

**THE CHOICES OF RICHARD FAUST**

**By Benjamin W Evans**

*Richard Faust was not happy.*

*He was twenty three years old, he had finished work for the day and in a few hours he would be wowing an audience with his superhuman guitar playing. But he wasn't happy.*

*As he walked along the pavement from Chatsworth Village High Street his head sank into his shoulders, his eyes stared downwards and his face sagged into the pavement. Below him the ground moved forward like a treadmill of tarmac. He didn't need to look up, because he didn't have anywhere to go. One day someone would show him where to go, but until then he was just moving with the rest of the world, wherever it decided to take him.*

*The concrete slowly rose into a steep hill and Richard's pace began to quicken. His eyes looked a metre ahead of him, his black DMs pounded the pavement and he began to sweat, and this was making him irritable. Greasy locks of hair stuck to his face and his guitar strap dragged on his shoulders, squelching against his perspiring skin like it was crushing an orange. His pulse increased and his teeth began to grit. To a passer-by he would look a walking pressure cooker about to explode.*

*Then he saw it. The escape. The door to another world. His head looked up laboriously and turned to it, motivated by a last sliver of hope in a morass of worthlessness and despair. His hands grabbed its black iron handle, cold against the oppressive heat outside, and pushed it open. And the relief arrives. His lungs could breathe, his could see, his heart could rest for just a moment. He had arrived.*

'Five minutes. Five minutes. That's all it took to get away from it all. And I know, I know. Suburbia is a wonderful place to grow up in. It's comfortable, it's pretty, it's safe, it's convenient. It's walking the dog on a Sunday, it's getting the train at eight, its barbecues on a sunny afternoon. It's nice pubs, its village greens, its young couples holding hands on their way home. Its cobbled high streets, its town halls, its community centres. Its social fucking paradise. And I'd had it with it. I'd had enough of it. I know what it's beginning to do to me, what it had always been doing to me. And I couldn't take it much longer.'

*The piercing screams of two over-stimulated pre-adolescent girls rang out from behind the gate, an aggressive warning, a reminder, of what lurked close, close by.*

'And I couldn't take it because of them. Them. Who had been holding me back my whole fucking life. Them. Who thought they were all so fucking smart, but when they actually came across any kind of true genius would treat it like something that had just crawled out from beneath their shoe. Them, who I had to spend every hour of every day trying to bow to, having to compromise every ounce of my potential just to fit in, just to be accepted in their moronic jokes and banal games. Them, who choked the creativity, the intelligence, the abstraction out of the world we lived and turned it into a morass of tedium, uniformity and the mundane.

But they weren't here now. They didn't come here. This place was mine. And that was why this was my place. Ladies and gentlemen I'm Richard Faust. Back there is Chatsworth, Chatsworth, wonderful Chatsworth Village in wonderful suburban Surrey.'

*Richard picked up his guitar and looked over the haven of paradise spread out in front of him. He was sat on a bench at the top of a steep hill, on a patch of grass maybe only ten or*

*twenty feet wide. Trees hung over him, their branches creating a canopy, like loving parents cradling a small child. A stream ran down one side, racing, trickling and giggling through the mud and stones and nettles that sat together on the incline. Green, lush grass covered the chalk mound on the other side, enjoying the fertility gained from a gap in the trees, gifting them mild summer sun and measured autumn rain. And in the middle, at the foot of the three contracting slopes, lay a lake glistening in the early evening sunlight, still and yet more alive than anything that surrounded it. It seemed ethereal, unworldly, a lone quintessence of sanctity and purity from which this entire natural greenhouse seemed to stem.*

I may not always love you  
But long as there are stars above you  
You never need to doubt it  
I'll make you so sure about it

God only knows what I'd be without you

If you should ever leave me  
Though life would still go on believe me  
The world could show nothing to me  
So what good would living do me

God only knows what I'd be without you

God only knows what I'd be without you

If you should ever leave me  
Well life would still go on believe me  
The world could show nothing to me  
So what good would living do me

God only knows what I'd be without you  
God only knows what I'd be without you  
God only knows  
God only knows what I'd be without you  
God only knows what I'd be without you'

*Richard looked at his audience of flora and fauna and smiled, shaking his head.*

'Nice wasn't it? Accomplished. Polished. Perfect you might even say? But you're not impressed. You're not displeased, you're not offended. But you're not blown away. You agree, I can play it well. But that's about it. And you're right. I can play it well. I can play it fantastically well. I can play it fucking perfectly.'

*A wind rustled through the trees as Richard mouthed these last two words.*

'No. You're right. You know what I really am. You're perfect, not me. I'm just a sell out, a puppet on suburbia's strings.'

*He looked at his watch and realised that the moment of intimacy has come to a close. An 'open mic' night at the Mash Tun pub down the road awaited. He must bid one brief adieu.*

'But you're not my audience. You're not my world. You're not down there. And down there, I am fucking perfect. And that's the most frustrating thing of all.'

*The residents of the Mash Tun were taking a well earned rest after half an hour's exertion setting up the stage for this evening's session. Cigarettes were being passed about, a round of cold pints was in transit from the bar and a large amp, two stools and a microphone stand stood proudly displayed in the corner of the conservatory area. The locals looked at each other with a shared sense of achievement. They weren't just here to sit and get pissed, they were assisting the progress of the young and not so young talents of the Chatsworth Village music scene. They felt a part of it now.*

*'An Evening with the Stars,' was the night in question, a clever play on words that many a town centre bar would be proud of, and it was the Mash Tun's flagship night of the week. It claimed to display the cream of local talent at its barest, it's rawest, playing the songs that mattered in the way they were meant to be heard.*

'Come to inspire, or come to be inspired!' it vociferated.

*And the chief inspirer, the star of the show, the headliner, was one Richard Faust. The master of the Open Mic, the man for which three locals had bust their respective beer guts and the man who couldn't give a flying fuck about any of this anymore.*

*Most concerned about the recent misgivings of his star performer was Dave, the head bar owner, compere, marketing manager, and probably toilet cleaner of the pub, who stood at the bar nervously awaiting Richard's arrival. He paced up and down, muttering to himself, styling his brown, pony-tailed locks and snapping at the pretty, far-too-young members of staff he'd drafted in for the busy evening, at every possible opportunity.*

'Fucking cunt, fucking cunt, fucking lazy bloody egotistical musicians... where the bloody fuck...'

