of crossing him. Only now suddenly I didn't love him anymore.

- 'I'll get that nun for this. I'll call the cops.. I'll, I'll set the Brother-Hood on her.'-

- 'No, Da please, no please, I hit her too.'-

Then he took me in his arms, pulling me close, and patted me.

I was suffocating and sucking for air. And he crooning and rocking me.

And belching so his stomachs lurched and wobbled.

- 'You're all right Linda my darling. You're all right.'-

He was patting my back, his sticky hand in my blouse.

And his other elbow jiggling at my tits, the big randy bastard.

Maybe Janice wouldn't have him?..

Janice had refused him. That was it!

I saw through my father now all right and I was getting angry. But I couldn't breathe, I was wimpy as a kitten in his power.

- 'You're all right, my lovely girly, you're all right.'-

- 'Let me go.'- I gasped, struggling feebly, but he cackled.

- 'You're all right my little darling.'- says he again with a squeeze.

And his hairy hand fell down between my legs.

For a minute I done nothing. I was so shocked at his bleeding nerve. Gripping me and starting to rub me.

Then I remembered suddenly he had done it before when I was little.

And I remembered more...

Oh crap..no no.
That's why I was so scared, and didn't dare ever think bad of him.
I couldn't blank it out any more, my heart was bursting with anguish!
I suppose he thought that he would excite me, and he was right!
My breath came back, I struggled, but he held me hard and laughed.
- 'Don't be naughty, little darling, don't be bad.' -

I started to panic and screech, like I was taking a fit.
- 'Shut up you bitch.' - he hissed, shaking me. And his other hand clamped over my mouth.
But I was past shutting up. At last. Twisting my head
I bit right into his hand! Oh yuk, like an uncooked chicken.
And I squawked and yelled again.
As he hit me, an unmerciful wallop across the head. I didn't even see it coming.
All I remember is sliding to the floor, and my head ringing, like a faraway fire engine. And my mother calling up the stairs and he was gone.
Well I've been hit before. Many's the time before and since. But when that pig hits you can't forget so quick. I crawled back to the bed and leaned against it. Dizzy and shaking. And I wouldn't have bothered getting up.
Only for the hate and shame and fury boiling over inside of me!

I got to my feet and staggered into the bathroom. Locked the door and sat down on the jacks, my head still spinning. Then I mopped my face, there was no blood, just a red mark. I would have a black eye swelling. But it wasn't my father's blow that really hurt me.

After that I got a fag out of my secret hiding place, and I lit it up right then and there, though I was wheezing a bit. Why should I care? And I sucked it in, hard, my hand was jittering with shock.

Janice had smashed a hole in my private aquarium, and I got washed right out
Finally I had to remember.
Sitting dressed on the toilet.
That my dear old dad had abused me all my life.
My idol was a monster.
Sometimes he got excited hurting and terrorizing me.
And he did it again and again.
Kidding himself that I enjoyed it too.

I could hear my mother talking... The clatter of dishes...
I'd been terrified of wrecking our family .
...the tap dripping...
Silent and compliant and blinding myself...
...sniffing and stifling my tears...
Now I couldn't deny it. Now it wasn't all my fault.
..the television blaring downstairs...
I couldn't just blank it out and go down for tea
NOT ANY MORE.
So I pe eked out of the bathroom and tippy toed down the creaky stairs.

Kathy was yelling for grub and banging her spoon.

And straight out the front door, clicking it quietly behind me. It was still light. Out I went.

One last groan from the broken gate, where Scamp lay gnawing on a bone.

And off, my feet slapping on the path.

Both ways were the same to me, my poor head throbbing like a train.

It was great GREAT to get out of that house.

* * *

Chapter Three

Linda is Maxie Moon

-*'Running through that suddenly golden snow.'*-

Linda — Maxie

I didn't want to go back so I just walked on. On and on, down the abandoned canal. It was freezing cold, you'd think it was mid winter. I was wishing vaguely that I'd brought my coat.

But I didn't care really, till it started to rain.

By the time I got to the bridge it was really coming down, almost snowing. So I turned right, out of the bitter east wind, and mingled with the people and the traffic. Everyone was rushing or queuing.

I was cold and hurt and going nowhere. And it was no evening for strolling.

Flashes of my rotten father. Gripping me hard and laughing at my pain.

-*'Sit up here on my lap dear. Just relax..*

Don't be naughty. Don't be silly. Don't be bad.'-

His puffy cheeks. Those faces, strange and savage, pushing past me. I could picture him laughing with his mates, the Brother-Hood of Concerned Citizens, sure he would send their skinhead thugs after me.

The lights reflected. Revealing and blinding. Wailing sirens near and far away..

I came to a CoOp Club and walked in boldly. The lekky was cut off again, it was dark, with lamps and candles, and there were even kids in there. I hid in the jacks for a while, then pronounced myself fit, and found a stool in the corner.

Just watching the pool players preparing their shots. Their faces would screw up with concentration. Then *click, clack*, and *plop* in the hole. And on to the next ball.

Ignoring everyone and hiding my damaged face behind my wet hair. Perched over the radiator like a boiling fowl. The steam rising off of me.

I wouldn't go home. *I'd die first*. But where could I go that they'd never guess? I thought of this fella Barney who used to promote our summer play schemes with the Pools. And he used to help kids

in trouble with the law and that. No good. I didn't know where he lived.. Barney Maguire.. But I knew where his sister lived, and I knew...

Next thing I was up and out the door, running through the wet snow to the chipper where I could phone, I didn't have a mobile then.. It was just getting really dark.

And as I ran a yellow street lamp came flickering on.
Turning the dirty wet sleet into swirling clouds of gold.
It's an image I'll always remember, running in that suddenly golden snow.

* * *

-*'Are you okay?'*- asked Barney. As the car almost stalled, and pulled away, clattering like an old fridge.

-*'I thought you weren't coming.'*-

-*'I had to borrow this jalopy.'*- He glanced at me sideways, his hair was dripping wet. -*'Will I run you back home then?'*-

-*'No, please Barney no no.'*- says I -*'Not now, I'm quite okay.'*-

But I was feeling a bit dizzy, so I just put my head on my knees and stared into the starry darkness. The little electric car whirred, in and out some side streets.

And before I could get my head straight we arrived.

-*'Come on up and get warm then.'*- says he. -*'You're in a woeful state.'*-

So I fumbled with the handle, and got out into a puddle.

Then I saw the grey block, and hung back in the lashing slushy rain.

-*'Come on.'*- He took my hand in his. -*'You know me, I won't touch you I swear.'*-

I followed him up the big wide steps, looking about, flat footed and guilty. Like a kid who's after falling in the canal.

Then he had opened the huge door, into the high hall and up the empty stairs. Leaving wet footprints behind me. Clutching my wet cigarettes and matches in my dirty red hand.

Then I thought -*'This is the beginning of my new life!'*-

I looked up, and there were strips of wallpaper and plaster hanging out of the ceiling. We came at last to a door marked 13 and went in.

It was warm and bright inside. Posters and books and mess everywhere.

A dirty orange carpet and a radio playing.

* * *

There I sat, in Barney's baggy clothes, reviving the scrapwood fire. Supping sweet coffee with a drop of whiskey in it and feeling quite recovered. The flat was a dump, he'd only recently moved in, but at least it was brightly painted and cozy.

Barney sat down, in an armchair leaking stuffing.

The chair not him.

-*'So what are you going to do?'*- says he. And I looked back square into his dark eyes.

-*'I'm going to get a job and a flat of my own.'*- I said.

He looked up at me quizzically, but said nothing.

-*'Listen I know you think I'm a silly girl, crying and everything. But I just had a bad day that's all.'*- Still he said nothing -*'I'm not going home, no way. My father will beat me up. My mother will skin me alive. If you'll just let me stay a few days I'll be all right.'*-

He raised his eyebrows still further.

-*'It's a small city. They'd probably track you down. How old are you anyway?'*-

-*'Nearly seventeen.'*- I lied.

-*'Come off it Lindy.'*-

-*'Oh shite.'*- I was thinking - *'He's going to throw me out.'*-

-*'Well I'm going to change my looks. I'll look quite different. You wouldn't recognize me I swear.'*-

I was getting desperate.

-*'I'll even cook for you!'*-

He laughed then, shaking his head.

-*'Listen first thing we'd better contact your dear parents and...'*-

-*'I'm not going back!'*- I squeaked. -*'There's nothing left can't you see?'*-

-*'I know. I know.'*- Barney raised both hands - *'Sure didn't I run away from home myself, some years back, and I didn't get battered.'*-

I put my hand to my face. It was starting to swell up.

I must've looked like a red balloon on a string.

But now I guessed I was winning.

-*'That was Sister Bernie my teacher, as well as my dad.'*- I said. -*'And I hit her back and all.'*-

-*'You had a fight with a nun?'*- He blew air..

I nodded, opening my blue eyes wide.

Cocked my head a little so my hair slid off my neck, sucked and parted my lips.

As cute as a hungry kitten, or so I hoped.

-*'Listen what I meant to say was this. Of course you can stay here a few days, and no obligations. And I won't mess around with you...'*-

-*'Yippee.'*- I was hugging him and hopping on his foot.

-*'Ow..ow.. Or better, I can find you a place to stay with friends, um. The CoOp Pool has a Runaways group; they're making up groups for the abandoned housing, um, this isn't the safest place in the world.'*-

-*'I'll stay with you. I'm here.'*-

-*'Wait and see, you could be in at the start of a brilliant consumer, producer, living collective.*

But we'll have to get in touch with your folks, and give them a really good excuse. Or they'll have half the country out looking for you.'-

-*'What can I say?'*- says I. But a good idea was flashing green in my head.

* * *

I guessed right about Barney all right. I had one idea and he had a better one. So we decided to try them both.

As we were talking a heavy *drip drip drip* began in the kitchen corner. It was lashing down outside.

-*'I'd really like to get some of my clothes and stuff.'*-

Barney was putting a plastic bucket under the leak. Which made it noisier.

-*'Can't you slip in when your folks are out?'*
 -*'Hairy Mary had a canary!'*- says I -*'Ma's nearly always home. And the half the street will be looking out for me. They're like that.'*
 -*'And your brothers and sisters?'*
 -*'Danny, yes, he'll help me. If I could talk to him.'*
 -*'Danny Green from the De-School? I think I know him, who did the sound gear for the Burndon CLAN gig up in the park? The last one.'*
 I was nodding eagerly -*'He's a wizard with the wires all right.'*
 I noticed Barney staring at me. I stared back in silence. Still dreading he'd throw me out. *Drip drip drip.* Then he decided.
 -*'How are you at keeping secrets Lindy?'*
 I crossed my heart, solemnly, and smiled as sweetly as possible.
 -*'I'm famous in the school for not telling.'*

He got up and dragged open the big wardrobe. A panel opened at the back. Then a wide shelf slid out of the wall between the coats. A shelf piled with papers and books, and a beat up computer screen.

-*'You can talk to your mother from here.'*- he said.
 -*'Oh good. You're on line.'*
 -*'Yeah, um, I'll show you.'*

Barney could dial out through this computer, and he did it for free...

-*'Hello Ma it's me Lindy.'*
 -*'Where are you? Why did you run out? Come back here this minute or...'*
 Her voice bellowed from a speaker. Barney looked scared. I was shaking.
 -*'L Listen to me please I...'*
 But she went on yelling so I waited for a break.

-*'Listen Ma. I'm staying in a Refuge. Just for a fortnight. Dad beat me up.'*
 -*'What? What are you telling me?'*
 -*'Listen to me a sec. I'm sorry I said that about Janice and Da okay. Can you hear me? I'm sorry okay...'*- I really did feel sorry about that.
 -*'So you should be. Mrs. G is telling the world and his wife. How dare you run out.. Come back here this minute or your father will beat the living daylight out of you girl.. Where are you now come back here this minute or you'll...'*
 -*'He can't hit me any more.'*- I shouted. -*'End of story. He tried to abuse and interfere with me.'*
 Finally finally finally. I'd just come out and said it.
 -*'What?..Don't you dare say that to anyone!'*
 -*'I'm staying in the Refuge okay. If dad sends the coppers after me I'll tell everything! I'm sorry, bye bye.'*

I put my hand over the microphone. Screwing my face against the shock and tears. But my mother kept on coming out a speaker on the wall. There was no stopping her!

I gave a shaky thumbs up to Barney.

He clicked the mouse just once on the -*'Stop It'*- box.

-*'Drip drippety drip drippety drop..'*- Went the plastic bucket.

That was it. I didn't know if I would laugh or cry so I started laughing anyway.
I even did a little jump for joy, avoiding his big feet.. And after that we phoned the neighbours.
I told Mrs. Mullen I was in a *Refuge for Abused and Beaten up Girls*. Course we counted on good Jenny Mullen to tell that to half the county.

Barney showed me how to send a message for my big bad brother Danny. We sent it to Freddy B, the sparky wizard in Danny's gang that Barney knew.

They got off on this secret stuff in the Burndon CLAN.

* * *

I was lying on the dirty carpet, trying to look at a magazine.
It seemed very late and my eyes blurred.
I stretched out my body in front of the hot little electric fire, twisted and yawned.
Throwing up my arms and hands.
Pleased with myself, and wriggling in the great woolly jumper.

My Dad would go mad of course but what could he do? Especially if the neighbours said he'd been abusing me. He'd lost his prize possession, and it served him right.

I yawned again and stretched.

Half stuck in the wardrobe, Barney was tapping away, furiously.

Next thing I must have dropped off because I vaguely remember him lifting me over to the bed.

Which was a rickety thing by the window.

Coaxing me into a sleeping bag, and turning off the light.

I lay there, now awake, my head throbbing and he still typing.

Staring at the cracks in the ceiling and the whole incredible day running over in my head.
When I closed my eyes I could see pictures, flashing like a video.

Repeating and repeating, like a TV Ad in my head.

A picture of Janice's arm sliding round my Dad's shoulders.

Her thick lips going out to kiss him, tongue sliding in and out, eyes rolling with glee. And a snap of my mother's mouth, stuck open, struck dumb for the first time ever.

Then poor Sister Bernie mouthing threats, and pinching her bleeding nose.

And my drunken father's yellow tobacco teeth, belching and drooling over my body.

Then one more flash of myself, running out to the phone.

Yelling. - 'Yes. Yes.' – in the suddenly golden snow.

I was going to sit up and tell Barney, but I was too lovely and warm.

And I must have blacked out then, being exhausted.

* * *

I knew there was something strange going on before I even opened my eyes. I blinked once, and saw these strange flowery curtains.

The dawn light coming through and they fluttering.

There was someone strange on the mattress behind me. And it wasn't my brother Frances.

Then I remembered everything in a rush. My heart jumped and my head buzzed.

I was free and alone in the world, scared and excited.

I had to think fast and make plans. I had lashed out at everyone and run away.

But I didn't care. I was glad. And I wouldn't go back. Not ever...

Only thing was I needed to see my friends, Mary and Keera.

There I lay in bed beside this Barney, but I was more thrilled than afraid. Lying back and thinking, half out of my bag.

Blowing up puffs of white warm air, towards the high cracked ceiling.

My whole life stretched out before me like an empty house.

For once in my life I was free, or anyhow I felt free, which is all that counts.

Like quitting a job you hate. Or passing out a prison gate.

First thing I needed was a haircut, and to dye my hair, brown or red?

Then I had to meet Danny and pick up my clothes and stuff.

In fact I needed different clothes...and money!...

Barney would just have to help me, that was all.

That big mound curled up beside me, like a giant hot water bottle with hair sticking out the top.

I lay there for a long time. My cheek on his warm brown arm like a big cat dreaming. And thinking how I might get work and a place to stay.

I thought I'd finally conquered my fear of touching men. Which was *much* too optimistic, as I soon found out.

But I felt like lying there forever.

My lips rubbing on his skin, his breath in my hair.

Our bodies rising and falling, like a calm summer sea.

It seemed exciting and dangerous, being in the bed beside him. Every now and then he'd snort in the pillow, like a sleepy pig.

After a while I moved a little closer. Or did he? Or did we? It's hard to tell.

So I could just get the warmth of his body.

And feel his heart. -*Thump, thump.*- And my own. -*Thump, thumpety, thump.*-

Till I giggled out loud and he half woke up, groaning and turning over. I didn't dare move.

He slipped his arm under me. Snuggled up close. And sighed and went back to sleep.

As I say, I didn't dare move. Hadn't he promised he wouldn't touch me? I started feeling scared and short of breath and getting desperate.

Wheezing like an asthmatic. I needed my inhaler under the pillow, but I didn't dare wake him by pulling away.

My heart leapt and my panic attack began

My father doesn't believe in panic attacks. Says they're just an excuse.
Well right then I really wanted NOT to have it.
It's noisy. It's messy. And it scares the shit out of anyone in sight.
That's when the alarm clock went off, real loud and Barney rolling out to stop it.
I grabbed my inhaler from under the pillow. Puffed and sucked, gratefully.
-*'I have to get up. There's someone calling for me at eight.'*-
When I saw him stand up, all hulky and naked, my gasps turned into giggles.
With his big long willy, bob bobbing about.
But what really got me was.. That thing was badly bent!

My giggles turned to little hoots. I couldn't stop.

It was -*'gotta-do-it'*- fashion then and now, to shave your personal parts.
And Barney's 'thingy' was *as bald and wrinkly as the long nosed lizard up in the Zoo*
But he must have been embarrassed all right.
Because he turned away quickly, hop hopping and struggling with his pants.
Then he tippy toed through the dirty cups and clothes, to put on the kettle and the fire.
While I controlled my laughter, Sniffing and wiping my eyes.
-*'You were talking in your sleep.'*- he said.
-*'Oh. What did I say?'*-
-*'Ah, just moaning like, and saying — 'No, No'- Like as if you were fighting off a flock of crocodiles.'*-
-*'That must have been my dad.'*- I said. And the panic nearly came rushing back..
-*'I'll probably be all day out.'*- says he -*'There's spare keys here if you're staying around.'*-
Just then someone banged on the door and two fellas walked straight in. It must have been unlocked.
I went to duck and hide, inside the sleeping bag. But it was too late.
-*'Hello, where did you spring from?'*- says one of them.
A bright red head of hair on him, and he grinning like a schemer.
-*'This is my mate, Peter the pirate, from Clan Orca. And this is Jerry, he's recently had to leave home as well, er. Lads, this is, um, a friend of mine. And you never saw her here okay.'*- He nodded then shook his head.
Peter crossed his heart, rolled his eyes and winked at me, mock solemn. Jerry had his head down, biting his quivery lips and glancing me a shy smile. Then started to tidy up, believe it or not. Jerry was another runaway, but shy and lonely and gay. A friend for me.
-*'Pleased to meet you, just call me Maxie.'*- says I.
The name just popped into my head right then. And I've been called Max or Maxie by most people ever since!
-*'You al-already know me.'*- said Jerry. He sure was familiar, those shaky wet lips?
Then he'd popped out his blue contact lenses and flopped back his hood.
He had a lovely sad face, though you wouldn't have guessed he was gay
-*'You're Jerry! Who got beat up. You never came back to school.'*-
-*'G-good disguise ey! So you ran away as well? Did those bullies g-get you too?'*-
He used to stop and stutter, just a bit.

Peter was already installed in the wardrobe, and had started up the not so secret computer. I was sitting up in the bed, pulling the sheet around me. We chatted, and Jerry tidied up. While Barney made us tea.

They nattered on about the latest 'Clan Plan', they planned to De-School our ex school when it finally collapsed. It seemed fantastic, I poo pood the scheme. [See ref. 10]

Peter offered me a fag and I took it. With Barney tut tutting, like a clucking hen. He hated cigarettes, and sometimes he'd try to ban them in the flat.

Then he and Barney rushed off without even finishing their tea.

Jerry followed, still looking embarrassed, but came back later.

-*'Make yourself at home.'*- says Barney going out. -*'The keys are on the table and there's some food in the cupboard.'*-

And they clattered off down the stairs.

* * *

For a minute I just stared at the closed door.

Then I leaped up, his pink sheet around me. Locked the door and jumped in front of the fire.

And I thought -*'I am free and alone and safe in the anonymous city!'*-

It was a big high square room, with a shower cubicle and a kitchen in the corner. The clock said quarter past eight, and I thought then of my folks and the kids at the breakfast table. My dad would be raging at me all right. But what would he do? I somehow expected him to start banging on the door right then and there.

Would my dad report me missing? With people saying he'd been attacking me?

Then I realized he would just lie. Sure he would accuse me of something. Oh shit, and he would get The Brother-Hood to find me, religious vigilantes, oh shit..

I refused to think about that now. I was much too happy.

I thought of the neighbours talking.

And of course *I had run out of the school and been sick on my teacher.*

I'd be the gossip of the day, I felt famous!

So I skipped over and put on the music, some new Clan-Rock, real stinky, and started to dance about.

Giggling and laughing like I was tipsy. Swirling the sheet, around and around. Stopping to admire my body in the wardrobe mirror...

squeezing in my puppy fat,

tugging out my little tits,

gleefully pouting and throwing sexual poses,

prancing and dancing and whirling,

till I collapsed in a sweaty heap on the dirty carpet.

After that I showered, put on Barney's super baggy clothes, and romped about, making porridge and boiled eggs and toast. I stuffed myself I was starving. Then I cleaned up the whole place and swept the carpet. And I found a pair of scissors, took down the small mirror, and proceeded to cut off my hair.

That was a nasty experience all right, for a vain young woman like myself. The scissors were blunted and I had to hack away for ages. When I decided I was finished at last it was certainly different.

Like a shaggy dog after having a battle with a hedge clipper!

I took the keys and went out, feeling pretty strange and obvious. It had stopped raining for the moment but there was flooding everywhere. In the streets everyone ignored me of course, which suited me fine.

Off I went in my new disguise.

My brother Danny showed up in the park on time. Hadn't he skipped school again.

He popped up out of the bushes, grinning and suspicious.

Clan Warrior style, in his hooded jacket, skullcap and long shorts.

But he hadn't been able to get my stuff.

-*'They were having a big row about you, over breakfast. It just wasn't the moment to start packing up your gear.'*

-*'Did he say what he's going to do?'* My heart was leaping.

-*'He's going to that Brother-Hood to ask for a detective to get you back, he reckons the police are useless. He says you stole money and hurt the baby.'*

-*'What! I knew it. I never took a penny, it's him that hit Kathy... He's mad. oh Danny he's mad!'*

I could've guessed what he'd say but I was shocked. I'd hinted at the truth and he'd attacked with horrible lies!

-*'I know but.. Well I believe you anyway.'* said Danny, supporting me.

-*'I have to stay free!'* I glanced around at the empty park. -*'What about getting my stuff now then. Listen I just need some clothes really, and my brown jacket, and shoes. And the Pools Credit Union Card, in the left hand draw under everything.'*

-*'She'll catch me. She reads my mind like a comic book.'* His eyes were wide and scared.

-*'No no listen, say you're going training. Use your big sports bag.'*

-*'Okay but... Um Tell me. Did he really, um, have it off with you?'* How could he ask that!

-*'Oh Danny. Would you go way outa that. He tried to feel me up that's all. Like he always done. But I'm worried now about little Kathy.'*

I was shocked that our rumour had worked so well.

All because I'd said a -*'Home for **Abused** and Beaten up Girls.'*

One word, 'abused', I used against my dad. And for that he set about destroying me.

-*'Oh yeah. And is it true you barfed on Sister Bernie? I mean.. Did you really vomit on top of her?'*

-*'It was an accident Danny. Swear to God. She got under me at the wrong minute.'*

-*'The wrong minute!'*

He held in a splutter, then guffawed loudly, covering his mouth and ducking down.

-*'The wrong minute! I'll be away off sis, before we're spotted.'*

He smooched my cheek and shifted off. Laughing and blundering about.

Under the rhododendrons.

I hid cautiously behind the flooded shrubbery.

Peeping out nervously and glad of my disguise. Feeling already like I was on the run, but really in case my mother would catch Danny and come down to grab me instead.

Chapter Four

Wonderful Maggie

-‘*You can trust me, you’re my sister.*’-

Maxie

I spent a lot of time in Barney’s bedsitter, mostly hanging about, listening to music and reading. He had loads of books and I started to read them all. I’ve always been a voracious reader. But I soon found this was impossible.

It seemed he didn’t care at all for his own property, but then I twigged they weren’t his anyway. People would just take them away, and he’d always bring back more he’d borrowed from the Pools library, or maybe robbed.

The local Pool in Burndon is well advanced. Some different CoOps that make things and others consuming stuff as well. Then there’s skill sharing, you know, someone offers to do plumbing, or window cleaning or whatever.

And a new second hand and free shop, where they used to have the car showrooms. You can just *go shopping without paying* if you know where!

But the latest brand new craze was Levels, we were one of the first I think.

So you could have -‘Level 4 Learning’-, -‘Level 2 Production’-, -‘Level 9 Happiness’-, or whatever, we were supposed to update monthly and average out.

Only people took the piss and gave themselves -‘Level 66 Sexiness’-. Barney and his friends were in it as well, but they were un-together. Not like Maggie and her friends.....

[See Glossary.Personal Levels]

Learning counts as Work, I mean, why not?.. And House and Family that’s Production too. I liked that new cool Project, like living in a game of Money Free!

Barney used to pick up people in those days. Much like he picked up books, but forgot the fruit and ‘vedge’, no offense to him. He had to be in company because he got fits of depression if he was on his own. So he’d often bring back friends or freaks or old guys or anyone at all, to smoke dope and make music, and drink and talk the night away.

But that first day, when I got back from meeting Danny with my bag, the place was empty and silent. The bell did ring a few times, but I was afraid to answer it. Barney never showed up and eventually I went to bed.

Then about two in the morning he crashed in with four or five more. I just pretended to be asleep, Peeking out from under the smelly duvet, as they sprawled about and went on about the CLANS and laughed a hell of a lot.

The CLANs were hot gossip just then. People said they were horrible street gangs. While Barney and his friends were promoting and getting them backing. As the force behind the revolution they wanted to happen... [glossary and ref.31]

Another guy arrived and they went quiet. Almost whispering, though I could hear it all. They talked about these really sick fascist boys recruiting in the schools. Like Killian Bate who branded me as a dirty whore and beat up Jerry. Maybe they were planning to do an action against them.

But they all started roaring laughing, so maybe not.

Those people were fun and zappy, but when I woke up again, it was getting light and they were all gone.

Just scattered bottles and butt ends to prove it wasn't a dream.

I got up and dragged up the big window and leaned out. It was a beautiful morning, the cold had gone, though thunderclouds were towering already..

I had nothing to do and I started obsessing on my teacher and my dad. Tying knots in my tummy.

You could see a lot from that window. It was a high house, and looked back on a clutter of long gardens, garages and a lane. Big greenhouses and little sheds. And a few old fellas out already, digging a ditch for the floodwater.

Cauliflowers, cabbages and onions. Runner beans and sprouts.

Some of the walls were knocked out to make bigger spaces, further down a lot of kids were arriving, in boots with tools and picnic-boxes, some kind of Pools play-shop or De-School I'm sure.

A ray of sun flashed out from behind a chimney pot. And seconds later the windowsill was flooded with warm yellow light.

It was a big wide granite window ledge, and mossy. A nice place to sit in the mornings if you weren't too afraid of heights.

I was still there, leaning out, feeling the sunshine seeping into my bones. Watching the swifts come swooping round the houses. A gang of quarrelsome sparrows were chirping loudly below me.

When somebody rapped on the door.

-*'Hey Barney it's me Maggie.'*- came a mellow female voice.

I didn't move, but the music was still playing. Then a key slid in, and a woman walked into the room.

I can see Maggie still, that first time, coming sudden in the door. And I wish I could see her still.

A big tall red haired woman, wide mouth and a few big freckles, wearing a worn orange coat and bright yellow trousers.

Speechless I stared at her. Seeing spots from looking at the sun.

-*'Oh sorry.'*- she said. Seeing me at once. -*'I was looking for Barney.'*-

I wanted to speak and talk and welcome her, but somehow I couldn't come out with a word.

I had this idea she was his girlfriend. She was chuckling in her deep voice.

-*'Well I'm not chasing after him either. So bad luck for him. I'm an old friend who lives down the road.'*-

She took her tea, and cupped it in her hands. Took a sup and smiled from ear to ear.

-*'So what brings you to this part of the world?'*- says she.

But I held my silence. Looking in my grey tea and figuring out a good story. Then I looked up, and suddenly right into her warm orangey eyes.

-*'You can trust me, you're my sister.'*- she said strangely.

And stranger still I began immediately to tell her the true story. It seemed like Maggie was the first really honest person I'd ever met, and I took to her at once. As if I'd always been waiting to meet her.

I started to tell her the truth, as I saw it, and it wasn't that easy. I told her about my problems at school and at home. Though *not* about my Dad molesting me. I was still too panicky for that.

I ended up crying on her shoulder. Getting my black eye bathed with a hot flannel, and laughing together, and making more tea.

With her my heavy masks slipped, and started sliding off. Leaving just myself, hard and soft all at once. Maggie my friend who showed me my way. She was a country girl, by birth, but she lived here in Burndon, in a rented house with six other women. Plus one man, three kids and a smelly dog.

They wanted to talk everything out clear and care for everyone, and give each person what she really needed. They all seemed to have the same way of going on.

We had great gas, me and Maggie. The way she would tell a story would have you in knots laughing for hours. She was helping set up a Health and a Dance CoOp, and she worked in a posh restaurant at nights.

The talk came round to Barney.

-*'The reason I came up here'*- says she -*'was to see is he all right, and check a few things with him. He got into a stupid fight the other night down at our place. And threw out two idiots who were plastered drunk.'*-

-*'What! I never would've thought he'd hurt a fly. Sure the kids used to climb all over him, on the Project.'*-

-*'Yes well... '*- Maggie sighed, then leaned forward. -*'He thinks he's really gay, him and Monica didn't work out. And he doesn't stop, he doesn't sleep. We all need Barney coz he knows everybody. Even the CLANs trust him.'*-

-*'You think he's gay and he's cracking up?'* - I asked. -*'Then why does he work so much?'*-

-*'Who knows why. Scratch half these fellas and you'll find they're clinically bonkers.'*-

Maggie dropped her voice and went on.

'He was in the Earth's Revenge, and the Planet Federation, and more things, I don't ask and wouldn't say. Barney's a playground worker, with male fantasies of being a guerrilla hero.'-

-*'A what?.. He's a terrorist?'*-

-*'Ha! Not at all. He's studying to be a sports masseur. He's not bad at it.'*-

-*'But you think he's a bit mad.'*-

-*'Course not. He's my friend that's all. Just, um, he can't stop to take care of himself.'*-

-*'So I'll tell him to slow down.'*-

Maggie laughed and hugged me hard.

But I was surprised and afraid, and pulled away.

-*Okay let's slow him down. We're hyper active all right, with all these so called De-School Projects. Now we're getting sponsors for local gangs to run them.*-

-*The kids love it, because the school is so boring, my mother says.*-

-*Listen Maxie I have to go, I need to see Carol before the meeting at eleven.*-

But I wanted her to stay, to go on talking, about anything at all. Just so long as she stayed with me.

-*I got to go.*- she said again. -*Look here's my cellphone number. Tell you what, would you like to come over for tea?*-

-*Yes, yes, thanks very much.* — I said. -*Yes I will.*-

* * *

I did go down to Maggie's house for tea which turned out to be a nosh-up. I was scared all right, going down there by myself, with my schoolgirl clothes and my black and blue eye.

[refs. 11 and 22]

Their house was big and crumbling. Set apart in trees. An old woman had let it out to the 'young ladies'. She died soon after and it became a squatted Pools center. I wandered down the old cracked pathway to a yellow painted porch.

I pressed the bell firmly but no one came, then a little tricycle came round the corner of the house, pedaled with difficulty through the mud by a very small child.

-*Hello hello.*- I said. And dark eyes flashed up at me.

-*Who are you?*- She panted in a squeaky voice.

-*My name is Maxie Moon.*- I said. -*I've come for tea.*-

-*Derrie, grubs up.*- A woman stuck her head out. -*Oh hullo.*-

-*Hello I'm Maxie.*- says I. -*Maggie invited me.*-

-*Come on in so, I'm Marie*- she said. Tossing back her long black hair. -*You're just in time.*-

The back kitchen was long and low and whitewashed a light bright blue. In the middle was a big wooden table, and people milling about, clattering knives and forks and dishes.

-*This is Maxie.*- Marie shouted.

-*You sit here by me*- says Maggie. And kissed my cheek.

-*Bring over the butter Marie.*-

-*Where's the salt?*-

-*Who's taken all the cups again?*-

I took off my coat and sat. The other wall was covered over with pans on nails, posters, notices and hanging plants. In the middle a smiling sun said -*Nuclear War, Fuck that.*- and others. -*Legalize Abortion.*- and -*Save The Biosphere.*- -*Private Property is Theft.*- and -*Wannabe Money-Free.*-

Marie and Tricia were telling a long story about a nasty manager and tucking in. And so did I. I was hungry.

After that day I used to eat there often, till we moved. You could starve at Barney's place. And they didn't mind that I was always skint. I would put some cash in 'The Pot' when I had it, and we were using money less and less. And I took my turn washing and cleaning and child minding.

I was sitting down to eat, and Patrick, Marie's older kid, was eyeing me across the table. The talk died as we all tucked in, but this Patrick kept glancing aggressively. The same dark eyes as his little sister.

-*'Were you in a fight?'*- says he loudly.

-*'Don't be rude Patrick.'*- said Marie at once.

I felt myself blushing, staring at my plate, and there was this big silence. Or so it seemed to me. Then I looked up. Flicking back my hair that wasn't there.

-*'Me dad..'*- I began. But Maggie had started to speak at the same time.

-*'Sorry go ahead.'*- she said.

-*'Me old fella b 'battered me.'*- I was staring back at Patrick. -*'So I'm after leaving home.'*-

I felt everyone looking at me, so I kept my eyes fixed on Patrick.

-*'My Dad's gone to America.'*- he said. And turned back to his food Then I did the same, stabbing at a carrot, as other conversations began. And I grinned and glanced about. I felt accepted anyway.

That's what I needed then, feeling I belonged.

And never more than that first day at Maggie's, with my black eye and my working accent.

And blushing like the carrot on my plate.

After a while some people rushed out. But others arrived, And we all got poured mugs of home made wine and got a bit merry, laughing and joking. Some of them started playing cards and Maggie took me up to her room.

She let me rummage through her clothes. All from the free shop or adapted. Throwing shapes and messing about. I got a pair of bright green trousers and a pink woolly like I'd seen in a Chic Romance comic, my taste in clothes being *dread and woeful*.

The others were into Clan Earth fashions, like, beautiful denim fringes instead of shorts. Strings of painted seeds and pods instead of a T shirt, skull caps and fiery wigs...

She had that room done up like herself, all oranges and browns, and the big tree rustling outside. She'd found some mellow music on the local Pools radio and we danced and finished our wine and talked.

Maggie asked me loads of questions all right. But she never once told me to go home.

Then she had a go at my hair, trying to straighten out the spiky bits, and hugged me again. I held my breath but this time I didn't pull away.

She was cuddly like that, was Maggie, and it struck me then that she must be gay. Which she wasn't always, because she used to go out with fellas but...

But she really preferred women, as she would say herself.

Maggie had no hang-ups about sex and that. And talking about it in detail.

Right in front of everybody.

And I was secretly shocked coz I had plenty.

-*'You're giving me an itchy clitoris.'*- she would say.

And squeeze me tight till I wriggled.

Being with Maggie changed my point of view in just twenty minutes.

It's true that I already hated the open hypocrisy of the school, and my mother's as well.

I'd just escaped my dad's sadistic trip.

But I'd swallowed all kinds of notions..

Of submission and guilt and purity, and needing to be punished..

The false glory of destroying yourself, in the service of oblivious macho shitheads.

We started telling stories and giggled plenty, I wasn't used to drinking, not at all.

Hugging Maggie made me squirm and wriggle. Okay I did get scared and panicky, but I didn't lose my breath or have an attack, like when *men* touched me.

Which made me wonder if I wasn't really meant to be gay as well.

Sure thing it was my lecherous father had put me off fellas forever.

But I didn't dare talk to anyone about that yet.

-I'd better be off to bed.- said Maggie again. *-Tomorrow we're doing a health survey I've to be out at the crack of dawn.-*

-I'll be off then.- My heart sunk, I had a problem with leaving her.

-You can stay over if you like, we've got mattresses.- But I shook my head.

-I'd better go back, sure all my stuff's at Barney's.-

-All right then. Listen come over any time, you can just walk in the back door, okay?-

-Yes please. If it's really all right.-

-You're in your granny's. And what about the Runaways, do you wanna go?-

-Um, I'm not sure no ..-

Meeting other runaways gave me butterflies.

-We'll talk about it tomorrow.- she said.

Walking back from my new friend Maggie's house.

I felt new-born. Like I'd just broken out of the egg.

Like she'd helped me smash away the rotten eggshell.

Pointing and peeping about. Delighted at my surprise.

The thunderstorm was breaking and I was elated.

Skipping from shelter to shelter, then dashing through the rain.

My whole body thrilled. Seeing things super real and new.

Glancing about for pursuers.

My feet bouncing and springing, with the first big drops off the cracked path.

There came a shocking flash, crackle and bellow.

But I arrived, panting and laughing, at Barney's door.

Before the real deluge began.

My past life and terrible sins were just past history.

I had escaped as well as run away.

*But I would **never** have gone back to Barney's. If I'd known what would happen that night.*

Chapter Five

Barney the Play Worker

- *'Just bop Groucho Marx on the nose.'* -

Maxie

The flat was in half dark when I went in. Just a candle stub guttering, shadows from the street-lamp swaying

. A dark figure crouched behind it.

- *'Barney?'*- I flicked the light switch but it didn't work. The dark figure ducked out of sight. The fire was flickering a little. My heart leaped.

- *'Barney! Barney its me!'*-

A shaggy head appeared.

- *'Lindy? Are you alone?'*-

- *'What happened to the light?'*- I thought the storm had got the lekky.

He didn't reply. I was fishing for change to try the meter.

- *'Just hit Groucho Marx on the nose.'*-

- *'You what?'*-

- *'The poster. Tap him on the nose. Go on. That's it yes.'*-

So I slapped the big Groucho Marx poster on his big round nose, just to humour him. The lights flashed on. The fridge clattered into life, and the radio started singing a dirge.

- *'Wow, that's brilliant!'*-

I picked up a doubtful towel and started rubbing my wet hair.

- *'That's another secret okay?'*-

- *'Okay, but, how does it work? I mean.. '*-

Again he didn't answer. His words were scrawling up and down the page.

His fingers poked the air, poised to plunge into a new sentence.

In a twinkling my arm went out and

I snatched that chewed up biro from from his hand.

For a moment Barney actually went to go on writing. Then he opened his hand slowly and laughed. His head lifted, and flopped back a little. Glazed eyes peered up at me from a million miles away.

He coughed, gestured vaguely. Spacing out of his tiny mind.

Then he giggled, staring up at me. A sloppy idiotic grin.

- *'Beautiful pink panther.'*- Reaching to touch my new woolly.

I took a quick step back. Dropping the biro.

The wind in the trees was dancing shadows on the walls

- *'You stay away from me. You're out of your bloody head!'*- I yelled.

-*'Out of my head?'*- He was cowering, shocked by my shout.

Barney was tripping. I was frightened and angry, but he wasn't violent, no, he wouldn't say boo to a goose. All he did was talk a lot of hooey, wandering vaguely through this colossal drama, glancing wildly about, without ever leaving the floor..

So I sat at the table, poured a cold herb tea, and listened to his rambling.

A fierce wind had got up, moaning louder and rattling at the big window. Till a small pane fell in and broke. Wind and water rushing in the gap.

-*'The biosphere is bollixed.'*- he said. And exploded with annoying laughter.

So I just ran over and stuffed a dirty cushion in it.

The window not his mouth.

He was kind of funny I suppose, I got into laughing with him, or at him. But it went on much too long. I put on some horrible old hippy music and he rocketed into momentary ecstasies.

It seemed he'd been tripping since that morning, sobering up a bit by now. But he looked terrible.

-*'What are you so depressed about?'*- I asked. And his eyes went sharp.

-*'Who told you I was depressed?'*- he demanded. The guy was paranoid.

-*'Nobody.. well, I was talking with your friend Maggie. I went down there for tea.'*

-*'That bitch. She's always spreading gossip about me.'*

-*'No you're wrong.'*- says I, looking away. -*'Anyway I like her.'*

We sat quiet for a while, now it was very late. Barney looked sick, rubbing his temples with his thumbs.

-*'Do you fancy a cold herb tea?'*- I asked.

-*'Good idea. Listen I'm sorry, Maggie's great, just very nosy sometimes.'*

-*'Because she wanted to help you.'*

I got up, chucked a bit of board on the dying fire. Outside it looked less dark. But I was beyond feeling sleepy. And the storm was waking up, with another shattering crash.

-*'Maggie says you gotta pass on jobs to other people.'*

-*'Yeah I suppose. Everybody wants our so called Play Schemes, now they seen how the CLAN gangs join in. They think we're the cat's pajamas, because we get their bad kids off the streets. Ironic, as really we want to give power to them.'*

-*'You want to give power to those hooligans?'*

-*'Yeah. We're getting them resources and money from the CoOp Pools, to be like their fire brigade or defense force, um. So they're sponsoring the De-School courses as well. Finally we're winning, but it's a hard battle, see. There's lots of community leaders and, and so called revolutionaries and priests, who are still mad for power and respectability and privilege... Ha!'*

He snorted in disgust.

-*'Like my dad. He's in the Brother-Hood.'*

-*'I'm on their black list too.. The Young-Hoods did in Jerry, in your school.'*

-*'Maggie calls them 'The Evil Medievals.'*- I said, and we both laughed.

-*'Remember the Youth Action Project where you met me. Two.. no, three years back now.'*

-*'Yes of course, we thought it was great.'*

-*'It only lasted two weeks Lindy, it was supposed to be all summer.'*

-*'Still, the kids loved it.'*

-*'Oh sure'*- he said -*'The idea wasn't bad, building the secret playground.. Decide and do a few things for yourselves.'*

-*'Quite right.'*- says I.

I sat down and got up again. He was making me nervous.

-*'Then didn't they ban the Performance, so it made no sense. And what about the Assemblies?..'*-

-*'Um, I don't remember, maybe..'*-

-*'There only was one, the School wanted them stopped when it got out that you talked about sex, and when we politely refused, they stopped the grant.'*-

-*'And that's what upset you?'*-

-*'No no'*- he was getting agitated. -*'That was good learning for us. We quit doing it through the schools. See all this infighting is about power and control, over some aspect of people that's their special piece of the pie.'*-

-*'You're right of course.'*- I said. -*'Do you want a coffee?'*-

-*'Remember Jamie and Golly?'*- he asked. Turning in his chair.

-*'Bleeding hooligans.'*-

-*'I suppose they were that, and young Katie with them, Coz they were of the few kids there who had a clue, what was being done to them.'*-

-*'I never saw them in school after.'*-

-*'They're in prison now that's why, and Katie, her dad nearly beat her to death. She's inside now and all, and Spooner when he...'*-

Barney stopped abruptly, red in the face, as I handed him his instant coffee. Then he plunged on.

-*'It's a battlefield, anything they can get away with is right, you name it. They'll use moral blackmail first, or just brute force, they'll strangle you in bureaucracy, or blacklist you or. Or stick you in an institution. For your own good of course, yeah, and if all that fails the Specials will beat you up, torture you, or put you away for ever.'*-

-*'Yes well..'*- He was getting into a rant

-*'Like my friend Stevie who jumped off the tower.. Yeah, and sure thing Stevie was dead right!..'*-

-*'Maggie said you have family problems and the cops are after you.'*- I broke in. He blinked at me in surprise, as if he'd just seen me sitting right opposite him..

-*'Yeah sure, but they're all living in the past, see. My grandpa was in the resistance all right, and me.. I was in youth prison for a year, when I was fifteen, about your age.'*-

-*'Really? What did you do wrong?'*- I asked.

-*'Nothing much that they got me for. People always ask me to set things up.'*-

He was scratching his shaggy hair again. Sure he had nits... or fleas.

-*'Starting with the ping pong club when I was ten.'*-

-*'They locked you up for playing ping pong?'*- I laughed.

-*'Later we done sabotage, they were well angry about the coal mine, it was the Save the Planet campaign.'*-

-*'I'm in the Burndon Earth Girls, but we don't do much now.'*-

-*'Really? The Eco-Burnies! They were red hot!..'*-

-*'So anyway.'*- says I. -*'Maybe it's your family that has you upset.'*-

-*'Maybe so, see, I seen bad things that's all, when I was a kid in the country, and my dad used to beat up my Ma.. and.. and.'*- He was throwing wild glances at me.

-*'Sounds like my family.. but. Or could be you need a girlfriend, Maggie said Monika left you. So maybe I'll find you a new girlfriend, okay, if you promise to slow down.'*-

Finally he looked at me, like he'd finally noticed I was really there. And he opened his wide smile.

-*'Or a boyfriend please really I'm gay you see... poor Monika, she suffered for me cracking up.'*-

-*'You went crazy?'*-

-*'Very boring crazy. So I've decided to give it a rest... long live celibacy!'*-

-*'Celibacy? Who's that when he's at home watching telly?'*-

-*'Refraining from sexual activity, celibacy. I'm giving it a rest, unless I find a compatible soul mate.. which is practically impossible.'*-

-*'Why not?'*- I asked.

-*'I'm on a weird wavelength that's all.'*- He stopped, and there was a silence. I couldn't deny he was a bit of a weirdo.

The wind and thunder had stopped as well. I could hear that blackbird, singing out the back, and my eyes started closing by themselves.

So I knelt beside the hearth and started my stretching exercises. Breathe in, reach up, hold it...

Barney stayed slumped over the table. The silence lengthened.

-*'Come on now, you're not so weird, we gotta get some rest.'*-

I stood up, went behind him, dared myself, and started rubbing his neck with my thumbs.

A just ex schoolgirl, giving him wise advice.

-*'You need to sleep now. You shouldn't take drugs, especially when you're miserable, you know that.'*-

He shut up at last, I was massaging his neck.

Listening to the blackbird with distant rolls of thunder.

Dizzying slightly with the waves of sleep.

-*'Thanks for making me talk, You're very patient, like Maggie.'* — he said. -*'Um.. Don't mind me going on like that, okay? See, I never talk about myself and, and I get worked up.'*-

-*'Don't worry, we'll sort you out.'*- I said, patronizingly. -*'But right now I need some sleep.'*-

Then the doorbell rang. Long and loud.

Chapter six

Testirical Morons

-‘Don’t get silly and hysterical, honey.’-

Maxie

Barney was off like a shot.

Out the door to the hall window facing the street. He was back.

-‘Special police.’- he said. -‘Looking for me.’-

The bell began again. He was emptying the ash tray, stuffing papers in a rubbish bag...

-‘It’s me they want for sure. Say you just left home.’-

-‘What? What do they want?’-

-‘Nothing. Politics, maybe take me in for a few days.’-

-‘I could say I’m your wife.’-

-‘Or say you’re a battered wife. They know I used to work with them.’-

He was in the wardrobe stowing the computer.

The bell was still ringing. And a faraway hammering had begun.

-‘Can’t you hide then.’- I said. He stopped for a second.

-‘Well, I do have a good place.. if you think you can pull it off.’- he said without stopping.

-‘I’ll convince them.’-

-‘Say I’m gone abroad, delay them if you can...’-

As I ran down the stairs.

Frightened but excited. People were waking up.

-‘Okay I’m coming.’- I shouted.

And a little man banged his door, cursing.

-‘Open up now.’-

-‘Who’s there?’- I yelled.

-‘Special Police.’-

I put the big door on the chain and opened it slightly.

A metal bar was instantly in the gap.

-‘What do you want?’- says I.

-‘We have a warrant to search the flat of Mr. Bernard Maguire. Open that chain honey.’-

-‘He’s left.’- I protested. -‘That’s my flat now.’-

-‘Open up now, here’s the warrant.’-

-‘Let me see it.’- My voice broke.

He waved a paper in the gap.

-*'Listen I'm after leaving my husband. I'm afraid you're his pals come to get me.'*-

-*'I'm counting to three.'* They were getting furious.

-*'I'm sorry that's my flat now not...'*-

There was a terrifying crash, as something heavy hit the door.

-*'Okay okay I'll open it.'* I shouted, and slipped off the chain.

The door swung back, nearly flattening me. Two big men pounded up the stair well. A third hung back, signaling me to go up. Stupidly I obeyed. I could've just scarpered then and gone to Maggie's.

When I got there the room was dark. They were rummaging about, flashing torches. One torch flashed in my face.

-*'What's wrong with the fucking light?'*-

-*'No money for the meter.'* I said. Barney must have bopped old Groucho on the nose.

So one of them had to put money in the meter and the lights came on.

-*'I'll take a look upstairs.'* said the older cop. And my heart leaped.

-*'He's not here.'* I squeaked.

Then suddenly they turned on me. Out of the blue.

One grabbed me. Crashed me up against the wall. I was shocked.

-*'Where is the queer bastard? Where's the dirty Clanner, darling?'*-

-*'He's gone. Gone to Germany.'* I yelled.

-*'Where? You're lying baby. What address?'* He was shaking me.

-*'What's your name, sexy. What are you doing with a dirty faggot?'*-

While he pinned me to the wall, the baldy one started pulling at my clothes. Pinching me.

-*'Hey! I don't know the address. Honest. Ow. Stop it. No, Stop it!'* I was shocked.

-*'Now now darling, don't get naughty and emotional.'* said the other one.

-*'Hey stop that. Get your hands off me! Now!'*-

-*'Come on sweetie you love this really.'*-

He was ripping off Maggie's pink cardigan. A button flew.

Yanked my T shirt up over my breasts. I never expected this.

This couldn't be happening to me.

* * *

-*'Hey stop ...stop...'*-

-*'Just be a good girl darling.'* He spat on Barney's floor. -*'And we'll take good care of you.'*-

As he slapped my cheek, not hard. Laughed and looked up at his mate for approval.

-*'Ow. Get off me. Stop It!'* I had started to resist as hard as I could.

-*'Don't get upset. Just relax now baby. Stop that'*-

He was twisting up my arms. Clicking on handcuffs.

-*'Just behave yourself like a lady. That's lovely.'*
-*'Ow, Ow, my wrists. You stupid bastard let me go.'*- I croaked.

They were trying to hang my arms over the wall lamp like some trophy.
-*'Tell us about your terrorist lover darling. Does he feel you down here, or here.? Does he..'*
-*'Don't touch me. Stop it! He's sending his address. Honest. It was...'*

The little baldy one was shoving a hanky in my mouth. I pulled myself up and kicked, but the square faced bastard held me fast. Lucky I didn't have a panic attack just then or I'd have choked.

-*'Don't get silly and..hys-hysterical honey.'*- grunted the little sadistic shithead.

Finally pulling down my green pants. Though I got in a good kick at last.

-*'Ow! You little shit. Ow ah, she kicked me really hard!'*
-*'We'll have to punish you. You dirty bitch. You dirty terrorist Clanner.'*
-*'You're a shit. Say it. You lesbian bitch.'*

He gave me a little slap, giggled, and looked around for approval.

-*'Say after me. -I'm a sexy shit'- Say it.'*

-*'I'm a shit.'*- I just croaked like a frog.
Seeing as the moron still had a gag in my mouth.
I was terrified, This really was happening.
-*'Hey come on it's my turn.'*- said the one holding me -*'What you need girly is a real man.'*
He laughed inanely.
-*'Help me hold her Fergie, she's really strong.'*
-*'Listen baby. Now you just have to relax and...'*
-*'You filthy shit. Say it you sexy shit, did your lover...'*

-*'Stop that now lads. Take it easy.'*

The first one, their superior it seemed, had come downstairs.
Double good news. He hadn't found Barney and he would stop them abusing me.

-*'You can let her down now boys.'*
-*'This shit won't talk and she attacked me.'*

He pinned me up harder against the wall..

-*'I will I will.'*- I squeaked, finally spitting out the hanky. -*'Let me down.'*
-*'What's your name then, darling?'*- said the sergeant.

What's my name? I thought.

-*'Janice.'*- I came out with. -*'Mrs. Janice Martin.'*
-*'How old are you? You're just a girl.'*

He gripped my jaw hard, smiling at my pain, and turned my head to face him.

-*'Ay.. my arms..T-Tell those stupid bastards to let me go.'*- I gurgled.
-*'Maybe we do have to teach you a lesson darling.'*- he said.

Then he grabbed my tits in both hands, squeezed and pulled hard.
-*'Hey. Oww!'*-
-*'Now you've pushed us this far you cheeky dyke.'*-
He yanked me forward, let go, then slapped my face.
-*'Stop it ow stop it stop it.'*-
-*'Just keep quiet and you'll get off easy. You're a very naughty girl. You've been a naughty girl.. Fergie, get a hold of her legs. Help me Tim.. Let's do this one.'*-
-*'Okay then.'*- Fergie nodded. -*'Let's gag her properly then, here I'll...'*-

My heart sank. Now their boss was joining in.
I had to just start screaming while I could!
But just then his radio broke in with a loud crackle.
-*'F16 central Special PP3 are you returning to base yet? Come in please.'*-
-*'PP3 here'*- he said. Holding up his trousers. -*'The bird has flown. We're checking the place over.'*-
-*'Just get a move on. We have mobile CLAN activity in your area. Secure vehicle and return to base. Repeat PP3...'*-

Instantly my body was released and I slid down. Hanging painfully from the lamp bracket, which started to give way, bits of plaster falling on me. The Sergeant kicked me in the side.
-*'Ow ow. Ahh..'*-
-*'Let's go. Run down and check the car.'*- he yelled.
And I saw a black gun appear in his hand, as he aimed another kick at my crotch.
-*'Your queer friend is a dangerous subversive. Tell him we'll be back okay. Tim, get those cuffs off her quick.'*-
They sidled towards the door, shouting and nervy.
The one called Tim removed the handcuffs and I slid to the floor, rubbing my wrists.
As he leaned down, gargling up phlegm.
And spat it full in my face.
-*'You're on our list girly. Next time we're having you.'*-
-*'Bastards. Bastards. Bastards.'*- I shouted after them.
When I heard the boots really stomping down the stairs, I burst into tears.
Next thing I was up. Trying to wipe the spit off my face. Pulling on my pants, and out to the front hall window. They were disappearing already, into an unmarked car. Leaning my hot face on the cold glass I memorized the number-plate, it was beginning to rain a little again.
-*'Bastards. Shitheads. Pigs.'*- I muttered, as the car disappeared in the drizzle.

A thin grey miserable dawn was creeping across the city.

I went back inside shivering to the fire, then I was nauseous and ran to the sink.
A minute later Barney appeared, with his rucksack and bags, and cobwebs in his wild hair, I tried to stop sniveling and started laughing instead.
-*'Welcome back.'*- I blurted.
He was unloading. Then dived into the wardrobe and came out smiling, they hadn't found the computer.
-*'You did it Lindy you did it!'*- He stopped. -*'Did they hurt you much?'*-

-*'They're pigs!'*- I was nearly crying again. -*'Horrible stinking pigs!'*-
He came over and put his arms round me.
-*'You're all right now.'*- he said. -*'You'll be all right.'*-

I caught my breath. Then broke away from him in a panic. It was the exact same thing my Dad had said to me.

-*'You're the same.'*- I yelled. -*'I am not NOT all right.'*-

I whipped up my torn knickers from the floor and threw them in his face. They were clean on. I picked up a dirty cup and it flew. Smashing against the mirror.
And after that I set about wrecking the gaff.

It didn't last, there wasn't much worth wrecking. I cracked the mirror all right, I broke a plate and damaged the good chair. Then I was back to the sink, and this time I did throw up. I let my panic out and took my pills.

When I finished with that, I'll spare you the yukky details, I washed my face and felt better. I saw that Barney was squatting in the corner, head in his hands and tears on his cheeks.

-*'Listen.'*- says he. -*'Will.. will I take you down to Maggie's.'*-

I really forgave him when he said that. He wasn't the same really and it was *my* stupid idea for him to hide. I was quite okay. Yet in another way I'd *never* be the same again. I had puked their shit out of my system, but I sat down shaking on the floor.

-*'Can you make a herb tea?'*- I asked. -*'It's too early to visit Maggie.'*-

-*'Yeah of course.'*- he said. Getting up. -*'Listen I'm really sorry, I was out of it like. You should've been the one hiding, not me.'*-

-*'Have you got a fag?'*- I asked, calmer now, and he looked for one. -*'It wasn't your fault, them coppers are insane.'*-

-*'But I should know that. I'm really responsible for you here. I'm sorry.'*-

He handed me a half cigarette and lit it. Then went for the kettle.

-*'Did you tell your name?'*-

-*'Course not. What, did you think I'd talk?'*- I was angry again. -*'They could rape me a million times and I wouldn't talk. I said I had just left my husband. Made up a name.'*-

-*'You're very brave.'*- he said. -*'Did they say their names?'*

-*'Yes they did.'*- I remembered every word.

Then the doorbell went. Five short rings.

-*'Oh shit they're back.'*- I jumped to my feet. -*'I'll hide this time!'*-

-*'No no that'll be the Clanner Alarm. I'll just shout out the window that we're okay.'*-

He was back in a moment and making the tea. Getting me into bed in the sleeping bag and zipping it up. And talking away calmly, like this kind of thing happened all the time.

-*'That was a really bad idea of mine, to say you're a battered wife. They get off on just the idea of that. Sure they abuse their own families.'*-

-*'Horrible horrible fellas.'*- I was getting dozy again.

-*'Because they're above the law, it brings out the worst in them. But it brings out their arrogance and stupidity as well.'*- He was making tea at the stove.

-*'I bet they're my father's friends.'*-

-*'Well maybe.. A lot are in the Brother-Hood now. Still they couldn't have got away with it, if that's any consolation.'*-

-*'They nearly did, only...'*-

-*'Only for our CLAN Alarm lot were closing in. I sent them a message.'*-

-*'How did you do that?'*-

-*'I only had to press a few keys... Shall I peel you some fruit?'*-

-*'No thanks. Well, yes please.'*- I remembered there were squishy pears.

-*'And I knew it was all my fault, I would've tried to stop them.'*-

-*'How could you stop them?'*-

He didn't answer, but lifted from a plastic bag a small grey revolver. Dropped it back in.

-*'Just for total emergencies.'*- he said. -*'I was waiting for you to start screaming.'*-

-*'What!'*- I gasped. -*'I was just about to scream.'*-

-*'You done great, I'm really sorry, ey. I'll make it up to you somehow, I promise.'*-

-*'You were going to attack them!'*-

-*'No no. Just firing that thing upstairs would make them piss and shit in their panties. And the Clanners were going to arrive any minute. And they would've..well..'*-

He stopped. And we both laughed nervously, realizing it could've ended infinitely worse.

Chapter seven

Maggie's Secrets

She whispered something shocking in my ear.

Maxie

The morning sun was flooding through the curtains. So I pulled the duvet over my head. Barney had started talking to someone in the wardrobe. Tapping at a keyboard. Then he was back.

-*Maggie will come and take care of you later on.*- he whispered in my ear.

-*Okay good.*- I mumbled, snuggling under the eiderdown.

And soon I slept again.

* * *

I must have slept for about ten hours, I slept all day long.

Waking up little by little to the sound of the wind, whistling and rattling the windows.

And a strange crackling noise..

Peeping out I saw flames. I threw the covers back!

It was Maggie with a sack of scrap wood. She'd made a new fire.

-*Hello lovely, I hear you had a terrible time.*-

She'd also brought cake, and biscuits she'd made herself.

Fruit and nuts and thyme, and special cream for my bruises.

Soon she got me into the shower cubicle in the corner, and soaped my back. Tending my various injuries.

-*Did they hit you with a baton?*-

-*No no, just some slaps and kicks.*-

-*You'll have to move out of here you know, and Barney too, if we can persuade him.*-

-*I'm not running from nobody.*- I said, quite falsely.

-*Yes of course. But I've got a good plan.*-

She wrapped me up in a warm towel, and set me down in front of the fire, drinking tea.

-*You'll be all right I think.*- she said. -*The worst thing is if you go into shock and denial. And feeling dirty and that.*-

-*You know other girls they attacked?*-

-*I worked in a victims group in the Free Pool.*-

-*'What? Were you, um, raped?'*
-*'No way.. Thank fuck for that.'*
-*'Thank **not fuck** you mean.'*- I said cleverly, and we laughed.
-*'Listen I spoke to Barney today. We can get those police for this, if you want it. We can make a big splash, so they'll be scared shitless to try it again.'*
She was rubbing the ointment gently into my bruises.
-*'How do you mean? They're the law, they always win.'*
-*'Not any more they don't. They're understaffed and underfunded.'*

The fire crackled and flared, and gleefully spat sparks.
-*'Barney's made us a chicken stew.'*- she said. -*'But it needs more cooking.'*- She was hanging the pot by the fire.
-*'But what did he say about the cops?'*- I asked, turning. Maggie put a finger to her lips and stood to switch on the radio, a bit loud.
-*'We can find out where they live.'*- she said quietly. -*'through the women's groups in the Pools, I know loads of them. We could shame them, tell their families. Or we could put it out on our radio and TV or.. Or if we let their local CLANs in on it, they'd have them fried with bacon for breakfast!'*
-*'But, but people wouldn't believe us.'*

I was getting dressed now, trying on the frilly knickers she'd brought me.
Suddenly I was happy. Posing in the mirror I'd broken.
-*'I mean, we've no proof of anything. I'm a nobody Maggie.'*
-*'To me you're a super somebody'* - She came back over. -*'And I wish I had a body like yours.'*
-*'My legs are too short. My bottom sticks out, look. Anyway your body's perfect.'*
-*'A bit fat though. Don't I look pregnant?'*- She laughed strangely.
-*'Pleasantly plump that's all.'*- I said, and squeezed her hand.

Then she said something shocking in my ear.
-*'Barney says he has a video of them abusing you. He wants us to have it and decide what to do with it.'*
I broke away from her in surprise, my breath catching.
-*'A video? What? There's a camera in here?'*
-*'Seems so. The German Wizards just wired it up for him.'*
-*'Where is it?'*- I laughed. -*'Groucho's eyes?'*
-*'Could be. I don't know that, to tell you the truth.'*- She still whispered.
-*'This is weirdo weird.'*- I said. -*'It's hard to believe... But if the video exists, what could we do with it?'*
-*'Well one thing we could er, maybe make photos from it. Blank out your face and show theirs. Like, put them on posters, caught in the act...or.'*
-*'Then they'd come and get me for sure.'*
-*'You'd have to be well gone from here, you'll have to move from here you know that now.'*
-*'Or my dad will get his nazi friends to track me down. Imagine, Killian Bate, he hates my guts.'*
I realized I would have to move on.
-*'The Brother-Hood? Worse than the cops if you ask me, and now they're funded because.'*

-*'But the police don't even know who I am.'*- I interrupted. -*'I could change my looks again!'*-
-*'That would be fun.'*- said Maggie. -*'We'll talk about this later on okay, and see the video. It's just a chance, and I want you to know everything from the start.'*-

I said nothing. The wind rattled the window again.
I could smell the stew beginning to cook. I was ravenous.
-*'It's scary for me. I don't want my body all over posters but.. But if it stops other women being attacked I, I'll just do it. I'll do anything I can..'*-
I can't believe I said that. That popped out by itself.
Really I was shaking in my short school socks.

She was putting the sofa cushions in front of the fire and we sat down together.
Now she'd decided to brush my raggy hair.
-*'It's even more than you think. Things are on the point of changing totally right now, like. The old ways are just going out the window. After centuries of shit.. Really!'*-
-*'Good riddance to bad rubbish.'*-
-*'If we splash this exposé properly, and go on reminding everyone, it could discredit and discourage all sexist and rape attacks around here.'*-
-*'We should go for it then. If we can cover up my face. We could get it on Pools TV. That'd really show them up for the bastards they are.'*-
-*'Chuck in a witch's cat with the cocky pigeons.'*- she hissed,
like she was casting a spell,
and chucked a splintered plank on the crackling fire..
-*'Just the idea gives me a panic attack. But I got my inhaler. Lets do it..'*-
-*'Yeah maybe, but it would have to be done right, like, not just a spectacle I mean, we.. They're sadistic, it's not so much about sex at all.'*-
She'd finished my now short hair and was rubbing me with her thumbs.
We sat cross legged, staring wide eyed into the glowing sparks.
-*'In some male circles attacking women is seen as -'Okay wow and how daring.'*- and that... Know what I mean?'-
-*'And we could change that?'*- I wasn't convinced.
-*'We need to talk to some clever people who know how to do it. It's a campaign, called 'Spot a Shit-On.'. With the projects and the radios and the telly and the Pools, and, and more stuff.'*-
-*'We'll talk to them, you know them..'*-
I could hear the stew bub-bubble in the blackened pot.
-*'..But would it really work?'*-
-*'We could strike a good blow, like.. To shame the rapist in these fellas heads.'*-

My legs were hurting, I stretched them straight, but she moved so I leaned back into her arms.
-*'My tits are small and boring.'*- I confided, with a sigh.
-*'You look just fine..'*- she said. Though I knew my face was more battered than ever.
-*'..Now that's enough about that. We won't decide anything yet, all right?'*-

But I had already decided.
It was Maggie made me strong. It was too good a chance to just throw away.

-*All right. Okay.*- I said. -*But what about dinner?*-

* * *

We moved the stew from the flames, to just simmer and made a salad and got the plates ready. She'd even brought a bottle of their *merry plum wine*. We re-hung the big blanket over the window, stopping the draft and muffling the noisy wind.

Then Maggie threw herself onto the cushions by the fire, in a flowing Tai Chi roll.

-*Come over here with me, Maxie Moon.*-

-*I am here.*- I wasn't so sure about rolling with this gay lady.

-*I've got another shocking secret. I've come here to tell you and Barney about it. It's a secret.*-

-*I won't tell a soul.*- I swore. -*Maybe you should turn up the radio again.*-

-*Well it'll have to be public soon anyway.*-

-*Is it bad?*- I asked, but I could see it was good. She was beaming and nervous.

-*No no I hope not, it's good good good.*-

-*I'm glad about that, er. What is it then?*-

She rolled onto her tummy, elbows on the rug and grinning up at me.

-*Well, remember I told you Barney was just an old friend. Well it's true..um..*-

-*What are you trying to say?*-

-*That I did make love to him, in my room, on the massage table.*-

-*He did it to you on the massage table?*- I giggled.

-*Well no, uh, really I did it to him. But he liked it. See I was taking care of him when he was all cracked up and out of it, like..*-

-*You gave him, er, special therapy.*-

I was surprised and intrigued and nodded her on..

-*I was putting massage oil on him and he got all.. well and ..*- We started giggling.

-*How did you get that thing, um, I mean?*-

-*You've seen it then.*-

-*Not like... inflated.*-

-*I got up on the table.*-

-*Oof.*- I said. -*Only times I got done it was terrible. My dad he..*-

I stopped, I'd said too much, how silly I was.

And suddenly I started breathing in little gasps.

-*Well, uh, sorry.. your dad? Oh shit no, your father?*- Maggie was much too clever.

She took my hands in hers and we touched foreheads. She just ignored my wheezing.

But I turned my head away, biting my bottom lip till it hurt.

I'd let slip a secret I hardly dared tell myself!

And Maggie had picked up on it. I shrugged my shoulders again.

Blinking back tears.

-*Shh, shh. Tell me if you want.*- she said.

-*It doesn't matter. um.. I started remembering things.*- I whispered, sniffing.

- 'You're blocking it out, sure. You'll have to tell me it all, okay? So then finally you can really get over it.'

I felt like I would fall into a black hole. I was going to choke. Maggie was rubbing my back gently.

- 'When he, um. When he started doing things to me... No I c can't tell it... Why am I still so scared?'

- 'You're safe here. You started remembering things he did.'

- 'Yes coz I'd seen through him and, and he lost his power over me! I've escaped Maggie!. And I found a wonderful new friend!'

- 'Who's that then?'

For answer I tickled her waist and we laughed together.

- 'You'll have to tell me all the dirty details.'- she insisted. - 'If not they can fester inside you.'

- 'Not now Maggie please please. Um, because I only just remembered. I'll tell you, uh, later okay? When I'm more ready.'

- 'Okay but.. I'm gonna make you. Really. A lot of kids, it destroys their whole lives!'

- 'A lot of kids?'

- 'Sad but true. Your dad isn't the only stupid, selfish, ignorant, er, victim of a perverse, uh, immoral system.'

- 'Sorry?'

- 'You won't have to go home Maxie. Unless the cops or thugs catch you. I won't let that be forced by law, I think I can promise you. And we'll work out how to protect little Kathy okay.'

There was a silence, just my horrible breathing. I didn't dare say any more..

- 'I think you're strong enough to learn to forget it all and, and even have a good sex life... Hopefully.'

- 'Yeah sure. Tell me what you did to Barney then.'- I said, hoping to change the subject.

- 'Are you sure you don't want to just go on explaining? Now you've started.'- but I was shaking my head - 'We'll talk later then, you just try and remember everything.'

- 'Tell me **your** secrets Maggie.'- I was really curious.

- 'Yes well.. Well the truth is I'm not into fellas at all myself. For me they're just dull. But that time was a bit different. It was me doing it to er, him.'- She tittered and blushed.

- 'I wouldn't know about that.'

- 'I rode him like a rodeo bronco. Well, actually I've never ridden a bronco. But it took him ages to, uh...you know. I had to..'

The image made me crack up laughing.

I started whooping like a cowboy film. Rolling onto the rug by the fire.

But then I couldn't stop it. Clutching my tummy and kicking my bare feet in the air.

Waterfalls of laughter, washing my traumas down the drain.

- 'How do you make them do it then?'- I spluttered.

Sniffing and wiping my tears.

Then exploding into more hilarity, as she knelt down in front of me, grinning.

- 'Most guys climax before they even get their pants off.'- she said. - 'Don't worry about that.'

- 'So is this your good good secret?'- I said, controlling my hysteria.

But I knew already it wasn't.

-*'No way that's not it. I done it on purpose see. Guess why?'*-

At that moment I really saw Maggie super clear, like. My eyes zoomed in on her.

On her tummy and elbows now, head in hands looking up at me.

Smiling to her ears and oozing energy.

So I knelt down in front of her

She was gorgeous and glowing and wonderful.

And I wish wish *wish* she were here again.

We rubbed noses, joined unexpectedly in a girls kiss.

She showed no sign of stopping so I had to break off.

-*'You're pregnant of course.'* - I said, catching my breath.

-*'Bingo!'* - says she. Smacking her lips. -*'And she's gonna be a girl!'* -

-*'Yippeee.'* - I whooped again. -*'That's great Maggie!'* -

Then she pulled up her smock and showed me her belly.

I laid my hands on her, half expecting it to jump.

-*'Look look how she's growing, I'm more than four months gone, see I'm changing every day.'* -

-*'You really wanted a kid. I'm so happy for you.'* -

-*'Course I did. Course I do. And look at my breasts. They're all big and pointy already.'* -

-*'You're right, and your nipples are big.'* - I touched them with my fingers and she shivered and laughed. -*'How brilliant.'*

-*'I want to have a girl. But I don't want a husband see, I mean, I don't need a man at all.'* -
.....[ref.22]

I cupped her tummy in my hands and she put hers on top.

-*'Does she move yet?'* - We were holding a baby girl inside of her. -*'Oh Maggie this is great, just great!'* -

-*'She doesn't really move, she's just floating in there, dreaming'* -

She leaned her head on my shoulder

A tear fell on my hand, next thing we were both crying with happiness, and rubbing the tears on her swollen tummy.

-*'I wish you were **my** mother Maggie.'* -

-*'Huh! You're a tiny bit big for a baby. We could be like, er, sisters.'* -

-*'I'll take my turn at being mama. Does she have a name?'* -

-*'I thought of Moonbeam, she was conceived on the full moon.'* -

-*'The kids might slag her off... No no, it's a grand name!'* -

-*'Doesn't anyone know?'* -

-*'Yes, Marie and Joanna. But I thought I'd wait before going public.'* -

-*'What about Barney then?'* -

-*'That's what I've come to tell him.'* -

-*'What a surprise! Maybe he'll, um, want to marry you or something.'* -

-*'That's why I'm nervous, I mean, fellas are so weird and possessive. But he's always been okay, um, and he's great with kids.'* -

She lay back on the pillows and I leaned to listen to her belly.

-*'Look how my tummy button's opened out, that's a good sign.'*- she said. And I kissed it.
-*'We can manage him, don't worry, I'll help you.'*-
-*'That's it yeah, help me. We'll just make him feel good about it. Half this macho stuff is blokes worrying how other fellas will see them.'*-
-*'Oh yeah? But is he really different?'*-
-*'I hope so.. anyway we'll soon find out.'*- she smiled. Staring right in my eyes as a silence lengthened.

-*'Maybe you'd like to take up with old Barney yourself?'*- she asked suddenly.
-*'What!. I need a family not a partner. Though he is definitely fanciable.'*-
-*'There's all kinds of families you know.'*-

The last thing I wanted was a man, or a baby for that matter. But feeling with Maggie was so wonderful, like, holding each other and Moonbeam inside of her, that I felt like I changed in those minutes.

From a silly runaway girl into a real woman.

I was really so lucky and happy to be friends with Maggie Bellows
I felt what it's like to be pregnant. A bit anyway.
And I felt like she really was my mother. And my sister.
And my daughter as well. Why not?
And, why not, the Goddess herself. All rolled in one.

Just then Barney came in. We just stayed embracing.
Grinning and snuffling like happy idiots.

-*'Hi Maggie. Hi Maxie.'*- It was the first time he'd ever called me Maxie.

-*'Wow you've made a big fire.. Mmm smells great.'*-
He knelt down and kissed us both, shedding his disgustingly filthy wet coat.
-*'You're looking much better Maxie.'*-
-*'I'm fine now.'*- I said. Leaning my cheek on Maggie's pregnant breast.

-*'Pour us some wine Barney. And come and sit here. Your stew needs a little bit more time.'*-
-*'Wine, food, fire, I'm impressed. Really I'm curious, what's the party for?'*- He was filling the glasses.
-*'You'll have to guess the reason why.'*- I said.
-*'I'm impressed anyway, and I feel guilty, you've transformed my dump.'*-
-*'That wouldn't be all that difficult.'*- Maggie murmured.
-*'Just come and sit down. Oh thanks.'*- I said as I got my glass. -*'You're in for a shock you know. Guess what happened!'*-
-*'Um..You've fallen in love with Maggie, but that's no surprise, I expected that.'*-
I grinned at him and snuggled up to her.
-*'Good guess Barney.'*- I said. -*'But that's not the secret.'*-
-*'You're wanted by the police.'*-
-*'Yes but no.'*-
-*'Um, you're...'*-

-*'Listen to me.'*- said Maggie. Her voice suddenly hard. -*'You've been my friend since I was a kid, right.'*-

-*'Yes well. We've had our moments I suppose.'*- He sipped his wine.

-*'No seriously... I prefer to stay friends with you. Just the best of friends. Not your partner or anything else.'*-

-*'I don't get it. Neither of us wants a partner, we know that.'*-

-*'But I want a baby girl.'*-

-*'Yeah well...'*- He still didn't get it.

-*'Will you still be my friend when I tell you the secret?'*-

-*'How can I say? Yes I will, okay. Unless you've murdered my mother or something?'*-

-*'Wake up please... I'm nearly four months pregnant.'*-

-*'What? Really? Wow that's great like, congrats like, I mean, how brilliant for you.'*-

-*'I'm glad you see it like that.'*-

-*'Of course why wouldn't I...'*-

-*'You're the father Barney.'*-

His face went blank. His mouth went slack.

Mister Maguire was totally stuck for words.

-*'Remember that massage session when you were having your schizo breakdown?'*-

-*'Um.. sorry did you, um, fill me in... '*-

-*'We made love and I got pregnant.'*-

There were a tense few seconds. Then Barney exploded laughing. Hugging Maggie. Hugging me. Swigging and spilling wine. The three of us rolling on the floor, laughing and snorting.

-*'You did it on purpose didn't you. You mixed some magic milk when I was, er, off the planet.'*-

-*'I knew I was fertile those days, yes. The moon was full and I did hope it would happen.'*-

-*'You saved my life, then you, you... It's a planned child..'*- His eyes were popping. — *'Hey wow I'm gonna be a gay dad!'*-

-*'She's a 'she' not an 'it'. You'll have to stop being so wild, Barney, and take proper care of yourself.'*- I sounded like my mother.

-*'Okay ladies you win.'*- he said, hands on his head -*'I'll do everything it takes.'*-

Maggie wanted us to keep quiet one more day, to tell her family first. We'd have to wait a bit to celebrate.

She would have a baby girl called Moonbeam. Okay well, it didn't seem such a bad idea at the time.

Chapter eight

Christo joins The Free

-‘*Hey here comes the old lap dog himself.*’-

It was after seven by the time Christo Rylee left his office in the old transport Works and made his way slowly down the steep concrete steps, across the yard and out the big iron gates.

The gatekeeper mouthed an obscenity, in place of his usual smile.

Christo walked on, ignoring him. His firm step and straight back belying his sixty four years. A big bluff smiling man, but a hard one. He had worked here for fifteen years and done his time as a blacksmith. Before rising to full time union official..

And he had prospered in that position. A man of transparent principle. The workers knew and trusted him, the warm smile, the camaraderie. Then the sudden flashing insight into people and situations.

Over the years he had risen in the Union, and his name had become a byword in the vast sprawling works. He had that knack of conveying that each person was somehow noticed and special to him.

But now an early group of night shift workers passed him by. Greeting the grand old man with hostile glances. Barely concealing their sneers.

The management too had come to like and respect Christo Rylee. For after the displays of power and the fiery rhetoric he would bring the various parties to a workable compromise. He had become an important cog in the institution. For in truth there had been a little leeway here, during and even after the good years. In the age old battle between Capital and Labour.

Christo’s mind was diving into the past. How could the bastards do this to him?

A job in the Works had always been considered a lifer, so that when parts of it closed down, there was only tighter competition for jobs. The rest of the economy might go, but we believed the Works would remain.

By the time he reached his middle fifties Christo was famous. Game for anything, sound as a bell. He’d helped negotiate complex disputes up and down the country. The bus and lorry drivers, the electricity engineers and postal workers...

But times had changed, irrevocably, as the private sector collapsed, and the State itself tottered towards bankruptcy. He was asked to do the impossible. The industrial workforce was slashed and chopped again, to cut back corporate losses

Christo realized he had no umbrella, as a squall of wind and rain swept up the street.

A line of redundancy deals, productivity agreements and doubled up jobs.

We struck at last, and lost, and took voluntary wage cuts. And struck and lost again and the power of the Unions was broken. Christo and his fellow officials had to be paid by the State.

But he stayed put, working against the tide, and still respected. Families with one member working could still survive, pooling the diminishing wages with the dwindling pittance of the dole.

A gang of yunkers were walking behind him. Were they just laughing? No no, they were openly mocking him now.

People had flocked to the cities, the population surged and poverty had been half forgotten in the wasteful decades of the boom. A century of predator capitalism had devastated the planet. Now the foreign owned companies had vanished and the locals were closing down.

It was only the Co-Op Pools that saved people from penury, with their self-help social services, usurped housing and money-free goods.

Profits dried up. Shipping routes were becoming impassable. The climate and costs made only losses possible. There was no new investment and markets shriveled up. The vicious circle went round the world and back.

Diving for refuge, looking for selected memories.

It was Christo himself who negotiated the deal, whereby the Pools had taken control of the redundant North West Works, and leased the plant and equipment there.

But they had moved in and never paid a cent for rent or hire. Had transformed the place, with an apparently thriving business. Repairing and adapting their fleets of air and alcohol and gas powered vehicles. Factory and farm machinery, scrap metal foundries. Dozens of specialist workshops. Plus a De-School center, and a big part of the engineering faculty of the Free Uni.

Economic nonsense. Yet the abandoned yards had sprouted permaculture gardens. Monster murals, windmills and play centers. Music, theater and manic activity.

It only worked because they hardly paid people, of course. Offering instead free food, some goods and protection. In fact it was a racket! Plus they voted on almost anything...with those weekly computer elections.

Christo disliked them, they were everywhere, like an invading plague. They took what was not theirs, and there was no room for the likes of him in their scheme. Their ideas had caught on like a virus, as a practical way of avoiding destitution.

Their biggest trick was the Pools free credit card...What a mafia!.

He knew that at least two of his own family had joined up. This black economy was easily the biggest employer in the area.

The rain had eased off, but a fierce wind was gusting up leaves and litter. Whirling clouds between the blocks of flats. Christo pulled down his cap and gritted his teeth. He would never cry.

And now the Free Union! Mushrooming overnight within the Works themselves. Demanding the impossible, trebled wages! Refusing negotiation and building to a strike. Putting enormous pressure on Christo to come up with the goods.

Cowboys. Extremists, he would fight them all the way. So that today, as always he carried a briefcase of papers on his walk home. Down the potholed street behind the occupied flats. And not a hooligan nor a mugger would dare touch him. For he was Christo Rylee and they knew it.

He had never believed the Management would totally betray him. Would they abandon the railways altogether? Would they really throw out men of forty years service with no pension, and just a few months pay?

Yet today that final blow has fallen. The Works and nearly all the rail lines will close completely. The logic of Capital has caught up with us at last.

* * *

Christo Rylee walked straight, as always, but his step was not quite firm, and his mind was reeling. Something had snapped inside of him when he opened the hand delivered letter.

Sitting blank at his desk, gazing out his filthy cracked window at the dismal yards beyond.

So it was left to his colleague, Paul Durfy, to get the last ditch redundancy campaign under way.

He was shocked, and in truth afraid.

For the first time he was afraid and ashamed to face the workers.

-*'They can't do it. They can't do it.'*- he muttered again, as he entered the shady yards of Green Street Pool.

He just wanted to get home. It wasn't far now, but there, by the playground, stood three angry looking yunkers, aggressive in Clan Warrior gear, bare chested in leather shorts, mili-caps and snarling dog tattoos.

-*'Hey here comes the old lap dog himself.'*- the woman jeered.

-*'Hey Rylee you ancient bastard. Where are your promises now?'*-

Christo walked ahead, ignoring them, but just then the other young fella bounded across to block his path.

And then the woman had pushed him. He was staggering back.

Tensing himself to fight, banishing his exhaustion and aching back.

-*'Too high and mighty to talk to us now are you?'*-

-*'No, no, no.'*- he blurted. -*'I'm really sorry I never thought they'd do it.'*-

-*'You knew!'*- the first young fella snarled. -*'You'll get your pension all right you scabby bastard.'*-

He didn't reply. They had in fact offered him a minimal pension.

A crowd of kids had come running, and Sheila from the Playground Pool.

-*'Ah leave the old wanker alone.'*- she said, arms folded.

-*'I will fucking not! This man is a two faced gombeen scab!'*-

As the shouting began the De-School project kids moved in closer, suddenly one of them grabbed and twisted the briefcase from Christo's hand, was off, dodging, followed by his friend.

-*'Hey give that back!'*- He ran a few useless steps, white hair flying, then stopped, suddenly dizzy, and had to bend over, head in hands.

-*'Are you all right Mister Rylee?'*-

Sheila was holding his arm. Nodding and gesticulating to the Clanners.

-*'Oh all right then.'*- said the first lad. -*'We'll get your bag back, if that's okay with...'*-

-*'Christo. Christo?'*-

-*'Is he hurt? Did they hurt him?'*-

He heaved himself straight, tears streaming, and pushed himself clear of the little crowd, walking quickly, back straight, towards his home.

* * *

Coming to the little gate a memory struck him, from half a century back, a smaller kid had beaten him up and he had run home crying.

The exact same helpless shame, helpless fury!

He grimaced, laughing through his tears and feeling in his jacket for the door-key. Hoping to avoid Pauline in the kitchen.

But she must have been watching out for him. The door opened in his face.

-*'Christo. Oh dearest what happened to you?'*-

He was going to go past her, brush the old woman aside.

Then he embraced her, suppressing a shuddering sob.

-*'They're closing the Works'*- he said. -*'and the kids have robbed me bag.'*-

He managed to get through to his study and slumped down heavily at the desk, where he supped the hot, sweet tea that Pauline brought him.

Slowly his senses returned. The briefcase arrived at the doorstep, with apologies from the boys, he took out the letter again. Shit, the papers were disordered, maybe they'd seen that he *had*, in fact, been informed of the closure before the workers, but hadn't believed it.

Christo read through the final letter again, warily looking for an angle, like the old campaigner he was. But there was just no way to fight on. His duty was to negotiate a redundancy deal, but no, he thought, even this chore would be denied him.

For now the Free Union would have their day. The pathetic redundancy payments could not defuse it, the remaining workers would no longer be divided. No no, they would call one of their Assemblies, and occupy the Works in league with the CoOp Pool robbers. The place must be worth millions, even as scrap at today's prices. [*ref. 3. anarchism*]

The police might have to attack. God knows what would happen then.

Christo was coming out of his shock. His thinking coming hard and clearer and his conclusions logical at least. He was out of the fight and his type of top down Union was dead as a dodo. Both sides would blame him of course.. a convenient scapegoat, impotent, powerless!

Yet still his mind was racing. He had to resist!

* * *

A low knock came to the door. It was his wife, Pauline, smiling but scared and worried.

-*'Sasha's here to see you. I said you weren't well but she says it's important.'*-

Sasha was his favourite granddaughter. An unlikely flirting friendship had grown up between them. He had always tried to keep in touch with the youth and he found her quick, sharp and sympathetic.

Sasha's friends respected her glamorous granddad, even while scorning him as a patriarch.

- *'Thanks, you can send her in, I need a bit of cheering up.'*-

She walked in without knocking, and his spirits lifted at the sound of her voice.

The sight and swish of her long black hair. Sensual, and springy in Clan Eagle style, with a black feathery skirt, bird of paradise tattoos and green militia flying cap.

- *'Yes thanks Granny.'*- she was saying - *'But why won't you come in and join us?'*-

He half lifted himself.

- *'Siddown pardner.'*- she said. A hand in his white shock of hair, then peering into the watery blue eyes.. - *'You survived so.'*-

- *'Of course I did.'*- He was grinning already. - *'You're much too early for the wake.'*-

- *'Very funny.'*- Sasha had sat cross legged on the carpet. - *'I wanted to see you anyway, but as it happens I do have an offer for you, from the Free Union. Everyone's raging over what happened.'*-

Christo groaned. Turned his head away. There was a silence. Then the wind was rising with a long moan.

- *'They got to you too then.'*- he said at last.

- *'C'mon Grandpa you know I was always in with them. The Pool not the Union.'*-

- *'Same difference.'*- he said, looking down. - *'A crowd of bleeding hooligans.'*-

The low knock came again. There was a tense silence as Pauline brought in more tea and cake.

- *'Don't go away.'*- said Sasha. Rolling to her feet and taking the tray.

- *'No no, I've things to do in the kitchen.'*- She backed out, pulling the door closed.

- *'The way you treat that woman is disgraceful.'*-

There was another pause. Both of them were irritated.

- *'You can't teach an old horse to jump hoops.'*- he said, predictably.

At that moment the door opened again. No knock. And Pauline spoke loudly..

- *'Now Christo you just behave yourself dear and listen to Sasha.'*- And she had left again before he could reply.

Christo's mouth fell open. Sasha was laughing, then she kissed him on the cheek and went to pour herself tea.

- *'So that's it Christo it's your own decision of course. You were always the smart guy so I'm sure you see how things stand.'*-

She put down the teacup and went on, suddenly fast and violent..

- *'You're washed up Grandpa, kaput. Your Union's smashed and now they propose to crucify you. After twenty five fucking years pacifying their workers for them.'*-

- *'More like thirty years.'*-

- *'So you just gonna play dead, like, sit round and dig your garden and, and die of boredom and frustration!'*- She stopped, her face flushed, her voice had risen to a shout.

He was taken aback, by Pauline more than Sasha, but his mind was running ahead. He knew this game backwards after all, only this time the negotiating issue was himself. He waited till Sasha squatted down.

-*'I had thought about the garden.'*- he said. -*'It is in a bad state.'*-

Sasha laughed and told herself to cool it, rolling over on her tummy, feet in the air.

-*'That's fine then. You're afraid to fight back. Grand so..'*-

-*'I couldn't say if I'll fight or not?'*- he said. -*'Till I hear all of your proposal.'*-

-*'Okay here we go.'*- She folded into a kneel, palms out. -*'The offer is this, two in fact. First, part time work, training young people. Five hours a week.'*-

-*'What? In what? I'm redundant for Christ's sake.'*-

-*'You're a blacksmith.'*-

-*'I haven't been a blacksmith in twenty years!'*-

-*'It'll be a basic introduction, no problem to you. And part two, you're invited to work with us. Organizing the takeover. We need your knowledge of the Works, and you being in it would swing a lot of older people our way.'*-

-*'You want me to just change sides, after all that's happened!'*- He threw up his arms.

-*'You'll have to change your ideas as well. We work with teams and Assemblies... no power structure, no leaders.. No more patronizing and constant shit-ons. No fucking Patriarchy!'*

Silence again. Both fidgeting. The wind still whining away.

-*'If you need time to decide.'*- She was scratching an itchy armpit, sniffing her fingers -*'Oh shit I think I've got a flea..'*-

-*'I need more information. Takeover you say, what takeover? I mean. I figured they'd occupy the place, rob what they could get away with for scrap and..'*-

-*'You're a year out of date Daddio.'*-

-*'What can you do with a bankrupt redundant train and bus Works?'*-

-*'Between you and me and the shithouse wall..'*

Cross your heart and hope to die roaring.'-

Sasha rapped from the *Floppy Willies* hit.

-*'Okay but..'*- He was smiling despite himself. -*'but I'll be dead soon enough at any road.'*-

-*'If things work out with the bus and rail workers, or what's left of them, and the Pools Federation, um, ..'*-

-*'Yes yes..'*-

-*'We'll be taking over the lot, the lines, the rolling stock, the engines, the stations, the buses. There's a lot of talk of opening disused lines. There's an advanced plan to move the biggest supply depot there, Merca-Pools.'*-

-*'You're joking. They can't do that!'*-

-*'The rail worker's want it. And the buses, they've been on strike for months, this Works closure couldn't have been timed better for us. If it had to happen at all.'*-

-*'But it's ridiculous. The cost!..'*-

-*'It's happening Christo. The country's bankrupt. Even the banks went under, with all the credit scams and the debt and mortgage strikes, or got gobbled up and stripped down. Capitalism is just a huge fraud, everyone knows it. The government had to borrow from the Pools Credit Unions for God's sake. They're denied more loans for not paying even part of the interest on what they owe.'*-

[ref.29 zeitgeist

-*'But how can you do it, really?'*-

-*'We need your help. It's the same all over, with health, with education. It's happening right now! Either we make something good from what's left or it just stops.. Including food, or housing, even the legal system and..'*-

Christo scratched his itchy two day beard.

-*'The police, or the army, they'll stop you.'*- he said. But Sasha laughed.

-*'Maybe they will all right, but those porkies are scared shitless of us right now. And the army..'*- She shrugged -*'They're hardly being paid any more, and the Free are in the army too you know.'*-

-*'Okay even if I grant you that. You know the railways lose millions every year. You can't finance heavy industry on community spirit. It's just silly.'*-

-*'You're not listening. Clean out your earholes. My bet is the Capitalist war economy is a helluvalot sillier.'*-

-*'What do you mean?'*-

-*'We don't even believe in money. But as it happens we got plenty of it. All those millions that were written off as bad debt in the last crash.'*-

-*'You're joking, the Credit Union is small time stuff.'*-

-*'Maybe baby. But we got endless free energy and friends multiplying all over the planet. Course we lack resources, so we have to trade for some things, and it's amazing what you can find in the meantime.'*-

-*'Or take over!'*-

Sasha was still jiggling to the catchy tune in her head.

-*'There's warehouses packed full of essential goods in this town, because only a handful of wealthy people have money to buy.'*-

-*'Of course there are'*- He leaned forward to pour more tea. -*'I didn't realize the conspiracy had gone so far, that's all.'*-

-*'Maybe you didn't really want to know.'*- she paused. -*'Anyway it's up to yourself now. Our proposition stands.. You've always seen yourself as working for the people of this area. You could've been a big union boss downtown.*

That stands to your credit. But now if you really want to fight on, and I know you do, you just gotta swallow your pride and listen to me and Pauline. We're organizing ourselves now, it's hard, but we still need you. Nobody knows the Works so well they say.'-

Christo Rylee paused to survey his options. He didn't find any.

The good negotiator- he thought- knows when to submit tactically and attack on completely different ground.

And just like that he made his decision.

-*'Okay'*- he said at last. -*'I'll work with you.'*-

Sasha was bouncing onto her feet hugging him and slapping his back.

-*'Granny come in.'*- she called. -*'Great stuff I imagine that cost you. Now that's settled, the Works Assembly is tomorrow morning at eleven in the old canteen. You can speak if you like, as an ordinary worker of course.'*-

He nodded, his mood lifting as various possibilities started flashing into his mind.

-*'And the Takeover begins immediately after?'*-

-*'With or without the rail and bus workers who have their Assemblies tonight.'*-

Christo shrugged and smiled.

-*'It does make a sort of sense to me I suppose.'*- Then he laughed out loud and thumped the desk. -*'I will speak. Of course I'll bleeding speak, pardon my French. And I'll support the takeover, which is what you want of me. Those slimy bastards will regret the day they double crossed us!'*-

-*'Right then.'*- says she. -*'There's fighting talk for you. Listen, um, I'd like to talk more but I need to leave. I'm supposed to be at another meeting at..'*-

He leaned back in his frayed leather chair and breathed deep. Just enjoying his granddaughter. She produced a new cellphone, tapped a few keys and spoke, bouncing on the sofa.

-*'Hello Barreler yes yes yes... that's okay he's with us and he'll speak in favour tomorrow. yes.. yes of course.'*- Now she was over with her arm around him. -*'Yes I told you he would, right, see you then.'*- And she giggled.

-*'You know something.'*- said Christo. -*'You're a terrible bleeding manipulator.'*-

-*'Runs in the family I think.'*-

-*'That's for sure.'*-

-*'Listen you just relax, your speech will be five minutes maximum. I'll come to your office in the morning and go to the meeting with you, like, moral support.'*-

-*'You don't have to.'*-

-*'But I'd like to anyway. We're gonna have fun!'*-

-*'Round ninety two..Christo Rylee joins the anarchists.'*- he grinned. -*'Well I suppose the yard can wait, the snails will get another reprieve.'*-

-*'Okay great, sorry to rush off. No don't get up I can find my way out.'*-

She had already kissed him, and was sidling backwards out the door, waving madly.

Chapter nine

Sliding thru Walls

-‘I’d just spoken the unspeakable in public.’-

Maxie

I slept really badly on Barney’s lumpy sofa. Woke up a few times and finally got up for a piss. It was still dark, only for the streetlights. Put on all my clothes and my wooly hat, quietly as I could. I did feel bad about disturbing old Barney, since he had hardly slept, but he didn’t even wake

up. I got a bowl of cereal, with water for lack of milk, and headed for the back of his wardrobe. My chance to go surfing!

Okay it took me five minutes to figure out how to switch the fecking thing on, but finally it warmed up and I clicked open the Wiki tutorial.

Then I heard footfalls. Plodding louder up the stairs. A neighbour who worked nights, why not? Or my dad with the cops, coming to take me home!

I pulled the stool in among the jackets, as, sure enough, the lock clicked, the high black door opened with a slow creak, and a figure came silently into the dim room. Came straight towards my hiding place.

Hands came through the clothes.

Icy fingers touched my neck.

I squawked like a trod on chicken, and so did he. Both jerking away

It was young Jerry, who else, then we were both gasping with relieved laughter.

The light came on. Barney had woken up and rolled out of bed. Crouching behind the chair. Maybe with his little pistol.

-‘Sorry Barney. Sorry, we scared each other.’- I said, as he groaned

-‘Yeah, s-s-sorry man.’- Jerry added. *-‘G-Go back to sleep, the dawn h-hasn’t even cracked yet.’-*

Jerry showed me how to use the computer. Quicker than the confusing tutorial. He would be in

fifth form, if he still went to the school. Now he did Free Uni with the Clan and he knew plenty.

.[see Glossary]

-‘Here listen to this.’- he whispered, passing me one of the earphones. *-‘The new one from The F-Floppies.’-*

There was hardly room for two on the stool. Our backsides sticking out through the jackets. But I didn’t feel scared of him at all, since he was a famous Gay runaway, I mean..

-‘What’s it like, to be gay, then?’- I asked [ref.22a,22c.]

-‘You’re n-not supposed to ask things like that.’- he sounded surprised.
-‘Why not? I’m curious.’-
-‘For me b-being gay is just normal, only if I have a crush on someone it’s, uh. it’s always a boy.’-
-‘What about er, sex?’-

I just thought I’d ask.

-‘Wh-wh-what.. Well. I haven’t actually g-got much experience.’- he admitted quietly in his trem-
bly voice.

-‘And I’ve actually got about zero.’- I replied.

-‘I fell in love with that g-guy G-Gary. In sixth form, but it was a disaster. We were caught k-kissing,
twice, it was really bad luck. So stupid.’

-‘Didn’t you get badly beaten up?’- I remembered.

-‘Later, by the Young Hoods, plus we got expelled instead of th-them. My father went m-monkey-
shit and got me locked up in a p-private rehabilitation clinic. It was horrible.’-

-‘Barney told me about it.’- I whispered. — ‘It’s shocking, I mean like.. ’-

-‘Course I escaped after only three days.’- he said, brightening up.

-‘How did you know where to go and, and what to do?’-

-‘I knew B-Barney. From the projects.’-

-‘Me too.’- I gave him a side hug on the stool. -‘We’re in the same boat you and me.’-

-‘There’s loads of yunkers dropping out these days, and schools c-closing up.’-

-‘Why, why is that?’-

I was quizzing him like a kid.

-‘Search me... Because the place is b-bankrupt? Coz the sea is too rough for ships?..’-

-‘Do you have a crush on Barney?’- I whispered, making him catch his breath.

-‘S-Sorry.. Oof.. Well, I fancied him last year, something rotten, on the p-play project.’-

-‘Oh yeah, and did you, er, have it off, um.. ’-

I’d popped the golden question.

-‘No no no, he’s a f-fake gay, I mean..’- he said in my ear. -‘He’s never had a g-gay lover, since I
knew him. Okay I do fancy him still, a bit but...’-

So maybe Barney wasn’t really gay. I didn’t know that.

-‘Me too, kind of.. ’- I was still whispering. -‘He has some big hang ups, and me too, gigantic
ones.’-

-‘Oh yes he’s totally screwed up alright. But harmless, more or less, and sh-shy like me..’-

-‘Did you see his long, er, yoke?’-

-‘His w-w-willy! Ha ha. He’s real embarrassed about it.’- he exclaimed. But very quietly.

-‘Looks like a long nosed anteater to me.’-

That got him. He nearly fell off the stool trying to suppress his giggles so as not to wake up Barney.
He was sixteen but just a big boy really.

-‘You’re right, you’re right.’- He whispered, wiping his eyes. -‘They g-gtave him this Dumbo
tattoo but he wouldn’t stick it on.’-

Remembering that finished him off. I fiddled with the mouse while he died laughing.

We were waiting for the website of the Brother-Hood, that my dad is in, or really for their youth section the Young-Hoods. They had a 'missing kids' section, and he showed me his photo in it.