*The sound of a thump on the door distracted him from his vitriolic inner monologue. Slowly and languidly a guitar case fought its way through a half-opening in the door, followed by a glum looking figure, sweating and seemingly carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. He looked at no-one, walked straight over to the microphone stand and let his guitar fall on the floor as if it was a body being dropped into a shallow grave. Dave exhaled with an audible sigh of relief.*

'Good evening Richie,' he began, looking at the bar as if he telepathically knows it's me.

'Alright Dave? How's tricks?'

'Not so bad, not so bad.'

'Are you sure Dave? That's didn't sound entirely convincing.'

'Do you want a pint Rich?'

'Possibly. I'd prefer it if you'd answer my question first though.'

'I'm sure you would. Will a pint suffice for the meantime?'

'It'll suffice I suppose. It won't entirely gratify though.'

'Perfect.'

I gave Dave a look of helpless frustration. He smiled back, mute yet knowing. One day we'll have a conversation when we actually display some modicum of sincerity but it wasn't going to happen this evening.

'There you go mate. That'll be £2.60 then please.'

'Is it not on the house tonight?' I suggested hopefully.

'I wish Rich. Supplier problems at the moment though, if you know what I mean?'  
'Lock-in last night was it?'  
'Don't joke; I'm in serious heat with the fucking cunts at head office at the moment. Apparently there have been some 'stock irregularities.' Dave raised one eyebrow dubiously.  
'So I'm afraid I've got to keep things a bit tight for a while.'  
'More than normal?'  
'You better believe it Rich.'

I reluctantly handed him over a five-pound note.

'Cheers my boy. I owe you one, I know that.'  
'Dave, you might want to times that by a thousand.'  
'Bollocks.'  
I don't think so. How many people did you get down here, before I started coming down?  
Twenty? Fifty?'  
'Fucking arse Rich. It was nowhere near as many as that.'  
'Exactly.'  
'Perhaps I should pay you some kind of appearance fee or something? Hell fuck it, I'll bend over now if you want and you can fuck me a little more up the arse. God! You bloody self-important musicians are all the bloody same. Thinking you're more important than anyone else, thinking that the world revolves around you, assuming that because you're an 'artist' you don't have to do the same things as everyone else. Like having a job for instance. Or a work ethic. Or an ounce of humility. Actually fuck it, I don't care if everyone comes here just to see your sorry arse, I don't want their kind of custom. I'm cancelling tonight. You're barred. Get out of my face. And never come back here again, you hear me. Never. Never!'

I paused and looked back at Dave for a second, waiting for the confessional smile. However, it wasn't forthcoming. Was he being serious? Had I said something, done something that had actually crossed the line? I'd been pretty drunk here last week, but I'm sure I didn't do anything that bad. Well fuck him. I could find somewhere else to play. I kept him afloat for God's sake!

'Well can I have my change first?'  
'Hey Richie, Richie! I'm only joking with you sonny boy!'

And here came the smile.

'You get so sensitive sometimes. What have I said to you before?'  
'Don't take life too seriously,' I murmured in response.  
'What?'  
'Don't take life too seriously,' I said.  
'That's right! And no more of your artistic strops tonight either.'  
'If you lose the post-modern crap.'  
'I would, if I knew what that meant.'  
'There are always some things worth taking seriously.'  
'Not in the pub there aren't Rich. We're in the entertainment business after all.'  
'Should I start juggling during my set tonight then? Maybe wear some really big shoes?'  
'You'd be surprised how many people go for that kind of stuff.'

I frowned and pushed some hair behind my ears.

'Suit yourself. When I want to waste my genius doing pantomime I'll let you know.'  
'No offence Rich, but I think you're doing a pretty good job of that already – not that I'm not grateful or anything. Anyway, I've booked you on for ten as usual. Is that alright?'  
'Yeah, that's fine.'

‘Good. We’ll chat later.’  
‘I’ll try and avoid it.’  
‘You wish.’  
‘I’m never coming here again.’  
‘Well I’m never serving you again. Now fuck off. I’m serious this time.’  
‘Don’t mind if I do.’

The sad thing was that Dave was right. I was wasting my ‘genius’ as he put it. But not in the way he thought I was. In this pub, this ‘alternative bar’ as it liked to call itself, in this microcosm of bravado and pretension I had cultivated an image in order to fit in - to try and conform with the overriding ethic of non-conformity. I looked absurd. Greasy, unkempt blond locks styled with expensive shampoo and hair products? Check. Ripped stonewashed designer jeans? Top Man’s finest. And a general demeanour of aloof superiority? Practised and perfected. So to these ends I was viewed as a brilliant but enigmatic guitarist who spent his time hanging around pubs, playing for free drinks and then buggering off back to a world of anonymity without ever achieving anything. It wasn’t true in an all-encompassing sense, but it was true enough in this world. And this was exactly how I’d wanted it to be. But tonight I...

Before Rich's thought process could reach its usual conclusion of venomous self-hatred, he was interrupted by a garrulous cacophony of voices and crashing instruments. Carrying two guitars and what appeared to be some oversized African bongos was a gaunt, blond haired figure, who was being rebuked from behind by a distinctly unladen accomplice who seemed to hold nothing but a bad attitude and a constantly overworked set of vocal chords.

‘Hey, there he is!’

Oh bollocks, bollocks. Time to put on the musicians cloak.

‘Alright Rich?’  
‘Evening Charlie. Evening Hugo.’

If there were two polarities of the musician caricature it was these two clowns. In typical, depressingly traditional style they formed a classically contrasting partnership. Hugo, the slick, good-looking, hugely confident South American with a mouth the size of the Amazon and Charlie the blond, almost albino Brit, who felt his music did the talking for him. I’ll let you decide who was more patently ridiculous. Whichever they were both offensively artistic and steadfastly remained unwilling to engage in just a normal fucking conversation. Which was one of the many reasons I was looking to get out of this gig as soon as possible.

‘Richie, Richie, Richie. How you doing my fucking ‘geetar hero?’ Been keeping it real this last week my man, keeping it easy, doing...I don’t know, whatever the fuck it is you do my man?’

‘I’m good thanks Huges, if that’s what you were asking.’

‘Ah man, man. I fucking love you Rich, don’t I always say that Charles, don’t I always say that? He can do anything, you know that? Fucking anything. I don’t what he does, you know, most of the time. Who fucking does? But I tell you what I do know, and I reckon you do don’t you Rich? This man can do anything he puts his mind to. Anything man. Don’t be fooled by him, I’m telling you. He’s got a soul as deep as Lake Como man.’

‘As deep as Lake Como?’

‘You know what I’m saying man, you know what I’m saying.’

‘Flattering as always. So what are you guys playing tonight then?’

‘Yeah,’ confirmed Charlie.

I looked at him for some kind of elaboration. Naturally none was forthcoming.

‘Okay then. Anything in particular? Some songs perhaps?’  
‘Yeah. Think we’ll do a couple tonight. A bit of the new stuff we’ve been working on you know.’  
‘Oh, good stuff. I don’t think I’ve heard any of that before?’  
‘Otherwise it wouldn’t be fucking new would it man!’ interceded Hugo. ‘Jesus man, for some kind of fucking genius you don’t half talk some shit sometimes.’  
‘I don’t see how one person hearing it means it’s not new?’  
‘What? Rich come on. Seriously. Get with the picture man.’  
‘I didn’t think you guys generally did original stuff, if you know what I mean?’  
‘What!’ screeched Hugo, almost hyper-ventilating.  
‘We’re doing a couple of new covers,’ clarified Charlie.  
‘Oh I see.’  
‘I’m not sure you fucking do man,’ began Hugo with a hint of aggression. ‘We’re not just doing some of your fucking straightforward chord-for-chord ripping off. This is original material we’re talking about here. Unless you’re telling me you’ve heard Whole Lotta Love done on the goddamn bongos before?’  
‘That is original, I’ll give you that.’  
‘I know,’ agreed Charlie.  
‘You’re not seriously doing that are you?’  
‘Hey fuck you man! It called deconstruction man, re-interpretation. You wanna read some Derrida man, open your mind.’  
‘I’ll look out for it.’

I had to bite my lip. What did they want me to say here?

From the ages of sixteen to twenty-two philosophy had been my life. I didn't have much of a social life; I certainly didn't have a girlfriend. Instead I had Aristotle, Descartes, Kant and particularly Derrida. I knew everything about him. I'd had an article on him published in a respected philosophy journal for fuck's sake.

'At its core, if it can be said to have one, deconstruction is an attempt to open a text (literary, philosophical, or otherwise) to several meanings and interpretations. Its method is usually based on binary oppositions within a text — for example inside and outside or subject and object, or male and female. 'Deconstruction' then argues that such oppositions are culturally and historically defined, even reliant upon one another, and seeks to demonstrate that they are not as clear-cut or as stable as it would at first seem. On the basis that the two opposed concepts are fluid, this ambiguity is used to show that the text's meaning is fluid as well.

This fluidity stands against a legacy of traditional metaphysics founded on oppositions, that seeks to establish a stability of meaning through conceptual absolutes where one term, for example "good," is elevated to a status that designates its opposite, in this case "evil," as its perversion, lack or inferior. These "violent hierarchies," as Derrida termed them, are taken as structurally unstable within the texts themselves, where the meaning strictly depends on this contradiction or antinomy.

Derrida insisted that deconstruction was never performed or executed but "took place" through "memory work": in this way, the task of the "deconstructor" was to show where this oppositional or dialectical stability was ultimately subverted by the text's internal logic. Meticulous readings find philosophy anew. The result of this renewal is often to find striking interpretations of texts. No "meaning" is stable: Derrida called the "metaphysics of presence" the thing that keeps the sense of unity within a text; where presence was granted the privilege of truth.'

Richard Faust

But I didn't do that anymore. I went looking for answers but all I found were abstractions. Different ways of viewing the world and others around us. Descartes' Cartesian method, Kant's Categorical Imperative and Wittgenstein's, fuck me whatever the fuck Wittgenstein thought. I did this to try and be better, to try and give myself a deeply rational mind that could debate a topic and come to a better, more satisfying conclusion. But instead it only really taught me three things.

Its fine to view the world in a different way but it also means the world views you differently. No-one over the age of 22 will ever admit they're wrong. There is hardly ever a right answer.

So I didn't do that anymore. I figured there must be something better out there. Something where the focus wasn't always on figuring things out, where life wasn't something to be quantified and logically deducted, where there was more of a focus on appreciating what was there and turning it into something better. And that's why I started to play music right? Wrong.

'Law! That's what you should do with your life, law!'

I'd asked my parents for advice instead.

'But isn't that like medicine or physics? Just learning and remembering, and learning and remembering? Why would I want to do that?'

'Don't be so naïve Richard. Law isn't just about that. It's about analysing real life situations, applying a sense of rational thought onto people and actions and actual occurrences. It'll give you skills a focus, rather than just leaving them redundant in this world of mumbo-jumboism' 'Mumbo-jumboism?'

'The bank will give you a loan for it.'

'Well why not then?'

I sat in libraries, reading case after case after case - *Cardill v Carbolic Smoke Ball Co.* (1893); *Donahue v Stevenson* (1932); *Handelsgesellschaft v EGVF* 11/70 - principle after principle - 'Where duty and breach are shown in must also be proved that the defendant's act or omission caused the damage;' 'merely stating an acceptable price does not make it an offer to sell, the other party must still offer to buy at the price;' 'for the Mens Rea of theft to be proved there must be dishonesty and an intention to permanently deprive;' - statute after statute - Homicide Act s5; Law of Property Act s1(1); Article 11 of the European Union .

There was no applying involved here. There was no rational analysis. There was no creativity and certainly no fucking answers. There was nothing that made you feel clever, made you feel like you understood, made you feel that you might have added something to. Just cold, hard trivialities, some you remembered some you couldn't. This wasn't the life for me either. So I stuck out the year and concentrated on learning the guitar. It was difficult, it was frustrating, and it was arduous. But compared to spending three hours trying to remember the intricacies of nineteenth century equity and trusts precedents it felt like a gift from God.