- 'Don't worry. It's nothing like you look now.'

I spoke into his free ear, the next track had come on our earphones.

- 'But maybe my dad will put me on it as well.'

- 'That's why I'm sh-showing you. Look at this..' - he said. And clicked 'Latest News'.

My photo flashed up on the screen.

It was two years old, a long time ago when you're fifteen. We were looking at a tubby little blonde with an angry grimace. That shitty snap was taken at some horrific family picnic on the beach, but in this case it served me well.

- 'Oh crap Jerry they're after me all right.'

- 'Nobody would g-guess that was you, honestly. And there's really just a few of them, they p-pay people to do all this... But you're right, you should move out of this place, ASAP.'

- 'Oh God no! Look here, no here, it says 'She stole money, damaged property and assaulted her baby sister.' My dad wrote that for sure.. What a liar, what a shithead, what a pig!'

How could my own father write total vicious lies about me? I saw now he'd always thought of me as his private property. I'd exposed him, just with rumour. But he replied with total war!

- 'I can't believe it! He's just making up lies, like.. off the wall!'

- 'That's nothing, they once said I threatened to b-bite off Killian's dick.'

I almost exploded with fury and laughter at the same time. I was slipping off the stool, half kneeling in the wardrobe.

Before I could recover he'd flashed to a photo of Killian Bate in a shiny suit.

- 'Killian! He's the one that called me 'filthy slut' - I gulped. - 'He thinks he's some kind of Rambo hero or something.'

- 'He wanted to k-kill me. His stepdad trained him as a nazi, to k-keep his brothers in line. He hates me because I know how to shame him, and he has a thing about g-gays.'

Just thinking about that creepy guy made me boil and shiver.

- 'That's why I came early.' Now he was really whispering. *- 'Finally today the C-Clanners are gonna take over their Youth R-Recreation Center.'*

It took me a moment to take that in, with so many surprises.

- 'What? The old church hall club by the school?'

I had never even been in it. Girls needed to be invited, and only girls they liked..

- 'That's it. The Hoods hardly use the p-place at all. It'll be a caff and a free shop and a disco and, uh, a P-Projects Center, for the Clan Groups and..'

- 'How brilliant! Right by the school. There'll be holy war.. but won't they just send the cops and throw us out?'

I pictured dozens of Sister Bernies with the police.

- 'I dunno. But they're not expecting that. Some of the p-priests support us, you know, and teachers too. Then there's the old desaintified ch-church behind it and..'

-*'Unsancticated you mean. But wow..the Hoods will go haywire.'*- I was holding in a giggle with my palm.

-*'I only wish I could see Killian's face.. Nothing happens there for donkeys' years, I leave, and three days later wow. Just my luck. But when will all this happen?.'*-

The stool was too small so I squatted beside him, pushing back Barney's shirts. A little light was filtering in, the dawn was breaking.

-*'They're meeting at lun.. at lunchtime in the gym. There's a whole l lorry-full of g-g-gear for a party. I was asked to help, to show up those nazi boys.'*-

-*'You're joking of course, you can't go back in there Jerry, they'll kill you.'*-

He must be mad.

-*'You know the side doors of the gym?'*-

-*'No, there aren't any, oh yes the fire emergency doors.'*-

-*'That's the idea, we all denounce them in the school y-yard.'* .

-*'Very easy to provoke. They'll beat you up on sight.'*- I warned.

-*'I hope not. They say it's too p-p-public. The SOFAS will make a video.'*-

But he looked very unsure about that.

-*'Oh great. We can watch the replay of them massacring you.'*-

-*'The idea is.. Killian says, 'You and who's army?' We click our f-fingers, and a hundred crazy Clanners come out the f-fire doors.'*-

-*'I'd love to see that! But they could stab you or.. or anything.'*-

He was clicking songs on a cool music site, with one earphone each. Then just when I was jiggling into the music he'd switch to another.

-*'Yeah you're right. Um y-yeah well.. They'll give me a b-bullet proof vest but.. Okay I won't do it if I'm the only one. The rest are ch-chickening out.'*-

-*'They are really scary fellas..'*-

-*'Yeah..They'll just have to d-drop the shaming part.'*-

Now I'd persuaded him not to do it I was getting into the idea myself.

-*'Maybe I gotta help you then, I can't miss this, I mean. They did call me a stinky whore and nearly ruined my life.'*-

Why do I say these things?

-*'Well if you want. We do really need someone, I can get another v-vest.'*-

-*'A stab proof vest!'*-

-*'Hey.. and I got c-coloured contact lenses for you, I'll show you, here, on m-me, they're just glass, like, they don't change anything, but you look so different.'*-

He slipped one in, looking awfully odd, in the glowy computer-light.

-*'L-Look, then I put in the jaw guard and..'*-

-*'Hang on, I can't see you, is that you in there?'*- I asked.

-*'Hey I forgot. I've got croissants... and milk. Come on out Maxie, let's have breakfast!'*-

-*'Let me try the lenses first.'*- I shoved him roughly aside. Forgetting to whisper.

-*'By the mirror... How cool.'*-

I yanked back the blanket curtain

With brown eyes I was really someone else.

-*'Look. Look. I'm brown eyed Maxie. Bye bye Linda, bye bye blondie blue..'*-

* * *

The SOFAS came and picked us up in one of those new air/gas vans. We sat on a hard bench, SOFAS refers to the 'Shit On Fascists And Sexists' group, I think. Barney didn't want me and Jerry to go along, but he didn't say anything in public.. They gave us a little megaphone, a zap wand attached to a motorbike battery in a back-sack, plus a written bit. And good advice that only made us nervous.

-*'So should I wear the contacts or not?'*-

-*'I will anyway, and the g-gum-guard. Some teacher or p-prefect might harass us going in.'*-

Jerry was happy I was going along.

-*'Or a Young Hood with a long knife!'*- I said dramatically.

-*'Don't say that, I'm sh-shaking already.'*-

Not diplomatic. I forgot that he'd almost been stabbed to death by them.

-*'They say the assembly should finish in twenty minutes'*- said Sammy the driver, as we arrived at the school. -*'You can just go straight on in.'*

Now I was suddenly scared shitless. I wanted to grab onto Jerry's hand, but that'd be idiotic. I could see he was literally quivering. In fact he was crying.

We ducked our heads and raised our collars, and headed in, with the milling kids.

Through the still missing school gates where I nicked the daffodils just a few days before.

The runaways were coming for revenge.

-*'Th-thanks for coming Maxie. I c-c-can't turn back I...'*- he spluttered.

-*'Piece of piss pal.'*- But my voice broke as well. -*'We denounce these creeps, then we hit the party. We'll be flying.'*-

Up the graveled drive. Feeling very odd to be back in my drab uniform. Jerry was trying to disguise his limp by walking slow.

But that was even more obvious. Shooting furtive glances behind him.

There were prefects, and monitors as well, but they didn't know everyone. I saw Sister Bernie, already lining up first formers.

A regimental saint. We were coming through into the big yard.

-*'Linda? Is that you?'*-

My friend Keera was kissing me. So much for my dark eyes and red short hair.

-*'Sshh. I'm in disguise. We've come back to denounce the Hoods, we're gonna squat their Youth Club.'*-

-*'Sorry. What? Lin..um.. you're crazy..They got big steak knives!'*-

-*'We got a p-p-plan.'*- Jerry stuttered conspiratorially. -*'We're gonna turf them out.'*-

-*'Oh my great giddy aunt.'*- said Keera. Eyes popping. -*'You're the gay guy they tried to chop up.'*-

She was hurting my arm, gripping so hard, as we stopped by the ancient slide.

But fair play to her, she didn't just leave us.

A first drop of rain splashed off my cheek. Oh no not that!

-*'You're the public okay. Wait here by the slide, and run if.. if..'*- I told her.

-*'Cheer us if you dare.'*- Jerry added, but it came out squeaky.

The yard was big and square, just cracked concrete and empty but for the slide. Yunkers chatting and throwing shapes. Waiting to go back in, after waiting all morning to get out.

Somehow that yellow slide had remained in the playground. A solid iron thing, high and too well made, with generations of coats of paint and names scratched into it. I stepped onto the first rungs of the ladder.

Then I slipped out my gum shield and my false stomach, which was just a wooly, and kissed Keera goodbye.

Jerry handed me the little megaphone from his rucksack.

-I thought YOU were going to start.-

-I c-can't speak. Let's go up the slide'- he whispered.

-Killian Bate is a stupid bollix!'-

I yelled into the megaphone, from three steps up.

So what the hell.

It just came out a shocking feedback screech

-Who do we h-hate?'- Jerry just spoke into it, not touching.

-Killian Bate!'- I half whispered his name. But it came out loud. Everybody looked around and stopped what they were doing.

I'd just spoken the unspeakable in public.

-Who do we hate? Killian Bate.

Who do we hate? Killian Bate!'-

We moved a quick step higher up the slide.

-The Hoods are bullies and sadists and get paid by the fascists to divide us and destroy innocent people...'-

In principle we just had to keep reading the text..

-So we're all scared of them and ashamed to be black or female or gay and...'-

People were not rushing over. Just watching cagily. All the activists were in the meeting, it seemed.

But a couple of skinheads *were* approaching all right. Keera was clapping and now a few older blokes, maybe Jerry's mates.

-They called me a filthy whore and got me punished just coz I laughed at them.-

-They almost k-killed me for being g-gay. Then they got me expelled.- said Jerry bravely.

-Now we're all going to denounce them okay?'-

Now I knew this wasn't going to work.

-We need all the girls, the black kids, the gays and dykes and anyone who feels afraid. Or even you skins if you want to change sides.-

I was reading and adding a bit. Glancing up to see what happened.

-We need you all to line up here, pass over the slide, and say something in the megaphone.-

-Like 'I won't date with Killian Bate'.

The three big lads *were* lining up. They were the ones who'd chickened out, and a group was gathering.

Then Killian appeared. Cool and hairless.

Along with two more skins. Much too arrogant not to swallow the bait.

-You little stuttering cocksucker what brought you back here. Get down till I give you a kicking.

Barry, get him down, and that little frigid cunt.-'

-*'Come up and get me K-Killi d darling, I know you're g-g-gay as well.'*- Jerry crooned into the megaphone. Really winding him up.

That's when the yelling started. We retreated to the top step of the slide, wobbling together. The two skins were coming up, teeth bared and brandishing black socks, supposedly with their butcher's knives inside.

While Jerry wiggled the tiny electric wand in front of them, and I plied the megaphone.

-*'Don't let him grab it. Give him a zap'*- I screeched.

But the zapper didn't work. Colin was jabbing at our ankles.

All of us shouting mad things.

I was hurling any insults I could think of.

-*'Go learn to wank. You squirt. You stinky fart.'*-

That's when the stupid skinhead got a shock and fell off.

With just a yell, no flash or sizzle as I had imagined.

But Killian himself was climbing up the slide side.

Jerry was hiding behind, but now it was *me* he was raging at!

-*'We're gonna cut your tits you filthy slut...'*-

A stone from Keera whizzed between us.

-*'No girl can stand you coz you got no heart...'*-

Jerry managed to touch Killi's cheek with the wand.

He jerked, slipped, twisted and slid back down.

Shaming them didn't quite work, but we had electric backup.

Four thousand volts, but only milli-amps.

He shot off the slide and landed, badly on his bottom..

-*'Killian Bate..Out The Gate.. Who do we hate.....?'*-

I looked up and they were coming out the fire doors. All the black and yellow Clanners from the Assembly. Sauntering across the yard. Clapping and jeering.

Master Bate sat on his butt, silent with shock and awe.

Others had grabbed the two skinheads and taken their knife bags. The rest had disappeared.

-*'Hurray just in time.'*- I said in the megaphone. -*'This is the end of the Hoods and Killian Bate's rule.'*-

It wasn't like the dramatic *sting* I'd visualized, maybe a lot of kids were just confused.

But for the bullies, and all the bullied, things did change completely.

Because now everyone was joining in the chant, as Jerry's friends climbed the slide and came out with their comments.

Jessica, one of the organizers had climbed up, and spoke, or rather squawked, into the mini megaphone. On the video they had to re-do the sound..

-*'Let's denounce these sickoes then, so that their power is gone. When you slip down this slide, imagine you smash through the invisible wall, and come out in tomorrow's world!...'*-

-*'They wouldn't let me in the club because I'm black and have dreadlocks.'*- said Joanna, next in line.

-*'They said they'd cut Jerry's balls off and they'd do me too. We were too scared to fight them.'*- said Jerry's skinny friend.

-I had to do the cleaning and they wouldn't let me play.-

-Killian said I'd be raped if I wore my headscarf.- said that Muslim girl.

That was just the start of it. All the gay and black kids climbed the slide. Though most of them didn't comment. Then another gang of the girls tried sliding through..

-Me too. They scared me too. They ordered us about.-

-He called me a monkey and a prostitute.

-I'm just slipping down...'-

Jerry had taken the slide, so I was left holding the megaphone.

-Thanks everyone for saving us. Let's never let those nasty Hoods come back again.- was my comment I think..

Then I closed my eyes and slid down through. It's still a thrill, though I felt no invisible wall.

-Let them g-go. Let them run away. . No no don't hurt them that's their g-game.- said Jerry.

-We'll do you slowly for this.- Killian snarled at me and Jerry. *-You'll suffer till you die.-*

Pretty idiotic, as Jerry was trying to protect them.

He and his last skin were backing away from the shaming clapping crowd.

-And you, stupid Linda cunt,- he was pointing at me! — *'We're going to saw your head off.-*

I'm not sure he really said that. The fireworks were exploding behind us.

Then a rocket whooshed right past us.

The occupation had already begun.

Everyone turned to see the big banner unrolling, okay it got tangled up, down the side wall of the ex Church hall.

You could only read *'Occup... ..lan Center'* which was good enough, with some Warrior doing a dance on the flat part of the roof.

A superior sound system crackled into life.

-On behalf of the Clan Assembly we declare afternoon classes to be hereby canceled. Teachers, take a break. Everyone is invited here and now, to a hot chocolate smoothie and cakes party. Starting now and prepared by the amazing Wallabies group. Applause please.

And one more thing from the Assembly.. Disgraceful fascist behaviour will no longer be tolerated from anybody.-

A bit of a cheer went up, I got a rush of emotion as I saw we'd won.

I'd been in favour of publicly beating up Killian Bate and his gang. They said maybe later. But finally the SOFAS were right after all. More than revenge we needed to really win. To make them give it up, not provoke them to be heroes.

Tears of relief were streaming down my cheeks. I saw how shaming works, if you got enough support. Next in line those pigs who tried to rape me!

I saw all those people just turn the other way.

The stink of fear and threats just faded out.

Just like that... everyone just turned their backs and walked away.

Preferring a chocolate smoothie.

Keera was hugging me, I wiped my cheeks and sniffed

Killian's power in the school was gone. He turned into a pathetic twirp, his few thugs suddenly irrelevant.

It was just bad luck that the Hoods got rich and grew, and I now had a mortal enemy. The Brother-Hood would come back to haunt me.

Jerry was being carried over on his friends' shoulders, looking pleased and shy.

Me and Keera dived into the crowd, hand in hand.

They had crowbarred open a rusty iron gate, between the high school wall and the now squatted former church grounds.

The freezing rain had begun to shower us in earnest.

But everyone was laughing and hopping up and down, while queuing to get through.

Keeping each other warm.

And slipping through the high black wall.

Chapter ten

Horny, Bossy and Wild.

Shaking out the feathers of my giant snowy wings.

Maggie's 'getting pregnant party' was wild, but short, because she went home early to tell them all at the Assembly meeting at her house. Barney soon ushered everyone out, delighted to be a dad to be, ecstatic but exhausted.

-*You done quite well Barney.*'- I said. As I made him help me clear up. -*You took it better than we expected.*'-

He just grimaced and obeyed me, nodding his crazy mop.

-*My family will be even more puzzled. But that's their problem. My problem is I'm falling asleep and I need to send some messages. We're linking up the CLANS with Civil Defense and the Free Pools, building flood barriers. It's...*'-

-*Leave it till the morning, oh come on.*'- I insisted. -*We don't want a destroyed dad.*'-

He was stretching... groaning and yawning.

-*I could get up really early I suppose.*'- he conceded.

-*Come on now, get to bed now.*'-

How I got off on bossing him about!

But he just really had to check in the back of the wardrobe for a minute, so I stuck my head in with him and watched. I knew already how to open the panel, how to slide the shelf out. How to...

-*I'll be here tomorrow morning for a while.*'- he said. Pushing back shirts and a jacket. -*If you like I'll show you more about how to work these things.*'-

-*Okay yes please.*'- I said. -*I like computers. Then I'll teach you typing if you like.*'-

He laughed and pretended to give me a dig.

-*I'm not that bad, I just never learned it properly.*'-

Finally I ordered him out of there. We unfolded his rickety bed, and he set his alarm clock. I even made him hang up all his clothes.

Barney was obedient, grinning and ducking his head, like a big bemused boy. I pulled the thick quilt over him, kissed him on the cheek and tucked him in.

I would kip down on the lumpy sofa myself.

I got out my sweaty sleeping bag, glancing into the broken mirror, hesitating to undress myself.

For me that was a big deal, undressing when he might see, and the panic was blocking up my throat. But I felt quite in control, and safe as well.

-*Nice new underwear.*'- he said. When he saw Maggie's frilly knickers.

-*'Stop looking now.'*- I said. Watching him in the mirror.

Swiveling my hips and throwing a pose.

-*'I got some clothes from the Free Shop, and I'm getting lots of Maggie's.'*- I said, holding my breath.

As I pulled off her woolly and T shirt, over my head.

-*'She's growing out of them, isn't it great Maxie, I'm gonna be a Dad!'*-

I picked up my cold sleeping bag to cover myself. For a long second I watched myself and him in the glass.. Poised there, the icy metal zipper tickling my tummy..

I was playing with my fear. Would I take it one step further?

Then I dropped the bag and slapped grinning Groucho on the nose. Replacing the harsh bulb with the shadowy yellow street-light.

That cold couch was no fun at all.

So I dived under the quilt beside him, shivering.

Okay he *was* still wearing his trendy cut off tights. So I wasn't *that* bad.

-*'Listen Maxie maybe we shouldn't be, um'*-

-*'Now you go straight to sleep. We'll do the talking in the morning.'*- I ordered.

-*'Your sleeping bag?'* he queried.-

-*'No no, I got the giant hot water bottle.'*-

The rain was still pattering at the window. I kissed Barney's shoulder goodnight, gave him a little hug and lay back.

Peering up at the high dark ceiling and thinking about how great Maggie had been. And all her friends, my new friends now. Marie and Joanna and...

A shaft of street light lay across the ceiling, half blocked by writhing leafy shadows.

It was cold, I shivered again and moved closer to him.

-*'I'm terrified of touching fellas. Maggie thinks it's because my Dad did bad things to me when I was little.'*-

-*'Really? What a bastard! I was suspecting something like that. But Maxie, in that case, why the hell are you jumping into my bed, like..?'*-

-*'You're not so scary. Maggie trusts you.'*-

-*'Thanks a lot. I'm not scary.'*- he said. -*'And nothing's gonna happen okay. I mean, you are very attractive of course, but I'm celibate and I'm mostly gay, and... oh hell I'll try the couch..'*-

-*'No no don't worry I won't seduce you, it's just... I've never been in bed with a fella before.'*-

-*'First I let you get abused by the cops, Now you're in my bed... I mean..'*-

-*'Nothing has to happen. Let's be friends, really okay. We both got our strange hang ups, see. I lose my breath and wheeze...sort of ..'*-

-*'Promise you won't fall in love with me.'*-

-*'Cross my heart with a smelly fart.'*-

He shrugged and turned away. Maybe I could even practice a bit on him, I mean, all my friends were swapping sexy stories. While I just wheezed and blushed, and clutched my grey inhaler.

-*'Okay then. Cool deal then, you're amazing.'*- he yawned and groaned.

-*'Let's celebrate being celibate, okay?'*- I said, brilliantly.

He chuckled a little. Uncle Barney gave me a little tickle.

-*'Sweet dreams then.'*- I murmured.

-*'Did she tell you about Little Agnes Street?'*- he asked suddenly turning back.

-*'What do you mean?'*-

He swung over, leaning on his elbows, but not touching me.

-*'Little Agnes Street. Maggie wants us all to move there, like. And now I'm beginning to understand why.'*-

I was lying beside him, and as he spoke I felt my nipples brush his chest. I flinched back with a gasp, but later I just let them touch again, growing hard and bobbly as we talked.

-*'Why, uh, why move there?'*- I asked.

-*'It's a whole terrace of houses, semi derelict. They were due for redevelopment'*- He was talking in my ear. -*'Now they haven't even got the cash to knock them down.'*-

I shivered, half cold, half scared. My cheek was also brushing his, and I giggled and stretched, but that made us touch even more.

-*'Where is it?'*- I whispered back, with a catch in my throat.

-*'Where's what?'*-

No answer. We were suddenly melting together.

Touching my bare breasts to his chest. I couldn't breathe of course, but it was worth it.

Barney rolled slowly away, onto his back.

-*'What, um, did you ask?'*-

He just pretended nothing had happened.

-*'Wow... B-Barney you have super sexy skin... um, oh yes, where's the house?'*-

-*'North side, Ragwort CoOp Pool. It's an active free Pool, in an old working class area. Very safe, central.'*-

-*'You're a great fella, you get ten points.'*- My voice came out pathetically squeaky. -*'You'll be a great Daddy, now let's go to sleep.'*-

I laid my cheek bravely on his chest and felt his breathing.

-*'And the video? Did you talk about that?'*- he asked.

I lifted my head. Breathing deep and better.

Blowing away a stray lock of his scraggy hair. He blew back in my face so I blinked.

-*'Yes, yes we're going to expose them coppers, if we can. But in a clever way, we have to talk to some women who know how, like.. To make a famous example.'*-

-*'You're really brave, how cool. I didn't get the chance to say congratulations, for, um, de-throning Killian Bate.'*- He paused.-

-*'That was everyone. The main thing is we destroyed his bullying scam, if you see what I mean.'*-

-*'Exactly the plan. But it was you made it really happen. That's so brilliant.'*- His praise embarrassed me.

-*'Thanks, but.. Tell me what you don't like. About me I mean.'*-

-*'Nothing at all, well maybe you're just a little bit bossy.'*- He came out with.

-*'Bossy! I'll show you who's bleeding bossy.'*-

And I went to pinch and punch him. But he laughed and trapped me with his long arms.

So I wriggled an arm free to tickle him and we arm wrestled, swaying the wonky bed. He was strong but I was tricky.

We stopped. He was separating again. He lay on his back.

I felt a bit rejected, picturing myself cuddling up in his long arms.

I felt that lump in my throat... So I dared myself, trembling and thrilled.
 I got up in a squat, like Maggie had done, and I threw my left leg right over him. What a fiasco. Why do I do these things? My left foot slipped right off the other edge of the bed. Okay it was dark.

And I fell astride him. All of twenty centimeters.
 Crushing Barney's balls.
 Giving myself a nasty jab in my moist, delectable, private parts.
 It seemed he had a tennis bat in the bed.
 -'YeeOww'- I squawked,
 And Barney bucked and whinnied.. Like a castrated donkey.
 Throwing me forward, so I almost headbutted him full in the face.
 My big front teeth just grazed his forehead and I hit the pillow.
 So much for Romance. We rolled in agony together.
 -'Jesus Christ, you're after mashing me bollox.'- says he.
 I burst into tears.
 -'I-I'm so sorry it was an accident, I hurt myself too'- We were sobbing together.
 No no, actually Barney was now laughing.
 Laughing his silly head off while moaning and complaining non stop.
 -'I'll be okay, relax, I mean... just because you flattened my willy and... and, tried to bite my head off, and...'-

I was examining the scratch on his head. There was blood on my fingers.
 -'Oh My Gaawd. Barney you're bleeding.'-
 I really thought he had to throw me out. Out of the bed if not the flat. But he just kept joking and shushed me and put his big bear arms around me. Either he really liked me or he was bonkers.
 I was still sniffing and shaking, but I'd got what I wanted after all.
 So I hung in there and watched myself calm down.
 -'Oh wow. What a big dangerous teddy bear I've got tonight.'- he said. Rocking me a little.
 Barney wasn't dangerous. Really he would be perfect for practicing on, I thought.
 But then he began to hum a lullaby.
 How could I sleep now? I was still hurting, but now I could feel myself, like, starting to tingle.
 I was getting a slow growing wave of pleasure, like, washing and rippling up all through me, and yes please, all over again. Feeling shaky but wonderfully alive.
 I hadn't drowned, when my Aquarium life got smashed.
 I'd scared off the evil serpents who tried to strangle me.
 Ha ha yes!. The pathetic panicky Linda Green was rocking, astride a great big nearly naked man!

The rattling noise got suddenly louder.
 I pulled the duvet back and gulped cold air.
 -'Hailstones, very bad for the gardens.'- he whispered.
 -'They say the sea's rising fast. The.. the ships can't get through it's so rough... Will it just get worse and worse till, till the end of the World? What will we..'-
 -'Shush shhh..'- He kissed the top of my head. Hands lifting under my hips. He rocked me forwards, and back, and down, and mmm...-'Shhh shush..'-
 -'He's showing me how to do it.'- I thought, and repeated with feeling.. -'Mmmm..'-
 I had realized, of course, that it wasn't a tennis racket I'd squidged my fanny on.

-*'Tell me Barney, why is your thingy too big and, er, bent?'*-

I know I know..I shouldn't ask such things.

In fact he kept it hidden in his stretchy Clanner tights.

-*'What? Um, uh, an accident. It got caught in the stable door, when I was a kid.'*-

-*'Ow!.. I mean.. Is that true, is it... Um, is it... um..?'*-

Somehow this talking naughty was exciting me even more.

-*'Sorry. Er.. I call him Dumbo. Not 'Your Thingy', How dare you be so rude .'*-

-*'Dumbo the elephant bent his trunk, and ran away from the circus '*- I chimed merrily.

-*'And he's not permitted to play, with horny, er, runaway young ladies.'*-

-*'Horny! Horny and bossy.'*- I giggled and coughed, unromantically.

Then I snuggled down on him and sighed. Just listening to the high wind. his fingers massaging me.. ever so gently.

I don't know how it happened but after a while I fell into my flying dream, ...

I was gone . Away in the head...

I lost myself. I was gone out of there.

Shaking out the feathers of my giant snowy wings.

Wavelets rushing round my bare feet. With a whoosh up the pebbled shore.

When a stronger gust off the lake, lifts me off the ground.

Straight up out of my body, sailing out over the rushes.

I lean forward, elated, and shoot right down across the sparkling water.

I am watching me fly, eyes wide, mouth open, crying up to the wild white swans.

While my friend massages me, ever so gently.

Shooshes me on a swaying bed in a high room.

I see myself, swooping safely back.

Crashing into myself in a slap of happy relief.

I was back in Barney's arms, I'd never left,

Dripping with sweat and panting like a puppy.

-*'You're great Maxie, but, um, let's take a break.'*- he was whispering. Trying to yank the heavy cover on us. -*'If that's okay for you, I mean..'*-

And he wiped my streaming cheeks.

-*'You're right, you're right, okay.'*- says I. -*'Thank you Barney, thank you for, like, taking care of me and, thanks for.. thanks for..'*-

I went right overboard with the thank yous.

-*'You're fine, okay, I like you, I mean. You're honest and, uh, pretty and wild. Sorry I'm just so sleepy tonight.'*-

-*'Pretty wild! Don't be sorry, thank you I.. '*-

He growled like a bothered dog and turned away.

So I lay my face on his arm, and breathed deeper and slower. What the hell had happened?

I never meant to make love with him, but now I was a bit sorry that I couldn't.

I could feel him breathing slower, and longer as well. And he was getting hoarse, would he start snoring? Soon he began to wheeze, like a baboon with asthma And soon I knew that he was fast asleep.

I had disgraced myself again, but Barney didn't take it that way.

How could I feel panic and anxiety when my friend was snorting?

I didn't make love with Barney that night.. But somehow we ended up as friends.
Maggie and me had examined him and he passed.
I didn't know how to solve his problems, or cure his fits of madness.
But I did know how be his friend.
He put up with me, as well as putting me up.
I rocked him gently and listened, to the violent wind in the trees.
He really did help me as well and I wasn't the first. Jerry had hidden out with him when he ran away from that home for juvenile schizophrenics.
Jerry was messed up by his horrible family. He's totally gay, but his father refused to believe it.
They even tried to cure him in that place, like being gay was a shameful illness.
Barney enjoyed helping us. He got a kick out of working with yunkers, like , giving bad kids a chance.. Him and his pals from the federation wanted to empower people.
Their greatest campaign, was to give power to the CLANS, through the CoOp Pools.
Before that they were classed as delinquents. Now they thought they were heroes.
I curled and let him sleep and got comfy. My mind still speeding and jumping through all the faces and things I'd seen. I was thinking about the video and all that Maggie had said and what it meant, then Maggie and Moonbeam and how she had told me and Barney she was pregnant.
Maggie my mama? Well, it's true she did sort of adopt me! To sort out my legal situation through her social worker friends in the Pools. They got me a judgment through a Pools Tribunal. Illegal but accepted on the nod, especially in family cases.
I was delighted with the idea of Maggie being my foster mother. The trick was to block an order. If my dad did get a lawyer he could now only start a case.
And then I was waking again, rubbing up against Barney.
Just breathing in time together without even trying. I was really there, undressed, with my own big sleeping friend. I'd like to have a photo. Feeling really grown up, daring and thrilled. I couldn't believe it.
But now at last I was really sleepy myself. -*'Horny and bossy and pretty wild..'*- I whispered, or did he say *pretty and wild*. I'd more or less decided I *would* expose the police who attacked me, and I was imagining already escaping to a new life with him and Maggie.
-*'Breathe deep, go to sleep.'*- I reminded myself, not daring to curl up between his legs. That's all I remember. I never went home at all, or back to school.
My home and school just fell apart behind me.
It seemed that we had hopped on a roller coaster ride. Destination unknown. With a lot of people hell bent on changing our world. And a decent plan, perhaps, of how to do it

act two.. re-creating

Chapter eleven

Cuddly Toys

-‘*Scaly lizards and twisting lilies*’-

Jimi Kwin opened his brown eyes and brought them into focus.

He grinned, then grimaced and hunched, as a band of pain attacked his forehead, and another shot into his groin.

-‘*Ow, shit what’s that?*’-

He’d been sleeping on a toy plastic car. Outside a real car was hooting and revving down the river quays, real thunder rolled not very far away.

-‘*Oh God, me head. What a party!..*’- he groaned.,

Sitting up to check out the gang, breaking into a chuckle, then a full laugh.

-‘*Ow ow ow.*’-

He grasped his temples, as his memory flooded back, and he took in the post party wreckage.

A huge stuffed toy panda was eyeing him with an angry scowl. There were mounds of cuddly toys, mountains of clothes, and people.. arms, heads, legs.. sticking out from under them.

He remembered robbing the booze, jemmying a roller shutter, and the lumbering run with crates of scotch and vodka. Moving on, meeting up with the others, and finally this crazy Clanner celebration.

They were in a safe house, a four storey abandoned, block facing the river, But to gain entry they’d had to scale a high back wall, all drunk and sprawling and muddy, and hefting crates up and down a ladder. [*ref.25squat*]

They had settled in a big high store on the third floor, piled up with sacks of toys and clothes, from a closed downstairs charity shop.

Jimi knew these places. He’d been on a Pools scheme to ‘secure and weatherproof derelict buildings’. He knew how to patch and block a roof leak, and slot in a sixty amp fuse.

On this floor there was a tap with water, and a working toilet, and stacks of old stock.

-‘*Bleeding massive.*’- he muttered. examining his attire. He was wearing a fancy gold jacket, and a woman’s summer hat. But where the hell were his pants?

And what a crazy party... Starring Macker the Magician... Leaping up on the table, holding a mock auction among the clothes and toys.

Inventing outrageous but fitting characters and jobs. Insisting they bid for goods and speak on stage,

It was so mad it was cool, and Macker had triumphed. The street gang had all dressed up. Swapping dares for promises, and rolling in helpless laughter.

Teasing and throwing poses. Bidding for each others erotic treasures...
Macker had been a panic. Doubling as a bumpkin, arguing with himself, switching character,
and taking off snatches of pop songs.
We laughed so hard you wouldn't have noticed us choking.

* * *

Now that is Bernard in a crumpled suit, snoring face up on a table, and Sandra the tourist in a yellow spoon bikini, and ...

And right in front of him, Janie and Carmody, sleeping on a heap of kiddies clothes. Not quite covered by a big curtain. Printed with a repeating pattern, of scaly lizards and twisting lilies.

Sleeping naked. Jimi observes. He can see a couple of flies, homing in on Carmody's hairy balls, and one of Janie's warm bare feet, actually touching his own thigh.

Her toes... actually resting on his calf.

Sucking his wishful gaze up and up her long legs. Setting off a thrill that shivers through him.

Jimi knows almost nothing about girls. He's sixteen, but has no sisters.. He and his Clanner friends have been thrown out of his crumbling all male school.

Dropping his face in his hands he peeks through his trembling fingers, hoping to see more. He flits off a fly that lands on Janie's foot.

Only now are there some girls, in their group. They are seven now, himself and Shoveler, Sandra and Potbelly, plus Janie of course, Ernie and Harry. No, they are eight.

Janie keeps rolling about, restless under those hunting chameleons. He would've made her a better bed than that.

She rolls right over onto her back.

The flowery curtain slides off her legs, exposing all her lower half. Slap up starkers in front of his face.

Jimi is gaping like a parrot fish.

He's never seen a girl undressed, close up in real life. Like an exotic tropical fruit, he thinks, but breathing. Framed by long wisps of curly red hair.

He hears her catch her breath. He holds his own, as five fingertips appear.

Short red painted finger-nails, scamper round her tummy button. Like naughty red mice. Skipping all the way and plunging in.

He doesn't know whether to laugh or groan.

As Janie stretches and moans.. ever so softly.

He can see her profile. Her mouth-suck in the sheet.

Too late to look away, he blushes and grins, letting out a long breath.

She sees that he's seen, that she can see him watching her.

And she rolls out of sight, under the lizards and lilies.

The giant panda stares back at him, unblinking, but now grinning.

Cocking his head, Jimi chuckles, and yes!

He barely picks it up... Her answering giggle.

*Jimi laughs out loud, and Carmody farts like a tuba.
The fly is back on her foot.. The thunder grumbles,
And the floorboards tremble, with the whoosh of an air-bus passing.*

* * *

Jimi was laughing, well woken up, though the dawn was only breaking.
Gazing at the fireplace, where Macker Mucdunna sat on a box, hugging his battered jacket to his skinny chest. Still wearing a curly black woman's wig.
His clothes were filthy and bloodstained; his runners worn right through.

Jimi half expected the sleeping figure to jump up, he was liable to leap into life, joking, cursing and singing.

The robbery and the party had been Macker's idea. He'd proposed it at a card game in Mart Street flats.

-*'Well we got nothing on. We're waiting for our De-School Project in the Free-Uni.'*- Jimi had replied. And everyone took that to be a yes.

No way could Jimi sleep more. Thinking about Janie's body and sniffing for her smell, imagining it was he snuggling together with her, just one meter away. Mmmm.. if only!

He sat up straight, rummaging seriously for his pants like a proper Clan leader.

He was way too embarrassed, to let his personal parts be seen. He'd never flash like Ernie or Harry did, hanging cool in Warrior bands and thongs.

He needed to feel a *normal average* Clan Warrior first...

And what if it suddenly changed size? Shrinking to a wrinkled walnut.

Or much too big, like now!

Ernie from Clan Sunshine wore a fashionable Peeny-Belt. They had dared each other into trying it on, up on the roof of the flats..

-*'Short, long or medium mode..'*- said the instructions.

One by one they had paraded, streaking round the chimneys. While the rest nearly melted laughing.

There were his pants at last, and his shoes. Under everything of course.

And there was Macker looking at a book. How lucky that he was staying with them now.

* * *

Jimi groaned and laughed, and got to his feet, clambering over cuddly toys and bodies to the window. It had been a good robbery, a good few days away.

Away from his family bickering in the little flat, away from his sullen enduring silent rage.

His father hated him, for failing in school, and seized on every single chance to shame him. But now, despite his hangover new life was rushing in him. This was a beginning. Now to divide up what was left of the spoils, and retire in good order. Maybe Janie shocked him wide awake.

Outside the broken window the rain had stopped, and a pale sun was piercing the murk. He took in the yellowy green waters of the river, sliding past below, imagining it gurgle like the booze in his belly

On the other side were more boarded up buildings. And further away the smelly leather factory, now occupied by the local Pool.

You could see the banners flapping in the breeze.

If you had work you could still scrape a living. The shiny offices, the rich gliding by in their big cars. But less and less people had work. And no one even pretended anymore that there was any possible future for him and his type. Or for hardly anyone really.

Jimi pushed back his greasy hair, took a deep suck of the cool polluted air. An open backed air-van pulled in on the pavement below him. Three men were getting out.

But his eyes were caught by a flock of black headed gulls, diving and skimming the water.

An armoured police van stopped below, blocking one lane. — *'No parking on the pavement.'* — he thought.

Then the side door opened and cops in robot gear started to clamber out. Nodding at the three men, who he now saw were carrying crowbars and sledge hammers. They were climbing the three steps to their door. There was a loud crack.

Jimi panicked, rushing, falling, shaking people.

'Get up. Get up. Warriors wake up. Wake up wake up the cops are coming in!'

* * *

Macker

I was already awake when Jimi started shouting, I'd been up, on and off, for hours, struggling with diarrhea and a bit of fever. Drinking tepid tap water, and feeding the fire with bits of broken shelving.

I'd found a paperback among the jumble... *'The Dispossessed'* by Ursula Le Guin. I'm an obsessive self taught scholar, devouring books by the kilo, but that morning my eyes wouldn't focus for a minute.

My thoughts just kept repeating and repeating. Bad thoughts, the death of my mother, losing my brother and sister.

And I'd cut my fingers and thigh, quite deeply, someone had moved the ladder when I was getting them all over the high, glass topped wall. That didn't really bother me. I'd washed and bandaged the cuts and I would heal cleanly, I hoped. What really did me in was...

'Get up. Get up. Warriors wake up. Wake up wake up the cops are coming in!'

Forgetting my woes I bounced over to the window, then to Jimi where he was shaking Steamer awake.

-*How long will the door last? — I asked him.*

-*A double mattress with doors behind and akro bar-wedges.*'-

-*How long?'*- I vaulted onto the table, where I'd hosted the party, clapping my hands like an Explainer. —*Come on now kids. Everybody up. Get your clothes on now now now.*'-

-*Five minutes at least I'd say.*'- Jimi estimated. A steady hammering had begun below.

-*Come on now. We want all the good bottles here in the crates. Bernard. Pato.. Can we go by the roofs Jimi? ..We'll never cross them walls.*'-

They were blundering about, looking for clothes and shoes. Some people were still trying to sleep.

-*Yes yes, it's a big wide ledge down to number fifty seven. That's empty as well. Yes Macker, by day it's easy.*'-

-*Okay kiddie winkles.*'- I clapped again, *Everyone's going out upstairs right now. We'll hold them off for a while. Get dressed Janie quick.*'-

-*I can't find my clothes. Where's Potbelly?'*-

I noticed I was still dizzy, trying to slide up the stuck sash window. Jimi and Shoveler appeared. We shoved it up together.

-*We're not going to fight them are we?'*-

-*No no, you'll see I'm going to wind them up.*'-

I pulled down the black wig. Got ready my high enraged housewife voice. Stuck my head half out, and let rip.

-*Stop that right now. Stop now, get away from that door. You. Fat fella.. I know you, that's private property you're destroying. For God's sake officers, there's children sleeping here, get out. Get away from that. Have you no shame sir, I'll have the law on you. You with the tattoo. Officers, arrest that man, my husband's in the Pool. They'll have your guts for garters, you there, you'll pay for this. There's decent people here, get back in your van right now you're a total disgrace to the force. You're.*'-

The men had paused. Consulted with the police, and looked set to continue. The door-frame was half smashed in already.

-*I'm warning you fellas. Right now I'll phone my brother and he'll have half the city CLANs here in five minutes. You officer. You're committing a monstrous Shit-On for the cameras. Shame on you. We'll all be up to your house to..*'-

I'd snatched up a box of children's clothes, and was chucking them out one by one. So they sailed down beautifully on the traffic jam and onlookers. Keeping up my diatribe all the while.

-*More clothes. Those sacks.. We need a girl's voice. Janie come here.*'- I said as the nighties went out. -*Just women and kids stuff.. You're my daughter, okay. Scream at those bastards.*'-

Janie looked doubtful, then yelled realistically, I knew she was a natural actor, from how she impersonated her ex teacher at the party, drilling the drunken yunkers in romantic poetry. Now she went convincingly into outraged victim mode. They couldn't see her of course, which was just as well, Jane was acting in the nip, half wrapped in a sheet with chameleons on it.

Impersonating her mother, while showing off her nice body and glancing for our reactions.

I slumped down and took a welcome break, feeling a bit dizzy and watching Janie move, so natural and sensual.

People were leaving the room, waving and grinning, passing back choice items to be thrown out. Others were collecting bottles or still dressing.

Jimi was selecting cuddly toys, dresses and lingerie for Janie to throw. And she yelling and threatening all the while.

I knelt back at the window and poked out my head. The work had paused, the door had unaccountably resisted, and a little crowd was blocking the far pavement, cheering as a shimmering nightdress sailed right into the river, jeering at the police and their thugs.

Horses were getting restless, vehicles hooting and people were hopping out of an air-bus.

-*'Shit-On you Rambo. Give us more*

Can't you even break a door?'-

I was chucking out handfuls of socks and briefs, hankies that floated away. Cameras and a microphone had appeared already. Then Jimi had a box of little pink rubber pigs. And all of us were grunting, as Janie started pelting the police!

-*'Go home coppers. Shame on you!'*-

The last party-goers were disappearing upstairs.

Shushing each other in shouts and honking like porkers.

Then a sudden gust of wind blew my black wig right off! Just like that. I snatched but lost it and it fell down among the officers.. A riot cop lifted his visor and pointed up at me in the window.

-*'That's Macker Mucdunna Sir.'* he shouted. -*'That's a wanted man. He's only taking the mickey Sir.'*

-*'Almighty shite.'*- I remarked.

A kid had caught the wig and run off with it, dodging through the jam. Then I shouted in my little boy voice

-*'You listen to my Mama. Get out of here now this minute.'*-

-*'He has no mother Sir.'*- The robo-cop shouted, pissing me off a lot.

And the sergeant had nodded to the heavies, who set about finishing off the door. Some of the crowd booed and whistled, but nobody intervened.

-*'Time we got going then.'*- said Jimi. -*'Oh! No.. Janie!'*-

She had snatched up an emerald green evening dress with gold shamrocks on it. She was doing a jerky belly-dance. Trying to wriggle into it, arms in the air.

Janie looked like she was having an orgasm. Jimi goggled and I gawked

-*'Let's go.'*- she cried. Gyrating in a hopping panic.

.The dress was much too small. It wouldn't go on.

-*'Help me Jimi, quick.'*- came her muffled voice.

The waist was tiny. He had to lever it over her tits. Tucking in her pointy nipples, then struggling down to her bottom.

-*'You're gorgeous gorgeous beautiful...'*- he panted.

-*'Ha ha ha.'*- she snorted. Both of them tugging.

I was staring at them, dumbly in a daze.

-*'Me mama says I was blessed with a bulging bottom.'*-

Her dress ripped up the back, but slipped down over her.

-*'Yippee.'*- They hugged and went to run. The crashing came suddenly louder. Any second now the angry police would be storming up the stairs.

But there I was still sitting, head in my hands, I couldn't get going at all.

-*'Come on Macker. Come on. Come on.'*-

They grabbed an arm each and pulled me to my feet. I staggered, breaking free of my lethargy. Suddenly happy, because I *did* remember my little rucksack.

-*'Last one out's a jailbird.'*- I yelled. And we all raced up the stairway.

There was a rickety ladder, just catching the attic skylight.

-*'You first Macker.'*- said Jimi -*'Up you go.'*-

I squeezed quickly out the little window. How had the others got the crates through? And crouched panting on the wide ledge, reaching in to help them up, feeling the strong cool wind revive me.

Janie was on the ladder with Jimi behind. There was a crash and cheering from the stairs.

-*'Out you go... Oh Janie!'*- She'd hiked up her torn evening dress over her posterior, but it burst right up her back.

Jimi grabbed her buttocks and shoved her up. Her bare feet treading his head as I pulled her hand. I heard shouting on the stairs. Then he slipped through after her to safety.

-*'Help me pull up the ladder.'*-

But the ladder stuck. They pulled together, swaying in the wind on the sloping tiles. There were more shouts and pounding of boots.

The ladder slid out. I caught the other end cleanly as it toppled, and we left it on the ledge as Janie shut the window.

-*'That'll keep them guessing.'*- said Jimi, as we scuttled off, leaning away from the edge.

We ran crouching along the wide ledge, all the way to number fifty seven, and in the open window. If there were cops out back we didn't clock them.

This building wasn't so wrecked at all. I spotted a coil of light, strong rope on the way down, and found a sack to bring it in. We made our exit out the back of the first floor, down a bit of drainpipe and across the muddy waste ground.

-*'Hairy Mary had a canary.'*- said Janie. Shivering in her bare feet, and winding bits of evening dress around her.

-*'Watch out, sure it's full of glass.'*-

-*'Here put on my coat.'*- said Jimi. Glancing about and stripping off his stripy jacket, though he wore no shirt beneath it.

Muddy? It was more like a lake, we passed two traveller caravans where a tied dog yapped madly.

-*'Excellent mobile homes.'*- I was thinking. Every one of them was some kind of a cousin. Sure they were doing well, trading recycled goods with the CoOp Pools, and world economic collapse was a grand opportunity for them.

A red haired woman opened a half door on the trailer, saw me shout a greeting, but she slammed the door shut. She knew who I was but I had no welcome here.

Because *bad blood never dries*, anyway I was only a half traveller and...

-*'Yer o fella's in the loony bin... loony baloony...'*- Came the familiar taunt.
We had reached a patch of concrete where two boys were playing with a pram.
-*'He's dead.'*- said the bigger boy. -*'Yer old fella dived off the roof.'*-
-*'Loony loony loony.'*- went the other as he skidded the pram.
-*'Get up the yard you long-nosed sparrow fart.'*-
-*'Woodja ever eff off outa that.'*- I replied in kind.

Then I was lagging behind, wagging my head. Jimi took my hand, he's a good guy, and Janie took Jimmy's other one.

We picked our way together, like a treble crab, through the deep ruts and puddles.
-*'Carmody will be waiting for you.'*- said Jimi to Janie.

-*'I'm not with him at all, silly, we just ended up together.'*- she said.
Slipping her arm round his waist, and changing the rest of his life.

Out onto the street and we stopped holding hands. Okay we were trying, with zero success, not to look like Newbies from Planet Weirdo.

But in just two minutes we arrived safely, through the gates of Mart Street Flats to meet up with the rest of our party.

I was still having trouble walking straight, biting my lips, head down.

Those traveller kids would slag me off, and say that my father was mad, but one phrase that big boy had said I could *not* admit. *Couldn't even think about.*

One idea only must rule me now. To get away somewhere safe, to rest and recover.

Chapter Twelve

Macker the Magician

-‘I am here to astound! ..I am here to amaze!’-

-‘Well now. me old partners in crime.’- said Macker. Watching a crowd of children skipping and darting inside the gates. *-‘It looks to me like the party’s over.’-*

-‘Hey lookat there’s Macker!’-

-‘Hey Macker cumear.’-

In a moment they were surrounded. Jimi raised his hands, but it was Macker whose arms and jacket were seized. Others were coming running, and small hands tried to prise the almost empty half bottle of whiskey from his pocket.

-‘Gis a sup o that.’- said a grabby boy.

-‘Ah go on out of that.’-

-‘Janie’s lost her knickers.’- cried the skinny wide-eyed girl.

-‘C’mon Macker and do a show.’-

-‘Ah Macker do Elvis, c’mon, c’mon please.’-

-‘The school is on strike again.’-

-‘We’re going away on a project.’-

-‘Hey Janie your bottom’s hanging out.’-

-‘That’s latest Sunshine fashion, ignoramus!’- Janie protested.

-‘Do your show. Do your show. C’mon. Oh c’mon.’-

-‘Get off! Get off of me’- Macker yelled. Head down. *-‘I’m not doing nothing today, I’m in rag order.’-*

-‘Please pretty please for me.’- A little black girl was hanging on his sleeve.

He sighed, grimaced and grinned, then took the plastic bag of his things from the rucksack, and gave it to Janie. He swung out the coil of rope, re-slung the sack.

Suddenly ducking clear of the grabbing hands., he went zipping round the crowd, and ran down into the courtyard, between the big old flats. Where he surprised a few tiny children playing,

and a few tired women, sitting out in the hot sun.

The kids pursued him in a mass, the girls and young fellas, all shrieking with glee.

As he ran he beckoned at a dark stairwell, where the rest of the Warriors were lurking with their booty.

Vaulting onto the roof of a smashed up car, a relic of the night before, he stood there, stock still, his legs splayed, bottle in hand.

Then he started yelling in an Alabama drawl.

-‘Okay you Ladies and Gentlemen down there. Will you please now take your seats in the places provided. Now you young gents have gotta stay offa this here stage. Or maa bouncers will eeject you head first from the thee-ey-tuh.’-

Macker dropped his head, wiggled his hips, threw out an arm...

Threw up a long lonely lamenting wolf howl.

He was off! A shaking and a hopping.

-‘Ain’t nothing but a hound dog,.....Howling all the while...’-

And the kids were howling and squealing. The women walking over with broad smiles. People were opening windows and leaning over balconies.

An air of Festival infested the sunny flats.

Girls held hands and danced. Toddlers were lifted onto shoulders.

A flock of startled pigeons dived by the green river. Clean washing flapped in the sun.

-‘Oh I’ll do any thing,...That you want me to,

But hey ho hunny lay offa my booze...’-

He was making an amazing noise, his sickness quite forgotten. Crooning into his bottle, and flapping the fronts of his worn out runners.

-‘Get off. Get OFF.

Get offa ma blue suede shoooz...’-

Jimi and Janie sat on the charred black bonnet, everyone clapping hands. While Paato and Steamer were lifting down little kids, as they climbed up onto the roof.

Macker could do Madonna and the Pope, and Michael Jackson till you cracked up laughing.

Plus a stack of acrobatic magic.

-‘I’m here to astound. I am here to amaze!’- he would shout, and everybody loved it.

And being so young and so little, he seemed to be mocking himself.

Next thing he had the rope out, telling a CLAN joke, while he hitched some knots.

-‘Have we got a volunteer? Have we got a hero?’-

He was swinging the lasso above his head.

—‘Can anyone here climb up there and hang this swing? Cos I’m well scattered folks, I’m well maggoty today.’-

He was pointing up the big double lamppost in the middle of the yard.

-‘Me me me. I can do it.’-

-‘Can we have your name, brave Sir?’-

-‘Willy Kenny.’-

-‘Now Mr. Kenny here will try to hang the swing for the Mart Street Warriors.’-

Wiry little Willy went easily up and up the pole, attracting all eyes, and hung and arranged the lasso. But Macker had disappeared.

-‘Run. Run. Run.

As fast as you can.

You can’t catch me I’m..

SPIDERMAN... all together now.. Run. Run. ...’-

He was shouting down from a third floor balcony, holding the other end of the rope, and tying knots, adjusting strings on his sack, and leading the chant.

-‘Run. Run. Run.....As fast as you can...’-

-‘But he can’t jump from up there.’- said Bernard.

-‘Okay now Ladies and Gents. Silence please. Silence please. You are about to see me, for the first and only time, leap into the air, like Spiderman himself, and fly round and round this here Emporium...’-

-‘No way can he jump, Steamer. He’ll hit the ground.’-

-‘The rope’s way too long.’-

-‘But I can only fly if you all shout together. You’s all gotta help me fly. When I count to three. All shout together.’-

-‘Don’t jump Macker.’- Janie was yelling,. Biting her fists.

-‘Jump. Jump. Jump.’- shouted the little kids.

Jimi was on the roof of the car, waving and shaking his head. The distance was wrong. He’d hit the concrete yard.

Macker was ready, hitching one more loop, when a wave of dizziness passed over him.

And the image he’d been blocking slipped clean through...

A child memory of his father. Patcheen the poet, diving off a cliff into a wild sea. He was a diver! *-‘He dived off the roof.’-* The traveller kid had said.

He could never have made that up. Why should he? And suddenly he knew that his father could really be dead.

-‘This is for you Dad.’- he said *-‘This is for you.’-* and then he was shouting *-‘Okay let’s do it... All together now, as loud as you can...’*

Run Run Run Run.....As fast as you can

You can’t catch me I’m

SPIDERMAN... Run Run...’-

Macker took off. But he went sprinting sideways along the balcony wall. When he reached the end of the rope he lifted off, swinging down in a wide arc round the lamppost, and pulling himself up the knots.

He whirled in over the crowd. He pulled the first cord.

Then all the coloured silk hankies and underwear were flying out behind. He was fairly whistling around. Almost hitting heads. Pulling himself higher.

On the second round the little wrapped sweets went scattering everywhere.

He had a foot in a loop, twisting round. Lighter in hand for the rocket. Sweets were flying. Confetti started whirling out, and up and away up in the breeze.

The fuse caught. The firework whooshed up, and exploded with a loud bang.

He had done it!

Pandemonium had come to Mart Street Flats.

Macker swung round once more, through a cloud of twinkling confetti. He planned to land on the derelict car, where Jimi and Janie stood close together.

The third round, but still much too fast. He doubted, jumped, hit the roof and rolled, knocking Jimi and then Janie onto the blackened bonnet.

And the three of them slithered onto the ground laughing and cursing.

-‘Yippeeyiyiyoo!’- he cried. Delighted to be in one piece.

-‘Ow ow ah oh Jayzus wept. You came in like a fucking plane!’- says Jimi.

-‘Thanks for stopping me.’-

-‘You’re a genius man!’- Janie muttered, screwing her face and grasping her sore leg.

-*'Are you okay?'*- Jimi asked her.
-*'Cacacaca Toooo!'*- she laughed. -*'I've never been dirtier in my life.'*-
-*'See the confetti!'*- The wind had caught and whipped it over the roofs.
-*'We thought you were gonna die.'*- said Bernard.
-*'My bleeding knee's bleeding.'*- said Macker.
-*'Uh oh.. look. Here come the Peelers..'*- Janie was pointing.

Three policemen were coming in, sure thing the firework had attracted them. They were a new Community Foot Patrol, a rare sight here, and always in threes.

-*'Crazy bastards.'*- someone yelled.
-*'Why can't they leave us alone!'*- Jimi protested.
-*'Shall I get rid of them then?'*- said Macker.
-*'You are a magician after all. Make them disappear.'*- said Steamer.
-*'No no, Macker.'*- said Janie, wagging a finger. -*'You're already in shit with them.. Your hands are bleeding you know. And you're sick.'*-

Macker pecked her ceremoniously on her sooty cheek. Bowed with dignity to lift a bit of concrete.

Then he vaulted back onto the burnt out car and started hammering the roof, holding up a hand and roaring hoarsely.

-*'Come here. Come here. Come here. Roll up back here. Come here you wonderful yunkers of the Mart Street Warrior CLAN.'*-

The police were hanging back, watching.
-*'I am here to astound! I am here to amaze!*
My last historical wowing today will be a disappearing trick. I'm going to make...
One moment please, just a minute, silence please...
Is that a horse's diarrhea I smell? Jimi. Phew that sure smells bad.
Is there a goddamn horse in the house?
Ah do believe there's uh sumthin rotten in this heea awditawrium.'-
There was puzzled laughter.

-*'Naw Naw'*- he shouted. His voice going. -*'That ain't no horse ah smell.. What ah smell is them thaar PIGS!'*-

His arm flashed out pointing. The crowd of kids turned to face them. The policemen looked dreadfully embarrassed.

-*'That sure is a shameful thing to see. Them thaar pigs coming in here. Wha only last night they bashed in poor Davie Driscoll's teeth.'*-

Macker glanced down at Jimi, Janie, Steamer, Pato and the rest. His face was white and strained.

-*'Do I hear Pigs Out. Come on everybody now.. Pigs out.. clap clap clap.. Hear us shout... clap clap clap..'*-

A few, then everybody else took up the chant. The older cop was talking to his radio, and another, a young country recruit, went beetroot red.

And the kids were edging forward, laughing and jeering. Diving to grab missed candy.

And as the cops backed off they moved in faster.

Next thing they were abandoning all dignity and running out the gate, with a hail of hard boiled sweets flying after them.

A low ragged cheering broke out and echoed round the festive flats.

Macker was kneeling on the roof of the burnt out car. - *'This was a mistake,.'* - he thought. Trying to shake his head clear. Now they would get him for sure. Then he pulled out his knife.

- *'I'll be off then.'* - he said. - *'Hey Janie me ole partner, give us me bag.'* -

He was sawing a length off the rope, so as the children couldn't leap off the balconies. Then he handed the good end to the first boy in line, who was waiting to fly, like Spiderman.

But at that moment a plump middle aged woman marched down from one of the stairwells, with a chair leg in her hand, and followed by a reluctant man.

It was Jaqueline Muranne, red faced and furious, and she was making straight for the car where he had performed

- *'Hey Macker watch your back!'* - It was Johnner Brennan.

- *'Get out!'* - she yelled, approaching - *'Get out of these flats! Macker Mucdunna you're a living disgrace. You filthy bleeding criminal. Out! Now! There's respectable people living here.'* -

The children were running back. A new drama!

- *'Get out you dirty rat! I seen what you done. Them coppers come in here only doing their job. Look at that car, someone worked hard for that car. Get out you little rat corrupting our kids.'* -

She was banging the chair leg on the roof, as the crowd gathered in, fascinated. Jackie paused for breath.

- *'Come on you.'* - The man indicated. - *'You know you're barred out of here.'* -

- *'Em ei conversing '!* Macker tried his posh accent. - *'With a Representer of Mart Street Pool?'* -

- *'Shut up you skinny pig you, or God forgive me I'll lather you. You dirty...'* -

Then Jimi acted, fast and sure at last. He swung up on the roof and stood in front of Macker.

- *'Now listen here. We invited our friend here to do his show.'* - he shouted. Waving and nodding his gang towards Jaqueline. - *'He had nothing to do with burning that car. Anyone who touches this man will answer to the Mart Street CLAN!'* -

- *'Get out you filthy scum.'* - There was no stopping her now. - *'I pity the poor woman after rearing the likes of you you...'* -

Macker's control broke, and he shouted back at her, spit flying.

- *'She's dead, she's dead, my mama's dead. You can keep your coppers and your stick, and shove them up your big fat arse hole!'* -

Jaqueline went to throw the chair leg. But Steamer caught her arm and it fell, then Johnner and Boiler were pushing her back, remonstrating.

Nothing had happened, the children were disappointed.

- *'I'm gone out of here.'* - Macker vaulted down - *'Janie, ...me bag?'* -

- *'Where will you go? Where do you live?'* - Janie had put her arm round him.

He shrugged, not having an answer, put his other arm round Jimi, and the three of them had a huggie.

- *'Good luck and goodbye, for now.'* -

As he slipped away Macker pulled Janie and Jimi into each other, surprising them with a close embrace, then grinned and waved

- *'Gotta get together.'* - He winked and disappeared.

Up the steps he went and out the back gate. No cops. He was gone like a shot, straight down the hill to the city. The children and the gang saw him go, Jimi and Janie shouted and waved.

But they didn't separate, twining together for a lingering kiss..

-*'Janie's got a boyfriend. Janie's got a boyfriend..'*- A little kid chimed in.

* * *

Macker

I knew already I was in no condition for running, so I slowed to a jog, stopped a minute, and continued at a slow walk. Down a street of old buildings, mostly squatted by the local illegal CoOp Pools.

Then the city center. Empty office blocks, all glass and big 'TO LET' signs. Guards and dogs inside. Shops, banks and insurance companies. Mostly closed.

My head was away with it, flashing back to my childhood. Busking with my dad, Patcheen, kipping in hedges, wandering country roads together in summer.

I crossed an intersection, there were bicycles, adapted air-vans, horses and carts, as well as secretaries and pale office people who were scurrying for their lunch. They were large people, well fed and confident in their smart clothes. Jackie was right about one thing.. I was totally dirty.

Patcheen taught me the trumpet and songs, and my first magic tricks. Before I even learned to read and write. I learned mad poetry, clips of ballads, and bits of jokes, all jumbled in the back of my little head.

There was a rumble of thunder, not more rain, I thought! And now I felt queasy, my stomach heaved and my eyes streamed. I was focusing on an empty flat I knew, in Little Agnes Street, which had a loose side window and a quiet back room..

I walked past a fancy restaurant, then the line of beggars and junkies, and over the river.

A violent man, my dad was gentle with me, but finally he had been installed in the alcoholic unit of the Mental Asylum.

But yes. He *was* a diver all right...

I joined a flock of pedestrians who were surging at the lights, went past a hotel and the Fun Palace, where the machines flashed and beckoned. Cold sweat trickled down my neck, as I ambled zombie-wise past bus queues and more squats..

There were three cops now... I turned sharply into a side street, dodging a horse and cart, as my thoughts turned by themselves, to Damien and Tessa, my brother and sister.

It had been left up to me to take care of them, in that high squatted flat. They were big kids, Damien would be twelve now, and Tessa, she might be thirteen. Our dad had come less and less often to visit us.

And now he was dead. But I couldn't think about that..

They'd been alright. I took care of them. And we were dab hands at robbing already. It had been okay, only for that neighbour blabbing to the cops, and Tessa letting on to that nosy Social Worker.

I was walking through a deserted carpark, then past the occupied bicycle factory.

A strange girl Tessa, she wasn't resentful like my brother Damien, just weird, a bit like Patcheen... *My father dead...* But where was Tessa now?

I could picture my sister through my tears, and I was wishing I had never struck her.

-*Shit shit shit.*- I muttered. Kicking viciously at a Coke can, which flew under a lorry and was squashed flat.

They had come with the police, and broken the door to get us out. I shinnied down the back drain pipe and abandoned them, something that still bothered me now.

I pictured Tessa again, calling me plaintively from the high window. Then her face was blurring, into a more terrible memory, of a younger Tessa, calling, and shaking our mother Katy, in her bed in the flat, she would never never wake up again.

-*I'm sick, I'm just sick, nearly there.*-

I shook my head fiercely.. I was dazed, I was a sitting duck. There was a cop car now!

I turned quickly into a candle-lit shop. It was chancy here, on the edge of a Free Pools area. I peered about the shop, the electricity was off.

-*Could I have a bottle of water please?*-

-*Sorry son.*- the shopkeeper said. -*We don't serve travellers here.*-

I stared for a moment into her heavy lined face. Imagining my mother's face instead. She had been genuinely sick, no one had realized that she was seriously ill.

I let slip a little sob, and I left the shop without replying. I was remembering how once I had joined in mocking my mother..

Very near now to Little Agnes Street, but the rain was heavier, dripping inside of my clothes.

But I only had to get there. There had been running water in the flat, a good mattress. I would rest up and heal and get clean. Maybe I would go down the country. Yes, with the Pools, and work on the farms.

I had to get out of the city. It was hot summer coming after all.

Now I was finally going to throw up, no no.

My head was zooming on that loose side window, that sunny room. I just had to banish that guilt and despair, that conspired to destroy me.

But instead of the flat I saw Patch, my brave father, years before when I was a child. *I saw him dive again. Diving heroically through the rain into a stormy sea.* And I saw that it was real and right.

I understood my dad's message. Patcheen diving for us, from the prison roof, onto the concrete yard.

-*So I'm an orphan now.*- I thought.

I came at last to the corner, and turned into Little Agnes Street.

And I stopped there. I groaned and opened my blurred eyes wide, then I closed them tight, as if to blot out what I saw.

The street was full of people, with banners hung across. There were children, dogs and reporters, milling and hanging out. Music was playing thinly through loud speakers, for a street theater group, in action and blocking the road.

A police riot van stood in the middle of it all. There'd be plainclothes police just itching to pounce! I'd have to turn back and really force myself now.

I turned to leave, feeling my stomach rise and my vision going, and next thing I was doubled at the corner, puking a vile yellow mix of whiskey and chips. As I retched I listened to a speaker, coming, it seemed, from some faraway compartment in my head...

- 'We have taken over these five good houses to live and work in, and to stop the stupid demolition plans of the Regensea Insurance Company, who abandoned these properties they had bought to speculate. They had bet on getting big profits by pushing up house prices and milking us dry.' -[ref.25.squatting.]

I spat, grunted and spat again, concentrating just on breathing. I lurched to some granite steps and sat, with my head between my knees. My eyes were pouring, rain was dripping from my sopping hair.

- 'Just a few minutes.' - But I was keeling over on the step. - 'A few minutes rest, and I'm off.' -

- 'Hey you, young fella.' - I heard it but I really couldn't get going. - 'Hey young fella. Are you all right?'

Someone had come down the steps and sat beside me. An arm went round my shoulders, a hand uncovered my eyes, peered in through my tangled mane.

It was a young woman, with short red hair and big blue eyes.

- 'Jayzus.' - she said. - 'It's Macker Mucdunna. What the hell happened to you?'

- 'I'm sick.' - I whispered and coughed, I didn't recognize her. - 'I'm sick and I'm on the run.' -

I let my head flop down in shame, choking back my nausea.

She squatted in front of me, blocking me from view, and glancing back at the police getting out of their van, just a few meters away.

- 'I w-wanted to kip in one of them gaffs.' - I explained.

- 'You're okay Macker.' - she whispered back. - 'Come on inside quick. Them cops can't touch you inside, and you're in no fit state to be running.' -

I couldn't reply, for the unexpected sympathy had dissolved me in choking sobs. I tried to rise.

She embraced and heaved me up, and I sniffed her gorgeous salty smell, as she half dragged me up the door steps.

I stumbled but she held me tight. Then I was peering through my stringy hair, into a dark passage, leading to a luminous green light.

The door clicked shut behind us.

I was safe.

- 'My name is Maxie Moon.. You're welcome here.' -

Chapter thirteen

Maxie & Macker

-‘You’re the magic boy I found on my doorstep..’-

Macker

I was listening to falling water, golden and gurgling, then changing slowly into real happy baby sounds, waking me slowly from my groggy dream. Now suddenly I was wide awake. Finding myself clean and bandaged, lying naked under a clean sheet, with an orange light glowing through it. I pulled back the sheet, blinking into the low bright sun. Was it morning or evening?

-‘Ma ma pa tu me?’- Came a baby voice.

-‘Oh! Hello. I can see you.’-

A little girl with curly red hair and freckles was peeping out at me from a bedside cot. She ducked out of sight. I stretched my nude body luxuriously against the sheet and yawned, pushing back a horrible half memory that my father was dead

I glanced round the long attic room. The big roof window with the sun flooding in. Wonderful. But where on earth was I?..

Yes yes, the booze robbery, the dressing up party, the swing in Mart Street Flats. Then I’d crashed out, and a woman had rescued me in Little Agnes Street.

-‘My name is Maxie Moon.’- she had said. *-‘You’re welcome here.’-*

-‘How lucky! How good..’- I thought.

I’d been taken in by people from Ragwort Pool. I’d been in a fever, and couldn’t remember it all... *Then I smelt her again. Her salty sexy smell on the sheets.* And saw her half lifting me up the steps. I sniffed the pillow, sucked air and chuckled.

It was Maxie had taken care of me, how good!

-‘Wan out wan down.’- The little girl was standing. About to fall out of the cot.

-‘Hang on baby.’-

I swung out nimbly, caught her up and whirled her round. Then sat down, suddenly dizzy, on the rush matting. Maybe I wasn’t really recovered.

The bed was a big mattress on pallets cut to size, the tables scrap wood. There were two doors, a sink, a large wardrobe and a wood stove with a black kettle. A high platform with a low table and a lamp, and another little window shafting in the sun. The rafters were packed tight with stacks of cardboard. I could hear the low moaning of the wind, the sun was going in and out of clouds. But I was warm, and liked this place, the giant poster of an elephant on the other wooden wall.

-*'Cuman play.'*- The little girl was pinching my arm.

-*'What's your name? I'm Macker, Macker, me.'*- I got a whiff of a shitty bottom. -*'You, what's your name?'*-

-*'Moobee.. Lookat Macka.'*- She was pushing up the lid of a wicker trunk and trying to drag out a cuddly giraffe.

-*'And the giraffe's name?'*- I was up and helping her.

-*'She's Cooty.'*-

I caught sight of myself, nude in the wardrobe mirror, all scratched and bruised.

But I was clean. My cuts were bandaged. And I smelt good... And what the hell had they done to my hair? I glanced about for my pants, embarrassed at being undressed. There were girly and clean baby things on a clothes-rack by the stove, but no sign of my stuff, my little rucksack, yes, but no clothes in it.

I took out a few leftover silk hankies, for 'Moobee' and her giraffe, bits of confetti fluttering out. Then I pegged a hand towel round myself, took a cotton nappy and picked up the child and Cooty.

-*'Where's the bathroom Moobee?'*- I asked. —*'I badly need a wee wee.'*-...

-*'Mackamackamacka.'*- Moonbeam was bouncing on the bed, pointing up at a near empty baby bottle on the wide shelf above. I bounced up beside her, then settled with her in the bed to let her drink.

-*'I'm bleeding starving myself.'*- I thought, now remembering Maxie trying to feed me soup. I was eyeing a bowl of fruit on the table, when suddenly the sun went in, and was replaced by that weird greenish glow. I jumped up to the big window, with Moonbeam, peering out.

The first things we saw were windmills, whizzing silently, five, six, seven at least along the back lane, and a big mural of a cow shitting, proclaiming —*'Don't **Shit-On** me!'*-

-*'Moo ooo, look at the cow.'*-

-*'Moo moo ploppy poo poo.'*- She was nearly finished the milk already.

The whole of their back yard was a greenhouse, with a bright green fishing net suspended over it, reflecting green everywhere, like living in an aquarium. A couple of roof tiles were lodged in it, rising in the breeze. -*'Wind protection, of course.'*- I thought.

A bush was waving, right by the window. A roof garden? The other door, of course, I went and tugged it, Moonbeam in one arm, she with the bottle. But it was as tight as a millionaire's arsehole. Then it opened suddenly and the wind rushed in. There was a little walled-in roof terrace, lined with big pots, overflowing spring flowers and lettuces. Plus a crate of seedlings, a sun-bed and a scrap-wood bench. The sun reappeared between two little black clouds, but I was shivering, and we ducked out of the wind, onto the sunny bench.

Peering over we could see out the front, busy Little Agnes Street. An old woman was waving her walking stick as she passed. Then yunkers with files, on a De — School project, yellow head scarves flying, with Clan Earth clothes, cool cut-offs and shredded denims. An air-bus was hooting to get through, bicycles came wobbling in the breeze. Now a gang of smaller kids, all holding hands.

-*'Nomor Macka.'*- Moonbeam announced, and went to drop the bottle from the third floor balcony. I just about caught it, remembering the incident with the wig.

-*'Oh no you don't. We need that bottle.'*- But Moonie began to moan.
-*'Hey Moony don't cry let's go in and play with Cutie. Let's eat some fruit okay?'*- We went in out of the wind,
-*'Wanna milk wanna milk.'*-
I walked her about, singing above her rising wails.
-*'You are my sun shine
My only sun shine
You make me happy
On the cold dark day...'*-
Then I heard boots, pounding nearer on the stairs, and seeing as I was only wearing a hand towel, I slipped back into the bed.

Maxie

Course I remember, I'd nursed him thru his fever, then he slept for a whole day solid. I was downstairs working when Moonie's baby alarm started singing.
-*'You are my sun shine. My only sun shine.'* That was weird coz I'd been caring for him like a big baby who'd suddenly turned into a crackly singer.
I bounded up the stairs. Half tripping on the door step and falling in on my knees.
-*'Ow, ow! That step!.. Hey Macker! You're better. I heard you singing.'*-
He looked stunned. Mouth open and peering up at me. Moonie stopped whinging when she saw me and held out her arms.
I was yeowing and beaming at the same time. But holding back, surprised to be shy of him. Panting from running up stairs.
-*'Are you, um, okay, er, better?'*- I asked, dumbly.
I'd cooed his funny face when he was feverish, and tended his cuts. I'd sponged his filthy arms, shyly, but he didn't wake, then little by little I knew his whole body. I'd slept beside him in my big bed that night.
But I hadn't talked with him, and I was shy!
-*'You're Maxie?'*- he asked.
-*'You gave her the bottle. Good good. Macker she likes you!'*- I bounced on the bed, and started kissing Moonbeam in his arms. -*'Sure she needs a nappy but.'*-
-*'I ch changed her. But, how could you hear me singing?'*-
I slapped what he'd thought was just a clock.
-*'Baby alarm, I was working downstairs.'*-
-*'Thanks a lot Mrs., er, Max, or Maxie, really, thanks for saving me and, taking care of me and um, washing me and...'*- He was actually blushing.

-*'Shhh'*- I put my finger on his mouth, then kissed his cheek, feeling his warm breath on mine.
-*'I enjoyed it a lot to tell you the truth, having a big sick baby to myself.'*-

I never intended to get off with Macker. I had a phobia for men, and my pathetic love life consisted of flirting with Barney.

-*'Maxie wanna tee tee.'*-

I'd lifted Moonbeam from his arms, but she was whimpering again.

-*'She needs more milk. Have you got some?'*- Macker asked. Picking up and animating the giraffe.
-*'Cutie wants to tickle you... Stop it Cutie!'*-

-*'Fraid not.'*- I said, laughing -*'But she'll be here in a minute.'*-

-*'I thought of the fruit.'*-

But Moonbeam was tugging open my blouse.

-*'Wanna teetee wanna teetee!'*- she yelled non stop.

-*'Not now Moonbeam.'*- But she was nuzzling in her head. -*'Oh well what the hell.'*-

My body was hot, I knew I'd gone light pink. I turned away from him, and let her suckle my nipple. Macker licked his lips, staring at me rudely.

-*'I, um, I let her suck and she's happy for a while.'* I said.

-*'Oh.. Um. Why not.'*-

-*'Maggie will be here in a minute with the real thing.'*-

-*'Maggie? Who's Maggie then?'*- He really didn't know.

-*'Moonbeam's mother of course. You met her yesterday.'*-

-*'Yesterday? But I thought she was your baby!'*-

-*'You thought...'*- I let out a nervous titter -*'That's a good one. No no. I mind her when Maggie's out working.'*-

-*'You're not her mother?'*- He raised his eyebrows.

-*'I like to share her, Maggie is Moonbeam's mama and Barney Maguire is her father. He lives here as well, but Maggie and Barney are, er, just good friends. See, um, Maggie is pretty gay. And pretty pretty too... And I fancy her mucho mucho.'*-

I took a deep breath, stretched, and tried to explain..

-*'We're not the typical family, like. Really, Barney's my friend as well but we're not together either. Well we work together and sometimes er, never mind. And Bernie is Josie's mother, but there's no father, don't ask about him. Jerry ran away from home like me. Then my brother Danny does be round a lot, and Peter, and Maggie's mum, and who else.. And you of course..'*-

Macker was shaking his head, big eyed and obviously confused. I went on.

-*'You're the magic boy I found on my doorstep and, and, well I'd like you to be my friend as well but...'*-

I wanted to say how I liked him, but my throat was closing up, suddenly like I would start with my stupid panic attack.

-*'Sounds a tiny bit complicated to me.'*-

Our eyes met and locked for some seconds. Somehow cutting my breath.

-*'But that's not all.'*- I said in a burst. -*'See Maggie is my semi legal foster mother so Moonbeam's my kind of half sister!'*-

-*'Sorry you lost me somewhere back there.'*- Both of us looked away.

-*'Don't worry. I like you Macker, but I'm n' nervous.'*-

He didn't react, staring at Moonie, so I dared to smooth back his hair. Plucking out a bit of fluff.

-*'You were really sick you know. The student doctors were here.'*-

-*'I'm fine now.. I really thought Moonbeam was your baby.'*-

There was a silence, we were both looking at Moonie, gurgling with her head in my shirt.

He was leaning closer.. I felt my hair prickle and the air shimmer. I could feel his breathing, goose bumps were blimping on my arms, but now I was losing my breath and afraid to look at him.

I flashed him a glance. He was looking lost, I licked my lips slowly, looked into his sad eyes, and mouthed a kiss.

- *'What happened to you Macker, you're all beat up?'*- I asked in a breathless voice..

- *'Yeah well.. '*-

He looked back down his lips quivering. He didn't hardly know me after all. Cradling Moonie between us.

- *'You can tell me. I won't repeat anything.'*- I promised.

- *'Today I found out..'*- he began.

- *'You've been here a day and a half Macker.'*- I squeezed his hand and he squeezed back.

- *'Have I? Well, um. I need to find my brother and sister.'*-

- *'You've lost them? And your mother and..?'*-

- *'She died last winter, well, more than a year ago.'*- he said, almost inaudibly.

- *'Oh Macker how terrible.. And, and your dad?'*-

- *'I just found out, I, I'm sure he's dead as well.'*-

He caught his breath, and went to pull back but I had leaned forward first, and he was crying helplessly on my shoulder.

Meanwhile Moonbeam had sat up and started crying as well. So I just rocked and patted the two of them, sniffing in sympathy myself.

And all three of us were blubbering merrily, when Maggie came striding in.

Tossing her long red hair, freckled and frolicky.

- *'Mama Mama Mama.'*- Moonbeam shouted.

- *'Hi Maxie, hello Macker.'*-

She was up on the bed, lifting and kissing lucky Moonie and swinging out a heavy breast, nearly clobbering me.

- *'And look what I've got for you Pinky Poo!'*-

I ducked out of the way and Maggie plumped down between me and Macker.

- *'Something sad happen to you kids.'*- she observed.

- *'Just now she got hungry.'*- I said. - *'Macker changed her and gave her the milk and sang and..'*-

- *'Macker! You're domesticated!'*-

- *'Hello Maggie, I think I met you in a fever yesterday. I hope I wasn't, er, I didn't..'*-

- *'You were lovely. You're a lovely fella.'*- She put her arm round his skinny waist and kissed him.

- *'I'm glad you're better at last. Are you better?'*-

- *'Um, Luckily I am.'*- he said. - *'We were just talking about my family so..'*-

- *'It's all very sad.'*- I said.

- *'Well, uh, well you're always welcome here.'*-

There was silence. We could just hear the wind, and a little sound of Moonie suckling. Maggie groaned and yawned.

- *'So what about your sister and brother?'*- I asked him.

- *'I don't know, I lost them, er. We were living in Walkin Street, the three of us in a flat, after my mum died. My father wasn't too well at the time but... But we were okay, they even went to school.'*

Then the cops came with the Social Worker and took them, um I ran. I ran away and escaped and used to do my show and, uh, I got sick...'

'A Social Worker!'- Maggie interjected. *—'I bet I can find out where they are in about five minutes.'*

'You can? I really need to see them again.'- said Macker. *—'Tessa's thirteen I think. But Damo's only twelve.'*

'What did he look like, the social worker?'- she asked.

'Er, a bit bald with a ginger mustache.'

'Must be Bryan Gouled. A born again bigot.'

Maggie had plucked a phone from the little side drawer, and was tapping a number.

'We're in luck ... Hello Georgina darling it's me...'- she said.

'I'll have to go downstairs and work.'- I whispered as she spoke *'We're doing a video meeting tonight.'*

'When were they taken?'- Maggie asked Macker.

'About, er, twenty days ago.'- Then he whispered to me. *'Can I help you Maxie?'*

'Yes yes help me.'- I said, delighted and excited.

'Tessa, and ..what's the boy's name?..Damien ... Yes I know.. yes..'- said Maggie on the phone.

'I can't find my clothes.'- Macker whispered.

'Drying downstairs... Wear mine.'- I said in his ear. Brushing my cheek on his, I really fancied him.

'Okay great, thanks and bye for now. Big kiss.'- Maggie put back the phone.

'Georgina will find out and call us back, she's super busy as usual.'

'Thank you, thank you thank you.'- said Macker. Sitting up in the bed.

Moonbeam had fallen asleep, after all that, and Maggie pulled her off, with a tiny pop.

'Ow that hurts'- she made a face. Passing Moonbeam gently to the high cot. *'I've got too much milk and it hurts.'*

'I'm always available.'- I said, smacking my lips. How I love her to baby me.

'Not in front of our guest please. You may be my adopted daughter but..'

'Don't mind me.'- said Macker, looking meek. *'I'm just happy to be in off the street.'*

'Well okay then, I should've had twins at this rate.'- she squeezed and squirted warm milk in my mouth. *'Oh yes mmm. That's better.'*

My eyeballs were rolling up, my anxiety dying.

'I think you're a goody Macker. Just very beat up. You look like you really need a mama as well.'

She lifted and pulled him close to me.

Gazed in his watery eyes, then hugged us cheek to cheek...

'Meet super mama, kids.. Trumpets. Orchestra please!'

'Mmm, smooth and sweet. Where's the cocoa powder!'- he said.

She stretched up her arms and fingers. Swinging her long red hair over us like a screen...

The phone was buzzing and Maggie took it.

'Hello. No it's for me Jerry... Hello gorgeous Georgina. No no, I'm just, er, feeding.'

Suddenly I was serious, and shaking awake.

Macker was already sitting up, blinking and biting his lips and trying to hear.

'Yes, yes okay that's good. Oh dear, yes... how awful... really?...yes I'll wait.'

There was a pause, Maggie took Macker's hand in hers.

-*'And, would custody be at all a possibility... no no... an elder brother... How old are you Macker?'*-
-*'Nearly, um, I'm sixteen I think, I could lie...'*-
-*'Yes, okay, to my email.. I'll talk to them then.. Yes.. yes.. right.. oh yes..'*-

There was an ominous silence that grew much too long. Maggie was nodding with false grins and nibbling her nails.

My eyes met Macker's again. He lifted his eyebrows and I shrugged.

-*'Thanks a lot then I won't keep you.'*- says she at last. -*'See you then for sure.. Bye bye then.'*-

She looked down at our expectant faces, hooking on her lacy orange spoon-bra. Macker was sitting very straight. Staring blankly at her wet brown nipples. I gripped his other trembling hand.

-*'She located a report all right.'*- she said. -*'Your sister and brother are both in the Youth Detention Center in Glenbay.'*-

-*'That's not far!'*- he exclaimed.

-*'Seems they haven't been put up for foster parents yet. They're classed as violent for some reason. Er, Damien has had punishments. Tessa was hospitalized briefly. Also punished. We can check all this out.'*-

-*'Sounds really bad. It's a disgrace I mean, these are entirely innocent kids.'*- I said hotly.

-*'Could I visit them in there?'*- Macker asked?

-*'You're on the run, remember.'*- said Maggie

-*'But I could go in disguise, this is great news! I have to go and see them.'*-

-*'Well, maybe Barney can fix it up.'*- I added.

-*'I asked about custody, uh getting to look after them. She thinks that's not on..'*-

-*'Why not? I looked after them before. They're almost grown up.'*- He waved his arms.

-*'If you weren't wanted, or had foster parents yourself. If you had money and work or were even a legal adult. If Bryan Gouled wasn't on the case, if..'*-

-*'Could I telephone them? Maybe I could rescue them!'*-

-*'Sure we can phone them.'*- I said. -*'Barney knows kids in there, and he's often chatting with them. And a load of screws are in the Pools by now..'*-

-*'That's great! Let's phone right now!'*- He couldn't wait.

-*'Oof.. You'll have to ask Barney how to do it. He'll be in the Assembly this evening.'*- Maggie explained.

-*'Couldn't we rescue them.. I mean...'*- he insisted.

-*'Wasn't there an escape from Glenbay, recently?'*- I said.

Macker suddenly rolled out of the bed. Then remembering he had no clothes on, he padded over to the clothes horse, to borrow some pants.

-*'Oooee nice bottom!'*- I said, and nudged Maggie's arm. But it was an inappropriate moment.

-*'Did she say anything about my father?'*- he finally asked it.

There was a silent pause.

-*'She did, yes.'*- said Maggie seriously.

-*'What? What, um, he's dead I know...'*- He was crying already.

I jumped off the bed and went over to him. Waiting as he struggled with my green tracksuit. It was much too big on the waist.

-*'Yes I'm sorry. She said he's gone.'*- Maggie said.

-*'Did he.. Oh shit. How did he die?'*- he asked. Holding up the trousers.

-*'You need to know really?'*-
-*'Yes Maggie, just, just tell me what she said.'*-
-*'Last month he escaped during a cell transfer at the Mount Alton Asylum secure unit F. Somehow he got onto the roof. When the screws tried to get him down he..'*- She looked into Macker's eyes.
-*'He dived?'*- Macker blurted.
-*'Yes, he did a, a swallow dive into the yard.'*-
-*'Oh my God.'*- I said, putting my arms round him.
-*'And what did he say? What did he shout?'*- he sobbed.
-*'That's all I know. Sorry.. I don't know any more. The report will arrive, on the computer, um... She's sending us the report today.'*-
Macker was shaking his head, vaguely waving his arms, streaming tears but not bawling.
I was holding him and patting his head. Crying myself and not knowing how to console him.
-*'I knew it, I knew it he's dead.'*- he said. -*'But Patcheen went really well..'*-

Chapter fourteen

The Ragwort Free

-‘Then I find Maxie has you captured in her bed!’-

-‘You should’ve woke me up.’- said Macker.

-‘Don’t worry. They’ll still be eating.’- Maxie was leading him by the hand. -‘You can have your chat with Barney and maybe stay for the first bit of the meeting.. This is the eating and sitting room here. Just relax, it only seems like chaos.’-

A big white room, a wallfull of posters and notices, a door through to the kitchen, a wide plywood table.

But the supper was finishing. Jerry and Jackie were collecting pots and plates. Bernie was reading out the house-meeting agenda.

-‘And that must be Barney.’- Macker thought.. Tapping at a keyboard, headphones in his bushy hair with mike attached, like an office on legs.

-‘Anything else.’- Bernie was shouting. -‘We have.. the roof, cleaning, the elections tomorrow, short items, visitors, Maggie’s birthday.. Come on let’s do it fast..’-

-‘Cakes for the Fair.’- said Maxie, sitting down..

-‘The Greenhouse repairs.’-

-‘The w-windmill.’- Jerry added.

-‘Hello Maxie. Hello Macker..’- said Maggie. -‘Everyone this is Macker the magician. He’s better.. You’re better aren’t you?’-

-‘Um, yeah, uh okay.’-

-‘Howaya Macker I’m Bernie, um, Josie’s mother. I left your food on the kitchen table.’-

-‘Hey Macker I’m Danny, remember me, from Burndon? I’m Maxie’s brother.’-

-‘Howaya doing?’- They slapped hands.

-‘Anything else for the agenda?’-

-‘The Mexicans haven’t arrived. We need a translator at eleven.’- Maggie yelled from the kitchen.

-‘I’m after ringing the docks again.’- said Barney -‘They’re finally free and on their way up here.. At last.’-

-‘Good. Good.’-Macker had picked up dirty plates, on the way to the kitchen. Barney rolled his eyes and grinned at him. But he was busy.

-‘MackaMackaMacka.’- Moonbeam was standing in her high chair. Waving her spoon in the air.

-*'Hey Moonie baby, is this food for me? Nyum nyum!'*- He had swiped her plate, steadying her elbow.

-*'S'mine no no...'*-

-*'Okay let's sit down and eat. That's it. In you get.'*-

-*'Oh good Macker.'*- It was Bernie at the door -*'That's your food there and that's for Josie she should be here any minute.'*-

-*'Can I eat out here with the kids? um, I...'*-

-*'Okay better, I'll go in then.'*-

-*'No no don't eat me. Naughty Moonie!'*-

Macker was happier in the kitchen with Moonbeam. Stacking dinner things at the sink, and diving into his Spanish rice, with a spoon.

The door opened. Barney came in, sat down quietly and took Moonbeam on his knee.

-*'They let me escape.'*- he said -*'While they're talking about all the things we have to vote on.'*-

-*'Aren't they important?'*-

-*'We do them every Saturday now. By computer... Don't tear it!'*- He had a kid's book out and was showing Moonie. -*'Can I get you a beer or something?'*-

-*'No thanks. Uh, you came to talk to me.'*- said Macker.

-*'Yeah that's right, I'm very sorry to hear about your Dad. Must be a terrible shock for you.'*- He was biting his thumb.

-*'Yes well um, I knew already really I just...'*-

-*'Maxie filled me in.. Seems like he done a brave thing.'*-

Macker felt himself bursting into tears, held them back. Patcheen's trick was working He'd somehow made his death a decent thing for his sons and daughter.

-*'I'm p-proud of him for diving.'*- he declared.

-*'A grand brave man alright... Funny thing is I was trying to find you last week.'*-

-*'How so?'*- Macker was sniffing, but wouldn't wipe his tears.

-*'Some friends are after you to do shows, but I couldn't track you down. I was told it's easier to locate the last Polar Bear... Then I find Maxie has you captured in her bed!'*-

He laughed and Macker joined in, nervously.

-*'Look there's Cutie blowing bubbles.'*- he pointed at the book.

-*'Cooty's not a nerfunt, silly. She's Quirky'*-

-*'You're right of course, that's Squirty. How silly of me.. Listen I've got an idea. You wanna do shows with us?'*-

-*'Yeah okay, but I got them big piggy-wiggy problems you know.'*-

Now he was juggling the apples.

-*'That's the deal, like, I'm in this group that gets yunkers out of legal trouble.'*-

-*'I got a hundred mile of robbing to my name.'*-

Barney winked at him, Produced some stapled papers from the elephant book, as Moonbeam slid down on the floor.

-*'Summary of your police file. Thirty two robberies I think they got you down for. Look here.'*-

-*'I'm innocent honestly.'*- Macker put on his sincere face. -*'I was in bed with the doctor at the time.'*-

-*Very good. Listen this is the idea see we do all this paperwork like and these kids get let off in the care of different Pools and CLANS. Like. Probation without screws.. Because the youth prison is bursting anyway. We've a sheaf of cases to go in next week and I could squeeze you in as well.*'-

-*What do I have to do for you?*'- Macker looked resigned.

Then he was crawling under the table after the child.

-*Nothing.. well you get the chance to work with us if you want. You're a genius Macker. We need your style, we need your buzz, to make these projects click!*'-

-*You're not jealous then?... I'm gonna catch you loony Moonie.*'-

-*About Maxie? Well, er, sure I'm a bit jealous but, I don't wanna be with her anyway and, um. I'm much too old for her so.*'-

Macker's head had appeared from under the hemp tablecloth and Barney put his hand on it. As is he would give him his blessing.

-*I'll be delighted if you're going to be with Maxie okay.*'-

-*I've no idea if I will or I won't.*'- He slyly grinned his gap toothed grin. -*Listen I'll take your deal okay, but what I need, like really, is my brother and sister, like. They're locked up, um, for nothing at all. Can't you get them out as well? Seeing as you're so pally with the coppers, like?'*

Barney took the phone from his top pocket. Unplugged the earphones and put it under a chair cushion.

-*Maggie just told me about Damien and Tessa. That's different cops and we can't wangle anything but..*'- He had lowered his voice conspiratorially. -*All those kids should be coming out soon. One way or another.*'-

-*When is soon? .. And how ? They need to come out today!*'-

Moonbeam started to squeal, as Macker pretended to pursue her through the chair legs. He

popped up to hear Barney's whisper.

-*We been wanting prisons closed for years. It's a project I'm in myself, like. We got good infiltration.. A good plan.*'-

-*Maybe I could help, if you need help?'* Macker offered.

-*Yeah okay. We know more or less how, see. Different families and Pools and Projects agreed to adopt an escaped youth, er yunker. It's just we need everyone to agree and that's tricky because it's secret. You can't tell anyone okay. But now with these Free Unions taking off maybe the youth prisons will, like, just fall into our area anyway. If you see what I mean...'*

-*How much do I have to work for you?'* - he broke in.

-*You don't have to..only if you want..the new scheme here two or three days a week. Then you have your own stuff on the side, and you should do Free-Uni. But if you're doing magic shows you'd hardly be, er, working as well I mean.. That's worth so much more.*'-

-*Two or three days. And what's the pay, or do we work for the bleeding community?'*

-*Just now we're all getting credit cards, from the Credit Union, I ordered you one.*'- Now he was crawling after Moonbeam himself.

-*A credit card for me! I'm a credit to the CoOp.*'- He was swinging Moonie up into his arms.

-*You can use all Pools goods and services, money-free. Your account is just in wurts, their program works out prices based on a balance of scarcity, what people want and need. Ecology cost and so on, using the surveys we do. We don't actually pay, er..'* [ref.7 and 16]

-*Maxie told me something... Just what I need, a Pooler credit card!'*

-*'Everyone will want you Macker, in their CLAN parties, in their gigs, on their TV shows. And now they started going out all over with Net TV. I seen you in action. I saw you turn a thousand kids into one big, er, happy family, like. With just some bin bags and a broken trumpet...'*-

-*'I've lost my trumpet as well.'*-

Just then the side door opened. A small girl in green plastic overalls, Earth style, came in, and she dripping. Swung off a shoulder bag and ran straight for Barney.

It was Josie, Bernie's daughter.

-*'Hey Barney Tammy wants to come round and watch cartoons in the playden can she come can she come oh please please...?'*-

-*'Whoa whoa.'*- He was lifting off her sopping top. -*'You haven't eaten anything yet, here's your yummy food.'*-

-*'Can she come please Barney can you ring her now?'*-

-*'Maybe for an hour just, I'll ask Bernie. Sit down here, it's late already you know, and I'm in a meeting.'*-

-*'Oh good goody good..'*-

-*'Wait and see. This is Macker the magician.'*- And he went in, closing the door

-*'Howaya Josie. Well you must be my sister Tessa's age. Hey Moonie you wanna drink?'*-

-*'I'm nine.'*-

Josie was wearing Earth gear, but in pink. Denim shorts, calf and armbands, a half length waistcoat. With beads and bangles, looking really cute.

-*'Only nine, you look like eleven. Tessa's much older. But she's locked up in prison now.'*-

-*'What did she do? Can I have apple juice as well?'*-

-*'Of course... She done nothing. Just coz we lost our Mum, they took her and Damo.'*-

-*'That's not fair.'*-

-*'Maybe Barney will get her back. Oh Josie, can me and Moonbeam watch cartoons with you as well?'*-

Now he was washing dishes.

-*'Um. Yeah okay.'*- She was gobbling her food. -*'But they're big kids cartoons.'*-

-*'Mackamacka wanup wanup.'* — Macker left the plates and lifted her onto his knee.

-*'You got CLAN hair, looks like Clan Orca.'*-

-*'And you're Clan Earth right, how cool. Maggie trimmed my hair. Bet you're.. bet you're in Baygirls or...'*-

-*'How did you know? I bet Barney told you.'*-

He had disappeared again under the table. Then he popped out.

-*'Ummm um umm umm.'*-

Rolling his eyes, cheeks puffed up, squatting and hopping in front of Josie and Moonbeam. Indicating he looked like a chicken.

Flapping his elbows.

Slowly he twisted one ear and slowly with much eye rolling, a brown egg was appearing from his mouth.

Gesturing wildly to Josie who just barely succeeded in catching it.

-*'Coz I'm the magic man. Yes I'm the magic man.'*- he sang. Repeatedly. -*'Will I lay a few more for breakfast?'*-

-*'Cheater beater pumpkin eater.'*- said Josie, hopping with glee.

Barney stuck his head around the door.

-*'Yeah Tammy's coming over but just for an hour, she'll go straight up to the playden.'*-

-*'Macker and Moonbeam are coming too.'*- said Josie.

-*'Oh really? Okay great. Finish your dinner but..'*-

-*'I'm finished already let's go.'*-

-*'Come on now wash your plate now and your fork.'*-

Chapter fifteen

Homosexual Sinners

-‘God will forgive you my son.’-

-‘Oh bloody hell. Oh heck, come on.. Come on!..’-

Dermot clenched and unclenched his fists, nearly writhing with frustration. Really he’d only been waiting half an hour, smoking three Marlboros in the driver’s seat of a converted white Ford. At the back of the pub and restaurant carpark. A common enough car with false plates. Only cars weren’t common any more.

-‘Why me? This is crazy. Why me?’-

He was too important to be risked like this, in such petty political hooliganism. Why him? If money were no object.. A test of loyalty? The sacred oath?... More like a test of idiocy.

-‘Where is he? Oh my God I can’t do this. I can’t, I mustn’t risk myself.’-

His thoughts whirled round again. Maybe he was being set up. Was he a pawn in the plots of the new young leaders? His chapter was *de facto* controlled by the well funded Brother-Hood. A bitter young leader had demanded a bloody oath.

Dermot ground out the fag, then gave in to the urge to light another.

The bitter young Supremo, Killian Bate, had humiliated him in the meeting. *-‘Don’t tell us you’re a friend of teenage faggots?’-*

Had forced him take on this menial role. His own group, Love and Happiness, had been exposed the year before, branded as assassins and extortionists in the lying *Pools* media, infiltrated by these same CoOp gangsters.

He was grinding his teeth. How he abhorred waiting. Rapped his knuckles hard on the dash.

Killian was bleeding him, of course... and it was an easy safe operation... Yes, he had to do it of

course... and later he’d command a whole network.

But risking him was just so bloody stupid...

He must go through with it nevertheless. The kudos he’d get, oh yes!... But...

Dermot had a technique that controlled his nerves. Regulating his thoughts and his breathing, sipping water from a bottle.. He slightly opened the window to let out smoke, and spotted Sam, coming at last through the few parked cars.

Excellent, he recognized him from the photo. Carrying the fold up yellow umbrella, yes, fine. Blue jeans, grey T shirt, brown hair.

Fine, could be anybody at all. A useful nobody.

He put on his own crash helmet and got out of the car, taking Sam's helmet and walked slowly to meet him, pulling up his scarf and half closing the visor.

Now he was calm, and followed his instructions to the tee.

-*'God will forgive you my son.'*- he said to the young man. -*'Trust in the love of your Saviour.'*-

-*'Yeah and to hell with you too father.'*-

He held back in a rushing wave of hate.

-*'No need for any aggressive swearing now... and your name?'*-

-*'You know I'm Sam already.'*- He took the other helmet. -*'Let's go and do the job.. But I need to see the cash.'*-

Dermot breathed deep, pointed to an old Honda 250 parked not five meters away. Strolling over and opening the carrier box, he passed Sam some black cotton gloves. The same as he wore himself.

-*'This is the bike.'*- he indicated.

-*'Stylish bastard. And what about the five hundred up front?'*-

-*'First I brief you, then we drive over there. I give you your advance. We do the job. Then I pass you the three thousand and drop you off here. Not bad for a few minutes work, okay?'*-

-*'Got a light mate?'*- Sam had produced what looked like a fat joint.

Dermot fished in his pocket and handed him two quality push button lighters. Rubbing them with his new gloves. And controlling the urge to remark on fire bombers who don't carry lighters.

-*'Okay son. Now this is just the second in a series of actions, designed to foment public fear. Our unfortunate duty is to put a brake on a tidal wave of sin. You too, my son, have borne witness to the rampant collapse of respect for our institutions and moral values. Such methods are highly regrettable of course.'*-

-*'Bla dee bla dee bla bla bla. Because people won't be guilt tripped into giving you their money anymore. Just spare me the drivel okay?'*-

-*'You would do well to start now to speak with respect. If you would wish to collaborate in future, in my sacred mission.'*-

Sam took the hint and shut up. There was a silence. A tipsy looking couple had appeared and were getting into the only other car left. Dermot glanced at his fake Rolex, good, it was after two in the morning.