However, the problem with God is that after the first few years of epiphany and salvation it all gets a bit samey. You start to get the feeling that there must be something else out there. And the feeling doesn't just so away. And then somehow a gift from God doesn't seem all that great at all.

*Hugo and Charlie's set finished to a chorus of rapturous applause. Their 'acoustic' cover of Like a Rolling Stone by Bob Dylan, with a five minute bongo solo from Hugo had particularly tapped into the collective ironic conscience of the crowd, an addition not entirely appreciated by Richard, who had purposely spent the whole set in the toilet as usual, emerging a minute after their due ending time to discover Charlie laying into the opening riff of Run to the Hills by Iron Maiden on a banjo.*

God they were awful. Awful. Awful fucking awful. Yet that didn't matter. They had the look. They had the attitude. They had the clothes. They had the haircuts. And in this world, that was all that really mattered. No-one really cared how good you were, no-one gave a fuck if you'd just pulled off the most complex chord sequence in the book, people did give a shit if you did something different but that was only because they felt so uneasy, so uncomfortable hearing it that they fucked off to the bar or looked away to talk to their mates. This is a world that prided itself on creativity and experimentation but there was nothing it hated more than change.

'Rich. Rich!' beckoned Dave from behind the bar. 'They're going down alright aren't they?'  
 'They are indeed,' I agreed with perfunctory interest.  
 'You're on next aren't you?'  
 'No. Fucking Alistair's on before me. Mind if I go upstairs for his set?'  
 'Yeah, no worries. What's wrong with Alistair?'  
 'Redemption Song. Better Man. If you can think of a more clichéd open mic set I'll be pretty impressed.'  
 'It keeps the crowd happy.'  
 'It makes me want to kill myself.'  
 'Yeah, but you're different Rich.'  
 'I'm not really at the end of the day.'  
 'Don't be so harsh on yourself. Getting a few of those old stage fright nerves are we?'  
 'No, not really. I'm not really bothered tonight to be honest.'  
 'What do you mean?'  
 'I don't know. Its maybe that I've reached the peak of my artistic endeavour in this art form. Everyone loves it. Everyone thinks I'm great. But I don't really give a fuck anymore.'  
 'Oh Richie, Richie. You keep on saying this. But I know you my man, I know you. It's just your way of dealing with your nerves. I understand.'  
 'That must be it yeah.'

Dave eyed me for a second and then shook his head dismissively.

'Listen Rich, listen. I know you think I'm just some kind of lackey barman, but I know where you're coming from.'  
 'Really?'  
 'Oh yeah. Do you know, back in the day I had a modicum of artistic ambition.'  
 'Wasn't that the homebrew you were making a while back?'  
 'No need to be facetious Richard.'  
 'How else do we ever talk to each other?'  
 'I was going to be a writer believe it or not.'  
 'Really?'

As far back as I'd known Dave had always been a barman. He used to serve my dad for goodness sake. It just didn't seem possible that he'd ever done anything else.

'Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well I did my dissertation on existentialist literature. So I was planning to write some kind of romance about Kierkegaard marrying a prostitute. But my tutor at Yale didn't really appreciate it. So I kind'a lost heart after that.'

'You did a dissertation? In existentialism? At Yale?'

'Yeah.'

'Bollocks.'

'Seriously. But, you know, I came to England, worked in a bar as you do. And then decided I liked it. Its fun, you can pretty much choose when you work and its pretty much a universally transferable skill. Apart from Saudi Arabia and those kind of places.'

'And you tell me about not realising my potential?'

'I don't know what you mean by that Rich. I'm happy and I do what I like doing. Who wouldn't want that?'

'Don't you ever think that there might be more out there?'

'No, I'm happy. If you found your perfect woman you wouldn't still lust after other girls would you?'

'I suppose not.'

'But I understand where you coming from Rich. You think you've mastered everything the world has to offer, and yet you're still not satisfied?'

'Don't you need to be discontent, to feel content, in a way?'

'No Rich. Imperfection is not a necessary part of perfection, despite what you might think.'

'But...'

'It's not Rich. Trust me. I'd love to say I have the solution as well, but I'm afraid I don't. At the end of the day I'm a barman these days, not a psychiatrist.'

'I don't think I need a psychiatrist.'

'I don't think you do either. I just think you're looking for something that doesn't exist. You've read a bit of Plato in your time I'd imagine?'

'Naturally?'

'The Myth of the Cave. The world of ideal forms. If there one thing that the modern world has taught us it's that this doesn't exist. So don't keep dreaming it does.'

'I'm not dreaming Dave. I know. This isn't it.'

'I don't know what else you want Rich. But I don't think it's good.'

'At least I haven't given up yet.'

'As Oscar Wilde said Rich. It's a perfect type of pleasure. Its exquisite yet never leaves you entirely satisfied.'

'That's latent homosexuality for you.'

'That's one interpretation. But anyway, I've got a solution for you. It never fails, believe me.'

'Really.'

'Now bear with me. This won't be the nicest experience you've ever had, but it'll work.'

'Alright,' I replied dubiously.

Dave went to the back of the bar and began rummaging through a few bottles of spirits, all of which did not appear to have been opened for at least twenty years.

Now, I'll mention one thing,' he added. 'This isn't entirely legal.'

In the background Hugo and Charlie were entering the final phase of their act - We Will Rock You by Queen. The crowd roared their approval as usual.

'It won't make me go deaf will it?' I asked hopefully.

'It won't make me go deaf will it?'

'It hasn't done that to anyone yet.'

'Oh well, you can't have everything can you?'

'I suppose not Rich. As you've already stated. Anyway...'

Dave placed a mysterious, unmarked green bottle on the bar, with single shot glass next to it.

'Now its only illegal if I pour this. So I'll have to get you to serve yourself if that's alright?'

'Is it illegal for me to pay for this?'

'No, but we'll say this one's on the house, for the time being.'

'Nice one.'

'No problem. Now I'm going to find something else to do for a moment, if you understand what I mean.'

'I get it.'

He walked over to the other side of the bar, to serve a couple of over-excited looking teenage girls, while o stared at the bottle in front of me. It eyed me back with a dark, menacing green glow.

'What was it going to do? Make me hallucinate? Kill me? None of these sounded like any real disaster at the moment.'

Rich poured a shot and downed it as if it was just a glass of apple juice. He looks around for a second and notices Dave peering over expectantly.

I let out a forced cough, feeling that was what I was supposed to do.

'Okay Rich?' asked Dave.

'Yeah,' I replied with disappointment.

'You okay to go on now?'

'I'm okay.'

'Good. Have a good one.'

'Okay.'

'You're better than that Rich and you know it.'

Dave wandered over to the conservatory and removed the microphone from Hugo's possessive clutches.

'Okay folks. That was Hugo and Charlie!'

More raucous fucking applause rang out. What was wrong with these people?

'And now. The last act of the night. You all know who he is folks. The man who needs no introduction.'

The same gag, every week.

'Its Richard! Faust!'

This is the last time I'm doing this - the last fucking time. What the fuck is the point?

*Richard walked up to the microphone, looking sheepishly down at the ground as usual. He plugged his guitar lead in laboriously as if it was laden with lead weights, tuned his guitar with purposeful punctiliousness while the baying crowd yelled out a few encouraging insults and then sat down for a moment, for a couple of lugs of his non-complimentary pint.*

*Then he launched into Eruption by Van Halen.*

*The crowd were hushed into their usual awestruck silence. Richard had talent that no other act could come close to - no act on the bill, in the town or in the whole country. His fingers moved with inhuman speed and accuracy, his mind still thinking at the same time, giving*

*meaning and feeling to what could have just been asinine shredding in lesser hands. He seemed to be playing as if his life depended on it, yet his face still conveyed monotony, boredom, routine. At the final hook, while his hands moved eleven frets with unprecedented dexterity a yawn visibly emanated from his mouth. The impossible it appeared, was too easy for him.*

*Then during his second number, a cover of Stop Breaking Down by Robert Johnson, he changed. His vocals howled and raged like a possessed poet, then turned down into a quiet whisper, while his guitar maintained a steady rhythm throughout, going off on the occasional variation yet still harmonising all the same. The two seemed to be fighting, competing with each other - the steady, the conventional, and the formulaic trying to confine the frantic, confused, manic alter ego.*

*The audience were unsure what to do. Was this a genius that they couldn't quite comprehend, or a seriously unstable individual tiptoeing on his last frayed ends of sanity? Either way it was transfixing, essential viewing. Until he was suddenly interrupted.*

Dave stood in front of me, just as I was about to break into 'Ballad of a Thin Man,' by Bob Dylan.

'Err sorry folks. We're going to have to leave it there for the night. Licensing laws and that.'

Rich became instantly aloof again, shrugging his shoulders disinterestedly and walking straight off the stage. The audience responded with uncertain, muted applause.

'Thanks,' I uttered to the already dispersing crowd.

'Sorry Rich,' said Dave aside. 'More fucking regulations I'm afraid.'

'No worries.'

Instantly forgettable. Not even they gave a fuck anymore. I slagged off Alistair and Hugo but was I really any better? I tried to keep things different, I've never played the same song twice, I always do stuff that's from contrasting genres, it's not like I'm allowed to play anything original for fucks sake.

'We're here to entertain,' Dave had said. 'Not audition for a fucking musical.'

But at the end of the day it was still just me. And if you'd watched me every week for a year I reckon you'd be bored too. Fuck it, that really was it.

'I'll have it sorted by next week, I promise,' purported Dave.

'Good. I'm sure Hugo will enjoy the limelight.'

'Rich. Hold on one second.'

I turned round angrily.

'There's someone here to see you.'

I slung my guitar round my shoulder and looked around pessimistically.

'Hey Rich, Rich? That's right yeah, isn't it?'

'Err, yeah?'

'Hi. My name's Reannan.'

She was astoundingly good looking. A brown haired, slim waisted, infectious smiling depiction of alternative chic.

‘Yeah, hi. I know who you are. You’re down here quite a lot aren’t you?’  
‘Yeah, I suppose. Only when you’re on really.’  
‘Just a coincidence?’

Reannan looked at me with confusion.

‘No, no. Not at all. I think you’re great. Seriously. When you played The End last week. It was just so...so random. Don’t get me wrong, it was great. But I mean, you know. Who plays that at an Open Mic? And tonight. What was that second song?’

“Stop Breaking Down?”

‘Yeah, great. That was fantastic.’

‘Thanks.’

So, are you like in a band or anything?’

‘No. I’m not really a big, band person.’

‘Oh right, I suppose it must be difficult for someone as good as you?’

‘That’s one way of looking at it, I guess.’

‘So, what. What else do you do apart from play down here? You must have some gigs coming up don’t you?’

‘Err no, not really.’

‘So what, what else are you up to?’

‘I’m preparing to leave, I suppose.’

‘Really? No way?’

Her lively demeanour dropped, as if my leaving was going to seriously affect her for the worse.

‘You know. I’ve been doing this for a while now. Its kind’a not motivating me anymore. And I’m not sure anyone, you know, is really into it anymore.’

‘Oh, no, no. Everyone loves you Rich. You must know that.’

‘I’m not so sure these days to be honest.’

‘Trust me Rich. No-one else is a patch on you. You’re just, just, just different. And you’re not trying to be like Hugo or that Bluegrass Tony guy.’

‘Who?’

‘You know. He only plays when there’s a crescent moon. He’s got that really big boot with the bell on it.’

‘I only don’t play when there’s a guy with a really big boot on the bill.’

‘But that’s what I’m saying Rich. You’re not contrived. You just don’t like doing the same thing. You give us a bit of variety. And that’s the reason we all like you so much. Maybe you don’t notice so much because people almost take you for granted these days, but trust me.

You are appreciated.’

‘Well, thanks, I guess. I’m not entirely sure that you mean all of that, but it’s certainly nice to hear it.’

‘You’re too modest.’

‘I’m just a realist.’

‘Sounds cynical to me.’

‘I’m far too insecure for cynicism.’

‘I think you’re well aware of what you are.’

‘I’m more aware of what I’m not.’

‘I think we all know who you can be.’

Reannan smiled expectantly at me. I acquiesced nervously and issued my usual retort in this kind of scenario.

‘Well, thanks Reannan. ‘I’ve kind’a got to get going now. You know. Gotta reach my potential, that kind of thing.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. We’ll catch up soon though yeah? You’ll be here next week, I presume?’