-*'You saw all the video cameras round the restaurant, I suppose?'*- said Sam with a scheming grin. Dermot's mind flashed wildly.

-*'We won't even be seen doing the job.'*- he whispered fiercely -*'And there'll be nothing to connect it with this place.'*-

Sam shrugged, inhaled through clenched teeth and blew out smoke.

-*'I came in through the hedge. They have no record of my face.'*- he said. Ostentatiously scratching his arse-hole.

But Dermot had driven in. And of course he had bought cigarettes in the bar. How incredibly stupid! Shit, they hadn't even mentioned cameras. Why not? And now Sam knew some way to identify him perhaps. Had hinted he had power over him already. Shit shit shit!..

Meanwhile the other car had unparked, was lurching out the gate.

-*'Obedience and humility. We are called upon to hold back the raging tide of corruption. In this case, open homosexual fornication!...'*-

Dermot lapsed into reciting Deuteronomy. Flecks of spittle flew.

While his eyes became fixed inexorably on Sam's left hand, which was now absently squeezing his testicles.

- 'We must fight harder to beat back the breakdown of moral control. Till the Holy tide turns back in our favour. For in the final analysis we work for God the Father, for the good of all, my child. Don't you see?'

Sam was gritting his teeth and taking it.

- 'For thou shalt firebomb gay youth clubs.' - he let slip out, almost adding *'and rape little kids.'*

- 'Our Lord used violence himself! In Jerusalem, when He cleansed the Temple of Corruption! When He...' - Dermot was almost exploding.

- 'Okay okay I'm on your side remember. Let's give the wankers a fright... Just tell me what I have to do, all right.'

Control. Control. Dermot managed to control his righteous wrath, and focused back in on the job in hand.

- 'Right look here in the carrier. In this bag. Three liter sized bottles of a Molotov mixture. You rip off the little plastic bags to get at the fuse. See. It's a piece of cake. It's a back door, over a wall from a bit of park. Nobody round at this time of night.'

First one you throw against the door. Second onto the rubbish bins in the yard. Third just in case, okay? Then you scatter this bag of leaflets, they're here. Hop on the back of the bike and we're off. Easy as rhubarb pie. Just keep calm and you can't go wrong.'

* * *

Five minutes later. They are parking by a lake-sized muddy puddle, under a wide leafy horse chestnut tree, behind the former West Burfield Community Center.

- 'I'll keep the motor running. The Gay Club entrance is just behind that wall. We keep our helmets on.'

- 'Hold on a minute. This place is part of a Free Pool now. Sure thing there's people inside, no way man, look! This place is a Pools Social Center now. It's a hornet's nest!'

Sam isn't sure his protests can even be heard, what with the motor and the helmets.

- 'There's CLAN gangs hanging out here! They'll chop our bloody heads off! Look there's bikes parked there out front as well...'

- 'Oh my Christ.' - Dermot is thinking. *- 'Now I've got a chicken on my hands.'*

He has taken out the envelopes and now hands Sam the one marked 500, as instructed.

- 'Two minutes work, plus your silence always.'

Sam stows the envelope and takes out the carrier bag. Puts his mouth close to Dermot.

- 'How do these things work then?'

- 'I told you, light and just throw hard so they break and burn. Keep them upright always, they say.'

- 'Alright. I'll just bloody do it then. Obviously you know even less than me.'

- 'God bless you my son.'

Now Dermot himself is suddenly doubting. They told him the place would be deserted. Only now realizing he's being set up by rival Supremos.

Sam walks casually across the patch of grass to the wall, as if to take a leak. Cursing and grumbling under his breath.

His heart beating so wildly that he has to gasp for air.

Peering over the wall he sees the metal door, and a small empty yard. Every square meter of the place is totally graffitied. There are lights however, coming from two small opaque barred windows.

Sure there are people inside, but he is past worrying now.

He takes out the first bottle. Rips off the plastic wrapper. Tries to light it..

But he cannot work the lighter with his gloved and shaking hands.

Oh shit! He pulls off one glove with his teeth. Click.

A fierce flame shoots up from the bottle. What the hell is in it?

And he flings it over the low wall against the metal door.

The bomb ignites with a whoosh as the bottle breaks.

Spouting yellow flame and black smoke.

Sticking like napalm to the door and round the frame. Then the second explodes in the rubbish containers.

Sam is jumping up and down to see better.

Now giggling and elated.

He chucks the third, without lighting it. Crash and whoosh against the door as well.

The door swings wide open. A bald figure leaps out through the smoke and flame.

Followed by a second man. Whooping with terror.

And a third, Jon Cunner, blunders out

Blinded by toxic smoke, he half collides with the door.

Falls over a bag and rolls through the sticky flames. Twisting with yipping shrieks..

A woman is trying to smother him with her jacket.

Then an extinguisher is spouting foam.

And a fire alarm begins to wail away.

But Sam has already turned and run immediately. Forgetting the bag and the leaflets. Dropping a glove.

-*'There he is!'*-

-*'Careful, careful..'*-

-*'There's a bike.'*-

Sam has sprinted for the bike. Splashing like a manic goose through the big puddles.

There is just enough time. But two blokes are over the wall!

Dermot is revving the engine. Pausing a moment.

Then, calculating he could be personally at risk, he suddenly revs and roars away.

Squirting wet excrement in his brown corduroy trousers.

Sam is running so fast he almost catches the bike anyway.

-*'Stop. Stop. Stop. Come back.'*- He twists wildly to check his pursuers. His foot clips the corner curb.

And he falls headlong, onto the concrete street.

He rolls, his helmet clacking on the road. Goes for his knife, but thinks better of it.

The motorbikes take off, pursuing Dermot.
Sam sits up, raising his hands in the air, as the youths close in.
-*Jesus fucking Christ Almighty.*- he splutters.

Chapter Sixteen

Spot A Shit-On

-‘For this I come to see the horse’s mouth.’-

Maxie

Course I remember, we showed them our shit-on routine..

It was just after Macker arrived

We were in the thick of our boring weekly house meeting, debating the sorry state of our roof.

Nine year old Josie was leading Macker through the meeting. He with a finger to his lips.

Moonbeam was sitting up on his head, waving precariously at everybody. I was waving back.

The doorbell started ringing, insistently.

-‘That’ll be the Mexicans arriving at last.’-

-‘Meeting suspended for now okay?’-

We all got up to welcome those phantom Mexican visitors.

Josie skipped through to open the front door first.

Then Lucia Perez materialized, for the first time in our hallway. Waving her arms and kissing everything in sight.

Next Sol, her sidekick, bald with a monster rucksack, coming in backwards and dragging a trunk on wheels.

-‘Hooray hoo ray we’re here at last... Barney! Is that you! You’re real! What a big boy!’-

Lucy dropped her bags.

And shocked us all with her now famous leap, into Barney’s arms.

Knocking him back staggering into Jerry and me, so we fell against each other and the chairs, all squealing and yeowling. Chaos came to visit us that night, with Sol in the middle shaking hands, waving his arms and kissing us as well. Camera equipment dangling and tangling.

-‘This is Jerry, and Danny, and Bernie.’-

-‘LooTheeYa, spelled L U C I A... Maggie! Maggie Maggie that’s you. Let’s see you wow so beeyootiful in real life!’-

-‘And you’re even more gorgeous.’- said Maggie, nodding politely.

-‘Fatter! Is that..?’-

-‘Moonbeam, Macker and Josie.’-

Lucia rubbed noses with Moonbeam, who Macker let fall into her arms, and she continued her round, holding her up to be kissed as well.

-‘Let’s go Macker this is boring.’- said Josie, tugging his Earth tassles.

Bernie was clapping her hands for silence.

- *'Why don't we ask Lucy and Sol to say something about their project, while we're all here?'*-

- *'Good idea.'*- said Maggie, stretching her neck.

- *'If you're not too tired.'*- Jerry added. - *'There's tea on its way, come and sit down. We're just finishing our house assembly.'*-

- *'No no that's why we came here to.'*- said Sol.

His English was a bit off, but Lucy's was perfect, in fact she's only half Mexican.

- *'Lovely well can we leave the last points, er, the Fair, um, short business, and.'*- Bernie was jotting in a ledger.

- *'Shouldn't we do the Credit Cards?'*- Barney suggested.

- *'Good idea. Point number seven. Let's just do the Credit Cards first then.'*-

[glossary and refs.16a24a24b.Page454MoneyFree]

Jerry pretended to sound a trumpet. Who said he was shy?

- *'Excuse me. Everybody ready?..Roll up Ragwort Poolers for a historic moment. Roll up. Roll up, Little Agnes Street, numbers two to four.'*-

He was dealing some green plastic cards out onto the table. -

'Yes folks, er, with these brand new cards we can NOW access nearly all the magnificent goods and services in this Pool of Cooperatives and um, many other locations in the known galaxy.. absolutely FREE.'-

Pausing for wows, guffaws and silly quips, he proceeded.

- *'Our credit has made a giant leap, if they work that is. They've printed them up for everyone except for Moonbeam and the goldfish, even Josie I think, sorry, especially Josie, and even Visitors Cards, for Macker, Lucia and Sol.'*-

There was cheering and laughing as we examined the plastic cards...[refs 7,16.glossary]

- *'I can't believe this, I just walked in.'*- said Lucia. - *'How much can I spend?'*-

- *'Nothing.. um. Or as much as you like. But if your account shows you took all the beer, they break your leggings.'*- Jerry explained, badly.

- *'With their armies.'*- said Macker. And got a laugh.

- *'What? You joke me.'*- said Sol.

- *'It's a sophisticated algorithm. Melding supply and demand with social and environmental variables, the Market m-mechanism and a nominal monthly credit level.. plus a lot of trust in the p-public.'*- said Jerry. - *'They say it works down the country already but...? - [ref.16.MoneyFree]*

- *'But the people are a little crazy down there.'*- said Barney.

- *'That's a blatant Shit-On, Barney.'*- I said, laughing. - *'Put that in the book Bernie. A Shit-On by Barney, racism against country people, how can he commit so many?'*-

- *'Okay I confess, but it was an affectionate joke, not, uh, nasty. I mean, I do come from the country myself...'*-

- *'What a pathetic excuse.'*- said Bernie.

- *'Thank you Jerry for this Card of Credit.'*- said Sol, an arm around him and examining it. - *'Maybe we begin to destroy capitalism today! Who knows?.. Later we make some interview about this Money- Free okay?'*-

- *'Tell us why you're really here then Sol and Lucia.'*- I said, though I kind of knew.

- *'Okay yes, really we have too many projects. And we are not married with each other.'*- said Sol. His arms raised. - *'I am very eligible..'*-

-*'Sol is available, ladies only, take notice.'*- said Lucia.
 Somehow wiggling her eyebrows independently up and down.
'First of all, we're sorry to be late. We had a shocking horrible trip, all one day on the ferry.'- she went on.
'The sea was like climbing mountains. All of the persons were vomiting...'-
 Sol was on his feet again, short and rotund, acting out the waves and the vomit.
'Then the Immigration Police got us. Taking off our clothes to interrogate us...'-
'Oh no!'- said Maggie. *'What bad luck.'*-
'They want to imprison us to wait for being deported.'-
'Then Barney saved us. Hoo ray!'- Lucia hugged him again.
'Barney? How did you save them?'- I queried. Feeling a stab of stupid jealousy.
 Barney was on his phone again, nodding and grinning, with Lucy's arm around him.
'My mobile suddenly started working.'- she explained. *'Barney told the police we are registered for a Visitors Exchange Agreement, by the Soli-Fest network.'*-
'It's true, they check it.'- said Sol. Nodding energetically. *'Barney send us a super air-taxi for no buses today. A very fast three wheeler with eight tanks in just four minutes. I was filming it all, through the city jamming up, air-vans, horses and bikes, air generators and also with...'*
 Hands all over the place, he acted the dramatic air-car ride.
'I make short programs for the Latin Teleweb Noticias.'-
 Then he was up on a chair with his camera.

'Windmills, air-factories, air-tools, bikes, cars, lorries. Air-Tech has just arrived!'
'The tea's over here then, self service.'- said Jerry with the tray.

I saw Macker nodding to me as he crawled out the door, with Moonbeam toddling after him full tilt. I blew them a kiss. Really I'd have preferred to go and play with him and the kids,
'But Sol, um, sorry, I thought you were here for an Indigenous Federation.'- said Jerry.
'I am an accredited delegate.'- he said with dignity.
 He had taken off his baseball cap, swept back his greased hair and turned off the camera. Paused a moment, facing us, palms up and staring in eyes. A longish calming pause.
'Of course yes, these films are a hobby for me. We come here for the Solidarity Festival next week. We bring some materials here and meet the groups organizing in the morning..'
Bueno, I am what you call Indian, from the State of Guatemala but I live in Mexico, then we make solidarity here, you know, community exchange, with the computer net, it really works! Me and Lucia gonna make publicity, to save some prisoners and refugees and orphanos. We have some horrible rich fascists and gangsters, who pay gangs and police to really kill and torture. These are not good persons.
But still we are more and got our own heroes, the kids don't want only Hollywood stuff... Then I wanna film a little bit your style over here, like, to inspire our friends as well.'
 Sol was speaking to Bernie, but loud so all could hear.
'But really I am the assistant of Doctor Lucia here of course, Famous in all the world now for the Women's Rescue programs on Free Net TV. yes yes.'

He dropped on one knee, as Lucia began, throwing her arms wide.

-*'Okay this is my chance I'm so so happy to come here and meet you real great family I only knew you on the message screen, no?'*

-*'Tell us something about your project here.'*- said Maggie.

-*'Yes yes we make a report and investigation of the fantastic 'Catch Yourself On' campaign. I am working like a doctor of Social Psychology, yes and a Mama as well. But we are more women, also grandmothers and street kids, and men also of course. My speciality is 'Deconstructing Institutions' then I have some legal problems, we...'*- [refs.9,11,21] Page453

-*'Yeeeeee HA.'*- Maggie let out her war whoop startling everyone.

-*'That's why Lucia's here you see. She knows Maxie was in the first video.'*

-*'For this I come to see the horse's mouth.'*- said Lucia solemnly.

I was stifling a giggle, then everybody was laughing.

-*'You've seen me on the rape tape? But you don't see my face.'*- I said.

-*'Shit on me.. Shame on you..'*- Maggie sang.

-*'We need to know how you make this campaign. Why does it work here?'*

-*'Exactly why. who knows? It caught on because it was cool, it isn't only about sexism it's, um..'*- Bernie tailed off.

-*'Some kind of crazy music and, and some constructive revenge also and..'*

-*'But how terrible for you Maxie.'*- Lucia was saying. Her fingers kneading my shoulders.

-*'Not really,'*- I said. -*'You don't see my face on the tape, well, course I don't watch that part myself but..'*

-*'We used bits of that film to show anti-woman terror in a gang rape situation.'*- Maggie explained. -*'The gang being the Special Police who everyone hated already for abusing their powers, yeah. Everyone was on our side.'*

-*'We used the exact same phrases as in the rape tape. But now in normal work or school scenes like.'*

-*'Only they don't seem very innocent or friendly anymore!'*- said Bernie.

-*'More like sinister.'*

-*'They spelled it out so nobody could deny it.'*- I explained. -*'The same words they used when they were getting off on abusing me. So we exposed the rapist in their heads!'*

-*'Um..You will explain me later, okay?'*- said Lucia.

-*'They picketed the homes of the cops who tried to rape me.'*- I told her. -*'And the police station as well. When the film came out on TV we called a demo, all the yunkers came and there was a ruckus. Then it all kicked off..'*

-*'That film was part of the -'Spot a Shit-On Campaign.'*- said Maggie.

-*'With some famous fellas getting shamed and ridiculed, like...'*

-*'I need to see how you do that'*- Lucia insisted.

-*'Just be a good girl darling and we'll take care of you.'* says the copper, after ripping my clothes. Then he slaps me, laughs nervously and looks round for approval, the other one nods and laughs. *'Don't get silly and hysterical dear.'* He slaps me a bit harder. *'I'm sorry sweetie you'll have to be punished now.'* See how it works?'- I explained.

-*'Of course but...'*

-*'Just be a good little girl darling and we'll take care of you.'*- Maggie repeated. In a sinister, cajoling voice . -*'But you'll have to work late again tonight love.'* The manager Mr. Doily pats his

assistant's bottom, and leaves for an early lunch. Then outside the door he's suddenly surrounded by secretaries and temps, who work under rubbish contracts..Gets spun around. They hold his arms, chanting...

*Shit on Me. Shame on You. We can change so You can too
Here's a plate of sticky goo! Shplat shplat fancy that!..'-
- 'A masked woman mashes a putrid fruit pie in his face..'-
- 'Give us a job gi's a part gi's some cash gi's a start..'-*

Me, Maggie and Bernie had whirled into our the dance routine, spinning and clapping, though we were out of practice and had no music.

A cup fell. Sol was dodging our chanting dance, leapt on the table to film us.

*- 'Shit on me... Shame on You
There is something we can do. Ooo oo.
Yes it's you ..
Now it's you we're gonna screw. Ooo oo.
For you the Shame For you the Blame...'-
- 'Hang on hang on that's not it.'- I said, stopping with my hands in the air.
Barney and Jerry were pulling back the table to make more room.
'It goes like this.. scary music.. thundery voice.. faraway shrieks..
An ancient curse still blinds your brain.
But we don't hafta play.. we're not insane.
A million years of praising smelly dicks.
A million years of cleaning for the rich.
We itch we itch we itch we itch we itch..
To Break the Chains we Free our Brains.
To Free our Brains we Break the Chains.
Coz we won't play. Not every day. Your prehistoric Slave-Girl Games..'-*

The others were clapping in time and joining in the chorus, as we whirled in a frenetic rhythm.

*- 'That's it, that's it.. We got it'-
Sol was filming. Lucia was cheering like crazy.
- 'Give us a one..up your bum. Gi's a two.. fuck you too.
Catch his ears or catch his snout. We know what it's all about.
Catch yourself on catch yourself out. Last chance now to work it out.
Catch yourself on and catch yourself out. Out out out out out out out OUT!..'-*

Me and Maggie half collapsed, cheering and coughing, into each other's arms, with Bernie slapping our backs.

- 'At which point in the film they let him escape, followed by the cameras and us jeering.'-

We raised our arms for applause. Lucia clapped and cheered and Sol looked shocked. The others joined in, more or less, they'd seen it often before.

*- 'The shame game. - 'Spot a Shit-On Campaign.'-
- 'We can do more of them.'-
- 'Go on go on please.'-*

-*'You can see real ones on the Net.'*
-*'Or in the street.'*
-*'I really love that one they done with the Mother Superior. I saw it... '*
-*'Come on girls let's celebrate it. Sister Hairy's liberated...'*
-*'Yeah, and the Bag Boys CLAN, that's a panic.'*
-*'Bag Boys, Bag Boys, Bag boys CLAN.'*
-*'How does it go?'*
-*'Later later come on Lucia and Sol we'll show you everything.'* said Maggie bossily.

-*'Lucy you can stay in me and Moonbeam's room if you want, and Barney's offered to share with you, Sol...Yeah okay..so let's get your things upstairs and you can rest a bit or whatever. Don't forget we need you Lucy to translate for this Spanish language session, at eleven...'*

-*'How great you arrived, it's perfect timing.'*
-*'Machacando machistas, but didn't the cops arrest you?'*
-*'Ha ha! The police went apeshit, wading in with batons . The politicians went potty!'- !'-*
-*'Hey little girly. C'mear you stupid brainless cunt.'*
-*'C'mon baby wash my socks..'*
-*'Shit on me Shit on me Shame on You.'*
-*'The Brother-Hood were haywire. The bishops.. apoplectic.'*
-*'Then they started those Spot a Shit-On competitions.*
-*'And er, the Vomit-On Videos... and the Shit-On Song Contest.'*

-*'These big bags we leave down here okay. Is the material for the Solidaridad Festival, the Soli-Fest persons, they pick it up pronto tonight.'*

-*'Just as well.'* I said. Barely shouldering a heavy rucksack
Then Lucia, Bernie, Maggie and me were disappearing upstairs, talking and non stop.
Arm in arm and staggering with the bags.

Chapter seventeen

Mexican Friends

-‘Maybe you’re not a real man if you don’t act that way..’-

-‘Shut up and stay quiet Danny.’- said Maxie. Elbowing her brother in the ribs. *-‘I’m just explaining for Macker, now don’t be slagging me off.’-*

Maxie, Danny and Macker sat on the floor, leaning against the side wall of the hot and muggy greenhouse. Sharing a long bottle of cold beer in the half dark. And waiting. Maxie had arranged and double checked everything. But the Mexicans were running late.

On the monitor they could see a rather dark image of a big family type audience watching a film. Sitting on lines of plastic chairs, under trees in a dimly lit public square. Watching the same *-‘Shit on Me, Shame on You.’-* film we all knew off by heart. It was the last part, with CLAN groups setting up the ‘Shit-On’ ambush on a boss, a patriarch and a politician.

-‘Hey look now they’re really getting into it.’-

Maxie pointed at the audience. Half the crowd were on their feet, cheering, laughing or shaking fists. It seemed the dubbing worked anyway.

In the middle of the Greenhouse sat Maggie and Lucia on a green sofa under the big fan. Facing the little camera. They and Maxie had put on blouses, old fashioned bras and flowery velvet skirts from the free shop. In Ragwort you could wear anything, or nothing at all, but we couldn’t shock our online friends with see-through summery Earth gear.

Barney, when he arrived, wore decent long shorts, in place of his customary pocket-belt and cut off tights. Maggie had her red hair up, displaying her long neck and fabulous goddess tattoo. Lucia was wearing lipstick and make-up, with spiraling ultramarine earrings.

-‘I’m dribbling sweat under that light. Can’t we open a window?’- Maggie grumbled.

-‘And let in the vampire mosquitoes? No way baby.’-

-‘They will make a festival after, with food and dancing in the square.’-

-‘Good. This should be short and sweet then. The video’s finishing now, in a minute we’ll be on. But why do I get nervous? It’s just an on line chat.’- said Maggie.

-‘Me too I have always some butterflies in public.’- said Lucia. *-‘Is that Moonbeam?’-*

She was pointing back and up at the slide screen that Danny had set up behind. He was projecting a stock selection of Ragwort Pool photos, it would be a randomly illustrated interview. Maggie had paused the slide-show, pulling back her headphones.

-‘Yes yes that’s Moonie and her friends in the Adventure Playground.’-

Just at that moment the door opened and Moonbeam's real curly head appeared. She was carried by Bernie who tip toed in.

-*'Moonie woke up again and started roaring.'*- she whispered.

-*'We're just going to start, go round the back.'*- said Maggie. -*'Don't you want to be in this Maxie?'*-

-*'Um, well, I'll come in if you need me okay, and you Bernie?'*-

-*'Okay why not! But am I dressed okay?'*-

She put down Moonbeam and buttoned up her Earth-style waistcoat. Concealing her trendy spoon-bra which shocked foreigners, with its comfortable squeeze-out nipple windows.

Moonie ran into Maxie's arms where she sat, treading her clean skirt with her wet shoes.

-*'Hey, ow, shit.'*- She brushed at the skirt. -*'Why are your feet wet?'*-

-*'Macka macka macka.'*- she shouted.

-*'Shhh shhh, Maggie's going on the telly now.'*- said Maxie. Rolling Moonie up in her long skirt.

-*'Shh, shh now tranki panki.'*- As she struggled to get to her friend Macker.

-*'Okay your mikes are working right, you're on their screen, okay.'*- said Danny. -*'Looks not bad.'*-

-*'Lookat the picture Moonie. Oh it changed.'*-

Macker was whispering, sitting with Maxie on the floor to watch, and she opening a fresh beer. His hands transformed into a friendly animal which hopped onto Moonie.

-*'Oh look now Moonie, just sit quiet and relax.'*-

Macker yawned again, as his hands played with Moonbeam. He could smell his own sweat, and Moonie, smelling of milk. Then he thought he caught Maxie's special sexy smell and sniffed her neck. Chuckled and moaned, and gave her a clumsy kiss on the cheek.

She started rubbing her head up against him, like a sensuous cat.

-*'Check okay. Three.. two.. one.. You're on.'*-

-*'Hello I'm Maggie here to answer questions..We hope you liked our film. This is Lucia Perez in person, from Women's Rescue...'*-

Lucia was on her feet translating. Then throwing up her elbows and embracing the camera. It seemed she knew one of the women who'd appeared on the screen, sitting on fold up chairs, on the low stage facing the crowd.

-*'Rosana says they are inspired with your revolution. They ask about this place here..'*- she said

finally in English.

-*'This is a big greenhouse we built, or really we moved it here, in the yard behind the house, just now it's a studio and night class center or...'*-

-*'They ask if you pay rent.'*-

Lucita, as they called her, was going fast. Facing the camera. Fanning herself with her notes.

-*'No no, this is Ragwort Pool, um. We have about more than three thousand houses and flats plus er... It's mostly occupied now so we don't have to pay. But we have to repair it or the water comes in. Usually it is raining a lot and very windy because...'*-

Lucia translated rapidly in Spanish. Barney had come in with Sol, who got his video camera going, and they stood behind.

Macker was watching the monitor intently, a surprisingly clear picture with this gear. Their camera person seemed bored with the stage and was scanning the crowd.

Zooming in and out around the square.

Macker got sucked in, felt himself zoomed right into Papatlan.
 A shadow of fever, pulling him into the early tropical night.
Old men slapping checkers on a veranda.
 Macker became that barefoot street kid, just hoping to sell gum and not get punished..
 Sweat dripping in his eyes.. *A skinny dog and a fat vulture .*
 Adjusting the headphones, hearing Rosana reply to Lucia, taking questions..
Big bats Diving round a dim street lamp..hunting moths and tropical insects.
 Background noise in the square. Shouts, echoes and faraway laughter..
 Now he could plainly pick out the cicadas, chanting in the trees.. And far off someone yelling.
 -'No no no. '-
 -'Look Maxie, behind the stage.'- Macker whispered in her ear, pointing.
 Behind the seated delegates and families, two kids with hanging trays. A bigger kid was twisting the arm of a small one, yanking his hair.
 Now Barney was peering into the monitor as well.. but the children got blocked from view.
 Macker shivering though his sweat. He had been a street kid.
 -'You can't be cold. Maybe you should be in bed.'- Maxie was feeling his hot forehead.
 -'Looked like an Indian boy, the small one.'- Macker whispered, still staring -'The sound is different than over here.'-
 Meanwhile Moonbeam had escaped them and run to Maggie, who was now introducing her, via Lucia, to half the town. And to many more viewers on Net TV.
 -'They ask for the father now.'-
 Barney swept back his crazy hair, sniffed hard, and leaned into the camera range. Waving and grinning.
 -'The man's opinion of this contra machista, anti-sexist film.'- [ref.22c talk about sex.page455]
 -'Me, my opinion? Oh shit.'- He squatted down in front of the couch. -'Well um, these women are right of course, they, or we, really, don't have to take that shit anymore. '-
 He was glancing up at the monitor, knowing he wasn't getting through.
 -'Can I ask the men down the back to come up to the camera a minute so I can talk to them? Lucy and Rosana, do you think I could talk to the men of the town?'-
 -'They are too shy! Come on. We do the man talk now. Ven. Todos delante de la cámara por favor! Algunos al menos, ven, rápido por aquí.. Ven ven. Come on at least a few of you. In front of the camera please.'-
 Barney had sat on the floor, cross legged, between Maggie and Bernie.
 Started bouncing Moonbeam on his knees.
 -'I don't know anything about where you live. I'm like an alien looking down a telescope from another planet. Can you see me?'-
 -'Si si, claro que si.. yes of course.'-
 -'I seen you fellas down the back and I seen you separated from the girls and just waiting for the party to start, am I right?'-
 -'I see you have leaders and obeyers. Even down to that six year old behind you, forced to sell chewing gum at night in the street.'-
 There was a buzz. People turned to shoo away the street kids as the translation got through.
 -'So I suppose you would lose your woman all right'- Barney was nearly shouting but grinning widely -'And I suppose all the girls would laugh at you, if you decided to stop these tricks.. These

tricks that we use, not even thinking, to make them do what we want... The women also learned to play this game..

So they think maybe, if its like here, maybe you're not a real man if you don't act that way.'-

He'd grabbed their attention, nodding and waving his arms. Pausing for Lucita to translate amongst murmurs and laughter..

- 'That's what happened to me and my girl friend left me and never came back!'-

Barney bowed and waggled his head, melodramatically.

- 'Awwwww...' - went Maxie and Margaret, with Lucy and Bernie joining in. The Mexicans were all ears now. Just about to crack up laughing.

- 'But finally a lot of men really tried it coz it was a campaign we had here. We were all gonna do it see. So we all tried to stop this dirty trick for catching and controlling and...' - He stopped, it was too long.

- 'Just change your minds, all at the same time, that's all you need to do.

Barney put his arm round Maggie, who accepted laughing and blushing.

Moonbeam was climbing on his shoulders, and thinking of leaping off his head.

- 'Maybe they'll call you sissy or gay. Could be they'll beat you up how can I know. But , but we have to change this all together if not the same unfair games, grow like a cancer all over again.'

Lucia was struggling with that translation. Maxie had leaned in to pick up Moonbeam, but Maggie caught her arm and she had to sit in with them. Pulling her skirt down firmly and nodding hello at the camera.

- 'This is Maxie Moonwho lives here as well...'

- 'Of course when the women understand you're really trying to be just a, a humble warrior, then they'll admire you all the more for it.'

- 'That's your delusion mate.' - Maxie muttered with a fixed grin.

- 'So how do we get from A to B?' - asked Maggie helpfully.

- 'Now we got good ideas you saw on the film. So maybe we can do this for the first time in history. Maggie is setting that up right now so we can talk by the computer... That's all I can say, thank you that's all.'

Lucia finished translating, arms wide she leaned to kiss Barney on both cheeks, patting down his awful hair a bit.

- 'Es un bombón.' - she said. *- 'Barney is a sweetie.'*

Moonbeam was watching and decided to kiss him too, then Maggie and Bernie and finally Maxie as well.

- 'Seems like it really works.' - He was laughing and wiping his cheek.

- 'But now we have three or four new questions.' - said Lucia waving her arms.

Chapter eighteen

Punky & Perky

-‘There’s a fierce lot of pairing off down here tonight.’-

Macker still sat against the wall, arms on his knees, half hearing the interview. Maxie and Moonie had joined the interview, while he was dropping in and out of a feverish sleep.

His thoughts, dreams and daydreams blending together.

While the others talked with the meeting in Papatlan, he’d been staring at the grainy screen, listened into the background sound, slipping right through into the sub tropical night. Peering about like a hunting cat, into the dark corners of the tree covered square.

Then in a blink his mind was in a dream. His family, Tessa and Damien were with him and he remembered without surprise that he and they were all just little kids.

They were out on a job. Picking strawberries with their mother.

-‘Don’t be gobbling them all up now Damo!’-

-‘Put them in the basket.’-

He woke to cheering and clapping. His siblings vanished, replaced by a familiar rushing wave of guilty anguish for losing them. This time cut short, as he really woke, and remembered that Maxie was looking after him. Remembered that Barney now had a good plan, to get Damo and Tessa back again. Plus he knew where they were and would talk to them tomorrow!

Macker got a rush of happiness. No need now to punish himself!

Joining in the clapping. Then yawning and gradually relaxing, as his breathing lengthened.

And very soon his eyes were closed, he drifted off again.

Maxie

-‘We’ll be off to bed then, goodnight darling.’- said Maggie in my ear. *-‘Your gorgeous friend Macker has nodded off.’-*

She gave me a long hug from behind, as I was trying to brush under the cabinet.

I twigged that she was sad I had a man. She was actually jealous of him!

-‘He’s sweet but you’re sexy.’- I said, leaning on my brush and wriggling in her arms.

As her hands slid in through the folds of my Sunday skirt, making me shiver with pleasure.

-‘Mmmm. Look at him. He should be in bed hours ago.’- I said, twisting to kiss her cheek. -‘Sure I’ll take him upstairs in a minute. I have a spare mattress for him.’-

-‘He’s a yummy fella, how lucky you are. I know I wouldn’t stick him in the spare bed.’- said Bernie, to my surprise.

-‘But we should all be snoring, hours ago.’- said Maggie, reluctantly letting me go.

I went on sweeping, while Sol arranged the tables and chairs, and Danny coiled a cable on his arm. Lucia was whispering to Barney on the sofa.

-‘We’ll just finish this off in two minutes.’-

I swept around Lucia who swung up her legs onto Barney’s lap, peering into his eyes from too close to focus.

Now I felt a surge of absurd jealousy and had to repress it.

I winked at Barney, who nodded and grinned.

But to me he looked both squashed and unconvinced.

-‘Is that the wind?’- Something was flapping about madly above us...

-‘Yeah’- said Danny -‘And they’re predicting a mini hurricane for tomorrow night. Yet it’s so bloody hot..’-

True enough, they said the climate change was coming faster than expected. It was even hotter than usual in the conservatory. Maggie finished stripping off her sweaty formal clothes; she couldn’t wait, and was ready to set off, undressed, but Moonbeam was struggling to escape from her arms. Maggie would always undress when she could, and enjoyed showing off her nice plump body.

-‘Shall I take her up.. if you like?’- Barney offered.

-‘I’m okay she’ll be fine in a sec. Say night night, big kiss for Moonie.’-

-‘No no no no no no...’- she shrieked desperately. As they disappeared.

-‘Sweet dreams all.’-

-‘Poor old Maggie. Moonbeam’s wide awake again.’- said Bernie.

-‘And your daughter Josie? She don’t wake up?’- asked Sol.

-‘Sleeps like a badger in January. And anyway she has her own little partitioned room beside me, see, now we have the two houses joined together.’-

-‘I’m thinking maybe I sleep down here. Not with Barney.’- said Sol.

He nodded and we followed his gaze to where Lucia was leaving with her arm round Barney, still talking urgently.

-‘Maybe I am making a crowd of three.’-

-‘There’s Free-Uni night classes later on down here.’- said Bernie.

-‘Please can I sleep with you then?’- Sol just asked her directly.

Bernie gulped with surprise and her eyes went wide. This guy was *not* shy!

-‘Um, well, yeah I’ve got plenty of room.’- she came out with.

-‘Fantástico’- said Sol -‘Let’s go. I am moving my bags.’-

Me and my brother Danny exchanged an open mouthed glance. I shushed him, slipping my hand on his mouth, before he could make a smart-alec comment. Bernie, who had always been a strictly single mother, was now going up, with this Mexican playboy type, to share her one bed room.

-‘Must be the heat.’- Danny whispered. Stripping off his waistcoat. -‘There’s a fierce lot of pairing off down here tonight. Well night night Maxie, have fun yourself!’-

-*'That's more than clean enough.'*- I said, finally stashing my brush. -*'Come on Macker wake up let's get you to bed.'*-

I hadn't even decided to make Macker my partner or lover or anything like that. I was looking after him that's all. But I *hadn't* rejected the comments people made, and I realized the others hoped I was 'with' him and were giving me a push. Like Bernie saying *'How lucky you are'* and Maggie's jealous lingering embrace.

It's true I didn't feel so panicky with this boy. And I did get off on babying him. And...

-*'Come on Macker wake up now.'*-

But Macker was off the planet, he didn't budge an eyelid.

So I lifted his tired head and gently kissed him awake.

Feeling a wave of pleasure gushing through me.

-*'Maxie.'*- he burred in his dream, and started to kiss my mouth.

I burst into a nervous giggle and pulled away.

-*'Come on sleepyhead, let's get you to bed.'*-

Shading his blinky eyes with my palms, I gave him one more kiss. Letting my tongue just glide behind his lips. I noticed my bare nipples brushing on my starched blouse, as I rubbed up against him. My breathing had stopped, a hot tingle rushed between my legs.

-*'Umm more!'*- he gurgled. Just what I was going to say.

-*'Where is everyone?'*- he asked.

-*'We are the last.'*- I gasped.

-*'Am I.. Can I.. Stay with you?'*- he asked the right question.

-*'Course you can. But just friends okay, I don't make love with men.'*-

I was still cupping his face in my hands...

Kneeling between his legs, where he sat against the wall. Wrapping him into my flowery skirt. Feeling happily protective, scared and thrilled.

I thought of maybe being undressed with him upstairs, but sure I'd have a panic attack and

ruin it.

-*'I'm gonna show you off, um, to my friend Deera tomorrow, alright?'*- I said.

Stroking his cheeks with my thumbs and looking in his soft brown eyes.

Okay I was totally soft and soppy..

-*'You what?'*- He was looking lost.

I realized he had even less love experience than me. At least I'd practiced on old Barney.

-*'Let me just check your bandages... hands up... That's it, let's see you now... That bruise still looks bad. I'll rub some of Maggie's cream on that, upstairs. Up you get now.'*-

Macker obeyed smiling. I pulled his arms, and he rolled groggily to his feet and leaned against me and the wall.

-*'I hardly count as a man, I'm just sixteen.'*- he murmured.

Maybe he was right. Maybe he needn't count in my mixed up brain. I mean, I'd taken him in like a lost child. Why must my gorgeous boy friend equate with the evil Killian Bate, the rapist special police, or my abusing father?

-*'Just let me check you over.'*-

I was examining his body in intimate, unnecessary detail.
 -*'Those bandages are fine. And you smell,, umm, attractive.'*-
 -*'You too. I remembered your smell. From when we first met, on the steps.'*
 -*'Uh Oh... forgot to shower again.'*-
 -*'No no it's a good smell like, strongly, um, sexy. It makes me really er, you know...'*-
 -*'Randy. Wow. You need special therapy sonny, that's a serious condition. Let's get you up to my clinic.'*-
 -*'And I smelt you in your bed. Oh Maxie, did we..um?'*- Our eyes met and flashed.
 -*'Did we what? Oh. No, I told you. I don't do men. I get panic attacks, you see, and I'm almost gay.'*-

I was squatting down, checking every inch of him. Slipping down my loose green tracksuit that he wore. He yelped and winced but really liked to be petted.
 -*'Oh good boy, your legs are much better, this will soon be cured.'*-
 Massaging round the cut on his bruised thigh. That gash from a glass topped wall.
 I let my fingers wander, more and a little further, undulating, under the elastic...
 Till his thingy bobbed up in his slip, and I jumped back with a gasp.
 What fun to have my own big injured boy.
 -*'Oh oh oh this fella's back in fine form anyway. What's his name?'*- I laughed
 -*'N Name?'*- Macker stood gripping my shoulders, sucking in the hot air through his teeth.

 -*'Where have you been recently? Everyone gives names to their personal parts nowadays.'*-
 -*'Th-They do?'*- He was cocking his head and peering down, like a curious bird..
 -*'I'm calling him Freddy coz he's jumpy like a frog, look!'*- I said, holding in my nervous mirth.
 -*'Ahh...ooh.'*- he giggled himself, confused. -*'Er, what do you call your, um, personal parts then?'*-
 -*'Ha! We thought you'd never ask! Hang on.'*- I said.

I kneeled a little closer and slid off that itchy blouse so it dropped behind me. I would extend a formal introduction to this exciting magician.
 -*'I'd like you to meet... These are, um... Punky and Perky. The twins!'*- I nodded them up and down in friendly greeting.
 -*'Hullo beautiful and hullo beautiful. Delighted to meet you both... Which is who by the way?'*- he said, playing the game nicely.
 -*'She's Perky, look! P and P need kissing AMAP.'*-

He breathed in deeply, started instead to sniff me, lifted and swung my body.
 Suddenly afraid, I shoved him off, and stood back to check the clock.
 The night students might appear, but I saw it was hours too soon.
 -*'AMAP?'*- he asked. -*'What's that?'*- His shaky hands were touching them.
 -*'As Much As P-Possible.'*-

He pulled me roughly, and I broke into a shudder, coming up in goose bumps as he sniffed and pretended to bite me. Then he took Punky, or was it Pinky and tried to swallow her whole, with little nips and wouldn't let her go.'

I wheezed and stifled giggles and tugged away. Okay I fancied him something wicked but I was scared that he got wild, I mean...

-*'Mmm very pleased to meet you too.'*- he spluttered.

-*'Your tits could be, um, Tadpole and, and Titch, okay?'*- I shoved him back against the wall to examine them.

-*'Ow. But small is beautiful, okay?'*- he protested.

I stretched and stroked him down, and accidentally touched Freddy, giving myself a fright.

-*'Yikes. He's escaped'*- I yipped. It felt like a rubber frog that might go squeak.

-*'Behave yourself now Freddy!' Get back in.'*- said Macker sternly.

-*'Yes, well. Then down here we have Whirlpool my navel. Say hello and a big kiss for her too.. Applause please, come on.'*-

-*'Howaya goin whirly baby.'*- he said. Trying his best to kiss my tummy button and breathe at the same time. While I shrugged and squirmed, and hugged his head in my arms.

My tummy button was just ticklish, I would take him upstairs, I decided, while letting my fantasy go further...

-*'That's Whirly finished.'*- says I, tugging his ears. -*'Gloria and Thumbelina down here are getting madly jealous!'*-

-*'Sorry, who?..'*-

-*'I now present!...'*-

I stood back, with the dramatic flourish I used to practice in the mirror, and opened the last red button as I twirled.

That velvet skirt cascaded off my legs.

Macker went full moon, but he clapped anyway. I was lacking any underwear.

-*'I'm happy to present... Say hi to my new friend.'*-

I stepped out of the red flowery skirt. Humming loudly for lack of sensual music. Throwing my idea of a pose, while he knelt there, just out of reach, clapping and sniffing rudely, and biting his fingers.

I noticed I was trembling all over. Smacking my lips and feeling hyper alive.

I'd forgotten to be scared, he wasn't scary. Macker clearly had less of a clue than me.

-*'This is my little friend Thumbelina..'*- I said, but now I was having second thoughts. -*'She's very excited to meet you, er.. say hello Bell.. uh, let's go upstairs then..'*-

-*'Hello Thumbelina darling!'*- he said, waving his arms. -*'It's been my great pleasure today to meet you all and...'*-

-*'Oh just one little kiss then.'*- My voice hissed strangely. -*'but not so wild as Punky had okay!'*-..

Chapter nineteen

Balihoki Shoes

-‘Why can’t she have you as well? Why can’t she? Bloody hell!’-

Maxie

-‘But Maxie, it’s the middle of the night.’- Macker complained.

Next morning. And I’d woken much too early, from another guilt ridden dream, starring a strange version of the diabolical Killian Bate. Macker was so groggy I let him slumber again. Then I noticed I felt good, and I was singing to myself while I got everything ready.

Forgetting the dream.

Trembling to the memory of our bodies together.

Finally I hugged him awake, he’s cuddly, and ordered him into the shower.

Soon I poked in my curious head.

-‘Hey Macker I found your clean trousers, uh, Macker?’-

No answer. Just the swoosh of water.

-‘Hey I’m going down to breakfast. I need to talk to Maggie before she goes out.’-

I didn’t have to go to work, but I had loads of work I had to do.

I peeped round the shower curtain. Empty!

In the same instant warm wet hands were sliding round my tummy.

Yelping with surprise I twisted into his arms.

-‘You nearly scared the shite out of me.’-

He had slipped away. Stopped the shower.

-‘Just half a minute and I’ll come down with you.’-

Hopping on one foot, tugging cut-off tights up a wet leg.

-‘It’s past eight already.’- I said, staring involuntarily.

Sucking my tongue not to laugh, as he bounced and hopped. Why are men’s fiddly bits so hilarious?

-‘Hang on, here are your clean pants.’- I forgot they were in my hand.

-‘No, look, I have a super pocket-belt, from the free shop yesterday.’- [ref.14 Free Shops.]

-‘Very cool wizard.. Let’s go then.’-

-*'But this Earth shirt doesn't even cover me belly;'*-
-*'It's just to keep cool. And show off your yummy tummy.'*-
-*'Yes well, um, Maxie..? Er...'*-
-*'You're gonna fall over.'* - I grabbed his elbow.
-*'Listen Maxie, um, it was really great sleeping with you and.. I liked it a lot um, like I'm sorry I'm so young, and, did you like.. did you...?'*-

He was too shy to ask me up front.

-*'You're putting that on inside out now, come on, hands up, that's a good boy...'* - I turned him round and pulled off the half length waistcoat.

-*'You're my gorgeous new friend.. Just don't be getting ideas that I'm your woman or anything but.'*-

-*'Yeah sure okay and..'*-

-*'Just friends, like very'* - I was nibbling his neck like a rabbit - *'er, very close friends.'*-

-*'That's cool but..'* - He shivered.

-*'Extremely close friends.'* - I was starting to get high on him again. - *'But don't be jealous if I get together with Barney today. I don't want him feeling left out. He's being polite and horrible. I know he'd dead jealous but he has no right, and I can't live with someone like that...'*-

-*'Don't I look totally weird?'*-

He was doubting his outfit, twisting in my arms to see the mirror. Anticipating embarrassing hilarity.

-*'Let's see you now. You're a perfect Earth Clanner, just relax.'* - I said.

Holding in a hundred thousand giggles.

On the way down for breakfast we had another last kiss on the stairs. I was giving him a good checking over.

Better late than stressing.

I was in *hopelessly happy* mode, with my very own magic boy friend.

We could hear the television news blaring up from the kitchen. For some seconds it didn't even register.

Then my brain switched on.

-*'Oh shit. Something bad has happened. They never watch TV at breakfast. Oh shit shit and I had a bad dream again, uh..'*-

-*'A dream? What about?'* - he asked.

-*'I don't know but.. They were burning us. Like witches... Killian's Hoods were burning Barney... Oh Macker...'*-

I was an instant neurotic wreck. Cowering back and gnawing at my white knuckles. But Macker swung open the kitchen door and went straight in.

-*'Morning all. Morning Bernie. Morning Maggie.. Howaya Josie how's tricks honey-bunch?'*-

-*'It's 'What's for lunch honey-bunch?' Silly billy.'*-

-*'Wow Macker. I fancy the cool gear. Hey look everybody!'* - said Maggie. But her eyes were really on me and she took my arm.

I had followed him in, and was compulsively cuddling Moonbeam in her high chair.

-*'What happened. Something bad?'*- I managed in a squeaky voice. Glancing up at the little screen.

-*'An eviction alarm, the Free Union again'*- said Maggie. -*'and er, Barney and Lucia went, and Sol.. Hey look, there he is!'*-

Jerry pointed and all eyes went to the TV, on the shelf above the sink. We could see Sol, standing on the roof of a parked car. Filming a yelling crowd who were pressing up a street of ugly warehouses.

The image jumped to a banner. Unfurling from a rooftop. We could hear distorted cheers. Panning to three panicked cops and a running security man. Being allowed to run away. One holding up his pants, another stumbling.

Scrambling away in a panic, from a hooting gang of Yeti Clanners...

-*'Yes yes folks that was the scene here just a few short minutes ago.'*- Came the commentary. -*'The re-squat is being completed right now. Live and direct. This is the latest er, venture of the socialized Ballihoki Shoes Group. The one that went bust last September.'*

For those who have just joined us. The warehouse was brutally evicted earlier this morning. Even though the Workers' Pool had an agreement with the owner, who later acknowledged this on Triple Pool TV. Coming to you live...'-

Everyone was clapping, I was clapping my hands with Moonbeam's inside them.

-*'They should have woken us up.'*- I said.

-*'You went the last two times.'*- said Bernie. Rolling her smiley wrinkles and nodding at Macker beside us.

-*'There was a firebombing as well, there'll be a demo for that later on if you...'*-

-*'Oh shit no, was Barney hurt?'*- I blurted, remembering my dream.

-*'Barney wasn't even there.'*- said Maggie.

-*'The toast, who wants more toast?'*- Bernie called.

-*'It was a Gay Center out in Burfield. I know some of them.'*- said Jerry. His face white and tense -*'One fella was quite badly burned.'*-

Macker's widening eyes met mine, a magnet was pulling us together. He knew I had dreamed of fire.

-*'How sick they are. But they caught them.'*- I said to Jerry.

-*'Yeah, how did you know? They got both of them already and showed a video of them trying to escape.'*- said Maggie.

Waving her fists, then standing, hands on hips. .

-*'Thugs hired by religious fascists, in the pay of The Brother-Hood. You'll see, they're going to town on the publicity.'*- [refs. 18,12 anti nationalist and fascist.]

-*'Quite right too. Imagine if Killian Bate got into power.'*- I said. Taking Jerry's shaky hands.

-*'Those warped bastards are just waiting for their chance.'*- he said angrily. -*'We gotta remember they haven't gone away.'*-

-*'Are you finished Josie come on you need your mack and your bike helmet. They'll be here in five minutes.'*- said Bernie

-*'I'm ready Mum. But I need my swimming things.'*- she said. Swinging her pigtails.

-*'They're here. Did you put your snack in your bag?'*-

-*'Oh look look there's a police charge!'*- Jerry broke in. The TV had flashed back to the docks from an election day interview.

-*'Stupid pig bastards. They could kill somebody!'*- I said.

-*'Is that Barney in the middle?'*- Macker asked.

-*'Let's all go down there.'*- I said, looking for my umbrella and feeling panicky

-*'Let's go now!'*- Maggie agreed. -*'Moonbeam can stay in the play-group, it's on the way, more or less.'*-

-*'Well I don't have time'*- said Bernie -*'I'll go straight to work, just till eleven, then I have to meet Sol.'*-

Macker was clearing off the table. The doorbell was ringing.

-*'That'll be your friends Josie. Bye bye and be super careful okay.'*- Bernie was kissing and double kissing her daughter who pulled away.

-*'I want to go to the riot it's not fair.'*- she moaned. Pushing her bicycle through.

-*'I'll be ready to go in three minutes.'*- said Jerry. -*'Don't forget Maxie we have that reception at*

half two.'-

-*'Mierda. I wanted to go swimming with Macker.'*- I said, and my arm slid round his waist.

-*'I'm off as well.'*- said Bernie checking her bag. -*'I hope to see you all in the Gobble-de-gook for lunch. I've got some snacks.'*-

-*'Sure thing, if we're not banged up in the slammer.'*- I observed.

-*'No way. We'll w-walk all over them.'*- Jerry exclaimed. -*'I guess some Free mole in the cops set this up, just to m-make us get stronger, I mean.'*-

-*'My tyre is flat.. oh bollocks.'*- says I. Squeezing the flaccid tube.

-*'We can walk it in half an hour. Even with the pram.'*- said Maggie -*'Anyone seen Moonbeam's woolly hat?'*-

-*'But it's boiling outside.'*- I protested.

-*'Yeah but they're predicting a mini hurricane tonight if ..'*-

-*'Don't you believe it. That just means there's a chance of it and they're afraid to be wrong.'*- said Bernie.

-*'They s-said it'll probably hit the South more than here.'*- Jerry agreed.

-*'Let's check all the windows are closed.'*- Maggie glanced into the greenhouse.

-*'Should we disconnect the lekky then?'*- I asked.

-*'No no there's classes here this morning, silly.'*-

-*'Let's just go. We're going now!'*- says I.

Taking Macker's hand and pulling him out, he had to hop and wave.

* * *

Eight fifteen am., but Little Agnes Street was busy *busy*. Moonbeam had to be strapped down forcibly in the buggy. But now she was happy already, weaving in and out, as a throng of helmeted yunkers passed by.

Air cars hissed and whistled at dodging, daredevil bikes. It was hot, yet the wind whipped up litter, and bits of leaves and sticks. Swirling around us.

Me and Macker, arm in arm and pally together. I couldn't stop touching him.

Maggie conversing with Jerry, who still looked shook up about the gay Club. We were taking turns to push Moonbeam in the pram.

- *'We'll go and see the Circus school after this, okay.'* - I was saying.

Then an odd thing happened.

A traveller with a horse and cart had pulled up on the pavement, delivering compressed air canisters.

Macker bounded over to him.

- *'Howaya hanging there?'* - he greeted.

- *'Hey Mucdunna. Your Da still in the Loony Bin?'* -

- *'My father has bravely departed this life, forever. He was a famous diver.'* - replied Macker. With well rehearsed dignity.

- *'Looney Tunes.'* - he replied. But less sure.

- *'Hey Gaybo are you going down the depot for more bottles? I see you just got empties.'* -

- *'You're right as it happens.'* - said the traveller.

- *'Give us a lift and I'll owe you a favour.'* - said Macker, nodding and grinning.

- *'Well..um. Hop up so.'* -

Macker's face lit up and he swung round to me, thumbs raised.

- *'Hop up so.'* -

Later he explained it to me. With three little words he was *in*, not *out*. Tolerated instead of ostracized.

- *'Hop up so.'* - Gaybo repeated impatiently.

- *'You just changed my life.. Oh and a coupla friends, and a pram. For a favour.'* -

- *'A favour bejayzes.'* - said Gaybo. Waving us benevolently onto the cart. - *'The famous Macker Mucdunna owes me a favour.'* -

I gave that skinny horse my apple core.

Hopped up the cartwheel and snuggled up to Macker on the bench.

In five seconds flat Moonbeam was up on our knees.

Barney

Sol had stopped filming and was getting agitated, waving his arms at me and Lucia in the crowd., pointing at the faraway police. A small brown balding man, on top of a white electric-pickup, yelling and waving his arms.

- *'Hey Barney, Lucia, they gonna charge. Hey look. Hey look they make the lines hey people look look..they're gonna attack, nos van a atacar ya!..Hey hey.'* -

It was only eight in the morning, but the normally relaxed street of factory units, old warehouses and little terraced houses had filled up, chock a block. We were all stood about chatting

in big and small groups in front of the banner draped factory, which was graffitied and bedecked with flags.

I was pretty sleepy, but Lucy was bouncy and cheery, gesticulating and asking difficult questions. I was chuffed as hell just to be with her alright. [*refs. 27,28 Spanish Revolution*]
Jeers and jokes. Whistles. Greetings and goodbyes...

The place was an extension of the famous Balihoki Shoes, a popular local brand now run by an employees Pool, and expanding because imports had stopped arriving, between the crisis and the impossible weather.

It had been evicted in a semi surprise, pre-dawn, police operation. We had got there for the triumphant re-occupation, with a fast growing crowd of supporters.

They had a telephone tree alarm, though I was already awake.

It was a hot and sweaty morning already, though it was before eight when me and Lucy arrived at the eviction scene. In time for the imminent resquat.

A breeze threw dust in our eyes. Trays of drinks were being brought out for us supporters. Many were leaving already, but even more arriving.

Shouts, laughter. The cops had inexplicably cocked up.

Even the owner had spoken to a TV reporter in favor of the occupiers!

Our indignation turned to belly-laughs. Gossiping, in a chummy scrum of bantering friends..

-*'What's on the menu today then?'*- asked Billy.

-*'We're a few sambos short of a picnic.'*-

-*'Barney, hey Barney me old flower. It's lovely to see you.'*-

-*'Hi there Peter. This is Doctor Lucia from Mexico.'*-

This beaming black beauty was linking my arm and firmly holding onto me. Wow!

-*'So many people.'*- said Lucy. -*'But are not the people at all afraid of the riot police?'*-

-*'This is an important social occasion. Any excuse not to go to work for us lazy bastards.'*-

-*'Who ah ya slaggin pal? I'm a hero of the fecking revolution!'*- Billy claimed, spuriously.

-*'We should all get free shoes for this, at the very least, I mean.'*- Deirdre argued.

-*'Maybe you will. This lot are anarchists you know.'*- said Colm.

-*'I got mine already. Lookat here they're deadly good.'*- Moira started her tap dance routine.

-*'Free Anarcho-Shoes.. Now. Now. Now!'*- I chanted, clapping, and Peter at least, joined in.

Jeers and jokes, whistles. Greetings and goodbyes...

It was at that moment we heard Sol shouting, from his filming on the van roof.

-*'Hey Barney, Lucia they gonna charge. Hey look. Hey look they make the line. Hey people look nos van a atacar ya!..'*- .

There was a sharp crack. Then a whole volley of loud bangs. People ducked involuntarily. And quite rightly, as rubber bullets whizzed by and tear gas canisters landed, spewing smoke, which was fortunately whipped up and away on the wind.

-*'Holy macaroni.'*- shouted Billy.

-*'Hold on! Hold fast! Link arms!'*- shouted a hero.

But everyone ran for their lives.

It seems that Sol was the only unpanicked person, calmly filming the charging police.

Me and Lucia were not so lucky. A bicycle fell, a couple of people in front of us fell over it, then

a human wave was pushing us on top of them.

I was just about able to keep my feet, holding onto Lucy's wrist and dragging her sideways, out of the pileup. But by then a load of screaming coppers were already upon us.

-*'Lookout lookout!'*-

Lucia faced them, ducking and dodging, but got some hard whacks as they clattered by, yelling like loonies. They would always go for a woman, and she was the wrong colour.

Then the second line, I felt a belt on the right ear and saw stars. Lucia got hit again, and I got a few more hard blows while I was reeling.

Most of the coppers had passed, but now a whole line-up of black hooting armoured vans was roaring slowly towards us. We had to vanish fast, I'd spotted people in front of some terraced workers' cottages, that began just ten meters back...

-*'The doors. The green one I think!'*- I shouted to Lucia, who was running easily in front.

The door opened like magic, just as we arrived, and we dashed straight into the hall.

It's common practice to hold open house during riots.

-*'Yippee, we escaped..'*- Lucy whooped.

A beardy bloke had slammed and barred the door shut behind us.

We embraced panting and spluttering, while batons or rubber bullets cracked and banged, and the vans roared past.

-*'Now!'*- yelled the hairy fella at the spyhole. The door swung open again.

A yunker couple charged in, and collapsed beside us, laughing and crying, then kissing on the hallway floor.

-*'Welcome all to Ballihoki Pool.'*- says Beardy, peering out.

-*'Oh Barney you're bleeding everywhere.'*- says Lucia.

-*'Oh shit...um.. It's just my ear I think.'*- It hardly hurt me then.

-*'There's paper and towels in the bathroom in there.'*- says a young woman who was there as well..

-*'Oh shit. I'm sorry. The blood.. Oh sorry Lucy I bled all over you.'*-

-*'Come on in the bathroom here and we'll stop that bleeding.'*- She led me in.

-*'It's the filth should be sorry not you.'*- said the hairy man. -*'Nobody else hurt?'*-

-*'I am a nurse assistant don't worry.'*- Lucia had pinched my ear in a hanky.

-*'It's my side and legs that hurt. But they got you as well.'*-

-*'On my culo, er, my backside, and legs, first we are stopping this blood. I put a little propolis I have here. It's gonna sting like hell with alcohol.'*-

-*'Eeeyow!'*- I said. Fighting a wave of dizziness.

-*'Hold that on there. After this we can go to the doctor for sewing.'*
Cheers came from the hall. Lucy and I poked out our heads.

-*'The police have stopped attacking it seems. There's about a million Clanners coming.'*- said the young woman.

-*'Thank you a lot for letting us come in.'*

-*'Sorry for the blood.'*- I said. — *'Are you in Ballihoki Shoes?'*

-*'I sure am, it's all this area not just the factory. Me and my father here as well.'*- She kissed our bloody cheeks. -*'I'm Sandra. We're Anarcho-Syndicalists [ref27. Anarcho syndicalists p 456]*

-*'So we heard. But how's it different from a normal Pool?..Okay they're all different but..'*

Sandra pulled some leaflets from the shelf.

-*'Instant democracy, recallable delegates. Swapping jobs. Report back to the assemblies and, like, so power freaks don't have a chance and.. practical procedures from past experience..'*

-*'Past when?'*- I asked.

-*'The CNT, in Spain... We have to go.'*-she was backing out the door.

-*'Come in here Barney, let's finish cleaning you.'*- Lucy ordered.

-*'It's my leg's killing me.'*- I complained.

-*'Oh yes there's blood coming through... Pants off please.'*

I closed the bathroom door and undid my nice Earth belts. My tights were pretty ruined.

-*'I'm afraid, um, I'm not wearing anything, under, um...'*

-*'I'm the nurse now, just relax okay.'*-Shreds of material were stuck in the bleeding cut.

-*'Let's see.. Oooh looks like they hit you with a sword.. But this one won't need sewing.'*

I was leaning against a long bathroom wall mirror, sucking air through my teeth, while she chattered on, stroking her silky arms between my legs, dabbing gently with a sponge.

I've never met anyone with such slinky skin as Lucia, okay my experience level is pathetic. But I felt such a whoosh of dizzy pleasure when she started sliding herself around me, I thought I would float off the ground. I was trying hard not to have a total hard-on.

-*'You're gonna be black an blue tomorrow Mister Maguire.'*

-*'Thanks a lot Lucy you're wonderful um, now it's your turn...'*

Faraway cheers and loud bangs from the street.

I went to kiss her impulsively. But she turned away at that same moment, and my nose hit her ear. I'm not a huge success at romance.

-*'Oh sorry sorry.'*- she turned and hugged me.

Me and Lucia were maybe falling in love.

Lucy slid herself against me and didn't let go.

Outside the riot police were running for their lives.

In the bathroom nurse Lucy was enjoying her role, helping me do up my belts.

-*'Now me. Can you help me clean up my back parts er, I think I can't sit down for a week. One moment I'm finishing you, now let's get your new pants on first okay. Coz this beautiful Dumbo is*

growing into a sunflower if we're not careful. Hey they're yelling a lot out there... That's okay for now you're a brave boy and maybe if you..'

Grinning bemusedly I pulled on our hairy host's turquoise shorts. Huge on the waist but terribly tight down below..

But had she said *Dumbo*? Of course she had.

And she'd said it on purpose. I couldn't believe it.

How did she know about *Dumbo*, a silly name Maxie used to make fun of my bent willy.

Finally I copped on to their girls-club sense of humour.

And I pictured them describing me, or it, or him, in a deluge of laughter.

I swabbed down her bottom wound, which was cut as well as bruised, and she started oohing and aahing with pain, I'm not surprised.

So I let my arms brush against her velvet skin, like she had done to me. As the implications of their gossip filtered through. I chuckled and grimaced and she was laughing too. Yeowing and grasping, as I dabbed on the alcohol mix.

So I let my fingers wander, where the masseur shouldn't go. Feeling her yearning into me saying - '*Yes. Yes please*' -

Then I gave her the most deliciously sexy massage I've ever done.

Course I haven't done many.

Explaining what I was doing and how she might feel, inviting her to take part.

Lucy liked it, moving and breathing in tune with my hands, till she was leading me.

Till she started shivering and gasping, and scaring me.

I felt embarrassed and shushed her, but I wouldn't stop till she did.

While Lucy was moving with ever wilder abandon.

Right there at nine am. in Beardy O'Leary's bathroom...

- '*Herb tea and snacks in the kitchen.*' - Came a knock and a muffled voice.

- '*Oh..Okay we're coming now... Come on Lucy, let's get your clothes on.*' -

- '*Vale pero..Now I am.. uh..*' -

All this time I had an earphone in and I could at least press busy or divert calls to the De-school Projects office, depending what number came up. Now finally I accepted a call from Sol, as Lucia dressed.

I passed her the mobile, and knelt painfully to help put on her sandals.

They chatted in staccato Spanish, but I got the gist.

Sol was fine of course, not a bruise on him. He was on his way already to meet the Soli-Fest people, and had seen some of the others, Maxie and Macker, Jerry and Maggie in the crowd, but nowhere near the police charges.

They hadn't brought our Moonbeam, just as well.

It seemed that me and Lucy had been very unlucky to get hurt.

In the kitchen there was tea and toast on the table. But nobody else there.

- '*Can't we phone the others?*' - Lucy asked.

- '*Um, yes I'll try.*' -

- '*They wanted to go see the new Circus School, I bet Maxie heard already you got injured.*' -

- '*I'll get the number then.. mm strawberry jam!*' -

We could hear more cheering but we didn't move. Lucy took my hand, sitting opposite, and we munched toast.

The early sun was flooding in the back window, sideways on to us, and I felt a dribble down my back, hopefully sweat not blood.

-*'Bueno. Maybe I have to give you back to Maxie then, I just lended you don't forget.'*- said Lucy.

-*'Ha! Borrowed me you mean. But Maxie has a new young magic friend. Right now she's with Macker and, er, that's fine by me.'*-

There was a pause. She was doing her angry eyebrow wriggling trick.

-*'Anyway I'm much too old. I'm like her, her favourite uncle.. Macker's more her age...'*-

-*'Why can't she have you as well. Why not man.. Bloody hell!'*-

-*'I'm old enough to be her...'*- But Lucy broke in.

-*'B.B.B., Barney! I seen how she looks at you.'*-

-*'Sorry ...?'*-

-*'Bullshit Baffles Brains..'*- she said, surprisingly.

-*'No no I don't really mind at all.'*- I insisted, wrongly.

-*'You're talking crap. You'll ruin everything like that.'*-

-*'Wh' what.. You think..?'*- I just didn't get it.

-*'Maggie says you got the magic touch as an organizer. They got you sorting out thousands of people's problems..'*-

-*'Well no that's not because..'*- I muttered.

-*'Then you almost destroy your own family. Just coz you got blocked by some repressed*

disappointment! People are weird.'-

She turned away and examined an inspiring CNT poster on the wall.

-*'You think..?'*- I queried.

-*'I know. I saw this too often before...'*-

A silence began, and grew too long. She didn't speak.

-*'Well maybe yes, it's possible I'm wrong.'*- I heard myself admit. -*'Maybe I'm just too close to.. like.. Are you really sure?.. I mean.. What should I do?'*-

-*'Just pay a hell of a lot more attention to your friend Maxie. Starting yesterday, or she's gone Barney. Bravely standing back to give her room.. para nada!.. That's crap Barney you know it really.'*-

I laughed nervously. But something really was clicking in my head. For one thing this woman was certainly in cahoots with Max and Maggie, though they'd hardly met. How did she figure all this out so fast? I laughed again.

-*'How did you figure that out so fast?'*-

-*'Really you told me. And more, other things I didn't understand yet. See I used to work as a healer.'*-

-*'But I never told you anything about me.'*- I protested.

-*'Come on Barney now, we all show clues, como.. How you move yourself. Your tone of voice. What you don't say. I've trained myself to amplify my feeling for that kind of thing that's all.. Sometimes I can heal people by telephone!'*-

I saw then that she was certainly right about Maxie. I was delighted with her for telling me, and with myself for getting it.

She made me see that by *nobly* pulling back to give Max her space I was only provoking a cycle of jealous resentment, just to feed the cozy self destructive melancholy I'm addicted to.

And because we lived and worked together that was gonna be more than enough to poison our mixed up family stone dead!

-*I'm seriously impressed.*'- I said.

-*Well maybe you downloaded a self-critical update.*'- she said, cleverly.

-*More like you just guessed the whole password.. straight off!*'-

-*Come on. Let's get going then. Ow ow. Mierda.. my bottom is burning.*'-

I got up and washed the cups, grimacing because my injuries had stiffened as well, and turned for the door.

But Lucia stood in my way and I melted into her arms.

-*Thanks a million Lucy.*'-

-*Thanky panky Barney, at least you tipped the nurse..*'-

-*You used to be a healer?.. But.. then what are you now?*'- I asked.

-*That's for you to figure out. But I still do healing, I'm an agony aunt for Women's Rescue.*'-

She lifted both our shirts to our necks, and began sliding her golden black body around my boring pudgy white one.

-*Clue one.. We really need a consultation every day for a week and we need to record it or better make notes in Emma's code... So what am I now?*'- [ref.11a anti_patriarchy]

I leaned my face back and looked at her, feeling a little trapped..

A consultation? A bad translation?... I didn't want to just guess something stupid, then it clicked.

-*I know already, you're a Social Revolutionary.*'- I said, and she tickled me deliciously again.

* * *

You might surmise that both me and Lucia missed our meetings that morning. We had to wait to get my ear stitched up. Fortunately we persuaded the nurse that the waiting-room included the back garden of the Balihoki Pool Clinic.

So we escaped the queue and talked, lying head to head in the hot, windy grass.

I realized that I'd been dumb, and that Lucia was as clever as they come, and she really was on our side.

I needed to ask her opinion, about all the projects and requests and CLAN disputes, and problems with impossible answers, that were chasing each other about in my head that Summer..

Like trapped bats, panicking in my skull.

Lucia is able to tease out ideas and solutions, asking more and more intuitive questions, until you would come up with an answer yourself. She knows that young people need rights and freedoms same as adults.

For example the shootings and raids over resources between the Northside CLANs and the 'richies' Clayton Co-Op Pool. It was Lucia who suggested a binding arbitration carried out by mothers from our Pool, which was a key step in defusing the whole stupid thing.. And that was later accepted as common sense practice.

And it was *her* suggestion to invite the volunteer ‘*Dynamators*’ or facilitators from the CLANs to make larger assemblies work properly.

It was a humid, sultry morning, finally I stopped talking, and lay there aching with my head in

her lap, forcing myself to concentrate.

While Doctor Lucy made a daisy chain.

Explaining to me, about other people and countries she’d known.

Letting me peep through her spy-hole, at a planet I hardly knew.

See Lucita, and Sol as well in his way, danced straight into the middle of our lives, like.. scattering the old magic dust behind them. They were in our federation and used to send us stuff. But mixed up with hundreds of other names and contacts.

I’m famous for knowing a lot of them, but I knew next to nothing about them as people.

Lucy did manage to know them personally. Who knows how.. I mean, how come she knew us before she even met us, just from messages?

She saw planet politics as firstly friends and families and somehow translated this mass of seemingly random information into social scenes and groups.

People like us, each shining a spotlight on the version of the same shitty system they happen to be trapped in.

Names I’d seen on mails became real people. She knew that Baadi and Fela were depressed, because their mother had to go into a home and they could hardly pay it, and because of a split with two of their friends.

And for them this was more important than how I saw them, heroically riding the stampeded Dragon, as delegates of the horizontal Trade Union, defying the Maoists, subverting the US backed, bourgeois nationalist mafia. And the Islamists as well,

And all the assorted hit squads and hangers-on.

And why? Because they were for real, and had wide and growing passive support.

I figured out things like that, but she saw ten times more.

Talking fast and serious. I had put my phone recording her and took no calls, trying my best to understand.

Finally the trainee doctors called us in, stitched my ear, looked at our welts, took photos and said we should join a common court-case against the police.

Then we picked up some painkillers from the Co-Op pharmacist, and, still talking earnestly, or listening in my case, we headed for the Gobble-de-Gook Cafe.

Chapter Twenty

Gobble-de-Gook Café

-‘How can it be free? It’s impossible.’-

Barney

We’d planned to go on free-bikes, but I was much too wrecked. And Lucy could hardly sit down. We called an air-cab. As we were waiting we watched a high yellow crane, swinging the head of a windmill above the clinic.

-‘More clean energy.’- she said.

-‘Mmm, I think they’re taking those ones down. Could be too much wind coming!’-

The air-cab arrived promptly and we travelled in style. Me attempting to be an alternative city guide. We arrived too early to meet the others, at the Ragwort Gobble-de-Gook, as they call the restaurant.

So I offered to show Lucy around...

I was fascinated, watching her delighted surprise. She’d sussed me out, in two seconds flat, better than I could myself. She just knew the answers to lots of stuff, plus she was sexy and pushy.

I was amazed, but cagey as well, afraid, of falling into another suicidal relationship. So I was hooked and scared together, if that is possible.

The Caff is in a closed down ex convent and primary school, controlled by the Pool, that backs onto the biggest original park in our area. There’s also the Info Shop and printers, and upstairs where you can do all kinds of courses and Free-Uni night classes. That’s where I tried to learn electronics. That’s where Maxie and Bernie do their Spanish class.

Downstairs they’ve knocked big windows and more doors all the way round. Half of it a free takeaway supermarket and warehouse, and the other part is a brand new kind of restaurant. The Gobble-de-Gook Cafe, where we were meeting... **[ref.14 Free _shops]**

-‘I never saw nothing so good!’- said Lucia.

-‘Well I dunno they’re always changing it. Look there’s Jerry working. You can bring your own food, and picnic on these wooden tables in the yard. The best bit is in the park at the back. I’ll show you, let’s reserve tables for everybody. The food is free, or almost all free, believe it or not. We don’t have to starve in Ragwort Pool...’-

-‘How can it be free? It’s impossible.’-

Lucia had my arm in hers, jerking me this way and that, like a kid at a funfair.

-*'Subsidized by revolutionary. um, taxes.'*- I laughed. -*'Really they don't pay you directly in cash, and people wash their own plates, um, and we don't pay rent, just gifts to the nuns and that, most of the food comes from the CoOp Pools and the energy...'*-

I stopped, glancing up at the sky

-*'Usually I come here to eat and use the computers. Over there, looks like they're all queued up with people voting.'*-

Out back we got our tables, picked up some juice smoothies and sat in the park. Leaning up against a young larch tree, half in the shade, to continue talking.

It's an old block sized park, with railings and trees on three sides. On the far side a growing Adventure Playground with walkways, tunnels, tree dens and high slide pipes.

The rest a field of grass. Dotted with groups of yunkers and not so young people.

In the middle stands an ornate fountain. Set in a deep pond. Where people were splashing and falling in.

Wetting themselves or cooling off their feet.

Lucia was bubbling over, while I was getting tired and stressed out. Trying to send a few replies and get through to my anonymous friend in the youth prison. It was still sunny and intensely hot, with a high soupy mist. So stifling the air cut at my throat. Yet the people were oddly excited, shouting and laughing...

Way in the south we could see a huge etched wall of cumulus clouds. Towering up from behind the trees like the Himalayas. Unreal, through a thin mist, black below and gleaming white. Like gigantic Hollywood icebergs in the sky...

She began to finger-massage my face and temples, as I lay up against her, trying to relax.

My good ear following the canter of her heartbeat. my own heart trotting slower in empathy. My head sliding down between the slopes of her breasts...

Suddenly I was falling asleep. She switched off the phone round my neck and kissed my forehead under the bandage.

-*'Your smoothie, finish your smoothie.'*- she said. But speaking in my dream.

* * *

Next thing Maxie and Macker had arrived, holding hands with more friends. Plus Jerry who'd finished his shift. And I was up and awake. Speedy with a headache, telling the story of Balihoki, and everybody fussing over me like mama hens! Preparing the tables and getting the food.

I got onto Peter by phone, and he hysterical, my head was hurting and racing. Then forcing myself to breathe right, relax a bit and help with the tables.

Just then young Macker's eyes met mine. I was ready for him now. My grin spread out and I nodded, knowing well what he was wanting.

What I *didn't* expect was for him burst into a sprint, and flip into a flying somersault over the tables. Almost landing on top of me. Everyone did a double take.

-*'You set it up! Can I phone?'*-

-*'Jahzus Christ Macker. Me heart just jumped out me ear hole.'*-
 -*'Can I speak to Tessa and Damo?'*-
 -*'She said okay, until two o'clock, look it's um.. this number just click green, say you're Barney's mate and she'll pass her phone in to them, one at a time because.'* —
 -*'This button?'*-
 -*'Here put on these earphones, if you get through you'll at least speak to one of them.'*-
 Macker wandered under the fat old battered oak tree. Holding the phone like it might bite him. But then I saw him laughing and waving to Maxie. I was glad.
 It was nice to help him so much with so little effort.
 -*'Hey Maggie and Moonbeam have arrived. Hiya Moonie baby!'*- said Lucia, swinging her up into my arms. I caught her safely.
 -*'Not a baby.'*- said our big girl
 -*'Course you're not.'*- I said, kissing her chubby cheeks and launching her back to Lucy.
 -*'Let's fly. Let's fly.'*- said Lucy whirling round.

-*'Now for Maxie.'*- I was thinking. Though really I had separated her and Macker accidentally. Or had I caught Macker's eye just then on purpose? -*'Who cares!'*- I thought. I was lucky enough not to be clumsy.
 -*'Hey Maxie could you come over here a second. Listen I need to talk to you.'*- I wasn't sure what to say to her..
 -*'What's wrong? What happened?'*- She looked scared.
 -*'Um, I forgot to ask how your Spanish exam went the other, er, week?'*-

She looked at me doubtfully. Examining my bloodstains and ridiculous girl's shorts.
 -*'Easy peezy. Tease 'n squeeze me.'*- she chanted. Wiggling her wrists. -*'They told me already I'll get an A plus.'*-
 -*'Congratulations. Wow! What a talent!'*-
 I took the chance to hug and swing her round.
 Copying Lucy and Moonbeam. Though my body complained strongly about it.
 And didn't unembrace her, not by chance.
 -*'I just wish the Free- Uni was so simple.'*- she said.
 -*'When are those exams then?'*-
 -*'Not till August, but it's not really the exams, it's just so much work. Just the Media group project could be a full time job.'*-
 -*'I know what you mean all right. You know we're booked for the Eagles flying course next month. Macker as well.'*-
 -*'That'll be great. We're really going to fly!'*-
 -*'It's just two days. Oh, I nearly forgot. Are you coming down the country at the weekend? There's the solstice party in Rosana's Coppice... Sure Macker would love it.'*-
 We were touching foreheads now. As if telling intimate secrets.
 -*'Love to, yeah.. But I promised you I'd childmind Moonie remember, and Josie as well.'*-
 -*'Let's bring them with us.'*-
 -*'And let's bring Sol and Lucy, if the van is free.'*-
 -*'We'll talk later. We have a reception in half an hour don't forget.'*-
 -*'Oh crap.'*-

-*I've missed you Maxie Moon.*- I said abruptly, and smooched her cheek. -*Lucy said she borrowed me from you. But I dunno how long I really want to be out on loan!*'-

Maxie laughed in surprise. Throwing her arms round my neck and pulling herself up, which hurt me a quite a lot.

-*Ow ow.*'- I exclaimed again. I'm hopeless at pain..

-*Oh I'm sorry.*'- She squeezed me more gently.

I could feel all the others watching us curiously. Though probably they weren't even looking. Macker still chatting animatedly to his brother or sister. And Lucia?.. Well hadn't she set up this comedy herself..

-*I'm afraid you're gonna dump me. Now you found a wizard your own age.*'- I dared to admit.

-*Don't worry. I'll always have time for my big old cuddly, er. anteater.*'- said Maxie. Rubbing against me with a chuckle.

-*Ow ow ow.*'- I groaned again.

But I didn't let go. And neither did she. Our bodies were saying a familiar hello, and wishing things had been different.

-*Oh sorry sorry.*'- she was still murmuring -*Oh Barney you're destroyed, let me just take you home now. You should be in my bed. Let's just go.*'-

-*Mmm let's just go.*'- I repeated, not meaning it to happen.

-*But we promised to do reception. Who could we ask?*'-

-*Let's just see how I feel, er.*'- says I -*They said this visitor is important. He's supposed to be here in, um, only fifteen minutes, wearing black with a flower.. well.. Listen if I'm still bad I'll just ask you. Or you just tell me, and you take me home to bed okay?.. But I don't want Macker upset.*'-

-*No no, Macker's cool.. He's expecting this already.*'-

-*Oh yeah?*'- says I. Feeling unfairly programmed despite my own blatant manipulations. Okay I'm a hypocrite.

Maxie looked into my eyes and nodded fast. Started kissing me, but quickly. Like a lover late for the train.

-*Promise me you'll come then.*'- she mouthed.

-*Yeah, um mmm okay..*'-

-*Come and sit down you two. Maxie you're beside me.*'- Maggie was calling, and I broke away.

She and Lucia had brought across a big load of pita-bread-pouches stuffed with humus and salads and eggs and cheese and exotic sauces. And Jerry with a tray of iced water bottles.

-*Special waiter service one d-day only.*'- he said, shyly. And we all started tucking in.

-*Place is crawling with yunkers today.*'- said Maxie. Grinning and smacking her lips.

-*I think this one has fish in it.*'-

-*Yunkers is young people.*'- I said to Lucia. -*They don't wanna be called kids or youth so..*'-

-*Can Moonbeam eat this? You wanna bit Moonie?*'-

-*Let her try everything of course.*'-

-*Seems like half the De-School projects have decided it's Do A Demo Day.*'-

By now there were half a dozen circles of yunkers on the grass, eating, talking and stripping off in the humid hazy sun, some making banners and flags and taking notes. and more crowding the computers under the awning.

As we sat back and munched another big gang of at least thirty came marching in from the road, behind - *'Stop Evictions'* - and - *'Death to Death Squads'* - banners. Chanting and laughing..

- *'How do they all get off school?'* - asked Lucia.

Everyone stared at her.

- *'Ooo ooh that's a clanger.'* - I explained. - *'We don't call it school anymore. Maybe Project*

learning or a De-School. They use the libraries and Free- Uni online.'

- *'Moonbeam's gonna choke.'* - said Maggie, but she spat it out.

- *'But, don't they have teachers?'* - Lucia persisted.

Some of them were running now. Spectacular, with flags whipping. Heading inevitably for the cool ornamental pond and fountain in the middle. Falling in and splashing water, undressing and getting soaked..

- *'Teachers preachers. No way.. Each group has a rota of helpers, on call or on line, they do have Explainers', maybe three or.'* - I began.

- *'Some have a dozen or more, as well as ..'*

- *'Look at them jump.'* - said Macker, pointing. - *'Look Moonie!'*

One fella had climbed right up on the high plinth of the fountain. Nearly naked. With huge spiraling eyes tattooed on his chest. Held his nose and bowed. Leaping wildly down into the pond, to whistles and cheers.

The second wore pants, but suddenly whipped them off and attempted a jig. His penis whirling like a mini windmill. Before being pushed off by the next in line. Meanwhile a general water fight was beginning. Some *agent provocateur* had thrown a hatful over a rival CLAN group.

- *'Here we see an illustration, um, of the domino theory of, er, aggression.'* - said Jerry.

- *'Looks refreshing to me.'* - said Maxie. - *'I'm cooking in my skin.'*

- *'Water anyone?'* - Macker offered the bottle.

- *'Yes, yes.'* - said Maxie, Lucia, Jerry and me together..

He stood up and began pouring icy water on our heads. Eliciting squeals and threats.

Maxie grabbed another bottle to retaliate. But he dodged like a boxer. She was up and after him. But he danced nimbly out of reach. Then they were off, running towards the fountain, through a gang of wet girls, chasing their *Explainer* with lumps of ice.

- *'Look here, come Sol, and Bernie and Josie. Look over there!'*

They were holding hands, Josie in the middle talking excitedly non stop. Josie in her skirt and bare feet. Chubby Sol in a swimsuit, draped in camera gear and a towel. Bernie in her strings of beautiful beads, wearing her small rucksack and flip flops, and no clothes.

It had gotten common that spring, if people felt like it.. no clothes.

- *'Come, come and eat something.'* - Maggie was welcoming. - *'Hey wow Bernie you look cool, think I'll strip off myself.'*

- *'We've been swimming. Over in Phelan's they're all starkers. All showing off their tattooed fannies and bollocks.'*

- *'What? They tattoo their fannies and testicles?'* - Lucia asked, laying on her thickest Mexican

accent. We all laughed.

-*'Naaa, they're only transfers. They shave and stick them on. See those girls over there.'*- Bernie pointed.

-*'They're really so creative.'*- said Lucia. -*'Us mamas can't look the fashion, but what the hell who cares. Freedom from clothes!'*-

And with that she whipped off Beardy O'Leary's grotty shirt.

-*'Don't be staring at us boys we know how your boring little minds work.'*- said Bernie.

-*'We'll have no Shit-Ons committed here.'*- Maggie chuckled. hands on hips and swinging loose her big freckled breasts.

-*'That's normal and beautiful for me.'*- Sol protested, though he kept his swimsuit on. Grinning and glancing sideways at the girls. -*'I wish in my country we would can do that..'*-

-*'Too hot for me, it's about f-forty degrees.'*- said Jerry. Bashfully turning away to unzip his pants. -*'But I've never seen those shy yunkers in the nip. That's n-new news, er, today!'*-

-*'Come and eat a pita-pouch they're great.'*- said Maggie. - *'Josie, why don't you come and sit on the blanket by me, look, Moonie's gonna have her nap. That's a great girl. And tell me everything that happened okay.'*-

-*'Me and Tammy got a prize for our web-quest they liked it a lot and... '*-

-*'Lookat, lookat that.'*- I interrupted, pointing at Maxie and Macker. They were right up on top of the fountain.

Macker was acting embarrassed and clumsy, hiding his crotch with his hands, though he was wearing underpants, while Maxie was waving his shorts jubilantly in the air. Snatching them away, so he almost fell. Macker had them all cheering and jeering, pantomime style.

-*'Oops. Careful Macker. He'll get wet.'*-

-*'He's gonna fall, haha, he's gonna fall.'*-

Now he was trying to climb up on top of her shoulders. A seemingly clumsy clown. Finally retrieving and impòssibly putting on the shorts, while somehow balancing on her shoulders. He and Maxie were really wobbling. Then he was raising his arms and standing up.

-*'Hurray he did it. Yippee...'*-

At that moment his pants fell down. He grabbed, missed, lost his balance and slowly toppled forward, arms flailing. We heard Maxie's faraway shriek. Everybody gasped on cue. But he som-ersaulted into a perfect dive.

Maxie was clapping and bowing up top, before jumping in herself.

The two of them were running back to the table, dripping and laughing and flicking drips on us as we applauded.

-*'Anyone got a towel?.. Ah well, drip dry.'*- Maxie was radiant and gorgeous.

-*'What a magnificent act!'*- said Jerry.

-*'Maxie is really strong, you held me perfectly.'*- said Macker.

-*'I learned in the yoga course. Food food food I'm ravenous. You should all jump in, it's super refreshing.'*-

-*'Hi Bernie, hi Josie, hi Sol, you arrived.'*- Macker greeted

-*'Hello kids. Really a bit far away shot and blocked up.. You are like professional clowns, no?'*-

Sol had been resting the camera on a low branch, straining up on a chair to see the viewfinder. Now he hopped down and took a monster sandwich.

-*I need some interview you promised me Jerry. For the magic credit cards of course, we're going to the free store to make it after, okay?. And also I like to go later to the Gay manifestation but Bernie can't come.. maybe somebody here can help me film, why not?'*-

-*Me please me please, si vous plait mon ami!*'- said Macker.

-*That's French silly.*'-

-*Fantastic offer. We have a new movie team!*'- Sol was grasping Macker like he'd just married him.

-*Me too.*'- said Maxie, putting up her hand. -*I'd like to help as well.*'-

-*This is my lucky day!*'- said Sol embracing her more formally. -*Look I'll show you what we have.*'-

The water war was raging round the fountain. While the demonstrators were lining up refreshed, raising up their banners and their chants, and marching round the park giving out tiny green leaflets, clad in cloth shoulder bags, flower tattoos and ankle bracelets.

-*Yeah but, do you know there's, um, a cyclone coming?'*- said Jerry to a woman with dreadlocks and a camera.

-*So we changed the time to five-o'clock, not seven.*'- she replied.

-*Oh that's quite okay then.*'- I said, with my usual sarcasm.

-*Hey sorry excuse please we're making a film for Latin Teleweb TV. Do we need some pass or permit to film the demo?'*- asked Sol.

-*They're here, hey Jamie come over here.*'- Karma yelled. -*You don't need a pass. So cool sir, I saw you filming in Balihoki. Did you get interviews there?'*-

-*I am giving you a copy of my film for totally free.*'- said Sol.

-*Barney here and Lucia were nearly assassinated by the police.*'-

-*Total shit, horrible fucking aggression. Oh Jamie, Babs, these people were beaten up in Balihoki.*'

-*This is CLAN TV..'*- Jamie was zooming in his camera on my bandaged ear.

-*And they hit you too uh, Lucy?'*-

Lucia had slipped on her sunglasses, smiling nervously, covering herself casually with a towel.

-*Oh bloody hell.*'- she laughed. Swiveled her hips, and showed her lacerated leg and bottom.

-*Oooh that looks really sore.*'- said Maggie.

-*You gotta see what I did to the policeman.*'-

Lucy was just SO attractive, she scared me somehow so lost my breath.

-*Could you recognize a photo of him?'*- blurted Babs.

-*I'm only joking, we did nothing to them. And they were with masks put on.*'-

-*The piggies got Barney's bottom as well.*'- said Maxie, with malicious glee.

-*Would you like to show our viewers your injuries? It could help with any court case.*'-

-*No chance, no way. They'll all be gawking.*'- says I. -*I don't want half of Ragwort up me arse.*'-

-*It'll go citywide, not just Ragwort.*'- said Karma, unhelpfully.

-*Even wider. Now we're in Net TV that goes all round the world.*'- Maggie added

-*Your incredibly long dong will get beamed all round the planet.*'-

Maxie smirked and bit her bottom lip,.

-*Our ratings will soar even higher.*'-

-*Come on it's your moral duty Barney.*'- Maxie insisted. -*Anyway you're nearly the last one wearing clothes. Come on now.*'-

-*'I'll show my bloody bottom I suppose.'*- I groaned.
 -*'We'll edit your face out, no big deal.'*- said Jamie. -*'And yours Lucy if you want, okay. Can you just tell us what happened to you...'*-
 -*'Yes okay I'll do the interview., let me put first on my T shirt. But I need my face misty okay.'*-
 She lowered her voice. -*'I'm a wanted woman in some countries, and they can menace me at home for showing my body.'*-
 -*'I'm filming you also then.'*- said Sol —*'Is my opportunity to record you in English!'*

Maxie

-*'Ow. Ow. Shit something's bitten my tummy, look Macker.'*-
 -*'Ooee looks like a bee.. Shall I kiss it better?'*-
 -*'Hang on.'*- said Maggie -*'I've got my magic ointment.'*-
 -*'Me me me. Let me.'*- Moonbeam would anoint my bite.
 . I'd been lying face down in the grass with Macker, with Moonie, still awake and riding 'gee gee' on my back. He sat against the tree and I lay back on him to let Maggie and Moonie cure my bite.
 -*'No Moonie just a tiny bit. That's a spider bite darling.'*-
 -*'Barney's gone all friendly and cuddly again, just friends.'*- I whispered. -*'After ignoring me all week.'*-
 -*'I saw you kissing when I was talking to my sister.'*- said Macker -*'Oh Maxie we got to get them out of that horrible prison.'*-
 -*'You're right. And they done nothing. Sure we could get stacks of people to go down there, I mean. How can they just lock them up?'*-
 -*'And then they punish them, the shit bastards.'*-
 -*'Look everybody.'*- Barney called over. -*'I think I see our new volunteer.'*-
 -*'Where?'*- I lifted my head from Macker. -*'Oh yes, could be him all right..'*-
 We were watching a tall man in black, making his way across the park towards us. A stark white face, shaved and stooping. With a big leather shoulder-bag.
 Picking his way apologetically through the half dressed, frolicking yunkers. Obviously failing to look casual.
 -*'Sure stands out in that kit.'*- we laughed.
 -*'He'd be overdressed in his underpants. Give him his due.'*- said Macker.
 As we watched two Clanners fell in with his stride, on either side. The three of them stopped, and our man half lifted his arms to be searched.
 -*'Uh oh.'*- said Jerry. -*'Well um, I see we still have security. I'll g-go and rescue him, shall I?'*-
 -*'I'm only famished.'*- I said, sleepy and hungry.
 -*'There's still two pita-pouches here.'*- Bernie was clearing the table, I nodded and she passed me a big sandwich.,
 -*'Oh Macker I have a spare house key for you. In my bag there in the little pocket.'*- Really I preferred to stay with him that day.
 -*'Thanks a lot, I'm off with Sol.'*- he said.

-*I know, but be careful darling please, I'll phone you soon.*'- I hugged him like he was going on a voyage, and he stayed a bit more. No one had ever seen me so in love.

I pulled him up with two hands, and leaned my cheek on his chest, shaking our wet hair together, shivering together as the cool drops ran down us.

-*The radio's saying we're in for a thrasher. They may give the famous 'Stay Indoors Warning.'*'- Barney informed.

-*What ! What time? When will it arrive?'*- I demanded.

-*I didn't catch that, hang on, no. If it's for real we'll hear all about it.*'- he explained.

-*Hard to believe.*'- Maggie was looking up, sniffing the air.

The great wall of cloud still seemed far away, but the mist was a little thicker. And now I saw it was streaming away from us. The storm was sucking it in. [refs.5d5e]

-*Well I don't feel a premonition.*'- I remarked.

-*Hallelujah.*'- said Maggie.

-*Usually you have the premonition, yes?'*- asked Sol. Packing up his tripod. Lucy had finished her interview.

-*Swing me Maxie. Uncle Macker. Swing me now!'*- Moonie demanded.

I shrugged my shoulders, brushing off grass and standing to swing Moonie round.

-*Three bad ones now, But I gotta get really wound up first.*'- I said, panting

-*She's uncanny with the second sight all right.*'- Barney nodded.

-*Thank you very much Doctor Lucia, that was wonderful.*'- Karma was saying loudly -*When can we meet to see your videos?'*

-*Is Friday good? Here this is my number, but we meet at the Soli-Fest as well... '*

Just then a low background grumble we hadn't noticed got louder and continued.

-*It's time to go.*'- said Maggie. —*Do we have to dress?'*

-*Up to you.*'- said Bernie. -*I'm happy as I am till the sun goes. What about Lucy?'*

-*She's coming with me. To visit a new dynamic org, called Social Explosion.*'- said Maggie.

-*Ha ha. You mean you're going to the bar with your girlfriends.*'- I interpreted.

-*To lubricate your Creative Destruction.*'- said Barney, grinning.

-*Okay okay, maybe you figured us out.*'- Maggie admitted.

I was squeezing and wringing out my dripping jeans.

-*Come on they're waiting for us. You shouldn't put on wet clothes. You'll get chilblains.*'- said Barney stupidly.

-*Yes but.. Could I just wear panties to the Reception?'*

-*Great dilemmas of our t-times..'*- said Jerry and they all laughed.

-*Bye bye dearest, bye Maggie. Bye Moonbeam. Bye Josie, Bye Bernie. Bye Sol Bye Lucy. .Kisses and. Huggies..'*- I proclaimed, backing away with Barney.

-*Bye kiddos and be careful.*'- said Maggie

Now Moonie was conking out, thumb in her mouth in the pram.

-*Everyone come home or phone if they give the Stay Indoors Warning. Okay, let me kiss you Josie.*'-

-*Goodbye Aunty Maxie. Bye bye Uncle Barney'*- said Josie.

I threw myself on Macker, who caught and swung me down.

Jerry and the man in black were waiting on the corner

Me and Macker broke our lingering kiss.
Our bodies unwillingly untouched.
-Excuse me Max and Barney'- said Jerry -'This is our g-guest James Smith.

Chapter twenty one

Remaking James

-‘*Dangerous Anarchist Subversives.. High Value Priority*’-

James paused, white-faced and sweaty, pinched his long nose and glanced casually behind him. Then he hurried on, a tall figure in black, with brown sunglasses and a plastic bag.

He’d taken a taxi to the city edge of the Ragwort area. Had come in a side lane to avoid any cameras.

A narrow street of boarded shops and gaily whitewashed squats. What a mistake to say he’d wear black! No one wore black, not on the hottest day yet, and he stood out a mile, the old men were pottering about in their swimming togs.

James glanced back again. -‘*Relax you idiot.*’- This was after all a *no-go area* for police.

He nodded deferentially to an ebony brown lady, who was crossing, with a sausage dog on a lead. Before noticing she wore nothing but a pearl necklace.

He looked up, shocked, and saw a banner reading -‘*Save The Bees.*’-

The bees? James felt better somehow, passing a tethered donkey, chomping in his nose bag. He’d walked two blocks into another world, feeling really surreal.

But feeling worse or better, his face just stayed the same.

A sad expressionless face, which hinted only of illness and life in prison. For prison had come hard to James Smith, formerly James Fitzroy-Smythe, first son of millionaire industrialist Malcolm Fitzroy-Smythe.

James had once been a rising star, the darling of the state media, a brilliant young historian and economist. The flashy dresser and flashy talker. James Fitzroy-Smythe, heir to spectacular wealth.

The young bourgeois taking a short cut to the top.

He began opening his shirt buttons, allowing his pasty face to register the slightest of ironic smiles, remembering back,

His path had been firmly set, but within his private self doubts grew. For one thing he hated his father, who was gleefully pursuing classic economic theory. Taunting his victims with arrogant contempt. Rationalize, cut out, dismiss and close up shop. Reinvest in property and gold.

James dug obsessively into himself, in lonely drunken sessions, but found there only the certainty of annihilation, half seen half remembered glimpses of a terrified animal, crying in the dark.

Only the sum of his memories and experience, soon to be wiped clean, and if they really existed, genetically inherited traits. He could only change, perhaps, by reconditioning himself, by living immersed in a 'chosen' and different experience and situation

To remake himself. A haphazard and contradictory project, but one which had haunted James Fitzroy-Smythe, in his egotistical ramblings, conducted over whiskey and sodas in his magnificent apartment.

Now James walked up through the backstreets of Ragwort Pool. Was he lost? He could hear faraway drums, whistles and chants, he knew about the attack on the Gay Club, and the eviction and re-occupation that morning. He knew about the impending storm. But now he was thinking back...

Left to himself he never would have acted. It was the strange and nasty fate of his friend and lover Michael Dalton that broke the mold. A strange doomed friendship, based initially on the excitement of verbal battles.

For despite his middle class origins and his many failings Michael Dalton was irrevocably committed to a workers revolution. Spurning the lures of Party leadership, or a soft job, he and his friends had set up 'The Wildcats', an underground organization dedicated through agitation, propaganda and sabotage to promoting the takeover of the workplace by the workers.

Two small kids with bows and no arrows were walking along beside him, but he was lost in his reverie. Then he stepped out to pass a bearded drunk. Sat comfortably on cushions across the sidewalk.

- *'Would you not have a Euro in your pocket for me Sir?'*-

James's heart jumped up in his throat, and he scrabbled for change. For a moment the bearded face had been Michael Dalton himself!

He gave the man two Euros, why not?

- *'You're not allowed to give him money.'*- said the bigger boy bossily.

- *'He spends it on booze and it's killing him.'*- added the other.

- *'No no I need money to buy a present for my kids.'*- said the tramp.

- *'You don't need money here. He has no kids.'*-

- *'Goway you busybody touts, I'll have you know.'*- he began.

- *'He has a credit card but they won't give him booze.'*- the boy insisted, stamping his little foot.

James stepped on. Leaving the officious children, arguing animatedly with the redundant beggar.

A few short months and Dalton had been gone. Snatched with six comrades in dawn raids and charged with a supermarket robbery that James knew he could not have committed. He had tried to help but his father was hostile. There was a brief court appearance. Their eyes met in the packed courtroom, Dalton even managed a wink.

But they had been terribly beaten. All had signed detailed confessions. And waivers that they had not been mistreated. Their lawyer was barred for contempt, The hearing was over. There was no bail.

James went home to his own luxury cell, his own private night of mental torture. Finally he suspected his father. Sir Malcolm had had him watched. Michael Dalton was a terrorist and

a queer, a mortal threat to the family name. Could it be possible that his father had had him framed?

Red eyed and exhausted, James confronted Sir Malcolm next morning in his penthouse office. Never in his life had he answered him back, and his arrogant father failed to recognize his verbal skills. Playing to his prejudice, then hooking and pulling...

Dalton was gone... Of course it was better for everybody... Of course his father had warned him, how wise... But how had he known?.. And what did his police friend say about the confession?

His father betrayed far too much knowledge of Michael Dalton's fate. When he left that office James knew for sure, and his father knew that he knew, that his lover Michael Dalton had been disposed of because he threatened the Fitzroy-Smythes.

Worse, his father had enjoyed doing it. James had caught that excited glint in his eye and breathless voice.

Maybe Sir Malcolm had orgasms over the torture of Dalton and his friends!

Why not? Videos of the torture? Of course there would be! James scanned his memory.. *His father hopping with pleasure after the disappearance of his arch rival. And, oh god yes. Laughter, after the death of his poor mother from breast cancer...*

So he had acted for himself at last. Ironically in blind reaction and anger. Cutting his family ties, leaving the university and changing his name to James Smith.

Five months later he was arrested, with three others, in an abortive bomb attack on the police computer center. It was just bad luck getting caught. He had been sentenced, in the end, to six years, a light term, and served four...

Now James willed himself to show no nerves. Not to glance behind, or clutch at the shoulder bag. And he permitted himself the beginnings of a smile. For now he would strike a real blow.

His father had died of a stroke the year before.

Now at last he was ready to act.

He had 'chosen' to sabotage the parasite rulers, not to get back at his dad, but for himself and all the victims of an evil system..

The lane had come out on the main road, full of people and odd vehicles. Across the road he could see the park entrance..

The leafy iron gate was manned by spiky haired youths. Sporting monster tattoos, stuck on their torsos, deep in earnest discussion. The sinister monsters moving their fangs and claws, as their host bodies breathed and chatted.

Two of the women wore gun bags, slung on their shoulders. He accepted a little leaflet and walked straight through the busy Playground Gate, under the slides, swings and walkways.

Then he swallowed and blinked in blank surprise.

About a hundred naked shrieking youths were playing tag and water wars round a fountain, beyond them stacks of picnickers and sunbathers, joggers and a gym class.

Anything but discreet, the place was packed. At least the coppers couldn't nab him here. He noticed a birthday party, a class Assembly, a demo forming up..

And a pervading air of hysterical excitement.

The restaurant tables he was looking for were on the far side under roofs and trees.

-*Loosen up uncle, have a swim.*- A painted boy was ducking behind him, as he got out his little bunch of lilac for the rendezvous.

-*Don't wet my bag please.*'- He was detouring away from the pond.

Two people were walking the same way as him. Then they were walking closer. And closer. He saw they were carrying gun bags.

James just stopped, tried to smile, and held up his empty hands.

-*Where are you headed sir?*'-

-*I have an appointment to meet Jerry Bonkers in the Gobble-de-Gook Restaurant.*'-

-*Jerry Bonkers!*'- they laughed. But then gestured to each other, moved away from him and crouched.

-*Sorry can you just empty your bag and pockets we have had bomb threats, it's just routine.*'-

James slowly put down the bag. Did they think he was a suicide-bomber? But just then Jerry himself ran up to them, panting. He stopped a few meters off, hesitating and rummaging in his pockets.

-*Um, hello there, uh. Great job lads I'm Jerry from the Reception group today, you're James Smith right.*'-

Finding his pink security pass he held it up for the Clanners.

-*Okay okay no problem, er, Mister Bonkers Sir!*'-

Jerry blushed ridiculously as they cleared off, snorting with laughter.

-*Thank you Jerry. Nice to meet you.*'-

-*The demo will be at five o'clock, five o'clock the demo.*'-

James stared helplessly. Two young women were jogging past chanting.

With hopping rabbit stick-ons, stuck on their tits.

-*The demo will be at five o'clock, five o'clock the demo.*'-

-*Come on Mister Smith.*'- said Jerry - *Welcome to the Ragwort carnival!*'-

* * *

Maxie

-*Excuse me Max and Barney.*'- said Jerry - *This is our g-guest, James Smith.*'-

-*Hi James I'm Maxie.*'- I said.

I took his cold skinny hand, stretched up to smack a kiss on his gaunt facebone.

He looked like a vampire on holiday, obsessively pinching his bony nose.

-*Excuse me please my pants got wet.*'- I said.

Really I was embarrassed, to be meeting this weird important dude in my wet black knickers.

I wasn't keen on this job anyway and I was much too sleepy.

-*No no, delighted to meet you, miss. Please, it's me who's wrongly dressed today.*'-

-*Very pleased to meet you, this is my, er, colleague, Barney Maguire.*'-

-*Yes. Yes of course.*'- he said. Did he know us?

-*We have a space, uh, booked upstairs.*'- said Jerry. — *But I suggest we sit out on the grass.*'-

-*Inside please.*'- he snapped. - *Let's go in straight away please.*'-

Barney took my hand in his, surprising me as we never held hands, but I didn't let go, I mean.. Maybe he had got wind, that I planned to leave the house because he was so cold and distant.

In any case I wanted to be pally with him so he wouldn't be jealous of Macker, but it was working way better than I expected..

Or maybe he saw I was mad jealous every time Lucy touched him, which was whenever she could.

We followed in, trailing behind and self consciously holding hands

-*'My friend Barney!..I'm sorry I got carried away.'*- I said.

-*'How do you mean.'*-he asked.

-*'Slaggin you off for not stripping in front of the cameras.'*-

-*'I felt hurt and ugly, that's all.'*-

-*'Don't be silly. We're all crazy about your body.'*-

-*'Lies lies. Scrub your eyes.'*- he chided -*'It's you that had us gawking. At your, erotic bottom.*

-*'Huh! What rubbish!'*- I exclaimed. Though I couldn't help laughing.

-*'And, and of course Punky and Perky, your not quite identical titties. Not forgetting glorious Gloria and your gorgeously sexy..'*-

-*'Ah but I ain't got that big bent Dumbo with the long trunk.'*- I hissed in his ear.

Trumping his salacious banter before he went too far,

-*'No wonder you're too shy to go on telly!'*- I added.

I was digging him with my knuckles, pulling myself gleefully up his shoulder.

-*'Here we go again, so obviously obsessive..'*- he said sarcastically.

There was a louder rolling grumble that was definitely thunder.

-*'Was it you who told Lucia the name, um, Dumbo.. er..?'*- He began, hesitantly.

But Jerry was beckoning us into a little room already.

There was a table with a clean Buddhist style table-cloth, five chairs, crisps, a jug of apple juice. Glasses and a candle in a saucer. Plus a dubious ventilator grill. No windows. It was hot and smelly, but the walls had interesting old posters.

-*'This is perfect.'*- said James at once. -*'I'm sorry to drag you indoors but you'll see it's a good idea.'*-

-*'It's gonna thrash rain anyway.'*-said Jerry

-*'If we don't suffocate in here we'll be just grand.'*- I said. Sitting on one side of the table beside Barney. With James and Jerry on the other.

-*'Help yourself to juice. Now James we're here to talk to you as a reception group. You've been recommended to us by some of our lot in prison, as you know and, er.. We've made a few more inquiries and, um, how about if we explain the setup here in Ragwort Pool and see how you might fit in?'*- Jerry explained.

-*'No no, we always let them speak first. Sorry James, we haven't done this for a while.'*- says Barney.

-*'Okay let's just do that then.'*- Jerry sighed.

James looked around at our smiley, tired faces, bag on his lap, and began.

-*'Well thanks a lot for coming I can see this is one more chore for you. For me maybe the most important point in my life. Um, I'm a historian and an economist, but I've a fair idea what they're up to in sociology and psychology and..'*-

I was yawning, instantly bored with this terrible fella. I was thinking about Barney and Lucia, if they'd got as far as swapping sexy names they could be together already. Would Barney finally have a girl friend?

I took his hand in both of mine, under the oriental table-cloth. Began pulling his finger joints, till they cracked. I was used to doing as I pleased with him, and him just accepting. Mister Maguire

was still my special friend.

-*'Of course I know you Barney'*- this James was saying enigmatically -*'and in a minute you'll remember me, I did some work for the Wildcat's Defence Committee, and I got arrested on an ill considered job.'*-

Barney just looked blank, which surprised me

-*'..as you may know I was with some of your crowd inside and, well, now I want to help and I can do something really good, um...'*-

He stopped silent. Jerry was taking notes. Barney's earphone was buzzing. I was rubbing my cheek on his bare arm, resisting a mad urge to bite him. James was scratching his ear.

Then Barney threw up his arms!

-*'The Wildcats. Micky Dalton!'*- he exclaimed. -*'Of course you're Micky Dalton's mate. You're James Fitzroy-Smythe!'*-

James's face remained immobile. Why the hell hadn't he admitted it himself?

-*'I was James Fitzroy-Smythe, I. well, I couldn't go through with it. I changed my name and disowned the lot of them.'*- He looked up into my puzzled stare.

-*'Now I recall!'*- Barney was slapping the table. -*'Remember I was thrown out of one of your debates!'*-

-*'Uh, no not really, what..'*-

-*'Seven years ago. We were disrupting, um, some rightwing drivel. You, as chairman, had us ejected, as we were not college members.'*

-*'Oh God yes, that was you.'*- he said. -*'I'm so sorry I don't know what to say.'*-

-*'Say nothing about it.'*- says Barney. -*'Times change and people change surely. I'm delighted to see you here in Ragwort so I am.'*-

-*'Sorry I still don't get it.'*- said Jerry quietly. Peeping over at James through his fingers. I had woken up a bit and broke in myself..

-*'So you fell out with your hyper rich family. But why and what happened next?'*-

-*'I'll tell you, privately. See first of all I never really believed in my career. Well the turning point was Micky Dalton getting life for robbery.'*- He stopped again.

-*'See Michael wasn't on that raid, because he was in bed with me that night. We couldn't prove it. They took him because my father had had us watched and asked his police friends to get rid of him. They tortured them of course.'*-

-*'Jayzus wept.'*- said Jerry

-*'What a horrible bastard.'*- I added.

Barney just shook his head, we were holding hands again.

-*'He got off on it all right, but I found out...Well I'm only telling you now to explain like my, uh, reason for changing, like..'*-

-*'Fair enough'*- says I -*'You must have had a hard time.'*-

-*'Yes I did a rather.'*- He still had a touch of a posh accent -*'but I was such a spoiled brat before. Now at least I'm doing something useful.'*

I could hear faraway megaphones, maybe they were clearing the park.

-*'How much do you know, about Ragwort CoOp Pool?'*- Barney asked.

-*'Not much, I came here as it's near where I live and work. And I knew of a few people, like yourself here. I think it's revolutionary. but under the guise of something community and harmless. Until The Free Unions sprouted up and takeovers of commerce really got going, that's the main thing I think they.'*

-*'You're wrong!'*- I burst in, angry with this ignorant bloke. — *'You don't even mention the whole women's and youth movements. What about the anarchist principals we fought for in the Pools. The De-schools, the coppice farms, what about the CLANs, the projects, like, the basic things which we...'*

But my speech was cut by another muffled smash of thunder, which roared on and on and didn't really come to a definite stop at all.

-*'They've given the Stay Indoors Warning.'*- Barney half shouted, reading a text on his phone.

-*'Much too late.. They're having tornadoes down the coast.'*

-*'Oh bollocks.'*- said Jerry nervously. -*'Listen Maxie let's just give him a chance to finish so we can...'*

-*'Give me a chance you mean. Why should I always shut up? You would support him, you're all jumping on the bandwagon to war. Like this man. It's all men, trying to force a confrontation to wank their blown up egos. What would happen if.'*

That's when the light went out. I stopped abruptly. It was pitch black in that room.

The wall of thunder was rising, with a new screaming whine, I was holding onto Barney. Something moved, then the whole place was trembling. I heard a faraway shrieking. Barney flashed a lighter and lit the candle. But just then the light came on again and the noise declined.

I blew out the candle, frustrated, but oddly thinking about Moonbeam's birthday.

-*'I hope this p-place isn't gonna collapse.'*- said Jerry. -*'I b-bet it's bedlam outside with.. '*

-*'You're right Maxie we know you're right.'*- Barney was facing me, his voice shaky. -*'Uh, could you just tell us very briefly James what you'd like to do, we have a climate emergency here this afternoon.'*

-*'We can fix you up with a place to stay.'*- I said, now feeling a bit apologetic, my anger gone .

—*'And there's plenty of work to be done.'*

-*'No no'*- said James.- *'I'm sorry about my manner and I take your point about heroes and morons because, because I have spent years myself trying to climb out of that trap. I can be infinitely more useful outside.'*- He had dropped his voice and we strained to catch his words over the thunder.

-*'I am offering you secret vital information.'*- he murmured melodramatically.

-*'How do you mean?'*- I asked him.

-*'I mean as a spy. I have good and bad news for you, .'*- James lifted the thick files and a computer memory from his bag and put them on the table.

-*'Let's have the good news first.'*- says I, optimistically.

-*'Well, okay, since I came out of prison last year I've made a start. I have set up a Business Consulting firm called -'All The Answers.'*- as a cover. *My father cut me off but finally my sister has signed me over thirty percent. She knows nothing of this. It's a real business. I've built up a team of experts who're more or less on your side.. on our side..'*

-*'Super practical. Super useful.'*- Barney was leafing through the first file, Me and Jerry reaching for the other two.

-*'I've risked bringing these files as a concrete blow against an absurd system which I abhor. As well as a proof of what I am saying to you.'*

The first is details of businesses in trouble and likely to close down soon. And a report on plans to close remaining social services.

The second is a countrywide list of empty or abandoned properties, with owner details and more information. It's a squatters' bible.

And the third is a secret government file on the Free, including intelligence reports and contingency planning. It's dangerous but..'-

-*'This is unbelievable!'*- Barney was clapping Jerry's back. Leaning as if to hug James who shrank back, nervously twitching.

-*'Hey Jerry take a look at this.'*- But Jerry was on his feet, oddly, tapping on the walls.

-*'Look it's time I disappeared from here, if I can get away. We should never be seen together again. There's just a few important details. And er, well I'm sorry to have to say that...'*-

-*'Of course, you'll need contacts in our intelligence groups, you can...'*- Barney began.

-*'No no, your intelligence is infiltrated. See page sixty eight, Annex XI Report Infiltration.'*-

-*'So what do we do about this?'*- I asked a good question.

-*'The story I'd like to put out on these two files is that they were found in a container and handed in er. What do you think?'*-

-*'Okay I suppose, it sounds like something we could do..'*- said Barney.

-*'I know someone'*- I said, thinking of a friend of Macker's -*'who'd swear on his mother's grave that he found the files. And take credit for the rest of his life!'*-

-*'What about the third file?'*- Jerry asked., sitting down.

-*'My idea is we exchange CD's of Greatest Hits or whatever, through a chemistry student at the Free Uni called, um... the passwords are in here, Maxie, don't lose it.'*-

' And he gave me a short brown computer stick on a neck-tape. Why me?

-*'It should be just the four of us for now. we're getting you some special codified mobile phones for emergencies. Um, I have to tell you something else, er bad news for you I'm afraid..'*-

-*'Sounds really scary.'*- I had no idea.

-*'One thing first.. We've commissioned in-depth reports on the Pools, er on the money-free economy, the De-Schools and Free-Uni, the CLANs as a defence force, um, they're on this computer memory. Can you copy and pass it round?'*-

-*'Yeah I think I could do that, I'll want to look at it first but.'*- I said,

-*'Sorry? Oh yeah. Shit.. the lights..'*-

The fucking lekky had gone again. Jerry produced a tiny solar torch and Barney re-lit the candle. I was trying to check my phone messages.

-*'So finally what is the bad news?'*- he asked

-*'A new company called 'Excellent Solutions' offered us a high figure for a report detailing leaders in autonomous movements, this was a while back.'*- he explained.

-*'Just tell us now, what are you getting at?'*- I was rude and impatient with him, mistakenly as it turned out.

-*'Okay. They see you as a threat, and a terrible example to all the other semi bankrupt countries. They want you erased. To them one more dirty war is peanuts.'*-

-*'I've heard that.'*- said Barney. -*'But getting rid of us could be easier said than done. Did you hear what happened this morning?'*- he indicated his bandaged ear.

-*'Yes yes. But now they want to start the dirty war.'*- he replied.

-*'I was afraid you'd say something like that.'*- said Jerry. — *'But how? T-Tell me how and that's something useful.'*-

-*'This company asked for details of strategic economic and energy nodes., they call them. One concrete target was the Air Factory, the main one.'*-

-*'What about it?'*- I knew about the factory.

-*'Seems it's going to suffer a dramatic attack, and soon. Maybe under cover of this storm.'*-

Barney rolled up his eyes, looking totally skeptical. What the hell was this guy telling us?

-*'You can't be serious man, what proof have you?'*-

-*'No proof Barney. Our agent found out. Seems like a practice target for them, just to get started like.'*-

-*'Well, I know all about the Air Factory, as it happens my folks live nearby and helped set it up. It's right by the Southern Valleys Pools that united with the City CoOps.'*-

-*'Well so that's lucky you know them.'*- he interrupted. -*'My man got their codes and used a remote access beamer. There's no way they found out.'*-

-*'So what are you saying we do?'*- he was still suspicious.

-*'Two things, in this case publicity is okay if you want it. Because it'll only make them think they have a spy. Second, don't expect to stop them. We're talking about money-no-object professionals. It's a media stunt, they used the word dramatic. Maybe the best thing would be to just close it down, maybe for maintenance.'*-

-*'Yes yes. But they use the conveyor line for transport up and down the mountains. Still, that factory is super defensible! I know the place and the people. Maybe they wouldn't believe me, but..'*- He stopped, he was shaking his head.

-*'Um. I'm sorry to tell you, well..'*- said James

-*'There's more isn't there.'*- I said, copping on.

James didn't respond. Just bit his lip. Then he spoke.

-*'It's not an accident us meeting, I told you, I came here to save your lives.'*-

-*'What, but you don't know us, are we in danger?'*-

-*'I found out 'who was doing what' days on Reception interviews, saying I knew some of them, then I picked a day with someone on the list. You, Barney Maguire.'*-

-*'A list? For what?'*-

-*'Our, agent got a blacklist. Four hundred names they already had prepared. I have it here. Seems they had a big money buyer for it.'*-

-*'A blacklist? But what for?'*- I asked, but I had a premonition.

He paused as a gust of wind began howling above us. We moved closer, our faces glowing in the candlelight.

-*'A hit-list. I'm sorry.. A death-list. They want to start the cycle here.. You know, killings, disappearances, bomb attacks, revenge, um, rapes, threats, black information, and reprisals. Sure they've*

done it all over the world. They'll attack their own people to have reason to respond. Destabilization. Poisons everything.'

'You're joking man, here we have about one murder a month. Who are these people? I don't believe they even exist.' I think Barney was trying to convince himself.

'Your name and details are on the list twice Barney. Under Ragwort CoOp Pool, just er, fourteen of you.'

James was swiveling the pages, holding them right under the candle

'God, yes. I do know these people. Oh bloody shite.' said Barney. His face gone whiter.

'And here you are, on a short list entitled - 'Dangerous Anarchist Subversives, High Value Priority.'

'Well fuck me backwards.' he said, amazed. *'High Value Priority no less!'*

Me and Jerry were craning to see. I caught the word 'Linda'. And there I was as well.

'Linda Moon, alias Maxie. Sidekick to terrorist B.Maguire. Vicious attacks on Brother-Hood and

men in general. Frigid dyke.'

'Frigid.. What a cheek!' I burst out. *'Only one person would write that. I've been set up by Killian Bate!'*

'Could be, he's a special prosecutor now.' said Barney.

'I'm not on the list.' said Jerry. *'But Killian hates me more than anyone.'*

'Maybe he doesn't know you live in Ragwort.'

'I'll check that for you.' said James.

The high screaming noise was back, louder now, and I realized it must be the wind.

Then the door flew right open by itself. Banging violently on the wall. Blowing out the candle.

So Uncle Barney lit it up again. I'd got text from Maggie at our house. She was okay, with Moonie and Bernie and Lucy...

'Maggie and Moonie and Bernie and Lucia say they're fine at home.' I announced loudly. I could hear shouts and loud scraping from below. Cracking noises from above as well.

We tried to carry on our conversation. But it was just Barney and James, speaking into each others ears.

'All hell is breaking loose.' Jerry yelled. *'What do we do with these files?'*

'I'll hide them in the Pool offices.' Barney shouted.

'Sorry we can't hear.. What are you're saying.' I didn't get it.

'What was that? We need to get to the basement.. ' Jerry shouted.

This was getting silly. The table was moving by itself!

As rhythmic crashing sounds became a roar.

Shuddering the partition walls. Merging to a higher splintering shriek.

Suddenly impossibly loud. Leaping into a terrifying new dimension.

I freaked, dropping my mobile. Started a yipping scream with my hands on my ears..

People with torches were blundering into the room. Yelling and duckng..

One was behind the door. Hiding her head..

We were about to die horribly.

Jerry had nipped smartly under the table. Pulling James down by the wrist.

'Come James. The roof.' He fell in his arms.

Crack Crack Crack, squares of the false ceiling vanished upwards. Debris was whipping round us. Barney and me were holding each other, his hair blowing in my face. I've never been so physically terrified,

Then everything was shaking., as something very heavy was slowly caving in upstairs.. Barney was pulling me with him. Crawling blind to the thick side wall.. I couldn't hear myself yelling. I just saw dust and flashing as the screaming crescendoed..

The lights were gone again. Blackness. Coughing and choking..

* * *

But then the noise was subsiding already. And then the volume was turning right down. The roaring and crashing just stopped completely. Moments later there was a shocking silence. Some light came in the missing ceiling. An ominous creaking.

A tornado had gone right over the solid old convent and into the park.

-*'Talk about climate chaos!'*-said Barney, coughing in the dust..

-*'Everyone okay here?'*-

-*'It stopped. Um, well it passed. We're s-safe!'*- said Jerry. Coughing and waving his little flashlight. Helping James out from under the table.

-*'I thought we were all gonna die.'*- I found the candle at my knees and re-lit it, but moments later the lights came on.

-*'If the roof beams went we'd all have gone through the floor.'*- Barney said, peering up.

-*'It could still happen.'*- said James.

I noticed that I'd wet myself a bit. Yuk! I'd have to wear those soggy jeans.

-*'If it's s safe to move we should um, all go downstairs.'*- I advised huskily, getting my voice back.

Barney and me were still holding onto each other, both of us badly shaken. He was showing a message from Marty in Phelan's. Over there they were all in the cellar, holding hands.

-*'I'm told we should be in the basement by the main walls.'*- he said too loudly. -*'They're saying the worst could be yet to come!..'*-

But for us the worst had passed. The wind went up to hurricane strength force-two, but we weren't touched by another tornado.

We went downstairs and helped, sweeping up and boarding broken windows. Making tea and snacks, and everyone trying to contact friends and family.

There were maybe forty people in the basement, the warehouse and the Caff.. We had a makeshift clinic, two student doctors, and lots of helpers. Just small injuries at first. Three injured people stranded nearby were brought in. And soon, wrapped in a blood stained sleeping bag, we had a dead body.

James stayed with us, he had no choice. He turned out to be practical and likeable, when you got used to his Dracula appearance and weird manner. At least we got to know him a bit, and he

and Jerry became friends. Which is great as Jerry's terribly shy, though much younger, and both of them are gay, of course.

I didn't really know what it all meant at the time. Figuring it like another malicious threat from Killian and his mates. I didn't really believe they'd be getting funded to murder people.

I couldn't believe they'd really hunt us down.

Chapter twenty two

The Green-Air Factory

-‘That’s if this contraption ever gets to the top.’-

Barney

We were all off for the weekend. It was raining incessantly and the buses were late. Jerry drove us to the bus stop in a Pools van, and we were parked up waiting. Macker, Bernie and Josie hadn’t come.

But Maggie and Lucy, were making whoopee with Moonbeam in the back, plus me, Sol and Maxie, three bikes and boxes of gear, and food.

They were coming to attack the Air Factory. [ref.one_Air_Tech]

It was me, Barney, who had been given the information.

Plus I was from the area myself, and I knew the place well.

The rain was dinging rhythmically on the metal roof.

We had zero proof that anything would happen, but luckily the Pools had believed us. They knew me. We used to send them crowds of kids on excursions and De-schooling projects. We did call an online vote, but too late..

-‘Why do we go to an Inipi Party in the rain?’- asked Lucia.

Me and my partner Maxie were off on a semi secret mission for the Defence Coordination. The rest were going to a weekend party.

-‘But it’s always raining.’- said Maggie. As if that made it make sense. -‘This is Solstice Awakening, it’s a Coppice Club party. You’ll love it.’-

-‘Excuse me, what is a Coppice Club? No, first, what is an Air Factory?’- asked Sol.

So I told them the story...

-‘The Air Factory was an open-caste mine in the Lapwing Mountains near here, that was shut down about... more than ten years ago.

Before going bust they had installed a brand new four kilometer conveyor belt, all the way down to the valley where the ore used to be unloaded into barges or lorries.

Even back then those valleys were full of CoOps and Collective farms. Where they infiltrated the outer forgotten suburbs and closing down industrial estates, that’s where the first Pool area was set up.

‘The Magic Power of the Air Factory’. A local mechanic called Grubby Raptor, what else, stripped and adapted his car to go on compressed air. With a pre-heat gismo that made it really zip.

YIPPEE. You have to all say, Yippee.

Soon all his friends were doing the same thing, but their boss banned them from filling their gas canisters in the garage.

BOOO...Come on. All together

So they built a windmill, but that wasn't enough, so they dammed up a stream, but soon they had too many customers..

AWWW

So they done a deal with the CoOp Credit Union and the creditors of the ex-mine, hooked up their air compressors to the braking system of the rock conveyor belt, and the Air Factory began.

Hurray, hurray, hurray!'-

-'That's all there is to it?'- Lucy asked.

-'Basically, well, people said they were destroying the western wilderness, but they made um, - 'Unique Deep-Lake and Cliff Habitats'- up there, and a lot of new coppicing and the-'Bear and Eagle Sanctuary.'-

-'It's a great place. We used to camp there every summer, when the only way up was a donkey path. The top part is run by Clan Eagle now, they have a hostel and a camp-site as well and er, they do the powered gliding and flying courses there. That's where me and Macker and Maxie are gonna learn to fly.

We help take care of the middle level, which is enormous, with a De-school project and soon the Adventure Way..

So anyway, the Air Factory was held up as a parable of collective ingenuity triumphing over capitalist lunacy. All kinds of machines and tools were fitted out to work on compressed air. Thousands, hundreds of thousands of tons of falling rock began working for us.'-

-'But what happens to the rock?'-

-'Most of it goes away by barge. They use it for sea defences, trying to stop the sea from flooding in. And they're converting some bays to fish and shellfish farms, spawning grounds and, and harbours and a new marshland. And who knows what else they do, cement I think, finally all that rock is not nearly enough!'-

-'The difference is these people know what they're doing.'-

-'They work with the Free-Uni and they.. '-

-'Look here comes the bus.'-

People appeared like magic, from another parked van and a car and various doorways and we all spilled out and started loading in the bikes and gear. Maggie and Moonbeam got straight in and reserved us the back seats, but there was enough room for everybody.

-'An air bus. My first trip in an air bus!'- said Sol as we pulled away.

-'It's not an air bus. It works on gas. Maybe bio-gas or on methane I don't know.'-

-'It's an air bus!'-

-'No no, it's a gas bus Sol!'-

Only later I realized the guy was taking the mickey.

-'Mama lookat mama lookat.'- Moonbeam had spotted a man who was leading a lot of wet horses.

In the coach there were some Clanners in green militia caps and pocket-belts, some of them specialists on their way to the Air Factory as well.

They knew me, and a couple, who introduced themselves as Marcus and Anna, came down the back, and pored over our big army map.

- *'Well not much chance of anything happening in your top section. Too hard for them to get to.'*- said Maxie.

- *'Oh don't you know, we just heard. A helicopter was spotted at dawn this morning, up above the cliffs. There really will be an attack, it's not just a rumour.'*-

- *'What!?'*- I gasped.

- *'Clan Eagle and people from the coppices reported it, unloading in the mist on the high moor. It was on the news just now. A chinook they say.'*-

- *'But that's an enormous thing!'*- says I - *'That means sure they'll attack from above, just cut the cables! I hope they got those maintenance clamps on.'*-

I was digging out my phone to check it out.

So me and Max spent the next hour at least on the phone, though the reception was mostly awful, while the bus squelched, and slid through mud.

Splashed up flood damaged roads and out through the suburbs.

Everybody talking non stop and eating sambos already.

And the sun finally piercing the mist.

By now it seemed we wouldn't even get to the Air Factory or the meeting in Duncantry. Because the military police had closed the only road.

There had been a confrontation between the police and some armed Clan Warrior, who had finally gone over the mountains on foot.

Maxie, me and our Clanners would do the same. We would cut across by forest tracks, through the maze of coppice plantations. Not so far from where Maggie, Lucita and Moonbeam and others on the bus were going to the Spring Solstice Inipi party.

- *'Hold on tight!'*- Our bus had taken a bend too fast and was trying to throw us all on the floor.

From Rosana's place it's maybe just an hour's walk by a cliff path to the conveyor track.

Unfortunately it's surrounded by swathes of new woodland, providing excellent cover for any saboteur raiders, with access paths and little clearings, between the layers of trees.

The bus bounced slowly over a ramp and negotiated the first hairpin bend.

I took Moonbeam on my knee and we played peekaboo with her. Then - *'I spy something green.'*- Meanwhile Maxie queried some details with the CLAN specialists, looking at the big map on the vibrating bus floor.

Sol had been filming his 'background footage' from the window, and asking a lot of questions. Now he was yawning and patting his stomach, munching on one of Bernie's vegetable patties.

- *'Wanta bitta patty!'*- He broke off a bit for Moony.

- *'What you looking for on the map?'*- he asked.

- *'We know where the mercenaries were dropped off, we wanna know where they'll camp, and attack.'*- Maxie explained.

- *'Are these all houses? And forests?... Where will it be the party?'*- Sol pointed.

- *'Here, Rosana's Coppice Circle.'*- Maxie said.

- *'Then around here, in this forest.. so many paths!'*-

- *'No no Sol, that's miles away from the Air Factory.'*-

- *'Their boss say factory factory. Okay but they gonna have some fun as well.'*-

- *'How do you mean?'*- I asked.

- *'Catch some kids for sex, maybe.'*-

- *'Come off it Sol, that's never happened!'*- said Maxie, shocked. And he shrugged.

-*'First one here then.'*- he said -*'In my country thousands have..But..But ask Lucia if you don't believe me.'*

Maggie and Lucia were still talking urgently, arm in arm like sisters on the bouncy back seat.

They hadn't been listening, but when I questioned Lucia with the map, holding it up in front of them, her finger hovered, and picked a spot near Sol's, by the coppice farms.

-*'My turn. Me.'*- said Moonie. Jabbing greasy fingers at a lake.

-*'I say they camp up here, maybe catch a chicken, these gangsters are all the same..'*

-*'Oh shit oh shit oh shit.'*- My guts were flipping. -*'Then we should be evacuating all the coppice farms not just...'*- And I slipped up my headphones to try and phone warnings.

I thought I knew something about guerrilla warfare, now it seemed I'd been naive.

-*'How long till we arrive?'*- Sol asked, with a burp.

-*'No not long, less than an hour to the pass. That's if this contraption ever gets up.'*

-*'If the old engine holds together.'*- said Maxie.

-*'I come with you and Maxie and these Clanner soldiers, no? Maybe the camera is mor stronger than the gun.'*- Sol observed.

-*'Yeah all right.'*- said Maxie. -*'Though the Solstice Awakening will be much more fun I expect.'*

And she pulled down her cap as if to snooze.

-*'A sol party for me!'*- said Sol -*'But is it not just for girls?'*

-*'No no, but mostly women.'*- said Maggie. -*'You're um, very welcome in the kitchen!'*

-*'Ha! I am a magnificent plate washer. Bad luck I must to go film some Contra idiotas.'*

-*'Yeah yeah, oh so macho man.'*- said Lucia.

-*'Tell me Maxie.'*- Sol asked. -*'Explain me what is the Coppice Pool?'*

-*'Oh um okay, well all these mountains were basically, um, bare. Just sheep and bogs, right.'*

-*'Oh Maxie, that's a valid eco-habitat.'*- I interrupted. I wasn't getting through on the phone.

-*'Yeah but much too much. Nearly all the native forests were eliminated by humans.'*

-*'Yes but what is it like, really?'*- asked Lucia [refs.20a.20b.5.permaculture/Climate change.]

-*'There's all kinds'*- said Maggie, joining in. -*'Rosana's coppice where we're going is the typical circle, well nearly, with the cliff to the north, it's maybe half a kilometer across.'*

-*'It's much bigger.'*- I said.

-*'Yeah okay. Divided like the spokes of a bike, or a cake, but with a big hub in the middle, it's fairly flat and pretty boggy, you need boots.'*

-*'Why is it round?'*- asked Lucy.

-*'Um, I dunno really. Each segment is planted with trees one year later, with paths between them. Then after ten years or seven or.. they prune the first segment, to ground level, and the next one is cut the year after and so on around forever. Not by hand, they got air tools.'*- Maxie got into explaining.

-*'Not so difficult, once a year.'*- said Sol

-*'In late autumn is best. Of course the shoots grow ten times faster than a normal tree. They do let them grow big, round the back by the cliffs. For fruit and nuts and building wood.*

Then in the middle they have a wooden cabin, and the fish and swimming pond and gardens, mostly covered now with plastic panels, in winter anyway and also.. '

-*'And the caves don't forget, very creepy caves!'*- Maggie added.

Our bus was swaying round some more tight curves.

-*'Volcanic caves with prehistoric settlements.'*- said Maxie.

-*'Ten or fifteen habitats altogether, plus the types of peat bogs, we have to conserve a part of each.'*

I joined in finally.

-*'So what do they do with all the wood?'*- Lucy asked.

-*'Make charcoal powder, for fertilizer and export. You get international grants for saving the planet.'*- said Maxie.

-*'Not any more you don't.'*- I said. -*'But the Pools help you set up. They started big scale mixed coppice forests about maybe twenty years ago, er, it's fantastic for all kinds of species. See the charcoal dust is CO2 negative, and nitrogen and methane negative and um, everything else positive, plus they can get bio-gas, and oil I think? Yes.*

Lots of the De-school Projects have a coppice now, with weekend cottages and greenhouses in the middle and, they make great places to live, and have Inipi parties and..

Before it was all camps and summer cabins, yunkers from the city on wild weekends.. The Coppice Clubs. Now more and more people live up there, at least in the Lapwing mountains, near the city, the other side had no access, it's wild..'

-*'Very wild, but at least the sea won't get them!'*- said Maggie, yawning at my speech.

-*'And tonight is the Solstice Awakening!'*-

-*'It'll pour down, lash down, piss in boots..'* - I said

-*'The forecast is good but..'*- Maxie shrugged.

Sol got up, talking to the other passengers and the driver, persuading him to stop to get a good shot of a wind farm. While the rest of us were gradually dozing off. In the back seat Moonbeam was asleep, mouth open, her head rocking between her mother's breasts.

And Maggie drifting off herself, cradled by Lucia.

We were well out of the city, still climbing slowly. The road was less bumpy, and I was nodding off myself, there was no phone reception, just guiding my mind to think of nothing and breathing deeper as I'd learned to do.

With Maxie using me as her pillow. Her head in my long jacket, and one naughty hand creeping inside my clothes..

Next thing I knew I woke up nearly puking. The bus was making a worrying clanking noise. I needed out, craving that mountain sky.

I'd made a horrible mistake. The Coppice farms needed warning just in case, the Awakening party should've been called off, why hadn't we seen that?

I'd subconsciously assessed these mercenaries by our logic not theirs.

It was our fault. My fault. And it was too late to stop what might happen next.

I breathed deeply but couldn't banish my nerves, like a nauseous acid rush in my stomach, would I have to vomit out the window?..

But.. Hurrah! We were arriving at the pass, pulling into the viewing car park, where there were two more coaches, several vans and lots of people.

-*'Wake up Maxie.'*-

I lifted her heavy head from my lap.

-*'Wake up everyone we're arriving already!'*

Chapter twenty three

Rocket Homes..Away!

-‘Closing down? But how will I live?’-

Mr. Michael Princk MBa was fairly romping round his almost empty manager’s office.

-‘We’ve done it, we’ve done it Gloria. We’ve achieved our utmost goal! No no! Don’t answer the phone!’-

-‘But Sir, it could be important.’- She squinted at him over her glasses.

-‘No no, it’s all confirmed. Today is the ultimate day. Now! Let’s close up now I say!’-

-‘Sorry Sir. What exactly do you mean?’-

-‘It’s all sold off! Today’s the final day. We’ll finish up now. Come on, don’t worry, I’ll pay you a whole half day.’- He slid open the partition window to the near empty main office. -‘Merri, Dolli, it’s all confirmed, we close in half an hour.’-

-‘Jolly good sir.’- said Merri, brightly.

-‘Wonderful news super boss.’-

Beaming and nodding, his two brilliant young financial managers lounged against the central pillar. They were dressed, for the first time ever, in shorts and T shirts, Merri was a whole head taller than Dolli, and was sporting the latest flowery *stick-on* tattoos.

Now they were chatting in their cellphones, waving their arms and leaning, graceful and elegant around that pillar... to whisper quick and chortle through their fingers.

-‘Eddie, Rose? Listen, now he says half an hour.. But it’ll be three quarters I bet.. Can you make it?... Okay, get the bastard on the corner. Everyone at the zebra.. great!... Doesn’t matter just get him.. Chow pal, quick as you can.’-

Meanwhile in Michael Princk’s office, Gloria was in and out of shock. Was it possible, after so many years? That’s why the temps hadn’t showed up and the sales people hadn’t checked in. Could it really be true?

-‘Closing down? But how will I live? Why didn’t you tell me before?’-

-‘Don’t be silly Glory. I wasn’t allowed to tell anyone except my finance team. Hush hush high

finance darling.’-

-‘But what about the staff, the sales people, me!’-

Princk had gripped her arms, hurting her, and kissed her wet cheeks.

-‘Don’t worry dearest.’- He winked. -‘What do you really think of our temporary staff?’-

-‘A lazy slovenly low-bred lot of dossers!’- She heard herself repeat, and his laugh brayed much too loud, slightly spraying her face.

-*'The temps work for Agencies. The sales staff are self employed, and you I hope will continue in my next Enterprise.'*- Now he was pouring cheap brandy. -*'A glass to remember my faithful Gloria. Cheers!'*-

-*'No thanks I..'*-

-*'I insist. You simply must! How long has it been?'*-

-*'Eighteen years. But what about my son? Our.. '*-

-*'Relax darling.'*-

His hand had crept around her waist, under her blouse and clutched at her left breast.

-*'That's it, just knock it back. To our future!'*-

Out in the office Dolli and Merri were listening and recording them on his web cam. The office net was coming in useful at last.

-*'How disgusting he is, but this time he's gonna pay.'*- said Dolli with a smirk.

-*'Get paid back. Achieve the ultimate pay day.'*- added Merri.

-*'Pay as you burn.'*- And they giggled and joked some more.

-*'Hang on he's taking her in the back office for a quickie. That's it, switch on the camera in there.'*-

-*'Oh no no no.'*- Gloria was saying. -*'Sorry sir I'm just not in the mood.'*-

-*'Now now this is our New Era, don't be silly, or I won't be able to confirm our agreement.'*-

-*'But, but.. I must have a contract so I can pay the mortgage.'*-

-*'Oh come on darling. Of course they won't let me give out false contracts, my silly girl.'*-

He'd pulled up her blouse, and was fiddling with her bra.

-*'But don't you worry love I promise to reward you in the New Era! Maybe we'll call the company that! See you inspire me!'*-

He pinched and yanked her tit.

-*'Hey that hurts! But when will this new era begin?'*-

-*'I'll be away for quite a while I'm afraid.. Come on, off with your things now. You know this is good for you.'*-

Princk had picked up a rocket from the desk, a little red and white rubber 'Rocket Homes' rocket. The icon and Executive Toy of the Company.

-*'Where are you going then? No. Stop it. Tell me first where you're going. No come on now, I need the address and phone number, right now!'*-

He had tugged her blouse right off, grasping with nervous twitchy movements.

Stuck his tongue in her ear, something she really hated.

Gloria retreated, grimacing, Michael came trotting round the desk after her.

-*'Oh Glory how can you doubt me, you hurt me so.'*- He was tripping over his trousers.

Out in the office Merri and Dolly were watching the screen, groaning in disgust.

-*'No no you don't.'*- Gloria had swung the executive chair between them.

-*'Oh all right then.'*- he said.

What she asked for had no importance, he never would re-hire her anyway.

She was much too old, obsolete for the job.

Mr. Princk leaned back to the open wall safe, burping loudly, and pulled out a paper. He actually held it up in front of the webcam a moment, as he passed it to Gloria.

Then he grabbed her, waving his rubber rocket.

-*'I'll be in Barbados darling.'*- he whispered, and she shuddered. He'd plunged his tongue back in her ear again.

-*That's it! Yippee!*- Merri and Dolli were embracing two offices away, Merri lifting and swinging little Dolli.

-*We got everything now, yippee. We'll just copy that and..*-

-*Ow ow that hurts. Stop that sir!*- came Gloria's voice.

-*Oh turn that thing off I can't stand it.*

-*Now Merri, we record it all, it could be useful.*-

-*Ow ow get off me!*-

-*I'll just turn down the sound, we don't have to listen.*-

-*Let's just go.*- said Merri. -*We got more than we need. Let's just take the computers, turn them off.*-

-*Well.. okay then. You're right, but just our portables, let's just go, sure Eddie will get the rest later.*- said Dolli. And Merri had already dived under the table.

-*Fine so I'm disconnecting everything and..* '-

Just then Mr. Michael P. Princk came trotting out of the inside inner office.

Holding the rubber rocket in two hands, naked but for his socks, bellies sagging.

Merri and Dolli froze guiltily behind the pillar and desk, but his gaze was blank..

-*Rocket Homes..Away!*- he shouted and threw. The rubber rocket flew and struck, smearing the glass partition, ever so slightly.

-*Rocket Homes..Away!*-

Princk stood unseeing a second.

His fast shrinking prick was dribbling a thin thread.

Then he clapped his white hands twice, grinned and disappeared.

-*He never even saw us.*- said Dolli, breathing in.- *The Rocket has fizzled out.*-

-*He's got a damp squib.*- said Merri. And they cracked up not laughing.

* * *

-*Where the hell is she? Let's just go, she's just a horrible bitch anyway.*-

Merri and Dolli were getting bored waiting. Reclining back in the cool leather seats of the big black curtained air and gas car, watching the rainwater run rivulets down the tinted windscreen.

-*That's true. But I thought we were gonna try and recycle her.*- Merri was rolling a number.

-*Yeah well. I wouldn't bet a black cat's fart on that one.*-

-*Anyway I want to see Princk getting shamed. Look here she comes.*-

Merri tooted and she turned. It was Gloria, almost unrecognizable.

Red eyed with her makeup off. And no umbrella.

-*Want a lift?*- Dolli swung open the rear door.

-*Okay where you going? This isn't your car, is it? It's brand new.*- But she jumped straight in the back.

-*We're going to an Inipi Party. Spring Solstice and far out furry hippies. Wanna come?*-

-*You got the rest of the day off, and your kid in religious boarding school.*-

-*The rest of my life off I think. But what is an Inipi?*-

-*Kind of do-it-yourself sauna. Hey you look cool without makeup.*-

-I just lost my job and got er, sexually menaced, with a ridiculous rubber rocket. I got zero prospects, zero compensation, a fourteen year old boy and a mortgage.-

-Happiness Level zero point zero.-

-Well, I really fancy you without makeup. How about a batwoman stick-on over each eye?'- Merri giggled.

-Look here, he's coming out! Let's stay and watch it!'-

-Just watch what happens Gory baby!'-

-My name is Gloria, please girls!'-

-Shit-on you sister, no girls here.-'

Princk's red Mercedes was emerging from the automatic garage door for the last time.

They got a glimpse of his ecstatic face.

His dorky eyes were gawking, his mouth hanging loose. Michael was delighted with himself.

-He just refused to lend me the bus fare..- 'You know I don't carry small change darling.'- After all these years the refused to give me the fecking bus fare!'-

-She just used a bad word, Dollie.-

-Just shut up Gory, and peel your peepers.-'

Dollie turned up the music, inhaled, stretching with a wriggle, and passed Merri the spliff.

Princk was gunning his huge motor.

Two women with a big old pram were waiting at the zebra crossing.

Waiting but not crossing, waiting but..

His foot hit the gas.

The woman pushed her pram under his front wheel.

There was a grinding crunch as the car stopped.

Bits of a pram. A woman screeching.

A man was filming. Another smashing the side window with a hammer.

Two more were pulling out Princk. Everyone from the bus stop was running over.

-Shit on me shit on me. Shame on you..'

Shit on me shit on me. Shame on you..'- ..The chant began.

-Now he's killed a baby!'- Gloria was scandalized.

-No no.. No way you'll see.. That's just for shock. That pram was really full of concrete blocks!-

They were dancing round Michael P. Princk, manic in a circle. The crowd had multiplied. The chants were angry shouts. Princk was horror struck. Shouting obscenities, hands on his head.

-All those people are Clan friends of the temps and the sales staff.-'

Thick black smoke was pouring from the side window of the red Mercedes.

-Uh oh..Time to go ladies.-'

-Bye bye super boss.-' Merri murmured, gliding quietly off. -'Have a magnificent holiday.-'

Merri was driving through the occupied Ragwort Pool area and up the hills. Weaving skillfully through handcarts, airbikes, lorries and groups of young Clanners.

-Did I just see what I just saw? I can't believe that happened.-' Gloria clung to denial.

-We just scored the winner. Our Levels went off the scale!'

-We won. We won it all. I can't believe it either.-' Dollie was clapping her hands.

- 'Well.. Are you coming with us then?'- Merri asked. - 'Oh Gory we've got a nice surprise for you.. The other staff got theirs already.'

- 'My name is Gloria, please.'

- 'We've paid off your mortgage.'- said Dolli. Passing back a sheaf of embossed papers.

- 'What? I have another eighteen years!'

- 'Of course you don't deserve it. You've always made us eat shit you snobby bitch.'- said Merri.

Trying to look hard.

- 'But in the end we were all in the same, er, pathetic crashed rocket.'

- 'This can't be true. You're just winding me up.. for revenge.'- The papers shook in her hands..

- 'It's just your share. If not we'll give more to Women's Rescue.'

- 'On the Wurts scale you paid it long ago.'- [see Glossary.WURTS.]

- 'We made it like old shitface Princk paid it.'- said Merri - 'For a thousand Euros our friends transfer mortgages to toxic loans and do the papers. They got the caretaker bank by the short and curlies, due to the mortgage boycott.'

- 'He owes you a lot more I mean. You ran his fraudulent business really. And we managed the money.'

- 'What? But I owe it, I have to pay.'

- 'Pay who Gory? The banks sold off what was left after the last crash and the mortgage strikes. The law is paralyzed, they just printed the cash to pay for the house in the first place.'

- 'Mortgages will be abolished if we get the money free market.'- [ref.29.Zeitgeist]

- 'I've always paid my way and ruled my corner.'

- 'Yeah like a fascist bastard. Why could you never once stop shitting on us!'

Dolli turned menacingly to where Gloria squirmed. Looking small in the big back seat.

- 'It's worse than that. Even worse.'- She shrank back.

They were zooming silently out of town, splashing through deep, wide puddles.

- 'Worse? Difficult to believe.'

Now it seemed that Gloria was weeping, then she blurted out..

- 'Old Shitface, as you call him, is the father of my son.'

- 'Oh my god. Oh my god. Break out the emergency hankies.'

- 'Oh Gloria I'm so sorry.. That's why you turned into a monster.'

- 'I'm not not NOT a monster!'- She said between sobs.

- 'Well he thinks he just transferred five million to an unnamed tax haven.'

- 'And he h-hasn't?'

The rain was easing off and they got a flash of the mountains up ahead.

- 'More like 'donated' to the CoOp Pools Credit Union.'- {ref. 7. CoOps]

- 'He was just a petty parasite, an obsolete rapacious capitalist.'

- 'We'll cut him off gently when it's all safe and tied up.'

- 'He should never have put his loot in a Clanner's bank.'

- 'It's not a Clanner's bank, it's a Credit Union.. But he should never have hired us!'

- 'We went to the wrong university.'

- 'That's for sure anyway.'

- 'Okay Gory, you're going through the Inipi saunas, and the deep massage. Then we're gonna teach you how to breathe.'

- 'My name... '-

-*'And could be you need some sessions like, how come you ended up with a superiority complex, and like, getting your knickers wet making us all miserable, and..'*-

-*'It was my mother really, she sent me to this snobby private school, and even though I ...'*-

-*'Okay not now, not yet please. Let's just wind right down first, okay?'*- Merri had a last drag of the spliff and stubbed it out.

There was a long silence, as the limousine gained height, the sun came and went, flashing them glimpses of the ocean below. White windmills were flying with black jackdaws, kids whizzing down the mountain on bikes..

Merri began chuckling to herself, a bit stoned.

She swerved to miss a cocky rooster on the hill, and laughed some more.

Just about out of the city.

Then both of them just started laughing together and didn't stop.

Deep and little at first, then hysterically, subsiding into giggles and roaring up again.

-*'Did you see his..his face at the 'Shit-On'?'-*

-*'Oh yes. Oh yes. Oh golly yes yes..'*-

-*'I thought he would explode! Did you.. did you see..'*-

-*'And then.. and when.. Oh Dollie.. and when.. and..'*-

But now they were laughing too much to even speak.

Merri had to pull off the steep road, she couldn't even drive.

Stamping their feet, and embracing, writhing with laughter.

Something snapped in Gloria's brain.

She squealed once.

Clapping her hands on the embossed receipts.

-*'This really is for real, isn't it!'*- She had started laughing herself.

-*'You clever clever, **clever** wonderful girls!'*-

Chapter twenty four

The Coppice Party

- ‘..ripples of pleasure ran up and down my body..’ -

Maggie

- ‘Look! A squirrel.. two of them!..’ - I pointed.

- ‘Where where?’ - said Lucy *‘Oh Yes!’ -*

With dramatic leaps one red squirrel was chasing the other.

Up and down the little trees, chittering loudly

and criss crossing the wide track.

Like we weren’t even there.

- ‘Oh look they’ve got babies. Look Moonie baby squirrels!’ -

- ‘It’s so beautiful here, everything’s glowing!’ - Lucy gushed.

But now the squirrels were fighting furiously.

- ‘Have you ever done conflict management, for squirrels?’ - I asked her.

Barney and Sol and Maxie had gone rushing away with the Clanners.

Off on bikes to the Air Factory, leaving them to walk to the party,

a beautiful walk, they said.

Lucia had been persuaded to take one of the air rifles, just in case.

Now Moonbeam was off and running down the path. Me and Lucia let her go.

A toddler running. Always just about to fall.

Through spectacular spring plants and flowers,

still soaked from the downpour.

Shooting and steaming up into the hot sun.

Running faster, hopping over rotten branches

The sandy path was more downhill than up.

Moonie fell headlong, but got up and went on without crying.

My heart leaped. My baby! But I saw she was okay.
Me and Lucy striding behind her, talking fast.
Ducking our heads, as swallows and martins dived round us.
Gorging on insects over big open puddles.
Past a deep pond, dug into the new drain, now overflowing
and gurgling over the wide track.
Frogs leaped in planned panic.
Plopping together into the water as Moonbeam arrived.
I had to explain everything to Lucia immediately.
So she could tell me what we were doing wrong.
All about the projects and improvised ideas,
The open conflicts, between the women's community in the Pools,
and the chaotic collapsing local administration.
- 'Don't go in the water . Moonie. No!'-
- 'Why not?'- said Lucia subversively.
- 'Mama look.' - She had chased a frog into the shallows,
and pulled out a round white stone.
- 'A psychedelic dragonfly look! Oh Moonie you're sopping already.
Off with those pants. C'mon.'
On the left the first swathe of trees had been cut back near ground level.
Alder and hazel and willow.
And the second layer, thirty meters back, and the next,
taller by a year's sprouting.
And the fourth a year bigger.
Thickly planted but with access tracks between.
We glimpsed a bigger clearing where a pyrolysis lorry and tractors
were processing a huge pile of dried branches.
More little clearings, a golden teepee and a yurt.
And here the first enormous black boulders scattered about.
Moonie was running again, her white bottom flashing like a rabbit's tail.
We came to a cross-paths, then the track divided, twice, and went up.
sniffing the first dog roses, spotting a bullfinch.
Ladybirds, tadpoles, a woodpecker.. long tailed tits.

Round a bend to a little clearing. Moonbeam stopped dead. Petrified.
A wild pig. Facing a big black long nosed pig on the track.
 -'Oh my god.'- I went to run forward but Lucy held my arm.
 -'No Maggie, no pasa nada, just wait.'-
 A mother pig, with a dozen or more fat tits.
 A whole gang of little striped piglets trotted out,
 learning to root in the muddy ground for shoots and grubs.
 Closer, quietly. Moonbeam turned, mouth open and pointing.
 The wild sow half snorted in disgust, really a snorted signal,
 because her whole stripy tribe followed her off the path.
 Vanishing one by one into a hole in the thick coppice.
 The little ones jittering about at the back.
 Wiggling their little tails like chopped worms.
 And there was Moonbeam trotting after the line.
 Trying to be a baby pig as well!
 -'No no you don't. I'm your mama not her.'- I made that clear.
 -'Wow Moonie aren't they gorgeous!'-
 -'These pigs are not so wild.'- said Lucia. -'Maybe people don't eat meat round here.'-
 -'Afraid a lot still do.'- said Maggie. -'But they say these boars are intelligent.
 Sure she knows the difference between hunters and lost solstice tourists.
 Now they're letting back wolves to even things up.'-
 -'Wolves here?'- Lucy glanced behind her.
 -'Well, in the western ranges, but they'll get here eventually I suppose.
 There's a few bears around here alright.'- I said
 -'Yeah, there's Barney Maguire and.. '-
 -'What about your videos then Lucy, I need copies of everything.
 Those are bluebells I think.'-
 -'Moonbeam is eating something. Stop Moonie!'-
 -'Let's see. They're blueberries, are they ripe?'-
 Moonbeam offered us one, her lips smeared bright purple.
 -'Only the blue ones okay. Not red ones yukky yuk. Only blue ones.'-
 Another intersection and we went straight on, uphill
 and suddenly steep and grunting.

twenty minutes, up and slower, now I was carrying Moonbeam.
The conversation was gasped observations. The sun scorched our heads.
Rubbing sun cream on her and on up again.
Then we had arrived in a flat central coppice clearing ,with big trees on the north side.
A small lake with a diving board.
An abandoned looking greenhouse, half sunk in the ground.
- *'Are we lost?'*- Lucy swung off her rucksack and the green airgun bag.
I bent to slide Moonie off my shoulders,
and we crouched panting in the spring meadow flowers.
- *'It's a flower garden!'*-
- *'Look Moonie can you pick me some of these daisies?'*
Of course we're lost, but they said just head for those black cliffs and you'll arrive.'-
Lucía was tying up her afro hair in a bun.
Then did the same to mine, without even asking.
She kissed and embraced me from behind, tickling and thrilling me..
- *'Look half the field's flooded, underwater flowers!'*-
I had pulled off my boots and was paddling in.
- *'Hey it's really warm water!'*-
Moonbeam came running into the shallow water, daisies in one fist,
splashing, squealing and falling and rolling. Spitting sand and spluttering. But not crying.
- *'Me too.'*- Lucia was undressing. - *'Wait for me. Wait for me!'*
- *'Last one in's a sweaty horse.'*-
She splashed over to the diving board to leap off,
but the water was infinitely colder by the actual lake,
and it was too high, she changed her mind. But I was on the board behind her.
- *'Now now no going back.'*-
- *'Let's jump together then.'*- said Lucia.
- *'Maybe it is dangerous.'*-
- *'One two three go.'*- And we plunged deep together.
Through a cloud of blue and white bubbles, into the inky depths,
and up and splashing out to find Moonie still picking flowers.

Lying in the warm puddles in the meadow after the icy swim.

-‘Que suerte, Maggie. How lucky to be alive.’-

-‘So first I copy everything and you make me notes in English of what is what.’-

I insisted, rolling onto my back.

-‘I am doing it this week I promise.’-

Lucy straddled my tummy and dabbed suncream on my cheeks ,
then started rubbing it all over. me.

-‘Your tits are wonderful, how deliciosa you are!,

All you need Maggie is more attention for yourself.’-

-‘And more sex! More, tell me more.

*Anyway so first we copy the videos of those healing therapy sessions
with kids, okay? We ask some of the De-school Projects
that Barney knows, and Free-Uni as well,
to take on dubbing and translation, er, as part of their courses
I bet they’ll be interested when..*

Look. Swans!’-

A pair of swans were gliding down from way up high,
in a tightening spiral curve, then leveling out,
whistling over us, feet up like water skiers, and landing on the little lake.
Hissing at each other, writhing their serpentine necks, and ignoring us completely.

Moonie was piling up pebbles, while I rolled on my tummy,
and Lucy rubbed my neck and back.

*-‘Then we expand the procedure for the family therapy
and conflict resolution videos and, and all the Dynamators training
and.. we need everything you’ve got, dubbed or just explained,
all this is on the Projects curriculum,just no one has the material to.. ’-*

I was turning and urgently entreating.

-‘I’ll copy all our material don’t worry.’-said Lucy, nodding.

I had to do this now. Not miss my chance! Right now while Lucy was here.
But she was silent and smiling, turning me over,
and folding my muddy warm body in her arms..

-‘And of course the women’s and health groups will want them as well so..

*so we make loads of copies with the computer.
They'll go like hot cakes and for sure... And they'll start making*

their own videos, in English and.. Moonbeam! Don't go so far.. Come back now!

Umm, what are you doing to me Lucía?.. That feels just great..

I think I'm gonna invite you to the orgasm area.'

- 'The what?'- she sounded surprised.

*- 'Last year they had a relax tent that we called the orgasm area
by the waterfall behind the Inipis.'- I explained.*

- 'I'm shocked... Okay sounds like fun let's go, but what about Moonie?'

- 'In the Adventure Cresh they'll be queuing up to play with Moonbeam.

Ah there you are!'-

*- 'Blow mama blow Lucy.'- Moonbeam had dandelions in seed,
though most had already flown or got wet.*

Then she jumped roughly on top of me, hurting my thigh. And went for a nipple.

She still suckled sometimes.

- 'Ow, ow.. Don't you miss your kids a lot?'- I asked, while cradling Moonbeam.

- 'All the time, but they're with my sister and all my friends.

And we talk by computer almost every day, or really in the night here you know.

Paco is thirteen and Duna is twelve and a half, more.

They're both going to the free school in the village which..'-

Lucita explains a little.

Her low melodious voice blending

with a robin in the hawthorn.

Massaging me, very gently, as Moonbeam gets her milk.

I lie back against her in the warm wet grass.

Really relaxing at last.

Lucía and Moonbeam, what more could I want.

Just watching the swallows

diving and soaring and the little high clouds,

forming and dividing.

As I fondle and kiss them both. And sigh again...

- 'Come on'- Lucia whispers, gesturing to the water.

-*'Moonbeam's asleep. Let's just put her on this towel, in the shade..That's it, gently'*-

-*'Last one in's a stinky bitch!'*- says I

And we gallop back into the lake again.-

* * *

-*'Piece of piss Georgy, our brave leader Gordon has gone forward to attack the enemy.'*-

He was peering out of the crack, that led from the wet and smelly cave.

-*'Thank Christ that sucker's gone.'*- George was already out -*'Hey it's hot and sunny now!'*-

-*'Don't knock him George, he's as good as you'll get.'*-

-*'Just cuz Gordon gave it to you, arse-hole!'*-

-*'Say that again and you'll have your balls for lunch.'*-

-*'Ah cool off, you pea brained spastic, I'm gonna sit out here in these horrible trees, listen to ma music.'*-

-*'I'm sweating blood.'*- said Pratson. -*'Some bug is eating me alive, I godda spend the whole day in a cave full of batshit. With no booze and just your smelly ass for company.'*-

-*'You had it easy pal. In Colombia we had deadly monster spiders, and mad communists with dogs coming after us.'*-

-*'But you got laid, right. They'd line them up later if there were no girls about. Here we're just Gordon's fucking porters, I mean, why the fuck are we here?'*-

-*'They changed plans at the last minute. But what would you know about chicks.'*- George leered.

-*'We all know you cut up little boys. Just like Gordon I reckon.'*-

-*'Ah well, I ain't complaining too much, if they wanna pay me seven grand to carry some plastic bombs down a hill.'*-

Pratson was shrugging and stamping on some flowers, then sitting down slowly beside his weapon. George smiled, exposing his missing teeth.

-*'Yeah well I ain't moaning bout that part neither.'*- He sat down, squeezing between two young trees and pulled his long razor knife.

Voices again, and laughter far away.

-*'That's young chicks laughing. Let's go spread some terror.'*- said Pratson, grinning.

-*'We're supposed to be gentlemen soldiers. Load a crap.'*-

-*'Cuz it's not kicked off here yet, that's all. They want it like...'*- His mind grappled with a concept.

-*'Like they started the dirty stuff not us.'*-

-*'Makes no difference.'*- said George. -*'Everybody gonna just believe what they're told anyway. I*

say we got a soldier's right. And our duty in noble service to our nation, is to kick off this fucking war.'-

-*'You're spiked man, you're wasted, look at your eyes.'*-

-*'I only took three, c'mon Pratson you pathetic faggot. let's just have a nosey around.'*-

-*Tell you what. We got four hours. If someone comes down this path we take her or him in the cave for a playmate. Then we bury the body under the mud in the back and no one's the wiser... That's common sense for you. Is it a deal?*-

-*And if nobody comes?*- asked George.

-*Hard luck for us, we're professional soldiers.. We get laid later that's all. Okay?*- as he spoke they heard laughter again.

-*Not okay no.*- said George. -*But I'll wait a while,. Sounds like these here woods are filling up with pussy. Why not just pick up some on the main track? Or maybe a little boy to play in the cave with you!*'-

And he hacked the delicate ferns with his razor machete.

* * *

Barney

The media say we didn't defend the Air Factory properly but it wasn't as easy as it looked. It was only by a stroke of luck that I got the tipoff and knew the people personally. In fact the south Pools Fed *had* put in for a Collective Wisdom vote, 'Wise-mass' they call it, but it came up after the events and was canceled.

One problem was the older growth forest, sections growing right up to the line. And another thing, because we didn't choose to stand in front of the line, and get shot down like aliens in a computer-game.

-*Their technology could be decades ahead, though they're mental cripples.*- Elizabeth had proclaimed. -*We must never play Indians to these cowboys.*'-

At that time our movement, if you could call it that, was snowballing on a creative buzz, but still on a fragile base. What we really needed was *no casualties at all*.

I suppose we got a grandstand view all right. It was me and Maxie and Sol, stuck in the bracken. Dodging the bumblebees, that were buzzing in the broom and gorse flowers. The rest were Arel and Elizabeth. the coordinators. and four more Clanners, in guard post five.

Sitting back in the thick bracken and heather, one of a dozen posts, on the ridges overlooking the conveyor belt that supplied rock to the Air Factory. Three hours there and the sun was simmering our brains., till we poured our drinking water on each others heads.

In fact Maxie was helping me, on the phone, and working with Sol as well, Macker was missing that day, so she was quite busy in the bushes.

What saved the Air Factory were the maintenance clamp cables, secured up and down the main cable, plus of course it was stopped and empty. It couldn't fall.

It couldn't go crashing four kilometers down like in the comics, destroying the factory, the depot and the village of Duncantry in a ball of flame. Thanks to James Smith's tipoff it couldn't. Plus the lucky chance that I was in a position to persuade people it was for real. Or was it luck. How much did James know about me?

Okay it's true, the cable was cut under our noses. By that mercenary, the so called Gallant Gordon. Sol had nearly predicted the point they would attack, he's uncanny...

Elizabeth had come crawling over to us, sweat dripping from her nose.

-*'The number six lot say they can see two drones, they ask Sol to film them with his good camera, understand?'*-

-*'Drones? What is this?'*- Sol didn't know everything after all.

'A pilotless plane.'- We were all staring at the much too bright sky. Some of the small clouds were puffing up, and getting threatening bottoms.

-*'There it is I can see one!'*- said Max at once. -*'Between those two clouds, the one that looks like a boat.. See it? Grey and blue.'*-

-*'Quite big and quite low.'*-

Sol had already adjusted his tripod, deft and fast.

-*'Looks like a 180 degree sweep camera with attached directional mike and aerials, maybe thermals. Pointing more or less, at us. It's dropping.. they got us big on their screens you bet.'*-

Okay he did know a lot.

-*'Pathetic bastards.'*- Maxie spat. Closing and buttoning her blouse -*'We got peeping dickheads folks.'*-

-*'There's another one. Over there!'*-

-*'Don't we have any drones?'*-

-*'They're coming, maybe. Well, the radio-robots club at the Uni are supposed to be coming up with some kamikaze planes for us.'*- says I.

Just then a radio came through loudly.

-*'Post six. Something thrown on cable. Post six suspect bomb on cable.'*-

-*'Shit shit shit.'*-

-*'Activate trap. Converging on post six. Activate trap now.'*-

I saw a dot on the line all right. In fact he'd thrown three packets of explosives tied apart with meter long cords, so they wound round the cable. The man had placed his bomb without even leaving the undergrowth. Later we knew he threw two, the first one missed.

So as planned we closed in to cut his retreat. But the bomb went off immediately with a terrific crack and the two trucks crashed down.

It wasn't spectacular or exciting, after two days worrying non stop I suppose I expected something more dramatic. A sharp cracking explosion, a screech of cable. Two empty rock containers fell crashing and rolling into each other, and stopped. About a hundred meters up from where we were on watch.

That was it, the clamps held.

Sol was able to swing and zoom his camera to catch unique, two seconds long, footage of the trucks actually falling.

Then Gallant Gordon slipped right through our vigilant lines unseen. A fact that was rarely mentioned afterwards. Luckily for us just minutes later he stood in a bog hole while running down the next little valley, and twisted or fractured an ankle.

Gordon was captured soon after without a fight, hopping painfully along with makeshift crutches.

Later they sifted through the whole slope to pick up his discarded gadgets. His radio detonator, RED, and his FPS of course, and also his drone screen, OHS, with the latest fantastic war games included, absolutely free.

* * *

It isn't a natural waterfall, though water does drip down the cliffs.
When there's a party Rosana's friend Dyana always used to redirect
a water pipe from the high fens.
So it would splash against the high rock faces and whirl down in spray and mist,
depending on the wind, onto the little meadow next to where they had the sweat
lodges set up.
So Dolli, and a dozen others were spacing to a *'Love Pump'* hit
inside the waterfall under the black cliff.
Dancing wrapped up in a fine warm spray. Leaping through sudden cool showers.

Drifting to the laid back music. Gliding through impossible shadows and bits of rain-
bows.
Flickering in and out of the hot sun.

They had three Inipis, one just warm for kids.
A team of volunteers were taking turns to keep them hot and full.
For sessions of Spiritual Awakening.
For me more like body regeneration. And from there for an icy dip in the pond.
Hot herb tea and joints by the little bonfires with our friends.
On to the food kitchen or the chill-out tent. And back to the incredible waterfall.
It was a really brilliant party, as you might easily guess.

But on this occasion there was armed security on the main tracks.
Now you had to carry a gun bag, or go with an armed escort, just to walk down to
the main road!
Dolli had fallen to her knees in the sodden grass,
leaning into the hot and cold waterfall.
She had smoked too much but was riding it. Happy to be alone in the crowd.
Gasping for breath and moaning.
As ripples of pure pleasure ran up and down her body.

-*'The moon! Look look, the moon everybody.'*-

It was nearly full moon as well.

Rising huge and white from the eastern trees, through a thin white mist.

While the sun still shone strongly on the other side

-*'Wow, how beautiful, this waterfall is unbelievable. Mmm!.. Hi Dolli, great to see you.'*-

It was Maggie arriving, jolly with Lucia.-*'Maggie, you're here! Where's Moonbeam?'*-

-*'In the Adventure Cresh with her best friend Oona.'*-

-*'I gotta see her. Hello again good ole Maggie.'*-

-*'Yeah sure. Meet my friend, Lucia. My healer.'*-

-*'We meet in the sunny rain it's wonderful.'*-

Lucia was kissing and squeezing as she always loved to do.

-*'You got a fantastic suntan Lucy.'*- said Dolli.

-*'Well, I'm happy to be a half black and a quarter Indian'*-.

-*'Uh oh sorry, did I commit a Shit-On?'*-.

-*'Sorry nada I'm glad you like my color. And I love yours.'*-

Lucia kissed her twice more to make sure.

-*'Especially I am loving the freckles, look at Maggie all freckles and punky and.. '*-

She started examining Maggie to see how far the freckles went.

-*'Stoppit Lucy.'*- Maggie giggled. -*'People are looking at my freckly bottom.'*-

The music had broken into a faster rhythm, though not loud, and they'd all begun to dance.

-*'So, you face the sun with your golden brown body,
and we'll face the milky white moon.'*- said Dolli.

-*'Serenity and Solstice.. Perfect balance, if we don't keel over and vomit.'*- Maggie panted.

-*'And a bomb just went off over the mountain.'*-

-*'The Air Factory.. we heard it, but they caught the guy.'*-

-*'And except for the guards everywhere.. and everyone carrying gun bags.'*-

-*'All empty, it's the fashion this year you know.'*- said Dolli.

-*'No no there's really two more terrorists. Barney, um, Moonbeam's Dad, is organizing a search.'*-

At that moment the music faded out, and a calm voice invited everyone for refreshments,

round the bonfire in the central meadow.

-‘Hi there this is Rosana. We’re just making up a safety list of everyone who’s here, and gone and coming. So please if you’re strolling around make your way back to the coppice center, immediately please. Everyone to the coppice center immediately please.’-

-‘Ah well, let’s get our clothes, shit my towel’s wet. ’-

-‘The others from our house are on their way up here, Bernie and Josie, and Macker and Jerry.’-

-‘Shit, my friend Merri went for a walk with Gloria, our ex supervisor. Rocket Homes has closed down, finished. We’re unemployed, and we’re rich, though we don’t need money!’

-‘Oh Dolli I’m so glad, that job was killing you!’ - said Maggie. - ‘Please please say you’ll help us out. We’ve got a great impossible financial disaster, oh pretty please just give us advice!’-

Maggie had hugged Dolli again, and the three of them walked arm in arm towards the center, chatting and carrying their clothes.

-‘Actually there is a way we can untangle your financial mess, by cutting all the knots. Money’s on the way out, we just use wurts, but don’t tell anybody.’-

Dolli whispered mockingly to me.

-‘Coz me and Merri found the magic keys!’-

Chapter twenty five

Gloria's Fine Shot

- 'Shut up and listen you stupid cow.' -

Merri and Gloria heard the announcement, and turned into a narrower path, in the direction of the darkening cliff. A few late bees were zooming, the first moths fluttering out.

Bright orange rays were fading out in the trees on their left. The first eastern moonbeams, lit up a thin curtain of mist, curling white through the willow saplings.

- 'Time we were getting back anyway, let's go find Dolli.' - said Merri.

- 'Why not try this famous inipi then.' - said Gloria. Swinging the heavy gun bag onto her shoulder. *- 'Maybe I can sweat out these fascist prejudices you keep accusing me of!'*

- 'Food first, we gotta eat.' - said Merri. Taking her hand.

They had reached two gigantic black boulders.

- 'Are you sure this path goes through?.. Ow there's brambles here.. I'm putting on my shoes, wait a minute.'

She was fishing them out of her little rucksack. No socks. And should she dress? Just the underwear then, Merri had her shorts on, but it was still so hot!

Just as she was slipping on the shoes Gloria caught the reek of male sweat.

For a second she really smelt Michael Princk with his rubber rocket. But that was just silly. Gloria had never smoked and had an excellent nose. What she smelt was a sweaty man.

Then her brain worked with a flash of terror. Gasping, she slipped her arm into the gun bag, and felt the cold tubes of a double barreled shotgun!

- 'Oh Merri run run I think they're..' -

- 'Why looky what we got here, hey Georgy our dates have just arrived..' -

Two gunmen in green had appeared between the boulders.

- 'Oh good girls, you're already undressed, almost.' -

- 'Sorry we don't know you.' - said Merri. Moving to pass them, but George shoved her back. Jabbing his gun at her belly button.

- 'Now now just take off your..' -

- 'Stop that we..' -

He had grabbed her arm, spun her round.

Tripping and pushing her down on her tummy, laughing sharply.

Twisting back her other arm under his knee.

He slipped on the yellow gag before she thought to scream and pulled it as tight as he could. Pratson had moved to take Gloria at the same time. But she was crouched, backing away and pointing the bag, her right arm inside. She was shivering, eyes bulging and Pratson really wasn't sure about her.

Gloria had seen immediately she was facing a terrorist version of Michael Princk..
-*'I'll kill you. I'll kill you. I'll kill you..'*- she was repeating, like a cracked mantra.
-*'Now don't you worry your pretty little head my sexy chickadee.'*- She had backed off another step, another. -*'Just put the bag down and..'*-
-*'C'mon Georgy it's party time.'*-
-*'Let her go let her go or I shoot. I'll kill you..!'*- Gloria was saying, as George tried to edge closer.
-*'Shut up and listen you stupid cow.'*- he burst out .-*'Just stop. Put it down..I'll cut your fucking tits you stupid cow!'*-

He was furious. Ranting and wheezing, as he unsheathed and waved his long razor knife.
-*'Do it! I'll.. Drop it now! You stupid cow you fucking cow you..'*-
-*'Let her go let her go let her go..'*-
Then Gloria pulled the trigger. But realized she was only tugging at the safety catch.

Pratson had tied Merri's hands behind her back, and was looping the rope over a low branch. So she stood painfully half suspended, bottom up.
-*'Now! Hands up ..I hate you. Stinking feminist!'*- yelled George.
-*'I'll kill you I'll kill you..'*-
-*'I'm chopping off your tits you frigid cow..'*-
-*'This one's ready to go. Come on, that bag's empty.'*- Pratson was saying.
Putting down his gun, he produced a knife and began slitting off Merri's shorts.
-*'MmmmMMmmMM.'*- Merri tried to speak, her face bright red.

Georgy had edged closer, still stupidly threatening Gloria. He would kick the bag sideways and have her! He must have the bitch. Now!
But she had backed off again, a step, a step..

-*'STOP THERE NOW..'*-
-*'Let her go, Let her go, Let her..'*
Gloria was pulling at a trigger in the bag, but nothing was happening.
-*'Stupid cow!'*-
There was a terrific roar in the little clearing.
-*'Ow ow ow.'*- She was hopping. The kickback had wrenched her wrist.
Georgy's mouth was open. His hand went clawing to his crotch.
Where he found a few slivers of bleeding shredded meat.
Expertly he flung the razor knife at Gloria. But she was gone. She'd tripped over a branch as she ran towards Merri, almost falling on Pratson who had dived for cover.

-*'Don't shoot don't shoot.'*- Pratson squealed, missing his weapon in the half dark.
Gloria's gun bag was pointing near his head.

-*'Don't move anybody or I shoot.'*- she squeaked. Fumbling for the second trigger with her numb hand.

But Georgy had gone into shock already. Kneeling humbly in the flowers and reciting the bible. Bleeding profusely from his absent penis and testicles...

* * *

Maxie

-*'I did notice a bang all right but it didn't strike me as strange. We were just arriving back at the Gathering.'*-

-*'Come Barney, Maxie, a shotgun!'*- Sol shouted, grabbing at Barney's arm and beckoning, and we followed him, running. The nearest guards had heard the shot, over the music, and quickly located the spot.

Sol got there first in fact, and snatched up guns and knives. I saw a naked woman tied to a branch, blood trickling down her legs, and a shorter woman trying to unty her. Sol was threatening two men on the ground with a gun. The Clanner guards arrived. They were calling for help, a doctor, a stretcher.

I thought she'd been raped. I picked up a jacket and was draping it around her.

-*'No filming them Sol!'*- I said, seeing him raising the camera. But he had zoomed instead on the captured terrorists..

-*'Congratulations young ladies you have arrested these professional mercenaries.'*- he proclaimed. Setting the tone. -*'You brave women have trapped these fierce monsters. What a fantastic effort!'*-

-*'Well we were lucky.'*- said the tall one, Merri. Sobbing and sniffing as I held her. -*'My office supervisor just blew that one's balls off.'*-

-*'I thought she was joking. Then she pulled away, picking up a stick and suddenly started whacking one of the men on the ground with it. We stood back. Nobody stopped her.'*

Maggie was arriving, though the guards, and we hugged Merri and Gloria close.

Gloria, the plump older woman, had accepted tissues and was blowing her nose.

-*'I tried to shoot him by pulling the s-safety catch.'*- She laughed through her tears.

-*'But then you saved the day for everyone!'*- Sol cheered.

-*'That bastard wanted to cut..cut bits off me!'*-

-*'Do you mind if I am interviewing, to show them up?'*- said Sol to Merri.

-*'Go ahead,I'm not really hurt, thanks to Gloria.'*- said Merri in a normal voice. -*'Just let me get some clothes on.'*-

Someone had brought a first aid box and I was dabbing her cuts with a bandage.

They had cut off her pants with a knife.

One of the terrorists was badly injured and weirdly yelling hallelujahs.

Gloria really had shot him in the goolies.

The Clanner guards had got him on a stretcher. Away down the dark path, and they were about to march off the other one, Pratson, when he suddenly found his tongue.

-I have done nothing but carry equipment for Gordon. I was forced to do this by threats to my family, They offer me only seven thousand Euros, black money. I am sorry for causing terror and I am asking for a secret detention place.'

-Shut up. Shut your lying mouth.' Gloria started yelling as well.

-They can kill me for talking to you. Please let's get out of here. They can bomb us with a robot plane any minute. They can see and hear us talking, by satellite, really!. I am completely innocent I was forced to...'

-Shut up you lying rat!'

The Clanners were glancing at the sky. Sol was filming Pratson's declaration but had leaned forward. Seemed to manipulate his neck. The terrorist went silent in mid sentence. Eyes wide. Seemed to be choking silently, hands scabbling.

-Tell us the truth.' Sol spat. *-Now! Or I click my fingers and you die!'*

Pratson couldn't breathe, his neck was out. Half paralyzed and desperate.

Sol raised his arms. Black against the last red rays.

-They're telling me to kill you, the souls of those murdered in Guatemala, when boys like you began the dirty war. Two hundred and eighty thousand dead brothers and sisters are asking me to kill you now!

Pratson's face was scarlet, his eyes popping from their sockets. I was totally shocked and couldn't breathe either.

The wind was whipping a cloud of leaves,

Flashing with the last sun through the writhing trees.

An owl screeched close, scaring us even more, if that were possible.

We all just stood and watched as Pratson jerked, violently dying in the flowers.

Sol reached down to him, casually. And suddenly he was coughing and spluttering, gratefully sucking in air.

-Okay. okay I'll talk, I'll talk uh ..Oh god, I'll talk, oh, ah...'

-Who sent you here, where did you leave from, where and when do they pick you up?'

Pratson soon got enough breath to tell them what he knew. Sol trotting behind with the microphone, still recording, as they took him away.

Gloria and Merri started giggling, half crying and recovering from the attack. They already knew Maggie, who was hugging and consoling them, as we all made our way back to the party, just a hundred meters away, through the young forest.

Chapter twenty six

The anti-guru Guru

Barney

By the time me and Maxie got back to the party we found the rest of our strange family had arrived, Bernie and Josie, Jerry and Macker himself, and everyone was round the campfire supping soup and talking about what had occurred.

A small crowd was arriving behind us. Valleyz TV with lights, and mikes and gear.

Merri and Gloria in the middle with Maggie, and Sol enjoying himself.

-*'This is Valleyz TV. Fine shot, Gloria Pearson we're proud of you.'*- said the anchor woman.

-*'Thank you, but I didn't actually aim at ...'*-

-*'He said he was gonna chop off her t-tits, with a huge big machete.'*- said Merri, arm in arm. -*'So Gloria says -'Shit on you sucker.'*- And blows his b-balls off!'-

-*'Well actually...'* - Gloria's voice was lost in the applause.

-*'Can we eat while you interview us?'*- asked Merri. -*'We're really hungry.'*-

I sat down with Bernie and Jerry, and Lucy, who was talking rapid Spanish with her mobile. Feeling stiff and old, and rather jealous of Maxie. She and Macker were laughing and hugging each other. and rushed off to show him everything.

-*'I've brought two, um, extra sleeping bags.'*- says Jerry, blinking up at me.

He rubs his cheek on my bare arm and looks up at me affectionately. Both of us wish sometimes that we'd become gay lovers. I lean down and we bump foreheads, blurring his black and white eyes. Me and Jerry.

On an impulse I kiss his shy wet lips, and he kisses me back, but gingerly.

Opening my eyes I see Bernie smiling at us.

-*'Where's Josie then?'*- I asked, licking my lips.

-*'Oh she's here, in the new 'Kid's Planet' tent with Tammy.'*- she said.

-*'She's really happy to be here.'*- said Jerry.

-*'Sounds like you done a great job Barney. They should be interviewing you as well!'*- Bernie nodded over at the media crew.

-*'No no no, I'm gonna be recycled.'*- says I. Ducking my head involuntarily. -*'Fame is not for me I'm afraid. I'm changing my name!'*-

-*'Recycled? But Barney you're not rubbish, not just yet.'*- Lucy laughed at her own pathetic joke...

I shrugged. -*'A group of yunkers will take on most of what I do. Okay it's confusing.'*-

-*'You're being threatened!'*- said Lucy. Catching on, and squeezing my hand.

-*'We rotate jobs to avoid power structures. Maybe I'll visit Mexico.'*-

-*'That would be great, why not come with us!'*- She let the subject switch.
-*'Me and Lucia are gonna set up the stall now, to publicize the Soli-Fest.'*- said Bernie. -*'I've brought some of the new leaflets, and the poster. It's next weekend you know, would you like to help?'*-
-*'Okay but I'll just check on Moonie first, looks like Maggie's busy.'*- I nodded to where Maggie and Dolli sat eating with Merri and Gloria, who were still being interviewed.
-*'Let's all go in and check out Moonie first.'*- said Bernie. Standing and pulling Lucy up.
-*'And we can all wash up our cups and bowls.'*-

* * *

The first person who passed by our information stall was Sol. He was in high spirits, brown and bouncy as a basketball. No one would guess the guy is fifty years old.
-*'My name is Sol, like, sun, no? So they make me a fantastic Solstice Party, and already they are preparing a planet wide Soli-Festival!'*-
-*'Let's change his name, he's a megalomaniac.'*-
-*'Hello Moonbeam my super friend.'*- he said, kissing her wet cheek. She was on my lap sucking her thumb. -*'Hey you wanna come running all over the party with me?'*-
She shook her head, smiled and dribbled, without extracting her thumb.
-*'Moonie's been playing a lot already.'*- I said. -*'I'm hoping she's gonna have a siesta with her dear old dada.'*-
-*'What will you do Soledad mi amor?'*- asked Lucy. Taking his hands as if to stop him running off.
-*'They are inviting me to do a guided massage, at nine in the relax tent. I'm gonna play the anti-guru guru. But now I'm copying the film of today for our TV station friends. Maxie gonna help me.'*-
-*'Don't you get, er, tired?'*- I asked, yawning and stretching my stiff muscles. Sol shook his head.

-*'I was a hyperactive baby... So then I take some Soli-Fest leaflets, okay. I like to explain to everyone at the party what it is!'*-
-*'Vale chico muy bien, what a good boy!'*- said Lucy. Kissing him before he disappeared. -*'Look here comes Maggie, here's your mama Moonie!'*-

* * *

Finally Sol got most of our gang to his guided massage session in the coppice that evening. He could have been a famous guru figure, but he's too smart to want it.
Maxie and Macker were having a staring contest. Maggie was with Lucy and the famous Gloria, and all her lady-friends.

It wasn't too dark and not too windy, one side was open and the moon was shining through thin white cloud, making the whole night slightly luminous. Sol passed round Soli-Fest leaflets, then got us all breathing down to different parts of our bodies, gripping and relaxing our muscles, nothing special but well done. He was in amongst us adjusting our positions. Touching everyone with an air of knowing, somehow setting a tone of mutual love and respect, like.. It's hard to explain how...

-*'Now we take five deep breaths, letting our bodies go floppy...'*-

Implying that where he came from, or in his philosophy, *of course* we all care a lot for each other. Taken for granted. And seducing us into that world.

All conveyed in a few words, gestures,. Slightly broken English, little laughs..

-*'It's true my friends I am a shaman and we can do magic together'*- he said -*'Now we are breathing down to our thighs, hold your breath, tighten, grip, and relax and breathe out..'*

Then massaging, some gently doing themselves, others a partner at the same time. I was sitting with Jerry and Bernie, but I massaged myself. Just simple and practical, but somehow transcending. He had a knack, no, he had access to a power from way back.

Like an invisible halo of knowledge and power. Sixty kilos of distilled charisma.

. -*'Down to our stomachs, letting the juices flow, down right into our sexual organs, releasing waves of energy that radiate through us.'*-

People walking past stopped, listened, then sat and joined in. Our numbers doubled and he repeated the first part.

It wasn't sexual, well, just enough to wake up the pleasure senses and let that energy mix. Sorry I can't explain it but it clicked.

Up on a little stage, with a cloud of moths whirling round a spotlight

He spoke quietly, maintaining the rhythm of the continuing session.

-*'Our blood courses more freely, wakening all our senses! Opening our eyes to a clearer vibrant reality. Feeling our blood flowing round our bodies.'*- he went on.

Only then did I realize he'd mesmerized us.

Because he began to wake us up, explaining how we could repeat and improvise the exercises.

-*'My interest, here and now, is to find a piece of a puzzle.. The sacred puzzle.'*- he paused for effect. -*'The sacred quest of the anti-guru guru.. Ladies and Gentlemen, is.. How to turn goatshit into Irish Whiskey!'*-

There was a silence. People started murmuring, there were confused giggles.

. -*'So sorry, please continue. I am illustrating for you the dangers of hypnotic voice tones ..let's go on, yes, but don't be hypnotized my friends.'*- he said

I was trying not to laugh. Maggie had opened her eyes. Stood up and lifted her arms high.

-*'He's right.'*- she suddenly yelled. Her echoing voice came back off the cliff. -*'We don't need gurus. We don't need heroes. Because we're all gurus and heroes!'*-

People were turning, some puzzled, some irritated, and staring at her and our group.

There was a pause. Whispers and mumbles.

-*'And then we continue. Breathing gently down to the neck and shoulders. And down to our arms, and to our hands, repeating..'*

And all the way down to the tips of our tingling fingers..'

Look about now, and share with your sisters and brothers..'-

Lucy was standing, leaning back to back with Maggie. I was sitting straight but relaxed, cross legged.

-‘We breathe in deeply together and hold our breath, feeling a rush of blood, and let it flow and spread down through our bodies. Flushing with oxygen, and freeing our blocked and twisted muscles.’-

People were doing it, but glancing about. Expecting Sol to mess with them again.

-‘Breathing down to our thighs, legs, feet and finally reaching our toes... Contracting all our muscles together, releasing energy as we choose.. like a long controlled orgasm.’-

There was a pause as we all thought about long controlled orgasms.

-‘Really I come to learn from all my new friends here. How you are making a new civilization here, which, we hope, doesn’t control people, or obligate people to mess each other up and destroy the planet..

Now it’s time to continue as far as you need to, leading, for yourselves, for each other,

beginning with the muscles of the neck... gracias my friends.’-

Sol sat in line, with us, and said no more.

Maggie still stood there swaying, arms raised, dumpy and powerful.

Back to back with Lucy, and the session winding down.

Maggie saw why Sol had to negate his power, and deftly stepped in to cancel out a conflict of spiritual and practical healing.

She was in her element in the Coppice Circle. If only we had stayed there. If only...

If only we had believed in Maxie’s dreams.

act three
social explosion

Chapter twenty seven

Imploding Institutions

-‘running and laughing together down the concrete highway’-

Barry stood up, calm as usual, and surveyed the scene, at nine am, in the big, low, badly lit basement. There were about two hundred of us there, all sweating buckets, mostly men, and stripped off to the waist.

The place was buzzing with loud excited talk. All the tattooed Clanners milling down the back, in kilts and thongs and caps and hanging pockets.

Young fresh faces and faces lined and balding. some contending with wobbly bellies. Others old already, with alcohol and frustration, plus a bit of hard labour as well.

Muscles bulging and males bonding.

Fists banging on flimsy formica tables.

Barry was brilliant at facilitating these precarious Assemblies. The trick was to flee forwards, with concrete proposals. So common needs and interest could come before the grudges, jealousies and feuds, just bubbling into eruption.

That must not happen now. This was the most vitally urgent Coordination yet.

Barry raised his hands and clapped them in front of the mike.

-‘Are you right then lads and ladies, we’d better get moving.’- he shouted. -‘Can we close up the doors now and can you all pull your chairs forward. You yunkers there’s no use sitting back there no one will hear you.’-

There was loud scraping of chairs as Barry continued.

-‘Okay my name’s Barry I’m the ‘dynamator’ and as you know we’ve called these meetings to make some basic links and coordination in a time of rapid change.. These are the Pools delegates.’-

He glanced down, pointing at Maggie, Paul and Franky.

-‘Then here are the Free Dockers and Logistics Union and they have an important proposal for us tonight, um...

...Are those doors closed up?... Then we have power, cement, customs agents,, teachers, warehouseers ,er. All you lot from the occupied Works and railways, Free Transport Pool, CLAN Coordination, The Cleaners, Council Workers, Free-Uni, Works extension.. Observers from Womens Rescue, and Gay Rescue of course, Autonomous De-Schoolers and lots of individual Pools and yunkers Projects. Sorry I don’t have all the names.

Here beside me is our friend James Smith from -'All The Answers'- and he has a fascinating report for us. These fellas in yellow arm bands are the security, just mind your manners okay, and they won't beat you to a bloody pulp!'-

The big basement had gradually gone silent, but for furious whispers. Barry yelled less loudly, but went on waving his arms.

-'This is a closed door meeting we'll have to decide our media message if any. Okay? That's my job done, and the first speaker today, Ladies and Honourable Gentlefellas.. Yes you guessed it... Is Mr Micky O'Bryane from the Free Dockers Union.'

Barry sat down relieved on his fold-up chair as a little chubby man got up. A small man but a big speaker. Micky knew how the crappy PA worked, and sent his voice booming round the long cellar.

Making clear brief points, the miserable declining wages, the layoffs, the redundancies, the final miserable sell-out of the traditional Unions.

The bitter Container Port disputes were reaching a climax, uniting the staff of factories, yards, customs offices, warehouses, logistics companies and the Dockland Pool, uniting under the banners of the new horizontal Free Union.

Micky was up on a chair. Fists shaking, he came to the crunch of his speech.

Tomorrow would be the dock-wide Assembly. They would vote to strike. Close down the semi paralyzed port. Occupy it as a Free Area.

And they asked for, no they demanded, the support and integration into the CoOp Pools the financial backing of the CoOp Credit Union **and armed support** from the CLANs Assembly. They would

treble the Pools controlled area, extending from the adjacent Transport Works, now also Merca Pool all the way to the sea.

Barry, Maggie, Paul and Franky were consulting in furious whispers. Micky had publicly used the word *'armed'* for the first time.

His words were a shock, a deliberate plot, a bid for power.

His tactic would split the Federation right down the middle.

-'You gotta stop him right now.' said Maggie *-'He just put Civil War on the agenda.'*

-'But I'm the dynamator, I can't just .. '

-'Just bloody do it Barry or I'll throw a wobbly myself I swear.. !

Barry was back on his feet as Micky sat down, amid a storm of clapping and stamping feet.

-'Okay fine can we just have a bit of silence before the next speaker, just to clarify, does this request for er, physical force have the backing of the Free Dockland Union?'

Barry's job was to dance in the middle but he just couldn't stay neutral any more. Now Micky was back on his feet, swallowing the bait by answering.

-'Yes certainly we believe it has overwhelming support. It'll be proposed at our Assembly tomorrow.'

-'So only if your, er, unusual personal suggestion were tabled and accepted in a future assembly would it be a democratic request.'

-'Well, er.' Micky's colleagues were almost exploding. *-'Yeah of course, we're just telling you all what to expect.'*

-'Out of order. Out of order.' Someone was shouting.

-‘Thank you. You can sit down now. Of course the Pools delegates will pass on requests from your Assembly. But not the dangerous personal suggestion of one man..

Our next speaker is James Smith, who will briefly outline a new technical report, you should all have copies, the green one.’-

There was confused muttering. How could the facilitator be putting down their wonderful leader?

-‘Well done Barry.’- said Maggie. As James’s amplified voice filled the basement.

A dark suited figure, impassive and out of place, James quickly outlined the disastrous state of the Dockland area. Pointing to detailed breakdowns and property lists, legal and financial structures....

-‘Taking over the port is like pulling a trigger, if the State lets you control imports, exports and immigration, they will get totally abandoned by their international backers, who will have to cut their losses. Then the alternative system would soon spread throughout the country.

But that would be seen as a shocking example to a whole lot of other small bankrupt countries and so-called ‘Failed States. We’d be seen as threatening the hegemony of the trans nationals.’.

That’s it folks, you have all kinds of details in the report, and we’re happy to help in any way we can, what you decide to do here this morning will affect the very survival of one of the most advanced social experiments in all of human history.

Our advice would be to avoid a confrontation if at all possible. And steer well clear of the remains of the international monetary system.’-

James sat down quickly, relieved. The place burst into applause and excited conversation.

Barry had to work fast to maintain calm, intervening for quiet and introducing speakers, as the takeover of the whole port area became an urgent reality before their eyes.

Maggie got up for the Pools Federation, the first woman to speak, as she immediately pointed out. They too would call an emergency assembly They could promise material support and pass on the request for armed help only if endorsed by the Dockers. But it could not be agreed without a general vote. Micky O Bryane must have known that.

However they would propose a compromise plan, to barricade the Dock area, and offer the CLANs Defence if the State attacked first.

-‘So that’s about all from us. Please read that ‘All The Answers’ report and only agree things you’re sure won’t cause a Civil War or invasion of this country.

I’m personally shocked by you guys getting all testicular. Your own family might get massacred! You have no right. Your whole attitude is an enormous Shit-On by exclusion!.

If this meeting were half women, there’d be no question of chancing all our futures on the ideas of one fella, fantastic little Napoleon though he is to be sure.’-

No sooner had she finished than Micky himself had slipped across to where our lot were sat. Suddenly popped up, wearing an empty shoulder holster on his bare chest, and grinning, despite Maggie slagging him.

-‘Hello there boys and girls.’- says he. *-‘I’m sorry to be making your life difficult.’-*

-‘Stay here a second.’- said Maggie, hotly. *-‘Why did you have to ask for guns?’-*

-‘Because it might just come to that. Better shock and stir up everyone beforehand.’-

-‘So you want our kids to fight the cops for you.’-

-‘Tell me one thing.’- Barry broke in. *-‘When exactly will you start the takeover of Docklands.’-*

At this moment Franky got back to the table.

-*'The CLANs are calling a red alert right now.'*- he said. -*'And I've got the list.'*

-*'Good news'*- said Micky in a loud whisper. -*'Because we go ahead tomorrow straight after our Assembly. We're just hoping the cops don't move on us tonight.'*

-*'Yeah well..'*- said Maggie -*'We need to have our own Assembly and this is gonna be totally divisive and destructive. You really shat on us Micky, plus ours is only an assembly of delegates anyway. So we fuck each other up. Your timing is way off man... '*

-*'I know I know, I'm sorry. Our proposal is this.. You call a countrywide Assembly for tomorrow with on line voting for those who can't come.'*

-*'What are you saying now.'*- said Franky.

'We suggest you have it in the Docks. In our huge warehouse. That way people can show mass support . Live and direct, zero bureaucracy. We need masses of people And you need to shortcut a debate that's sterile. Because we're going ahead anyway. Don't you see?'

-*'I see some blatant manipulation that will put a lot of people in danger without their consent.'*- said Maggie, red in the face.

-*'No no. We've organized a safe exit route for people who want to leave, and kids and all. I know this all looks casual but they've been planning for months. Our technicians could set up online voting from there, with your help.'*

-*'Well we'll consult about that immediately. I like the idea myself.'*- said Franky. -*'I mean, inside a shit situation. Er, Paul has a new bulletin from Supplies Coordination. Things in urgent short supply in various depots. When will they computerized this?'*

Paul passed him a pale blue memory which Micky tapped with his knuckles..

-*'Consider that done!'*- he said.

-*'Yeah well, there's going to be one hell of a row if this takeover comes off.'*

Micky smiled, bowed slightly over his little beerbelly, and was off.

-*'Shit shit shit shit.'*- said Maggie -*'We're being railroaded all the way. You'd better do something with this meeting Barry.'*

The low hall was milling with excited people. A camera team were setting up lights around the dockers.

-*'Get up and do your thing Barry, it's a bleeding madhouse in here.'*- said Franky.

-*'No stop stop.'*- said Maggie. -*'We need to decide if we'll call our Assembly in the Docks as they want.'*

-*'We can't decide that, for everyone.'*

-*'So why not do one of those Snap Surveys! Maxie knows how to do it.'*- she suggested.

-*'Is there time?'*- Franky asked.

-*'Why not. People do it every day. Three sentences outlining the problem. Suggest General Assembly in docks with on-line voting. Yes or no. We leave it on the message boards for a few hours just. They're really accurate they say... '*

-*'Great idea, um, Paul could you try and organize it.'*

-*'Yes sure we can do it! No problem I'll get help now.'*- And he vanished off into the crowd.

Maxie

-*'Hey Maxie, it's back this way.'*- shouted Maggie.

Me and Bernie tried to turn around, all irritated and itching and sweaty, trying to push Moonbeam in her pushchair, through the excited angry mob.

We were looking for the Kid-Space in this great history-making Assembly in the Docks, but it was packed out, like a bar at closing time..

There was a big group of women blocking the way in, and chanting '*Civil War..Out the door!*'- Moonbeam joined in. Standing precariously in her buggy, yelling and clapping gleefully.

Maggie was part of the coordination, hundreds of women and Pools were mobilizing to stop the Civil War sparking off. They'd taken over an empty Customs office in Perkin Street.

We found the Kid-Space, it wasn't as bad as we had expected, for a mostly male Free Union, and Moonie was happy to stay, for snacks and games.

Outside this old union codger Christo Rylee was up speaking, all sweet and reasonable. While the long warehouse got hot and was getting hotter.

With storms of shouts and clapping and stamping feet.

Till finally Micky got up. Their big power grabbing leader, though he was only little. With a gang of ugly looking dockers dwarfing him. We could only see his raised arms.

But he got everyone all sitting and quiet. They had to shut up to hear his quiet voice, and the first white cards were being collected and things got moving. Explanations and requests and messages.

They were dividing up the people into big groups of about a hundred, under various coloured flags.

To us it was blatant manipulation and it stank.

Later we in the Pools would have our meeting but the takeover would have already happened, and we'd be dragged into a total confrontation with the State, which we weren't ready for.

Okay I did feel bitter, they would destroy what we'd built up. But still you had to admire them. They were just a gang of normal fellas. Embarrassed, hands in pockets a bit disheveled. Squinting into the lights up on the stage.. But they were talking about revolution.

They were throwing down a brilliant and daring challenge to the whole world!

Voting for an all out strike, of course, but it was the second unexpected card that was the key, the strike was just a cover.

They voted to take over the entire industrial dockland area and integrate with the Free Pool CoOps!

When this was announced they all went testicular and hopped with glee. Me and Bernie, though not Maggie, were lepping up and down with the rest of them. They nearly lifted off the old asbestos roof!

* * *

Only now did we really realize it was happening then and there! It had to be a surprise. It was instant takeover. Just add supporters. Their defence groups had left already, bulldozing their way out the doors, to close the roads.