‘Oh of course. As long as...’

‘I’ll be around, I’m sure.’

‘Okay then Richie. I’ll see you then.’

Reannan looked back at me suggestively, then smiled and turned and walked away. God I liked her. Every time she spoke to me she seemed clever, she seemed insightful, and she was interested in what I had to say. She didn’t just want to talk about music or The Mash, she wanted to know about me and who I was. That was what I found so alluring, so interesting, but was at the same time the reason I shied away. The person she wanted to discover was not the person I wanted it to be at the moment and I wasn’t going to let her find him until he was. Alright I wasn’t stupid, I knew she liked me. But I didn’t really like me, and until that matter was sorted out we weren’t going to work together. That was it. And you’re right, I thought I might be going mad too.

Reannan walked away and gave Rich one last coquettish wave as she exited the front door. He let out a helpless smile, unable to fight off her infectious warmth and affection.

‘How did it go Richie my boy? She looks a bit of a keeper to me I must say.’

‘I don’t know Dave. We’ll see what happens I guess.’

‘See what happens? What is wrong with you Rich?’

‘Alright, we’ll see!’ I replied defensively.

‘Okay, okay Rich. Just asking, you know. If you’re scared, know that you like her a bit too much and are making excuses to yourself, that’s fine by me.’

I looked at Dave with a suspicious, evil stare.

‘She. Seems. Very. Nice.’

‘All seeing, all knowing,’ commented Dave in response. ‘Nothing you can do about it.’

‘Does that mean it’s not worth me talking you then? If you’re already omniscient?’

‘You don’t do it because it’s worthwhile Rich. You do it because you want to.’

‘I’m just being polite.’

‘You gonna join us for a quick symposium upstairs?’

‘Fuck off.’

‘Free wine.’

‘Who’s up there? Charlie and Hugo?’

‘Yep.’

‘Great.’

‘And some guy called Joe. Who keeps just sitting there quoting Nietzsche. Fucking annoying if you ask me?’

‘I’ll stay for a little bit.’

‘Good man.’

*Hugo was already in full swing as Richard entered the upstairs chamber, his garrulous rhetoric forcing a haze of cigarette and spiff smoke into Charlie's typically morose face. Behind this, masked by the soot-filled haze was a third mysterious figure - all, black haired, forming a chiselled and well-tailored silhouette. He seemed separate, aloof to his acquaintance's usual attention seeking.*

'Fuck no man. Fuck no! Honestly what the fuck are you talking about?'

'You can. I swear it.'

'Not in a fucking millions years man. Not in a fucking million years. Actually that's right. Not in a fucking million years has anyone else been able to tell us the answer. Yet you've decided you have after a simple bit of five-minute deduction. Honestly who do you think you are? God or something?'

'Forget about it.'

'Too fucking right. Honestly I've never heard so much bollocks in my entire life. Seriously. You make me sick, you know that?'

'There is no knowledge of the world that is absolute, non-perspectival and certain,' said a didactic voice in the corner of the room. This I presumed was Joe.

'Too fucking right,' concurred Hugo. 'Too fucking right.'

*Hugo sat back satisfied and had a long drag on his cigarette as Richard announced his presence, slumping into the nearest available beanbag.*

'Oh look who it is. Richie Rich.'

'Alright Huges?' I replied with pronounced disinterest.

'You're a bit of an academic man I hear. Maybe you can help us out here for a second.'

'I...'

'Good man. It's an age-old question we're dealing with here. That Charlie thinks he's got the answer to.'

'It's not the one about bongos and Strawberry Fields Forever is it?'

'No. What the fuck? No. Its not. Chicken and the egg. Charles here thinks that there's an answer. An answer to what is by definition an impossible question.'

Okay. Now I was slightly interested.

'By definition?'

'You know what the fuck I'm saying Rich. You know what I'm saying.'

'Not really. But hey, why not? Maybe Charlie might be right.'

'Oh really?'

'Why not?'

'Alright then Plato, what's the motherfucking answer then?'

'I'd say the egg.'

'That's what I said,' suggested Charlie.

'Shut the fuck up Charles. Let's hear the man speak.'

'How's your Aristotle?'

'What I don't know about Aristotle Dickfaust, is not worth knowing.'

I poured myself a glass of wine.

'So presumably you're aware he basically invented science, or certainly the scientific way of thinking we know today?'

Hugo remained silent, looking at me impatiently.

‘Our reason gives us the ability to categorise the sensory world before us, from which we create more complex ideas. For instance if I look at a rabbit, I see long ears, large front teeth and a fluffy tail. In the same way if I look at a chicken, I see that it has feathers or hear that it clucks, something that all ‘chickens’ have in common. Now I would postulate – in Aristotelian terms – that an essential part of humans’ idea of an egg is the potential to become a chicken. But the idea of a chicken does not so necessarily entail an ability to lay eggs. It is something that you expect chickens to be able to do but it is not so absolutely fundamental to their make-up as an egg has to possibly become a chicken. Therefore I feel that if an egg exists then it is necessarily the case that it can become a chicken and thus, from the inherent causation in the words ‘to become a chicken’, must come first.’

‘There you go,’ stated Charlie.

‘What a load of fucking bollocks,’ suggested Hugo.

‘That’s your response is it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Look I appreciate this does have its flaws.’

‘You’re fucking right it does.’

‘But at least it’s an attempt you know. At least I’m trying to develop some understanding of how the world works.’

‘Found any solutions yet Richie?’

‘Nothing entirely satisfactory yet.’

‘Maybe it’s just a waste of your fucking time. Like playing the guitar is.’

‘It’s a rather vacuous pursuit I’ll give you that. Unlike the divine transcendental experience that playing the bongos is of course.’

‘I’ve got the attitude man, I feel the music, I live the music. And that’s what it’s all about Rich. That’s what you don’t understand. You’re a fraud Rich, remember that, and you know it. This isn’t what you want to do and can fucking tell. You’re the one who’s looking for the transcendental experience and you’re not going to find it here I’ll tell you that. We’re all far too realistic for that.’

‘Far too fucking stupid,’ I mumbled.