They were calling forward the big groups, assigning the coordinators with flags and sending them off on various tasks. Mainly to back up the pickets, but also to occupy offices, tour the factories,

secure the machinery and the wharves. Stop ships leaving, take over the Customs headquarters with their Union. Later, the police station itself.

That's some of it. They had it well thought out I must admit.

We went with the third big crowd, a lot of people from our Pool. Out the side door we had come in. We got purple pass cards in the yard, dunno why, and were offered heavy sticks.

Then we followed the megaphone. Just jogging, but down the middle of the road. It was lined with offices and industrial units. Towards the North entrance, about a kilometer away.

Groups of people were cheering and clapping us. Flags flapping in the boiling sun.. I think we all felt that physical surge of liberation, running in the salty wind. An image of freedom to remember!

The first part was really slow, me and Bernie slipped off our shoes and jogged along. Barefoot, in our Clan Earth denims, tassels and waistcoats. Maggie suffering in her long jeans.

We could see a lorry pulled across, blocking the Dockland Gates, and a traffic jam building up ahead.

Then this vanload of police appeared, led by a Special Police car. Careering out of a side turning. Off towards the road block. We yelled after them, waving our sticks.

Maggie had a stitch. She and Bernie dropped back. But I was enjoying myself. Running up the front.

The police were at the road block. Skipping the queue and hooting madly. Sirens shrieking.

We were almost up to them. There would be a fight. Only then did I realize the danger! The Special Police spilled out of their car. Guns in the air. The peelers were abandoning their van.

But just then the lorry moved forward a little to let them slip past. We were nearly on them. Two fat coppers running like the clappers. A stick whistling past their ears...

We all stopped there, panting, hands on knees, and watching the others all catching up. Laughing and gasping and clapping each others backs.

There was Maggie, shirt open and face bright pink.

All freckles and her shock of red hair flying.

Oh Maggie my darling why did it have to be you!

They were calling for us to link arms across the road.

The traffic would just have to turn back. But no one was complaining.

Hadn't they just seen the Law running for their lives!

The rest were lining up. But I just sat. Sweating on the hot tarmac and drifting off.

Suddenly drifting right away. Into a dizzy faint.

I heard my name faraway and tried to slip out the hole. But it was too narrow, and too white and bright to see anything. I was alone, swallowing back vomit, wrapped up and dazzled and trapped.

That prickly heat. Crawling like a poisonous centipede inside my neck. And I was slipping right out with it. Just popping slowly right up out of myself. Observing like a camera, without the least concern. What I could see below.

-Now let me see that's Macker, falling I'm afraid.

Shot down from behind in the trees. Quite faded into the future.

Me, falling fast, backwards from a very high place.

Curious motions. And so much blood.

Killian Bate, laughing silently and wagging a red dripping finger

That was Barney clearly, taking a dive as well.

Face down in it. Splat. How odd.

And Maggie. Oh dear me. Why can't I see your face..'-

-Maxie, wake up now, come on.' She was dabbing tepid water on me from a small bottle.

I opened my eyes but it was much too bright. I was dizzy and felt like puking, half lying on a sizzling hot road. But now Maggie's face was normal. Scarlet red, but normal, and I hugged myself tight to her.

Pushing in between her mama breasts, and sobbing that I'd never let her go.

I'd had a premonition again, but I didn't really know what I had seen.

We stayed there for about ten more minutes just. Back up at the railway bridge, a huge crane was lifting containers, from a line of lorries. Sealing up the bridge and road. Then we would pick up Moonie. Our gate was already a Pools area anyway. It was the south gate that had the Bands and the cameras and the human blockade and the army due to move in at dawn.

Maggie sprinkled me with more water, in the shade of the barricade. Loose wrapped in her shirt, she rubbed my back. I'd give anything to be in her arms again.

But just then I was much too nervous. And getting worse not better. The meaning of my premonition sank in.

It's only in my head, I know, but I've been right before.

And like before I tried to forget, and just got more upset.

-Maggie, I know it's just auto-suggestion, but when I fainted on the road I saw Barney falling into a lot of blood, and you, I couldn't see your face, um. I'm sorry to tell you but you both have to go away somewhere safe, right now.'

-Oh come on Maxie. It's perfectly safe here.' she said, very stupidly.

-We'll get Moonie and Barney and go home right now okay.' I insisted.

-We'll go home for tea right enough. But we've got to come back and prepare the Assembly, I mean, you didn't really see us hurt did you?'

-No Maggie I know I'm right, you just got to go. Do it for Moonbeam.' I tried the old moral blackmail.

-Don't be silly now.' she snapped. *-If something's going to happen to me it can happen here or there or any bleeding where. See I'm a poet.'*

-You don't believe me! How can you..? You think I'm crazy. How can you treat me like shit when

I'm trying to save your stupid life!?'-
 It really was too much. She wouldn't listen!
- 'But Maxie, we've got to stop them taking up arms. We gotta get a vote accepted and win it. Really. It could save thousands of people's lives!'-
- 'But lose your own maybe.'-
- 'Come on.. we can't say - 'resist them passively'- and then run off home ourselves and watch it on TV. Anyway. It was you said it's just auto-suggestion. I mean, you didn't see me hurt.'-
- 'Cos you stupidly woke me up when I.. ' -
- 'Ah fuck off Maxie, you're giving me a headache.'-
- 'Fuck off you, I'm gonna look for Barney he'll tell you it's true.'- I said, not making much sense.
- 'What would he know he doesn't even... ' - she began.

But I'd shed her shirt, and was away off up the road, carrying my shoes. In fact I had to meet with Macker and Sol.

Sol had arrived back here from Italy. Now he was making a documentary on the Dockland takeover. With me and Macker helping him.

A Criminal Conspiracy

It was a truly beautiful room, massive sparkling windows overlooking the Castle courtyard.

Round the polished mahogany table sat three Generals, the Police Commissioner, and lesser worthies. Shuffling their papers, muttering in quick whispers.

Among the grey heads sat young Peter Kennedy, spotless and dignified, personal aide to the aging General Mulcatty.

Only one thing was out of place in the ornate room, and only Peter knew it.

Captain P. Kennedy was a traitor and a spy.

Lerriman stomped into the meeting, at the head of seven of his Cabinet. It had been a difficult day. More economic meltdown. Then this ludicrous and dangerous business in the Docks.

He stood before the marble fireplace. Skipping preliminaries.

- 'Right Commissioner You're in the hot seat. How in God's name did you let this happen?'-

- 'Yes Sir.'- The police chief cleared his throat. - 'At about 11.00 am. this morning in an Assembly in Mackenzie's warehouse the new General Dockside Trade Union set...'-

- 'Get to the point man for Christ's sake.'-

- 'They were voting for another strike attempt. Then they gave out a secret red card, calling for a general occupation of the entire industrial area, and voted it through, um. They had big cranes and.. And they sealed up the three entrances with piles of containers. It's a live media spectacle, you..'-

- 'And they're still blocked?'- Lerriman interrupted.

- 'Oh yes. And most of the companies are voting to join in. Their staff I mean. Right now they control the dock area, the warehouses, customs, the river, the railways, er, the local council, the customs facilities, I said that, all the offices, two schools and all the old blocks of flats and The Mercy

Hospital, the old museum, social security offices, oh a lot of stuff. One gate is open to pass holders and there's lots of movement and traffic.. '-

- 'Aren't they on strike?'

- 'They're committing wholesale robbery sir. Two major convoys have gone out through the Pools areas already. Shipping is beginning to move again. They've been doing deals all right.'

- 'And the Police Stations, couldn't you even save them?' - asked Bruton sarcastically.

The Special Police chief was smiling as he lit a slim cigar.

- 'Oh no. They never took them, er. The staff are still working but..er '-

- 'But what? Come on.' - said Bruton, butting in.

- 'They voted to um, integrate with the Pools Assemblies, um, not with us...'

- 'They what? They've mutinied!' - Lerriman burst in, waving his hands. *- 'I want this stopped right now! This is an enormous conspiracy man. Don't tell me Commissioner that you didn't know!'*

- 'We, have been warning you for months, about this Free Union. But till today just a few people knew about this er, takeover.'

- 'And you were one of those few!' - shouted Lerriman in triumph.

Letting an A4 sheet of paper skim out across the mahogany.

- 'Here's a copy of a letter, warning you of the takeover, sent to you yesterday by the Special Police. Do you deny that man?'

- 'He has a whole Section devoted to discrediting me.' - The Commissioner pointed at the grinning Bruton. *- 'He sends me paranoid letters every day!'*

- 'Paranoid!?' - Lerriman was grasping his own head in two hands. - 'Negotiations! What is it they want?' - He was glancing about. *- 'Flatson! Are you the Minister for Employment? Or is this the fucking Monkey House.'*

- 'Yes Sir. I mean no Sir. I mean.. We do have a meeting fixed for next Thursday with a Coordinating Assembly.'

- 'Next Thursday! Commissioner, before I fire you. What is your plan to recover the Docks area?'

- 'With respect Sir. That is not a matter for the civilian police. In fact we can't do it.. '-

- 'Why the hell not. Bruton! What do the Special Police say? Has the Commissioner lost his marbles?'

- 'Not entirely Sir. There is a logistical problem, er, and right now a very big human blockade that we need to clear away, um. His police are demoralized, and they haven't been payed this month. Let's face it. Also they're infiltrated and getting goods and services, in a Credit Deal with the Pools Federation.

I'm afraid it's true, Sir. They wouldn't do it at all. And the Free of course are still playing pacifists. When we know they're armed and trained. Plus they're showing the whole confrontation live on their media. Like a ridiculous er, morality play, so we can hardly just suppress the facts.'

Bruton shrugged and lifted his white palms in the air

- 'Of course we would do it, Sir, but our forces are too small, General Mulcatty is your man now Sir.'

- 'General Mulcatty?' - Lerriman asked, between his hacking smoker's cough. *- 'What is the army plan to stop this rebellion?'*

Mulcatty was coughing as well. A big man, now overweight and grown old, plagued by high blood pressure and a nasty gastric condition. He felt his stomach flip, as his name was called, and he coughed again, suppressing a grimace.

-*'Yes Sir of course. Our plans are not yet finalized, er, but basically we would take the weakest point. Unfortunately it's protected by railways, the river and the sea. As I say. Our commandos take the key points. We saturate the area, cart away the ringleaders.'*-

Lerriman glanced around. Realizing that this was just pathetic. Everybody was studiously looking down. Except the smiling Bruton.

-*'You like that plan then Bruton.'*- he asked.

-*'I can't really say if his old tanks will go through a pile of containers. But they'll surely mash up the thousands of women and kids standing in front of them.'*-

-*'Oh yes'*- Mulcatty broke in. -*'I forgot to mention. We fire standard crowd dispersal material. They'll have to move away.'*-

-*'Right you are General!'*- said Bruton. -*'I'd like to send some of my boys along to help if that's okay. Providing of course the army doesn't switch sides as well. So if you're giving the order chief?...'*-

Lerriman sat calculating, cheeks in hands. His fortune was safely offshore.

Technically he was an embezzler, he thought, though morally his services well deserved it.

-*'It's a grim choice we must face up to like real men. We won't get another cent in credit till this is controlled. Either I resign and finally leave the country with the rest. Or I have the guts to give the order. I mean, we have to suppress these people.'*-

-*'Quite okay with me.'*- said Bruton. Flexing and cracking knuckles. -*'These fellas are getting far too cocky.'*-

All the rest either nodded minimally or sat frozen. Eyeing the cameras and wishing like hell they weren't present at all. This was history *not* to assist in making.

-*'That's it then. You can go along Bruton, and liaise with the police and army. I want a military conference at eight o'clock. Just one thing Commissioner, I'm relieving you of your post. You've done a fair job but times have changed.'*-

The police chief had shot to his feet. Went to storm out,. Then stopped.

-*'You are making your fatal mistake Lerriman. Putting police matters in the hands of a senile General and a sadistic megalomaniac! Good day to you.'*-

And he disappeared, with an explosive bang of the old oak door..

Fear and embarrassment reigned. Then Lerriman spoke.

-*'You really think you can handle this then General, give us some details now.'*-

-*'Yes well as I say. We go straight in by surprise. Through the South Gate at dawn tomorrow if we can arrange it.'*- He glanced at Peter Kennedy and the generals who nodded and shrugged nervously. -*'Yes at dawn. We'll set up a little diversion, send some boatloads of soldiers down the river.'*-

Lerriman's eyes gleamed and he smiled at last, rubbing his hands.

-*'At dawn tomorrow, yes that sounds more like it. Maybe we'll even catch them sleeping.'*-

And Bruton's laugh came braying, long and loud.

The chandelier had flickered off. Now it came on, brighter with the backup generator.

-*'And our media needs preparing.. Saving the country from anarchist bandits.. Preventing invasion of foreigners.. Where's Chintzer?'*-

-*'I'm still here, I don't know why.'*- said the Minister for Communications. -*'We have bad news if it's of any interest to you, The Herald has closed down, all our outlets are controlled by Nooz Corporation.'*-

-*'But their boss is on our side'*-

-*'This mornings keynote Times editorial is titled.. SEND COALITION TROOPS NOW.'*-

-*'Nobody reads that. Anyway that might be a good thing.'*-

-*'Fine, fine. And all the flunkies on the planet will copy the line. But you're right, no one reads our press anymore.'*- He sat down abruptly.

-*'Okay that's all boys. Let's go for it!'*- said Lerriman. Clicking his briefcase shut. Provoking several non committal grunts, as the conference concluded.

* * *

Barney

The Docks Area Takeover..-*'Not another one'*- said Damo.

Macker's siblings, Damo and Tessa, were finally out of the Youth Protection prison and living with us in Little Agnes Street.

-*'Either we provoke a civil war or just take the whole country.'*- I was saying.

-*'Our daughter's going to be three next Friday.'*- said Maggie. We were unfolding the pram in the hall of the Little Agnes Street house.

-*'I know I know, big girl Moonie!'*- says I. -*'How about a party on Saturday at lunchtime. Jenny said she'd help and bring Oona.'*-

-*'Yes yes, good thinking Barney but Sunday would be better, we'll talk later. Is everyone ready? We're leaving!'*-

-*'I'm just coming, very sorry okay.'*- said Jerry. Bounding back upstairs.

-*'Do we have to go? I think I'll stay home.'*- said Tessa with a moan.

-*'There's gonna be a big yunkers' concert. Come and have a look anyway.'*-

-*'Let's take our bikes then.'*- said Damo. -*'So we can escape fast.'*-

-*'No way I'm cycling with you!'*-

We were off to yet another Assembly in the Docks, but this was the big one. To decide if we would start armed resistance

With online countrywide voting, and all that media circus.

-*'Hey Uncle Barney we saw you on the TV.'*- said Tessa.

-*'What? Barney or Pardy?'*-

-*'They called you Pardy Brown, a well known figure, but it was you.'*-

The great thing about being recycled is I get some time to be me, whoever that is, and spend some time with Moonbeam while she's small.

So people ring through to an eager group of yunkers instead.

I'm Pardy Brown, who's putting together a Play Projects guide.

I work upstairs in the back room, looking out at the windmills and the rain.

Often entertaining my daughter Moonie. Yes, I'm recycled and I like it.

I refused to move house but I do take precautions. A few on James's death list have really been bumped off. Today I'm sporting my short mustache, sweating in my trilby hat, and my boringly respectable half length pants.

The Earth fashion round here is cut off tights and peeny belts, with hanging tassels and pockets, some trendy guys just let it all hang out.. So there goes my cool laid back image!

-*'Why not stay at home with Moonie and watch it on TV?'*- Maggie asked.

-*'Why me?'*- says I -*'It's you that Maxie is worrying about. Really. And her premonitions are always right.'*-

-*'Yeah well, I'd prefer to risk getting bumped off. She didn't actually see me dead in her dream you know.'*-

-*'Everybody ready. I'll go out the back and meet you out in the street.'*-

It's just a detail. I slip out by the back lane, never the front door. It doesn't make me nervous or anything.. I love to feel streetwise, and this day the place was buzzing with life..

This Assembly it's the real thing. Like a key chess move. Taxing imports and exports is their last source of big money and credit.

The atmosphere was electric on the way down. A marching band, drums and trumpets, flags flapping in the gale. Then shouts and running feet. Fist fights and yelling matches, between transport workers and Poolers up from the country to say -*'NO NO NO.'*- to armed force.

Me and Maggie and Jerry, plus Damo and Tessa on the bikes. Macker and Maxie were there already, in Sol's super film team. Bernie had gone away at the time, with Josie as well of course, to join Lucia on a Soli-Fest tour of Europe.

The whole road was blocked by the Women against War groups and the so called PAWS, Pacifist Warriors leafleting and arguing, menacing with broom-handles, in their improbable pigtails, short denim waistcoats and legbands. Maggie left me Moonie, and rushed off with some women to picket an access road.

Two circus sized marquees had sprung up by the railway sidings. People were milling about and queuing for food. We followed, dodging the scaly prehensile tails of a class of Yeti Clanners, masked up with snarling dragon heads on their bare chests, with nipples for eyes and high spiky hair. Others in half length mili-belts with bulging pockets.i

Some Coppice Clanners came dodging through crossways, with blowpipes and green painted bodies. All of them laughing their heads off.

-*'Stay with us Damo, at least till we see Macker.'*- He was about to disappear.

Down beyond the marquees we could see a crowd of little dome tents. Campfires throwing sparks into the orange and deep blue twilight.

And across the tracks a makeshift stage. Windmills whizzing, and a band playing.

Summer was coming again. And every gathering would blossom into a festival.

The giant warehouse was filling to the corners, one side a long line of computers, cables in pipes. Queues of people behind them were voting already.

Someone had recycled a lorryload of carpets and they were still being rolled out, or hung on the walls, along with flags and banners.

-*Over here, over here!*’- Jerry had spotted some of our Pool.

Just then they announced the army and police attack at dawn next morning. Confirming the rumour but still scary. We were *inside* the area, after all.

Our media were showing the whole thing live. Macker and Maxie and Sol were in the middle of it. The Free Unions had been calling for a General Strike since early afternoon.

The great warehouse was humming, people making five minute speeches. I had been asked to speak for Ragwort Pool, a well known figure, though I expected to evade it.

More news in my earphones, people were marching in from the outer suburbs in growing crowds.

Instead of tea and telly whole communities were walking into the city.

Riot situations were kicking off, outside the defunct Central Bank and Stock Exchange. In front of the still operational Police Headquarters. The Assembly and voting was being relayed live.

The first ballot would close in half an hour.

* * *

Maxie

-*You have to rest Maxie.*’- said Sol. But I wasn’t tired at all.

In fact I felt exhilarated, the vast energy of the resistance surging through me. I was learning so much, working with Sol and Macker. Well, Macker knew less than me, but he’s a genius, and adorable.

I was still really worried about Maggie and Barney. I’d warned them and shouted at them and threatened them. Their hard luck, I told myself. And anyway I wasn’t too sure about my premonition. I needed to forget it and I had distractions

-*My name is Richard Daly and I’m seventy four years old. Me and my family have been in the CoOp Pools from the start and we done a lot of work, building them up..*’-

The Assembly was boring. We headed for the South Gate for a joint report. Sol, and me and Macker.

We were sat in a band of shade, waiting for them to set it up. It would be my turn to ask questions, but I had the list in my hand and I wasn’t afraid.

-*Tell me Sol.*’- says I. -*Is it possible to repeat a premonition, to check out the details?*’-

-*All is possible my friend.*’- says he. -*But my experience is that you can not believe nearly nothing of these visions, and a forced replay can be even less. Also it could be dangerous for you.*’-

-*But it is possible, a, um, replay?*’-

-*Oh yes claro que si. Of course you can. You need someone who understands you, your mind, your life, your body. Barney might..*’-

-*Shh we’re ready to start!*’-

-*Are you ready Maxie?.. three two one..*’-

-*'Here we are at the South Gate, standing under the cool shadow of this high barricade of containers. We have here Brian Harper from the Docks Defence. Brian, can you tell us what is planned to happen here if the army really arrive at dawn tomorrow as we expect?'*-

-*'Yes well that depends what the Assembly decides and how people are voting up and down the country. But all these people you see sitting here outside the wall have decided already on the human blockade, and we've heard that thousands more are on their way.'*- Brian explained clearly.

-*'So you probably won't resist with arms.'*- I said.

-*'Well if they decide on arms it would be very awkward, because we have no guns here as you can see. And in any case we could never start shooting with all these people sitting in the street.'*-

-*'What do you advise our viewers to bring if they're coming to the blockade?'*- I asked, in my best voice.

-*'Gas masks if they have any, lemon helps, something to sit on, drinks and snacks. Helmets if you have them.. '*-

-*'You're expecting a gas attack then?'*-I knew that worried lots of people.

-*'Tear gas, a watercannon and warning shots. But if this gale keeps up the gas will be useless, and the water could be refreshing, it's so hot.'*-

Sol switched to a cloud of agile gulls, diving and screaming, as some kids chucked bread in the harbour.

-*'So what will happen then?'*- I asked.

-*'They need to refuse to fire. The officers will refuse to give that order. We're preparing reception centers already for soldiers and cops who come over. The Pools are offering them a Deal.. credit cards, jobs, housing, health and old age care, what else, education..'*

Later we'll interview a soldier who's come over. As you know police posts and councils across the country are now declaring loyalty to the Pools Federation...'-

We had two cameras. Macker on one and Sol doing little clips that he was able to slot into the interview. Instant editing. Thousands singing together. A crane loading a ship. A cormorant diving in the port. Boys flying kites, up on the container wall...

-*'So listen cops and soldiers, tell your mates. They offer you double bonus for tonight and tomorrow. It's another obvious lie. They admitted it in their meeting today and we have it on tape. They're broke and can't borrow more. What about last month's pay? It's all lies, bringing back pensions? Desperate lies. The Pools are offering you the Credit Deal, so check it out on line. '*-

-*'But how can police and soldiers know who to trust?'*-

-*'Talk to your colleagues. We're all wearing red armbands in the morning.. It means you won't fire gas or bullets at your own people. Plus maybe you'd prefer to be part of the Pools Fed. So put on an armband they'll be handed out.'*-

-*'That sounds like a good idea. Finally Brian what's your personal opinion about this?'*-

-*'I was working as a warehouseman. Shitwork, by the day. But we've had no work all year. Now at last we're getting the docks moving again. The government want to stop us. They're instigated by a handful of capitalist bosses and foreign banks. Just to get another loan so they can rob more money off us.'*

It's stupid and pathetic, it's a scamf they really want to stop us they'll have to kill thousands of innocent working people to do it. It's incredible, people are gonna sit in front of the tanks, with their babies and their grannies

-*'And if they fire on the people?'*-

-‘A civil war... I imagine myself that the CLAN militias would take over in a few weeks, however .. ’-

-‘Thanks very much Brian. We’ll be back here a bit later on. Now we pass you back to Patricia live and on the spot at the Assembly, and then we’ll interview one of the catering and reception groups.’-

That was my interview. My claim to fame!

Chapter twenty eight 'Revolution Day'

Barney

I'm up here preparing my talk, for the soldiers when they arrive at dawn. I'm all psyched up and shitting myself. My appeal probably won't work, and then what?.

It's two thirty in the morning here. I got keys of the manager's office, ninth floor, a Customs and Excise building. This floor is in use, but empty now, the rest was abandoned until today. It isn't because of the strikes that the Port is stopped. It's down to economic collapse and impossible weather.

Maggie will come up with Moonie in a little while. It's a luxury office with Jacuzzi, kitchen, fridges with some beer, and a panoramic view of the resistance down below.

I did make my little speech at the Assembly today. They liked it too much. The technique is to talk like it's to your best friend, assuming that he or she really wants to help, but just can't quite understand how to join in.

Now they want me to talk to the soldiers, *me*, I'm just a playground worker that got political. How am I supposed to rescue a whole mass movement? Like a twenty ton truck that's trundling off down a mountain with no brakes!

Down below they've built a bonfire near the stage. Yunkers are lining up to leap through the flames, I'm trying to spot Damo and Tessa but no luck.

I can't figure out how to open the windows, and I'm sweating like an ice cube in an oven!

Okay, I do know a bit about talking to men. How to press those male-bonding buddy buttons. But how come I'm suddenly the one who can make those fellas disobey orders at gunpoint? They're institutionalized for fuck's sake!

A bell rings.. *Dingledong. Dingledong.* Maggie is here, with our daughter Moonie, asleep in the pushchair. All smiles in her long yellow T shirt, she's flirting with Clan Sunshine fashion.

Maggie is into women and I'm celibate, we've never been lovers.

Pushing the pram, she come shambling through the office chairs, swirling her red cape, her red curls springing out with throaty laughter.

'Hi Maggie great to see you.' - says I. and give her a bear hug - *'I'm going totally loco up here, so I am.'* -

'It's much too hot here. Wow what an amazing view, they should film from up here.. So what happened to my big baby boo boo?' -

'Congratulations Margaret. You's done really well to win the vote. It was a historic mobilization. Really impressive.' -

-‘Everyone helped. Your little speech was a cracker! But the next step is even more dodgy. You doing the appeal then?’-

-‘At the main gate. Oh shit Maggie maybe I am a good person to do it, but I can see it just not working. And Maxie had a premonition and..’-

-‘I know I know sure I was with her. She’s raging with me for not running away... Now just breathe slowly and..’-

While chatting she’s checking my pulse, tut tutting to herself.

-‘I can’t get through to Lucia at all, and it’s..ow that hurts!..it’s you who’s in danger Maggie. It’s really you should get out and..’-

She’s lifting my eyelids, peering in my iris.

Relaxing my muscle tension, pulling on my penis.

-‘Stop talking now Barney. You’re all wired up. First drink a lot of water, here.. Off with these strip lights. Look there’s a table lamp. Shirt off, why are you wearing long pants? You’re wet.. Now I need you to lie out flat on this table. Just relax and think of nothing..’-

-‘But Maggie I..’-

-‘No buts. If you can’t do the appeal there are others will. Just lay back on this cushion, you’re starting to relax already.’-

She’s quite right of course. Getting nervous won’t help if there is no solution. On the contrary. So I’m just trying to let go. But I’m not able to. Then not trying. Then little by little. Just flowing along with Maggie’s low familiar voice. Again and again. Breathing through those unknotted muscles. Little by little. Untying the tangle in my head,. As her cool hands and arms slide over me.

Waking my skin and making me shiver and pimple.

-‘And now again down to your tummy I can feel that knot of anguish shrinking now, and breathing down again, come on now, that blood is beginning to flow a little more freely and..’-

I find myself almost moaning. She does my legs, leaving old Dumbo strictly alone. And I’ve stopped worrying about my problems. Because I’m thinking now this must be how she massaged me *that time..*

That time she made love to me when I was off the planet. When she got herself pregnant with Moonbeam.

-‘Deeper breathing down please.. I’m feeling a sexual tension flowing up through you.. deeper now, just relax.’-

Finally I open my eyes. Reflections from the bonfire are flickering with black shadows on the office ceiling.

Music pounding but almost inaudible.

My anguish has vanished. It’s gone, how did she do that?.

Maggie’s at the foot of the table, massaging my toes and somehow I feel randy.

Really I’ve gone right off women, except for Lucia but she is not for me.

-‘I was thinking of Moonbeam’s conception.’- I whisper.

-‘Me too, that’s funny..’-

-‘Did you, did you enjoy that or..?’- Its me enjoying her hands and arms, sliding up my calves and thighs..

-*'Yes yes never more. Never more with a boring man, I mean! But don't you remember at all? Didn't Maxie tell all the dirty details?'*-

-*'We've never done it again. We're Pools-married and live together with our almost three year old daughter and..'*-

I can feel the curve of her tummy, rubbing on my toes and the soles of my feet

-*'Two daughters. Breathe deeper now, come on, and relax.'*-

-*'You can't count that adoption scam, just to help Maxie.'*-

-*'Why not? She adores being my daughter. Okay not with you as her dad, of course not.'*-

We laugh together. Lifting on my elbows we gaze into each other, I'm attempting to feel her delicately with my awkward toes.

She bites her bottom lip and rolls her eyeballs.

-*'And yet we never make love, like, you and me Maggie, I mean one to one and face to face like now.'*-

-*'Coz I don't do men, and I'm in love with Lucia, , but maybe.. '*- She raises her eyebrows and cocks her head, mischievously.

-*'I'm kind of in love with her as well, but why not, um..'*-

-*'Share?'*-

I slide one foot under to pull her closer with my toes.

She squeezes me and laughs and leans to reach me.

Swinging one knee up on the table, punky, with a chuckle and a snort.

'Will you join me then Margaret?'- says I. Holding out my hands for hers.

She likes my efforts at massage with the foot it seems.

-*'Well, shall I show you how I made Moonie, then.'*- she suggests, and roughly straddles me. -*'Now that I'm getting in the mood, I mean.'*-

She wriggles off her yellow T shirt dress, and shows me her trendy spoon-bra with the nipple holes.

-*'Maxie thinks we're gonna die tonight anyway.'*-

Wearing just the red belt, she poses for her own reflection, in the glass partition. Hands gyrating her hips. Sticking her tongue out at me, before I make a remark

-*'Hey I know, I got the fireman's key. Let's go up on the roof!'*- says I.

Maggie laughs, shaking out her red locks. Pushing me hard, back down on the table.

But a soft beeping noise begins, from the desk computer I've been using, beside us.

-*'That could be Lucia at last. Yes look I can see her!'*- says I.

-*'She's coming through.. Is this the mike?'*-

-*'Hola mis amores! A hundred kisses I'm sorry I just got the messages, we're all sleeping here. Hey I can see you. Hello hello.'*-

-*'Hi, great to see you, lovely Lucia. Can you hear us?'*-

She's in a tiny room, all shelves. Me and Maggie are both swinging over to kiss the little camera.

She's doing the same in Rumania. And we're all laughing.

-*'I was sleeping with my naughty children they are in the bedroom. Hey are you kids getting something together?'*-

-*'We're both in love with you Lucy.'*- says Maggie

I sit back on the edge of the table, opposite a sleepy looking Lucia on screen. With Maggie standing in my arms, my thumbs in her red belt.

-*'It's incredibly hot here.'*- says I, embarrassed to be seen. But Maggie delights in showing me off, posing with just the belt, and teasing me.

-*'Hey that's my belt Maggie , give it back!'*-

-*'Ha ha! Come and get it. Look I'm thinner. Can you see?'*- She swivels sensuously against me.

It's true, she has lost weight, she's pretending mad passion, while Lucy, is flashing and posing with her towel.

But then our laughter dies. We're suddenly serious.

-*'Maxie had a bloody premonition about us.'*- says Maggie, unsmiling.

-*'And they want me to do an appeal to the cops and military, not to fire, I can't see them not firing, Maggie relaxed me but I'm still going mad... Lucita help me please!'*-

-*'Ya lo se, ya lo se, I know, I talked to Maxie and with Sol before. He has a free phone.'*-

-*'You did? He has? And what do you say?'*-

-*'Well um, you're right Mister er, Brown. But you need to listen to Maxie. It's not your fault they been setting up something much too dangerous. We can get that uh, symbol of victory, without risking a real life massacre. That's my opinion.'*-

-*'Super Lucia, that makes sense anyway.'*- says Maggie

-*'But it's too late, we can't.. They're sure to fire.'*- I say.

-*'If you're gonna read the appeal you must be somewhere totally safe.'*

-*'They want a mother's voice, to order them to not shoot'*- said Maggie.

-*'They told me that. Not you Maggie, if there's anyone else. Maxie would do it. But she's got the heeby jobbies.'*- Lucy explains.

-*'The heeby jebbies.'*- we say together.

-*'If Barney and Maxie will risk it so will I.'*-

We're facing the camera, my chin in her hair. She's rubbing her bum idly against me, while talking seriously with her girlfriend on the screen.

-*'No no don't risk anything. Sol says stay far away and make them build you a concrete box.'*-

-*'I'd feel bad with everyone else unprotected.'*-

-*'Sol had an idea for that. It's crazy to sit in front of the soldiers. They could be all drugged up and forced to fire. Sol has the answer, um, an English word... Hey is Moonie in that pram?'*-

-*'What? Did you say Sol has the answer? The answer! The answer to what?'*- I half shout. This is too surreal for me.

-*'Can you point the camera in the pushchair Maggie.. oh Moonie I love you. Pooty poo!'*-

-*'We'll get onto Sol, he's probably still filming with Max and Macker.'*- says Maggie. Pulling the pram close and pointing the tiny camera at the sleeping kid inside.

-*'Don't go! I want to kiss Moonbeam, and you both.'*-

-*'When will you arrive Lucia? We're missing you a lot.'*-

-*'The latest will be next month. Bernie and Josie will come first with my kids. Then the refugee children, about six hundred. If we don't need papers then they send even a lot more. We're having horrible problems. It's a bad dream for the legal team..'*-

-*'Gorgeous Lucy. Love to Bernie and Josie and your kids. We got to go I guess.'*- says I.

Maggie wriggles provocatively in my arms. I don't let go, I'm shy to be seen not dressed.

-*'You gotta promise me not to take any risks. If they can't organize it right it's not your fault. A concrete box or nothing okay!?'-*

-*'Okay darling a million kisses.'*-

-*'Catch you later Lucy, thanks so much again.'*- I'm looking for my tights.

I can see Lucia kissing her webcam, huge blurry lips filling our screen. Plus the reflection of Maggie grinning. She skips aside, suddenly flashing my body, she just *had to* beam Dumbo across Europe. I'm waving and blushing, and they're squealing with laughter.

-*'Bye bye Lucía.'*-

-*'Bye bye Maggie bye bye.'*-

-*'Bye Pardy. I love you.'*-

It takes us just a moment to dress. Maggie in her long T shirt with the red belt, to go with her hood and cape. We're putting on our shoes when the office bell rings.. *Dingledong*. and a knocking begins. It's Maxie, looking wild and angry.

-*'Oh Maxie honey I'm so happy you came up I'm sorry for what I said.'*-

Maggie goes to embrace her but she moves smartly aside.

-*'Sol asked me to come up as he couldn't get away. Lucia has been ringing him. He wants me to tell you the answer.'*-

-*'The answer! Oh my Christ what's the f***** answer?'*- I'm cracking up with this stuff.

-*'The request went straight through, there's an all night Defence Assembly still going on. They're getting lorryloads right now.'*-

-*'What? What? What are they getting?.. What is the answer?'*-

I gasped and half choked. Blowing any fuses I had left.

-*'Bales. Bales of straw. We're gonna fill the whole square with strawbale barricades. Mass murder, or mass suicide. With a down home farmyard flavour.'*-

-*'This is Sol's answer?'*- I expected something a bit more high tech.

-*'Yup. Think about it. For the appeal you'll have a concrete bunker behind the straw, I ordered the blocks, they're delivered already. No problem at the Assembly. I said you had a tip off that they're gonna shoot you!'*-

-*'It's true. Oh Maxie how great you are, you've saved us. We really didn't know what to do. Listen, can I help with the appeal then if we can't find a better woman's voice. I'm sorry I went against you, really I am.'*-

-*'I need to say sorry as well.'*- says I, contritely.

-*'Listen I'm not menstrual and I'm not stupid. You think I don't know you've already decided what you'll do, and to hell with my advice.'*-

Maxie is shouting. But now grinning as well. She punches Maggie's shoulder hard and turns as if to walk away.

-*'Ah well, be a bleeding hero then..'*-

This time she lets Maggie embrace her, and the hugging moves on to a kiss, and looks set to become a regular session. So I switch off the main lights again, get my shirt off and go back to my notes. Some Defence Assembly fellas will be here in half an hour, and I've got some good ideas now.

Lucy and Maggie have inspired me. The army and police are infiltrated and haven't been paid. Maybe we really can do it!

* * *

Five am. Thursday and the army is on its way here. Three convoys have converged on the motorway south of the city. Thousands of police are securing the route to the docks, skirting the city, passing some formerly middle class suburbs.

Pools TV is showing footage of hundreds of youths, throwing stones and the odd Molotov at the police cordons. Sprinting away from police charges. At a quarter past five, all the boats and ships in the harbour begin blowing their horns.

* * *

Steven Chester heard the distant horns begin and saw the sporadic rioting on both sides of their route. Sitting in the back of an army truck. Grinding along slowly, bumping over failed barricades, swerving round blocks and bricks. He was sitting with seventeen others, and fighting back panic. Plucking up courage for words.

Stevie wasn't in the Pools or the Free Union, but he'd seen the leaflets, read the Credit Deal. It was the only way forward on offer. How could they expect him to work without being paid? And, on the list passed round the night before, he'd seen half a dozen 'Chesters', who had pledged to join the human blockade. He had sacrificed two red T shirts. Sitting on the toilet snipping dozens of strips, for the armbands he now had ready in his pockets.

-*'Hey you fellas.'*- he shouted at last. -*'I hope none of you are opening fire this morning.'*-

-*'Right Chester.'*- said the officer. -*'One more word and you're under arrest.'*-

-*'Go right ahead sir. But there's ten of us in this truck. Anyone firing on our families will get shot down from behind!'*-

-*'That's it Chester. Court Martial. You're arrested.'*-

There was a rising murmur of mutiny.

-*'Arrest him and you can arrest me too.'*-

-*'You can fuck off Sir if you arrest Stevie.'*-

-*'Why can't you leave him alone.'*-

The officer was cursing and lurching in the swaying truck. Steven had taken out the armbands and was tying one on.

-*'I heard on TV they're not even doing Military Trials anymore.'*- he said loudly -*'A red armband means you will refuse to fire. Not gas not bullets. And that they won't shoot you.. Anybody want one?'*-

-*'Really? And they know that..? Okay give us one of them.'*-

-*'It's true I heard that too.'*-

-*'Let's all wear them. No point getting shot by mistake by our own side!'*-

-*'Which side are you on?'*-

-*'I don't care either way. Half my school friends are Clanners or coppers!'*-

Just then the lorry was pulling over. Chugging slowly to a definitive permanent stop.

-*'That's your lot lads.'*- shouted the driver. -*'This one's empty as well. It ran on gasoline for Christ's sake!*

* * *

Barney

I had slept a little bit. But I was awake when all the boats' hooters and tooters started going off. Still worried about my speech, but now in good spirits. Maggie and Maxie were sleeping together on the pull-out sofa.

Moonie got up in the pram and roared for her Mama.

I lifted her out to show her the view, but dada wouldn't do. Then Maggie was up and took her, still undressed and groggy. Moonbeam was finally weaned, more or less, and fortunately as it turned out. She was practically three.

I dived into the little kitchen for the snacks.

-*'We gotta get some cool air in here.'*-

-*'Who wants thyme tea with honey..I got the thyme and I got the honey!'*- I said cleverly.

-*'Me me please, a big mug.'*- Maggie chimed

-*'Me too... And the muffins?'*-

-*'Where's Macker, I'm worried about him.'*- Maxie called

Dawn hadn't even broken yet. Though the sky was lightening in the east, silhouetting black cranes.

Now the yunkers had a huge scrap wood fire and the dancing orange flames were lighting up the tents and the container wall. The concert was still going on. We could see a lot, breakfast was being served from steaming stalls, queues for the excellent compost toilets.

Groups were emerging from the marquees, linking arms and singing. Lining up to pass inside a container, placed longways with the ends opened, to get through to the outside of the container wall.

Whenever the horns abated we could hear singing and shouting from the crowd outside . Mixed up with the concert music,

-*'Looks like they went mad with the straw bales all right.'*- says I, gazing down.

-*'Looks brilliant'*- said Maxie, embracing me from behind and proffering her muffin. -*'We'd*

better get down there, I promised to be back by half six.'-

-*'It's not even half five, let's go back to bed.'*- says I, mock flirting, and she laughed, now lifting her mug to my lips. Now on tippy toes, she gave me a friendly head butt.

-*'Good tea. Sorry I abandoned you for Maggie.'*-

-*'Lucky-me lucky me..'*- Maggie chants.

-*'I want up I want up.. look at the fire!'*- Moonbeam was galloping about the penthouse office with her mum in pursuit. Attempting to whinny..

-*'I was going to ask you to try and give me a premonition.'*- said Maxie, seriously. -*'But time ran out. Anyway Sol said it wasn't likely to work.'*-

-*'Give you a premonition..?'*- I didn't understand her. She seemed to be crying, then I figured it out. -*'Anyway I'm only an amateur sports masseur not a magician! I mean.. '*-

-*An intense stalled climax with sycophantic mantra panting, is what he recommended I think.*-
-*Me me me, put me down for anything like that !*- said Maggie, now whirling Moonie round, in the chair. -*I've got your notes here Barney, and mine. Come on Maxie, have you seen my yellow dress? Let's move let's run..!*-

Maxie let out her held breath with a long shudder, and laughed, dripping more tears on me.
-*You'd better put Dumbo away properly then.*- She whispered laughing. -*I hear he's been behaving abdominally.*-
-*Ha ha, very good .. He's had to change his name.. keeping his head down..* '-
-*Oh yeah? Tell me quick and you get a lick.*- she bantered, salaciously.
-*Come on now.. we're gone gone gone! We gotta take Moonie to the Cresh first.*'

That's when the bell rang again and Macker, Sol and Jerry finally arrived.
-*My friends my friends.*- Sol rushed in, arms wide. -*Here you are in a hotel office! Perfecto! Can we film from the roof?*-

Maxie ran to Macker and they embraced at the door, like they'd been separated for years..
-*We're here to c-collect you. Pardy you're wanted below to do an appeal.*- said Jerry. Giving me a shy squeeze..
-*I'm ready.*- said Maggie -*We just got to drop off Moonie at the Cresh.*-
-*We could take Moonie.*- said Maxie, still embracing Macker, with tears streaming down her face. -*If you two want to go on ahead.*-
-*Good idea. But why are you crying Maxie?*-
-*I don't know I..*"-
-*Hi super Moonbeam you wanna play with me?*-
Macker had hunkered down and Moonie rushed into his arms and swung around and around.

-*We are filming here just five minutes please please we need these shots from above for editing after.*-
-*Yes Sol here's the key, go up the lift shaft.*- says I, fishing in my pockets.
-*They're going on ahead.*-
-*Don't forget. No risks. Keep your heads right down.*-
-*I promise. We promise.*-
-*Let's go then.*-
-*Bye bye Maggie bye bye...*-
Moonie was keen to stay with Macker and Maxie, who were waving, arm in arm.
Waving like crazy till the lift doors cut them off. It ended in a rush.
-*Bye bye Maggie bye bye.*-

* * *

James Smith was up all night as well. Sitting alone in his little flat. Then pacing up and down. Listening in to police and army channels with a scanner, and checking out the live TV coming from the docks.

Then sliding up his window to greet a dawn-full of wailing sirens. Near and far away.
Shouts and breaking glass, he pulled the curtains and flicked off the light. A dozen masked Clan Warrior were retreating down his street.

Flinging the odd rock at the riot police. who now stopped, half hearted, and began sitting down, and lighting cigarettes.

James pulled his window down, closed the curtain and decided to start work.

The army convoy was passing along the seafront, just a kilometer from where he lived.

* * *

Barney

We all had to walk through a lorry container that was cut open at both ends, to get out to the wide intersection. There it was already full of people sitting down, and we headed across towards a green flag as instructed.

The waterside stretch of bare tarmac was transformed.

Spotlights on the barricade wall lit up huge banners, reflecting on circles of friends and families.

All sitting on carpet and tarpaulins, and straw-bale barricades.

And it wasn't raining!

A Pools radio station was playing in the background, shouts and laughter, and babies bawling.

Maggie took my hand and we picked our way through, nodding, greeting people. Past a first-aid station, then a group with buckets of water, for tear gas grenades.

Dozens of yunkers in red headbands, reception groups for cops or squaddies who might change sides.

-*'Some hope.'*- says I to Maggie. -*'More likely we'll all get arrested.'*-

Our bunker was just concrete blocks piled in a wall five high, behind bales of straw.

A table with chairs and two mikes, a tiny bubble car parked in the middle.

And young people, tekkies and media types talking to us all at once.

A small boy with his mother was reading a poem about his rabbit.

-*'Welcome you're just in time.'*-

-*'If they fire gas jump in the car. It's sealed tight so you can go on talking.'*-

-*'I hope I'll fit in.'*- I said. Fumbling with my notes. -*'Maggie here will share the appeal, so we're doubled up.'*-

-*'Very cool. They've been installing a backup PA, since we heard they want to kill you.'*-

-*'We're safe from bullets here anyway I hope.'*-

-*'They'd need to fire a tank to get you.'*- he said. Which didn't really reassure me.

-*'Can you just try out the mike for you voice levels, you can chat with the people a bit.'*-

-*'Oh shit. Oh crap. This really might not work.'*-

-*'Just keep cool, we're gonna enjoy ourselves if possible.'*- said Maggie'-.

-*'Five minutes. Five minutes.'*- someone shouted.

The boy had finished his poem and a chain of people handed me the mike. All nodding and smiling comically.

-*'Hello hello'*- My voice boomed and shrieked, I held the mike back a bit. -*'Hello everybody me and Maggie here are doing the appeal to the cops and soldiers at this gate, in just a few minutes from now. Congrats everyone from all over the country here on this historic morning. Congratulations on your courage and patience.'*-

I paused because there was loud clapping and cheering.

Then I realized they were cheering me. This was a very easy crowd to please.

-‘They’ve asked me to repeat advice for people still arriving. A lot of the soldiers are wearing red armbands. Which means they won’t fire anything at us. But others could fire gas. We pick up the grenades with gloves or a cloth and put them in the water buckets. Luckily there’s a strong breeze blowing away from us.

If they try their ancient water cannon or rubber bullets, or if some mad soldier shoots real bullets, we shelter behind the bales of straw. The water cannon lasts just two minutes. The rubber

bullets... If the first salvo doesn’t work we hope they’ll stop. Many of them we know would refuse to fire.’-

-‘Now all you groups of reception volunteers need to spread along the front. If we could just... ’

I was reading from a shaky piece of paper. My voice echoing down from speakers up on the barricade wall.

* * *

Lerriman the Prime Minister was awake, fully dressed and furious, with his private secretary and bodyguard. In the study of his suburban residence.

Now he slammed down the telephone, red faced, eyes bulging, across the room Barrington was tapping helplessly at a second line.

-‘Now they’ve cut the sodding phone lines on us!’-

Earlier in the night a crowd of Clanners from Ryefield had penetrated to his back garden, outflanking the demoralized police, charging down back lanes and through gardens.

Lerriman had been shocked, outraged and finally openly terrified.

The Special Police had fired in the air.

Evil smelling gas had seeped under the doors.

Now, like almost everyone else, he tuned in to the syndicated Pools radio, suddenly hearing Barney’s deep cajoling voice.

* * *

-‘First of all we appeal to them not to fire. They have permission to shoot in the air, but we ignore that. Then we’ll be inviting them to come over. Each reception group will escort some of them through the tunnel.

So they’ll get breakfast inside while we process them okay. We cheer them as they come.

Now we need to hold up the banners and flags of all the Pools and areas represented here. Just ones that have the name on them, all right. If they see the name of where they’re from that’ll help. That’s cool yes, for the TV cameras as well.

What else, can you just take notice now where is your nearest First-Aid station.

In case anyone gets hurt. Um, that’s all the warning I think..

We’re in this together now. We just gotta stand firm no matter what happens.

There’s just no room here for panic or running okay.

We stand together for freedom, we stand for... ’-

Barney stopped speaking. Immediately everyone heard the sirens, lots of them, and now far away the roar of engines.

An audible sigh, a giant gasp rose up from the crowd, as everyone felt fear. Maggie had taken the microphone.

-Hullo there this is Maggie Bellows from Ragwort Pool.- she said. Her voice echoing off the wall of containers, and out by TV and radio round the world.

-I'd just like to congratulate all the people, especially the women and children here this morning. I'm here to appeal to the soldiers as a mother when they arrive in a few minutes.

I think we have time for one more song, to keep our spirits up.-

Maggie started off, in a low clear voice, that boomed nevertheless.

* * *

Maxie was on top of the container wall, with a dozen media people, using the second video camera, connected to Sol's for snap editing. She'd zoomed in on Maggie, leading the singing, and panned slowly across the crowds, while Macker was holding one of the microphones to Brian Harper, the defence speaker.

-Yes we can see them clearly from here now.- He was saying. *-Armoured cars coming over the river bridge, um, I can see a water-cannon and what look like a tank. Or very large bulldozer. A lot of troop carriers. It's an enormous convoy.*

The last of the boats is going out of sight. Soldiers stuck all over it like dummies. As you say Jimmy that looks like a diversion, er. We still have a couple of those drone planes overhead... Now I'm handing you back to Myra on the quays.-

Barney was glancing through his notes, some moving words, some fine sounding phrases. He felt Maggie's hand squeezing his.

One of the young Tekkies tapped him on the arm.

-We think they're just about in range of our big speakers now.-

Barney took a deep breath and began.

'Cheerful and friendly' he thought. Like an early morning disc jockey.

-Ha ha. Ho ho ho. Jolly fine show.-

-Sing away folks.- he began. *-If you can hear yourselves above this thing. Hey Howaya doing. I'm told you fellas over in the police and army can maybe hear me now.*

Well good morning to you all from the Federation of CoOp Pools, and I hope you're not going to shoot me, or anybody else here this fine morning, er. Well I have a list here, greetings. A long list of your families here in the street. And the appeal, the Credit Deal we're offering.

. So this is the Deal. If you come over this morning. First we have a good breakfast ready. Then full rights for yourselves and families, that's food, housing, health, learning, old age sport. On special offer today, a Poolers credit card and whatever else is going.

Some of you are wearing red armbands to show you won't open fire, Well nor will we, so you can relax okay!...

So that's the situation folks, there's about twenty thousand of us sitting here in front of the gates. Like whole families with our kids and grannies and all, really.

We're not moving and anyway there's nowhere to run. It's all sealed up with containers, okay? Just so you know.

We're here to defend the dockers' rights. We want to get the docks moving again. Problem is a few rich and powerful people will lose their little money-spinner like. They got the government over a barrel because they control their debts.

Now each one of you has an important choice to make this morning, Are you listening now? Will you obey the wishes of the corrupt and bankrupt government. Or the wishes of the people. Who in fact you were hired to serve and defend?'

The front of the column was in full view. Two old tanks and a water cannon. Led incongruously by dented and paint splattered police vans. The three tanks clanked slowly to a halt. Across the big wide intersection.

While the lorries and Armoured Personnel Carriers began unloading behind them.

The people chanting and waving their flags and banners.

'Welcome friends.' Barney persevered. — *'It's almost time to decide now. If you all refuse to fire they can't punish you all. And don't believe that bullshit by the way, about double pay and bringing back pensions. If they had money they would've paid you for last month.'*

The soldiers and riot police were being led out and lined up in front of the tanks.

'If you follow orders you're gonna massacre your own families.

It's not on lads and you know it. I know it's a terrible hard thing to do. Now see this passage on your left. Make for the red flags, through a tunnel to safety.

I repeat, go with the reception groups with the flags and red hats.

Breakfast is that way okay. Good good I'm told a lot of you have armbands.

Now here's Maggie Bellows with the requests. '

Barney knew he was doing really well, the sound system was excellent, the crowd were buzzing support. The police and army seemed unprepared to counter an appeal, but the soldiers were still mechanically following orders.

'Come on Maggie.' he whispered as she began. *'See if you can wake them up!'*

* * *

Anthony Burns was confused and afraid, trooping out with all the others from behind the water-cannon and tanks. *[ref. See Preface]*

But more than anything he was irritated. He was afraid his anger would overcome his fear.. Could he just run across? But he had no armband. Some woman had started to read out names, ludicrous! His own brother and sister were probably here.

Anthony moved forward to the megaphone orders from behind, line after line, lining up sheepishly to do their duty.

And now he was shaking with frustration.

It was impossibly wrong, but he couldn't break ranks.

Then Tony did a simple thing.

He lifted his arm from his gun, and began to wave.

Immediately his wave was answered, dozens, then hundreds of people were waving, and the soldiers. Yes, they were starting to wave back!

There were shouts, then laughter, and broad city voices, cheering and jeering, then everyone was waving and laughing on both sides.

The tension had snapped, the crowd was edging forwards, clambering over straw bales.

A meter. Five meters.

At the front a big gang of women, pulling off their helmets, darting and lunging forward. The reception groups with red flags, throwing down sticks and shields.

Maxie and Macker were following through the opening gap.

Then they found themselves suddenly flat on the tarmac.

* * *

Barney

- 'Okay fantastic that's it just come on over!'

At one moment I heard my own laugh. Echoing above the tumult. In the next loud bangs. Some soldiers or officers fired rubber bullets.

And everyone started diving behind the strawbales or holding up their shields.

And in the same chaotic moments the Special Commandos by the river took the opportunity to open fire.. a laser guided anti tank grenade.. at what they took to be the command post. The 'bunker' where me and Maggie were speaking from.

They had received an order to silence the subversive speakers at all costs.

And of course our defence forces fired back, the State had trumped our pacifistic bluff.

The Specials came under a hail of pellets as a dozen shotguns opened up on them from on top of the wall.

I've seen film of them writhing and falling and crawling into their boat, abandoning their weapons.

And me? I was just swimming lazily down. No no. Now I was drowning.

I was somehow trapped underwater, no, of course.

I was buried under blocks and bales of straw.

- 'Barney. Tell them to stop shooting. Tell them to stop shooting. The Specials opened fire but they're stopped. Barney tell them to..'

These messages were repeating in my headphones. Yes.. I was getting a message.

I realized I still had the mike in my fist, I was getting more info...

- 'Okay that's it you can all stop shooting now.' - I heard myself say.

And it seemed that the microphone worked.

- 'Everyone stop shooting immediately that's it. The shooting is over.'

I was hearing myself, but with a high nauseous whine.

- 'Great stuff Barney ask the soldiers to get up and come across.' - Came a voice again in my ear.

In reality the rubber bullets had stopped because rebels in red armbands had trained their guns on the perpetrators.

A historic mass mutiny was happening and I was an important part of it.

While in fact I saw nothing at all, I was injured and buried under the straw and blocks!

Just then Brian's voice came on the backup PA. From up on the containers.

My part was finished. What a relief.

But on cue I felt a unbearable rush of pain surging through me..

-'Excellent stuff that's great now all you fellas move to your left.' Brian was saying. *-'Where you'll meet your welcome groups and pass through the tunnels..That's it quick as you can, all you guys behind the tank can start moving forward.. .Let's just forget about shooting and murder and go for breakfast instead.. I heard they're doing eggs on toast for ten thousand back there..'*

I could hear wild cheering as the crowds merged. I'd managed to get into a semi crouch. But I couldn't push up. Panicking now. Groaning and crying out. As I realized I was terribly hurt.

-'Help me Maggie, Maggie I'm buried.'

I was bleeding to death. Drifting off, panting and crying..

Just trying to pump blood round and stay alive. I heard Maxie yelling and wailing.

Then I was out. They were pulling me out.

Out to a bright white nightmare.

Hundreds of shocked white faces were staring at me, as the crowds filed out behind a cordon of Clanners.

-'I'm still alive.' I grunted. I was trying to lift an arm.

I noticed my hand was missing one finger, with a second, hanging horribly by a bit of skin.

And that I had one boot filling up with blood and..

I noticed Maggie lying on her back.

Smiling, eyes glazed. In a big pool of red paint.

And Macker and Maxie kneeling in it. Sobbing and keening.

I saw the paramedics, looking embarrassed..

And I knew that Maggie was dead.

I *did* manage to hop over and kiss her goodbye, I wasn't dying after all. Her face was untouched, Maxie was wrong about that, and her smile was almost perfect. But she was missing an arm, and when I got close I saw she'd lost the back of her head as well..

Her brains were spilling out the back like bits of grey and red jelly. I tried to push them back in with my good hand, which was pretty silly..

I was holding onto Maxie and Macker and all of us crying.

Some doctor was covering Maggie with a coat.

* * *

Barney

-'We've won. We've won We've won We've won.'

-'Welcome fellas, where are you lads from?'

-'We're brothers, from Merton Town..'

-'Okay that's great your people will be over here with the Selldry Pool. Hey why don't we take you there and I'll explain..'

I don't remember the next part well, I got a sedative. They took me on a fast trolley, with a gang of yunkers clearing the way, like a football star injured in the final moments of some famous victory.

When our crowds rushed forward they had swallowed up the entire army and police contingent, spilling back to completely fill the only road out. The reception groups suddenly had masses of help, and were welcoming and negotiating the surrender.

They were escorting groups of soldiers in all directions, joining the banners of their home areas.

While a few officers, round their command post, were still trying to arrest people., and even firing in the air, others maybe just ten meters away, were donning red armbands, and supervising the changeover.

I was out of it, like being taken ill at a fantastic party, but I don't remember much pain. Now Sol was trotting beside us, Maxie holding my good hand, and pushing the trolley through the container tunnel.

-*'What about Moonbeam, we have to pick up Moonbeam.'*- I was actually lucid.

The top part of the trolley slid off, straight into a new white Red Cross ambulance, Maxie and Macker jumped in as well and we were off. They were prepared for hundreds of casualties, so I got star treatment.

We just held hands and cried, it came in waves. Every minute I'd think again of Maggie. What she'd said or done, or just her laugh, or how she'd shake back her hair, or her freckles or..

And every memory triggered a wave of pain and grief.

Maxie suffered more than me, biting herself bloody and pounding the ambulance wall till the driver complained.

Macker just stared at the floor and cried.

-*'Listen.'*- says he to Maxie. -*'Why don't I go uh, why don't I go back for Moonie and take her home, okay? And you look after Barney.'*-

Maxie kept grabbing him; we were arriving at the clinic already. She wasn't able for talking just then and neither was I.

-*'Bye bye Maggie bye bye.'*

Chapter twenty nine

Lerriman's Last Plan

-‘We need them dead. Just announce they’re dead’-

General Mulcatty and Commander Bruton were ushered in without ceremony for the Emergency Rule session in Lerriman's back office. Leaving a crowd of security men and bodyguards smoking in the patio outside.

Lerriman watched coldly. His bulging eyes red from the sleepless night. While Mulcatty eased himself painfully into his seat, his hemorrhoids were itching like crazy.

Bruton shuffled in his briefcase, smiling his ice cold smile.

-‘Okay Bruton. The security prospect at this moment.’-

-‘Right you are. The police and army and my own men are at present concentrating on central Government buildings and vital installations. As specified in the appropriate legislation.

As you know the General Strike today has been called as a stoppage in situ. They’re stopping work on the job. We have reports already of some Assemblies implementing takeovers of their companies. And these add to the overnight occupations.

We have a fluid situation sir. We can’t put figures on it. Active intervention is not indicated.

This morning the Pools TV stations are calling for marches. These will converge on the police headquarters and three army barracks. Starting at noon. In the present atmosphere these will be large, angry and uncontrollable. After this morning’s losses we are of course totally overstretched and...’-

-‘Tell me one thing.’- Lerriman was rattling his white knuckles on the black table.-‘Why did you open fire this morning?’-

-‘You yourself authorized us to fire as a last resort. Plus we had the drone intervention support. We took out our target.’-

-‘Don’t give me that! I gave permission for warning shots if rubber bullets and teargas failed. You’ve handed them an enormous propaganda victory. You’ll have to discipline those men!’-

-‘So it’s come to this Sir.’- Bruton laughed humourlessly. -‘We have to discipline critically injured men. Because we tried to stop a subversive slut causing a massive mutiny.’-

-‘Well no, are they all badly injured?’-

-‘Two of them might be better off dead, they’re full of shotgun pellets.’-

-‘We need them dead. Just announce they’re dead and move them somewhere else.’-

Bruton laughed, but Lerriman was serious.

-‘It will have to be totally deniable. They control the health system you know. And they monitor your meetings!’-

-‘Take them to an army clinic, let one of them ..you know.. on the way.’- Lerriman had signaled cutting his own throat.

Bruton gave the thumbs up, suddenly fearing himself that the place was bugged, though it had been double checked.

-‘Which brings us to some vital business. Have we no ideas yet who talked yesterday?’- For once Bruton stopped smiling.

-‘No sir not yet, they had details of our meeting almost before it ended, no bugs.’-

-‘Could it have been the Police Commissioner?’-

-‘I’m afraid not, and he didn’t have details of our plans. Our first suspect is Peter Kennedy, General Mulcatty’s aide.’-

Mulcatty spluttered into furious shaky life, like an old rattled lorry starting up..

-‘That’s slanderous rubbish sir. Kennedy if completely loyal. His father was one of our best commanders.’-

-‘But some of his wife’s family are in the CoOp Pools.’-

-‘Well find out fast for sure and tell him zilch from now on. We need to hit these people hard and soon and without warnings. I want the leaders rounded up and interned. I want the docks and all illegally held property taken back. I want concrete plans on those lines right now!’-

Mulcatty was examining his shoelaces again. But Bruton spoke up.

-‘Yes sir may I remind you of the problems we had last year. Their lack of leadership structure. Plus internment is not a present option. The prisons still open are completely full as you know.. But I do have a good plan to get rid of them!’-

-‘You do?’- said Lerriman and Mulcatty together.

-‘These people get their support by providing four things. Food, housing, work and goods. The key to deactivation lies therefore in cutting their supply routes, destroying their stocks of food and goods, their factories and power stations. And only when their support is waning, and when our resolute action has received international support and renewed loan credits, do we start taking back the actual property, And making mass arrests.

This plan can be achieved by just two thousand loyal men. It will be essential to jam or destroy their media in the most vigorous manner possible. Otherwise we only provoke greater opposition. As happened this morning. And risk more defeats and mass defections..’-

Bruton paused, taking more and more papers from his briefcase, this was his crowning achievement!

-‘I have here a detailed operational plan to finish the CoOp Pools and the Free Unions, using our remaining forces and assuming financial liquidity, over a six month timescale. Of course I can only guarantee this if I am granted overall control.’-

-‘You want the Commissioner’s job?’-

Lerriman had been expecting this much. But Bruton was shaking his head.

-‘I will be commander of overall security. You appoint a new police chief but he and Mulcatty answer to me. We continue Emergency rule, trot out the cabinet for show. But we decide. I know it’s not democracy but this is a National Emergency.’-

Lerriman's mind was racing in circles. Mulcatty was a yesman. Should he condone Bruton's naked bid for power?

-*'Tell me one thing.'*- he asked -*'What does your grand plan say about today?'*-

Bruton actually paused to take a sip of water before replying. Savoring his triumph. Before continuing, with an arrogant toss of his head.

-*'We announce to the emergency cabinet meeting this morning a new detailed plan to take back the docks tonight. Using an imaginary hand picked commando force. We let the spy report it, and they get busy with their barricades down there. Then at an earlier time we attack and destroy their Supply Depots, all twenty two of them around the country, which will be lightly defended. We can also destroy some of their transport, and cut off main routes out of the city, blocking any resupply plans.'*

I have all the logistical and operational details here sir. It's straightforward military tactics, er, they've nearly murdered three policemen now sir. We plaster that fact all over our media. I'll personally deal with the chairman. Shock, horror, hysterics, weeping kids...'

-*'That'*- Lerriman broke in -*'is just the kind of thing I needed to hear.'*

Chapter thirty

Bye bye Maggie

- 'Being famous won't give Moonie her mama back.' -

Maxie

Moonbeam is asleep with Bernie and Josie, we haven't told her yet. How can I possibly explain to a two year old that the police killed her mama?

The house seems empty and echoing . *Maggie come home!*

I got to get this down now, while your blood is still fresh and red on my clothes. Before it turns black. Before my grief gets fuzzy and I can't even picture your face.

Or gets buried by new blows, striking down my family and friends.

Oh Maggie it can't be true I can't accept the truth I saw and held myself your warm smiling freckled face... my mama my sister my lover my friend... oh crap..

I'm so used to thinking *-I must tell Maggie.-* or *-What would Maggie say?-* that I can't go two minutes without thinking of you, getting knocked down again by a raging sorrow.

That mean sadistic sorrow kicking me when I'm down..

How pathetic I am really, obsessed with my own pain, I want to write it down and then for it to stop!.. I have to forget you to stop getting hurt!

I prefer to go with you than betray you like that. Time is no healer no no, just an anesthetic and a fucking obliterator, that's for sure..

-Imagine this is your mother speaking. You, I'm talking to you!-

That's what you shouted Maggie, real angry

-Don't even think of obeying and attacking these families here. Just don't do it, okay!'

Me and Macker were coming down the long ladder at the back of the barricade wall.

-Listen to me soldiers I love you. All of us here love you. Especially the girls!..'-

-There's a red laser light on us, from a drone.-'

Barney was saying distinctly at the same time.

-Just laugh and walk across when the moment comes, they can't stop you all.. Half your mothers and girlfriends are here waiting for sure..'-

Leading them with your deep throaty chuckle.

Then they started with the rubber bullets and the Specials opened fire.

I knew you were hit Maggie, I was fighting and struggling through the packed crowd screaming your name. I knew they'd got you and that Barney was alive, even before his voice came back on the PA.

But I knew too late to save you, and you wouldn't have listened anyway. Too late. Poor Barney was buried, but alive! Sol says they did let off a smoke grenade to block their aim.

But too late to save you Maggie, and it seemed like nobody even cared.

Because as I looked up from that big slab of bloody meat that was you, everyone was cheering and roaring, as the army and police started coming over.

It seemed like you died just seconds before the key finally clicked.

Coz they *really were* opening the big metal container doors..

And the mass of mutineers *really were* pouring through..

Arm in arm with their reception groups..

Loud laughter was really echoing out of the metal tunnel..

Like your speech turned the key, just that little bit more.

So it clicked..

And let the new age in!

So maybe they killed you to stop freedom happening!

But they were just too late and too incompetent as usual..

The rest of us may die old and forgotten, in our piss stained beds.

You Maggie will be remembered...

But so what?

Being famous won't give Moonie her mama back.

I needed to go with you to stop this torture... I needed to cut my throat...

Pathetic with a blunt penknife and Macker wrestling it off me... Only for Macker, here, watching over me, and for Moonie would I stay alive.

They got Barney on a trolley and we pushed him out of there.

Abandoning you Maggie. Rushing through the tunnel to freedom with the rest.

I remember the first rays of sun were coming up beyond the port, shining red through the clouds of spray. Out over the tormented sea.

Poor Maggie they killed you real quick.

But the stupid bastards lost anyway, and the revolution has triumphed.'

* * *

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Chapter thirty one

Dinner at the Grand

-‘You’re a spy, man. Admit it.’-

Peter Kennedy was worried and walking fast, head down, through the back streets to avoid the marchers, strikers and rioters, who thronged the city center

-‘I’ve lived to see Revolution Day!’- he thought.

Glancing back furtively at the Special Police, two on foot and two in a car, who were watching his every move from a discreet distance..

Before it had been easy, now it was dead risky, and he had urgent information to send. There would be a new attack on the docks by the Commandos that night. Twice he had almost been caught using the little cellphone.

It was ludicrous. After the mass defection of a whole army and five hundred police due partly to his tip-off, they hadn’t even searched him properly!

-‘Smash the State. Don’t be late.

Celebrate. Smash the State’-

A crowd of yunkers had appeared at the crossing, running and throwing poses. There was no traffic.

They were waving placards with big photocopies of Maggie Bellows, the activist killed that morning, with her baby girl grinning cutely.

Peter walked on, muttering the details of the message he must give. Boys and girls in Clan Orca and Warrior garb came running past, some with air-guns drawn. It was the first time he’d seen civilians openly carrying guns, never mind school age kids!

-‘Oh shit oh bloody shite!’- he cursed.

Peter Kennedy knew he had been set up, the Cabinet Meeting had served only to announce a false plan, complete with curfews, martial law, commandos from helicopters!..

Bullshit! They couldn’t organize a piss-up in a brewery!

General Mulcatty had almost admitted it. -‘We’ll outmaneuver them this time.’- He’d said at one point, rubbing his hands in childish glee, Peter’s mind whirled in circles, then he saw an intact phone box!

In a second he was in it, depositing a coin successfully and tapping fast. The Specials reacted slowly, of course. It was working! The phone rang once.

-‘Hello Maeve?’-

He was prising out his penknife with his teeth.

-‘Hello.’-

-‘They say they’ll attack by the North Gate at midnight. The Commandos from Martins barracks, securing the barricade from helicopters and launches. But it’s false I think it’s...’-

The line went dead.

Probably because he was sawing the receiver cable with the sharp knife.

A few seconds later, too late, the police swung open the cabin door.

The cop whacked Peter's face with his studded glove, grabbed the dead receiver, and hauled him out of the box. Then the second and third were twisting his arms back.

Banged his head on the door.

-*'Okay who did you ring?'*-

-*'I was trying to ring my wife to say I won't be home.'*-

-*'What's the number then?'*-

-*'None of your business.'*-

His head crashed against the door again. The first cop was tapping, and shaking the phone.

-*'Everything's our business. You're a spy man. Admit it.'*-

A fist dug in his belly, but they had been spotted by a tattooed Clanner across the street.

-*'They're police. They're police. Leave him alone pig bastards!'*-

The Specials were unholstering their guns.

The young fella backed off, shouting and pointing.

-*'Police. There's Specials over here! Let's get the murderers!'*-

-*'The number is 8279433.'* said Peter helpfully. -*'But the phone is broken.'*-

-*'I saw him talking into it.'*-

-*'I was singing.'*-

-*'Well it's broken now.'*-

-*'Either he's telling the truth, or he's a smart fucking fly-boy.'* said the sergeant. -*'Let's go together by car. This following is ridiculous.'*-

-*'And I'm getting the feeling the cop shooting season is just about to open.'* said the other one, nervously.

Peter protested feebly, but he'd done well. In fact his heart was soaring with victory.

He was driven to join General Mulcatty for lunch, jammed between two overfed policemen.

-*'I got a phone call from your lot last night.'* one of them came out with. -*'Offered me a job down home on the shellfish farms.'*-

-*'They're not my lot.'* says Peter. -*'But will you think of taking it? You can do Free-Uni from there now, it counts as work on the Credit Deal.'*-

-*'Really? I didn't know that.'*-

-*'Sure we're only stuck up here because there was no work down home.'* said the other.

-*'Here's the hotel now, we'll slip you in the back. Listen, er, we don't agree with killing that woman.'*-

* * *

General Mulcatty clambered out of the armour plated Mercedes, slipped through the police line, and stepped almost jauntily into the glittering lobby of the Hotel Magestique.

Freed at last from the endless bureaucracy and political charades that were his life, he had issued a stream of clear and precise orders, following the details of Bruton's plan.

Meeting Peter in the lobby he took him by the arm, as they were ushered to a reserved area upstairs.

He was very fond of Peter, his calm good humour, his brown skin, he had caught himself sometimes, muttering veiled endearments.

Yet this time he had withheld the details of Bruton's plan, grinning at his disconcerted looks, when the military preparations obviously did not fit the proposed operation.

Peter followed Mulcatty and the Special Police, who took a table beside them, outwardly his attentive smiling self, but inwardly fighting down waves of panic and fear.

He knew now they had let him make that phone call. He must at all costs find out from Mulcatty the true plan, but he feared that then he would be too terrified to act.

-*'This is a great treat Sir, thanks awfully.'*-

-*'We deserve it boy. We have done a great day's work.'*-

Peter leaned forward confidentially.

-*'To be quite honest Sir, I'm a bit worried. This business with the informer, what if they find out our plans again? And then some of the orders are, um, surprising.'*-

-*'Why of course you're worried. Because you don't see the whole picture.'*- he laughed again.

Peter tried to keep his face puzzled and expectant. Smiling manfully into the General's stinking breath.

-*'We're not going to attack the docks.'*- he half whispered. After the waiter left.

-*'We're not?..'*-

Peter rolled his eyes in feigned surprise, delighting Mulcatty, who was shoveling in food.

His habitual gluttony vanquishing his doctor's advice.

-*'No son, I can tell you now, I think. The commandos will destroy all their supply depots, starting with Merca-Pool in the center, and their transport and factories.'*- He sat back, grinning, to watch Peter's response.

-*'G Great'*- he managed to come out with. His brain whirling in horror. -*'A surprise attack at midnight. They'll all be down the docks. Brilliant Sir!'*-

Mulcatty clapped his hands, beckoned for Peter's ear.

-*'But not at midnight.'*- he whispered. -*'They move at nine o'clock!'*-

-*'Great idea Sir.'*- said Peter. This was Bruton's work for sure. -*'We'd better eat up so!'*-

The General was sawing his slab of meat. Peter crunched a mouthful of salad.

Thinking not of the message, but about his two young sons.

If he could get away soon he might still take them to the cinema.

But then again they might be out on strike..

His heart was leaping. He had to act. Every minute delay would count for lives now! He must radio James. At any cost.

Peter took one delicious fork-full of fresh salmon with lemon. Steeled himself.

-*'Excuse me Sir, I'll just slip out to the toilet.'*-

Then he was walking to the door. And a Special cop was getting up and following.

-*'Just taking a leak.'*-

-*'Me too.'*-

And they were alone in the roomy perfumed toilet.

-*'Gotta get out it's a trap oh shit oh fuck.'*- Peter was thinking, then deciding -*'Gotta get rid of this man.'*-

He had managed a few squirts against the pink tiles. The Special was still pissing.

-*'Great dinner in here.'*- said the cop.

As a surge of anger swept over Peter. He hit him from behind, whacking his head against the wall, and again. As he collapsed the flush came on, spraying yellow and bright red water.

And Peter was on his knees. Frantic. Gasping. Pulling out the slim phone.

-*'James James. Can you hear me James. Oh shite he's not there. Oh come on!'*-

-*'This is me. Don't panic. Using wrong name.'*-

-*'Listen they move at nine. Not the docks. All the supply depots. Coming through the city to hit Merca-Pools Center first.'* - he said rapidly.

-*'Got it. Anything else. You okay?'*-

-*'No no I just knocked out a Special in the jacks upstairs at the Magestique. The General's outside eating with lots more police.'*-

-*'Okay cool it. Hide the phone, try a toilet tank. Say yer man slipped okay. Maybe you can get out, okay?'*-

-*'Yes yes I'll try it.'*-

-*'We'll pass by the door in about ten minutes. A yellow air cab.'*-

-*'Okay I'll try it thanks a lot.'*-

-*'Calm down now. Great work bye bye.'*-

In a moment he was rid of the special mobile, he took a deep breath and opened the door.

Across the sumptuous dining area General Mulcatty was still tucking in.

But two more Specials were walking quickly towards him!

-*'Hey your mate's hurt, He's after falling. Come quick.'*-

The police glanced at each other, snub nosed pistols appeared in their hands.

-*'No no he's after slipping.'*- said Peter desperately. As they followed him in. -*'Slipped and hit his head.'*-

Outside Mulcatty went on eating, as Peter helped pull his victim out of his piss and blood.

The man groaned deeply.

-*'Oh no no no he's waking up!'*- Peter thought.

-*'I'll just go and call a doctor.'*-he said.

-*'No wait here. You're under arrest.'*-

But he was already out the door. Darting between the tables.

-*'Stop! Stop that man. Stop or I shoot.'*-

A loud bang. Breaking glass. But Peter was out of the Dining Room.

Belting down the corridor. Leaping into the wide stairway.

-*'Stop that man!'*-

Seeing men running below. Trying to stop. Lifting his arms. More shots and falling in a black scream.

Then nothing more. Peter Kennedy's body rolled to the bottom of the stairs, still twitching, as tourists scattered in panic.

Excited men closed in. Jerking up their guns over his limp and broken body.

Chapter thirty two

Smash the Prison Gates

- *'Also I'm thinking Maxie wants to suicide..'* -

Barney

If I live long enough I can tell my grandkids I missed the Revolution because I was at home babysitting Moonbeam.

As if a revolution happens just like that. But it *was* a watershed, the army being openly humiliated instead of destroying our goods depots, and the soldiers coming over that evening.

Because the police began to follow suit, country stations were already allied with us, more were discreetly declaring for the Pools Federation.

Now everyone from the rubbish collectors to the health workers, from the park keepers to the semi state bodies, were lining up for a credit card, and anything else that was going.

And I didn't babysit Moonbeam anyway. Bertha, Maggie's mother was there. Crying constantly and organizing everything. The funeral, the wake, the condolences, the flowers, the insistent telephone, the reporters at the door.

While I just slept, drugged to the eyeballs. Woke to an excruciating pain in my missing finger. Took more pills, watched half a cartoon with Moonie, and slept again.

So what about the 'dilemma'? I'm always asked.. -'How do you tell an almost three year old girl that her mother is dead?'- Happy Birthday dear Moonbeam... oh shit.

Well that day I was too busy controlling my breathing and not falling over or vomiting in the bed.

I woke again to a piercing whistle. I had a special little mobile I had to keep charged up and with me. For just one very special call. Maxie and Jerry had them as well.

I half woke up, finally found the green button and heard an unearthly de-code program. It was an urgent message, relayed from a spy. Those prize idiots were sending their last faithful commandos to attack our depots. In just forty minutes time, it seemed.

I was too ill already or I would've been upset by the awful responsibility.

-*'Zak don't bother.'*- it squawked at the end. I was Zak that month. But I could hardly just not

bother. What if the others had problems.

What if the whole of history turned out different.

Coz I dozed off! *Oops, sorry I didn't bother.*

So I passed the message to CLAN Coordination. Before returning rapidly to dreamland.

So anyway, I missed the 'Revolution'. Or that spectacular failed attack that has become a symbol of it.

For me what happened was more like a black comedy sketch. More than half the army vehicles 'broke down' or ran out of fuel on the three kilometer trip. Got lost or had accidents.

A lot of squaddies had suddenly twisted backs, or asthmatic fits, or just forgot to put their boots on..

I woke again at about 2 am. Took my medicines, felt I could function, and turned on the radio. Lucky it was my left hand lost the finger.

I heard a faraway explosion. An occasional artillery shell was still being fired, from the last government positions.

Then I noticed I was crying.

I'd forgotten I had ten stitches in my leg as well and I had to hop. I hobbled obsessively around the house.

But it wasn't only the physical pain, I was being chewed up alive by remorse and anguish.

Every time I thought of Maggie this lump in my throat would try to choke me.

And this could run and run. I'd known this lady since I was six years old!

I remember the day a cow we were herding pushed a car off its jack. It fell on Josh the farm-hand who was underneath changing the oil. Maggie was about eight years old. I was fiddling frenetically with the jack.

But she dragged a scaffold pole from the barn. And we levered the car up, enough to save his life.

She saved my life a few times as well.

And she had our baby girl.

I was hobbling about. The rain rattling at the windows. Getting unwanted flashes of Moonbeam's birth.

Not the expectant beginning in Maggie's incensed room. With Smudge the midwife, with Maxie and her girlfriends, among the huge cushions and sexy Hindu hangings.

And *not* the ecstatic ending, with a red and battered baby in her arms.

I remembered the forgotten part.

Maggie screaming and begging to die. Again and on and on.

When Moonie was still stuck and in danger after ten hours torture.

And Maggie's wails were mingling with my father's choking death throes, the year before.

All mixed up with the rain and my own sobbing..

* * *

At some point my phone started ringing.

- 'Hey Pardy you awake? I am figuring you is awake now?'

It was Sol. At least he didn't call me Barney.

- 'Hello my friend, good to hear you.'

- 'Listen by me.. We're down here guarding soldiers, me and Maxie and Macker, and Damo and Tessa and.. Why don't you come down? It's over Breeding's Stores in Silver Street, fifth floor. Come on down here I need you.'

- 'What?.. Now?. I'm wounded.'

-‘You gonna be okay. Take a taxi. I need to interview you with our magic friend about the Kids Prison Breakout.’-

-‘Sorry mate.. it’s after three in the morning. And...’-

-‘Well okay, come if you can... Also I’m thinking Maxie wants to suicide...’-

My eyes were shooting about, striking photos of Maggie on the wall in front of me.

Now Maxie wanted to commit suicide. Of course she wanted to bloody suicide.. Sol knew.

-‘Oh God.. shit er yes, you’re right..’- I said. *-‘I’ll be there in twenty minutes.’-*

-‘Take a taxi. Everyone’s awake.’-

-‘Okay thanks a lot, just keep an eye on her, okay?’-

The air-cab arrived before I could drink my tea, and I couldn’t manage to put on my water-proofs, but to hell with it.

The streets were busy all right. Maybe a lot of speedy people high on what happened. Many people who had marched into the city were too late for the actual fighting. But in good time for the celebrations.

I saw a few streets cordoned off, and a still smoldering building, and that’s all.

Then there were queues of Pools lorries moving stuff, who knows where or why at three in the morning.

The whole of the center had just fallen into our area. Lots of groups were staking claims I suppose. And there was plenty of personal looting.

We were there in ten minutes, despite the traffic. The driver recognized me from TV photos, gave me a good shot of plum brandy, and insisted on waiting outside in case I needed him.

My problem though was just to get up to the fifth floor. The lifts were out and my leg hurt. I went up a bit and had a dizzy spell for a while. Thought about it and went a bit more.

Just tasting how it is to be crippled. And not appreciating it...

It was a big open space with just a few remaining desks and computers. And a lot of soldiers, crashed out on mattresses and cushions. Maxie, Damo and Tessa were there all right. But asleep, propped at a partition or sprawled on the floor. It was another hot sweaty night.

Sol wasn’t visible but Macker was tending a projector, flashing TV images on the wall.

-‘Barney Barney Barney. You’re all right!’-

His face was black with smoke or oil. His clothes ragged, for once.

Our little gap toothed traveller. Guarding over twenty big soldiers, with just an air rifle lying on the floor. Of course they weren’t really dangerous now, but still.

I knelt painfully to embrace him with one arm, and he found me a chair to sit on.

-‘How’s Maxie? How are you?’-

-‘She won’t talk. Just cries. And she cut her face up, banging her head...And you?’-

-‘The worst day of my life. We’d better get Maxie home. I got a taxi downstairs.’-

-‘You should still be in hospital yourself I reckon.’-

-‘I still don’t know what happened. Were there many killed?’-

-‘No no, but it was shocking and bloody. The most killed was here in the next street.’-

-‘You stopped them here?’-

-‘Everyone was charging down into the center. The last barricade was near here, we arrived first because Maxie knew which way they were coming. She, um.. ’-

-‘I know, she got a message.’-

-‘She jumped up on the stage at the Docks Assembly and read out the message. People thought she was crazy. Then some Clanners arrived and confirmed it and sent us all off to stop them.’-

-‘With your bare hands, what madness!’-

-‘That’s what I thought, but they didn’t want to fight at all. The bulldozer went through the first two barricades. But the tanks all broke down, would you believe it.’-

-‘So were there many of our lot killed?’-

-‘They were so slow we had time to get up on the roofs. We were given molotovs and showered them with fire. Half of them were trying to surrender and the rest were running away. Some fella got burned alive, it was horrible to see it.’-

-‘I can imagine it was.’-

-‘We filmed a lot, Sol’s just gone to deliver a good copy. We were able to edit a bit when the lekky came back on. We.’-

I was glancing about as he went on. A lot of the soldiers were awake and watching Pools-TV on Macker’s projector screen. Macker followed my gaze.

-‘It’s over Barney, we’ve won. Just a few units of Special Police holding out.’-

-‘And the fascists? And the mercenaries?’-

-‘Never appeared, far as I know! I know you saw this coming years ago, but for me it’s ..it’s like, um. A new dimension!’-

-‘And for me finally it’s hardly worth it.’-

-‘But Maggie would order you to forget her, I mean. We already knew that life’s a piece of shit!’-

I chuckled and coughed, agonizingly.

-‘Moonbeam is Maggie, in a way, like Damo is my dead father.’-

I held back my laugh. The idea of surly little Damien being Macker’s dad.

-‘See I understood it now. We’re organizing all these soldiers and cops to be escorted back. To be taken in by the Pools in their villages or wherever. They’re enrolling them in the Free-Uni already, and copying what we did with the escaped kids.’-

-‘I know that, problem is there’s a lot of them. And they got awful hangups. And all the adult prisoners are going to be coming out as well. And.’-

-‘But we can do it.’- He was on his feet and animating. *-‘We can do it because their hangups don’t make any sense anymore. Without a money system they’re just obsolete. It’s fantastic, it’s really happening! All their shit prejudice ideas you could never change in a million years.. They’re obsolete Barney. They do not apply!’-*

And he flung six juggle pins up in the air.

-‘That’s as may be, but we’re not prepared for this... Oh shit I just remembered. Maybe it’s not too late.’- I had my phone out already, one handed.

-‘What, what happened?’-

-‘About a thousand useful things I should be doing.’-

-‘No, no Barney come on, you’re well out of it. Let your support group be Pardy for tonight.’-

Maybe he was right. I was vague and queasy. And just standing up again would be quite a challenge.

-‘Oh all right then. I’ll just check in and tell them I’m back.’- says I. And clicked quickly on the first number.

That’s when Sol appeared.

-*'Hey Barney you made it. You look quite bad.'*-

I was trying to leave a message for Anna.

-*'We took good quality historic footage. Already edited. You know what is footage?'*-

-*'Lengths of film, yours is digital.'*-

-*'You knew it! I love this loco language. How's Moonbeam?'*-

-*'Sleeping. With Maggie's mum. I didn't tell her yet.'*-

-*'No no. Don't tell her at all.'*-

-*'But she'll have to know.'*-

-*'No no, Our adult ideas don't figure, she doesn't have to know on our level.'*-

-*'Just lie then?'*-

-*'We could tell her Mummy's gone away, till she's used to the change. If not you'll damage her*

for her life!'-

-*'At least she'd more or less finished breast feeding. What about Maxie? Macker reckons she's really out of it.'*-

-*'She thinks it was her fault. She thinks she let her die because she's a bad person.'*-

-*'Oh God. The sin syndrome.'*-

-*'She's sure Maggie was killed by God to punish her. Maxie's crazy right now. And you?'*-

-*'I really am to blame. I knew Maxie's premonitions come true.. Still I'm better out of the house.*

Thank you for calling.'-

-*'Then we gonna do this interview. Oh... !'*-

Macker was making Maxie more comfortable. I saw her lashes flutter and lift.

I blew her a kiss but she looked right through me.

Her eyes start darting about madly.

-*'No no no Maxie.'*-

Forgetting I was crippled I fell forward on my face.

As Max was rolling smoothly to her feet.

Up and running for the open fifth story window!

Sol knew. Sol flew. Even slightly before her it seemed.

Bounding into her path. Catching her easily in his arms, and laughing.

-*'Oh no you don't, sorry I can't lose my film crew!'*- he said.

Then Macker was hugging them both and Damo closing the windows. We would sweat even more.

I came off worse in fact. As I landed on my newly deformed hand. And I lay there gasping on the false tiled floor. With nobody hugging me.

-*'You gonna help me Maxie we're gonna interview Macker and Barney with the Smash Prisons video. This one is for the 'How To Destroy the State' series. We need this version, they gonna make a commentary and this is our opportunity. Come on Maxie snap out of it I'm now going to.. '*-

I realized they had the computer and projector cabled up. So he just had to click away from Pools TV, and we were watching the start of the video, about the rescue of Damo and Tessa. Plus the other 189 inmates of the ex youth detention center..

The integrated transformation, - *'Smash the Prisons!'*-.

I was still on the floor, openly crying. As the -'Freedom. Freedom.'- music came crashing in loud. The sleepy soldiers were sitting up and taking notice. And me too. I'd been in on this from the start but it still inspired me.

Dissolving that noxious institution must be the best thing I've ever been in [ref.26. Prisons]

-*'Come on Maxie here's the question list, you know, just ask the best ones.. So how DO you abolish a prison?'*-

We could see hundreds of people, milling in what looked like a colourful Pools center.

-*'What's happening here?'*- asked Sol. Handing me a mike.

-*'Well this isn't really chaos.'*- I was sniffing back my tears -*'In fact it took a year to organize. We knew the prison well and had infiltrated the warders. We gave them alternative work or study or whatever.*

Then each one of the yunkers in there, boys and girls wings, had a reception group. And a family to take them in.

We worked with the De-Schools and the Free-Uni projects, um, it's a long story.. Social Science had a lot of volunteers.. Let's see.

..Teen Rescue, the Foster Swaps they're Catholics. Mostly the CoOp Pools, CLAN Defence and above all their own families. Quite a bleeding jigsaw and we waited too long!'-

This commentary was much worse than the original.

On the video we could see the groups with colored flags waving. Getting into buses. And a whole gang of Clanners in overalls, all off to rescue the youth prisoners. Failing to look inconspicuous.

-*'But that doesn't solve the problem for the future.'*- Maxie was staring at the wall like a zombie, but Sol insisted on interviewing me. I didn't see much point.

-*'Yes yes it does because our Pools justice can refer to the placings network. And, and don't forget that by getting rid of the worst part of the money system, we hope to cut criminality by ninety per cent at least and..'*-

-*'But if there are no police any more?'*-

-*'The cops never had a clue, even when they were well funded.'*- I explained -*'They were set up to protect the criminal scams of the ruling class, er. Like the money system itself.'*-

The film was showing buses unloading and the rescuers filing quickly through a smaller door in an enormous castle style gate, itself set in a tunnel through the walls. Then they were in an ancient grotty prison dining hall.

Another controlled chaos. And there was Maggie speaking. But we couldn't hear the sound.

-*'Maggie was a key organizer in all this. The one who really saw what is necessary to permanently dissolve a poisonous self defeating institution.'*- I declared -*'And, um, dis-intoxicate and de-brainwash it's victims, like. There was a lot of follow up, er.. We were creating a model or a template for abolishing other.. but let's ask.. Tessa and Damien, you spent six months in this place, were you expecting this to happen?'*-

Damien shook his head, still furiously shy. But Tessa took the microphone and spoke. I got a rest.

-*'You can see us all coming in now. We knew it was happening, still it was a shock to see a*

Clanner with a gun and the keys. It was the middle of the night and we were locked down, um. You

can see us now, the girls, only sixty five of us. And in fact we'd never even seen the boys close up, before that minute. So imagine!'-

- 'And were the prisoners happy with the, organization?'-

- 'Yes of course we were delighted. For us more than our family we needed our friends. Or a gang of new friends. Maybe in a De-School project or in a CLAN or some in the Free-Uni.. That was the best thing for me. That you had got that together.. See all those coloured scarves, they're just for the colour of the buses.. It takes about ten minutes for everyone to find their, uh, reception groups.'-

- 'Macker Mucdunna, you organized shows with the prisoners. Was it necessary to smash down the gates?'-

- 'You can see down the back now our CLAN friends do have a couple of lads in handcuffs. All the rest went free immediately

What did you.. oh yes the gate. We only destroyed it for the photo. It was like a visual blast. Just so you remember. Everyone remembers that image. That gate wasn't needed anymore so, well, if not you just see people being taken out and, and so what!'-

- 'Will you tell us how you did it then?'. Tessa asked, grinning up at her big brother

- 'Two big tow trucks and plenty of chains. Plus we loosened up the hinges in the walls with pneumatic air hammers.. It wasn't magic at all really, but it looked good..

..Hey you army fellas watching back there. The way we recycled these prisoners is the model for how they want to recycle you. Maybe tomorrow, with reception groups okay.. Only there's a lot of you and it all happened too fast. So just be patient okay? You'll all get home and get sorted out okay?'-

- 'This is it. This is the good part.'- .

- 'Now ladies and gents it seems the sound is turned off. We can see a million kids and their rescuers all packed in the prison yard with a mad magician.. HA HA.. I'll turn on the original sound now... Here it comes...'-

Abracadabra I love you my dear

Make these big gates

Disappear!...

Come on everybody together ready..

Give us a One Two Three Four

Annihilate the Prison Door

Five Six Seven Eight

Tear apart the Prison Gates

All Together Five.. Four.. Three.. Two.. One...

GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO GO...'-

The gates disappeared of course, and the crowd were hopping with glee. Then we saw the great slow motion sequence from outside...

*The prison doors dissolving into smithereens flying in every direction...
The crowd charging out through the dust.
Flags flying, all making for the coaches.
Flanked by Clanners in formation.
Just a few city police ducking behind their car down the road.*

The soundtrack continued with laughing, singing and joking. As the coaches disappeared one by one and the interviews began.

Sol nudged my good arm. The guy is a genius.

Maxie and Tessa were hugging and talking, crying and animated. And now Macker was embracing them both. Only Damo sat silent.

Maxie was laughing. Her eyes had come alive.

Sol was winking at me and rolling his own.

-*'It really worked.'*- he said.

His arm around me where I kneeled.

-*'And you too are uh, snapping out of it, no?'*-

Chapter thirty three

Kazoo

-‘Waves of happiness were beaming off her’-

Maxie

I was living on my nerves, sleeping little and always working, not to think about how they murdered my friend.

I was damaged, yet desperately happy with Macker as well.

-‘What the hell is that noise?’- I asked, swinging Moonie up onto my shoulders.

-‘Seagulls’- said Janie grinning -‘A huge flock of gulls, squawking and screaming out to sea.’-

-‘Goway outa that. I hear children.’-

Bernie was waving her arms. Peering into the early morning sun, streaming through wisps of thick sea mist. She’s one of the Soli-Fest organizers, with a megaphone and a computer.

-‘Come on Josie let’s get down the front.’-

There was a fanfare of trumpets. Two rockets shot up, behind the crowd of us waiting on the quays, and exploded out over the harbour.

The strong sun was glaring off the water, We were cheering blindly, as a crackly sound system buzzed into life.

-‘Let’s have a big warm welcome now for the exchange students coming into the dock now.’-

Only about six months late.

Everybody was pointing and peering. And we could make out the prow of a ferryboat. Materializing in slow motion from behind the grain silo.

Then we saw its decks were packed with screaming, laughing and madly waving youths.

The Mexican kids had finally arrived.

We’d all got up in the dark and had been waiting more than a hour for the ship to come in.

Clustering little by little into groups of friends.

Me and Macker and Jerry had come down to welcome back Lucia, who was bringing her two ‘kids’, Paco, aged fifteen, and Luna who was now fourteen. We had never met them.

Plus about seven thousand friends, instead of the seven hundred they had proposed! And more than ‘exchange students’ they were refugees of course. Mostly Latin American, but with groups from many other countries. Previous exchange groups have been a big hit over here.

The Soli-Fest were sending us as many as we could absorb to extricate itself from the racist tangle of European bureaucracy..

Because at that moment immigration was already controlled, or should I say *not* controlled, by the Pools Federation.

We had no central government here anymore and everything seemed to go better.
Nobody missed the politicians at all. Except maybe banks and corporations, who had already fled. Instigating invasion and lamenting their losses.
What a horrible shame those poor richies finally lost their Scam of enslaving everybody!
With weekly online voting, we call it 'Wise-Mass', we have more democracy than we could ever have wanted.
Too much? Okay I'm a little cynical. voting on everything is super popular around here.
All those economists scoffed, but our Wurts market works, while theirs is a disaster. Now, all the kids are competing at Personal Levels like it was football.
I'm average 6.3 at the last count. I got a bad attitude.
And as for the Invasion! By now everyone is bored waiting, to be invaded by the so-called Peace Intervention Force.(PIF).

That sun off the water was dazzling me.
There was welcome music. Synthesizing trumpets. A few fireworks going off too soon.
Jimmy and Janie had appeared, from Mart Street Pool. They're friends of Macker, who I didn't know before.
Janie is a big tall girl, compared to me, and was nearly eight months pregnant at the time.
Wearing purple denim bands. A beautiful smiling sun on her huge round belly,grinning from ear to ear and drumming her fingers on it, in time to the atrocious music.
Then she invited us to put our ears to her. To listen for a response from her baby boy, they knew it was a boy.
Egging us on at inventing comical answers. While she guffawed with laughter and Jimmy looked shy and worried.
Janie had a flat already, it was easy to get a place, with so many people moving out of the city.

And they'd invited two students who they'd come to pick up
She was explaining how Macker had got her together with Jimmy. Pelting the police with cuddly toys and rubber pigs, and escaping in fancy dress over the rooftops!
They were delighted that Macker had found me for a girlfriend.
After half an hour waiting together on the dock, we were treating each other like long lost lifelong friends.
And me of course I was longing to tell Janie my new secret, that I was pregnant as well. And that Macker would be the Dad. I slipped my fingers down my own little tummy and listened to Janie's big smiley one. And the tears were springing to my eyes.
We'd decided it was too early to tell everyone.
But every day it was more difficult to keep my blabbermouth shut.

Janie was obviously ecstatic. Waves of happiness washing off her.
Delighted to show off her smiling sun, and display her big chocolate nipples.
squeezed out the windows of her new yellow spoon-bra.
Hung with thongs in cool Clan Warrior style.
Made up to match her eyes.
Janie was gorgeously pregnant, just like I imagined I'd like to be in a few months time!

Course if you'd asked me a few weeks earlier I'd have said no way I wanted a kid. I was well known for it. Still and all I *had* known full well I *wasn't* being careful. And neither was Macker, somehow I felt in a good situation to have a child, even after what happened to Maggie..

Kazoo wan't chosen exactly, but extremely wanted. and I'd grown to love my little foetus already. She was conceived in such a funny game that we both felt delighted about it. like, .. well I'll tell about that later.

I was tempted alright, to tell my new friend Janie, but I must ask Macker first.

Then we were all cheering and squealing as the ferryboat loomed into the dock.

Blasting it's horn to shock the dead awake. The trumpets and fireworks going off.

Lined with a throng of excited youth, jabbering in every language but English.

Waving cardboard signs and queuing up to get down the gangways with their bags. There was no customs and no immigration. Though they were filming the whole thing, and questioning the odd suspicious character.

And they were filling out those World Passports. What a waste of paper, I mean. They were only valid here, and here you didn't need a passport.

And there was Lucy at last! Half way down. Frizzy afro hair floating up in the wind. And her son, who was much bigger than her. They had to wait a few minutes while they made the exit safe,

waving and pointing at us.

Then Sol was underneath with a trolley. Hopping with glee! We were all pushing closer. Lucy was swinging down their bags and they were jumping off the blocked walkway, one by one, it wasn't so high.. And others were starting to copy them. Causing a happy chaos on the dock.

Duna, her daughter, was afraid to jump down, almost leaping, then clutching back.

She's a glowing black semi adolescent, her dad is African-American.

In a short skirt and yellow knickers, Sol and Lucy beckoning below.

-*'Jump Duna, now now. Yes. No no.'*-

She closed her eyes and just jumped blind. Sol managed to swing-catch her, though she's big, and they fell in a heap. Duna turned out to be a gem.

-*'Thank you thank you for all coming to meet us so early in the morning.'*-

Lucia had Moonbeam in her arms already. Kissing and shrieking and hugging everyone several times over. And her big kids who we hadn't met, Paco and Duna and their friends, were doing the same, but much more politely. They thought she was pretty wild as well.

-*'How great how great hello Maxie, Jerry, hello Bernie, Macker Macker, Soledad mi amorcito! Oh Moonie I've come to play with YOU! Hi Josie hi Trisha hi Danny hello Damo, que maravilla how marvelous!'*-

Then she took me by the shoulders and said in my ear..

-*'Congratulations Maxie darling. When's the happy birthday?'*-

-*'Wh What?'*-

I was flummoxed. How the hell did Lucy know I was pregnant?

-*'Sorry Congrats on your Spanish exam!'*- And she kissed my cheek, winking. One hand casually on my tummy.

Later she explained she'd spotted me from the gangplank, crooning over Janie's belly and just stroking my own.

Lucia Perez could read my thoughts at fifty meters!

She disappeared again. Janie was squeezing my hand till it hurt. She had definitely heard and understood.

Glancing sideways I caught Bernie's eye, she just nodded and grinned and nodded again. She'd copped on for sure as well. And since I hadn't denied it, it was obviously true. And the yunkers? No no, too busy meeting Duna and Paco, though you never know.