‘So I’ve got a suggestion for you. Why don’t you just get out of here, quit fucking jacking off every Monday night and go and find what it is you want to fucking do. Because you’re wasting all of our fucking time here at the moment. The world’s got a lot to offer you know.’

‘God is dead,’ confirmed Joe helpfully.

‘Alright Nietzsche you have something to add to that at all?’ I blurted in irritation.

‘You’re spending your time looking for something that isn’t there man, that’s your problem. You’re looking for something divine, something beyond the world, something that doesn’t exist. And if you just admitted that then all your worries would go away.’

‘Yeah, God is dead. I know. Surely that statement is self-refuting anyway but there you go. What happened to Nietzsche again?’

‘You’re presuming that if God is dead, then there’s nothing else there. If you can’t find this divine ‘rightness’ then there is nothing else. Man.’

‘So what, I should just give up?’

‘You just need to stop trying to find the solution all the time. What’s right. What makes sense. What you should do. What you shouldn’t do. What can lead to you finding satisfaction, finding your perfection. Only once you realise that, will you realise your true potential as a human being, unrepressed by the chains of falsehood.’

‘I’ll keep on trying just for the moment, if that’s okay with you.’

‘You do what you have to do.’

‘Thanks, I will.’

‘But one day, you might realise that you don’t actually have to do anything.’

‘I’ll take that on board.’

‘You should do man. Then you might actually realise your potential. Which is all you’re really looking for.’

'Just like I see you have. Anyway, cheers for that. I've got to head off and check myself into the nearest mental asylum and not shave for two years.'

'If you could take your fucking guitar with you, that would be great,' saluted Hugo.

'I'll see you next week Huges.'

'Like a headache that just won't go away.'

'See you later Rich,' voiced Charlie with a hint of politeness.

'Will do dude. And you're right about the egg I reckon. Nice to meet you Frederick.'

'What?'

I turned back around and he'd disappeared.

'Christ, where did he go?'

'Who?' asked Hugo. 'Charlie?'

'No. The other chap. Joe wasn't it?'

'Don't know what you're talking about Rich.'

'Alright whatever. I can't be dealing with this now.'

'Laters Rich.'

*Irritated and bemused Rich left the dialectical couple to their own devices and headed back down the stairs to the bar, the laughter of Hugo and Charlie echoing behind him as he went.*

'Had I gone mad? What were they laughing at? Was I being paranoid? Had there been anyone else there at all?'

*The bar was dark, cold and empty as Rich walked through, a desolate cavern of lost dreams, empty promises and unanswered dreams. He stopped briefly and looked around, to check that nothing had changed, looking for clarity and assuredness in the heavy wooden tables and comfortably buzzing fridges. This was solid not ethereal, reliable, tangible, constant. Silence, objects, the only things he knew he could rely on, the only constants in a tangible world. No other people. That was the most important thing.*

*Rich exhaled, drunk in the untainted air and walked towards the front door, checking once more at the bar to make sure no-one else was...and there was Dave, standing erect, smiling welcomingly.*

'Wha...fucking hell Dave. Where did you jump out from?'

'You know me Dave. I'm always about somewhere in this place.'

'I can fucking tell. Err, anyway. Cheers for tonight. I'm gonna head off now. You won't ever see me again unfortunately.'

'Oh well. Hope you're sure about it this time. Maybe I might get some paying customers in instead.'

'Yeah whatever.'

'How were the boys upstairs? Was that Nietzsche-quoting arsehole still there, bloody wanker.'

'Yeah. He was. Although...yeah, no, he was yeah.'

'You sure Rich?'

'Yeah. Sorry Dave. Think that shot you gave me earlier's getting to me.'

'Hallucinations?'

'More the opposite if I'm honest. Things just keep disappearing all the time.'

'Don't worry Rich. I'm sure it won't last.'

'It better not. I've still gotta get home somehow.'

'Cab?'

'You paying?'

'You gonna pay me back?'

'I'm never seeing you again.'

'You can bloody walk then.'  
'Not a problem.'  
'Good. I'll see you next week then Rich.'  
'Not this time.'  
'We'll see.'  
'Later.'  
'You're barred.'  
'Fuck off.'

I opened the door to finally leave for the night.

'Oh, just one more thing Rich.'  
'Yep?'  
'No don't worry about it.'

Fucking wanker. Right that was it. No excuses this time. There was nothing else for me there. No longer was I going to be governed by that synthetic world of self-indulgent wankers. I had better things to do now. I knew Nietzsche, Joe, whatever the fuck his name was, was wrong. There was something better to be had in this world, something more than just accepting the mundane. And I was going to fucking find it. Like any decent argument, it was gonna take a good deal of thought and effort, but it was still just a case of figuring things out. It was just as simple as that.

*Rich lit a cigarette and walked back towards the town centre. Instead of the usual downcast hunch, he stood tall, striding with a new found vigour and purpose, a goal at his destination. This was a different Rich, a Rich who knew himself, knew what he wanted, and knew how he was going to achieve it. Until he dropped his cigarette into a puddle.*

Yet something still lingered in me. Something about what Joe had said a few minutes earlier. Something about rejecting the possibility of everything else. No, no fucking no. I was not admitting defeat, even though the rest of the world was willing me on to do it.

*Chatsworth High Street was attacking Richard's senses with a blitz of temptation, arousal and idealism.*

*'Free entry before ten!' bellowed the sign outside The Drink nightclub.*

*'Playstation 3. Book now,' urged the local computer games vendor pressingly.*

*'New F Cups!' allured an impossibly flawless model in the window of La Senza, eyeing Richard playfully, drawing his eyes towards her cleavage.*

*'Open 24 hours!' announced the supermarket proudly, whose soporific staff stared into space, trying to unravel the circumstances that bought them to the graveyard shift.*

Why don't I just do it? Why don't I just embrace it, take pleasure in what this world has to offer? I wasn't starving, I didn't have to worry about being shot in the street so fuck it, I should just enjoy the same pleasures as everyone else - nice clothes, cheap holidays, binger drinking, orgasms. What was the point in dreaming of something better? Why didn't I accept the life that was so obviously placed before me?