Macker's sister Tessa just adopted Paco as her willing servant from the word go, like they were always destined to be a couple

- 'Macker come here' - I saw him darting through the crowd. - 'Come here, sure everybody's guessing I'm pregnant!' -

I was yelling my secret above the din.

He started whooping. Leaped up on one of those giant anchor hooks. Started producing little edible cigars which he was giving out to us.

- 'This cigar is candy!' - said Tessa, sharing it with Paco. - 'Does this mean I'll be an Auntie?'

- 'And me! Uncle Danny.' - said my brother. Catching on at last, and I resigned myself to all my ex school-friends from Burndon finding out. And my parents as well.. oof!

- 'Now Ladies and Gentlefellas.' - Macker announced. *- 'We are giving this little uh, boy or girl the name Kazoo because both of her parents were..'*

But he broke off, seeing me shaking my head and wagging a finger.

He was almost explaining, to everyone assembled, our erotic fantastic embarrassing fantasies!

- 'Sorry we're just in love with the name and we hope for a happy pregnancy.'

- 'Congratulations señora Maxie.' - said Duna. Lucy's big brown daughter.

Duna gave me a good hug. So then everybody else felt they should follow suit. And every minute somebody else we knew would appear and start congratulating me and so on. I didn't mind at all, I was laughing too much. Then Lucy was back and apologizing for letting on and I was saying *- 'No no no'*. I was glad it happened.

The crowds were dissolving, like butter in a pan. We hung around a bit longer as Bernie and Sol and Lucita were making sure no one got lost.

- 'We can't lose even one little one.' - Lucy said on the way. *- 'Their parents would string us up and throw darts at us!'*

The place seemed loudly silent, after the high pitched chatter., Macker had brought over his pony and trap for the bags, and we set off for Little Agnes Street on foot.

It was just starting to rain.

- 'Hey Lucy we've got a country cottage now. It's on some coppice farms we share with the neighbours.' - says Tessa.

- 'Where is Barney? He's gone back to nature?' - Lucy was disappointed not to see him.

She fancied him all right, but she hadn't nearly got over her ex.

Barney was away off down the country, leaving Moonbeam quite happily with us, except for her odd tantrums. He'd gone off again to work on the De-School project called Adventure Way, above our new coppice patch in the Southern Lapwing Mountains

-*'He grew up near there, it's a great place called Ice Haven. It has an Adventure Trail.'*- I explained.
-*'Is it icy then?'*-
-*'No no the opposite. With enormous caves and hot water pools, like. On the other side to Rosana's Coppice.. '*-

Macker had invited Duna and Paco up on the cart and now insisted on me getting up with Moonbeam. Because she wanted to drive it. Which meant just holding the reins, with everyone walking behind like a funeral procession.

-*'We're going to, um, scatter Maggie's ashes up there, next Sunday. You're all invited.'*- said Jerry.
-*'In a prehistoric burial cave. It's a good place..'*-
-*'Thank you thank you'*- said Lucia -*'Of course we are going to come. I was so sad I couldn't come back for the funeral.'*-

Chapter thirty four

Up the Cable Railway

-‘subvert them, seduce them, bamboozle them!’-

Barney

-‘Good luck to you Mister Barney sir, goodbye now sir.’-
The bus was really getting there on time.

-‘Pardy, my name’s Pardy now..Okay then, bye bye lads I’ll be seeing you.. Come on everybody they’re waiting for us to get off.’- I said loudly *-‘Can you all double check we’re leaving nothing at all on this bus.’-*

-‘Duncantry cable railway. This stop!’-
-‘Can you open up the side?’-

I had three boxes of provisions stowed inside, and a fold-up trolley to move them. Plus a second trolley with big mountain wheels, carrying the folded white Eagle flying suit I’d been learning with. It was light, but gigantic.

I was acting like an Explainer to the class of De-Schoolers on the bus. But really I was just on my way back from a Defense meeting. This group would take the line all the way to Eagle Park quarries at the top, they wouldn’t come down to Ice Haven for three days. Then I *would* have to do Explainer all right, so it was better to play the part from the start. So I acted the tour guide

-‘Here below us on your left we can see the world famous Air Factory facilities. Where they bottle compressed air. You’ll be helping out there for a shift on your way back..’-

-‘Excuse me do you know what time the cable train leaves?’- It was a chubby red faced boy, or was he, or she, a girl?.

-‘The platform is up here. There’s three cars, they stop the line, clamp on securely. And off you go when you’re ready. So there’s no fixed time. I’ll show you. This way everybody. I’m waiting for my family, they should be here by now and we’re only going as far as Ice Haven anyway.’-

-‘We’re going to Ice Haven on, er, Saturday I think.’- said the boy with goggle glasses.

-‘I’ll be showing you round when you come down the gorge on the new Adventure Way. It’s really scary but you’ll love it. And you’ll stay in the Eagle Park self service hostel.’-

-‘Yes yes, but isn’t there a road up there?’- A good question.

-Not to Ice Haven. See this line of cliffs it goes right the way round the base of the mountains, like a castle. There's donkey tracks up all right and there used to be a village up there. This cable railway is the easy way up, it's a wild reserve, coppice farms and cliffs, enormous caves..'-

We were arriving at the station already. I got two yunkers pushing my trolley of provisions. Then Nancy Williams, the coordinator, had appeared, I was greeting and kissing her.

While fending off a plethora of questions..

Turning I peered carefully down the valley and spotted another bus, weaving its way up round the base of the basalt cliffs from the other side.

-The other bus is going to arrive.' - I said. *-We'll wait a few minutes so you can all go up together.'*

All our lot were beginning to gather. To scatter Maggie's ashes.

Maxie and Macker should be on that bus, bringing me Moonbeam! And Lucia had promised to come, I would see her at last!

With her two teenage children and Bernie and Sol and their Mexican friends who would join the D-School trip. Plus our very own CLAN support group, including, Damo, Tessa and Danny, Maxie's brother. They had to try the new Adventure Way.

It was all arranged and working out. On the Sunday we would finally sprinkle Maggie's ashes in the prehistoric caves.

* * *

-Papi papi I'm going in the train with you! Papi papi!' - said Moonie, hopping down from the bus.

How great to have a daughter who jumps into your arms and wants to be whirled around.

Maxie and Macker would come up two days later, they had volunteered to do scout duty up on the border, so we saw them for only about one minute, they stayed on the coach.

They were laughing non stop. Clapping happy and chokey jokey..

-What are they so excited about?' - I asked.

Waving back at Maxie, who was shaking Macker's T shirt out the window.

-Ha ha HA! Wait till you hear the latest!' - said Bernie.

I never guessed then that Maxie was pregnant.

I was really looking at Lucia.

Our gazes locked on, like laser targets in a video-game, the moment she jumped out of that bus! At least she didn't jump on top of me this time, maybe because her big children were present. I

hadn't seen her in the flesh for six months.

So I had to be introduced, half in Spanish, to her kids, Duna and Paco and their refugee friends Lila and Rafa, and all without really looking at them, because I was in *-lock-on-mode'* with Lucy, tripping over their luggage and laughing.

She kissed my face, sniffing and kissing off her own tears. Her silky hands in mine.

Kissing my missing finger as well.

* * *

-It's a funicular railway. We don't hang in the air or anything. It uses the quarry line that was here already. The Air Factory. Three stops, the Air Factory, Ice Haven and Eagle Park.'

-*'It's amazing! Like a time machine or something. All new but it looks home-made.'*

In fact it was pretty full, with eighteen teenagers plus Nancy and all our lot. Lila and her brother Rafa would go with the educational trip, but Lucy wanted her kids Paco and Duna to come with us, to get to know the family.

-*'The carriages are made from three big rock buckets cut and welded together. It's very safe they say.'*

At that moment it jolted violently, throwing Bernie to her knees and sending Moonie's mountain pram zooming up the aisle. Where Sol deftly apprehended it.

-*'Everybody put on their seatbelts please.'*

-*'But there **are** no seatbelts!'*

We were off, and we completed a hard day's climb in less than fifteen minutes. It's a wonderful form of transport. While Sol filmed, hanging out a window, and the rest all marveled at the cliffs and pinnacles, and the vegetation hanging off them. And Bernie quizzed me on the Defence meeting I had attended.

-*'I hate those meetings.'* I said. -*'The older ones are all showing respect and calling me Sir. Just because my family were rebels and I got hurt by the police!'*

-*'But you get a chance to get our ideas across.'*

-*'The ideas are accepted already, from the Assemblies and online voting. It's just organizing everything for going underground. But a hell of a lot of it!'*

-*'What about the invasion? Aren't they afraid?'* asked Lucy.

-*'Everybody's bored and yawning with the idea by now. It's been on-off-on-off.'* said Bernie .

-*'Well uh, they have supply routes and depots set up, like, with backup social services, media and computer nets, and making things disappearable um, down here they have surplus of everything. At least everything edible. Despite the impossible weather.'*

-*'Because we don't have to support armies of bloodsuckers.'*

-*'That's what they say all right.. '*

-*'Look look look..'* Moonbeam was yelling.

Seven black vultures were wheeling round the craggy tower in a line. Soaring right past us. One by one, without flapping a single wing. Ignoring the clanking cars. This was the first year the vultures had ventured so far north.

-*'Eagles! How amazing!'*

-*'They're vultures actually, but there are human eagles whizzing round this mountain.'*

-*'Me and Maxie and Macker have our Eagle Certificates.'*

-*'Are you saying me you can fly?'* asked Sol.

-*'Look look a boy, he's flying.'*

-*'Yes you're right.'*

-*'In the suit, like this one. Your arms are about nine times stronger.'*

-*'But not for long you have to glide and soar.'*

-*'Can we go to Eagle Park Uncle Barney?'* asked Josie again.

-*'No but we'll go for a swim okay.'*

-*'So tell me.'* Sol was intent on quizzing me. -*'Is the invasion finally gonna happen now?'*

-*'And what about the resistance? We know you're going to resist the invasion.'* Lucy asked,

She was explaining in Spanish for Paco and Duna, who more or less understood English anyway. She quickly gave this up.

-*'Maybe they've got cold feet.'*- I said. -*'It's the corporations and the banks want the invasion. The public in the coalition countries aren't keen.'*-

-*'Thanks to all our wonderful supporters everywhere.'*-

-*'And with the depression. war isn't so good for business right now, it seems.'*-

-*'But I thought the invasion was certain.'*- said Lucy.

-*'Yes yes, they'll come in hard I suppose and take over. But after that, um,..probably they'll have little cash and contradictory orders.'*-

-*'We're gonna subvert them, seduce them, bamboozle them! Didn't Sol explain to you?'*-

-*'Every day they don't invade our resistance plans get less important, and the subversion programs more organized.'*-

-*'Fantastic. So there won't be a war?'*- she said.

-*'As of now the war is practically confined to mining all the roads with plastic remote code detonation mines. Only dangerous if activated. They're still putting in thousands of them.'*- I explained, only realizing the change myself.

-*'Apart from being able to blow them to bits if they go outdoors, the plan is to keep them high and happy and get them on our side, I'm not sure I get it myself.'*- said Bernie,

-*'Excelente!! This is possible and realistic, their mandate is a fatal political compromise, we can really do it!'*- said Sol suddenly.

-*'See the cliffs up on our right, that lean outward. Under them is the way to Ice Haven and on to*

the southern Lapwings. That's where we get off.'- I said.

-*'It's a super impressive place, but what are you doing up here really, Barney? Are you dropping out because they killed Maggie?'*- asked Lucia directly.

-*'Who's Barney? Oh well I give up.'*- says I, shrugging. -*'I like it here that's all, see, we used to er, play at being guerrillas, with the Earth's Revenge group. And, uh, helping my uncle Mick with the archeology and.. Now we have electricity and the net, the cable railway and the adventure trail and, and Maggie's Kitchen, it keeps us busy.'*-

-*'Maggie's Kitchen, up here?'*- Lucia broke in.

-*'It's the self-service hostel for all the young people coming through. It was her idea you see.'*-

-*'Maggie's Kitchen! Nobody told me that.'*-

-*'Because only Barney calls it that.'*- said Bernie. Pulling her head back in the window.

-*'Look! There's an Eagle, oh she's disappeared.'*-

-*'I'll call it Maggie's Kitchen as well.. And what's up the top, what are the kids going to do?'*-

-*'I have the program here. The top stop is there, Eagle Park, near the quarries. There's a hostel refuge where they stay and a coppice and fish farm. Then after lunch getting samples from the lower crater, for the geology project, writing it up in the evening. Plus sending messages to their families and.. In the morning they go to the Air Factory quarries, um, a picnic lunch there. One group does measurements for the climate change study, others start their coppice project and do Free-Uni classes.'*- I stopped for breath.

-*'I am wanting to go also.'*- said Paco.

-*'The best part is the next day. They come down the amazing new Adventure Way!'*- I said proudly.

-*'Look here's the platform coming now. Press the button again, Josie, just in case they forget to stop it!'*-

The line suddenly slowed and gradually stopped, the carriage swaying sideways.

-*'Mama I want to go with Rafa.'*- said Paco to Lucy in English. -*'Please please Mama is a super oportunidad for me I have to go!'*-

Lucy was already digging a jumper out of her rucksack. Draping it round her tall son and kissing his cheeks.

-*'Va lay va lay. Okay okay, but Duna you are staying with us today.'*-

We'd reached the little platform and I swung open the gate, which locks on the main brakes. Then we were maneuvering out my provisions and eagle suit, with Moonie in her pram.

-*'Is that all right Nancy then? Paco here will come with you lot, he's Rafa's friend and he speaks English.'*-

-*'Prometeme Rafa hijo, que tendrás mucho cuidado, vale..Promise me Rafa you'll be really careful okay?'*-

Sol was nodding my attention to Duna and Lila, saying a tender tearful goodbye at the gate.

-*'Come on Duna you'll see her Sunday.'*- said Bernie. -*'We're holding up the Air Factory line.'*-

But it was this girl Lila who was clinging onto Duna.

And when she broke free I saw she was really sobbing.

I jammed my boot in the gate as it closed. It automatically re-opens.

-*'Venga Lila. You come with us, usted puedes venir con la Duna.'*- I ventured in my crap Spanish. And she grabbed her bag and came running out.

-*'Okay Nancy, you're back to eighteen now, all right?. No need for her to suffer.'*-

She just smiled and nodded and was taking notes. As the gate finally clicked shut.

Then she disengaged the fail-safe brake.

act four
love is a battle

Chapter thirty five

On Broken Tree Hill

-‘I was turning into a powerful switched-on woman.’-

Maxie

-‘Slow down Maxie, Maxie wait for me.’-

Freewheeling, bicycles clattering, skirting bumps and ruts. Me and Macker raced down the steep, narrow, twisting lane.

Totally awake. Zooming downhill between high hedges.

Dodging the bumble bees and flies, and briars that shot out thorns to snatch our faces.

Faces sunburnt, radiant, flashing in the sun and shade. Drinking the warm rushing air that flung out our hair.

Then slower, and then much slower, and now heaving, and blowing in lowest gear, and then to an uphill stop.

-‘Again! Macker I beat you again!’- I gasped, for I’d pedaled a few meters further up the hill.

-‘Ah but my bike’s much heavier.’ he spluttered.

And with some justice, his bike had the little tent, and a powerful new air rifle, in a bag, strapped to the crossbar.

A gang of big black crows wheeled over us cawing aggressively. There wasn’t a soul about. The road was closed, the area evacuated and the invasion still imminent.

I dropped my bike in the ditch, wading through the high weeds. And climbed up a little stone wall.

After some high sprays luscious fat blackberries.

Reaching up for the plumpest and blackest. Popping them in my mouth and closing my eyes, to savor the taste and texture.

And another, and just one more..

-‘Hey give us down a few of them!’-

-‘Get your own, these are all mine!’- says I. Clambering higher.

The stone I was perched on wobbled, and Macker gripped my thighs. As I almost fell forward into a sea of thorns and nettles.

-‘Go on give us a gorgeous berry.’- He was grinning up at me. His gap toothed grin between my brown legs. I dropped one single berry in his mouth,

His warm hands slid right up and up, and I giggled.

-*'I wonder could I find a ripe berry here..'*- His fingers were inside my shorts and..

-*'Go way outa that.'*- I squealed and wriggled. -*'Stoppit I love it!'*-

-*'Blackberries! Blackberries please!'*-

I reached up and gobbled a few more big ones. Fed him a few. And stretched up for the best ones of all, holding in my breath with pleasure.

-*'This berry feels delicious, oh oh oh!'*-

I was twisting down, laughing, to rub them in his face.

Naturally I fell off the wall on top of him. But we rolled together without injury in the high weeds. Kissing blackberry juice and sweat from each others faces.

We had plenty of time to reach the border before dusk.

* * *

That trip with Macker started off idyllic. The threat of military attack was just a circumstance, which allowed us be alone together.

There were no people about, the area was prepared for an invasion that had never happened.

It was our first time out of town since my pregnancy was confirmed. I hardly even got morning sickness. But I could feel my hormones transforming me, minute by minute!

I saw things double clear that day. Every dandelion blowing was a miracle. Every touch was shivering magic spells. And for me I remember that as happiness. Tickling Macker in the lush green grass, I felt elated and fulfilled.

Like bursting out of my chrysalis. Oh yes! Turning into a powerful switched-on woman!

But next day I would remember that evening as the last happy moments in my horrible life

We hid our bikes in the thick bushes, filled our water bottles from a trickle in the mossy bank, shouldered all our belongings and set out up the steep hill. Up there we would camp and keep an eye on various lanes which crossed the border.

It seemed so peaceful, hot and humid. So quiet I found myself whispering. How could we visualize tanks, roaring down these lanes? It all seemed absurd.

Would jet planes force us to spend money and work in Macdonald's?

Yet just a minute later we had our first sighting. A faint clatter and Macker was pointing to a fat black dot, hovering far to the north. A helicopter on patrol, searching for terrorists.

And pumping more planet-destroying gas in a few minutes than we would in our lives!

We had missed the good path, it was a hard climb, and prickly. Skirting a thicket, through a boggy patch and alongside a tiny gorge full of trees.

Then up steeply. A kestrel, hovering just above us, in the unreal deep blue sky.

Hovering higher, and always a little higher.

As if to mock our grunting sweaty climb.

Macker pressed on ahead, leaving me plodding steady, I saw him silhouetted, leaping across ledges, calling up at the hawk and then back down, pointing the easier way.

But I was in no hurry at all anymore, because now those sharp pains had started stabbing up under my ribs. Just climbing steadily on up, trying different positions to ease the suffering.

And now I did feel suddenly really sick and nauseous, and I was getting the shakes as well. Shivering in the heat, my vision was even blurring a bit, and then a lot..

Oh no please not a premonition..no no. Don't let me be switched-on that way!

- 'Come on lazybones. This way through the cottage.'

Macker's arms were waving a moment against the sky, then vanishing. Macker the clown, the actor, Macker the director.

And sure enough there was a roofless cottage, three of them. Tiny houses filled with nettles, the people swept away completely.

I was panting and dizzy, Kneeling down a moment by the abandoned hearth. A thistle in my face, the hawk screaming and wheeling right away.

And the helicopter suddenly louder, and louder again, buzzing like a bee, trapped in my head.

Then I saw you. Aunty Moiyra. Once known as the sunflower girl.

Left here to die alone. Dying in your sodden bed by the dead fire.

Hands trapped in your beads. Eyes sunken, cheeks caved in.

And the water leak spattering off your solid face.

They abandoned you, okay, for the sake of the children

And you turned into a slab of old grey meat,

like Macker, lying face down broken in rocks face down in a rocky hole like

Macker face down shot down from behind in the bushes, like

I Macker like....oh shit shit shit.

I didn't want to see any of this stuff but it was now too late.

Then I was up. And out of that ruin in a panic, hands and head shaking in the air. Banishing what I had seen, beating back glimpses of the flapping banshee. Of an old woman trapped in dead meat. And myself, wailing and banging my head after Maggie's death.

I ran away from that creepy cottage, in fact I climbed. It was too late not to see so I would just have to ignore it. Now I was pregnant I had no time for this crap.

Do you really wish to delete? Yes, yes please! For me anyway that was a solution. My body was running with sweat and my face with tears. But this time I came through stronger.

No way would I mope for nightmares in the day. I pretended to myself it hadn't happened that was all!

The fat bug helicopter faded and faded and was gone, and I reached a flat white rock, and there was the broken tree. And indeed, a tiny bright green meadow, with buttercups and fresh grass, half taken over by the gorse and thorn, and daisies and cow parsley gone to seed.

And Macker, singing merrily, as he pitched the tent already.

* * *

From that hill you could see the two lanes below, winding through the little steep sided valleys. And to the north a lot of little lakes, shimmering.

Like orange and silver fishes in the setting sun.

In the west, ridges and higher ridges, and a glimpse of big mountains, with high pink and white topped thunderclouds. Shafts of light between them, pointing to the wilderness of rocks and bogs.

And the gigantic wild ocean beyond.

And right below us an intricate mosaic of little fields and rocky outcrops, half swallowed up, by hedges and little thickets run wild.

-*'Oh Macker darling I'm not feeling very well.'*- I explained. -*'Maybe I'm just gonna lie down for a bit if that's okay.'*-

* * *

A long and grumbling far off roll of thunder. It was a black dark night, and I woke up sweating in the little tent.

Another flickering flash and I saw Macker, wearing headphones and sitting cross legged in the door-flap, Macker with the rifle across his knees, and watching out, alert for enemies.

A wave of affection swept over me, and I scrambled up to hug him tightly from behind.

-*'I'm so sorry I must have slept for ages oh my dearest are you all right..'*-

He went directly into doting father mode. -*'How was I feeling?'*- and -*'I must rest more.'*- and -*'What would I like?'*-.. while I gave him a few dozen kisses.

-*'And how are your pains? Poor Maxie, are you feeling any better?'*-

-*'Any sign of those shitty bastards then?'*- I thought I'd just change the subject, I mean, in case we both got drowned in lovers' drivel!

-*'Well yes actually.'*- He surprised me. -*'They say there's a big raid down the east, and they've been landing troops from the sea.'*-

-*'What! You must be joking!'*-

-*'It may be another practice raid but really it's much too big already, the media are going mad. And they've invented a terrorist atrocity and are accusing us of it.'*-

-*'What, what happened?'*-

-*'They claim the CLANs have been torturing kidnapped immigrant kids to death, like, for refusing to do slave labour, you know, with photoshop, interviews, shock and horror.'*-

-*'That's disgusting, what shitheads!'*-

-*'And we got a phone message, we have to be ready to let off a mine to close the road, and leave here at a moment's notice.'*-

-*'A mine? How do we do that?'*-

-*'It's simple, a double bind random code, we just activate our bit, with the mobile, look here..'*-

-*'We're sitting on the front line, what the hell are we doing here!'*-

There was a flash and a mighty crash, I yelped with fright.

But it was only the storm breaking over us.

It was more like a thundershower than a storm, but it relieved the suffocating heat. The breeze blew a little bit chilly up there, and we cuddled together, watching the shimmer of lightning and talking to stay awake.

We talked most of the night, things we'd never explained, like the sordid details of my family, and his tragic one. Now Macker was presenting some kids shows, while I was still filming with Sol and helping with the Clanners Way soap, in one of the teams.

Me and Macker did different Free-Uni courses in the evenings, Macker did theater and filming, and very pleased with himself.

Then we started talking about Moonbeam, how would I have enough time for her when Kazoo was born?

-*'We can't even call this kid Kazoo anyway, you know that.'*-

-*'Aww? why not?'*-

-*'Everyone's asking why and, well.. we should never have admitted she was conceived during a Kazoo playing competition. They want the erotic details and, and I can't explain that in front of the kids who are always about, like. So now they're all speculating and..'*-

-*'Oh well, I see what you mean.. why don't we give another name and then just call him or her Kazoo among ourselves?'*-

-*'I thought of Scat.'*-

-*'Scat!? Scat you smelly cat!' Why Scat?'*-

-*'The Scat Sisters, Maggie's ex band.'*-

-*'Maggie had a band? Okay.. Or why don't we just call her Margaret directly..'*-

-*'Shockingly normal.'*-

I'd never explained the whole story about Moonbeam and Maggie. And we talked about politics, and if the Free Unions in other countries could stop the invasion... about Lucia and Bernie, how great their kids were, and how amazing they'd brought seven thousand yunkers to help us...

Each time one of us was starting to nod off the other would ask a question. So finally the night was short.

Too short, because we had to talk about the CLANs and the De-schools and all the controversies of the Collective Wisdom votes.. Wise-Mass we call it now. if ex banks should be used firstly for clinics or for free-shops and if it was okay to have a nursery in a bar... and so on and on.

We talked about Money-Free and how brilliant that it was catching on. Neither of us had got even to square one in the money system, so we had no compunction at all about being the first generation to stop using it. The virtual market works better anyway.

The idea was to arrange things so we could have as much choice and free time and quality of life as possible. Making it really tricky, and shameful, for any person or agency to impose on or exploit us.

The flicker of lightning had long gone, but we still heard distant thunder.

Neither one said anything but little by little it became clear..

That it wasn't, that it couldn't be thunder.

And little by little we knew.. that what we were hearing was bombs or artillery shelling, far far away!

-*'Let's get our clothes on and everything packed up ready to go then.'*- says I suddenly.

-*'There's nothing more to pack.'*-

-*'Come on I'm taking down the tent.'*-

And it was soon after that Macker suddenly grabbed the mobile.

It was ringing in his headphones.

A moment later we were reading a de-coded message.

-*'FIRE ALL AND LEAVE NOW.'*-

-*'Oh shit oh where's the code?'*- Macker was rummaging for his little book.

I couldn't see anything on the road. But yes! I *could* hear heavy engines.

And now the clatter of a helicopter as well!

-*'Okay I got it'*- said Macker and I saw the code. -*'But where's the ALL button'*-

-*'No, no, type ALL it's two once pause five three times pause five three times again and send.'*-

-*'It's buzzing again, how do I. yes.'*- said Macker frantically, as a new message appeared.

-*'WAIT CLANNERS JUST FIRE NUMBER THREE.'*-

-*'What. What. ..How do I? ..'*- He was getting really jittery.

So I took the mobile, re-entered our half of the code, and pressed three.

Peered as hard as I could to check the third bridge was clear.

And then pressed enter.

At that same exact moment there was a tremendous explosion. We fell to our knees, cowering needlessly from the faraway flames and bits of flying bridge. It was like, two hundred meters away from us.

Macker had the little video camera already going, though it was half dark. I was just kneeling there shaking, in the muddy meadow.

-*'Oh god maybe I just killed someone!'*- I said.

But I didn't have another moment to worry about that.

Immediately one two three four little rockets were shooting up.

Bursting into intense white phosphorous flares floating slowly down.

Lighting up the whole countryside, like a football stadium at night.

I gasped and scuttled under the broken tree.

Shouldering my rucksack and dragging in the air-gun and the packed tent.

I was feeling like an insect on a white dinner-plate.

And sure enough we could now see two helicopters. First I thought they were hovering.

But then I saw they were coming directly for us!.

And I could make out headlights of vehicles, stopping beyond the smoking bridge.

We really had blocked a military convoy.

Then I saw them. The Clanners! Two white air pick-ups careering towards us up the winding lane. A green army vehicle roaring behind them. With young fellas and girls in the back, trying to just hold on. And shoot and throw things at the pursuing jeep.

-*'Hide Macker hide let's go.'*-

But Macker was zooming in on the scene.

The armoured car spurting flashes.

A yunker flinging an axe.

The troop carrying helicopter whirling in towards us.

A beep beep beep and a message in my hands.

-*'FIRE ONE SAVE KIDS RUN-'*

So I re-entered the code and pressed one in a second flat.

One of the air-vans was burning a back tyre but got across the nearest bridge.

As I pressed that button again. Yes, I did it deliberately twice.

I didn't see anything after that, but Macker filmed it all brilliantly. And I think that those explosions have permanently damaged my hearing. The local Clanners escaped, waving their fists defiantly and firing a crossbow at the armoured jeep. That film clip was widely shown on our media, as an example of heroic, if somewhat lunatic, resistance.

But now the troop carrier was clattering in to land right on top of our little hill.

I heard a zinging noise and guessed that bullets were flying.

I was off, panting with terror.

-*'Let's go let's go now Macker, run run run.'*-

I was running for the edge, just twenty meters away.

Clumsy with the tent and the gun.

I was thrown or fell on the ground but rolled to my feet and kept running.

Reaching the bushes and boulders.

Glancing sideways I saw Macker running behind.

Saw him fall, face down. His arms bent back.

Face down in the rocks. The camera flying in the furze.

I saw Macker for the last time. Vanishing into the rocks.

Because at the same moment a shell or a rocket went off behind us with a life shattering 'wham'. Maybe from the smaller attack helicopter.

I was flung forward over the edge, straight through a sapling. Smashing a rotten branch like brittle candy. Turning in the air. And landing with a terrific 'whock' on my back. Down in the deep leaf litter.

Then I was rolling to my feet again, like a headless chicken. And scrambling frantically down another fifty meters.

Before collapsing, safe in the thick and tangled coppice.

Chapter thirty six

The Ice Queen

-‘All nature was just.. wiped out?’-

Barney narrating

‘Uncle Barney. Uncle Barney, can I take a baby rabbit home?’- asked Josie, holding up a terrified bunny by the scruff of its neck.

I was amazed she had actually been able to catch it, This first valley had long been a nature reserve, maybe it was half tame, more likely it was dying of myxomatosis.

-‘Sorry Josie you’ll have to let her go, she’s terribly afraid look at her shiver, please Josie, she’ll die of terror.’-

The rabbit shot off, no way was it sick. It glanced back once at Josie, and disappeared.

I was feeling laid back, accepting the spliff from Sol, and it was actually sunny. Okay it was boiling hot, but not raining.

So we were mellow and a little stoned, walking barefoot hand in hand, along under the overhanging cliffs.

Little did we suspect that the invasion would begin that very night!

We had loaded the provisions in the big pram, with our shoes and excess clothes, which was almost everything we wore, and were all laughing at Sol’s hilarious monologues...

He was acting out the plight of the young Mexican shoplifters, on their first visit to the new *FREE* shopping center.

I grunted and chuckled, offering no more explanations or anecdotes. Bernie was picking sprigs of wild lavender, which grows abundantly under there, and slipping them behind our ears. Duna and Lila were pointing up, arm in arm to where a band of rare choughs were soaring and diving, round a cave mouth in the cliffs above us.

Moonbeam had disappeared. Shit. I was glancing back, but Lucy sprinted ahead, and presently she and Moonie appeared waving round the next bend.

-‘There’s water round here! Hot and cold bubble baths!’- she shouted beckoning, and they vanished again.

It was the usual story, when people first visit Ice Haven. You reach the first little thermal spa and spend the rest of the day there. But we were in no hurry, I lit up the little wood stove, and started to heat up a delicious soup I had prepared, to eat with our sandwiches.

One pool was a bit too hot and the other too cold, so everyone was in and out and splashing and laughing a lot. I was the last in, to the cold one of course, I did about twenty lengths, it’s tiny, and splashed a few people. Then I headed for the hot bubbly one, where Josie and Moonbeam

were building a little dam with sand, Helped by Duna who was showing off her body, and Lila, shy and wearing a swimsuit.

There in the dark back corner I sat back against the wall, where it's more fizzy and bearably hot, and you can look out at what's going on, watching Bernie and Sol through the sunlit steam, seemingly imitating sea-lions, barking and diving in and out of the cold pool.

After a minute Lucia surfaced and glided straight into me, twisting to kiss and sit up on me, and be folded into my arms. The low sun shining in from our right, burning off the steaming water.

-*'So this is Ice Haven, mmmm more like warm heaven!'*-

-*'Oh yes, and there's all kinds of wildlife here.'*- I said, stupidly.

-*'Is it true there's a prehistoric tomb?'*-

-*'Further down, in a dry cave, actually in an ex volcanic blow hole. My uncle discovered it, er, twenty one years ago, when I was a boy. I saw it then and we helped make the photos. They've been studying it ever since, off and on.'*-

-*'Well they sure had good taste in caves... Oh Barney why aren't you into women? You're totally irresistible.'*- She started spinning over and over, rubbing against and nibbling me.

As slippery as a soapy seal.

-*'It's the hot water turning you on.'*- I gulped. -*'Anyway I thought you knew already, I'm hopelessly in love with you.'*-

-*'Tell me more, I'm not believing you.'*- She was on my lap now, squirming in my arms.

-*'I do remember one incident, in, er, Beardy O Leary's bathroom. Did you..'*-

-*'Yes yes, please show me how you did that, do it now.'*-

-*'Ha! I could give you a tutorial. But I'm only an amateur masseur and, er, missing one finger.. Oh no not now Lucy, later when our daughters go to sleep.'*-

-*'You're trying to escape me again.'*- she murmured.

Pinching and nuzzling me, as sensual as a playful otter..

-*'Barney, Mama, la sopa ya esta hirviendose. The soup's ready!'*- it was Duna.

-*'Can you take it off the stove. With the cloth, careful it's hot! We eat in five minutes.'*-

-*'Josie's falling asleep'*- said Bernie -*'And Moonbeam as well.'*-

-*'We could put them both in the pram, I'll put my stuff on the trolley.'*-

-*'Okay let's do that now.'*-

-*'Mira mama yo y Lila queremos subir al hostel con los demás. La Bernie me dice que si hace falta, ella subirá para cuidarnos, o mama por favor!'*-

Duna had been scheming to join Paco and the other yunkers for a birthday party in the Eagle Park hostel. Now she had somehow enlisted Bernie as a chaperone to evade her mum's objections.

-*'Que pasa? Bernie? Are you offering to take these two to a mad party?'*-

-*'It's an adventure training course. They're doing deep ecology and geology projects.'*-

-*'I know that. But the rest are all older. Duna's a child, and Lila even more. And, and Lila nearly doesn't speak English.'*-

-*'I translate to Lila.'*- said Duna in English. -*'Please Mama. Paco is there. We make a promise to you we won't do love with nobody.'*-

-*'Promising is easy..Oh Barney what do you think? Do I send my baby girl up the mountain with a gang of CLAN boys all half undressed? Help me Barney. You know.'*-

-*Well, like, I can see why you're upset um. But these kids aren't as wild as they look, they wouldn't, I mean. If you like I could phone Nancy the coordinator and she'd watch out for these two young ladies. They're not that young. Plus we could ask Tessa, she's responsible, and her brother, and his friend and Damo..*'-

I could see that Lucy was being swayed.

-*'...So it's not really necessary for Bernie to go up and..'*- Bernie and Sol were nodding.

-*'Oh well if you're all sure, I don't want to be a neurotic mother but.. Listen Duna you can go a bit later on okay. Is there a cable train later?'*-

Duna was looking down, serious and penitent. While glancing gleefully sideways at Lila and me.

-*'Nearly always.'*- says I -*'You just have to call for it to stop.'*-

-*'Well I'll walk them to the station anyway.'*- said Bernie. And Sol was nodding a -*'Me too'*.-

-*'A bit later okay.. And promise me you won't dance the whakka with anybody!'* - Lucia giggled, and everyone laughed and relaxed.

-*'How far is it from here then?'*-

-*'It's less than an hour's walk to the cottage, half that to Maggie's Kitchen.'*-

We were all leaning up on the cool cliff wall, and against each other. Watching the last rays of the sun disappear, and the thunderclouds mushrooming in the west.

-*'I suppose that prehistoric family sat here as well. Watching the sun go down.'*-

-*'Yes yes, but cuddled up over here in a pile of furs. Everything was freezing up.'*-

-*'Really? Didn't you say this was a huge sun trap?'*-

-*'The last refuge. An ice sheet more than a kilometer thick broke around these mountains, and went on nearly to the sea, which kept retreating.'*- [ref.17 Ice Age]

-*'What! You know that?'*- asked Lucy. Between translating for Lila.

-*'Oh yes that's a fact. Our prehistoric friends were trapped here with a lot of other animals. But finally they were all exterminated, by the ice and each other. And ice and rubble came over the top. Hundreds of meters thick. Covering over the watertight tunnel where they buried their dead. That's how we know about them. It was dry and a tiny bit warm inside, preserving their bones for millennia, more than twelve.. My uncle and his friends dug it out, looking for volcanic gemstones.'*-

-*'So the ice stayed for twelve years'*- said Lucy. Gripping my hands -*'Maybe someone could have survived.'*-

-*'Twelve thousand years.'*- I clarified the problem. -*'The ice sheet stayed for twelve bloody thousand years!'*-

-*'Oh shit... So everyone died here.'*-

-*'Absolutely. And all the plants and trees, all the insects of course. No reptiles. All the birds and animals and fishes. Well there's some little pink fishes in the hot water here that may just be survivors.'*-

-*'We really know that then, from their bones and everything.'*-

-*'For certain, the whole country was annihilated by the most recent ice sheet. This was a final refuge. South facing mountains, facing the sea. But they seem to have been quite happy people. There's no evidence of them killing each other anyway. And they weren't patriarchal, a wise lady was in charge.'*-

There was a silence, except for Lucia explaining quietly in Spanish for Lila, Duna understood. Then everyone was just staring and thinking.

Time slowed down. Time stopped.

-*'All nature was just.. wiped out?'*-

I wouldn't say any more. Unless they insisted. We were listening to distant grumbles of thunder.

There were four pairs of us in that cave. Plus maybe a whole race of spirits. Almost remembering a prehistoric climate holocaust. Not suspecting the invasion would start that very night.

There was Bernie and Sol, their arms linked, me and Lucy, cuddled together, and beside me Duna with Lila, looking scared and sleepy. And Josie and Moonbeam of course, sleeping with little snorts. As happy as the night is long.

We sat in silence a while. It was only half dark, and little bats were flitting in and out.

Eating the mosquitoes we attracted.

A pair of nightingales were competing in the woods, one close and one answering, so very far away I wasn't sure it was real.

Lucy was rubbing her silky cheek absently on my hairy chest. Nibbled a nipple and I shivered.

Not minding what her daughter saw, though I felt quite awkward.

-*'Tell us about their last, uh, queen.'*- said Sol. He'd obviously read something.

-*'I'm not sure that's a great idea.'*- I said, nodding at Duna. Lila appeared to be sleeping. -*'It's heavy and it happened right here.'*-

-*'Oh don't worry we've seen everything.'*- said Lucia. -*'If it's too much guts and bones we'll ask you to stop, that's all.'*-

-*'Well. Why not tomorrow.'*- I wasn't in a hurry.

-*'Tell us now. Tell us now.'*- Duna breathed menacingly into my ear.

And Lucy was whispering from the other side. While I was getting nervous, to have both mother and daughter leaning on me.

Because Duna's little hand had wandered under my kilt in the dark and she was stroking my legs. Feeling trapped I turned towards Lucy, but Duna's naughty hand was slipping closer and closer to my private parts!

-*'Tell us about the Queen, Uncle Barney. Tell us Uncle Barney! Tell us now!'*-

I crossed my legs firmly and began quickly.

-*'Well okay, uh. The semi-fossilized bones and artifacts in the blow hole are all jumbled up, they used to slide them down. Except for the last two. We photographed them as they were. The crippled queen, about forty years old, had been sitting up, cradling her dead daughter. The latest study says they're not sure she's the daughter after all, maybe a girl friend or a sister, anyway.'*-

-*'Sitting up? Was she alive in there?'*-

-*'Sure she was, and she could pull the stone to fall shut. She was the last one in all right. When her daughter was killed, she went into the grave with her.'*-

-*'What happened to the girl then?'*- asked Sol.

-*'She was killed in a fight with a bear.'*-

-*'How can you know that?'*- said Bernie.

-*'From her wounds, and there was another skeleton with them, a baby bear.'*-

-*'A baby bear?'*- Sol rolled his eyes in surprise.

-*'The mother bear was killed as well. The two women would've been over, about there, by the dead fire, dying of hunger in the pile of furs. Maybe still hoping their men might come back. When the*

brown bear came in we think the daughter got her with a spear. But she kept coming it seems, and got her as well.'

- 'And they killed the baby?'

- 'The cub couldn't survive without her mother of course. And the mother had to attack the humans to have milk to feed her cub. It was the end game.'

I sprang to my feet, shaking off soft hands and jiggling away pins and needles. To point out marks where beams may have slotted in, to block off the next caves.

- 'Probably the bears attacked when the fireplace over here was totally out. Sure they had burned the barricade walls to keep warm. It was maybe minus twenty degrees in summer, um. But, but this year some real experts are coming to do tests.'

I sat back between Lucy and Duna.

- 'The queen could've eaten the dead bears.'

- 'But she didn't, she dragged the dead girl and bears into the grave tunnel with her. She didn't bother to eat them. More like she took them into her family. Get it?'

- 'Not really.'

- 'Maybe she felt akin to the last bears, even though they had killed her daughter. Maybe.'

- 'Si si si' - said Sol suddenly leaping dramatically around us, huge shadows flying. - 'That happened here, but very long time past!'

- 'Maybe I understand.' - said Lucy. - 'The ice queen was the last one alive here, and buried herself in the family tomb. So maybe she was the last of all the animals still surviving!'

She was rubbing the stone with her forehead, and feeling the dark rock wall.

Biting her knuckles and glancing at nothing, flashing the whites of her eyes.

- 'Maybe, or one of the last. All nature was being wiped out. So she made a special ceremony for the Goddess, um, I don't suppose she was very sad to go, not for herself. She was crippled remember, she could maybe just crawl, from the turf fire to the hot springs and back. She had to stay alive for her daughter. But then she couldn't survive without her either, and she didn't want to. See what I mean?'

- 'But she couldn't be happy, to see her people dying one by one?'

- 'No no not happy, but proud maybe to have completed her life, or whatever I don't know. But we think she dressed up in polar bear furs, with a ceremonial walrus tusk spear, strings of beads that got scattered. With resin balls enclosing baby teeth, and drops of blood and semen from previous generations.'

Our race had survived for countless millennia to seemingly go extinct in this cave. She had the skulls of others arranged around her. And ivory knives carved from the great woolly mammoth, extinct already.

And she laid herself out beautifully. As if she guessed that great Uncle Willie would come sliding down on a rope. Like Indiana Jones with a torch and a camera. Only twenty thousand years too late!'

- 'How amazing we can know what happened so long ago.' - said Sol. Stretching up his arms.

- 'Isn't it.. Some of the D-school groups who come here do a play, like, they make dramas about the ice age people here.'

- 'Tragedy.' - said Bernie.

- 'We need to make the film.' - said Sol.

-*'We were the first to do it I think. Me and Maggie and Stevie and.. years ago. Stevie's dead as well he.'*-

-*'You made a play?'*- said Duna, in my ear.

-*'Hey Barney, were you the bear?'*- Lucy squeezed and tickled me, and Duna joined in.

-*'Okay okay. Maggie played the Ice Queen, of course. We didn't know then that the girl was her daughter, maybe she wasn't. They could've been lesbian lovers... Yeah okay I played the mother bear, and the narrator as well.'*-

A few giggles just. Then a silence. Lila had woken up, coughing, and she and Duna started whispering in low voices. A nearer roll of thunder.

Then a far off squealing, rising desperately and slowly fading out.

Some small mammal was being killed in the woods below us.

-*'So let us hope the climate doesn't kill us all with the hotness!'*- said Sol. Suddenly bounding to his feet.

-*'Why don't we get going fast.'*- said Lucy. -*'It seems like we have very little time, and I need to make a telephone.'*-

-*'A call, not a telephone.'*- said Bernie.

-*'Oh no darling, a telephone's call. Is it possible here?'*

-*'We got excellent coverage, with the aerals on the peak..'*-

Duna was eyeing me up, and squeezing my arm.

-*'Um, Uncle Barney don't forget you promised we can go to the party.'*-

-*'Oh all right, I'll just see if I can talk to Nancy, and er, Tessa for you two then.'*- I said.

She looked chuffed to have totally manipulated me.

-*'Oh Barney, oh dear are you sure nothing bad will happen to them? Que cara dura tienes hija mia.. Duna's got a bloody cheek!'*-

Lucy leaned across me, quite rudely, and started to cuddle and croon over her far from baby daughter. Duna looked self conscious, but then embraced and kissed her back eagerly, murmuring Spanish endearments in her ear. Digging and slipping me grins, and conspiratorial winks.

I finally copped on. They weren't jealous or competing. Duna's game of flirting with me was half to avoid Lucy telling me something. Some secret that once spoken would make us stop her going to the party.

My own ego had made me guess wrong. She didn't mind at all if her mother was with me. And she was winking to make it all obvious to slowpoke Uncle Barney.

-*'Ha ha ha. You can't fool Barney the bear for long.'*- says I.

I bear hugged the both of them, rolling them right over and sitting, but not heavily, on top.

-*'This time I win. The winner is Barney the bastard!'*-

And so on, trying to pin the two of them, and tickling, till they mock-squealed for mercy.

These are very ticklish people.

-*'No. Stop. Ai ai ai stop no . Barney. Really Please ah no oh no...'*-

The racket had roused Moonbeam. '

But instead of crying she was climbing out of the pram.

Cheering us on and eager to join in.

-*'The bear! Come on the baby bear.'*- Sol and Bernie were cheering too.

-*'Uncle Barney. Can I go in the pram now. Please please?'*- said Josie when the noise died down a little.

-*'Ha ha ha. I'm guessing all your secrets. You can never fool Barney the bastard!'*- I lied.
Growling as fiercely as I was able.

Chapter thirty seven

Maxie's fall

-I settled down to spend the long day crying.'-

Maxie

I woke with a throbbing headache. It was day, but still dark and gloomy. A bullet or bit of metal had grazed my left arm, causing a cut, that's all. If it had passed a bit deeper, they told me later, I'd have bled to death. And I didn't even know I'd been hit!

Plus I was scratched and bruised all over. All alone, I thought, in the forest, cold to the bone, with cold rain water trickling down my neck. So I fumbled and groaned, and found the mini umbrella, still in the rucksack pocket.

I was all in one piece it seemed. Later I discovered little bits of shrapnel in that rucksack. I wasn't badly injured after all.

But Kazoo hadn't been so lucky.

I was just so dozy. First I thought I'd pissed myself, but I was more sore and sticky than wet.

I realized I was having a really bad period. But of course I couldn't have a period.

Then I was fiddling frantically with my pants.

Maybe I'd cut my leg, or the blood was from my arm.

Maybe no baby. A lot of blood had come from my vagina.

And sure thing the future Kazoo had gone with it.

It's weird how I just don't react sometimes, when something really bad happens to me. I got out my hanky, the water bottle and tissues and tried to clean myself up. I stuffed the soggy mess under a nice yellow rock, and sat on it, under my little broolly.

Only then little by little, did I begin to cry.

I had lost Macker, and Kazoo too, it seemed. It was my fault, obviously I was being punished. Maggie was gone forever and Barney didn't need me any more. Only for Moonbeam would I even think of going on with my life. And I knew she'd be well looked after.

So I just cried a bit more. And then I settled down to spend the long day crying.

They must've heard me, sniveling in the bushes, because I wasn't left there long.

One minute I was staring blankly at some frondy fern.

Next thing Veera Chimes was staring through it at me.

-Maxie Moon? We're here looking for you. But now we're cut off as well.. Are you okay?'

-Did you find Macker?'

-Macker Mucdunna. No we didn't. Maybe he's hiding, or captured. You both did a fantastic job.

Only for those mad Clanners you'd have been safe. Oh Maxie you're injured. Let's look at you first..'

-*'He's dead, I'm sure. I saw him fall, when they opened fire. He's dead, I saw him fall. He only came here because I asked him.'*- I began sobbing harder.

-*'Now Maxie, there's nobody up there, we just searched. Just lots of beer cans and plastic rubbish they left behind .. Let's see your arm now.'*-

-*'I saw him fall, like in my premonition. The..the video camera flew up, into the gorse.'*-

-*'Camera? He threw a camera? Then he wasn't dead see. But where is it?'*-

-*'Right in the g-gorse, coming onto the top. We filmed the, the whole thing. And I've lost the air-gun and the tent I think. Oh shit and where's the mobile phone?'*-

-*'We found a green tent all right.'*-

She nodded her head and some of her party scampered off. Then she was starting to clean my arm.

-*'My name's Veera.'*- she said. -*'Sounds like you've had a horrible time.'*-

-*'Oh Veera I've lost my baby Kazoo as well.'*- I said at last, showing my bloody pants under the jacket -*'I was more than three months pregnant..'*-

-*'What!? Maybe it's not too late!'*-

-*'No I, I already c-cleaned myself a bit. Th-There's a bit of her under this stone I think..'*-

-*'Oh shit shit how terrible poor Maxie. Oh my darling you poor unlucky girl, oh how awful for you..'*-

She was crying herself and embracing me, then remembered her medical training

-*'..Now you gotta be hard and put that foetus out of your head from the start okay Maxie. Okay will you promise me that.? It's time to be a hard woman alright, like all our sisters done before. Come on now I know you can do it. You'll just have your baby a bit later that's all..'*-

-*'But Macker.. Macker is dead how can I? It's my fault as well he only came for-for me.'*- I went on weeping.

-*'Hey hey enough of that now. Dead men don't hide video cameras, and there's no body. Really that's true.'*-

-*'Sure they took it to bury, I never should have..'*-

-*'Now stop that now Maxie, they're arrogant idiots, they could never be bothered carrying bodies. And we found no blood.'*-

-*'Ow ow.'*-

I think she'd done the same first aid course as me. She'd got my pants down and was dabbing me with iodine, while a young fella with a mustache and headphones held a big umbrella over us and looked the other way, his face all yellowy white.

-*'We gotta move, do you think you can walk? We'll get you to the clinic in Hankshill. See we can't get home, we're cut off. But everything's normal on this side.'*-

-*'Can't we just walk through?'*-

-*'They're making road blocks and checkpoints. And they've arresting some people. Now the Clan-ners are making friends with them, giving them drugs and food and playing music wherever they stop.'*-

-*'You're joking.'*-

-*'No no they want to get in with them and everything, but some have been arrested. Sure thing they took your Macker as well. So we can't go through, in uniform, or injured, we're all terrorists to them... Maybe we'll slip back tomorrow.'*-

-*'They're coming back now.'*- Another fella appeared. -*'They've found the camera! The film is amazing. And the convoy has finally got moving. They're being escorted across the border by the Blackroad CLAN!'*-

-*'Did you see if they have Macker prisoner?'*-

-*'We asked Ernie from Blackroad to find out for us. He'll ring us later.'*-

-*'Let's get out of here then.'*- said Veera. -*'I'm sopping wet!'*-

-*'Let's just go. Let's go now then.'*- says I. Trying to stand up.

Chapter thirty eight

Macker's goats

- 'I really could hear bagpipes far away!' -

Macker

Thanks to everyone who helped me write this part.

I was delighted with myself because I had been able to zoom in on the Clanners defiant escape from the military. I got them on video, firing air guns and arrows at the army vehicles, celebrating their escape when Maxie blew up the bridge.

- 'Run, run, run Macker run..' - she cried.

I almost lost my life getting that sequence. The moment the Clanners went out of view I ran for it. This huge noisy helicopter was about to land on top of our little camp site. I ran after Maxie, zipping the camera, it was just a few meters to the edge and a drop into a thick wood.

Running like rabbits but too late. Those bastards just opened fire on us without warning. My mind was working at warp speed, like it knew it was about to stop forever. I threw the camera hard as I could, into some prickly bushes.

But just as I did so I missed a jump, tripped on a rock and fell headlong.

The luckiest fall of my life, into a boggy hole with a splat, because at the same moment a terrific explosion went off just behind us somewhere. I was flat in the mud, dazed and winded and just gasping for any bit of air I could get into me.

But I was okay, little by little I was coming round.

I needed to find Maxie fast, I needed her to be alive!

Then there were a couple of soldiers clambering past, ignoring me. I wiggled my hands and smiled, figuring they were less likely to shoot me that way. Three more had appeared and noticed me.

They seemed to be taking aim, I would be difficult to miss!

- 'Excuse me excuse me have you seen two white goats back there Sir?' -

I said as loud as I could gasp.

- 'My goats. I've lost my goats!' -

The first soldier lowered his rifle.

- 'Kid says he's lost his goats man.' - I caught the twang in his voice.

- 'American! Hey you Mister American hi there Sir. You wanna little grass, no seeds? Hey American you seen a coupla goddarn goats back there? Or you prefer a little black hashish, personal

use only, anyone interested?' - One of them was nodding. *- 'I tell you what pals since you just arrived I can make you a special free offer today only and... ' -*

I didn't dare stop talking, two of them were looking at me gravely, like they were waiting for me to finish speaking before casually finishing me off. No problem to me of course, the talking, I was always a chatterbox, but then a young wiry haired officer pushed through.

Corporal Burnstein had arrived.

- 'Don't shoot him boys remember we're community soldiers. We need to talk to the locals.'

- 'Maybe he's a suicide bomber.'

- 'Maybe he just blew those bridges. Search him Carl. And Buddy and Willy, search all round here carefully. You boy what's your name?'

- 'Mucker.' I said grinning hard as I could. Later I wished I'd used my real name. *- 'Mucker Durutti, and we've never had a suicide bomber in this country, as far as I know.'*

I managed to slip Carl a ready made joint as he was searching me.

- 'Hey keep your hands up! Tell me, how can I get in contact with the local police force?'

- 'Oof... Tricky one.' I tried to laugh. *- 'They were finally disbanded and abolished last year.'*

- 'What! So there is no law here!'

- 'Well really there's thousands of laws. They vote every weekend on them.'

- 'But.. how do they catch criminals?'

- 'Um, tricky as well. There's no crime here really. Since they legalized drugs and abolished money I mean. Why steal something if it's free?'

- 'That can't work. No money?'

- 'There is some actually, and.. just we don't need it much. Can I get up now Sir?'

- 'We're here to bring back law and order and restore the legitimate government. We need a strong loyal police force to help us.'

He had nodded to Carl and I was allowed to extricate myself from the muddy boghole.

- 'Everyone knows why you're here Sir. It comes on the telly every day. So you guys may as well just tell the truth. Hey why don't I advise you Peace Police! You don't know too much about this place.'

- 'We found a gun Sir, down the bank there. It looks like an air rifle. And a good cellphone, look..' Buddy and Willy were back already.

A big wave of golden happiness broke and splashed all over me.

Maxie was alive! They'd found the rifle and the phone, but there was no talk of blood! No body., sure she was alive! I felt like hugging them.

- 'And an empty pussy cat purse with Maxie Moon written on it.'

- 'Is this weapon or that phone yours?'

- 'Not at all commander, that's a toy gun, for scaring off those goddamn crows and jackdaws, in them there cornfields.'

- 'Don't talk shit sonny. This is a lethal weapon. Found ten meters from you, in a terrorist bombing post. Carl, lock this prisoner in the ATC. We find your prints on that gun boy and you'll do thirty years.'

That didn't worry me much. In fact I was elated, walking down the hill and chatting with the squaddies. Number one, I was alive, two, it looked like Max had got away, three they hadn't found the camera with film of the bombing... just as well! I

If I could just slip away now things would be perfect.

But that was before they started torturing me.

-*'Hey Simon here's a prisoner for you he needs dabs and DNA tests compared with a file on a gun and a cellphone.'*-

-*'Hello Simon I'm pleased to meet you Sir.'*-

-*'Did you speak to me?'*- This guy looked like a pork butcher on his annual outing.

-*'Yes Sir how happy I am to have a Community Police Pacification Force here this fine morning!'*-

-*'Either you shut your mouth or I cut out your tongue right now!'*- He had me by the collar, twisting it to choke me. I nodded and grinned sincerely.

-*'Oh Carl, by the way,'*- I gurgled. -*'could you possibly loosen these hand-ties they're cutting the blood at my wrists.'*-

Carl would've done it. I'd forgotten to pull and tighten my muscles when they put them on.

-*'I'll see to my prisoner.'*- said Simon -*'You insolent terrorist shit!'*-

He cut the wrist bands, passed my hands through a prints machine that pricked my fingers, and slipped on new ones. Behind my back, a knee pushing me down. Then pulled and jerked them twice as tight.

-*'Ow ow ow that's way too tight Sir.'*-

-*'That's it. That tongue comes out.'*- And he had a big razor in his hand!

-*'No no the Sarge wants to talk to him. He said he's not to be harmed.'*- Carl had hung around to put in a word for me.

-*'You'll destroy my hands Sir. The blood is stopped.'*-

But he was taping my mouth over with a wide duct tape. This time I remembered, and opened my mouth as he did it. Pulling it down slightly so it wouldn't block my nose.

Then I was in a dark stinking armoured vehicle, free to move around, and trying to be busy not to think about the pain in my hands. The hatch let in a line of light, and I could just about see out.

More and more soldiers were arriving on foot and being let bivouac there in a field of poppies and thistles, while they waited for their vehicles to catch up.

My improvised prison was full of plastic crap, half eaten junk food and Macdonalds happy meals. A piercing stench of piss and shit and sweat. Rotting trash and stinking tissues. In the cracks there was packed sand, this van had been in some colonial desert.

So I got into managing my pain. I had no choices and plenty of experience. But after a long hour or so I knew my hands would soon be permanently crippled.

I was standing up, shaking my head violently, moaning and crying out and stamping my feet. My world shrinking in, till all there is is pain.

My feet stamping by themselves in time to the distant pipes..

Pipes? Yes.. pipes! I really could hear bagpipes far away!

Next thing I was trying to get a sideways angle to see out the crack, like a drunken swan, waddling with my hands behind my backside. Nothing, clouds of dust and wind flung leaves. A big storm gathering..

Then they were appearing, yes! Coming slowly down the hill. One two three, a dozen, lots of them!

Shaven and, tattooed, more than half naked, wearing pouches, wide yellow arm bands and leather belts. Some in black. Some in green. Some on ponies. Steering their big wheeled trolleys, loaded down with beer and ice. With bagpipes, trumpets, quivers, and the mockers blowing!

The Clanners! Clan Yeti were coming back!

The chosen strategy was to subvert, infiltrate, convert and corrupt. We'd have preferred a guerrilla war of course, but a series of Wise-Mass votes confirmed the policy. It was better, we thought, than the pacifist alternative.

I knew all that, in theory, but these country Clanners had heroically run away, then just gone home, got their friends and their woeful music, and all of their home brew beer... And met the invading army head on, before they had even gotten across the border!

I wasn't left there a minute longer, the officers were outside dithering over whether to open fire, arrest them or tolerate a social exchange. Corporal Burnstein had me taken out to give them the lowdown, and with my hands freed, though still hopping and shaking my wrists in agony, I was ordered to oblige.

-Of course your mission, as community commandos, is to make friends with these harmless, er, hippy types.. So that the message goes back, that our cultures can unite, as one family, in peace and harmony with.. '-

-They're handing out marijuana Sir, and good beer!'-

-What, for free?'-

-They have a donations box. Victims of Corporate Terror!'-

-They sure are lousy businessmen. Look Wilky that girl's wearing nothing!'-

-Where, where?'-

-They're painted on! Lily pants and jungle fruit!'-

-And that guy there. He's got a vampire bat dick. And, oh my great god look!..

Two gorgeous looking lads were strolling round the bend, holding hands, in shorts, suspenders and tails. Real tails.

-Oh my gawwd!'-

They just *had* to wear them. The latest rage in fake prehensile monkey and parrot tails. Controlled with their P belts by a little box, tiny hydraulic tubes and an air-canister.

Plus a judicious swing of their sexy buttocks.

-Body art, monkey tails, stick-ons, you want some, you need some now?'- I said.

-Let me get a photo, hey you girl.'-

Simon had a gun stuck in my shoulder blades. Still, I thought that was the moment I should've made a break for it, while they were gaping at the bodies under the art.

-Here's a copy of the booklet, I confiscated one.'-

A young sergeant appeared behind the armoured car.

-But this is a What's-On mag, with a yellow phone guide.'-

-They're handing out local cellphones as well, there's a free offer.'

-Anybody want fresh apples? They're very sweet.'-

One of the trolleys had an amp and lorry battery, and a skinny black Clanner was strumming out a mock-Country singalong.

Another was starting to mass produce popcorn, while circles of soldiers gathered to fire questions.

Flirting openly already with the Clanner women. Who were laughing and handing out those pink plastic instruction cards. On how to avoid committing Shit-Ons with them.

-*'It's too late already to stop them.'*- said Corporal Burnstein to the officers. Hands on his head.
-*'They just took over, look at that! This mission is a trip to another planet.'*-

Just then some kind of officer appeared.

-*'I've got the forensic scan results for that prisoner sir.'*- My heart fell and I was groaning inside.
-*'He handled the air-rifle, very powerful but not fired recently. And the cellphone as well. It's not analyzed yet.'*-

-*'Okay boy you're up for interrogation. Any more details?'*-

-*'Yes Sir. Both items were handled by a second terrorist. Young woman, less than twenty, fair hair blue eyes about one meter eighty, maybe pregnant.'*-

-*'It's her!'*- said Corporal Burnstein gleefully. -*'We have her photos already, running away. What is the name of your accomplice sonny?'*-

-*'YEEEEEE HAAAAAAAAA.'*- I shrieked. Too late with my Clanner whoop, and started yelling.

-*'Tell them I've been arrested. Tell them.. '*-

Simon the butcher just grabbed my hair and twisted, nearly wrenching my head off.

But the Clanners *did* hear me anyway. I heard them whoop and shout something. And I *was* seen, getting my mouth re-taped and my damaged wrists re-banded, and being kicked back into the van.

Sure thing a lot of people would try to get me out.

Chapter thirty nine

Adventure Way

-‘I’m 13, I hardly shave, and pus squirts out my spots...’-

-‘Hello Tessa this is Pardy.. Hello Tessa.. Are you awake at all’-

Tessa was awake all right, had slept really short and really badly. Oh so romantic, under the stars with Paco, who was already asleep before he even lay down, leaving her to battle with tiger mosquitoes, *inside* the useless net!

Okay he *had* been fantastic, off another galaxy, calm and elegant and so funny, in black and purple. He had smiled mysteriously, surreptitiously squeezing her tits, and murmuring endearments in exotic Spanish.

Tessa was more than ready for Paco to be her lover, but he was holding her at arms length. He was so calm and mature and super intelligent, yet physically he just wasn’t ready, even though they were the same age. Paco was affectionate, he’d grin and blink rapidly and give her little hugs, touching was just fine and fun..

But then suddenly he was a shy boy, and he’d gently evade her hands and shrug and giggle.

Tessa replayed the vivid memory again, feeling an echo of that flooding surge, hands on each other’s buttocks, as they danced the Whakka up close for the first time..

*Starting slow and mocking, ironic and gasping with sex,
breaking into short lines of fast double rhythms,
short but next time a little bit faster and longer..*

She heard a far off shrieking cry, on the mountain, and something was flapping in the breeze, maybe the bugs would blow away.

Now she was even wider awake, stretching her hot body and leaning on Paco in his sleeping bag..

*You danced it embracing, as a slow number,
and ended up rubbing wickedly against your partner at double speed!
It had been deliciously lecherous, Paco finally got going!*

Then Damo had ruined her night, her stupid jealous ugly little brother!..

She had rolled over to look for the ringing phone, taking care the mosquito net didn’t open again. Locating it, she jabbed a flashing button.

-‘Hello Tessa this is Pardy.. Hello Tessa.. Are you awake at all...hello can you hear me...’-

-‘Hi super Pardy baby. What the hell’s wrong now?’-

-‘Hello Tessa. Sorry to wake you. They say the invasion has finally begun. They’ve landed troops up and down the coast and they came across the border.’-

-*'Oh my God.. Macker and Maxie were on border patrol, the stupid, stupid.. '*-
Paco was stirring in the bag, catching the urgent tone.
-*'Yes well we don't know what happened yet. The phone they had was cut off.. '*- Barney explained.
-*'Oh no no no, oh shit oh.. '*-
-*'Don't worry there's no battles, like, it seems like a really Mickey-Mouse invasion.'*-
-*'Micky-Mouse 'Wise-Mass' as well. How can we not resist them, and at the same time blow them up!'*-
-*'I know I know. But we can't talk by phone. Listen we've called a Coppice Pool Assembly for half ten this morning here. Then some of us will try to get back to the city. Maggie's Ashes Ceremony is postponed, er, sure thing your CLAN group will want to go up for the demos and that. Can you make it down for the meeting?'*-
-*'Yeah of course. We can get there in an hour and a half from here.'*-
-*'If you leave early you'll have time to come down the Adventure Way. Nancy has the harnesses.'*-
-*'Well maybe.'*- She wasn't too keen.
-*'The lads are well into it anyway. They want to do it, and I need their opinions.'*-
-*'Okay then. But Damo's being a pig as usual.'*-
-*'I hope nothing bad happened to Duna and Lila?'*- Barney asked.
-*'No, of course not. Duna's great, taking care of everyone. They slept early in the tent. No. I'm happy to babysit Duna, she's a goody.'*-
-*'One more thing. Can you wake Danny and ask him to ring Sol here now. He wants to go right now and needs an assistant.'*-
-*'Okay I'll do that.'*- Tessa groaned and started digging for the torch.
-*'Leave the tents with Nancy okay. And tell them all, that anyone undoing both safety clips gets punched on the nose, by me.'*-
-*'Okay but ... Well let's hope my brother and Maxie show up soon.'*-
-*'They'll be back I bet, see you here about midday then. Big kiss Tessa. Keep cool with Damo.'*-
-*'Huh! That's impossible! Bye bye.. '*-

* * *

Damo was hanging back, just following the thick wooded track. Eaten by mosquitoes while he slept. Or by something worse! Leeches? Lice? Too shy to shed his heavy pocket-pants. Itching and scratching till he bled, and feeling that he stank.

The sweat dripped off his balls, and down his legs.

Carrying the rucksack, of course. A lump in his throat and tears in his eyes, after another furious row with Tessa before leaving. Now thinking of his brother Macker, sure that the bastards had got him, sure they would kill him.

Damo just about suppressed a sob.

-*'Just get away from me Damo you moron you pathetic fucking brainless stinking idiot. Get out of my sight you smelly wanker. Too stupid to wank! No wonder everyone hates you. You stink! Where are your friends? You got no friends coz everyone hates you boring boring bad tempered lazy shit! Just get your spotty pus filled ugly mug out of my life and stop making me miserable '*-

Tessa had ranted on to her darling younger brother, and more besides!

Of course he *did* know how to wind her up all right, but that was self defence... Accuse her in public of stealing his things, of spreading false stories about him, of having it easy in prison and making up lies to get credit, of being fat and smelly..

But it *was* true that he had no friends. And maybe he *would* just prefer to get into his own thoughts, who wouldn't? Detention hadn't been so bad in that way. Couldn't be worse than Tessa slagging him off.

Mocking him in front of Duna and the others.

Especially in front of her.

Because he had been surprised by a powerful and totally secret love for Duna. Since he first saw her coming down the gangplank, with Paco and her mama Lucy. That moment, when she swung over the rail after her mum, glimpsing her golden black legs and pink knickers.

Duna. Too frightened to jump, gnawing her knuckles, only two meters up, incredibly beautiful and vulnerable. Then jumping off blindly, eyes closed. To be caught and swung by a laughing Sol on the dock below.

He was thinking about gorgeous Duna, and whacking a vicious looking thorn bush with his stick. That lump stayed stuck in his throat, pondering his pathetic folly, that someone as repulsive as himself should dream of such a girl.

Such a woman, he should say, because on another level he saw she really was a special person, apart altogether from the amazing crush he had on her.

One thing was she just talked to you, and touched you and listened to everyone all the time. Duna just assumed that everyone she met, even himself, had an important emotional life, which she, and why not everyone else, was eager and privileged to share, and of course needed to tell each other about, immediately.

Where the hell was that coming from? She said her mother was a witch!

Thinking of Duna... ah... with faraway thunder already grumbling. Damo slowed even more, stopped to drag a fallen branch from the new track..

And also because she was just so so sexy! He could reproduce her image in his head, in loving detail.

To him Duna's puppy fat reflected heaven on earth, why not!

Her eyes, her hair, her dark exotic skin, oh, her little pink nipples that stuck up, so brave and free!
Her..

But there she was! What? In the flesh? There was Duna herself!

Padding back down the mulchy path in her moccasins and orange flannel skirt.

Of course. She had come back for him!

-*Oh hi Damo I am coming for you. Come on don't be sad, let's walk.*- And she took his two hands in hers.

-*Wh wh um, thanks for uh coming.*- His breathing was out of order.

-*I'm happy for to come, let's go. Is gonna rain pronto.*-

Damo was struck dumb, shocked that his erotic fantasy was a real person. They set off, hand in hand.

-*Maybe you tell me what is really the problem by your sister?*-

-*'Er, well, she can't stand me. And she has to be with me as I got no friends'*-

Damo shrugged, suddenly jubilant. He was saying something intelligent, and he was holding Duna's soft hand!

-*'Then I get irritated and make up something terrible.'*-

-*'For me she's dominating and bossy.'*-

-*'Really?'*

-*'Yes sure and I got a problem for share the room with her, even for a temporary um time, but under this she's a great person.'*-

-*'I know that really but.. Is this the way?'*-

They had stopped, where the path went suddenly down steeply into a cave, past geological and Eco Information Boards.

-*'Oh yes I am turning here, is a short cave, come down. Now tell me please what is your problem Damo. Tell me quickly all the hard things for you, then I tell you mine.'*-

There were stalagmites and stalactites, Duna was embracing one. Big ones and small. Cold drips on their overheated bodies.

-*'Ummm cool at last! Come on. Tell me now.'*-

-*'My problems are, Tessa is older and clever and does everything well. Me, I need to hide in my safe thoughts. I can't read or write very well yet, while Macker's a scholar, so they say I'm stupid. I am stupid, that's why I got no friends, um.. My mum died. My dad killed himself in the alcoholic asylum, I'm.. '*-

He stopped. Goggling at Duna, who was licking and undulating against the cold, slimy stalactite.

-*'Mmmm salty and cool. One moment please, um, you got no friends coz you scare them off, coz you think they can't like you, coz you think you're stupid?'*

-*'Something like that, er, and also people look down on travellers.. '*-

Then she had grabbed his hand, pulling him round two corners, under an overhang. They were crawling and scrambling out onto a wide stone ledge, overlooking the valleys. Panting, their knees a bit scratched, they could see right down the twin gorge.

Gigantic cumulus clouds were boiling up above them, the cables below criss-crossing the chasm.

-*'Go on, go on, tell me more. We can find the answer out, what more, don't stop..'*- Duna insisted.

-*'I'm 13, I hardly shave, and pus squirts out my spots, when I..'*-

-*'I've got something good for that, in my bag..'*- she broke in.

They set out across the apparently easy rope-way, clicking onto the safety cable. But soon they were sweating and laboring, and still not getting even half way. Finally they reached the far side, collapsing in the muddy grass.

Then Damo's mind shifted up a whole gear.

-*'My head is too full I can't speak. Full of paintings I can't paint. Stories I can't tell, and songs, all trying to jump out and be free..'*-

It was true, but Damo couldn't believe he'd just said it out loud.

-*'Hey cool you're an artist!'*- Duna had found water, gushing out of the cliff wall, and started splashing herself, wetting her skirt. -*'Two more bad things and you're finished. Tell me horrible secrets..'*-

-*'I'm always in the way. Er, I'm clumsy and slow and very very boring. Now the torturers got my brother and Maxie and..'*-

He stopped, half laughing almost crying, why was he confessing to her? She was nodding at him to continue, scooping water onto her head.

-*'I know nothing at all about girls and I can't ask.. I don't even know what is a, a period, or, or a c-clitoris..'*-

-*'Really!?. Oh wow! Then this is my lucky day!'*-

Duna tucked up her flannel skirt, and seemed about to give an illustrated lecture.

He thought she had flowery underwear, then remembered the stick-ons.

Her smile spread out from ear to ear.

As she peeled open two petals of a purple lily. To reveal and feel. And show off her little pink gem.

-*'The girls here give friendly names to their clitorises. Lila calls hers Kissy, get it?. Maybe coz you're a poet you can think of a gooder name? My Mama calls hers Erosa and... See how she comes out if you play with her, look, bigger and super good. Like yours but more, um, littler..'*-

Damo was half entranced half horrified. As she swung a leg up the mossy bank, showing herself off.

-*'Kissy?. That flower smells real.'*- he whispered, biting his lips -*'It's a lovely lily.'*-

-*'Lovely Lily. That's it, that's fine! Look I'll show you how I..'*-

She was sniffing the false lily aroma.

-*'Oooo, these eco-tattoos smell delicioso. They even taste good, like nectar.. But I can't reach down to her, um. Can you..um..?'*-

But Damo was spaced out and totally missed the moment.

-*'Oh no no I promised my Mama no!'*- she laughed merrily.

Patting down her flannel dress, she kissed his cheek.

-*'Don't be sad Damo anymore please. Tell me a good secret now and we'll be friends okay? I got an idea I'm waiting to ask you.'*-

-*'You do? Oh, something good, er let's see. I can remember everything that ever happens to me, er. Oh look the next cable starts here.'*-

-*'A good secret, about me. Come on if you can't tell we can't be friends. Yes or no. Now!'*-

He was stuck, suddenly she was being very hard.

-*'Well okay um there's one thing see I..'*- No no he couldn't.

-*'Just say it what the hell!'*- She sounded like Lucy, her mother.

-*'I'm in love with you Duna.'*- he blurted.- *'Since I first saw you jumping off the boat. I know this ruins everything, um..'*-

He stopped, because she'd put her hands on his face, and was kissing both cheeks. Grinning like a porpoise.

-I knew it I knew it, that's why I was timid about talking to you. I'm not in love, sorry, but it don't matter we can be friends. Only you gotta treat me normal like your amiga and just be normal. If you can do this I'll help you okay?'

-'Yes yes yes that's, er, fine, I know you're a good person apart, um I. You're my friend! Um I don't need to do anything I mean, sorry. I'm happy just to see you.' He didn't know what to say.

-'Well let's see if you get better from it. This is my idea, mira, look, my brother Paco and Tricia are really like lovers right now. I mean they're fifteen both. But they got nowhere in Little Agnes Street to um, meet. Coz I'm sharing with her and you're with Paco in your room. Oh but Paco's very happy with you. He says you're clean and friendly and very quiet and boring.'

Damo was nodding quickly, starting to catch her drift.

-'And you don't really stink, Damo.'

She was staring straight into his eyes, from just a foot away, her fingers round his neck, twisting and curling his hair.

-'I can't believe you're saying this. Are you saying, um, sorry I don't get it.'

He glanced about, squirming, on one leg.

-'Yes you do. We share your room. Only for a short time, by most until the other house comes empty. Then I show you how to read properly, and you correct me my English.....What do you say?..We treat us as only friends and help you and me.?''

She leaned back, peering quizzically, then gripped him and heaved, and momentarily lifted him right off the ground.

-'You wanna do a dope deal baby?'

She couldn't stop laughing at his gob-smacked face.

But kindly disguised it so he could start laughing too.

-'I am a dope already. Yes yes of course you got a deal. I can't believe it.. You don't hate me!'

-'That's cool then.' She slapped his shoulder gently. *-'Are we going down this cable now?'*

-'Why don't we try this one yes, and skip the others. Go by the path so we can catch up.'

-'Catch what? My first problem is the high places. They scare my pants off.'

-'Me too... what else?' The control light was still flashing green and she was hooking the set of wheels on the harness to the cable.

-'I tell my secrets when we are arriving back to our room okay. But first I need to make it okay with my Mama. I will explain you girly things, okay?'

-'We say 'explain to you', not 'explain you'.

-'Thank you Damo! Explain TO me everything.'

-'We need to go to the CLAN first. And ask them to get Macker and Maxie back. There'll be a demo and.. Look! You just lock on the safety catch, grip down here.'

-'I know that already thanks. But maybe they're now by our home waiting for us. Then we gonna throw away that horrible army.. Oh shit Damo it's impossible. You have to push me I can't jump!'

It was a terrifying drop, across the deep half gorge.

-'No no, no puedo. I can not jump.'

-'You don't jump silly. Just lift your legs and hang so it rolls along. But nearer the edge, here I'll hold you.'

Damo held her in his arms and neither one let go.

She turned and kissed his mouth gravely. Gravity was slowly pulling them apart, with little gasps of terror. Lifting her knees, she drifted away backwards, out into the void, their outstretched hands separating slowly.

Like the awful end of a Bollywood romance.

-*'See you in a minute then. If I die you get my cuddly pig!'*-

Barney

-*'Hey Barney bring down my bag. It's somewhere there.'*- Lucy called up to the balcony. Where I was clearing away the last of our office as the storm began.

-*'And the other computer leads.'*- came Bernie's voice. *'They must be still up there.'*-

I'd been working up on the wide balcony since before dawn. Lucy'd been there all night long, taking part in a Women's Rescue show and chatting with her friends all over. So it was she who had raised the alarm.

The invasion had really begun.

It's relatively cool there at night, and often beautiful, with the mist swirling up from the wooded valleys. You can see the sea on a clear day, and imagine the Ice Age.

We'd planned to have the local Assembly outside as well, on that big balcony terrace at the front of Maggie's Kitchen, our self-catering hostel. It's a fantastic free hotel, based on an old drying barn for coppice cuttings. Successive project groups have fitted upstairs platforms, dormitories and showers, log walls and a real kitchen of course, and stacks more stuff.

The neighbours were already gathering. We'd have our little meeting instead in the covered terrace below.

But the kids still hadn't arrived from their first ever descent of the new Adventure Way. A strange and scary early morning storm was beginning. I was worried, which was unusual for me. Everything had been made double safe, but the violent and unpredictable climate change was breaking new records every month.

Lucy read my face. She saw that I was nervous straight away, and started getting frantic herself.

-*'I can't get through to Paco please let's go look for them now!'*-

-*'They'll arrive in a minute sure if something happened they'd turn on the alarm or phone us.'*-

-*'But look at that wind, they'll get blown away!'*-

-*'Let's give them five minutes. Look Bernie's set up the office down here.'*-

Bernie had found a good corner, in the dining, work, and play hall downstairs. Now she pulled back her headphones.

Weary and concerned wrinkles were lining up around her face.

Lucy sat on the bench beside her. The page had come up, and suddenly she resumed her typing.

-*'Finally we're postponing the Health and D-School conferences, it's a pity, but we'll have more time to prepare.'*- said Bernie. -*'Did you send the translated report yet?'*-

-*'Yes yes, well I'm just finishing now.'*-

-*'Look. Look at Moonbeam now. How bossy she is!'*-

Moonie had the two Parker kids and Josie copying her. Marching behind her round the library and workshop area. There was another loud crackle of thunder and they dived under a table together, squealing.

-*'The bombs, the bombs! The bombs are falling down!'*-

A wild banging noise came louder and louder.

Like angry giants crashing through the trees .

-*'We'd better cut the lekky, I'm going to close shutters.'*- said Bernie. And rushed off.

-*'Why don't you try phoning them again Barney?'*-

Lucia was typing flat out while switching language. Yet was able to hold a conversation at the same time.

I stood behind her a moment, started massaging her neck, and temples. She began squirming her bare back against my tummy, arching, then groaning. Finally she stopped typing and pressed save. Threw her head back, and tried to rise and kiss me upside down.

-*'That's finished at last.'*- she sighed, turning.

Grabbing me hard and urgently. Then breaking away.

-*'It's all translated into Spanish, I've put in a cover note to reassure the mothers.. But why don't they come Barney, oh why, why why?'*-

I noticed the window behind her had gone black dark, as if night had fallen again.

-*'Is that report for the families of the exchange kids?'*- I asked, to pass time. My own stomach was churning.

-*'Yunkers, please, not kids. There's a program that sends it to everyone. More than forty thousand addresses, between individuals and media and..'*-

Now she was staring in my eyes from too close up, tears on her cheeks, holding me tightly and pulling me violently against her.

-*'But what does, um, what does it, er, say?'*- As if I didn't know.

The lights went out, her face was flickering black.

-*'It just says none of the foreign visitors are dead, and just two lightly injured, plus three arrests only, and, um,. Giving details of the campaigns against the invasion and what they have to do to help..'*-

She was pinching my back and leg, trying to lift and hurting me, but I didn't complain..

-*'Then saying it's all exaggerated, that we can manage and like, absorb their troops, oh, only so few of them and, and not to believe anything on Fux TV and.. '*-

I was half listening. Our legs were mixing up.

While another part of me was marveling at my luck.

Only now in the middle of the crisis did I really get it. This amazing woman was actually in love with me! How else could you explain it. And I realized then that I'd never been so mad about anyone else, not ever. I mean.. I was always thinking about her.

Lucy had stopped explaining and started crying. And I cradled her loosely as she sniffed and wept with worry. Twisting against my chest.

And how come we had somehow both fallen in love! Lucky or what? And what did that mean?

Then I saw in the lightning flash, why I'd been denying we were gonna be lovers.

I was afraid to lose my safe little groove. I

I'd been saying *no* because I was scared I'd break down again and have to reject her. But now I was through that, hopefully.

And a moment later all kinds of new scenarios were slotting into place..

The kids, the house, our future.

I should be ashamed of myself, being blocked up for so long, never seeking help, while giving good advice myself.

That's when I let my lips join with her shivering ones, and my tongue slid under hers. I kissed Lucia for the first time because I wanted to, not just letting her kiss me.

She realized that straight away and hugged me even closer.

Like she'd fold me up and wrap me into her.

That whacking noise distracted us. Bushes lashing the hostel walls. We have the big pine trees tied with steel cables so they can't fall on the wooden houses.

-*'That's it Barney I'm going out.'*-

She was pulling me and I followed towards the door.

Shouting over a tremendous roll of thunder, then I was lighting the oil lamp.

-*'Let's go, let's go I'm pissing in my pants!'*-

But just as she spoke the door swung violently open, side-swiping a chair, and Paco, Tessa, Damo, Lila and Duna came piling in. Unslinging their bags, hopping with cold, hailstones falling from their hair. Heaving the door shut and starting to strip off sopping clothes.

Making puddles in front of the wood stove.

Lucy had vaulted over the table and grabbed Duna and then Paco. Getting wet herself.

-*'O mis pequeños estábamos tan tan preocupados por vosotros. We were so so worried about you my little ones.'*-

-*'No pasa nada Mama hemos triunfado!..'*- said Duna. Kissing her and explaining that everything was fine.

Bernie had appeared with the towels and another lamp.

I'd thrown in kindling wood. The stove was instantly blazing up with the sucking wind.

-*'There's a torrent running down the path!'*-

-*'I'm sippy. Let me in. I'm sippy.'*- Paco got in by the stove.

-*'Did they find Macker and Maxie yet?'*- Tessa asked.

-*'We know where Macker is. There's a repo'09't from some Clanners who made friends with the army, that came across where they were.'*- I explained.

-*'What did they say?'*-

-*'They're sure it was Macker was arrested. For setting off two mines that didn't hurt anybody. They think he was, er, badly treated.'*-

-*'They're torturing Macker! And Maxie?'*-

-*'We still don't know. It's too early, but she must have got away.'*- I tried to sound optimistic.

-*'Shit bastards. They got Macker!'*- said Damo.

-*'Seems like it. We're all going up for the demo. They're sure to do the Ultimatum thing.'*-

-*'What? Have they killed people?'*- asked Tessa.

-*'Their special forces are doing atrocities. You'll see. But tell us about the Adventure Way. We were so worried you'd fallen down the gorge!'*-

-*'No way, you know it's safe, you can't fall.'*- said Duna. Sharing a towel with Lila in front of the hot stove.

-*'But the trees can fall.'*- said Bernie.

-*'That's why the cables bolt into the rock.'*-

-*'It was terrifying mama the tirolinas are terrifying.'*-

-*'But was it educational?'*- asked Lucy.

-*'Yes yes yes. Do we have time to go up and come down again?'*- Paco asked.

-*'No no, another day. Sure we'll come here a lot.'*- Lucy glanced round at me. -*'Is it okay if we come here a lot?'*-

I nodded and winked at her, but still not really convinced.

-*'The Party was creative and fantastic..'*- said Paco. Rubbing Tessa's hair.

-*'And mama. Me and Lila didn't fuck nobody.'*-

-*'Double negative Duna.'*- said her brother. -*'In English that implies that you did make love to somebody.'*-

-*'But we didn't. Tell to them Lila.'*-

Lila just giggled and blushed, her teeth clacking. The towel she shared with Duna was too small, so she was tugging and squashing to keep covered. She was shy to be seen undressing, and shyer to be rubbing naked against her friend.

But Duna loved to pose, rubbing her rastacurls with the other end., and showing off her erotic stick-on tattoo. She was happy to reveal herself and her bashful friend, really there were only ourselves in sight.

Tessa and Paco were drying each other, absorbed and chatting non stop, like grooming chimps I once saw in the zoo.

-*'There's a great slide through a cave and under a waterfall...'*-

-*'And the last swing..WOW!...'*-

Even the morose and brooding Damo had shed his dripping pants.

With an odd swagger, ice spilling from his hair and pockets.

All eyes zoomed in, for a first glimpse of his athletic looking, pure white body..

He was almost hairless, with interesting bright pink underparts, but maybe that was due to the hailstones.

-*'Mama I need to tell you everything now!'*- Duna exclaimed, staring at him.

-*'Luego vale. Later okay. Come into the meeting for a bit they're just starting. But get some clothes on you quick.'*-

-*'That doesn't matter here. Oh mama, please don't worry, just relax.'*-

Chapter forty

Maxie phones home

-‘Run for your life missus. The monsters are in the village.’-

Barney

That covered terrace wasn't the best place for a meeting, they'd closed the shutters up, but the rain was rattling the roof. The lightning had passed however and we'd put the lights back on.

They had the TV on loud and everyone was sucked into the invasion reports, as we all filed in, with Moonie and Josie, and the yunkers still in their towels.

-‘Oh my god they're going to kill them!’-

They were showing part of the video of the murder of Oscar and Mary, earlier that that morning.

They were dressed in white feathers and CLAN Eagle gear, waving, chained by their ankles to the Salmon Bridge in Foxford, holding up the army column on the old coast road.

Under the high reinforced banner reading..

-‘Foxford CoOp Pool. LOVE IS ALL YOU NEED.’-

-‘Don't watch it. It's horribly bloody.’- said Bernie. *-‘They shouldn't show that on TV. The kids.’-*

I picked up the staring Josie, and Moonbeam in the other arm, and whisked them out of sight, as the first tank obeyed the signal and lumbered forward over Mary and Oscar, on the screen.

-‘Oh crap no they can't, poor things, oh shite that's gross!’-

Everyone just stared in disbelief, the TV was subtitling demo and transport details, the tank just drove ahead. I craned back to see.

Their bodies popped open, like ripe tomatoes.

Their insides got squirted over the road, everyone was yelling.

In the same moments I felt and heard the mobile phone.

Buzzing and vibrating in my left tit pocket.

I hadn't realized I was waiting for Maxie to call.

But at the first ring I'd dropped Josie and Moonie in Lucy's arms.

I was dancing back away from the noisy horror, with the cellphone in my hand.

She was leaving a message. I could hear her but she couldn't hear me.

-‘Hello Barney. Hello can you hear me this is Maxie. Hello. Oh shit.. Well um just to say yes. I am alive and Peters.. How stupid. Hello? Well bye bye wonderful family it was.. Oh yes they got Macker I'm afraid they're hurting him. Can er, can somebody tell the Clanners and.. Um hello? Oh forget it..’-

Hello Maggie? Kazoo is dead you'll never see her, they got Kazoo as well.. Okay bye bye, um, kisses for Moonbeam if you can hear this... '-

* * *

Maxie

Veera was right. Everything was normal when we arrived in Hankshill and very friendly as well, with Rose the midwife taking great care of me and it was -*'Oh Maxie this.'*- and -*'Oh Maxie that.'*- and -*'What would you like to drink with your medicine?'*-

Rose was so warm and loving to me she almost convinced me my miscarriage was just nature's way of avoiding a probably dead or damaged child.

While I was feeling inside that this was a punishment.

I was to blame, for my sins. And for mocking God

I got a sedative in the forest and then an anesthetic while they cleaned and sewed up my arm. Only four stitches. Then more pills maybe antibiotics.

Plus I was exhausted and shocked and grieving..

How could they expect me to cheer up and have a real nice day?

-*'Hey look they're showing your photo on TV you look great.'*-

-*'What? Oh no..'*-

-*'Hang on that was a preview. it's Fux News.'*-

But it was the first item up, hot news.

-*'After only twelve hours in action the Pacification Force, PIF, have identified a number of dangerous terrorists. Four brave soldiers have sacrificed their lives for Humanity. Three in accidents and one in unclear circumstances..'*

Don't be fooled by this pretty young girl. She tried to blow up our peace keepers before they even crossed the frontier. The name on her purse is Maxie Moon and this is her rifle and mobile command unit..'-

It was a good photo of me, unfortunately. Leaping and running from the helicopter, turning my head to glance back. It looked like I was flying through the air..

-*'And this evil looking fellow, already detained, threatened to put a bomb under Samuel and Duggie's Humvee, when they were having a Coca Cola on a well earned break..'*

And now we go back to Reverend Paulson who's embedded with our troops.. Reverend we were discussing with our experts earlier on about how a lot of youngsters over there go round half naked and showing...'-

The cameras zoomed in and lingered, on a succession of uncovered tits and bums, shots gleaned from stock footage of a Clanners demo against the upcoming invasion.

-*'Is this due to a breakdown in parental control or a serious perversion of family values?...'*-

It all faded out for me. I couldn't focus on it. I didn't cheer up, in fact I went all groggy and had to lie down. Shit. I hadn't even noticed I'd lost my pussy cat purse in the explosion.

Soon after that I was evacuated from there to Foxmouth village, which they said had a boat service for refugees. It seemed Hankshill would be taken after all.

In Foxmouth I was taken to the Pools Center which was a big ex pub and oddly deserted. I was given a cup of tea from a machine, and parked again in front of the telly, while Myra checked out the best solution for me.

She never came back. Then a woman was rushing in and out with some boxes.

-*'You can't stay here darling, this place has already been evacuated.'*-

But she didn't say where I should go and I didn't ask.

And anyway I was doing some good thinking now. Remembering through some important conversations I've had with friends, mainly with Maggie. Which I mustn't forget ever.

Pools TV was on the box and I saw my photo again, only I somehow wasn't too interested. I think they were denying it was even me, fair play to them.

I forced myself to concentrate when a list of kidnapped prisoners came up. A to Z.

Yes yes yes! -*'Macker Mucdunna. Famous children's magician. Probably detained.'*-.. So he was probably alive!

-*'Yippee.'*- I finally woke up and leaped to my feet.

Only to suffer a new wave of nausea. I staggered to the jacks with stomach cramps, where I stopped to retch and dribble a bitter bile..

When I finally found my way out the bar was deserted. Maybe Myra had come and missed me? Now the TV reporters were openly crying. Hysteria doesn't help, I thought, self righteously. Then I saw the clip repeating, of Oscar Chang, of Chinese father, and Mary Wested who had apparently picked straws to stand on the Salmon Bridge in Foxford that morning.

But Foxford must be near here!

The first armoured car refused to fire on the brave pacifists, who were blocking the narrow tourist bridge, it even tried to turn around. And only after a general in a jeep had remonstrated with them did someone open fire.

Even then only Oscar was hit, it looked like they got his left arm, and Mary stood there heroically till the tank went over them. Their bodies just seemed to burst, then they were mangled up to a pulp in the tread.

I was paralyzed with horror. I was alone. Now they had really called our bluff, this had to mean all out war! And I remembered the talk of thousands of mines under all the roads and bases..

Two masked boys ran into the pub, shouting.

Glanced around, and scampered for the back exit.

-*'Run for your life missus.'*- one called. -*'The monsters are in the village.'*-

-*'Maybe I should hide in the storeroom.'*- I thought, too depressed and terrified to move.

-*'We repeat the warning from Pools Fed that all houses within two kilometers of the old coast road need to be evacuated immediately. Due to death squads operating ahead of an army column.'*

'We remind our viewers that the Ultimatum is now in force and they have seven hours left to halt all killings, rapes, torture and detentions now going on. We have received new atrocity videos which..'-

-*'Unbelievable.'*- I said out loud. They were going on with the pacifist line while we were being killed in the streets!

I noticed a man coming in the pub doors, backwards. A youngish half bald man sidling into the empty pub, looking back out. It was Christy Peters. But I didn't know him then. When he turned I saw his face was streaming tears.

-*'Anyone left here?'*- He was turning back to leave.

-‘Yes me!’- I shouted, waking up. -‘I’ve been left here by mistake and I’m a wanted terrorist!’-
-‘Oh dear me you’re Maxie Moon. Um. Come on follow me we’ll run across the fields.’-
I tried to do just that and lurched a few miserable steps.
-‘You go on.’- I said -‘I can’t run I got shot and lost my baby.’-
-‘No no. I’ll get the motorbike from the shed. Wait two minutes. We’ll take the boat, the Yellow
Tubmarine.’-

And he too slipped out the back.

A boat. I would go in a boat. Then I must phone home.

I picked up the bar phone. It had a tone. Tapped out the first number in my head. It was Little Agnes Street. But the ansaphone came on.

-‘Hello this is Maxie, um.. I was looking for Macker but. Well I’ll phone back.’-

I cut off, disappointed. Tapped a second number from memory.

It was Barney’s cellphone.

It rang and answered immediately. But I heard only a light buzz.

-‘Hello Barney. Hello can you hear me this is Maxie. Hello. Oh shit.. Well um just to say yes. I am alive and Peters.. How stupid. Hello? Well bye bye wonderful family it was.. Oh yes they got Macker I’m afraid they’re hurting him. Can er, can somebody tell the Clanners and.. Um hello? Oh forget it.. Hello Maggie? Kazoo is dead you’ll never see her, they got Kazoo as well.. Okay bye bye, um , kisses for Moonbeam if you can hear this.. ’-

* * *

Barney

-‘Maxie is alive! Maxie is alive, they’re both alive, she just phoned.’- I yelled.

-‘Hurray, Maxie’s okay. Is she okay?’-

-‘I couldn’t speak to her. She couldn’t hear me, it went dead. Hang on I recorded it, I’ll play it back.’-

I consulted the settings, found a little jack lead, plugged into the music amp and pressed EXT and play. Bernie had turned off the TV and we hushed and leaned close, hearing Maxie’s strange and stilted voice. I was trying the number again.

-‘Hurray she’s alive and she’s free.’- said Bernie, at the end. -‘But she’s seriously drugged or something...’-

-‘She’s off the planet. She asked for Maggie!’-

-‘She was being ironic.’-

-‘No no she’s lost her baby, she was pregnant, she called it Kazoo.’-

-‘What? I didn’t even know that.’-

I was totally shocked. A lump had come up in my throat and tried to choke me.

-‘Why did she keep saying bye bye?’- Lucy asked.

-‘Oh my god. Because she’s suicidal!’-

There was an ominous silence.

Filling up slowly with the cruel screaming wind.

I had looked up the number on the net.
 -*'She rang from Foxmouth Pools Center formerly Jackson's pub.'*- I croaked.
 Trying the dead number again.
 -*'She's okay, she's okay then?'*- said Duna.
 -*'Just a minute. Isn't Foxmouth on the evacuation list?'*-
 -*'That's Foxford.'*- said Tessa.
 -*'The whole coast is evacuated now.'*-
 -*'There was no background noise?'*- said Bernie. -*'In a Pools Center?'*-
 -*'Yes, yes there was, I heard shots and screams.'*-
 -*'What! She's alone in the Center with the death squads outside!'*-
 -*'Bernie can you look for any phone numbers in Foxmouth. Tessa could you get onto Pools Defence Central, um, Lucia could you phone Sol. I'll try my contacts. The rest of you, let's get our stuff ready to move straight out of here now! The meeting will have to be without us.'*-

I wanted to zoom over there right that minute!

* * *

Maxie

-*'Okay bye bye, um, kisses for Moonbeam if you can hear this..'*- I finished...
 I knew I was talking to myself. The line was now totally dead. Then I was hearing loud fireworks. Or gunfire and yelling! I whirled round.
 Expecting to see the bogeymen come charging in the door!
 But it was good old Christy Peters. Panting as he got my arm over his shoulder and ushered me out.
 -*'I've got the bike, we still have time. They stopped in the other pub. They've..they've disemboweled Martin, the landlord. He's still alive.'*-
 -*'Oh my god.'*- I said again. -*'We've got to fight them now.'*-
 -*'Tomorrow. If they don't stop. That's what we agreed. Hold very tight.'*-
 I gripped his waist but nearly got wrenched off the back, as we zoomed down some back lanes and arrived immediately, at a little jetty in the woods just south of the village. A little inlet within the bay.
 The tide was ebbing but the big motorboat was afloat, beside a wrack of seaweed.
 Two grey seals were right up on the steps. After fish guttings.
 They splashed back down, honking possessively.
 The boat was covered in with a perspex roof, which proved to be just as well. Christy was staggering down the steps with a thirty liter can of fuel.
 -*'Let's just go we haven't a moment to lose!'*- he said.
 I glanced out at the little patch of foaming white beyond the headland of the bay.
 -*'Lets hope we don't have to swim for it then.'*- I said

Chapter forty one

Love is All you Need

-‘Oh Lulu Lululu.’- Barney gurgled, urgently.’-

Barney

-‘Let’s go. Let’s go. Let’s go and find them now!’-

In less than an hour we had cleaned up Maggie’s Kitchen, prepared our picnics, fed all the animals and were all out the door with our bags on our backs. Leaving the neighbours having a meeting.

It was a mistake to all rush off, we needed someone at home working with the phone and computer. It was my fault, I was all shook up. I think I was anguished and elated at the same time.

-‘Let’s stop here and have a pow wow.’- Bernie shouted as we came under the cliffs to the hot springs.

-‘A pow wow! Yes yes we must to divide the jobs. We stop here just ten minutes okay kids.’- And everyone was unshouldering their bags.

Next thing I saw Moonie was running up the steps. I just about caught her, as she went to jump in the deep end with her clothes on. She’s fearsomely fearless!

Josie was in already. Then all the yunkers were splashing in. Squealing and ducking each other. I shed my pants, held my nose and let myself fall backwards into the cool pool. Just easing through my headache, while Bernie and Lucia got us organized...

Tessa and Paco were to be our media team, helped by Paco’s friends.

Bernie would make info-packs on Maxie and Macker and coordinate everyone.

Duna and Lila, along with Damo who they seemed to have adopted, would organize the demo. We wanted to do it at the Ultimatum ceremony and try and get on stage.

And me and Lucia would go and search for Maxie.

It was a good plan, I thought, and felt better. I got busy copying stuff I had on Maxie and Macker for them, some recent photos, the video of Macker making the Prison Gates disappear.

A classic clip I had entitled ‘Maxie Moon leads a Shit-On shaming attack’..

We were joined by four volunteers from Eagle Park, then we were all on the Cable Car, sliding smoothly down the mountain.

Just then, that -‘Oh Susannah.’- music started up, in the bottom of my little rucksack.

-‘Oh Susannah.’-.. Oh no what next!..

It was James’s special mobile from his spying network, that I carried charged up always. I was cursing myself and panicking again, trying to answer that phone. It was sure to be something

incredibly important, I couldn't even breathe hardly, because it all depended on me, it was just too much I couldn't even remember how to start the decoding.

I was cursing like fuck. just tipping all the stuff out of my pocket-bag. Coins, a notebook, buttons, clothes. Aspirins, contraceptives, socks.. a toothbrush, Lucy deftly picked out the phone from the debris, in its nifty plastic pocket.

At least I got the passwords right, and I was relieved at the mass of letters and numbers rearranging themselves on the screen. Then I was blocked and desperate, needing Maxie. But the time logged program switched by itself to the next random order, I entered the third password and it was selecting only the relevant letters and numerals from the pile, before starting to decode.

Hi. Raiders from 5 pm. Locations. Occ. Zone.

Hope update. 2 pay guests. Meet Bradmt. 2 pm.

Softly monkey.

And underneath a jumble of letters and numbers.

Lucia and Bernie and me were puzzling over the message. Whispering up the back of the Car.

-*'Looks like the second part didn't decode.'*- I said.

-*'They're GPS coordinates.'*- said Lucy. -*'You can get aerial and satellite photos on the net of the places they're going to raid.'*

-*'Holy Baloney!'*- says I. Realizing what it was all about.

I was supposed to convince the local defence forces, in all these coded places, to evacuate their populations and resist new special force terrorist attacks, that very evening! What bastards, why would anyone believe me phoning up out of the blue..-*'Hello my name's Pardy Brown, er, like. I think you should evacuate half the country, um. Jolly good then, bye bye'*, I mean, who did they think I was? My headache was pounding back in. I was jittery.

Bernie gripped my shaking hands. Lucia had the portable already on.

-*'Don't worry we'll help you. I bet we get a good signal here as well.'*

-*'What is Occ., occupied I suppose, are they going to attack in an area they've already taken?'*- I said.

The descending Funicular was nearly arriving in Duncantry station. Hissing and crashing as the little rock-filled wagons slid into the compressed air plant, and powered turbines below the station.

-*'Terrorists arriving with guests?'*- Bernie queried.

-*'Some rich perverts I guess. They pay to cut up alive people, maybe rape somebody in a real war. Then sell the film of it for porno and get more rich. Ask Sol he knows.'*- said Lucy. While rattling away on the keys.

-*'Here we are already.. That should come up on the screen.'*

Sure enough an aerial photo appeared, very clearly, and she enlarged and it grew and grew.

-*'This is Rossis Farm Permaculture Cooperative. Target marked with an asterisk. Dolphin Hills. About thirty kilometers from the coast. Two entrances. Adjacent woodland connects to forest track. Part of Rossis Pool.'*- She was reading.

-*'Rossis! Oh shit yes I know it. One of their lads was murdered last year.'*

-*'What? Why?'*

-*'They're activists and.. The Brother-Hood have fingered them for sure.'*- I'd figured them out, but I realized I needn't have told Lucy.

-*'It's incredibly clear, I can see people, by the barns.'*-
-*'Lots of kids and animals. I can see chickens!'*-
-*'Time to go. Come on.'*- said Damo. Following to the cable car gate.
-*'Here take this memory, it's photos and videos of Maxie and Macker. Don't forget.'*- I said.
-*'Come on, come on oldies we're all off!'*- Tessa called. With Moonbeam beckoning wildly from her shoulders.

* * *

It was a long drive to Bradmount for me and Lucy, but we'd easily arrive in time. Plus it wasn't so far from Foxmouth, where Maxie had phoned me from.

So our trip in the borrowed little white air-car did make sense, and Lucy turned out to be an expert driver. Seemingly much too fast then slowing just in time for the endless bends. Fishtailing through flooded edges and skirting gigantic puddles.

Thousands of ancient trees had been ripped out of the ground, or simply snapped in two in the latest storms. It would take months more till even the ones in the way were cut up and cleared, while the autumn cyclones were due to arrive anytime. Once we had to turn back and try another road.

Passing tractors, and demonstrators waiting for buses. Honking hellos at Earth Clanners, mad yunkers whizzing past on air-bikes.

The first hour had been hectic, we had the two mobiles going, getting accredited and calling the meeting of the CLANs near the places on the list. We had to put everyone on alert, but one step removed, almost casually. -*'Maybe perhaps'*- and -*'Could you possibly'*-. Softly softly catchy monkey!

We got a breakthrough on Maxie and Macker, . I contacted a guy from Black Road CLAN, through his parents, he'd actually seen Macker being bundled back, shouting, into an armoured van, the description was him.

Now we were sure he'd been nicked, but more, he told me someone had said a Veera Chimes had taken a casualty to Hankshill village, and after a search and a few calls I was able to get through to her.

Veera was friendly and apologetic and shocked that Maxie was missing. -*'Sure she'd show up in someone's house.'*- she said. And she told us the whole story of how Maxie had lost Kazoo and been evacuated from there. Someone had said there was a refugee boat from Foxmouth, but that was all she knew.

Lucy insisted she was fine and kept on driving, while I dozed off a few times, woken by violent swings, and splashing rain, then shouts and hooting. I was sleeping, strangely, and dreaming I was arrested and tortured, in horrible snippets, my head in Lucy's lap as she drove...

.....I can hear my interrogators yelling at each other..... I'm hoping they'll forget me!My face is on the concrete floor and I notice I'm crying..... Watching a trickle of blood from my own mouth..... I can't possibly tell them about Maxie..... They would torture her as well, for every name she knew..... Then kill her anyway. But I can't possibly keep quiet any longer..... I would much rather die but no way they'd let me..... They'll pull out my nails with the pliers.....

Drown me in a bucket then pump the water out..... And start again.I can't possibly resist. Then they'll get Maxie, and Macker, and a few more friends in these cells..... Unless I can bite off my tongue!Maybe I can cheat them yet!....

-*'Wake up Barney. Wake up.'*-

Lucy had pulled the car off the road and stopped with a jerk.

I opened my eyes and looked up at her, quickly slipping back, into an infinitely better reality, as she bent and covered my face with wet kisses.

-*'You scared me so much I nearly crashed!.. It's not your fault my poor darling.'*- she said. -*'Just get that clear none of this your fault okay?'*- She was stroking my face on her knee.

-*'You're right.'*- I muttered and coughed. -*'Let's just explain what we know and leave the meeting. Let's go find Maxie.'*-

-*'Okay with me.. We must be in the occupied zone by now. But I haven't seen any army.'*-

I struggled to sit up and look out.

-*'Let's keep going then.'*- I said.

The defence meeting was in a big cellar under a barn, even so they had music playing and a wave scrambler buzzing in the next room. We didn't really need be there, because the first people we met were James and Jerry. Plus Sol was there, they'd picked him up from a clip he was doing for the soap serial *Clanners Way* in Foxford Bridge. I didn't even have to vouch for them, it had all been checked out.

We just watched the maps and photos projected up on the screen, I did suggest a good hiding place for an ambush. The good news was the targets had been reduced to just three, apparently our spy, or their traitor, had sent another message.

The Brother-Hood had sold a target list with their enemies on it, but an infiltrator had passed it to us.

Sol had just taken over the meeting, though they knew very little about him. He had made one excellent suggestion, then another, then he was telling the defence teams what to do. because they realized he'd done it all before.

He explained exactly, how to lull the attackers, those little details of lazy normality. They were setting up a baited shooting gallery, where we would just sit tight, and never hit each other in crossfire. The details of mobile clinics, the transport of prisoners strapped to stretchers, an escape thruway and secret decentralized individual cells. How to baffle the electronic drones.

I was following it, more or less, sitting by the wall on fold-up chairs, but now Lucia had dozed off completely, on my shoulder at first, then conking out with her head on my knee.

She'd been up all night with the computer, getting interviewed.

She was snoring slightly under her mop of hair, and I was feeling pretty blotto myself.

I was coming over all emotional, amazed to have this gorgeous brilliant creature sleeping on me, like a big baby.

I felt all tender and protective, believe it or not, just holding her, with tears in my eyes.

Jerry and James were smiling over at me, but we couldn't speak without interrupting the briefing. They pointed jokily at the sleeping Lucy, silly sexist suggestions.

But I could guess, by their obvious body language, that they'd also got something together between them!

About time, I thought, about time Jerry found a really good friend, and that James finally unlocked his cupboard.

I tried to mime the two of them kissing and gave the thumbs up.

They weren't offended, on the contrary, and both of them had to start coughing to cover their laughter.

Their romance had blossomed. doing a defence course together. Jerry and James would take part, but I managed to turn down the offer when they ked me to coordinate one of the teams.

-I'm quite sure you'll do it as well as me.- I said. *-Me and Lucy here must go to search for our friends who got lost on the border this morning.-*

I gently tried to shake her back awake.

* * *

We were nearing the coast before we saw our first invading troops, well, a parked tank by the crossroads. The old coast road was busy, buses and bicycles arriving, banners, flags and lots of demonstrators on foot, with traffic honking or whistling in support.

-What a nerve they've got.- said Lucy.

Hooting and flashing the lights, and perky now after her nap. -

-They're coming to do more atrocities while we're demonstrating about the first ones.-

In the village they were putting up a scaffold stage and a big screen in the park, next to the now doubly famous Salmon Bridge, but just past there we came to a new-police road block.

We had to stop and tried to grin and be jokey with them.

But the cops had their orders and made us put our hands through their *-Prints and Pricks'-* machine.

Then they seemed to forget about us. Because they had gotten into an argument with a few protesters, who suddenly became dozens, then more were arriving.

She was edging the car slowly forward, and more. Drifting through the brave demonstrators as they shouted and screamed..

-Sure those new-police have inherited old files on me.- I said, worriedly. *-And they're in league with the Brother-Hood.-*

-And me too, the alarm bells are gonna ring in that magic box.- Lucy whispered.

-Who are the murderers?

YOU are the murderers.

Who are the murderers?

YOU are the murderers...'-

We cruised away slowly as the military police backed off to their armoured vehicles..

-They'll come after us I bet, since they got resources now. '- I said.

-Maybe not me, they got other problems.-

-But I'm on a death list as an anarchist guerrilla.-

It's just three kilometers winding down to Foxmouth, which is tiny, at most a dozen houses and two pubs. One is a Pools Center, nearthe gurgling river, where we stopped.

This was where Maxie had rung me from, seemingly alone, upset, and about to be caught by the irregulars. Yet saying -'bye bye'- like she had a suicide plan.

The Center was buzzing, full of people on General Strike. A whole crowd were swilling real *Free-ale* and preparing for a 'naked demo'.

We asked everyone but the people were from elsewhere, they knew no 'Pete', and nothing about a boat.

We searched the kitchen and toilets, and even rummaged in the bins for clues.

-*If she went by boat the jetty is just down the road, first left, used to be part of Barkly Estate.*'- We were told as we left.

Lucia

(This part is by Lucia. Thanks for all help.)

We got to the tiny harbour in three minutes. A bendy road thru a forest. It was only a little pier with no boats, it's dry when the tide is out.. It's a lovely place, calm and sheltered from the wild, foaming sea outside the bay.. But there was nothing much to see. No clues.

-*This is no good, no va bien.*'- I said.

-*Maybe she's already home, munching my muesli.*'-

-*Can I jump in for a minute Barney, I'm melting?'*-

It was extremely hot, but with low black clouds coming into the bay.

-*Me too, let's hide the car in the gateway.*'-

There was a big open gate right there under the trees. Like the entrance to some hidden mansion, or haunted house. I drove in and under a tree like a big dark tent. A yew tree, he said

-*I'm leaving everything in the car, look there's an old Harley bike parked in here.*'-

We were jaunting down to the jetty, swinging our hands together.

-*Look look Barney a seal. Two of them!'*-

They were sniffing at a pile of old shellfish.

-*They're tame seals.*'- said Barney. Unhooking his Clan-Earth pockets and tassels. -*I'm going in.*'-

-*Wait, espera, let's jump together.*'-

The animals were staring. Big sad bug eyes staring at me as I undressed.

Shyly I turned my bottom, unpeeled my yellow cut-off tights.

Only then did I see the note.

-*Look Barney there's a notice.*'-

There was a little glass covered board with a lifebelt hanging under it..

-*FOXMOUTH JETTY*' it said, and a note pinned underneath.'-

-*Please leave left hand mooring clear. Christy Peters.*'-

Hanging my clothes. Some bell was ringing in my head!

-*What does that remind me of?'*- I asked.

-*Peters. Peters. Peters! That's it. Yippee. Maxie said 'Peters' in the phone message.*'-

-*'You're right..Good. Good.. Find Christy Peters and we'll find Maxie.'*-
-*'Maybe they came here on that Harley under the yew tree. And left in a boat!'*-
-*'That's it. We've found the clue!'*-

The spotty grey seals seemed to be nodding gravely in serious agreement.

I shuffled off my shoes and hung up my new yellow bra that set off my semi black skin.. Left on a hook by the lifebelt, the last I ever saw of it.

-*'Let's jump together. One, two, three.'*-

We held hands, naked, on the edge of the high stone pier. Looking down at the gurgling dark scary water. Low black clouds racing towards us. The wind whipping at us so we shivered, our long hair flying. Glancing at each other, his eyebrows dancing.

Instead of jumping he grabbed onto me, laughing.

-*'Come on then, One two three.'*-

And we leaped together, flapping and squealing off the edge.

Deep. Green. Cool and wonderful. I was pretending to be a seal myself, diving and spinning slowly, pushing off the rocky floor and shooting up. Then pinching Barney's soft bottom and twisting away, in clouds of rising white jewels. The surface was full of that seaweed with little bubble floats in it, all fresh but in bits, maybe ripped up by the storms.

I came up behind and slid up him, hugged him from behind.

-*'Listen Lucia there's a helicopter, Lucy, don't pull me under.'*-

-*'Oh dear. And it comes closer. Let's get out, let's go '*- I said, panicking.

We started for the playa. On that side of the jetty it's just a four meter wide stony cove. Steep and deep in piles of seaweed, and a wall of rock with barnacles on the other side.

We were nearly reaching the shore, I raced him, but the helicopter was coming real close behind the pier. Faster!

But they would see us getting out.

-*'No, wait, too late.'*- He was pulling my arm.

He was pulling us together, pulling us under a whole raft of seaweed at the water's edge. Then the chopper seemed right over us, whooshing wind.

I was giggling with terror, but enjoying it as well. Holding his waist with my legs like a wrestler and helping him arrange our seaweed hat.

-*'They'll see our clothes, maybe they can detect us.'*- I said, sliding against him for a perilous, salty kiss.

-*'Mmm nice. We're still okay, they're looking at the seals.'*- he said, and hugged me tight.

I thought I heard some gun-fire in the surf. Maybe they were killing the tame seals, and we were trapped there, waiting, that killing machine was hovering and roaring right near us. Sure they'd seen our gear.

Meanwhile I was sitting naked astride this guy's lap. Getting lifted and dropped in a heap of slippery gurgling weed. They were about to blow us both into bits of fish food, while the swell was sliding us together, oh so erotically.

-*'Oh Lulu, Lululu..'*- Barney gurgled, urgently.

He kept on laughing, while my Erosa and his Dumbo were becoming close friends.

You're not supposed to laugh all the time. It's un-romantic!

We needed to make a quick dash for the trees when the chopper went out of sight. But we didn't make a move, preferring to giggle and slither together, under the seaweed. Our kisses cancelled out our fear, like adolescent lovers hid in a cupboard..

The rising wind was making the waves come faster, throwing us harder and higher as the clouds swept closer, the chopper was nosing down under the yew tree.

-*'Oh crap. Barney they've found the car.'*-

I was trying to see, but he pulled me back down.

-*'Wait till they go Lucy, stay till they go right away.'*-

-*'They're going now, look, sure thing they've called the cops.'*-

-*'Okay let's run for it, in. in two minutes.'*-

-*'My darling sea monster, estoy loca por ti. I'm crazy for you'*-

-*'That's what's so lucky! Because I'm mad about you as well.'*- says he.

Finally, he'd let go and said it, I remembered how he'd changed, during the storm.

I gripped him hard till he squeaked. -*'Enough, enough.'*

-*'My lovely seal, I'm going to take care of you always okay.'*-

But I chose a fatal moment to start the romantic stuff.

-*'I just saw a blue light. Down the bay. Another. Let's run for the car!'*- he interrupted.

We hauled ourselves out of the heap, like a weird two headed Medusa.

The black snaky weed swirling down off us, and slipping back, into the splashy waves.

-*'My clothes, I need my clothes.'*-

I needed my new tights that I left on the pier, my blouse, my Clan Earth sandals and my sexy matching spoon-bra, that I'd picked up just that week in the Free Boutique.

-*'No no.'*- says he -*'No no. They blew away.'*-

Pulling me by the hand up the steep tiny beach.

Barney looked like one of those obscene Hindu gods. Or a leaping wild salmon!

His legs going like windmills up the flowing pebbles.

Leaps and crabs in the seawrack. Yelps from our delicate feet.

I fell and scrambled, he paused, and heaved me up.

Gasping and flashing, amazing, in the shaft of yellow sun.

My bare feet slapped in blood on the tarmac, past a bloody butchered seal, cursing them. Across the road and he was slamming the metal gates behind us, while I was diving into the car and starting it up, lucky thing we'd left the keys behind.

-*'There's another exit road I think. Through this Estate.'*- he said, grabbing out the map, as I fishtailed the car on the wet leaves, and we zoomed off up the wooded drive-way.

Just three corners and we came on a big square lawn, with a dozen elderly people offering a laid back greeting. They were waving croquet sticks and tea cups, but very unaggressively. I thought of Alice in Wonderland.

These people were having a croquet party on the front lawn of the mansion, overlooking the wooded inlets and islands, dark now against the black clouds. The next shower rushing up the bay.

I stopped with a skid by a purple haired woman, who was striding languidly towards us. I suppose she was sixty by her deep wrinkles, but dressed in a flowing ribbon skirt and stylish spoon-bra, with those nice daisy stick-ons, and rouged nipples.

-*'Oh no no my darlings. The Nude Demonstration is on the Foxmouth road.'*- she said. And Barney burst out laughing once again.

-*'The new-police are after us for terrorism.'*-

-*'Ha! That's a fine thing. We don't have terrorists here!'*- She was leaning right into the window.

-*'Can we drive through here madam? Look here.'*-

He'd wrapped his naked bits in the soggy map, now unfolding it carefully despite our haste.

-*'That track is flooded my dears, a tractor might get through.'*-

The other players were gathering, nodding.

We all heard a nearby 'CLANG' and the roar of an engine.

-*'We'll try it.'*- I crunched into gear. -*'Love your nipples!'*-

And sprayed up gravel as we shot down into the wood.

Barney says I just enjoy destroying machines, though that car wreck was never deducted from our credit Levels. Okay it was super dangerous, driving flat out into a forest track we knew didn't go through.

But we nearly *did* get through. I got us round a huge pond, whacking down young saplings, and nearly got off the ground on the first hump. Slower through a stream, but we kept going, just about. Until we mounted up on a log and stopped, our front wheels spinning uselessly in the air.

The motor screamed and shook.

Like a robot making love.

As the back slid round, and totally blocked the track.

We jumped out. Barney had been trying to pack up our cosas. While being shaken like a marble in a tin. And I took some seconds to check. Another lucky thing, as I got my camera, my reading glasses and Barney's cellphone under the seats.

-*'I got no clothes. Oh shit I got no shoes!'*-

-*'Doesn't matter look look.'*- Barney whooped -*'Will you look at that now!'*-

Through the last trees we could make out the local Ultimatum Demo to Foxford, the naked protest. Families and older people, shouting and shaking their banners and filling the road.

We set off but immediately we were both caught painfully in the brambles at the edge of the wood, as the crashing came closer. They'd catch us after all.

-*'Oh shit ow help me I'm caught!'*-

Barney just threw himself through. *Good and punky*. Rolling through the curtain of briars, and snapping them with his weight, I love him. He was scratched to pieces of course.

I unhooked two vicious bands and tippy toed quickly after him. He leaped across, but I had to slip down, grimacing, into a drain of stinky gurgling mud.

I was waist deep and grabbing for his wrist.

And he yanked me up safe onto the road with his good hand.

The whole demonstration had stopped to gawk at us. People trying to see what was happening and sprouting umbrellas, as we scurried hand in hand into the center.

I was laughing with hysterical embarrassment, panting for air and trying to shake the foul putrid slime off my legs. The rain was just beginning to beat down.

Barney was even worse, all mud and blood. Holding bits of soggy map over his shocking parts, though everyone was semi naked, and giggling like he was tickled pink.

I was laughing with nerves and shock but *he* was enjoying it.

-*'Let's all continue to go quickly.'*- I yelled. -*'The new-cops are persecuting us, for.. for resisting them..'*-

-*'Keep moving please everybody.'*- Barney shouted. -*'They're coming out of the forest now.'*-

Those military police had an awesomely bad experience in the wood. The first one appeared from the ditch as we marched away. Hatless and drenched, with a bloody face, kicking at the thorny vegetation and throwing his hands in the air.

We joined in with the protestors, chanting louder in the rain..

-*'Justice for Oscar and Mary*

Stop The Killings NOW

Justice for Debbie and Sarah

Stop The Killings NOW

Justice for David and Fergal

Stop The Killings NOW.....'-

We were being offered water and hot tea from a flask.

They were dabbing our scratches with tissues and camouflaging us behind a bandera, trying anything they could think of to help us.

Barney was explaining to those round us how we'd hidden under the seaweed. Luckily leaving the erotic details in their imaginations..

Then he was telling how they'd killed the seals, which seemed to outrage them much more.

I was starting to shiver now with delayed shock, it wasn't cold, but my scratches were biting me like wasp stings.

A little guy with a square beard had adopted us.

-*'I'm Shoveler'*- he said. -*'I was a Primary School Teacher in Foxford.. Geography and Social Science. Now we mostly go out on projects, which is better than the old school. They call me an Explainer now, not a teacher, and we meet in the Gro-Center, sounds like horticulture doesn't it..'*-

-*'Oh really.'*- I said. Feeling dizzy. -*'Pardy here is in the De-School Projects, we're doing an Adventure Learning place in the Lapwing mountains.'*-

Suddenly the rain was really splashing down, cleaning some of the blood and mud off us.

Barney would *never* undress in public, even in a naked demo. He feared people would get shocked, as his willy was much too long and bent. Maxie used to tease him and he'd really blush..

A motherly woman had given me a hand towel, which I very generously donated to Barney. I am a saint.

He tore a strip down one side so it went round him and made an apron of it. I imagine the owner was pissed off.

-*'Thanks a million Lucy.'*- He beamed happily in his designer pinafore.

We were all marching naked down the middle of the road in a thunder shower.

-*'By the way Mister Shoveler, do you know someone called Christy Peters?'*-

-*'What? Of course. Brilliant man. Our free-shop is full of delicacies he catches or trades. Christy is a great sailor as well.'*

-*'I'm glad you think so. It seems like he and our friend Maxie escaped by boat this morning. Escaped from the Death Squads, see she's wanted for terrorism because, um..'* He had said too much already.

-*'How amazing. You lot sure live dangerously. Lucky she found Christy then!'*

-*'Where do you.. Do you think she's safe?'*

-*'Sure she's safe. Christy has passed through hurricanes in that boat. Not a bother on him he's a born Orca.'*

When he said that I hugged the little man and swung him right off the ground.

-*'Oh Shoveler que bueno you really think she's okay.'*

He staggered from the hugging and looked quite shaky.

-*'Of course.. There's a whole history of Christy the sailor. Sure she's okay, he's our good neighbor.'*

-*'How can we find him?'* Barney asked.

-*'His cottage is round the next corner. See up on the hill behind those trees, there, before Foxford. Go up and check if you like. He lives alone but he keeps Open House..'*

I glanced behind, the police were following, in two brand new Mercedes riot vans. A girl was draping another little towel round me and kissing my cheek, she'd seen me shivering, though the rain was easing off already.

-*'Well yes, we need to slip out of the demo quick, um, those trees look good. Sure the drones will be out in a minute.'* said Barney, peering up at the sky. Shoveler and the others were following his gaze, baffled.

Now a few marble sized hailstones were falling as people were trying to get dry and dressed.

-*'L-Let's just move slowly to this s-side.'* I shivered. -*'Then we can maybe disappear into that wood. Is, is that the cottage?'*

-*'Yes yes, that's it'*

-*'Maybe we can disguise ourselves and escape them.'*

-*'You stay in the demo, you would be recognized.'* I gave Shoveler another good hug, he was short and hairy and still looked shocked about it. Or he thought I was loca.

-*'Thanks a million for helping us. What about the toalla, and the hot whisky, here..'*

-*'Keep them. Keep them. Take what you need from Christy's, he'll be delighted.'* He waved and I sipped a little more.

Then they were all marching round the bend, and me and Barney were slipping off, ducking into the bushes under the trees.

-*'What's the name of his boat?'* Barney whispered back loudly.

-*'The Yellow Tubmarine.'*

-*'Does he have an old Harley?'*

Shoveler was nodding though I wasn't sure he heard, and we were scarpering smartly.

We trotted into the shrubbery and jumped blindly into a dark soggy ditch, keeping our heads down, and letting the protesters, and then the police, go slowly past.

No problems. Except that Barney was squeezing me so tight I couldn't breathe.

I was getting more hooked on him, not less. He was so brilliant, but so vulnerable and friendly as well. He was always ready for a laugh and bashfully sexy.

My vows to stay single were being lost in that squelchy mud.

We stayed there. Both of us knew too much about getting arrested... *tedious, tiring, humiliating, infuriating, endless...* and Barney knew something about getting tortured as well.

I'm not an innocent baby sheep. But I'm not an international criminal tampoco.

Well, not if you accept that laws made through fraud, coercion and corporate politics are totally invalid.

It's just that I've traveled a lot and did my doctorate in *Social Change through Imploding Institutions*. Plus I got too well known, doing forums and presentations and advice sessions on Net TV.

We're causing incalculable damage, to the personal interests of petty tyrants. Really I've been fortunate that I was never '*disappeared*'-or got a long prison sentence yet.

Waiting in that muddy ditch, I stretched and groaned, delighted and relieved to have escaped.

I was filthy, my scrapes would surely get infected, but me and Barney were hot and happy, like a winning mud wrestling team, together..

All seemed quiet, we peered out of the trees, scaring off a couple of crows but nothing more. The demo had got down to Foxford and was filling a grazing field by the river, where we could see flags and banners waving far away.

The house was up on a little hill among plum trees, small and square with a hexagonal glassed in tower on the flat roof. Below it on the other side was another house with sheds and a barn, then just fields and a patch of woods stretching over to Foxford village.

We followed the track behind the hedge, both 100% filthy.

Bloody and limping, dressed in two stinky hand towels and two kit bags between us.

Luckily we met nobody and hopefully there was no one to see us.

In just three minutes we arrived.

-*'Hurrah hurrah this is just great Lucy!'*-

The back door was unlocked. We went into Christy Peters' lovely kitchen.

Our muddy footprints marching in behind us

Chapter forty two

Back to the City

-‘Oh my god. An unborn baby! We didn’t know that.’-

All the others, Tessa and Paco, Duna, Damien and Lila, Bernie and Josie with Moonbeam, and Rafa and his friends, had gone back to town on the coach. We were determined to do everything we could, to find Maxie, and Macker as well.

No invading troops had been visible on the bus trip back to the city. There *was* a delay, caused by blocked up traffic doing detours, but a decent storm would cause more queues than that.

On arriving in town Duna, Lila and Damo went directly to the Prisoners Aid Center, while the others headed back home to Little Agnes Street.

Moonbeam was crying and had to have her pants changed, but she cheered up instantly when Josie got to zoom her round the Free Depot in the little buggy. One stop to pick up the groceries and fresh fruit on the way.

When we turned into our side-street we heard chanting, a small crowd with placards and banners, was hanging about, right in front of our house.

-‘Freedom for Macker and Maxie...Stop detentions NOW..’-

Lila was holding Duna’s hand, with Damien happily padding along behind. Happy to watch Duna moving her body, and indulge his tremendous love. They walked round the park a bit before finding the new Prisoners Aid.

He didn’t feel jealous of Lila holding her hand, he thought. Obviously everybody should love her! But maybe he made some body movement, because she turned and offered him her other one.

Damo was shy about that, but took it, and the three went on together.

The place was by the Zoo and horseracing track, where the big demo was already gathering. It was being converted, along with the defunct Sports Center next door, into an ‘Adoption Center’ for the invading PIF troops, who were occupying the former barracks, police HQ and adjoining Mount Venus prison.

There was yelling and hammering inside, shifts were working round the clock.

The makeshift prisoners’ office was a partitioned corner, with a half dozen desks and monitors, being worked mainly by yunkers clad in recent Clan Orca fashion..

They wore red wrist and shoulder bands, some with their hair shaved down the middle, with black and white leather kilts, wild marine type tattoos and chunky tire shoes.

-*'You speak with them Damo. They're your family.'*- said Duna.

-*'Hello there I'm Rita what can we do for you? Are you planning to take a soldier prisoner as well?'*- There was a silence.

-*'Tell them what happened Damien, Damien!'*- Duna insisted.

-*'Um er, yes we are. But we came here because my brother was captured this morning, . By the PIF army on the Border.'*

-*'What!? What's your name. Are you Macker Mucdunna's family?'*- She saw us nodding, Lila didn't understand much.

-*'Hey everyone Macker the Magician's brother is here.'*- she yelled. -*'Listen we badly need info on current prisoners the Ultimatum rally is on at six and it's our big chance to get them out, are you his sisters?'*- Duna and Lila shook their heads.

-*'The picket.'*- said Duna. Nudging Damo.

-*'We want to organize a picket for him and Maxie. Maxie's disappeared.'*- he said.

-*'We know the story. There aren't so many prisoners. Have you any new information. Have you got any photos or.'*- It was a bloke from another desk.

Duna had passed Damo the memory, marked -*'Maxie and Macker, media images.'*- that Barney had given them. He gave it to Rita, the freckled girl.

-*'Good. Good. Good.'*

-*'Was your brother tortured do you know?'*

-*'Yes I'm sure they're torturing him! Not coz we're travellers, they don't know that.. um, the Black field..?'*

-*'The Black Road Clan.'*- said Duna. -*'They talked to Macker, in a prison van. He said they destroyed his hands.'*

-*'Oh shit really? This is important. How can we..?'*

-*'The number's in the phone, I have it here.'*

-*'Let's see, those Yeti Clanners. They're showing a great video of them escorting the PIF across the border. Claiming they were saving the soldiers lives, they blew up bridges.'*

-*'That was, um, our friends done it.'*- said Duna.

-*'You know that? And Maxie was shot by the troops?'*

-*'Oh wow look, look, is that her?'*- Rita had found the -*'Catch Yourself On'*- campaign video. Maxie was leading a -*'Spot a Shit-On'*- dance around a corpulent banker.

-*'She's magnificent!'*- People were craning to see the screen, and clapping.

-*'She was waiting for a baby who got killed by the army this morning.'*- said Duna -*'The baby would be named Kazoo. She was injured by them and, um, miscarried..'*

-*'Oh my god. An unborn baby! We didn't know that.'*

-*'Maxie left a phone message as well, she's thinking of suicide.'*

-*'Oh shit, we only knew she was rescued but then disappeared.'*- said the guy with the headphones and the file.

-*'Also did you know she's on a death list of the Brother-Hood?'*- Duna whispered.

-*'Oh bloody hell. We gotta find her fast.'*

-*'We need to get interviews with you for the TV, I'm copying this memory, but not a circus okay. Let's all go to the demo center, it's just next door. Are there more family?'*

-*'Yes but the others have gone home.'*- said Damo -*'What about helping us do a picket?'*

-*'Have you got a number for them..'*- It was another woman. -*'Little Agnes Street..'*

-*'Listen don't worry.'*- Rita was holding Damo's hands in hers.. — *"There's not that many prisoners yet. Um, see because your brother is getting tortured and Maxie got hurt and lost her baby, um, we need to say that at the Ultimatum demo. Like, you won't have to do the picket. You'll have about a million people shouting for them.'*-

-*'They can add an unborn baby to the Ultimatum list.'*-

-*'What is that? Maxie wouldn't want her baby on a list.'*- Duna protested.

-*'Sure she would.'*- Rita explained.- *'It's to stop more getting killed or hurt.. If their General doesn't stop all this, if he doesn't announce it at the demo before seven, then our terrorists will start killing their officers. Tit for tat, or soldiers.'*-

-*'All the details were decided by questionnaires and Wise-Mass votes. We're hoping they'll back down. All the subversion programs depend on that happening.'*-

-*'Killing them. But that will be a war.'*- said Damo

Duna and Damien were looking dour and doubtful, then the mobile started buzzing, like a drill. It was Little Agnes Street. Duna took it and turned up the sound.

-*'Hello this is Tessa.'*-

-*'Hi Tess, I am Duna. Listen they want to interview everyone and do a big protest for Maxie and Macker to make the army stop.'*-

-*'Oh yeah. We just arrived home. There were about fifty people in the street waiting for us.'*-

Now Duna was giving Damo the phone.

-*'Damo, ask her for any more stuff on M and M. Be nice to her now okay.'*-

-*'Listen Tessa we're going to the demo center here and they want to interview us all, can you look for any more photos or videos or anything good about Maxie and Macker. They want to put it on the screen at the demo.'*-

-*'Ask her to bring it over.'*- Duna whispered, gripping his arm.

-*'Er, Duna says can you bring it over.'*-

There was no way Tessa would take anything resembling an order from her disgusting little brother. But it wasn't at all direct, and no one was listening at her end.

-*'Okay I'll take a bike, we're all going up to the park later on anyway.'*- she said.

-*'Hey kids we're just getting news of Maxie!'*- said the guy with the yellow file. -*'She's escaped from Foxmouth jetty in a boat.'*-

Chapter forty three

Clanners Way

'Suddenly it was snowing red rose petals in Foxford Bridge.'

Lucia and Barney

-Look Lucy look!-

Me and Barney had lucked out. I never met Christy Peters but I loved his pad, he was Clan Orca, like a lot of mariners, and merchants. They still used money for trade, though not in their personal lives.

It was one big open plan room, with nooks and cupboards round the sides, a low wooden table and a shell stair to the tower.

As I came in the door a large orange cat got between my muddy legs, meowing pitifully, with her white barred tail in the air. So I checked out the kitchen area, found the cat food, the scissors and a bowl of apples, and followed Barney up the spiral staircase to look for a shower.

The tower was a big solid greenhouse on the flat roof, with a pink water tank on top, like a dinosaur's nipple.

He had it done up like the bridge of a boat, with a wheel and a telescope up there, and fantastic views of Foxford Bridge and the wooded islands in the bay.

The back part was a bathroom and I could hear Barney in there, door open, talking on the phone. I looked in.

-Okay bye bye and thanks a lot.- He was getting off the potty.

-I've asked my recycle group to find Christy Peters. We need a rest.- he flushed the toilet.

There was a large bath in there. Which turned out to have limitless solar hot water. He got the shower going and we shared it, soak and soaping the mud off each other. And easing the aching and itching of bruises and scratches.

Later I was up and clicking the scissors.

-I'm so sorry dearest, but it'll have to come off, off, off!- I was snipping in the air to scare him.

-Good idea.- he said. Glancing down at his groin. *-Oh you mean my hair!-*

Those scissors were sharp and fast and I had most of his shaggy wet mane in the compost bin in a few minutes. It was a unique ecosystem but it had to go. He was practically bald by the time I'd finished. I'd been dying to cut his hair off since I met him.

-Your turn lovely.-

-No no I'll put it up in a bun. I can't do my Presentations with no hair.-

-‘Off it comes. At least part of it. Sure it nearly reaches your waist.’-

I’d been growing my rasta locks for ten years and most of it went in ten minutes. I couldn’t help crying a little, and it was only then we found the electric shaver!

Neither of us was specially hairy to start with. But soon he was bald as a new born baby. Not a hair on him. And I wasn’t so far off it.

We sat cross legged eating macaroni. Stinking of aftershave and antiseptic. Up there sailing on the sofa, on *The Bridge* in Christy’s cottage.

From our telescope the army and military police were nowhere to be seen. We took this as a good sign, if they’d cleared off to let the demonstrations against them pass by, it at least showed they were sensitive about them, and these protests could go on for ever and ever, so...

-‘I feel like I’m on Cruise Yacht. I must phone my kids.’-

-‘Take a rest Lucy. I’ve promised to look at the questions for the Ultimatum demo, the net works here it seems.’-

He’d got the little portable going, it seemed none the worse in its plastic pouch.

-‘Change some phrases, lend my famous common touch. They think I can do magic spells because I was speaking when the soldiers mutinied last year.’-

-‘Why questions? For who?’-

-‘Chosen by online voting. They’re to ask the General of the PIF, if he appears. But they’ll use some of them for the fake General, Tootsy Coopers and his gang...’-

-‘Who’s that?’-

-‘This guy does comic impressions on TV. A great one of the General. It is pretty funny, and totally political.’-

-‘But why do that?’-

-‘Set the mood I suppose. There’s a program of entertainment before the Ultimatum expires. Here they are. Decode..’-

I’d finished my plate. Rolled off the sofa.

-‘Fancy some fruit? Or shall I roll a spliff?’-

-‘Both, both please. Oof, these questions are heavy heavy..’-

I threw a juicy looking apple at him, way off target. But he caught it cleanly with his complete hand.

-‘Maybe the comedian is on TV.’- I said, picking up a remote from the table.

-‘Six o clock, Clanners’ Way, it’s just starting. Put it on why not. Maybe we’ll see what Sol’s group are doing down the road in Foxford.’-

I flopped down beside him to watch, on my tummy, feet in the air and curving in my back.

-‘Clanners’ Way. I’ve never seen it. It wasn’t on last year was it?’-

-‘I think so, but just once a week, and chaotic. Now it’s five days a week, there’s a lot of video CoOps, who do a sequence each. Plus they have writing competitions and editing workshops and...’-

-‘All that for a soapy serial!’-

-‘There’s loads of good film groups around just now. It’s gone planetwide on the Free-Net stations. Clanners’ Way is fashionable.’-

-‘Really?.. Here they are! Looks like Clan Coppice type kids having a party. Cool and sexy all right, and what, kids from all over watch this?’-

-‘Trillions of billions. It’s copied and highly collectible. I mean, it’s free, and you can choose your CLAN, fashion and music and do it yourself, um. The fellas get a heroic image of themselves, and good friends and.. like, despising what was essential before..’-

The screen had flashed to a series of announcements

-‘You don’t need money to be a Clanner, on the contrary.’-

I was still stretching on the rug.

-‘But they do get dignity, some embedded ideas, plus access to the Free-Uni.. And then there’s the online game.’-

He was finally getting a good picture. I was munching my big sweet apple.

-‘I should’ve guessed.’-

-‘You don’t accumulate cash or too much stuff, but making or giving or inventing does raise your levels. Your Skills, your Love and Strength levels, for example. In fact you lose some Cred with excess cash. Danny has a Combined Level 8.35!’-

-‘That’s good?’-

-‘Watch out your lot don’t get hooked on it. I mean, it’s a nice video game but why not do it in real life? Look the Earth Clanners have a kindergarten. They’ve got kiddies, ha! They must be getting old. With African rap music.. and jungle tattoos.’-

-‘That’s better now..Tell me the plot, then I can watch it. Maybe they dub it in Spanish.’-

-‘Sure they do.The Clan Orca lot were trying to get a container ship of scrap computers and stuff, for free. Already happened in real life.’-

I was checking the mobile for messages. The cat had decided to curl up against me.

-‘They all live in a fictional Pools area called Slumberger. Some parts are actually filmed at home in Ragwort. Do It Yourself lifestyle and fashion. They all meet up in the park and the eat-house

and De-School and especially the Coppice farm and have complicated romances and conflicts. Plus shocking revelations and adventures. Soapy but copied from real life.

Floods and climate chaos and squats and takeovers, in the background, like.’-

-‘So this is what they watch. Hey pass that bottle.’-

-‘Then family feuds and er, a lotta laughs and new dances and music and recycled clothes and inventions and festivals and parties, er, Wise-Mass voting.’-

-‘It sounds a bit like, too much.’-I was cuddling that slinky cat.

-‘Exaggerated. Just sparking and, and brimming over with great practical ideas, Really anything in the news, and they do work sometimes of course and the Free-Uni. Horribly romantic I reckon and, like, really obvious but discreet sex.

See now these two, Paula and Ricky are in Sol’s film-CoOp group, seems they’re both in love with Lewy but they haven’t told each other, and of course we don’t know if he’s gay or not yet. And the invasion’s coming. But I dunno what happened yesterday or..’-

-‘Okay okay, I suppose I’ll watch a few. It’s good for learning the English slang.’-

-‘Mmm, your English is better than mine, sure Sol knows the story, they’re coming to Foxford to interview the CLAN of Oscar and Mary that got killed.’-

-‘What! But they can’t mix a real life tragedy with a soap serial!’-

-‘Well yes, they just stop and say -‘Now this is real life.’- Look, they’re Clan Eagle, see the leather patches and tails.’-

It looked like they were recalling a previous episode.

-*'Turn up the sound. I see they all wear clothes, more or less, in the serial. And in real life just the fashion part..'*-

-*'Right again. They couldn't show it in India or anywhere at all, I mean, with their bollocks hanging out. Clanners' Way is banned I imagine on all official channels as it is.'*-

-*'No me sorprende nada.. I'm not surprised. But the obscenity is in the cultural hangups of the viewers and censors.'*-

We were just settling down to *boggle at the telly*, as Barney says, and I was opening the packet of crackers, cat on my lap, when something big and black flashed past the windows.

-*'What the hell?'*- I thought it was an air force attack.

A giant black bird was soaring up, slower, and much slower, then diving, and swooping on down towards Foxford.

-*'Clan Eagle.'*- said Barney, pointing up at some more, high in the sky. -*'Showing off their new flying suits.'*-

I tried the telescope, squatting and swinging it up, without success, then something passed, I went back. And then I saw them soaring.

-*'Oh Barney Barney, look look they're amazing!'*-

I could see them clear and close, gliding into the wind, relatively hardly moving. A whole gang of Clanners in leather patches, laughing and swooping into each other to pass a flask of something. Obviously at home and rippling through the air. Effortless, amazing!

-*'I want to fly as well. They really can fly!'*-

-*'I'll take you for a training flight one day. Maxie and Macker did the course as well.'*-

-*'I know. Please please. But explain me, how is it possible we can fly?'*-

-*'The wonders of modern pneumatic hydraulics, ultralight compressed air tanks, and of course the safety of wrap-around airbags. You can flap your wings for up to half an hour if necessary. With five or ten times muscle strength. Then if all goes awry, change instantly into a beach ball.'*-

-*'I can see them perfectly, have a look through this. See the pink one, like a flamingo.'*-

-*'Dyed goose and turkey feathers. See the bridge on their backs? Support cables to the shoulders, elbows and knees.'*-

-*'They have little wings on their legs as well. Look at those two flying together.. Oh wow Barney they're making love.'*- I said. And they actually were.

-*'In your sexy imagination. They're probably adjusting straps for a dive.'*-

-*'But they could make love? I saw them.'*-

-*'Not in front of the Clanners Way cameras, look here on the telly.'*- he explained, wrongly.

-*'The brown one's diving, look!'*- I said.

Suddenly it was snowing rose petals in Foxford Bridge.

The yunker in the big brown bird suit came whizzing down.

Right under the wide -*'LOVE IS ALL YOU NEED'*- banner. Did a backwards loop, and drifted slowly through the petals to a landing area, amid cheers and clapping, in front of the big posters of Oscar and Mary.

He's followed by a white feathered girl, dropping from way, way up high.

*She bunches her wings, a blond suicidal angel.
Diving faster than falling , in a cloud of flowers.
Suddenly low and close.. and much too fast.
Hair whipping, her mouth and eyes wide with terror.
A slight flap, a twist and splay of the tail, and she is soaring, easily up and away.
Gracefully looping backwards, as the purple vulture whistles down.
Swooping in behind her..*

-*'She nearly pressed her airbag button. Then she'd bounce like a balloon!'*- someone was commenting on the TV.

-*'I just hope Paco and Duna aren't watching.'*- I said. -*'If they flew like that I'd die worrying.'*-

Bracken, the brown Eagle, was helping Deirdre extricate herself from her white angel suit. While Hellfire the vulture seemed to just jump out of his violet feathers.

They raised their arms to the cheering crowd, then cartwheeled together on cue across the runway. Now hugging their companions, Dekko and Gemma, the Eagles being interviewed by Paula and Ricky, the visitors from Clanners' Way.

-*'And the rest of them. Aren't they coming down?'*- Ricky spoke into the microphone. Sol had them well drilled.

-*'No no. They're having a go at those toy spy planes.'*- said Deirdre. Still panting heavily.-

-*'And then they're going up to the city.'*-

-*'For the Ultimatum demo?'*- asked Ricky, checking his question list.

-*'That's right. We've been voting on our own CLAN proposal, suggested by the Eagles.'*-

-*'Oh yeah, what's that?'*- Paula, the star-crossed lover in Clanners' Way had taken the mike.

-*'You know already.'*- She acted fed up. -*'Oh, okay. We're going to get rid of being poor and hungry. And stop CO2 and climate change. In all the world.'*-

-*'Oh yeah. Just like that, mate.'*-

-*'Why not. With just a few per cent of their military budget they could do it. But we want fifty, allocated within a month, or we declare war.'*-

-*'You must be joking.'*-

-*'Phase one. In a hundred and thirteen countries. Violent pacifist actions.'*-

-*'Like what?'*-

-*'That depends, could be just talking to people.'*- said Bracken.

-*'That won't scare the fancy pants off them.'*- said Paula, pouting.

-*'We need to close all oil and coal fired power stations, for a start, and stop petrol or diesel vehicles and planes. Also the banks and money system will have to go, like over here. They enforce the debt trap scam behind world hunger.'*- Deirdre explained.

-*'So we just declare war. It does sound barking bonkers!'*-

-*'The war started already. It's their system that's totally crazy. Now we got some ideas, and we just got some millions of kids to help us. We don't got cruise missiles, but we can fly... Okay Jimmy now's the moment, fire away!'*-

Hellfire was grinning wildly at the camera and repeating the signal into a mobile phone, not knowing what he was supposed to say next.

-*'Ah yes, um, this is in honour of our friends, Mary and Oscar.'*-

Paula was waving the microphone, hopping and pointing up at the sky. We heard distant fireworks, in real life and on the TV. But oddly out of sync. Everyone was gazing up, cameras yawing. There was a smoke trail, tiny shapes darting against the black and white clouds.

A flash of flame and a little plane spiraled slowly down. As it got close we could see it was tangled up in a green fishing net, and it wasn't so small.. Eventually it exploded, not at all dramatically, on one of the hills behind the village. Seriously scaring a sheep.

They'd lost another million dollar toy.

-*Hasta la victoria siempre.*- I laughed. -*Always keep on till you win.*- Waving my fists and jumping up. Half expecting the army to appear in a rage, but nothing happened.

We went out on the roof terrace, jumping and cheering, passing each other the plum wine. Barney was bald as a yummy white mushroom. If this was violent pacifism we were all for it.

There was a jangling from in the glass house. We had a net call from Little Agnes Street, it was Bernie.

-*Hello I was trying to get through to Pardy Brown.*- The little camera was working but she didn't recognize us.

-*It's us Bernie. Big kisses. We had a hair cut, well, every hair on his body.*- I giggled. -*But where are you?*-

Her worry face cracked up in laughing angles.

Then she started coughing, and had a job stopping.

-*Oh dear.*- I said. -*Are you all right? Are Duna and Paco all right? Where's Moonbeam?*-

-*Don't worry Lucy. Moonie's here rushing all over the house with Josie and Una. They're hyper happy to be back. Any news of M and M?*

-*Yes we know Maxie went off in a boat with a freelance Orca. But we didn't find her yet. What about my little babies?*-

-*They've all gone up to the demo already. Seems like there's thousands of people wanting to help us get Maxie and Macker back. The street outside was full of people when we got here. All the neighbours were out...*-

-*Cool Bernie, you're a supernova. Did you see Clanners' Way?.. Sol had his lot down here and the local Eagles did a flying display, we could see it from here.. We're in this weird captain's house, eating crackers.*-

-*I'm sorry Bernie you got left home with the kids again.*- said Barney.

-*No, no I'm more than happy to watch this one out on TV. I'll see the repeat. But what about the, um, the other thing?*-

-*We don't know yet, we went to search for Maxie. Sure it'll come on the News at seven. Hey it's coming up now. I'll ring back to talk to Moonie a bit later on okay?*-

-*Bye for now, monster smoochies.*-

-*Bye for now.*- we said together, and laughed.

-*It's seven o'clock and this is Pools TV...*- I held my breath.

The music rose and faded as the camera zoomed slowly in on an enormous burning helicopter. With a line of silhouetted Clanners passing in front, lugging some heavy gear. Me and Barney were clutching each other's bald bodies.

In trepidation for Sol, and James and Jerry.

-‘Twenty two plain clothes army and mercenaries have been arrested by CLAN defence groups in ambushes near the town of Bradmount this evening. Those detained landed in a large helicopter as part of the terrorist attacks which left six dead this morning. All of them have now been removed to safe refuges hundreds of kilometers away. At least two of the attackers are confirmed to be civilian corporate managers on a murder and torture expedition. There have been no deaths reported but at least twelve terrorists and six Clanners, Defence Volunteers, were injured. The helicopter which transported these troops...’-

-‘They got them!’- Barney exclaimed. -‘Yes Yes Yes we really got them all!’-

-‘Yippeee, we got them!’- I repeated.

Really surprised and relieved, these boys had really won.

-‘Well done Barney, James and Jerry. Well done Sol!’-

I thought it was more Eagles flying past. But a flock of black headed gulls were diving and ducking past our tower. Over the ridge, suddenly soaring up together, as a stiff gust of wind caught them and rattled our windows.

Screaming like loons as they dived and vanished down the bay.

act five...
Flight

Chapter forty four

The Ultimatum

-‘Have you ever heard of Shari Paba?’-

-‘Hey, hey Tessa, leave my friend in peace.’- said Duna. -‘You found us finally now just forget it.’-

-‘Your friend! This useless pile of pus and pigshit!’- She was pointing at the disheveled Damo.

-‘How could you choose this for your friend!?’-

-‘Shut your fat mouth you stupid...’-

-‘No no no stop it now Damo that’s finished. Stop it Tessa and Damo don’t provoke her. Show them the artwork, come on.’-

Damo opened the red file obediently. Dour and glowering

-‘Okay not bad.’- Paco and Rafa were having a look as well.

-‘Don’t get it dirty, it’ll be an A5 leaflet, Maxie and Macker on one side, and the Prisoners Campaign on the other. Two little photos, details of the next demo, where to send your protest..’-

-‘It’s perfect’- said Paco -‘How many will they print?’-

-‘We have to decide now. It’s through here. Damien can you ring Bernie and say they’ve arrived.’-

-‘No wonder we didn’t find it.’- said Tessa as they entered the complex.

Rafa and Lila were chatting in rapid Spanish, waving their arms at random.

The ex sports club was turning into a maze of bars, restaurants, balconies, stages and semicircular spaces. It was lit by wide skylights, and even retained some healthy sports facilities. They were threading their way through the volunteers and builders, to the already finished part adjoining the Zoo-Pools Center.

-‘It’s the other door you go in, really.’- said Duna.

-‘Oh yes and they said they need more helpers for painting, tonight. We said at least three of us will come.’-

-‘You can count on me, claro que si.’- said Paco. And the others nodded.

-‘As long as I don’t have to work with Damo!’- said Tessa. Shrugging darkly.

-‘Don’t start that again, please please.’-

* * *

-‘What CLAN are you lot then?’- asked Travis. Lounging down with Bradley under the boardwalk.

-‘Sunshine of course.’- said Sanny.

Displaying the smiling sun, radiating from her navel, swiveling her tray and her hips, so her seedpods crackled.

-‘Now who here wants cold beer?’-

-‘Everybody I reckon.’- said Willis who was passing.

Stopping to stare at her, he unclipped his sweaty helmet and ducked into the makeshift bar, followed by two more bored soldiers.

-*'We're a Clan support group, not real Sunshiners.'*-

-*'Hey wow I think I saw you on Clanners Way!'*-

-*'Cool gear kids. Are those real tattoos?'*-

-*'Three fours, I win!'*- said Brydi. -*'Anyone else playing?'*-

-*'I've got six beers here.'*-

-*'Yeah let's play then. We could be stuck here for hours.'*- said Travis, and Sanny sat in beside him.

* * *

-*'I said, militarily irrelevant.'*-

-*'Sorry Sir?'*- said Joshua the interviewer. -*'Could you explain that Sir?'*-

-*'It's not about winning militarily. We could crush them like ants. It's about faith in money and business. These people are like a virus, our investors got zero faith right now.'*-

He leaned back, perilously bending the plastic chair.

-*'They say they're harmless family type CoOps, getting beaten up on by our special troops.'*-

-*'That's so so wrong Joshua. They're experts at media manipulation. While we don't even have censorship.'*-

-*'We got memos saying we gotta pull together as our boys are in danger. What does that mean, Sir?'*-

-*'Right now we are being slandered by bleeding heart intellectuals, on hundreds of Free-Net TV channels. Channels that have zero credibility. All these programs about World Hunger and Debt Traps*

and, and even Climate Extinctions and Saving the goddamn Cockroach. They want to blame everything on our boys.'-

He paused to burp and proudly pat his bellies. -

-*'Racist, sexist, anything 'ist' they can think of. Pumping it out twenty four seven non stop! These unreliable sources need to be curtailed for the sake of Democracy.'*-

-*'But we don't agree with censorship, sir.'*-

He finally looked down at Joshua, a dangerous looking look. Josh was nervously chewing his tongue.

-*'We need to look hard at our sources son. If during this emergency, we take our information only from our trusted journalists, embedded with our boys. Er, so we can be sure not to get twisted by evil propaganda, and follow the path of truth and justice, set down by our Lord in the Holy Bible... You got that, sonny?... Now get lost.'*-

-*'Yes Sir. Thank you Sir. Good night.'*- said Josh.

-*'Hey Wiply did they check this boy's papers properly.'*-

Ultimatum Demo

Lila, Duna and Damo were leafletting at the main park gates. Having split up to better cover the throng of people flooding in. But they reached just a fraction of the people, and the leaflets were getting low. The crowds seemed nervous and angry, excited and would-be festive, but with a raw, violent edge.

-*'Here's a leaflet about our friends who got arrested.'*- Lila spoke in English with perfect intonation, she could do lots more phrases besides.

Damo was trying not to be gruff and unfriendly, tried not to stare at his shoes.

The clouds had evaporated, it was late but still sunny, windy and very hot.

Duna saw a familiar face, a couple.. hard to place.. then her memory clicked.. *On the quay when they had first arrived.* Janie was young and jolly and even more pregnant than then.. Janie and Jimmy.. Macker and Maxie's friends. Yes, they had met on the pier, getting off the boat.

Then she remembered herself saying -*'Congratulations señora Maxie.'*- ..on Kazoo, of course!

Duna was quick and clever, and she dropped her gaze casually as she turned away unseen. But Janie and Jimmy had spotted Damien in the throng and remembered he was Macker's brother, beaming, kissing and greeting him.

Jimmy and Damo were slapping shoulders, partly blocking the heaving crowd.

Janie was looking at the leaflet, suddenly clutching at her enormous tummy, slapping her own face hard.

-*'Oh Damo is this true oh no no no it can't be true!'*- she cried.

-*'Yes but we'll get them back, everybody's er, helping.'*-

-*'They got Kazoo. The bastards got Kazoo!'*- she yelled. As people turned and gaped.

-*'Yes, well she..'*-

But Janie was starting to wail, shouting -*'Fucking Bastards.'*- and comforting made her worse. Then Jimmy started raging and roaring as well, and the whole section of the mob was stopping and dangerously blocking.

Damo and Duna squeezed Janie through the gates and turned sideways, out of the crush of people coming through. Everybody was staring and craning to see.

Jimmy was yelling that the killers got his friend.

But Janie really was taking a bad turn. Now she'd bitten her tongue. With scarlet blood all down her turquoise blouse.

-*'Damo run over to that flag with the red cross and get a doctor over here now.'*- said Duna, hugging Janie tight..

-*'Don't be sad Janie. Please don't be sad, come on. Maybe you'll have your wonderful baby today!'*-

* * *

-*'Ladies and Laddies.. Goodies and Baddies!.. I give you!.. Exclusively here today!.. The right Horrible!.. GENERAL.. TOOTSYS.. COOPERS!.. '*-

Curiosity and the excellent sound system gradually won out, shushing the hubbub of the gigantic protest meeting.

-*'General. Is it true what they're saying? Shut up back there and listen now.. General Tootsy, is it true that civilian casualties aren't counted? Aren't we human beings as well?'*-

-*'Now listen you all here. There's good and bad all over. I reckon it's your viewers who are racists.'*-

-*'But would any decent person join the army of the Evil Empire?'*-

-*'Our only goal is to spread happiness, prosperity and Our Western Values around the globe.'*-

-*'Lovely, er General. Do you know that our young CLAN friends here have united to accuse you of collaborating in the murder of five hundred million people?'*-

-*'Now that's what we call poppycock, son!'*-

A group of Clan Eagles had appeared, swooping and looping over the vast crowd, disregarding safety precautions, and dividing attention from Tootsy's fake interview.

-*'It's a detailed report. Endorsed by world famous historians and economists.'*-

-*'Impossible.'*

-*'Is there a person still alive. Remembers nineteen forty five'*-

-*'Sorry?'*-

-*'They say you put gangsters and mercenaries in power in dozens of countries. Printed up a lot of dollars and lent it to them.'*-

-*'That was the banks..'*-

-*'You won the war sir, many thanks. So then you could control the banks.'*-

-

-*'This report says these countries still can't pay back even the ever expanding interest on their dubious debts.'*-

-*'Well, they borrowed the money.'*-

-*'General Tootsy Coopers, are you aware that more than twenty five thousand people die every day in these same countries of hunger, main cause? Fifteen thousand of them children? Every day Tootsy.'*-

-*'Oh come on man, gimme a break.'*-

-*'Did you know it's difficult to die of hunger, General?'*-

-*'What?'*-

-*'To die of hunger, main cause, usually takes over two years of degrading, miserable, painful, soul destroying suffering. Did you know that?'*-

-*'Well actually I haven't tried it recently. Ha ha.'*-

-*'Which, according to the calculation of our CLAN friends, adds up to well over a thousand million years of intense human suffering you boys are responsible for.'*-

-*'I'm glad you say 'you boys', I'm not the only general who.. '*-

-*'Did you read that you could stop this horror with just a few days a year off your military budget?'*-

-*'That's a job for charities. A lot of wonderful folks back home are.. '*-

-*'But you couldn't stop it could you. You couldn't. You wouldn't dream of stopping it. Because they wouldn't obey and pay anymore, would they?'*-

-*'That's wrong as well.'*-

-*'If you abolished their debt they wouldn't be so keen to sign away anything they got, or might ever get, for a new line of credit. Would they?'*-

-*'Monetary discipline does play a fundamental part in the maintenance of law and order.'*-

-*'And that's what you're doing here isn't it? Showing the rest that nobody can escape your money system.'*-

-*'I'm sorry boy but the law is the law. We can't just make an exception for you wonderful folks.'*-

-*'If you won't play they'll get you back. They got a million in Iraq.'*-

-*'Hey quit with the one liners will ya.'*-

-*'Oh by the way General Tootsy, have you ever heard of Shari Paba?'*-

-*'Maybe so. Is she a singer?'*-

-*'Well, yes, she was a singer. Um, Shari was one of the fifteen thousand children you killed last Wednesday.'*-

-*'I'm sorry I was golfing on Wednesday.'*-

Tootsy had raised his arms and slowly turned, his profile glinting on the giant screen.

Acknowledging massive imaginary applause. Deigning to share slight dignified bows.

-*'They chose her as their symbol because an aid worker knew her and included a photo and a few lines in her blog.'*-

-*'That's really not my problem You can't just.. '*-

-*'Wednesday 25th. Shari Paba. Aged about four. A few days dead.*

Mother died last year. Dehydration. Diarrhea, stank.

Old aunty can't carry water, men don't help much.

Big black eyes. Gifted singer.'

That's what she wrote, you wanna see the photo? Can we just put Shari's photo on the big screen please?-

-*'Awww.'*- Came a murmur from the multitude. Shari had been a sweet looking kid.

-*'Okay we need to imagine this girl Shari, but fifteen thousand times over. Dying after long disgraceful suffering, every single day for the last seventy years. So that these criminals can keep their power and wasteful lifestyle...got it?.'*-

-*'You really can't accuse us, how dare you.. '*

-*'It's the CLANs accusing Sir, not me. They're organizing a new Ultimatum. Worldwide voting next Saturday. Just put CLAN Ultimatum in a search engine. Next Saturday will be that vote folks.'*-

-*'More mindless violence from those naked perverts and degenerates!'*- Tootsy was mock scandalized.

-*'The leading suggestion as of now is Violent Pacifism. They want to destroy the monetary system. Shut down CO2 power stations and industry. Abolish debt. Introduce the Peace and Plenty system we're working on over here.'*-

-*'That's just superstition. Hocus Pocus Bunkum, you'll see.'*-

-‘Thank you General for your time. Now...Three Two One Disappear!’-

The trumpets hooted and blared.

And the false General Tootsy Coopers vanished in a puff of pink smoke.

Through a trapdoor in the stage, we supposed.

Only to reappear in another cloud, waving his arms and coughing, amid general clapping and jeers. He was clapping himself, relieved as he’d feared that as a comedian we wouldn’t understand a serious message.

Everyone had understood, now if only the real General would appear..

* * *

They were flashing up Sol’s clip of the burning helicopter, in silhouette with subtitles about arrests and demos, and a big digital clock, counting down.

The Ultimatum to the occupying army had only fourteen minutes and some seconds left to run.

-‘We do have a safety warning.. Watch out for falling airplanes. This is serious now, there’s a battle going on above our heads where the Eagle CLAN are getting rid of some drone spy planes. But some of them are big and heavy so watch out, see that smoke trail now, that could be a robot falling out of the sky.’

As he spoke the trapdoor had reopened and a priest with a video camera rose slowly through the hole. His arms uplifted, pope-wise, to embrace the world. It was Tootsy Coopers again, of course.

The big screen melted and faded up to the logo and flashy music of Fux News International.

-‘Let’s just see how the world media are treating this massive protest, here in nearly forty degree temperatures this evening. First Fux News.. You imagine they are analyzing the implications? Teasing out the truth on why the hell we’re being invaded?’

Well no no no Ladies and Gents. We now present the embedded Reverend Paulson, with the third program in the series -‘Why must they show their Tits and Asses?’- The only programs they’ve shown about us, so far.

Here we see some kids they’ve found. And yes, oh wow, you can see that girl’s boobs. What a shocker. And can it be true. I blame the parents! Look at those obscene degenerates, I saw his bottom. Look at that...’-

Tootsy was getting laughs with these clips, but abruptly the screen flashed over to a golden

Eagle, spiraling down over the demo, trailing confetti.

The clock kept ticking away.

-‘Don’t laugh too much folks. Because we heard people are editing all that innocent footage of half dressed kids, and flogging it as child porn. Our children are a market niche and an investment opportunity.’- The logo and music blared *-‘I’ll keep my pepper spray handy in case they come filming in Rayton.. Dora, get your pants on this minute!’-*

The screen had melted again to a grinning boy, squinting into the glare, zooming back he became a black and yellow Eagle, drifting into the breeze. Then suddenly there were dozens!

In Foxbridge, and many other towns, local demonstrators cheered as the cloud of Eagles came spiraling down on screen, Lucia and Barney, on the rug in front of Christy's TV, Bernie bouncing Moonbeam on her knee, on Pools and FreeNet stations round the globe.

-Now let's get quiet, quieten down. These are some of the victims gonna come on the screen in a minute. We want a big cheer for each one of them and.. And some of their families are here and maybe want to say something.

According to our decisions last week on the Wise-Mass we are going to start killing them back, tit for tat and starting with their officers. Unless of course they call it off in the next few minutes. We have a message here that our terrorists will start at midnight, and they say they have hundreds of murders, lined up and ready to go..

Now.. er, um yes just a minute is this real? Well I'm told we do now have a video call on the line, a General Makyntosh hey .

Sorry..Are you sure?.. Yes they claim he's their top man.. This is real now. Shut up everybody. This is for real. We have their General on line. Can we get him up on the screen? Hang on five seconds let's get him on the screen.'

A fat bald general with medals appeared, looking false with a plastic smile.

Clasping and unclasping his hands.

A lot of people started laughing and had to be shushed.

-Mr. real General Makyntosh, Sir, have you got the concessions we're demanding then. And can you prove it's for real?'

-I read a statement from the High Command

- 1.Our Mission here was never intended as a war and we do not wish it to become one.**
- 2.We can therefore apologize for any untoward incidents which were not programmed, and are already being investigated.**
- 3.Punishment measures will be taken according to our legal code.**
- 4.We hereby order our troops to open fire only as a last resort and to avoid arrests wherever possible**
- 5.All prisoners will be processed as quickly as possible**
- 6.As a confidence building opportunity we now authorize the immediate release of fifty men without blood crimes and we communicate our willingness to negotiate for a reciprocal agreement.**
- 7.Our Command also agrees to restrict patrols for the present and allow cultural exchange and entertainment as requested.**
- 8.Copies of this signed statement will be made available to our troops, and to the Federation of Cooperative Pools through our legal representatives..'**

General E.K.Makyntosh. Pacification Intervention Force'

The sound system couldn't cope, excellent though it was, because as Makyntosh got into the details of the statement everyone was realizing already that the Ultimatum had worked.

This could really be enough to stop or at least delay the real war beginning!

The screen flashed to an army camp. A small crowd were being herded through a door, looking disheveled, confused and half blinded by the light.

-*'There's Macker. Is that Macker?'*-

-*'I'm not sure I can believe this.'*-

-*'Macker is being freed!'*-

That was it. The stage had lost its central role as everybody embraced each other and a massive party began.

There were four minutes left on the clock.

The escalation was canceled, though the prisoners were not released as promised.

Some soldiers were already abducted, others went AWOL or fell in love.

All sorts of wild initiatives were being set in motion.

We detonated our plan, our crazy hydra-headed subversion campaign.

Chapter forty five

The Trap

-‘Quick quick disguise me girls. The punky wig, the hat!’-

Barney

-‘Next stop Riverbank Park. Buses to the center stop here. Passengers for Ragwort Pool, the path across the park is now cleared through the next gate down.’-

This is our stop already. The bus hisses to a halt, next to the dark ruined park. Lucy is worried, she wants to go into town and pick up Duna and Lila. While I will take the short cut, through the park and across the little river, and be home with Moonbeam in just ten minutes!

Me and Lucy don’t suffer from premonitions, unfortunately. Maybe we are just too newly in love, to worry about falling into a trap. We’d gone all starry eyed and smoochy, giggling under Christy’s sheet in the back of the bus, getting bounced together, in mutual ecstasy mode, on the long road home.

-‘Thanks for the trip Rainer. Excellent driving.’- says I.

As we slowly follow the group of Clan Sunshiners out of the bus.

Lucy is pinching my arm and pointing.

Two of the Clanners have those gargoyles stuck on their bare backsides. You know, that pull sinister faces as they walk. They’re grimacing and leering up at us, with every step and shuffle. Strings of seed pods clacking.

Our eyes are popping, Lucy lets out a snort, then we hop down, holding hands, and the door clunks closed behind us.

-‘I’ll just have a quick squirt in here.’- Lucy ducks and squats, under the tangled foliage blocking the park entrance.

-‘Me too. Me too I’m dying for a pee.’- says I, clambering into the dark behind her.

The park has been blocked by fallen trees. Flooded over and wrecked by the latest storms. But it’s a good place for a piss, though black shadows flicker on the breeze. Seeing a gleam of metal I think of a gun. CLAN Defence have been phoning to inquire for our safety.

-‘Lucy, there’s water here. Lucy?’-

It’s a drinking fountain and it works, spraying my flip flop shoes.

-‘There’s fresh water here Lucy. Lucy?...Lucy where are you? Lucy?’-

First Macker and Maxie are gone. Now Lucy. Thirty seconds out of sight and I’m thinking I’ve lost her forever.

-*'Here Barney, relax I'm over here.'*- Comes a loud whisper.

She's just a few meters away. Her skin flickering orange through the leaves, from the only street-lamp. She's found the perfect seat, on a fallen birch tree, smooth and white with perfect back and foot rests. Stripping off to anoint her angry scratches, rubbing all over with aloe and calendula.

I watch her, open mouthed

-*'Over here. I'll rub you with my magic marigold.'*-

-*'Um, hang on a minute.'*- I'm scratched much worse than her.

Lucy pulls me against her slinky body, and uses herself, to anoint my cuts and bruises.

-*'Oh wow. What are you doing?'*-

Pulling me to her throne in the dying tree.

-*'Just, uh, lift a little.'*-

She's the right height, if I stretch up a bit, for rubbing herself all over me.

We meet in mutual ecstasy mode.

She misses her bus. See if I care, I'm in an anti-hurry, taken in by her oily body.

Moonie will be sleeping anyway, I figure, and Bernie doesn't want to go out.

I've been waiting all my life, for Lucy to rub me with her breasts and tummy here tonight.

-*'Stand on this branch, I'll do your feet and legs'*-

Concealed in the rustling bushes, sliding together, I'm gliding higher and impossibly higher, while all the time she's chatting and laughing as well.

-*'I love this physical stuff, it wakes my brain...'*-

She claims it inspires her, and makes her tingle.

-*'Fellas have testosterone,'*- she quips. -*'but I get off on sex. Oh, get the mobile,'*-

She pauses to chat on the phone, confirming her appearance on a Women's Rescue program later on.

I'm murmuring a melody, happy and bemused.

Looking up at a line of starlings, chortling in the tree above us.

Peering up I can see six. Shoving each other off a roosting branch.

Whistling up like wolves would, to a high half moon with a misty halo.

Lucy says a laughing goodbye to her phone, and we squeeze together with a groan, like the first and last time ever...

As a yellow shit splashes on my newly bald head.

-*'Ah yuk yuk yuk I've been shat on!'*-

-*'Te han cagado encima! They shat on you!'*-

I'm fishing for a tissue, while Lucy rocks with merry mirth,.

Slapping her bare feet on my legs.

-*'Oh oh, so sorry to laugh darling, here let me help. Oh my super hero. You are saving me from that smelly bird shit.'*-

-*'A squirt of yellow starling shit.'*- says I.

Wiping myself with a grimace. I clap my hands loudly, till they flutter off a few meters.

-*'Beautiful birds but really I...'*-

Lucy shushes me with her mouth, black figures are passing in the street.

A line of little puffy clouds are approaching. While we gaze up through the branches, getting sleepy.

The clouds are close to crossing the moon, but somehow they never arrive, somehow evaporating and now vanishing completely.

I'm whistling up at the musical starlings, imitating them copying us.

Getting emotional, impossibly happy and sad.

We are totally transient.

No more than those little disappearing clouds, in our fleeting moments of joy together.

I'm sniffing, my cheeks wet, and kissing Lucy's face.

And I realize we are doomed.

-*'We're just little clouds, trying to cross the moon.'*- I say, catching my voice.

Grasping tragically at the miracle of life and mortality.

But it comes out just silly. Not profound or earth shaking at all.

-*'Oh my poor baby thinks he's a little cloud on the moon...'*-

Lucy rocks me sarcastically. Biting her bottom lip not to laugh. Then we're tickling and mock punching. She pulls me to shower under the drinking fountain.

The freezing water whooshes out, I shake and gasp, like a stranded fish, with fleeting joyful moments left to live.

Drying each other as best we can, with my smelly T shirt. Pooh!. We dress in our awful Orca rags.

Of course we don't have hardly any hair worth combing. Well, I have absolute zero.

Ready to go and now there is no bus, but I've found us a park bench under the fallen vegetation, and Doctor Lucy wants to sit on my lap...

-*'Your baby computer, don't forget it.'*-

It's still hanging in the tree

-*'Good good Barney. It costed me fifty wurts.'*-

-*'Can't cost wurts, they're just a measure. It's the relative value, that's all.'*-

-*'Money is a measure also, well kind of...'*-

-*'But wurts measure the value we choose for freely distributed goods.'*- [see glossary]

A gust of wind is rushing in. Chasing its tail through the bushes. Every shadow could be a waiting assassin.

-*'I know that.. But what's a wart worth in wurts? Tell me that.'*-

-*'That's what Josie always says.'*-

There's a light flashing through the shrubbery, and now a distant hissing.

It's the city bus. Lucy swings on her little rucksack, and grabs for the portable, nearly clobbering me on the ear-hole.

Then she's off, with a hop, rushing and laughing non-stop.

Lucia waddles out, dripping, from the shrubbery, holding up her tattered Orca kilt.

And waves to stop the air-bus, just in time.

* * *

Smoothing down my awful clothes and blowing kisses at the bus, I head for Ragwort Pool. The new short cut is through the next park gate, just fifty meters down the street.

There are two white vans parked there. One of them fires up and roars after Lucy's bus, spewing black smoke. Suddenly I'm paranoid, the second is also obsolete diesel, with painted over windows. Pretty unusual, and where do they get the fuel?

In the gate I go, glancing behind me. The raised tarmac path crosses the ex football pitch, now a serious lake, fallen trees are cut and stacked beside it, and a great mound of mud and wreckage is piled beside the stream.

Three black shadows come into the park behind me.

Now where did they spring from?.

Then I make out three or four more.

Emerging ahead of me, spreading out to block the dark path.

My heart nearly leaps right out my mouth.

I've learned to be streetwise and I know I'm trapped, by people with money and time and resources. Finally I'm being dealt with, properly by professionals.

This path leads to my daughter Moonbeam and our lovely CoOp squat, just a few hundred meters away.

But it might as well be a hundred kilometers.

-*'Excuse me is this dog yours?'*- someone shouts.

What dog? There is no dog.

And that drawl is straight out of a deep south cotton-field type racist movie.

I have the cellphone out to throw it away.

I click on Lucy's name and she connects.

She's in the bus.

-*'Hey Lucy they're arresting me in the park. They're after you too in a white van after the bus.'*-

Maybe they have seen the light on the phone.

A whistle blows once as I speak.

And they all start running towards me!

* * *

-*'Not fair not fair not fair.'*- Moonbeam screeches.

Throwing her pink, rubber elephant out of the bath.

-*'I want my papa now.'*-

Bernie reaches to pick her up, but she squirms away, shrieking.

Why the hell did Barney have to announce his arrival and then not show up.

-*Don't worry Moonie he'll be here soon. Sure that old bus broke down and they have to fix it.*-
And his phone doesn't work either. Oh sure. But Barney would borrow a phone.

Bernie retrieves the squirty elephant.

-*Oh watch out Moonbeam. Cutie's gonna squirt you.*-

-*I want my papa and I want my mama now!*-

The phone is ringing. That must be Barney at last.

-*Hi Bernie? This is Phil here from CLAN Defence Coordination. Listen it's an emergency, we need to evacuate your house. We're coming right now. Just lock up all the doors and hide upstairs.*-

* * *

Lucia

We separated by the park. I was just three minutes on the bus. When Barney rang.

The back was full, we were stuck there in the people and traffic, in the middle of a victorious street fiesta.

A smiley old couple were nodding next to me. The banners outside read Pollard Free Pool.

There was a street party with a stage and a band, food stalls, drink... and lovely clothes. Loads of really lovely clothes, and really, I was *unbelievably* tatty.

I was in bare feet, still wearing a horrible borrowed mock-seaweed Orca kilt, bits falling off it, in shreds and sopping wet.

Plus a borrowed spoon-bra and knickers, but really filthy and floppy.

People smiled sadly and accepted me, but I had a light scratch right across my face.

And I still had some blood stains, and lines of mud.

Not to mention bodily juices.

I was a mess, and stuck on a bus... When Barney rang.

Okay I *was* going to stop off at Tina's, on the way to pick up Duna, so I could shower and borrow clothes. But perhaps I'd get some new clothes here, since the bus was blocked.

And I had to look good anyway for the 'Rescue' program, but would my free credit card be valid in Pollard? Of course why not.

In fact I was overjoyed with my friend Barney, he was clever and funny to be with, and so yummy as well, I was feeling well. I was loved and wanted.

Tingling sharp in my body and my head. After so many doubts and double thinks and backing off. He had finally let himself go, you wouldn't have guessed it.

Lucky my girlfriends had insisted he was crazy over me. I couldn't wait to tell Duna and Paco, though really they knew already, but still. He would be perfect for them..

Finally I'd buried my own doubts as well, okay I could maybe do more stuff alone, but Barney thrilled and delighted me, and he was great with the kids.

I was smiling to myself in the back of the bus, stretching my tingling body and deep breathing. Feeling young and in love again, and getting in the mood for a party.

Yes why not, I could check the profiles later. I would jump off the stopped bus and get some clothes.

That's when the cellphone buzzed. People turned round to look, as the ring-tone was a baby crying, it was him, and I jabbed the green button.

I was grinning stupidly, embarrassed and nodding to the passengers.

When Barney rang.

- 'Hey Lucy they're arresting me in the park.

They're after you too in a white van, after the bus.'

- 'Hello Pardy, hello..Pardy. Hello Pardy.' - I just heard yells.

Turning my head I caught the eye of the driver of the white van,

He was stalled behind the bus.

We both looked quickly away, he was shaved, with headphones.

Not specially suspicious..

But that was a walkie talkie on the dash. And handcuffs!

Shit, mierda, he'd seen me turn to look. He must guess I was alerted.

Yes. He was talking to himself..or into a microphone.

I leaned over. Slid down onto the floor.

And started yelling like a crazy lady.

- 'Help me. Help me please.' - I shouted *- 'Help me the army are arresting Pardy Brown in the park. They're here as well. Listen everybody please. Don't look now they're here in a white van behind the bus. Call the Clanners someone please. Call the CLAN Defence. Help me I'm Lucy. I'm Lucy from Women's Rescue they want to kill me...'*

It was the old nodding lady who believed me first.

She had her mobile out, pressed Pool and asked for CLAN Defence.

The bus driver was on his feet. Peering back at this awful raving woman on the floor.

The yunkers all gawking with open mouths. Some of them smirking.

- 'She's throwing a wobbly.'

- 'They're coming to kill me! Behind the bus.'

- 'It's true, there's a van-load in front as well.' - shouted the driver. He believed me anyway.

- 'This computer. Can you hide it. Somebody. In your clothes. And my mobile.'

- 'There's weird fellas getting out behind. They've got guns. Look out!' -.

- 'The terrorists are here!' -

- 'Quick quick disguise me girls. The punky wig, the hat!' -

In just a few seconds I was transformed. In a green wig and gorgeous Clan Earth tassels..

- 'Block the door! Block the door!' -

- 'Here they come.' -

Our driver was leaning on the horn.

Ramming into the van in front. A bus driver's dream come true.

Throwing us back and forth like floppy dolls.

-‘Oh God, we’re all going to die!’-

Ramming the white van forward. Swinging the bus sideways. Right across the road.
Demolishing an ice cream stall, as mothers dragged their kiddies off the street.

I was kneeling on the floor, thinking of wedging myself under the seats.

The yunkers were shouting and pointing out the windows.

The road was blocked. The crowd was five deep on both sides.

A big Yeti fella had grabbed a commando in a bear hug from behind.

And a chaotic struggle began.

And finished in half a minute. The doors of the van in front were jammed by our ramming, with four Special Forces soldiers inside.

Clan Yeti from Pollard, plus our bus driver, were publicly acclaimed for arresting them. Actually they surrendered. Plus there were two arrested, a man from Mossad I think, and a local nazi from the Brother-Hood. The rest escaped.

I was all in one piece, how fine! Crouching on the floor of the bus, but Barney’s mobile was dead.

I was trying to phone Duna, then explaining what happened again. I was shocked and laughing together, if that’s possible.

People outside were realizing we had won and started hopping and cheering. The white van and its prisoners were cordoned off.

I was just shaken, dying for a pee and a hundred per cent filthy. They wanted to interview me for TV.

I felt like a battered parrot, in my borrowed tassels and lime green hair.

-‘This is Doctor Lucia Perez from Women’s Rescue!’- [see glossary. Womens Rescue.]

-‘Congratulations Lucy. How did you capture all these Commandos!’-

-‘All these people caught them not me. They try to get me, for showing that they are criminals. That only proves that we were right. Also they are arresting Bar no Pardy Brown in the river park..’-

In my mind getting arrested meant getting tortured and raped and maybe killed. Disappeared

forever, or never ever getting free.

Like millions of people stuck in prisons. I felt like I was born again I was so LUCKY.

Thank you gracias THANK YOU to all those people.

Oh shit, What about Barney? Maybe he got away?

-‘Those specialists couldn’t get me. The capitalists’ military institutions are imploding. They are incompetent, because their whole operation is another underfunded, um, demoralized.. disgusting, fiasco...’-

Then I was kissing the interviewer and my new friends who were cheering like I’d just won the World Cup.

Everyone was understanding now what had just happened.

Those tonto Specials made another balls up. Those idiot boys had let me get away!

Barney

Stupidly I thought I might escape. I *was* in top form, for my age I mean.

I kicked off my useless flip flops and charged sideways into the muddy water.
Flung my mobile phone into the 'lake'...

I used to play volley in the surf. It was knee deep but it had been a flat hockey pitch.
I scooted along, my arms flailing, and kicking my legs out sideways.
Like a coot in a panic, but too heavy to take off.
I was heading for where the old bridge had been, behind the pile of flotsam.
Two Specials were splashing behind me, the rest ran round the shore.
I would leap over the torrent and out the park gate, dive straight into the little streets of Ragwort, where every door was unlocked to me. We had no crime.
Yes yes, and I was actually pulling away from them!
That's when those evil bastards opened fire.

They must have had orders to fire at my legs, or I'd be dead already.
One of my pursuers fell first, with a yell, as my left leg got a terrific whack, like an iron bar.
Now normally a cut knee would finish me off for the day, but I was so wound up I just kept right on going.

Up and hopping, out of the water and behind the heap of wreckage.
One soldier was splashing out behind me.
-*'Stop there Maguire, or I shoot.'*- Came a local voice.
Next I only needed to leap a raging three meter wide river, on one leg, and sprint fifty meters to safety. It was impossible. I would never get away.
Hopping and yelping like a run-over dog..
I saw someone had placed a long, thick, builder's plank where the span of the old bridge had been.
The torrent gurgling just under it.
I didn't stop, balancing by pure luck.
And I hopped straight across, into the very dim streetlights of Ragwort.

Reaching the cobbles I fell on my good knee and heaved the heavy plank forward.
So the other end fell in the river.
Gulping air and crying out, I glimpsed my pursuer's open mouth.
As he fell sideways into the raging water, clutching the plank.
Then I was out the park gate, lumbering crab-wise on a foot and two hands, over a brand new flood protection dike.
Past a night work crew with an air digger.
-*'Watch out.. they're.. coming..'*- I didn't stop.

Round the corner and straight in the first door.

A young fella from the volunteer crew was following me.
Scuffing at blood spots with his shoes.
Blundered through into a little kitchen.
Past a yapping terrier, and straight out the back door.
There was no stopping me.

- 'Gotta hide. Help me hide. I'm shot, I'm shot.' -

Half the garden space is common. This lad Patsy had his shoulder under my arm and we staggered rapidly down the middle path. A glasshouse, a laundry, a workshop, flowers and a natural swimming pool.

Finally it sank in. Like the cartoon coyote who finally notices he's run off the cliff.
I fell and rolled over in agony, dragging my assistant down with me.
Then I saw a cartoon door right in front of me.
And I pulled myself into a large dog kennel there by the path.
A small collie was backing up, baring it's teeth in terror.

My new friend Patsy was squeezing in beside us. The stink was terrible.
He said he saw Clanners, running past with guns, he thought I was sobbing.

- 'You'll be okay Mr. Maguire. I'm calling the doctors now. Just hang on.' -

- 'I'm laughing.' - says I. *- 'I'm laughing not crying.' -*

Okay we'd been careless, we should've phoned for an escort from the bus, but I'd gotten away.
What luck. I had escaped, I felt like I'd won the Galactic Cup, with a brilliant fluky goal.

But then I remembered they'd surely got Lucy. Probably they were torturing or raping her right that minute in the van.,

And of course it was all my fault and I couldn't save her.

Then Moonbeam started wailing in my head.

- 'Oh shit, can I use your phone please, I think they got my friend.' -

Chapter forty six

Chained to Wainy

- *'Free the child in your head.'* -

'Finally they're not letting anyone out at all. It's not just your friend.' - said Bruno to Damo, with a glance and a shrug at Macker's support group.

Damo and Duna were still waiting at the prisoners' center for Macker to be freed, but it was looking less likely by the minute. By now every prisoner had a desk and support group, logistics, infiltration, supplies, coordination...They'd been planning this for months and they had too many volunteer.

'He's my brother not my friend.' - said Damo *'They've been torturing him. His girlfriend is lost and had an abortion..'*

'A miscarriage.' - said Duna. *'But why not let them out? They announce to the whole world they'll let them free and then...'*

'They request verifiable ID.' - said Jennifer. *'They need written proof of regular residence. They require guarantees and bail bonds. They insist on medical certificates in triplicate.'*

'Medical certificates! Why the hell do they need medical certificates in triplicate?'

'It doesn't matter. Let's just go in and get him out!' - said Damo, suddenly militant.

'Do we dress up as soldiers?' - Duna pointed to a passing group of Clanners in PIF army uniforms.

'No no that's something else. Wait for the briefing okay in a few minutes. This is a rolling takeover. It's not just tonight.' - And Bruno turned back to the computer, shaking his head.

'There's no doors in the cell-blocks. No windows. No window or door frames even. They do have electricity, and drains. But the prisoners are luckier than the squaddies. In the barracks we've taken out the toilets and the wiring.'

One way or another...The prisoners were coming out.

'Five minutes! Five minutes to go!'

A manic old man was shouting, gesticulating at the line of food and drink trolleys that were stopping in the central aisle and still being loaded up. Then he was dancing round a computer, switching his headphones.

'We need a medical group in four fifteen immediately.' - He barked into a cellphone.

'He's a darts fanatic...That's right. Darts in cell twenty two.'

'Cheese, salad, veggie rolls, magazines, marijuana, ice cream, condoms, plasters, mosquito repellent, cellphones, stretchers, handcuffs, skeleton keys, rubbish bins, music six four three...' - chanted skinny Lizzie from a check list.

'Candles... I know but they trade them. As many as you can get.'

-*Mosquito balm, massage oil.*'-

The PIF forces had occupied the former police and army barracks and set up a Holding Center in the former prison, but the anti invasion groups had spent months preparing the place for them.

And it seems there were multiple tunnels. Mount Venus Prison and Barracks were *as permeable as a wormery*, and the new Zoo Pools Leisure Center and soldier's entertainment complex were right next door.

The army had decided to keep their hostages.

But one way or another...The prisoners were coming out.

-*Two of those arrested in Hurndon have come out already, still handcuffed to their guard. They're having breakfast.*'-

-*They kidnapped the soldier?'*-

-*No no. He turned out to be a rapper, into the Eagles and a fan of Clanners Way.*'-

-*They're treating him like it's his birthday.*'-

-*Are we really going in there?'*- asked Damo. Getting nervous. -*Won't they just arrest us as well?'*-

-*They're tolerating vendors, Their Caterers had to pull out. They got no water. No power. No doors. No drains...'*-

-*And far too much hashish!'*-

* * *

-*Okay here's the info on the guy guarding Macker. Name of Wain from Kentucky .Has contributed to the Gay Rescue show on, er, Indy-TV, married with one child.*'-

-*Gay Rescue?'*- Damien exclaimed. -*But Jerry from our house is in Gay Rescue, isn't he?'*-

-*It's TV as well. Some online help and advice shows they have, like, family stuff. They take our shows now.. Chain Reaction and Clanners Way.*'-

-*He's gay, did you say. Is he gay? I can't seduce a gay fella.. Damo you'll have to try.*'- Duna complained, pouting.

-*Me? No way. And you're not seducing nobody.*'- said Damo hotly, -*That's not the idea.*'-

-*Well, that is one important tactic, but you're too young to qualify.*'- Jennifer explained, -*We are actively supported by the Prostitutes Collective.*'- And she nodded towards an uproarious table, further down the hall.

-*Will there be prostitutes, when we're all 'money-free?'*-

-*Let's get Jerry he'll help!'*- Duna exclaimed. -*I'm phoning Jerry now.*'-

-*It's the middle of the night. We don't know this guy is gay, he is married..'*-

-*It's ringing. Hello Jerry.. James, hello. Is Jerry with you?.. Hello Jerry hi...Good morning this is Duna speaking! It's me Duna. Yes. Sorry to wake you but...Listen we need your help, they still won't let Macker out...'*-

* * *

Macker

-*Jahzus it stinks in here. Oh hello.*'-

-*'Don't they have a real prison?'*-

Still stuck in the van. Two more prisoners were herded up into the back with me. My wrists were still hurting like hell and I was glad of the company.

-*'Hi there I'm, er, Yoo Wan.'*-

-*'A Chinese name. I'm officially Mucker Durutti.'*-

-*'Cool name. This is Suhkia.'*-

-*'Maybe I can guess you surname. Would it be Mr. Willy?'*

-*'Nothing so common. My family name is Dykk. With a 'y.'*-

-*'That's disgusting!'*-

-*'What are you in for, Mister Kerr?'*-

-*'Sabotage!'*-

-*'Wow!'*-

-*'A Coca Cola machine that only took dollars. But Suhkia here is accused of Conspiracy to cause Actual Bodily Harm.'*-

-*'You punched a soldier?'*-

-*'He called me a pathetic little faggot. I happen to be homosexual.'*-

-*'He's a political prisoner of conscience.'*-

-*'Well I never wanted to be.'*-

-*'With any luck we'll be out tonight. They're doing an enormous demo for us.'*-

-*'We know. And what did they get you for?'*-

I put a finger to my lips. -*'I'll tell you later okay.'*-

We were classed as a Holding Center in a Staging Area. Translated that meant eleven hours cooking slowly in a metal van. My wrists were all cut up and I still couldn't feel two fingers properly.

But we had some fun as well, Yoo Wan's sister Emma and his girlfriend Anna Key were held in the next Armoured Oven. In fact I composed a dreadful One Act Drama which we later performed in the cell. It started like this.

-*'My name is Mucker I'm a clever little *****,*

Though I never went to school.

I'm chained to a thick Called Suhkia Dykk

And a chap called Yoo Wan Kerr...'-

Meanwhile, outside the oven, a magnificent Revolutionary Action Machine was whirring into motion, on our behalf.

The Staging Center was *already infiltrated.*

Fruit smoothies were being subversively *sucked up straws.*

Security was *fatally compromised.*

Cherry ice cream and veggie hot dogs with spicy ketchup were being *openly distributed.*

The tattoo stall was *swinging into action.*

Mosquito Balm and massage oil were being *freely applied by sympathetic women.*

Someone heard us banging and located the hole. The hole we had enlarged very slightly. The bottom corner of a rusting back door.

That was the end of my theatrical efforts. That's when they slid us through our mobile phones. And the end of my peace of mind.

With a telephone I found out in five minutes. I found out that Maxie was missing, and that my potential kid, name of Kazoo, was gone forever.

I needed to get out of there immediately, I had to find her fast as she might be suicidal, I was getting contacts and forgetting them and getting wrong numbers, half crying, kneeling in the corner, upset and confused.

Then I got through to Lucia, who was with Barney, she implied that they were hiding from the police. She told me Maxie had escaped in a boat, and had left a message.

I felt much calmer, they had a lot of people looking for her, and Barney said that if she were going to kill herself she'd hardly bother escaping in a boat.

We spent three hours on the road to travel maybe fifty kilometers, due partly to demonstrations for our release, but that didn't stop us complaining.

I was hanging onto a bar, feeling nauseous as the metal box swayed and braked and endlessly lurched about. What a stupid egoistic bastard I had been, why the hell had I let Maxie go on patrol?

I was wearing earphones and listening to book summaries by phone for my Free-Uni course. -*'Nietzsche and the Atheist Psyche'*-.

But I could only think of how I'd failed Maxie. I'd just gone along weakly with her..Why? Why? Why? Because I was selfishly afraid of losing her love. My cowardly ego had let her take a risk, when she needed someone to say -*'No Way. You mustn't go.'*

We arrived eventually to Mount Venus Prison, back in the city. I'd spent some weeks there before in the Youth Section under the Old Regime. We expected immediate release, having heard all about the Ultimatum victory by phone on the way.

Suhkia and Yoo-Wan were in high spirits, we were about to become celebrities. I was still sulking myself, but at least we had arrived.

Our visit to Mount Venus Prison, Barracks and Police Station was short, and weirder than the weirdest black comedy you could ever imagine.

They had tunnels already constructed to the Zoo-Pools leisure center next door.

The van door swung open at last, on the wet cobbled courtyard, behind high stone walls. Where generations of terrorist anti-colonial leaders had been executed.

But their ghosts didn't appear, instead we saw two Orca Clanners, staggering under a pile of thin foam mattresses. They were ignored by the soldiers, letting them fall on the wet cobbles, and making a bee line straight for us.

-*'What color mattress would we prefer?'*- They began. And found out who we were and what cell we were headed for.

Then the second APC opened and Yoo Wan's girlfriend Anna and her friend Emma jumped shakily down.

We were handcuffed to soldiers who were to be our guards.

No way they were letting us go, we were led by an officer to the west wing cells, followed by the mattress boys, and a mobile soup stall which joined the cavalcade and smelt fantastic.

Our cell had no door. It had no frame to hang a door on. It had no windows, nor bars, nor window frames, At least they'd left the cellblock with water, lights and toilets.

We were all handcuffed to each other, with a light chain to our minder, whose name was Wain.

In fact Anna and Emma were chained to a guard called Myra, in the next cell, but they later came and joined with us.

I talked to Bernie on the phone. She'd been left minding Moonbeam and Josie and the house, again. She was angry about that, and she admitted that Maxie still hadn't called.

Something even worse must have happened to her. I needed to find her. I needed to be out of that prison immediately.

Our minder, Wain, was chained to me, and I was cuffed to Yoo-Wan and Suhkia. He seemed strict. Grasping his gun, and didn't answer or smile at our jokes.. But I soon found out he wasn't bad or angry. Our guard, like me, was hurting and confused.

I told Wain about myself, simply, because he couldn't catch our accents. It came out both our fathers were recently dead. And I told him Maxie, or Paxie as I called her, was missing and had lost our baby.

-‘Oh my gawd Mucker how terrible. I can check if she’s arrested if you like. Would she give her real name?’-

-‘She would not.’-

-‘You’re not Mucker Durutti either, are you?’-

I shook my head.

-‘And I’m not Suhkia Dykk, and he’s not Yoo Wan Kerr either.’-

Wain broke into a long throaty laugh, rattling our chain. Only now he'd got our schoolboy humor.

-‘Tell me exactly where and when she disappeared.’- he said. -‘We’ll see if she’s detained.’-

Soon we were slurping our soup. Supper from the soup group, who were also coordinating support. We were sat on the ancient blue tiled stone bench. Etched with the names of long dead and forgotten prisoners, and all listening to the Pools Radio they'd given us.

The radio was pre-tuned to the Forces Network, the 'Gay Rescue' program, which was hardly a coincidence.

-‘..Gay Rescue is a planet web supporting Gay people with problems, giving advice and support personally or secretly in many cases, as well as publicly on Net TV and cellphone shows. We have a mushrooming list of local groups and can sometimes give legal and physical help..’-

-‘Hey Gay Rescue how cool.’- said Suhkia.

-‘How strange.’- said Wain. ‘I helped on those shows.’-

-‘Really! But we know them. Maybe you know Jerry, he lives with us. Well next door but we eat together..’-

-‘Jerry? Sure, must be him. I’ve sent him messages.’-

-‘How grand! ‘You’re practically family!. Jerry’s a very nice fella. Still pretty spooked and serious.’-

-‘What happened to him?’-

-‘His family happened. His dad used to beat him for being gay, um. He was in a rehab center, a shrink bin. He escaped to, er, our friend’s, and joined Clan Earth.. but that was a few years ago He’s much better now.’-

-‘They tried to force cure him from being gay!-’

-‘Well..I’ll give him a buzz, sure we’ll meet him later on.’-

-‘Not unless he comes in here, but I’d like to see him. I got a problem with my kid..’-

-‘I’ll ring him now. What happened..’-

Wain was in the throes of a painful divorce, and his ex, Trixie, didn't let him speak with his three year old kid. When I phoned Jerry I told him this, and I told him Wain was helping me look for Maxie. Maybe someone could help him, and us.

Next thing Suhkia had to piss. So we all had to stand up, shuffle in with him and watch him squirt. He had a nice little circumcised pinky. Then back beside the missing window. So that You-Wan could reach out and hold hands with Anna in the next cell.

We heard angry shouts approaching. Strong torch beams probing about...

-*'We're here to escort the undressed girls. Where are they?'*-

Three drunken looking Military Police had arrived with orders to escort all undressed girls from our cell to the Officers Quarters, in the Henry Pogrom Building.

-*'This is cell B stroke X seven.'*-

-*'No it isn't.'*-

-*'Yes it is.....'*-

They were aggressive, swearing to discipline Wain for not producing girls. Fortunately they were called to a barracks dispute and rushed off.

Meanwhile Yoo-Wan had whispered a warning via the window. Anna and her friend and minder were hiding as best they could in the next toilet.

After that they came and stayed in our cell. Myra, their guard is a good head, despite her military family. We all shared a big joint of Yeti Gold that she'd just scored for free. Wain didn't smoke but he did loosen up. Maybe he got a passive hit.

-*'Of course this stuff isn't authentic, the only thing really Yeti is the name.'*- said Emma knowledgeably.

-*'They extract chemicals they say cause paranoia and memory loss. This is just light and floaty.'*- said Anna Key. Blowing up a smoke ring and passing it to me.

-*'Suits me fine.'*- says I. Inhaling a little.

-*'Orca, Yeti, Earth, Coppice, Warrior or Sunshine.'*- came a sing song shout from the corridors.

Another big supermarket trolley came trundling in. This time with dramatic posters of stick-on tattoos. A portable computer and various electronic boxes on top. Steered by two women in overalls and mili-caps. Clipboards in their hands.

-*'Orca, Yeti, Earth, Coppice, Warrior or Sunshine?'*-

-*'Earth. Earth and Orca. What've you got?'*-

-*'New tattoos.'*- She was opening a big file. -*'Have a look at these. You must be Mucker, Suhkia and Yoo-Wan.'*-

-*'I'm impressed. We're not forgotten, how did you know?'*-

-*'I've seen your photos, and real names. You have a lot of supporters out here already...Good, and you women? Anna and Emma, we saw you earlier but you've changed cell. So then you're Myra and you're Wain.'*- She was tapping at a keyboard.

-*'I need water and a cloth.'*- said Suhkia.

He had selected a line drawing, of a kid with a catapult, squeezing out a barred window. Designed to go on the forehead. Titled -*'Free the child in your head'*-.

They had a whole series of new forehead stick-ons. Little kids, ogres, elves, fairies and leprechauns. -*'Kill the killer, or rapist, or soldier, or free the slave.. in your head.'*-

-*'So can you all just be patient while we get things organized okay? I imagine you'll be out for breakfast. But they've been going back on their Amnesty promises. Wain and Myra. Here are your local cellphones. They're a present, we have a shipload of them. No, the blue one is yours.'*-

-*'Hey great just what I need.'*- said Myra. Fingering it eagerly, while Wain looked dubious.

-*'And here are your credit cards. Everyone here has credit cards and we hope you will be coming out and, er, integrating okay?'*-

-*'Now I seen everything.'*- said Suhkia Dykk. -*'They're giving them fucking credit cards!'*-

There were loud echoing voices outside. And the *stick-on women* made a quick exit. Anna had chosen little animals, which she peeled off and began sticking on us and herself. The way we were sweating you didn't need water, and with so few clothes our bodies were an open canvas for artistic talents.

I liked the series of little fellows in your head and I'd selected a wizard throwing stars. You-Wan helped me put it on. I was inspired...

-*'It's time boys and girls, for me to present our Revolutionary One Act Drama, entitled 'I Just Done Pissed in the Prison Van.'*-

That lasted about half an hour. They started cheering, which attracted the *soup group*, the *CLAN Boutique*, the Eagle prisoners from cell B stroke six and their guard. Plus the beer and marijuana trolley, as our audience swelled and we repeated the whole thing.

Finally some Military Police herded everyone back laughing to their cells.

- *My name is Mucker I'm a clever little *****,*

Though I never went to school.

I'm chained to a hick Called Suckia Dykk

And a chap called Yoo Wan Kerr...'-

* * *

Time slowed down. We were all half dozed off by the time Duna and Damo showed up. Ostensibly delivering sweet and salty popcorn.

I was really surprised. What next! My little brother was hugging me, half awake, in the cell, giving out bags of popcorn in the middle of the night in the middle of Mount Venus Prison.

I asked them to just get me out but they shushed me up.

-*'Great stuff Damo you found me. Thanks for coming in.'*-

He was trying to distribute midnight popcorn to our sleepy cell-mates, explaining that Barney was in hospital and Lucia was looking after him. How the Specials had tried to nick them both but they got away. While Duna shoved me over and sat beside Wain, our guard, who was still curled up, asleep or pretending, on the cold stone bench.

* * *

She brushes his hair back from his face. Lightly with her fingertips. His eyes flicker open but she goes on stroking his locks.

-*'Hello Wain, dearest.'*-

-*'Who the hell are you?'*-

He lifts his head, groaning, and she moves closer smartly, so it rests on her leg.

-*'I am Duna. Daughter of Lucia. The Women's Rescue healer.'*-

-*'Lucia Perez?'*-

-*'You know my mom!'* She bends and kisses his cheek.

-*'Just the name.'* He raises himself and finds he's leaning on her.

-*'So I came to fix things for you. You're Wain right. Macker said you're missing your kid Cherry, right.'*-

-*'Well yes but..How did you know that?'*-

-*'You're entitled to online interviews with neutral supervision. Your sister Babs has agreed to do it.'*-

She is staring into his eyes, close up. Tracing a face-line with her index fingertip.

-*'Babs, you know Babs?'*-

-*'Your lawyer spoke several times to Babs.'*-

-*'But, my wife won't..we can't.'*-

-*'Your ex-wife Trixie. She has agreed to immediate access in return for non prosecution. Saved herself a big potential fine. Your attorney..'*-

-*'Attorney? I have no attorney..'*-

-*'From Women's Rescue, silly.'*-

-*'But, er, but I'm not a woman.'*-

She giggles and whispers in his ear.

-*'But maybe a little bit gay. Yes or no?'*-

She squeezes his hands. But he slyly doesn't confirm yes or no.

-*'Anyway Cherry is a girl.'*-

Damo is chatting with me and I'm yawning. I see he's simmering with jealousy, as Duna makes friends with sleepy Wain beside us. Next thing she's swapping his army cap for her Earth shades.

-*'If you want to confirm the interview you can chat with your daughter this morning.'*-

-*'What? But I can't leave here.'*-

-*'Course you can, it's here as well. All the persons are going to the Welcome Bar. It's allowed to go with a big amnesty.'* She's throwing shapes, playing with the cap.-*'And no one will care anyway. Your friend Jerry is coming to meet us there and we'll eat something okay?'*-

Wain says no. Under no circumstances would he leave the prison premises while on guard duty.

But Suhkia has recruited Myra straight away, and the girls are keen to go.

Soon Wain is explaining to Duna, like they were lifelong friends. She whispers in his ear, rolling her eyes at us, and they laugh together, while her fingers get frisky with his shirt buttons, and squeeze his aching neck.

She wants to swap more clothes, she wants his mili-shirt. She acts the soldier in his cap and makes us laugh. She's wearing a peep-top, flashing her teenage breasts, and swishing silver tassels on her gold black skin..

-*'Come on Wainy, let's go. You're only young once.'*-

-*'Well maybe I..'*-

Duna has closed his lips with her small fingers, then slips her tongue through them to kiss him.

-*'Just come!'*- she says urgently. -*'If they call you just say -'All is good Sir.'- okay? Do it for me Wain, for me and Cherry.'*-

-*'Oh all right, Okay but only if I can really speak to my daughter.'*- he says, giving in.
Duna tugs the chain to clap, jerking all our hands together. Kissing his cheeks.
-*'We're going out for breakfast!'*-
Daring herself to squeeze him, surreptitiously where she shouldn't. .
-*'Now honey! This is only if you behave yourself, right. I don't want you messing with me in front of our mama.'*-
-*'Can I just try on your shirt a minute? Oh please Wainy please.'*-

* * *

-*'Wakey wakey Mr. Wan Kerrr.'* I growled, shaking him gently. -*'Get up now Suhkia, Anna, Emma, Myra. Who's coming for some breakfast now? Come on now let's go, I need something soft to sit on.'*-

None of us were really sleeping anyway. We were all propped on sharp tiles, ancient etched out names on prison stone. Impotently swatting at the agile mosquitoes.

And because we were chained together, with every movement really annoying everyone else.

The Great Escape. We poke our heads out of the absent cell door, shushing each other loudly, and all tip toe noisily along to the wash rooms, where our *'stick-on distributor'* unlocks an ordinary brown door.

Glancing guiltily behind us, getting tangled up in brushes and mops, shouting at each other to keep quiet.

Still handcuffed together, and all chained to Wainy and Myra, like a gang of disobedient dogs. Trying but failing to stop laughing.

One dramatic thing does happen. The chain falls off the boys. It clatters on the chipboard walkway in the passage, we are still cuffed together but no longer attached to Wain, our faithful minder. Could be the lads have been tampering with it, maybe it's badly made, as if it knows we're just some steps from freedom.

We walk down an ordinary well-lit corridor and through another door, pushing back a normal mosquito screen.

Out into the big cool carpeted Welcome Bar, empty up this end, with a few people dancing Salsa, but lazily, under a spotlight below. It's *much* too early in the morning.

A sleepy looking Orca is waving and calling, but we flop together on a ring of leather sofas, I see that the bar is open, and serving hot food..

So ends the Great Escape. Bye bye Mount Venus.

* * *

Barney

I didn't expect to spend more than one day in hospital, I'd lost blood, my leg muscle was cut and the tendons were damaged, but it wasn't infected.

I was feeling optimistic, after being reunited with Lucia and Moonbeam. I would get out in the morning and I should heal fine.

Then I went down with a fierce stomach bug, hospitals are dangerous places, and they kept me in, on the drip.

I took the opportunity to catch up on a few years of lost sleep.

But that same morning the doctor told me that, exceptionally, I'd have visitors, James and Jerry and some others.

I felt sure it was some more terribly spooky espionage stuff, but I couldn't see why they had to consult with *me* about it.

Especially when I was all drugged up and ill.

I was right about the spooky bit. They were setting a trap for the new leader of the right wing vigilantes now being groomed for power by our glorious Invaders.

Young and brilliant, Killian Bate had proven to be the most vicious and manipulative, and his sponsors had made him cock of the walk.

I knew this kid personally, his dad had trained him as a bullying thug and he was good at it. His sadistic obsessions added a special shiver, and his sexual predilections were pretty horrific.

Maxie and Jerry knew him even better than me of course, having humiliated and deposed him as the Adolf Hitler of their school, when the Clanners took over.

I woke to find three people round my bed, a guard at the door. James and Jerry were standing, with a masked and hooded somebody sat in the chair.

I was feeling weak and queasy, Jerry was patting my head.

Soon they were talking about that guy we love to hate.

'Suddenly he's a respected representative.' - James was saying. *'They're all queued up to back and give him cash. He was featured in Time magazine, flashing that charismatic grimace.'*

Somehow his boasts were chic and daring, his wild threats were somehow sexy. Who else would offer to cut up gays, brand lesbians and execute aliens on Pools TV?

'Maybe it's a good thing that he's their leader.' - I observed. *'I mean, the guy is actually a maniac, in my definition.'*

'No no, we're promoting an internal power struggle, if he goes now they'll be inoperative for months, just at this key point...'

It was my incognito visitor, a deep gurgly woman's voice, I felt I knew her but...

'Sorry I wasn't introduced.' - I said, curiously.

'It's not that I don't trust you, er, Mr. Brown.' - and she giggled.

'You're right, one day our dear Brothers might torture me for your name.'

'They're well capable, it's all that Killian enjoys.'

I knew her voice, I was nearly sure of it, nodding and chuckling under her hood.

'So what's the plan, and how can I help?' - I offered.

'Well first, thanks for seeing us when you're ill.'

They hadn't actually given me a choice, and I badly needed to squirt diarrhoea in the bed pan.

'We need to take out Killian Bate. He hates Jerry, and all gays with a vengeance, but he's pathological about Maxie, since she did that interview denouncing him.'

'She really got to him, saying how he pissed in his pants and ran away.'

Our guard was shushing and pulling the door handle, as footsteps approached and faded in the corridor.

-*'Now you're all evacuated from Little Agnes Street, we thought of setting him a trap, using his knee jerk psychosis. We're wondering how you feel. Or Maxie if she were here.'*-

-*'No problem here.'*- I said. -*'It's time we moved house anyway, and I know Maxie would be all in favour.'*-

-*'But we thought of using another interview, of her goading him.'*-

-*'Yes yes, we worked as a team. She asked me to act for her if she were killed, um, I know the tape you mean, see she was waiting for proof that, um, that someone died under torture.'*-

-*'We have that now, a recording of his boasting and threats. Her name was Laura, she was gay, she died of complications next day.'*-

-*'What a bastard. Maxie would have been happy to trap him.'*-

-*'But Maxie is alive, At least let's hope she's alive.'*-

-*'Of course she's alive. Let's hope she turns up today.'*-

-*'So anyway, all this will happen tonight, or tomorrow, if it happens, it's all set up and Hil.. I mean we.'*-

Of course, he'd almost said her name. I'd actually once shared a squat with this brave infiltrating lady.

-*'Hilda Curbin!'*-

I interrupted in a whisper, reaching out for her hands.

-*'How could I not have known that it was you!' —*

Chapter forty seven

Permaculture

-‘They’d finally figured out what wild is’-

Macker

‘Hi Jerry. Hi James thanks for coming so early.’-

‘Hello Macker, are you okay? Hi Duna, you got him out!’-

Jerry and James appeared first. All smiles and poring over a portable. Standing too close to each other, just accidentally jostling, in that obviously affectionate way.

They were waiting in the bar as planned; I’d phoned to say we were coming out. Along with James who’d driven him from Dab Abbey, and had offered to take us out there for breakfast.

Because we were homeless. Our house had been evacuated, after the attacks on Barney and Lucia, and we were all invited to stay with James in this Permaculture Cente

I’ve done circus workshops there, okay it *was* a really good place to stay.

But I was just destroyed. My hands were hurting, and I wished I could just go home to Maxie’s bed.

‘This is Wain our guard I was telling you about. Plus Emma, Anna, Myra, er, and Yoo-Wan and Suhkia Dykk.’-

‘Welcome to freedom everyone.’-

‘I can’t believe they accepted those names!’-

‘Hi Wain. I’m Jerry from, um, from Gay Rescue, er, in the flesh.’-

‘Hi Jerry, thanks for coming man.’- said Wain.

‘I didn’t imagine you so young and healthy looking.’-

‘Well I expected someone younger!’ They both laughed.

‘Hey you wanna grab a coffee with me I need to ask you something.’-

‘Yeah cool, um.’- He turned to Duna who was wearing his cap and shirt, open to her knees.

‘Don’t lose my shades, I’ll mind your shirt, okay?’- she said, slapping his shapely bum.

‘And the handcuffs?’- Suhkia held up his hands. Obliging me and Yoo-Wan Kerr to do the same with one hand each.

Wain turned back, rummaging infructuously in his pockets.

‘Gentlemen. The keys to freedom!’- says I. Rising with a magician’s flourish,

I produced the handcuff keys.. from out of my mouth.

The reception area was full of people still waiting for prisoners to come out. Like a fog bound airport at daybreak. My cell mates had to resume their normal names. as friends and family hailed and welcomed them. I needed to locate Maxie, but no one could tell me anything new.

Duna's friend Lila appeared and they were embracing and gabbling enthusiastically in Spanish. I could see the dawn, streaking through the clouds, outside the big windows. The storm had cleared away.

My sister Tessa was waiting there, fair play to her. She was curled asleep on a curved couch, with her boyfriend Paco, who'd been sent by Lucia to bring home the wayward Duna But where was home? Our house had just been emptied. I asked James, taking him aside.

- 'Oh yes I'm terribly sorry we had to evacuate your house, we got a tip off about a raid, looking for Pardy and your , er, partner, which is actually good news.'

- 'What? They want to murder Maxie and that's good news?' - I queried.

- 'Yes, relatively speaking, The Special forces are working with the Brother-Hood, it means neither group has arrested Maxie. or even realizes she's missing.'

James has a weird manner, even giving good news came across chilling.

I wandered back to the empty lounge to have a kip.

I'd taken painkillers but I couldn't sleep for missing Maxie. Of course I knew she wouldn't be there, but my body expected her, like a mental toothache throbbing right through me. I must have nodded off finally.

- 'Macker. It's me, Jerry. I'm really sorry to w-wake you up, I need to talk to you in s-secret.' - he whispered. *- Putting an arm around me.*

- 'Oh Jahzus I'm knackered.' - I groaned.

- 'Sorry Macker, we need to know if you're okay about putting out you and Maxie's new program.'

- 'Who Do You Hate?' - *Of course, but it's not finished. '*

- 'It is now, they want to try and trap him. Would Maxie mind?'

- 'I was just a camera assistant, but if you want my opinion? Go right ahead. He couldn't hate us more than he does, and fair play to anyone who tries to stop him.'

I was pleased. Maxie had really gone for him in that video, and she wanted it to go out.

- 'That's great then. We're setting a deadly trap for Killian Bate.'

* * *

The minibus had bench seats and a windshield, bolted onto the roof in front of the air bottles. I went on top, to wake myself up, with Jerry and Wain, and Duna, who seemed to be some kind of triangle.

Plus Myra who came with us, without her prisoners. Their families had taken them home. She was quite relaxed, about being a deserter, and surprised us with another Yeti spliff. Stamping to the heavy road music, that James and Damo put on down below.

She offered me the joint but I was already floating, and I belted myself in tight, to try and enjoy the interesting trip down the country.

Damien stayed downstairs, he said he'd get carsick up on the roof. I felt sorry for my 'little' brother, he was bonkers crazy about Duna, but he hadn't the foggiest how to compete for her attention. He had done well in helping to free me. Even Tessa had reluctantly grunted a *'Well done Damien.'* - before bedding down on the back seat with her boyfriend Paco.

We were zipping along. Then stuck in the morning traffic. Horses, carts, skates, air cars, lorries. The bike lanes were flocking with kids, zipping in and out on air-heelies. At the big square stacks of yunkers were milling about, anticipating already the *'Save the Soldiers'* demo due that morning. *'Hurray, hurray, save the soldiers!'* -

Myra was up and yelling back, still in her PIF uniform, as we crawled through. And suddenly they were all lining up to clap us, spotting those uniforms. Wain looked guilty but lifted his arms and smiled. While James revved off, as quick as he safely could.

'BTW. Why the hell do they wanna save us?' - asked Myra.

James was tootling our three tone horn and people were waving back. Though we didn't know them.

'Maybe they really want to at least stop convoys of troops passing the central square. Because everybody knows it's mined, and our terrorists have vowed to blow them, and any bystanders, into smithereens. So the pacifists have a pretext to actively resist...Save The Soldiers!' - Jerry explained, leaving her looking a lot more baffled..

We swerved into a bus stop lay-by, watching as three PIF armoured carriers, one with smoke billowing out the back, came racing up the wide street, and passed us, sirens screeching.

'Uh oh, looks like trouble kicking off.' - said Jerry, fiddling with the radio,

He tuned in to a seriously shocking weather forecast. Then Pools Radio went back live to Rainfort Pool, reporting a running riot, at eight o'clock in the morning.

It was all sparked off, they said, by a Fux-News crew, embedded in a PIF convoy, who were filming kiddies at a bus stop. And were now run out of the area, with bricks and tranki-darts and a mass demo..

Marta Burns of Pools radio was on the spot, interviewing locals, outraged by the child porn revelations the night before. The violent mob had multiplied in minutes, a land mine had gone off, cratering the main road, nail bombs were thrown, barricades were being built or reinforced...

'They pulled out your colleagues to avoid an all out war.' - Jerry explained to Wain and Myra.

'Are all the neighborhoods so, uh, hostile?' - Wainy asked.

'Well a lot of wild Yeti's do live up there.' -

'The TV crew was disabled by feathered syringes fired from air-guns, or blow-pipes. The famous 'tranki-darts'.' -

The soldiers who had gone to their aid went all groggy as well.

Plus the medics who went for them...

Some of them were picked up by fake ambulance teams, the Yetis of Rainfort have gotten their 'guests'. And sure thing they'll befriend, seduce and brainwash their captured visitors.' -

'Or in correct language, 'encourage them to participate in de-toxification.' -

What was happening in Rainfort was a taste of what was imminent elsewhere.

We stopped in Hurlingford village, by the river, to change air bottles, and pick up aspirins, and mosquito balm. Plus fruit, antiseptics and contraceptives. Duna, Myra and Lila swung down from the roof seats, descending on the little Free Supermarket.

Myra was keen to try her Credit Card. While Jerry and Wain nattered on about the Gay Rescue advice programs. And I took my chance to lie across the seats and rest.

But Maxie came back in my head, pleading me to come and find her quick.

From that carpark I could see the river bridge, and a few kids exploring the new Adventure Park. High lime and beech trees with walkways, and a scary high swing, across to the fort, on the river island below...

-‘..So then we got to the checkout. Nobody there!. Coz it’s a do it yourself checkout, stupid. Look, look at my cool Earth peep-top and tassel pants!’- Myra was delighted. -‘I left my mili-shirt, that’s fair exchange...’-

-‘You don’t have to exchange. It’s a free shop.’-

We set off. A relief from the blazing sun. I’d gone all morbid, missing Maxie, but Lila anointed and bandaged my damaged wrists, and Duna fed me bites of her apple, while provocatively poking Wainy on the seat in front. Myra was still talking, behind me and massaging my temples. Rubbing her freed nipples deliciously on my bare back. Hanging on as we swayed and shook. Trying out whakka steps to a stink rock hit.

I wasn’t really ill, just sad. And with so many nurses I soon cheered up .

We were flying along, or it seemed fast upstairs. Ducking branches as we skirted coppice circles. Ponds and lakes and permaculture plots. **[ref.20 Save The Biosphere]**

Lots more people were moving out of town to live on their country workshops.

While gardens and farms were creeping back, into the opening city.

There was an agreed plan, more or less, and I could spot a lot of changes, from when I went out to Dab Abbey for my Circus School.

The whole wide valley was being intensively adapted, more near the city, and less on the sides, blending to wilderness in the Lapwing Mountains to the west.

They’d finally figured out what wild is.

How to integrate and adapt, to benefit both ecosystems and exploitation. All that was already well known.

The big holdup had been the rapacious insanity of capitalist chaos.

Intensive organic may be ten times as productive, but it doesn’t give a fortune to one big rancher.

Biochar and horse shit regenerate the earth, but they don’t boost the nitrogen Corporation.

Local varieties and biodiversity may deal with pests and diseases, but they don’t multiply the dividends of GM agribusiness.

Dab Abbey, where we would be staying, had been declared a Permaculture University.

A couple of yunkers in Eagle suits swooped down above us. As we approached along a ridge of the surrounding small hills. Wain and Myra had never seen them before, I’d done the flying classes.

Slip streaming sideways, little by little. The huge glossy black one first. Gliding down just over us as we waved wildly. The red cheeked yunker unclipped his forearm, indicating the apples, and dropped right onto the roof, twisting his huge wings forward into the breeze.

James was slowing down and blowing the horn.

Suddenly he was among us on the roof seats, clad in just a P-belt.

Gasping and grinning and grasping my arm..

Duna popped two apples in his bag and. Went to kiss him but missed.

-*'See you in the Palace.'*- he said, floating out of reach.

Gripping his thumbs on the controls, twisting back his wrists, he flapped once.

And vanished, shooting up thirty meters, easily in time for the next bend.

Now the russet condor was whistling in close. Lifting her scarlet crest and tails, spreading her legs to brake. An older woman, golden brown and sexy. In pale purple cut off body tights.

But the wind was at a wrong angle now. The two were planing up, back suddenly out of sight.

James had been hooting below, fearing an accident with cables or trees.

While the rest of them were electrified, like, whooping ecstatically, as the air-van hissed its brakes.

Then freewheeling downhill, past the low greenhouse sheds into Dab Abbey.

For our own safety, we had been evacuated to an ex colonial Palace, at the behest of our friend James, ex of *'All The Answers'*, who had his mobile office there. It's a nice place. Half of one lake is reserved for water sports.

Greenhouses and shade houses and the misty Cloud Cafe.

The old estate has been occupied for fifteen years, and become a center for intensive organic farms in the county. Plus the biological research faculty, emergency habitat recuperation program, labs and workshops of all sorts. The fish-farms, coppice, old forest and marsh reserve, as well as student hostels and campsites... and more stuff.

James pulled us into the parking behind the lake restaurant.

-*'Here we are now. Why don't we just relax and have breakfast on the piers. Then I'll show you where you're staying. Our day office is under that awning here, and the others were sleeping in those air tents. I think Lucia took the second one..'*-

-*'Oh Wain, I have a message that your chat with your daughter will be at eleven thirty, our time.'*-

Duna had slid out of her half of Wain's shirt, and leaped straight off the ladder. Rolling onto the soft wet grass before we stopped, heading for her mother in the tents, her laconic laid-back brother Paco tagging along behind her.

Then the rest of us were clambering or jumping, off that super air-van, name of Elmer.

I was better now, just missing Maxie. I was dried out by the breeze and eyeing the water urgently. The sun was too hot already, sizzling us like pork sausages.

Though pillars of cloud were boiling up over the Lapwings.

* * *

Duna sheds her bag and cap, and dives under the gossamer clad iglu top.

Lucy is lying face down, and rolls groaning up onto an elbow, sunk into the feather bed.
 Duna jumps straight in and hugs her.
 Moonbeam is flat out with her elephant, on a mini mattress alongside.
 -'Como te he añorado cariño, how I've missed you darling.'- they speak in Spanish.
 -'Oh mama que te han hecho... What have they done to you. Moonie is here how good. Oh mama were you fighting with a cat?'
 'I'm okay, Barney's in hospital..But we escaped!'-
 -'I love you poor mama, you're scratched all over.'-
 With a pop Lucy uncorks a little pot, and sniffs the rose essence in the calendula balm.
 -'We had to run through thorns, we...Hey Pacito mi amor!'-
 Tall, skinny Paco ducks under the mosquito walls. Kneels to kiss his mother.
 Swapping slaps and digs. Like friendly yunkers would..
 -'Hey don't hit her... no se pega.'- says Duna. Shouldering him off jealously.
 Lucy dips her fingertips in the cool aloe blend, and touches her temples. Spotting Paco's adolescent spots..
 -'We rescued Macker and we...'-

Moonbeam groans loudly, stirring now, she's frowning and sweating in a difficult dream. Tosses and grunts without waking, as all watch her. Then her face relaxes visibly, with a little snort. Duna and Paco chuckle.

-'Oh Duna I hope you didn't make love with any soldier to get Macker out. You're too young and they could have syphilis or something worse. I wanted to come and get you but..'-

-'No mama. Now just lean back I'll do your face.'- Duna orders. -'I just made eyes at Wainy and it worked.'-

-'Oh but you're much too young. I'll make love to him myself! Why not, where is he? Paco, is she lying to me now?'-

-'Es la verdad'- Paco conceded, gesturing theatrically. -'I could admit she tells the truth this time.'-

-'Where is this boy. I am happy to seduce him.'- says Lucy, licking her lips.

- -'Sorry Mama no. There is a queue already, see girls and boys both like this funny guy. And maybe he's gay, who knows?'- Duna explains.

-'Anyhow he's on our side now... '-

Lucy has struggled to her knees in the deep mattress. Lifts her arms dramatically. Like a shaman in a cheap movie.

-'Oh my children, your mother, Lucia Perez, must tell you important news.'-

-'Oh my god. You're not pregnant?'- asks Paco.

-'Que miedo... I'm shaking.'-

Duna is dutifully rubbing in aloe on her mother's scratches and bruises. Kissing each one better, tasting a nipple.

-'I'm seriously involved this time. Stoppit Duna. How would you like a new papa? Children of mine. So Duna and Paco are gonna be your sister and brother.'- says Lucy, lifting Moonie who's woken up.

Biting her lips with nerves.

-'What! Uncle Barney's my next papa. Ha!'- says Paco. -'He's cool, okay. And he's not so old!'-

Lucy exhales with relief, Paco says okay.

Her wrinkles smooth and she's kissing Moonie's fat cheeks.

- 'Barney's my papa too.'- Moonbeam reminds them. Unsurprised and snuggling into Lucy.

- 'Yes okay mama I know, that's great.'- Duna exclaims. - 'But really I'm in love with him as well!'-

- 'Yippee. Hurray. Okay. That's settled.. Ya está..'-

All of them are hugging in the cool air tent, when James bangs the breakfast gong.

Macker

I was still arguing with the group from 'All The Answers', gathered round a computer, under the awnings in the outdoor office.

- 'No Macker. Sorry we can't do that.'- I was demanding the impossible.

It looked bad. All those searches, mails and phone calls found no trace of Maxie.

Even if she were imprisoned somewhere under a false name they'd surely let

her phone, if only to check her story. Maxie had her own support group looking for her.

They'd checked through every boat, arrival and sailing on half a continent, without tracing Maxie, Christy Peters or *The Yellow Tubmarine*.

The cyclone season was upon us already, planes and commercial ferries were finishing up their runs. Shipping insurance would expire the following week.

We had another breakfast with James and his friends In the Cloud Café section, which has a short wooden pier sticking out the front.

Displays of ecology projects. And sprinklers.

A high spray, too high and fine to wet you, but making it lusciously cool.

Damo and Jerry and Myra and Lucy and others went charging off the pier, led by my super sister Tessa. Followed by Moonbeam. She's only three but wore an air-suit, still she had to be rescued.

I wasn't in the mood for bathing or partying that day, but others were.

There was a sense of relief and excited celebration. Pools TV, for one, had stopped moaning on and on about the invasion.

Suddenly it was obvious we were winning.

What would twenty thousand coalition troops do, even on a military level, against half a million Clanners who wanted to party?

They made a good deal for Wain and Myra, our guards. They'd be taken back into the prison, later on, if they still wanted to, and chained in the washrooms, with the story that we'd been rescued. I mean we *had* been publicly amnestied anyway.

If they wanted to stay longer they'd be given 'proof' that they'd been kidnapped. The aim was to paralyze the PIF army through mass desertions. But also we needed friendly contacts, if not spies inside. So Wain and Myra did choose.

I'd sensed an air of daring elation as we came through the city. With the Ultimatum Demo we had won a stand-off game of chicken.

Now *they* were playing *our* game.

The radio was playing 'thrash whakka', at nine in the morning.

We saw ourselves appear on Pools news, while sitting in the Cloud Café, emerging from the tunnel, like in a surreal painting, into the kitsch decoration of the Welcome Bar.

Blinking, with bemused grins, like rescued miners.

When the welcoming began.. - *'Macker Mucdunna, well known magician.'*- I remembered again in my body that Maxie was gone. That ball of anguish burst again, spreading in my gut like a bleeding ulcer.

Me and Maxie had forgotten to be cynical and self protective. Like we had swallowed each other. Losing each other was like cutting conjoined twins, we could hardly survive apart.

A rainbow bubble can't be chopped in half.

I was ill and irritated, sitting by myself, Everyone else was unwinding and undressing and leaping in the lake. People were nice to me, but I couldn't eat or sleep, I didn't queue up for the Wise Mass voting. I didn't go with the others to tour the workshops and farms.

And I didn't even visit poor Barney, who'd caught a virus in the clinic, with a *bucket of snots and the flitters*, as Tessa remarked. I did take a call from my friends who had the baby. They had it on a portable and we had vision...

- *'Hey Jimi. Hey Janie. Hello Warriors!.. How's it hanging?'*-

- *'In front of me bollocks. Great to see your ugly pug.'*-

- *'Look Macker look.'*-

Janie was holding up the wrinkly baby to the camera.

- *'Congratulations! How brilliant!'*- I said.

- *'We're calling her Macker. Did they find Maxie yet?'*- said Janie. Still blocking the camera with the fuzzy baby.

- *'What? No we didn't. Um..She.. escaped by boat..'*-

- *'Well tell her to ring me as soon as she gets back.'*-

- *'We were so sorry to hear about Kazoo.'*- Came Jimi's broad voice. - *'Janie was really upset and me too.'*-

- *'Yeah well. What can I say.. I didn't know myself till last night.'*-

- *'Are you okay then, I mean, did they hurt you?'*-

- *'Just my hands.. They're a bit banjaxed all right.'*-

- *'Evil bastards!'*- Jimi shook his fists.

- *'How was the birth Janie?'*- I asked.

- *'Easy Peasy. Well.. It went too fast and I got three stitches.. Look I'll show you!'*-

- *'No no.'*- said Jimi. Before realizing she was joking.

- *'Macker Two is enormous and guzzles milk all day long. The sweetest thing in the world.'*-

- *'In the Milky Way.'*- said Jimi. - *'Listen when can we meet up?'*-

- *'We're out of town. Lying low.. Hey thanks for calling him Macker.'*-

- *'You brought us together. Remember.'*-

- *'What do you mean 'him'. Macker is a girl.'*-

And she held up the infant again. Undoubtedly she was a girl. Name of Macker.

- *'And she needs a nappy. Yesterday she pissed on me.'*-

- *'Bye bye friends. I'll catcha later. Big kisses. Big hugs.'*- I had to break off. The lump in my throat was trying to choke me up.

-*'Yeah All the best Macker One. Bye bye now.'*-

-*'Kisses. Huggies. Bye bye.'*-

That didn't cheer me up. That made me worse, I hid my grief to not upset my friends.

* * *

-*'Any news about little Agnes Street?'*- I still wanted to get home. There was a silence.

-*'It's this evening, this thing with Killian.'*- James whispered.

-*'So maybe we'll go home tomorrow?'*-

-*'Look I've brought you a recorder we don't use. It has a mike and headphones.. Solar batteries.'*- He handed me a cloth bag.

-*'Sorry. Why?'*- I was surprised.

-*'You said you have a million stories. If you record them I'll put them on line.'*-

He's a clever fellow James, and thoughtful, I had a *plethora of literature* cluttering my head. The new stories and plays and stacks of jokes. And all the comments on my Free-Uni course.

Plus all the accounts and legends from my dad and granny. Now transformed and shaped, making sense of it all. The idea that Sol had explained to me that night, and from living with the Free.

I had a voice recorder and a death feeling. Buzzing on near death adrenalin. Plus I had the opportunity to pass something on.

So I wandered round, talking and acting for my invisible public. The visitors thought I was well weird. Unloading my media files. Those worlds on worlds that live inside my head. I ended up in a scrapwood hut. A hide for spying on wildlife, with viewing slits, bench and binoculars on a chain. It's up on the little cliff of the ex quarry, next to the lakeside bar.

The other side is eco-reserve, marsh and ponds. With shelduck and godwits, and the odd purple heron.

But you could see the bar from there as well. I was recording myself, while idly spying on my friends and family, who were having a session on the shore below.

Myra the guard was singing and strumming enthusiastically. She never went back to the PIF, took a cottage and joined Clan Yeti.

Our guard Wain was getting attention. He was trying to talk to Jerry, while Duna and Lila and Lucy were all around him.

From my position as God looking down, young Duna was the clear seduction winner. Clinching the competition by hopping up on his lap. But finally got trumped by her mother, who sent her to bed.

Wainy told me he let Duna flirt with him to avoid any real relations.

-*'She's a real good kid. Just adores playing sexy games.'*- he said.

-*'Some guards arrived, and James and Jerry rushed off with them, looking worried and glancing at their watches. Sure thing they were part of trapping that Killian Bate.'*

Meanwhile I was telling and cajoling, recalling more and more things, laughing and singing

and cursing into the mike.

A plethora of nonsense and genius, no less, though no one could hear me.

I recorded till the batteries ran out. Then found a fresh set and a solar charger in the bag.

Wain went back to the PIF the day after.

They had Troops Out events outside Mount Venus at three pm. every day. This time they were releasing captured soldiers, welcomed by famous artists here in solidarity. So that the media would show up. They wanted to keep those news sharks biting, before all swimming off, to some bloodier or sexier story.

One of the 'prisoners' to be released on the Zoo Park main stage was our ex guard, Wainy. And all his new friends and ex prisoners were invited to get up on stage and pretend a tender farewell. He would act openly as a Relations Coordinator.

I didn't go but I saw it on TV, everyone hugging the possibly gay soldier Wain, who had heroically refused to be seduced and kept everyone guessing. Playing the last post and acting heartbroken.

That ceremony was so crap it was a classic howler, reeking of vicarious sex. They'd been given back their uniforms, and empty air pistols to wave about. James and Jerry hugged Wainy and kissed his mouth, which Fux News had to ignore, and everyone saluted wrongly.

This guy has everyone drooling, Duna and Lila had orders to keep their hands off him in front of the cameras, being underage. Duna returned his mili-cap, curtsying, arms stretching out, with infinite sadness, only for him to frisbee it back to her, as a keepsake.

Cheering erupted and they faded into an orgasmic whakka hit.

Glancing back continually and waving, our ex guard Wainy was led away by the Military Police.

For interrogation, debriefing and fumigation..

Chapter forty eight

Killian Bate Shot Dead

- ‘Maxie Moon ..voted a 100% Bravery Level..’-

Reports are coming in confirming the death of Killian Bate, the new ‘Supremo’ leader of The Brother-Hood, the organization being touted to form the nucleus of a new national Police Force.

Mr. Bate was shot in the head by a female Clan Defence officer in a house in the Ragwort Pool area.

He was duly declared defunct on admission to St. Mary’s Hospital at 22.35 hours.

A Clan Defence spokesman announced in a press conference that Killian Bate was killed in a sting operation, claiming he was on a death squad operation against a gay and a feminist activist at the time of his death.

The claim is backed by independent witnesses. Two videos of the killing have now been released to the press.

The confirmation of Mr. Bate’s death has already been greeted with fireworks and impromptu street parties in city center neighbourhoods.

Mr. Bate had publicly threatened two activists only yesterday on Pools TV.

Their house was evacuated, but several Clan Defence specialists were in waiting when Mr. Bate and his associates broke in.

Two heavily armed men were arrested, one inside the house, and the second, along with a surveillance vehicle, was seized in the laneway behind.

A spokesman for The Brother Hood blamed a schism in the organization, led by the vice Supremo, Bernard Hart, for setting up the ‘execution’ of Killian Bate.

He called for him to step down in favour of the ‘more moderate’ Michael Kennedy, who he claimed has more CIA support.

However a Young Hoods ‘Supremo’ categorically rejected both candidates in favour of the radical racist, Vyncent Greane.

The incident began at 21:15 hours last night, according to the Clan video, when Killian Bate and an armed guard entered the house, in Little Agnes Street. Entry was gained via a rear greenhouse, allegedly using an ex police issue skeleton key.

A Pacification Intervention Force (PIF) spokesman condemned the killing in a strongly worded statement.

He blamed a terrorist plot which would not be permitted to subvert the peaceful democratic process.

The gay organizer Jerry Reaser, and Maxie Moon, the feminist activist, are residents in the house, but were not present at the time.

The previous day their documentary, 'Who do we Hate?' was shown on Pools TV, denouncing Killian Bate for murder, torture and attempted rape.

The pair were being impersonated by the Clanners team who were lying in wait for Bate. Ms Curbin stated that they were doing an open Uni cooking class online.

The house is used for night classes and is a registered De-School resource.

The video shows Mr. Bate wielding a knife and pistol, announcing he would kill Maxie Moon and Jerry Reaser in the most horrible way imaginable and abuse their bodies.

The Clan officer turns and shoots first, hitting Killian Bate in the head. Pools TV did not show the actual shooting and cut out Mr. Bate's threat, allowing availability to adults on request.

The statement adds that when Ms Curbin shot him he died immediately without further declarations and his accomplice, a hired guard, surrendered.

A second press conference will be held at 12.30 hours, amid intense political and media speculation.

The late Mr. Bate was widely tipped to head a US approved provisional Government.

His ambitions had been damaged by Tuesday's documentary which accused him of torturing the cleaner 'Laura' to death.

The shock demise of Killian Bate plunges the Brother-Hood into a bitter internecine feud, with no clear winner in sight, according to our political correspondent.

The latest polls show the organization already reeling after recent financial revelations.

The Brother-Hood spokesman categorically denied any link with the spate of death squad killings, attributing them to internal feuds, and refusing to answer a series of reporters' questions.

He maintained Killian Bate's innocence, claiming he was tricked into going to the house by an anarchist infiltrator. He also asserted that both of the video's are falsified.

The vigilante group spokesman demanded the arrest and punishment of his killer, Hilda Curbin, who he claims, infiltrated The Brother-Hood as a pastry chef.

Tributes to Ms. Curbin are still pouring in. She appeared flanked by masked bodyguards and was even applauded by the assembled Press Corps.

She and Maxie Moon have been publicly acclaimed and voted a 100% Bravery Level in street celebrations in Ragwort Pool.

Maxie Moon herself was not present at the Press Conference.

Her colleagues announced that she is in fact missing, having disappeared in an atrocity zone the day of the invasion.

Her documentary, -'Who Do We Hate' - was pre-prepared and awaiting broadcast.

This reporter was able to verify that Maxie Moon is indeed on the missing list, and has her own Support Group, and this was widely known, though not, apparently, to the deceased Killian Bate.

The prisoners organization told me that efforts to locate her are being redoubled, with a TV appeal scheduled for this evening.../cont.

Chapter forty nine

Bye bye Maxie Moon

- *'Flocks of dunlin and starlings, wheeling as one soul'* -

Maxie

When the tide is high, which looks like nearly always here, flocks of wader birds arrive in circling swarms. Criminal immigrants, like me, in the waterlogged parks. Illegally colonizing the earth, between the sandbanked middle class suburb, the decrepit blocks of flats, and the ex industrial estate.

Flocks of dunlin and starlings, wheeling as one soul.

Flights of curlew with their wonky beaks.

Leaning out the gaping window, I listen long for their lonely whistles.

I've been waiting in this ninth floor flat for five hours.

Being a terrorist is no fun.

Anyway I didn't kill any stupid soldiers. Okay I blew up two bridges. It was me who pressed the button. Only coz we happened to be there on patrol, at the wrong moment. Only coz Macker couldn't work the phone.

Actually it was the PIF soldiers killed my baby, and got Macker and almost killed me, and they had no right to do that. Or even to be there at all.

Macker would have come if he could. We need each other now. We're like the two lost wheels of a broken bicycle. Why doesn't he come? Because they got him..

Okay if they had asked me to blow up those soldiers I would've pressed the button. Even before they attacked us. So really I AM a terrorist, just a hopeless failed one.

I failed in everything actually, not that it matters. My ex family, my ex friends, ex school, ex work...Only thing I did right was shaming Killian Bate out of our school.. and helping to make the CoOp Pool work..

There's ten floors here I'm on the ninth, I think it's mostly empty or legalized squats. This is the flat of a Ukrainian refugee, she went to pick up her kids and didn't come back. Something like that. There are seven or eight more big blocks, further away.

The only good thing about this flat is you can see the sea. Not close but not so far away. You can see the boats and the white tops of the waves behind the dike.

Looking at the sea is therapy for me.

And there are always gulls. Soaring up over the roof.

Or flapping past in a line, intent on mysterious missions.

The boat was fun at first, but then it was much too long. Like being on a roller-coaster that goes on and on and you can't get off. Especially as I was ill and depressed. Christy, or should I say ***** , was nice to me, like a nurse. He'd do anything for you.

But coming here at all was a 'total no-no'. We arrived in the middle of a police crack-down in the whole area, on top of the normal repression which they say is bad..

Another crackdown on '*criminele illegalen*'.

Everyone is being watched. Every phone controlled.

We are criminals for subsisting and for doing petty scams, oppressed for just existing.

Janneke says they get power by false attacks, like, murdering their own men. To set off and then exploit the fascist feelings. They send the police on these 'Clean-Ups' and Razzias, just to keep the pot bubbling, and have a crack at the autonomous movements as well.

There's food here in the kitchen, all her stuff is here. But eating makes me vomit.

I'm having a psychotic episode. I can't hardly sleep or eat, though I'm bored here waiting.

Well, I've decided not to let them arrest me. I've done too many bad things already. And I happen to know a couple of secrets I would tell, if they really tortured me. Then they'd get my friends whose names I won't put here..

I won't let them arrest me. I'll take my own life. I can do it.

I would've done it when they got Maggie only Sol stopped me and gave me something else to keep me busy.

There's nothing to stop me here.

The front window is over a patio where hardly anyone passes. That window is open.

If they start to smash the front door lock, I'll just hop out.

I don't think I'm seriously crazy at all. I mean, I don't really want to live anyway. So why would I let those mentally sick bastards have my living body?

If anyone reads this and can do it for me. I'd like my ashes to be sprinkled in the sea..

I've spotted three squat apartment blocks in the middle of the sea, up north. That's what Christy was going on about. Joining the Orca pirates!

Someone is knocking, it's Janneke come back!

* * *

Macker

-*'Look here comes Sol and Bernie on a double bike.'*-

There was a bicycle and skate way that came down directly from the hills. Much shorter than the road, and skirting the first eco lake. They were zooming down on one of those air assisted tandems, with Bernie pedaling on the high back seat and little Sol filming below. They came straight towards us. Yipping as they skidded to a stop on the wet grass.

-*'We've got a clue! Maybe we found Christy Peters.'*-

-*'What? What?'*-

-*'We convinced his Estonian relations of our good intentions. One of them rang him two days before he left.'*

Bernie paused, panting, hands on her knees.

-*'He used the name William Slighman. With an I, a G, and an H. That's it. Put that in your search engines and click em.'*

-*'We already have six pseudonyms.'* - said James, wearily.

-*'But this is hot, my baby. This is the bizz!'* - said Sol. Melodramatically swinging his arms.

-*'It seems he did have the idea of using that name on his next, er, adventure.'* - Bernie explained.

James had entered 'SLIGHMAN' and...Yes! ..Bingo.. There were results.

A William Slighman had been arrested for illegal entry the day before. His small boat, *De Zwarte Kat*, had got away... Aha! He'd been changing the name of the boat.

Just him. So what happened to Maxie? Had she escaped? Had she never been with him?

Soon they were milling with laptops.. Yes, he was in prison.. Charged with Illegal Entry and Abetting Criminal Immigrants.. Had an Orca lawyer, no statements.. Bail money to be arranged.. No mention of a second person on board..

Yes there was a big movement there. But right now a security sweep, a police operation, was underway..

That could be why she hadn't phoned. But where was she? And how had the boat disappeared?

Contact between our lawyers and Christy's. Infoshop bulletins, English version.. Sporadic rioting. Demonstration today.. 'Migrant Rescue' activist Suzie Peersoan arrested the day before.. No

bail.. Series of pickets in her favour.. Occupied factories still threatened with eviction.. Recent Clan Eagle, Free Union and Immigrant Rescue activity..

Nothing about Maxie. But of course refugee arrivals wouldn't be public news.

But now there were loads of leads, instead of none. Normal contacts were cut off, due to the police crackdown. But soon they could do a coded echo routing search. Thanks to the *German Wizards*. In the local version of a CoOp Pool they found a branch of *Migrant Rescue*, and were granted member access to an internal daily log.

And just a few seconds later we knew that Maxie was ALIVE.

One new arrival.. Minnie Pijper.. Eén nieuwe gast..

A sudden rush of joy went tingling through me,

Maxie ..Minnie..had to be her!

-*'YeeeeeeeeHA.'* - I yelled, believing it. -*'She's there with the Pool.'*

They'd found the only cure for me. Like being upgraded into a new person.

I couldn't stand still, I was jiggling for joy.

Maxie was there alright! Minnie Pijper.. Refugee, arrived yesterday morning. Christy Peters must have put her ashore before he was detained. Or had she escaped with the boat?

-*'Yes. Yes. We found her!'* - The searchers were punching the air. And now they had details in English..

-*'Minnie Pijper: 19.. Location: unavailable.. Condition: distressed.. Needs: urgent medical attention.. Nationality: refugee.'*-

-*'Distressed. Shit. Shit. I'm going there now. James, can you get me on a plane?'*- I said.

* * *

-*'I'll go with you then.'*- said Lucy. -*'You don't speak Dutch or French.'*-

* * *

We couldn't get on a plane that day, so we took a 'fast' ferry. Which turned out to be the *snailboat*. Leaving Moonbeam with Bernie and Josie, again, Barney was still hospitalized. The boat was half empty so we got a luxury cabin, courtesy of the company. And both of us slept..

I woke up thinking I was on a long long swing. We had a nice view of a wide grey sea, but the cabin was high up and swayed like crazy.

Between the weather, the price of diesel, and the tragedy of the year before, the ferry company was bankrupt. Now it was more or less part of the Free Pools, a workers Coop.. It's creditors had been bought out by the Credit Union, who had socialized it.

Which explained the star treatment and the happy staff.

The ships would get wind turbines and sail assisted power, they said. Plus *new safety features*, i.e. unsinkable lifeboats. But that would be in the Spring. These were the last runs of the season.

Lucia is fun to travel with, and now I was in fine form, refusing to think about arriving too late. Subjecting her to the latest mad stories I'd been recording. Her English wasn't up to all the local jokes, but she laughed obediently when they were explained.

We went out on deck that evening, exhilarated by the wind and spray, and ate our sandwiches. Huddled behind the big funnel. Plunging and leaping. Passing the bottle of plum wine and yelling in each others ears. Only when we went in did we see the notice prohibiting all deck access. The door wasn't locked.

We had the penthouse cabin. And James had given Lucy a good portable with satellite net access. Better connected than the captain, we could watch Pools TV, or a billion other possibilities, and chat with our families and friends.

An alarm woke us at three am. So she could take part in an Asian Net TV show for Women's Rescue. Actually I was awake already, my head was hopping about non stop.

Lucy is a therapist or a sort of healer, as well as an activist. And this was more than an online agony aunt show. I managed to shine two lights on her, adjust the little camera on her face and position the mike. She had come prepared, and dressed in a spectacular yellow and scarlet cloth, like a sari shirt.

With a violet headband that hid her lack of hair.

She was on this show every week. It was mid morning in Karachi or Mumbai. A good time, with husbands and keepers and children out of the house.

Millions of women now have the chance, open or clandestine, of watching or copying Free-Net TV. Including this show... [*refs.11a.11b.11c.Feminist anarchism*]

Real life solutions to common misogynist horrors. Physical, economic, cultural and religious semi slavery.

I had taped the camera down, and she tried to sit relatively straight. Though they might see her leaning strangely into the swell. Adjusted the mike to cut the wind noise.

She had me massaging her head and neck, while we watched the first part.

Her skin is smooth and dark chocolate brown. And slippery as warm silk.

We heard news from local groups all over. They do have money and lawyers, and I never knew that Doctor Lucy was so famous. She was sipping from the flask of maté, herb tea, to perk herself up

Massaging herself under her flowing robes, shuddering like the ship, eyes closed and sucking her lips, while I fiddled with the settings. Then she was being connected.

Lucia was a smash hit. They loved her. And I'm sure she saved one woman's life. Guessing the root of her persecution straight away, and persuading her to seek refuge.

It was a dowry dispute over ownership of herself. With an accusation of attempted adultery.

Lucy's voice infiltrated vibrations of healing.

A sister link.. I'm vulnerable like you.

A shared assumption..Of course I'm safe here and they help me.

And an assertion implied but convincing, that..:

In my real world,

outside the nightmares you're trapped in,

of course we share and are cared for.

I'm already in that real world.

Here are the keys!

All that with a few odd words, inflections, tones. Intimate female body language, touching and reaching. All mixed into her answers on the show.

And more I couldn't understand...I'm a clown, I know about the art of public communication. But I could learn a lot from Lucy. She's an ace. They had her answering problems where she really *could* help. I thought I heard a million voices saying 'thank you Lucy'.

Sure it was the wind. I imagined secret copies of the show.

Discs or tapes or memory sticks swap hands,

invisible and powerful, in the immense thronging markets of Asia.

What I saw, that dawn, on the yawning ferry: Those women would dynamite patriarchy. Really undermine and replace horrible outdated customs and laws. Slavery and brutality and unfair privilege. And not just to benefit some State or God or Corporation.

They had a small studio audience who applauded like crazy. Then they were gone... and I was cheering and clapping and being embraced, a public of one.

Our ship let a mighty blast, real close. We ducked in shock and laughed.

The sea was calmer now, we must be arriving.

-Let's hope we find Maxie fast.- I said. Peeping out the porthole.

We were coming safely into the harbour.

Barney.

I woke up still in the Clinic, with the phone ringing. My fever had gone, the infection was controlled, and I'd just been sleeping. Hours and more hours. The phone had been disconnected of course, but now it was ringing.

There were curtains round my bed, with a sliver of dawn sun beaming through, shining specks of dust moved lazily round the suspended drip bottle. That phone should not be ringing.

I groaned and picked it up.

-*'Hey Barney? Barney you waking out already?'*- It was Sol. I might've guessed.

-*'Waking up. Yeah you just woke me you bastard. How did you get through?'*-

-*'Remember I telephoned you on the night of the Glorious Revolution?'*-

-*'Because Maxie was suicidal..'*-

-*'It's happening again. Lucy and Macker took the ferry to get her. But we are thinking they arrive too late. We can't phone her for she is hiding from the police.'*-

-*'Oh bloody shite. What do I have to do this time?'*-

-*'I just got a plane ticket. It takes up in fifty minutes. Me or Bernie will go. But we think you would be good, er, better.'*-

-*'Oh God. But I'm attached to a drip.. I got shot in the leg.. Okay I suppose I have to go!'*-

-*'We are in a taxi now. We are coming to the clinic so early in some minutes.'*-

-*'Listen Sol. I feel okay to go. But I need to see my daughter.'*-

-*'She is here with us now, and Bernie. Moonbeam is here in the taxi!'*-

-*'Oh Moonie Moonie.. how are YOU?!'*-

I had to go. I understand what makes Maxie like that, it's like her ace card. -*'If you push me too far.'*- she's saying -*'There's a limit. I'll just self destruct.'*- It scares me because she does have a strong will. She *has* done things sometimes, for no reason, for the reason that she decided to do it. Now she *did* have a good reason. She's well capable of suicide in my opinion, and that's a real reason why I need to reach her *now*.

* * *

Maxie

It's calm and sunny now, but this morning we had another deluge. The very top of this window is badly fitted and the wind squeezed the water right up and squirted it inside.

I felt the whole block move, and Henni says it's tilted a bit worse.

The birds know what's coming.

A whole flock of them came in today, sea dwelling birds, fulmar, kittiwakes...

Did I spot a female guillemot?

They've taken up residence now, without an original, stamped, legalized, sworn translation of a birth certificate between them, paddling about on the flooded hockey pitch.

-*'Com op Meeny, we gaan nu naar de doctor ..Come on we're off to see the doctor.'*-

Janneke speaks English. Maybe better than me, but forgets to sometimes. She took me by bus to the Health Center. They'd gotten me a priority appointment with the gynecologist. A check

up, their doctor had already seen me in the flat. Pretty good in two days with no papers, and I paid nothing.

These people are on our side and they're friendly.

When we got there the square opposite was filling up with riot police vans. The Crackdown, we got in just in time. There was shouting outside, while waiting my turn on a bench. They were going to suppress the '*demonstratie*', Janneke said.

Next thing they had closed all access to the Health Center, and were controlling all those leaving. Only then Janneke told me she was wanted by the police, on *both* sides of the border, just for helping illegals like me.

And *I* was a terrorist with no papers. We were trapped.

-*'The last time this happened they finally came in and captured some migrants left inside.'*- she explained. -*'But this time I bet we all escape.'*-

-*'Oh Yanny, um, you wouldn't have a gun or a long sharp knife on you by any chance?'*- I asked politely.

It would be better all round if I weren't taken alive. In the flat I could just step out the window, if it came to it. Here it would be much more complicated.

Janneke understood my idea, she already suspected.

But straight away she got stupidly upset for no reason.

She started embracing me and stammering something to the woman next to us.

While I was trying in vain, to explain I deserved to be dead.

The strip lights went off, then came flickering on. Two boys came dashing through. The immigrants in the queues all snapped their heads around, eyes flashing with panic.

-*'Minnie Pijper, komt u binnen alstublieft.'*- The specialist was calling me in, right on time! Janneke came in with me, holding my hand firmly, as if I would commit suicide in front of the gynecologist.

She prodded me with a long cold instrument, checked my insides on the screen. Then surprised me with a hug and kiss. I was clean inside, she said, and the infection was going fast.

-*'She's right,'*- I thought. -*'I no longer feel maggoty.'*-

She spoke fast. Gesturing to Janneke in Dutch or Flemish. Trying to ignore the louder echoing bangs.

And now even louder, tear gas or baton rounds. A flurry of shouts and yelling, the background shriek of demonstrators' whistles.

Outside a battle was shaping up, over a woman called Suzie who got arrested the day before. The health staff and even the local cops, they said, were on our side, against the Security Police, who were drafted in from elsewhere.

In the hall they were gathering illegals, mainly black and brown faces. This had all happened before. Escorting us through the adjoining hospital to a supplies yard, which stank with rubbish

containers. Then some of the others were clapping.

Peeping through cracks in the high gates We saw the riot police contingent..

We saw them running away!...Hurray..hurray!

Getting poked with shocking cattle prods. Powered from battery packs.

Squealing and scattering as they flashed and sparked and crackled.

*Ignominiously, they fled the charging 'krakers'.
The jubilant anti fascists with their electric swords.
Squirting spray and punching - 'YES'-in the air.
Some in black body socks. Others in jump suits.
Whirling and leaping in their sexy black capes.*

We were all cheering and palming the metal gates, which were suddenly swinging open.
A whole raft of cyclists was arriving, this was a coordinated escape.
Tandems, powered air-bikes, a bakfiets, cyclists pushing second bikes.
In two minutes we were all mounted, one way or another, and rapidly disappearing, into the maze of cycle lanes, that laced the side streets of the ancient city.

I was presented with a really fast bicycle by a fella called Hans. Wide smiling mouth and spiky blond hair. He spoke English as well, cocking his head and trying to figure me out. Shooting off but pausing on the corners. We'd lost Janneke. I was fine at first, but I just got hotter and hotter. Till I felt like a steaming beetroot, but on wheels.

We were in Zeezandijk in just twenty minutes. Which was much quicker than taking the bus. There was a traffic jam of police vans here as well. But we arrived through the back of the middle class streets, straight to my block, no problem.

Handsome Hans squeezed my two hands and handed me a handy '*fietsslot*'.

Then he locked the bike to a lamp post. It was mine to use.

An armoured police van was cruising our way. Side doors open. So we said goodbye.

I wanted to ask him in, and after I realized that he wanted to come up with me.

We were both of us awkward and missed the moment, and actually I needed a friend.

I hate when that happens. Still it was lucky for Hans, that he didn't fall in with a suicidal terrorist like me!

So that's about all, I'll finish up now... Okay the lifts were turned off again so I plod plodded heavily upstairs. Two stories up and I stop.

I should NEVER have gone against my Dad or the church.

That's why the visions began. Because I need to be punished hard.

For making those shaming videos. For shaming Killian Bate.

It was my fault...they got Maggie as well. Really I killed her, with my premonition.

I did it to punish myself.. I dreamed her dead and she died.

She was involved with fornication, just like me.

My father was cruel, to torture me for fun. But I was just as bad, I mean...

I dreamed Macker dead as well, and even Kazoo had to go.

To pay off my sins.

That's it! That explains a lot. Though I know it's really bullshit.

Plodding to the fifth floor. Why bother going up?

Of course. I would be *safe* in the flat. When the torturers come for me *the window is open*.

In fact I need not wait! Now I can be really free. I don't have to wait.

Maggie used to say she was deleting my corrupt files. But copies would creep back. She was lying to herself of course, she had no choice. The only sure way is just to delete yourself.

There's even more birds here now. Gathering as if for an important assembly on the hockey pitch.

A spaniel ran out, flopping his ears, and they flew up, like a huge leaf, rolling down behind him again.

Maybe when I jump out they'll all fly up, like a thousand wing salute. That'd be cool.

I'm finished writing, at the window. Here I'm *safe*..LOL...Ha ha.

I would just like to thank everyone who has helped me. Please don't feel guilty about me. I'm not saying you're doing bad okay. I got my own crazy reasons that's all.

This morning I wrote goodbye notes to my friends and family. I used up all the envelopes and I've given them to Henni just in case. I'm sorry if I left you off the list. Really I'm not well and I ran out of envelopes. And the phones are still off.

Henni has been in three times, even makes me herb tea. She's a Jill in the Box! There's great activity upstairs and on the roof. She says they've heard the cops really will take this block next. They get the police radio so they know.

They're flying out anyone dodgy in the double training suits. I'm on their list. Anyway I know how to use those suits. But I don't see any point moving to another block.

Why mess up more people who have nothing to do with me?

More and more easily I'm clicking the links.

Of course Macker died, to punish an evil person. And Moonbeam is cursed for sure.. Conceived by a trick and born out of wedlock, I mean!.

Naively I used to think Barney was a good person. Ha!

I was too infatuated to see he was in league with my dad.

The proof was staring me in the face!

I wound up Killian Bate by mocking him. Then he cut up other girls in place of me.

The puzzle of my life is clicking together, like crazy religious pieces that join it all up. Hurting me but calming my anguish.. That's enough writing. End of story.

The police down there are getting ready, banging on their shields.

I don't have to wait, for sure they've traced me now.

I bet that Killian comes up with the cops.

P.S. Of course I did it on purpose, I deliberately spewed on Sister Bernadette.

How could I have deluded myself so long.

* * *

Macker

Me and Lucia were met in the Ferryport by a woman called Kimi from Women's Rescue, and she drove us across, to the local squatted Center, in Zeezandijk where we knew Maxie was hiding out..

They were doing a police operation, on both sides of the frontier. Yet we walked straight through immigration. Seems they didn't want to catch anyone. We were waved courteously past the security check at the port gates.

While Lucy was trying to hide her portable, under the back seat.

Almost a pity, I felt, as I had rehearsed my cover story and memorized my false ID. I thought this was too easy to be true and I was right.

We expected disbelief and suspicion, but at the Center they were happy to tell us Maxie's address. She was in a tower block on an estate in the middle of the Security Operation.

About to be stormed, certainly, by the '*Speciale Politie*'. We'd surely be arrested if we went there right then, they said.

I was demanding a solution and starting to shout. But just then Barney rang. On Lucy's notebook, the phones were off. He was here! He'd just got off a plane, with Moonbeam, no less. So I

gave him the address, in my thickest of Traveller accents and warned him about the police.

A woman called Janneke showed up, who actually knew Maxie and had been to the doctor with her that same morning!

She offered to take us there immediately in a CoOp bread and veggie van, if we could rendezvous in time.

Perfect for me as I was a bundle of nerves. This Janneke admitted that Maxie asked her for a gun or a sharp knife!

The phones were all cut, but she could send a message to the neighbours in Clan Eagle, to check she was okay.

So it was that me and Lucy arrived at the estate in Zeezandijk with Janneke. All wearing black and gold caps and aprons of the '*Bakkerscollectief*', the '*Bakers Collective*'.

Sailing slowly past a line of riot vans and whirling clouds of sea birds. Getting dropped off directly at Maxie's block. T

There was a message.. We weren't sure if Barney had already arrived...

There were no lights in the lobby. The lifts were dead.

So we had to climb up all nine floors.

* * *

Barney

It was a really expensive one way flight, I'd almost forgotten about using money. I was physically not too bad, considering.

My leg didn't bother me too much, but I was flustered and stressed out.

Attempting to manipulate my crutches and my daughter.

And feeling like this was all too late.

Moonbeam wasn't affected by my worries. She'd been neglected, now she was on a flying adventure to find her Auntie Maxie, and she was having a ball!

She is already endearingly or unbearably precocious. Depending on your point of view.

-*'Josie says Auntie Lucy's my new mama.'*- says she.

Belted on my lap, after bossing our way to a window seat.

-*'What! Er sorry?'*- I hadn't assimilated being Lucy's partner myself.

-*'And Auntie Lucy says Duna will be my sister.'*-

-*'Yeah well. Would you like that?'*-

-*'Oh all right then.'*-

She shrugged and sighed like an old lady.

-*'But not Paco he's boring. Can I have Auntie Maxie for my mama as well?'*-

-*'Two mamas?'*- I gulped. -*'Nobody has two mamas.'*-

-*'Please papa please. Why can't I have Maxie as well, she plays with me.'*-

-*'Oof. You'll have to ask her about that. How do I know what she'll say?'*-

-*'Please papa pleese.'*-

I couldn't tell Moonie of course, that we thought her chosen mum was about to top herself.

If she hadn't already done so.

-*'How about a few more papas?'*-

She considered this carefully, biting one finger. While I wished fervently I hadn't spoken.

Just then we hit turbulence. The plane shot down about fifty meters.

Then jerked violently up again. Showering bags from the lockers.

I was terrified. Everyone was screaming.

Moonbeam was ecstatic.

Nobody would be surprised if another of the last flights of the season disappeared.

-*'You're the best papa coz you take me flying.'*- said Moonie.

Craning at the window as we plunged sideways into a thundercloud.

But we landed safely and below it wasn't stormy at all. My mobile tootled when I switched it on. A message. Local number..-*'Bye bye Pardy Brown.'*- Must be Maxie. Shit shit. I was trying and trying the number... nothing. The message was old.

-*'There's a phone blackout today.'*- said a man in the security queue. -*'Operation Catch a Criminal Scrounger.'*-

-*'Me. Me. Let me press the buttons.'*- Moonbeam demanded.

But now the phone did ring. It was Bernie in Dab Abbey, with Danny and Damo and Tessa and Duna and Lila and Paco. Or some of them, plus others.

They'd had a similar message. Maxie had been texting suicide notes!

The taxi driver spoke English, but balked at the address they gave me for Maxie.

The housing estate, he noted, was full of dirty squatters and stinking immigrants.

So I had to *flash the cash*. Explaining that our auntie was ill and we were in a hurry. He had that little screen with a moving map.

Moonie started shouting 'Left' or 'Right', often wrongly, and pointing dramatically. *Driving the driver bananas*. We came to the first canal.

-*Look look Moonie. There's houses floating on the water.*-

-*I see ducks. Ducks in the water. Stop here. Now papa, ducks!*-

On the 'snelweg' highway it was less than half an hour. 'Snel' means 'fast', not 'snail' it seems. Zeezandijk was more like a police camp. But they waved the taxi through. The driver shrugged.

-*Dank je wel. They stop the CoOp taxis, the green ones.*- he said.

By luck we'd taken a yellow taxi. Rightwing friends of the police. And we glided straight through.

-*Hello. Hello Lucy I'm arriving.*- I could speak through her laptop.

-*Us too, we'll wait at the door.*-

-*No no. Go straight up quick as you can. ..Okay bye bye.*-

I'd already paid the taximan. We were robbed.

I swung out onto my crutches and me and Moonie went for the door.

It was dim in there and smelled of piss. The lifts were obviously dead.

I'd left hospital that morning. Unhooking my own drip. Now all I had to do was throw down my crutches and heroically hop up nine stories. Oh, and with Moonie on my shoulders. It was totally unfeasible.

-*Hey Moonie let's run up the stairs okay.*-

But Moonie was running for the lift. The lights had come blinking on at that moment.

And the doors slid open for her.

Like she were a mini magic super witch.

The Eagles or 'Adelaars' on the roof had switched it on.

* * *

So it was that we passed Lucy and Macker on the stairs. I saw them from the little window in the lift.

Puffing and blowing on the sixth floor.

The door slid open and I swung out on my crutches.

As a Womens Rescue clanner called Janneke ran past, wheezing. She was the champion runner. The lift had stopped at floor eight and a half. I'd have to hop one flight.

-*Run up Moonie. Run up to Maxie quick.*-

And up she went, with me clattering after her..

* * *

When Janneke arrived at the apartment Maxie was still alive.

She had heard the racket on the stairs.
Had scrambled out onto the concrete windowsill.
Where she sat, her bare legs dangling, eight floors up.

Her plan was *not* to be arrested. She'd jump first.

-*Break the door and I jump!*- she yelled, in English.
But clever Janneke had the key in her hand.

When Maxie saw the door open she twisted violently around.

And slid out over the edge.

* * *

I was hopping up, using the metal banister as a crutch.
And Moonie trotted into the flat ahead of me.

Maxie had seen it was only Janneke . But it was too late.
She slid out off the sill. Facing each other. Mouth open.

The sharp windowsill jammed up painfully under her breasts.
Her hands fell on a ledge that shouldn't be there..
She hung there a moment. Grimacing with pain.
-*B-Bye*'- she mouthed.

As Janneke grabbed her arm and Moonbeam ran in the door.
-*Auntie Maxie will you be my mama?*'- she was yelling.
Maxie's eyes were popping.

Her sweaty fingers were slipping off Janneke's arm.
Her breasts plopped under the ledge. One, two.

As I came hopping in the door.
Full tilt and falling forwards.
Grabbing her other arm in my two hands as I fell.
Whopping my head off the floor.

I had to let go but I couldn't let go but I had to let go but....

And I didn't let go. Second best achievement of my life.

Macker and then Lucy rushed in next. Like we were queuing up to save Maxie. The *'Adelaars'* were arriving from upstairs. All of us yipping or shrieking, or sobbing with relief and delight.

We hauled her back in like a record fish. And helped her to the sofa.

Where Moonie scrambled up on her lap. Chatting like nothing had happened.

Maxie and Macker were cuddling, and I pulled back,

Melting into a sweaty, panting Lucia, who embraced me from behind.

The room was still trying to turn, I was dizzy with a lump coming up on the side of my forehead. I turned, shaking and crying in her arms.

-I didn't let go! Hey Maxie we saved your life!'-

-'We've saved you, let's all go home.' - said Lucy.

And we all tried to hug each other.

But she spoke too soon.

Chapter fifty

Free As A Bird

-‘All my nerves were screaming -‘You can’t fly.’-

Maxie

It took me a few minutes, I mean, I was deep down in the depths of the deepest depression. I couldn’t quite snap back into normal life. So I just held onto Macker and cried and closed my eyes.

-‘I’m sending a message’- said Barney -‘Maxie is fine. We saved her life. Coming home soonest.’ I’m sending it to Danny, and your mother, and Bernie and Damo and Tricia and Josie and Duna and Damo and Lila, Tricia and Paco and Janie and Jimi, and James and Jerry and more besides.’-

It was so great just to hear his smarmy voice going on.

-‘Hey guess what Maxie,’- said Macker.-‘Janie’s had a baby girl and called it Macker.’- I couldn’t reply. Thinking of Kazoo.

-‘Jerry and James are gay lovers.’-
Why oh why did I lose Kazoo.

-‘The PIF stay in their barracks. Then they come out and party with the Clanners. Lots of them support us already.’-

How cool. We were winning the war without even fighting. But that was not enough.

-‘And Killian Bate is dead, Hilda Curbin shot him in the head.’-

I opened my eyes and looked around. That worked, that switched me on. I-have to confess that news of his death brought me back to life

Somehow that man was everything that was doing my head in. Suddenly I was fine.

-‘Are you serious? He’s really dead.’-

They were all nodding, except the eagles who didn’t get it.

-‘They set him a trap, with you and Jerry as the bait.’-

Macker and me were hugging.. The eagles were craning out the window.

Lucy was dabbing Barney's head with her healing fingertips.
While he was chucking aspirins down his gob.
-*'Come on Maxie.'*- she said. -*'I'll put my magic cream on your bruises.'*-
-*'I was slipping out that window'*- says I -*'but my breasts got caught on the sill, and saved my life.'*-
-*'Saved by your tits. What next?'*- said my beautiful magician.
-*'Because they're big. I had, uh, nice little tomboy tits till I got pregnant.'*-
-*'That's true enough.'*-
-*'So I was saved by Kazoo. Or by making love with you!'*-

I was weeping and laughing at the same time, showing Lucy my new bruises.
-*'How weird. Seems like everyone took turns to save you. We pulled you in. Barney head butted the floor.'*- he said.
-*'Janneke definitely saved you. And Sol and Bernie found you, with the help of Jerry and James and your support group and...'*-
-*'All the people who pushed us to look harder and...'*-
-*'You forgot about Moonbeam.'*- I interrupted. -*'She asked me to be her mum!'*-
She was wriggling on my knee, hurting me.
-*'What? But Moonie...'*-
-*'I'm gonna have two mamas. Maxie and Lucy. Okay? And I want Macker for my other papa.'*-
Everyone was laughing, amazed.

-*'Actually she's serious.'*- Barney said, but Henni, my friend from the Eagles, was yelling at us. She was announcing that the cops were lining up to take the whole block by force. Unless all foreigners were handed over immediately.
Maybe I was right to be depressed.
We really could be interrogated, and deported to some secret prison.
Or get disappeared and tortured to death. Lucia has warrants out for her everywhere..

And Janneke of course was on the run.

* * *

Lucia

-They offered to fly us out, if we could come that instant. But after all my moaning about wanting to fly I turned out to be a chicken.
-*'We know how to fly them ourselves.'*- said Macker proudly.
-*'Heel goed. They have just two airbags, and double tails.'*- Henni explained.
-*'We use double tails as well. You need them for braking.'*-
-*'Then you could fly to the ferry. I'll take you there if you like. They let us land on the helipad at the back.'*- said Janneke. Nodding eagerly at the Eagles.
-*'Hasn't the boat left already?'*- Macker asked.
-*'It leaves at six but we can catch up with it easily. Then they can hardly stop us.'*-

-*'This ship is run by our friends.'*- I said -*'But I can't fly.'*
The Eagles were consulting. Finally nodding and pointing at me.
-*'We need the suits, but more we need you free. Especially Maxie, and Lucia Perez must stay free.'*-

Everybody turned and looked at me. They knew who I was, they needed me free. What a complement.

-*'But no way I can fly in one of them.'*- I said.
Heart in my mouth and clutching Moonbeam protectively.
-*'I'll take you in the training suit. You don't have to do anything.'*- Barney offered.
-*'But.. I can't jump from here.. You'll have to push me off!'*-
Really a chicken would be braver. At least it's got wings.
-*'You don't have to jump. You'll see. The wind just lifts you up.'*-

I had to go with Barney. Maxie and Macker were a pair, and Janneke would take Moonbeam and show us the way. It's a bit complicated, the checks and straps. They had an assembly-line of people taking off, and others landing up the other end.

I was so scared I was crying. Lucky I'd pissed first. I was allowed my little bag with the notebook, tied round my tummy and that's all.

No shoes, just bra and panties. We had to crouch together, me underneath, on the soft hot tarry roof, and hold some metal rungs.

While they clipped a climbing harness round the two of us, shouting instructions which I forgot. Then they unfolded and clicked the suit on top of us.

It was light, and immensely wide, like a kite. All filled in with white goose feathers. Janneke and Moonie were in front of us in the take-off queue. Macker and Maxie behind. The Eagles were shouting checks. Dropping and lifting the windbreak fences.

We moved forward. The front fence folded down, and Janneke lifted over us, quite lazily, with Moonie waving like mad, close up underneath. We could have reached up and touched her.

Except I was strapped under Barney, crawling forward now, like a clumsy two headed dragonfly. It would have been sexy I suppose, if I hadn't been so terrified.

All my nerves were screaming -*'You can't fly.'*-

Ready. Twist wings back, tails up. Lower front windbreak. Let go the bars.....

My eyes tight shut, then peeping, then gazing around. We were floating up, my heart was leaping about. It wasn't so windy at all, we were creatures of the wind!

Gliding away down in a wide curve, with the odd flap, then rising with the warm air. And into the head wind. Till the three of us circled together. Now Janneke turned south, slowing back till we came alongside. Blowing kisses.

My fear was gone, just nausea looking down. I could have helped Barney, lifting my arms, with the controls and flapping. But the pneumatics did the work, with ten times our muscle power. We needed to flap because we were too heavy.

Janneke was pointing urgently behind us. She began a long shallow dive. Followed by Macker, with Maxie slung under him, and us behind. We were all slipping sideways down over Zeezandijk center.

She was giving Moonie a bag of little leaflets and sweets, and yes... the pedestrian zone was packed.

There was a demo of yunkers and krakers, waving up at us, as Moonbeam emptied the bag, cannily keeping a fistful.

Barney had turned on the flapper and we lifted, well over the cables. Then I saw Maxie had sweets as well, all smiles and trying to throw me one.

Suddenly I was enjoying the flight. If Maxie could smile already so could I.

In fact I was loving it, as we wheeled gradually into line, while zipping across the parks towards the sea.

Now lifting on the warm head wind, and diving at the same time. So that we whizzed out into the breeze.

Flying is like yachting in three dimensions. Yawing a little and clawing to our right, then over the promenade in a wide curve.

Slicing the air down, and ourselves up, flying headlong over the dike and the strand.

A whole cloud of black headed gulls were surprised into the air and whirled about us, some falling in with our route. As we shot away across the sparkling water.

We lifted up and up and slowed. Then plunged one by one into another curve. Janneke was pointing and I saw the walled harbour further down the coast.

In ten minutes, they signaled, we would arrive. I was chilled from the wind, yet sweating against Barney, twisting up to give him a mid air kiss.

-I'll love you always always, Lucía.' he said for the first time.

-Me too me too.' We married in mid air.

Daring to follow Janneke down. Till she was skimming across the waves like a monster albatross. We whizzed along, planing under the wind like gulls do.

I was gone beyond terror, Moonie was getting sprayed, shrieking with fear and delight.

While Macker pointed out some giant fish.

A couple of gannets shot by and splashed, diving for their dinner.

Barney was kissing my neck, whispering an erotic fantasy, in my right earhole.

His arms were firmly strapped while mine were free. I tickled him, and made sexy gestures over to Maxie, who started laughing and wriggling in her harness. Scaring Macker who lifted higher. You wouldn't believe she tried to kill herself an hour before.

Then we were wheeling to the right, a bit awkward, lifting and using the flapper and losing speed, threading among gulls

Janneke was pointing at the ferry going out.

Luckily the ship was heading into the south west wind. Soon we were cruising up behind it. A couple of sailors were roping off the helipad at the back.

The upper decks were packed with passengers. Were they waiting for us? Janneke gestured Macker and Maxie to land first.

Moonbeam was trying to explain something terribly important to me. And I was nodding, impossible to communicate in the air at thirty meters. Then I saw her pointing as a couple of dolphins jumped clear of the water, following the boat and getting thrown sprats.

That's what they were all watching, but the next spectacle was us landing.

Macker went in perfectly. Then folded their wings forward a smidgen late, and got blown sideways, Maxie catching the rope and a sailor jumping onto one skewing wing.

- 'Don't forget to drop, Lucy.' - said Barney in my ear as we drifted in.

We were coming in short. We would fall screaming into the churning propeller.

But Barney judged it and the wind behaved.

Like hovering, but relatively rushing forward, almost motionless but very unstable, through the whistling air.

Three meters above the helipad center. Two. One. ..Now!

I unclicked my hip belt and my bare feet hit the metal deck. Grabbed onto the cross rope.

We slipped out fast, the sailors controlling our flapping, folding suit.

Janneke and Moonbeam landed behind us. Barney hid behind me bashfully. Hopping on one foot, and hiking his disgracefully revealing boxer shorts. All the passengers cheered and clapped and whistled.

Janneke had landed, making it look supremely easy.

Had unclipped Moonie, who escaped, running wildly across the heli-deck.

Intercepted by her bald hopping daddy who grabbed her arm.

- 'Up Papi. Lift me right up.' -

Moonie decided to do her much rehearsed acrobatic stunt, which was standing up on his shoulders.

Only she forgot that Barney had just one good leg.

Maxie linked arms with Barney and they hobbled along. We all headed for the bar, through the flashing cameras.

Moonbeam was holding on by Barney's ears, and flopping like a rodeo star.

Trying to pose elegantly for her cheering public.

The End

More info

Glossary

(* denotes -'Only in this book, but may exist'-. Let's do it!)

Air Tech.

Climate Meltdown has caused constant gale force winds which are used to fill gas bottles with compressed air. You need lots of them, but they're free and eco-friendly. All manner of devices are powered by pneumatics, new pre-heat technology and added catalysts make it efficient, powering Air-Tools, Air-Cars, guns and even the Eagle suits' wings. The Air Factory adapts a quarrying belt to compress air using gravity.

Biochar

It's powdered charcoal. Any organic material burned without oxygen. Makes a good CO2-negative fertilizer that lasts forever, on our scale. You could convert your own dead body into Biochar. Check it out in Wiki, in real life!

Brother Hood

Far right vigilantes who also create and finance fascist youth groups, playing on reactionary parental fears of Youth Social Revolution. Receive lavish funding from section of the church and CIA. Maxie and Jerry are blacklisted due to their ridiculing of Killian Bate, a rising Supremo in the Hoods. Groomed as a nucleus of counter revolutionary army.

CoOp Pool*

*A combined consumers and producers cooperative, including a voluntary pooling of resources and skill sharing. Typically the CoOp Pools provide a ration of goods and services Money Free, but **do** measure their value, in Wurts, which includes a supply/demand percentage plus ecology cost, and social desirability factors.*

Coppice Farm

Coppicing is an ancient efficient method of woodland management. Trees are cut back to near ground level, every 7 years or so, planted in sections or strips to have a yearly harvest. Very eco-friendly, depending on the mix of species.

*Plus if you convert the wood to Bio-Char and use as fertilizer
it's a 'best land use' for mitigating Climate Meltdown. See refs.*

CLANs*

*Originally stands for Communal Autonomous Networks.
The CLANs start as street gangs, supplied and backed by CoOp Pools as local militias.
Linked with the De-Schools and the Free-Uni they develop into diverse cultural groupings,
with distinct ideas and customs.
In these chronicles we meet Clan Orca the mariners, Clan Eagle the pacifists that can fly,
Clan Sunshine from the SW with the sexiest clothes,
Clan Yeti from the mountains, and Clan Warrior, of course. etc.*

De-Schools*

*The secondary schools are closing down or have 100 per class due to economic meltdown.
De-School projects are action learning often based on CLAN groups
and pre-Free-Uni online self education.
In reality they are often organized with Explainers (ex-teachers)
and share ex school buildings with the Pools. See Refs.*

CLAN Fashions*

*We include here the prevalent hot climate body art.
Stick-Ons are removable tattoos which tend to replace clothes
in CLAN crazes and belonging symbolism.
Various fashions include; Functioning Air-Tails and Crests that mimic birds and animals.
Peek-suits and pants, made of leather strips hung from belts.
Spoon Bras, now the norm, leave nipples free, with health benefits.
Current Clan Earth gear in Ragwort includes pocket belts, cut-off tights,
and short waistcoats over shredded denims.
Plus the famous pneumatic Peeny-belts
which present and regulate the size of male and female parts,
prevalent in Clan Sunshine.
Body-stockings and net jumpsuits are popular,
but every CLAN has it's own distinct and changing style and fashion.*

Free Credit Cards*

*Introduced even before the uprising they are popular everywhere.
You don't have to pay for Pools goods or services but the Wurt Value is recorded,
with bar codes etc, in your account, for controlling abuse and rationing where necessary.
You could lose status on your Personal Levels by excessive consumption.*

Gay Rescue*

..See 'Women's Rescue'. If you're oppressed in any way for being gay you can get and give help discreetly online.

A vital resource in countries where being homosexual is persecuted or classed as illegal.

Personal Levels*

This practice is partly introduced in advanced Pools like Ragwort by the end of the book, on a voluntary basis.

Groups or households calculate their Personal Levels by averaging various indexes. eg... Production Level 6, Lover Level 2, House Level 5, Spend/ Save Level 4,

Education Level 7, Combined Level 6.3. Housework and Childcare are included in Production, which in some Pools counts double.

The idea is that Levels give an idea of personal worth

NOT based on how much cash you happen to control.

(Fans note. Levels exist in computer games where millions use the system, e.g. Runescape, though Combat Levels tend to predominate.)

Shit-Ons*

-'Don't get silly and hysterical my little darling'-.

A Shit-On is an attempt to control or intimidate using unfair authority or power, usually sexist or racist.

They are denounced in a public Campaign.

Organized groups perform surprise 'shaming attacks', usually on public figures who abuse their authority by committing 'Shit-Ons'. Bosses, teachers, politicians...

Maxie's attempted rape video is used in the Spot A Shit-On Campaign and becomes a model for other places. See Ch.16.

Michael Prink suffers a shaming attack by his sacked temporary workers.

(Fans, what a scandal that such campaigns aren't extended worldwide!)

SOFAS

A network of autonomous direct action groups. Stands for 'Shit On Fascists And Sexists'.

Many great real life groups exist, and have often succeeded in blocking fascist expansion, using tactics like those in The Free.

Wise-Mass*

Online votes and surveys, weekly or more frequently, using a simple password system.

If you can read the information summaries you can vote on it.

In 'The Free' Wise-Mass replaces corruptible politicians and officials at all levels.

Votes are organized by Pools or Free-Uni technical groups who monitor implementation.

Wise-Mass multiplies benefits in sound decisions and community participation.

(Note. Of course online voting and collective wisdom surveys exist in real life, but don't yet replace politics!)

Women's Rescue*

..Starts as a resource for getting and giving help and advice online. Anonymously if necessary. Develops with strong volunteer local and international groups. Harnessing online potential. Seeks to undermine physical, cultural, economic, religious and sexual semi-slavery of hundreds of millions of women.

Lucia stars in popular advice and healing sessions on Free-Net TV stations.

Offshoot of the self-help immigration Soli-Fest network.

Wurts*

A way to calculate the value of free goods. The wurt value of something in the shop includes variable eco-cost, use-value, and desirability cost, as well as scarcity value.

The wurt is decided automatically by a computer program.

But people argue and vote on the variables that calculate it.

..Curiously you can have a negative wurt.. e.g. you had a glut of apples.

But you can't spend a wurt, It's a measure.

There appears to be a danger of wurts turning back into money.

The concept takes a bit of getting used to but beats calculating everything on absurd values of a capitalist market..

(Fans note. Sadly we only know of wurts existing in the last chapters of these chronicles.)

What it's about

laughing and lamenting

Accompany Linda through her hilarious, terrible day, as she:
-escapes her useless school and abusive daddy,
-changes her name to Maxie
and falls in with the feminists, squatters and gays.

The State is going bottoms up, the Climate is going crazy,
we're living the collapse of capitalism, blow by blow,
with a rainbow.
Maxie and her new friends get free of their traumas,
and get into dealing subversive death blows, to a skinhead gang,
a bankrupt school and the testicular special police.

Next thing they flee to Ragwort CoOp Pool,
in a big safe occupiedworking class area.
We play the adventure live through their eyes,
laughing and lamenting... inventing social revolution.

The PIF soldiers eventually arrive, to restore capitalist chaos,
Macker and Maxie are missing, the hunt begins,
while the spaced out invaders get subverted, corrupted,
swallowed and (burp) digested.

Our odd family puzzles with the pieces.. finding a fun lifestyle,
a coppice farm, and bright ideas for saving The Planet,
but keep your hankies ready, folks.. click on your giant wings,
for the fantastic FLYING finale!

some themes.

The play is the thing, but this one has more skins than an onion,
for example..
How to spot a Shit-On. How to shame a moron.
Implode a noxious institution, or sabotage the war machine,
Plus a tasty recipe for destroying the banks
and pooling some goods and skills in Money-Free.

This book is a lot of things at once.
It's feminist, it's permaculture, it's a crazy youth craze..
Living better than kings with not so many things,
making the 2.0 society with no bosses,
and maybe even recreating ourselves?
The Free are inspired by the anarchist fiesta, trying out
Pete Kropotkin's cut on Darwin.. Cooperation in tooth and claw.

But what about the onion skin? Which one is you?
Orca, Yeti, Earth, Eagle, Coppice, Warrior or Sunshine?
Clap along now, with the yunkers rocking the whakka,
in Clanner gear you gotta try on now.
Thanks everyone for your help and support with this project.

About the writer

Who cares who I am?

Just so the book can be neatly labelled and filed away?.

"I knew it! ...an evil anarchist! But is it a woman or a man?"...

Who I am is not important here, except to show, perhaps,
that I *am* serious, about these scribbles.

So here goes...

After a boring education (I did Eng. Lit. and a thesis on De-Schooling)

I began a rather brilliant career as a Layabout.

Passing my idle hours on Adventure Playgrounds,

Street Theatre, Anti Nukes and Subversive Nonsense.

For several years I shared a magnificent squat in central Amsterdam,

before definitively dossing down in Brixton,

where I accomplished a creditable six and a half years on the dole.

While whiling away my life doing Squatters Aid, Pirate Radio and Partying

I enjoyed superb park-view accommodation,

and jotted down the first version of this book

for the *classless* Hooligan Press.

Retiring extremely early to Barcelona beach,

I *was horrified* to have to work and even pay rent.

But then the occupations took off,

and I ended up living in a 'Social Centre' (on top of a mountain.).

Here I play around with gardens and mechanics, and, um,

look after children and horses.

I can cook a deadly vegetarian paella

and my hobbies include solar-powered internet and, er, rooting in bins.

We have a wizard windmill and dispose of excellent compost toilets.

I do have one big son, who's 11 years old and speaks 4 languages (not all at once).

Summary of story

Act One

Most of this part is told by Linda Moon. By chance her philandering Dad is exposed in front of her school friends. Linda is distraught, has an unlucky fight with her teacher, and runs out of the school, which is near closing down anyway. Back home her Mum is furious and bad Linda baits her by exposing daddy's infidelity, in front of their nosy neighbour.

Hiding in her bed crying, her dad arrives home drunk and tries to molest her. Linda has changed, and she resists for the first time, breaking her father's power over her. On the spur of the moment she runs away from home.

In *'Linda Leaves Home'*, Ch2, she luckily finds her ex Playleader who helps out kids with problems, Barney is sort of gay, lets her stay, and she meets his friend Maggie and falls in with the feminists, squatters and the 'CoOp Pool', (which is a self help pool of skills and resources growing fast due to the economic collapse).

Linda doesn't go home, changing her name to Maxie Moon, and fights through her trauma of her abusive Dad and some nasty special police, '*Testercial Morons*' who almost rape her. she agrees to help in a community campaign against abusers of power.

Barney has suffered a mental breakdown, and while nursing him Maggie has succeeded in getting pregnant, though she's gay. She and Maxie inform Barney he will be a dad but *not* in a couple..which turns out to be quite to his liking.

Maxie's dad has gone to a vigilante group *The Brother Hood* who are getting money and resources, (not like the useless police), they seem to be closing in on Maxie, and later she's on their death list.

In a short chapter 9 old Christo's adventure clues us in on economic meltdown and takeovers by the Free Unions.

In *'Sliding Thru Walls'*, Ch.10, Maxie teams up with Jerry, a young gay who's also had to leave home and school. They take part in the exciting occupation of a church hall, and manage to pull off the brilliant 'shaming' and 'de-powering' of a group of skinhead bullies in their ex school.

Barney has secrets too, and his flat is unsafe. Maggie plans that they all move to a squatted street across the city, in a big active working class area called Ragwort Pool. Maxie is in fine form in *'Horny, Bossy and Wild'*, provoking old Barney and even hopping into bed with him. But struggling with her trauma and not yet able to make love. The baddies are closing in and they will all move house soon.

Act Two

A year has passed. Act Two begins with '*Cuddly Toys*', a gang of street kids having a wild party in an abandoned charity shop. Which leads us into the amazing one boy show of Macker the magician.

Macker flees alone through the dark city, battling with illness, hangover and guilt for the loss of his entire family. Heading for an empty house he knows of.. but the street is full of cops. Too ill to walk he's taken indoors by a young woman...- He's rescued by Maxie Moon. They have moved to this house, and Maggie has had the baby.

We're in Ch 14, Macker wakes alone from his fever , clean in a Maxie's clean bed, and takes care of a hungry baby in the cot beside him... She's Moonbeam, Maggie and Barney's kid.

Macker falls in love with Maxie who's been minding him. With Maggie's motherly help they find out how his Dad died, and make plans to locate his arrested siblings.

'*The Ragwort Free*', is a modern 'Paris commune' based on assemblies . on line democracy, permaculture, free shops, solar and air power. Others in their house are Berni, a single mother and her 8 yr old daughter Josie, and Jerry, the gay survivor.

The back yard is a conservatory extension which doubles as a class and online meeting room, Maxie and Maggie are active in the '*Catch Yourself On*' campaign, exposing and shaming all kinds of bullies.

They do a demonstration for two Mexican activists who arrive, these are Lucia, the healer from '*Women's Rescue*' and her 'assistant', Sol. Both are deep amazing characters, and central to the rest of the book.

There's a series of short exciting adventures. Maxie and Macker gradually become a blissful couple, she treats Macker as her pet patient, he's awestruck and needs a home, with him Maxie finally gets over her allergy to men, in a jocund and sexy sequence, '*Punky and Perky*', Ch19..

Maxie dreams about. a firebomb attack on a gay youth club, in '*Homosexual Sinners*', Her premonitions are becoming a problem but her panic attacks are much better.

Barney heads down with Lucy and Sol, the visitors, to the eviction and reoccupation of '*Bal-lihoki Shoes*', Ch.20, now a workers CoOp. Sol is a film maker. The others follow after seeing a police charge on breakfast TV. Barney and Lucy are beaten up by the cops but become close friends while tending each other's injuries. Barney is still unready for romance.

All the characters join for a lunch picnic at the free '*Gobble De Gook Café*', in the park, a spectacular sparkling scene of revolution, fun and games, climate chaos...and intrigue.

An important visitor and yet another vicious storm coincide. Maxie Barney and Jerry interview the turncoat aristocrat tycoon..James Smith.. whose consultancy firm is spying for The Free, while a tornado sweeps over .

Now on a death list and linked into the spy web Barney and Maxie plan to try to prevent a terrorist attack on an alternative power station, in the Lapwing Mountains.

'*Rocket Homes Away*', Ch.23, leaps to a zappy story of a podgy little macho businessman who's closing his company and dismissing his workers. Starring the much abused Gloria, who passes down her mistreatment to the rest. Plus Merri and Dolli, his undercover new age finance team, who rob everything and distribute the assets. There's a solstice '*Coppice Party*' on a tree farm nearby. They do thwart the attack on the power station, but two reserve mercenaries go haywire

and almost murder and rape two of the party goers, but not stopping the idyllic CO2 negative, permaculture scene, finishing off Act Two

Act Three

In Act Three we hop on board the runaway train. The social movements try to salvage, health, industry, etc. in *'Imploding Institutions'* with pooling, personal 'Levels', and the 'Wurts' money free market. Our family are up to their necks in it. It comes to a head on clash, The Free Unions, split the movement, and the failing government go for confrontation. Maggie and Barney almost become lovers, while Maxie has a new premonition of Maggie's bloody death which no one takes seriously.

The showdown is *'Revolution Day'*, Ch 28, suffice to say 'Bye bye Maggie', Barney in hospital, and the police, army and prison institutions being disbanded.

Maggie is gone but events rush on. At the end of the Act we visit the docks to meet Lucy who arrives back from a Solifest -No Borders- tour with thousands of young 'volunteers', read 'illegal immigrants'. We're guessing Maxie and Macker's super secret... that Maxie is pregnant, and plans to call her or him 'Kazoo', Ch33.

Barney has retreated to the mountains where he's helping set up an *'Adventure Way'* for the De-Schoolers, and they all set off up there, to visit and scatter Maggie's ashes in a prehistoric cave settlement.

Act Four,

The movement is threatened by an imminent invasion to restore capitalist chaos. Macker and the newly pregnant Maxie, take a turn at border patrol, *'On Broken Tree Hill'*, Ch35, en route to the ashes ceremony. They're ecstatic together. But it's a very bad idea as the invasion finally happens, trapping and separating them. Maxie is almost blown up, escapes but miscarries her baby, Kazoo, while Macker is unhurt but arrested and mistreated by the PIF soldiers.

Meanwhile Barney and the others, including little Moonbeam and Lucy's teenage kids. Luna and Rafa, who become key characters, have gone up the cable railway with Barney to a stay in the hostel. On the way they visit hot and cold thermal springs in caves under the cliffs, taking in the saga of *'The Ice Queen'*, Ch36, people wiped out by the Ice Age thousands of years before.

That night they get word of the invasion. The teenagers are called back from a party up the mountain, trying out the new *'Adventure Way'*, Ch39, descent. Another storm breaks with total violence, throwing Barney and Lucy together again, maybe Barney is ready for love?

Then *'Maxie Phones Home'*, Ch40, quite suicidal, they trace the call to a Pools Center in the middle of the danger area, and they all set off to search.

In *'Macker's Goats'* Ch 46 he tells the story of his brutal but hilarious imprisonment, then poor Maxie recounts her nail biting adventure, she's located and saved by the local Pool, mistakenly evacuated to the coast where mercenary atrocities are taking place, and rescued from there by a maverick 'Orca' in an unsinkable pirate launch.

In *'Love is All You Need'*, Barney and Lucy have got info on the mercenary attacks, from James's spy net, set off by air-car to arrange a trap, and go on to search for Maxie. They get stopped at

a road block, get away, follow the trail to the jetty at Foxford, where Maxie left from, and piece the clues together.

But the PIF have identified them, a helicopter arrives while they're swimming, and they barely escape through the woods and brambles, hiding in a naked anti invasion demo and then in the cool cottage of Christy the Orca who has disappeared with Maxie.

They can't locate Maxie, but do escape themselves, after watching the '*Clanners Way*', Ch43, serial on TV and an exhilarating flying display in the new bird suits.

Act Five

We're back in the city where our friends are finding mass support in the search for Maxie and Macker. Soon they know Macker is alive but maybe tortured in custody. They press for his and others release in a massive pre planned post invasion demonstration, demanding also that aggressive operations cease, before the '*Ultimatum*' Ch44, countdown. No sign of Maxie.

The event is hosted by a mock General who denounces once more the crimes of money, the world economic system, and planned hunger deaths stretching back to the 1940's. The Clanners call for a worldwide insurrection on the lines of their D.I.Y. Revolution.

The invaders *do* back down, at least on paper, though the prisoners are not released as promised. The way is opened for total subversion by the well prepared popular resistance.

Meanwhile Barney and Lucy arrive in the city, only to find the Special Forces awaiting them. They're separated in a wild, philosophical and sexy adventure. Both escape, though Barney is shot in one leg. '*The Trap*', Ch45.

In '*Chained to Wainy*' we witness the comical subversion of the invading troops, and the classic culture smash when the PIF, mainly north American soldiers meet the local Clanners distributing free beer, sex, marijuana, stick-on tattoos and party invitations. The monsters turn out to be normal people on a crash course to unlearn consumerism.

Macker and his friends quickly get free, but his home has been evacuated plus he's grieving. Missing Maxie who seems to have been lost permanently, casting a shadow over '*Permaculture*', Ch47, and the victorious trip to Dab Abbey.

We're on the rollercoaster for the thriller ending. We know these people and how they'll react, but not the luck of circumstance that signals life or death. We really don't know. Maggie did die after all. Maxie's grief and guilt complex unite with her determined character..she will jump to her death!...

...Even then they're not out of danger, leading into '*Free as a Bird*' Ch49, and the fabulous flying finale.

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Afterword...Dedication

Peeping round our blinkers

Some years ago I met a man called Diego Camacho (pen name Abel Paz) who wrote the classic biography 'Durruti: The People Armed', and a dozen more great books and films in Spanish.

An agile grinning old fellow, with a Ducados in his mouth, he complained jokingly that he never got a cent back from the English version of the Durruti book (now in 14 languages!). I foolishly said I'd try and translate something, but I was never able. Diego outlived his torturers and jailors (he spent more than 10 years in fascist prisons) and lived again in Barcelona, where he had attended the Free School, Natura, as a child. He spent his time explaining what he'd seen, tirelessly inspiring new generations of youth, even touring to promote the film 'Land and Liberty'.

But what the hell happened here, that hot sunny day, the 19th July 1936? What could be so shocking, that all sides collaborated, to murder tens of thousands and gag people till now, intent on wiping all memory of those events from the face of the earth? I place here some paragraphs from Diego's book 'Trip to the Past' (*Viaje al Pasado, my bad translation*). He was just 16 at the time.

Revolutionary Fiesta

I wandered from group to group. All talk was of the rapid victory over the army (*takeover attempt*) in less than 12 hours of street fighting with the troops... one incident.. In the blink of an eye the multitude had raised a colossal barricade across the Paralelo.' (*a main street*).

'The troops took up positions, commanded by a lieutenant, who showed little patience, and ordered his subordinates to attack the barricade without protection. Just when he began yelling the orders to attack a captain turned his weapon... and shot him dead. The soldiers stopped firing and began to approach us, shouting enthusiastically 'Viva La República'... We all started fraternizing like crazy, they were stripping off uniforms and all explaining how they'd been misled by their superiors...'

'Barcelona had been converted into a labyrinth of barricades, many strategically useless, yet meaningful, built by all the neighbours, who placed with every piled up paving stone, their longing for social and political change.'... My note: This was a big modern city and a beehive of social and political activity. Another takeover by the army, this time fascist controlled, was the last straw. When the CNT activists set off the factory sirens in warning, everyone finally said 'They Shall Not Pass', and built barricades.

‘For me the time spent at our local barricade in the Clot neighborhood was vital. Nearby the Bar Fornos had its billiard hall converted in a twinkling into a free Popular Restaurant. The Damm beer workers had left 100’s of bottles, store workers piled up hams and sausage, hot bread..’-

‘Barcelona was being transformed, and so were social relations. For example.. at the barricade I met Lola, a family friend who’s partner Antonio caused constant problems due to his obsessive jealousy. She was running about, being useful, surrounded by men. Later Antonio arrived with a lorry-load of activists. I saw no hint of his usual jealousy he was delighted to see her there, only worried about their 5 year old daughter. The lorry went through amid wild cheering for the CNT and FAI. How many more people experienced similar changes ?

‘On the 27th July the local federation of the CNT union published a manifesto calling for the end of the General Strike , and asking people to go back to work. The generalized expropriations (*workplace takeovers*) were a response to the abandonment which we found when we got there. ‘Most of the owners had gone, both big and small, for fear of reprisals by the (*mistreated*) workers. They called open Assemblies and collectivized industry... In less than 36 hours the economic base passed (*surprisingly*) from private to collective property. ’-...

That’s what happened. Instead of installing a National Catholic dictatorship the military fascists accidentally provoked a leap into future, allowing a unique, short-lived Social Revolution, light years ahead of State Communism or predator Capitalism. Diego was there, he lived that accidental revolution that terrified all oppressors. He’s dead now, but he inspired us too, and he’d enjoy being quoted in this new edition of *The Free*.

The book on your screen is a novel first, but the settings and background explore creative updates of ‘The Idea’, in the context of resource and climate collapse.

This book is unique. The trick is to play it live, to peep round our daily blinkers. Other worlds and social systems are not only possible, but are coming pronto.

Like it or not.

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