*Rich kept going, kept walking, kept his eyes ahead of him, knowing that his escape route was just around the corner, at the crossroads where he could turn away from the neon and the noxious perfume and into darkness again. One side of the road lead to Cinderella's nightclub and TGI Fridays, the other way lead home. He looked both ways for a moment and lit up a fresh cigarette. Three teenage girls walk passed him as he did so, the lights of the club reflecting off their short, sliver skirts. They turned to critique the male subject behind them.*

'Hey good looking!'

'Hey Kurt Cobain!'

'Play us a song sexy!'

Okay I wasn't that tempted yet.

*A figure walked up the street opposite these three temptresses; a tall, confident, well-built figure. He wore a long black, impeccably tailored suit, with a jumper fitted snugly over his shirt. He looked very much the epitome of Surrey chic. He had a chiselled jaw and large dark eyes that drew your face towards him as you got closer. He walked dismissively passed the three girls who could only stare longingly after him, shocked into silence at such a magnetic air of power and dominance. The lights from the club seemed to follow him, illuminating his path like he was an angel descending from the heavens.*

'Richard!' came a deep, booming voice from his powerful chest.

*Richard ignored him, concentrating on lighting up a slightly saturated roll-up.*

'Richard! It's me. Joe. Remember?'

I looked up and saw him standing there, smiling widely, opening his arms invitingly.

'Well of course I fucking remember. I only saw you about ten minutes ago.'

'How are you doing Rich? On your way home?'

'I certainly am now yes.'

'Still trying to find something better?'

'What? Has my life ethic changed in the last ten minutes? No.'

'Are you sure about that?'

'Yes.'

'So that's it. You're definitely off home? Nothing wavering? Nothing tempting?'

'That's the plan, yes.'

'What if I could offer you...offer you something else?'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

'I have had enough boring conversation tonight, thanks.'

'It won't be a conversation. Maybe something more like a deal.'

'What kind of fucking deal?'

'Come down this way and I'll explain it.'

'I'm pretty happy here thanks.'

'Suit yourself.'

'No problem.'

'Character is determined more by the lack of certain experiences than by those one has had.'

'What the fuck is that supposed to mean?'

'Are you interested now?'

'Doubtfully. But I'd like to know what you have to say.'

'I promise you will be. If you're not, I assure you I'll never speak to you again. You just have to say the word.'

'That's gotta be worth a shot.'

'I thought you'd say that.'

'Well done.'

'So...do you wanna come this way?'

*Suddenly a car raced up the road, its screeching tyres and quickly-revolving engine distracting Rich from Joe's inviting advances. It sped headlong into the crossroads and skidded to a halt in between the two of them, blocking Joe from Rich's view. The window was opened with high exertion and the face of Dave came forcefully through, eyeing Rich with intense urgency. He got a hold of himself and audibly and visibly tried to control his rapid breathing and perspiring forehead. The façade was not entirely convincing.*

'Alright Rich,' he began.

'Yeah Dave, alright?' I replied, not really appreciating this interruption.

'Yeah,' he panted. 'Good thanks. Just passing through you know? Thought you might want a lift.'

'You're offering me a lift?'

'Yeah.'

'You've never done that before.'

'Well there's a first time for everything isn't there? So come on. Get in.'

'I'm kind'a busy right now.'

'Really? Doing what?'

'I'm having a chat with young Joe here.'

*Dave spun round sharply and saw Joe at the back of his car smiling smugly. His face dropped and his expression became grave and serious, like he'd just had some shocking, terrible news. He turned back to Rich and put his hands on his head incredulously.*

'What are you still talking to this idiot for?'

'Because he wants to,' boomed Joe vehemently. 'I'm giving him key to another life. An existence that a man of his obvious intelligence, talent and looks fucking deserves.'

'What?' I asked.

'Don't talk to him!' warned Dave earnestly. 'He's more trouble than he's worth, trust me.'

'Really?' replied Joe unimpressed. 'Could you give Richard here any reason for that at all possibly?'

'He should just trust me, if he knows what's good for him, that's all I can say.'

'That's it?'

'That's is Rich, I'm sorry I can't intervene here. I can't control you I'm sorry, so I can't tell you why you shouldn't do this. But trust me; what he's offering is not the better deal. Get in the car, I'll drop you back home and nothing will have changed for the worse, I assure you of that.'

'What the fuck are you talking about?'

'Is that what you want Rich, is that what you want?' Joe began to walk towards me. 'Do you want everything to stay the same? To be working a crappy nine-to-five job every day, because you believe that the social repression you live in has determined that is all you deserve? For the highlight of your week to be playing the same fucking songs at a crappy open-mic night in a local dive populated by retarded twenty year olds? Rich you're a genius and you know it. You've just got to stop pretending that you need to be accepted by the world, that you need to dumb down your act for people to like you or appreciate you. They're not your problem Richard, you are your problem. And I can help you solve this Rich. I can make you forget all your worries, remove all your insecurities, become the master of your own universe, the

leading man in the movie of your life. But you have to come with me now. This is your one chance. If you don't do it, that's it. You'll be stuck in your bitter and twisted, self-righteous, sad, lonely world, forever thinking about what might have been, knowing that you could have been a contender if only you could have figured out how. I've got your answers Rich, right here. But only if you want them.'

'Don't listen to him Rich!' yelled Dave still in the front seat of his car. 'It's not what you think, I promise you. It's much worse than that!'

'Come on Richard. This guy's a silent observer, nothing more. You don't want to listen to him. He won't change anything. His only interest is keeping you where you are, keeping you repressed, protecting you from the rest of the world.'

'Rich. I'm serious. Get in the fucking car. I can't emphasise enough. This guy is trouble.'

'Okay, okay, okay. Hang on a second. Is anyone gonna actually explain to me what the fuck is going on here?'

'All will be explained Rich, all will be explained. Just step this way and I'll tell you everything you need to know.'

'I can't tell you Richard. I can't tell you. I'm sorry I can't intervene. You just have to believe in me, that's all I can ask.'

'So that's a no then is it?'

Both parties stared at me earnestly. Well what was I supposed to do now? This Joe character appeared to be promising something interesting, some kind of new experience, some way out of the monotonous reality that made up my days. Dave? Well Dave I could normally trust. He was a pretty good judge of character, and he'd seemed pretty earnest in his analysis of this guy. It was all getting very surreal and very unsettling, and for that reason it made sense to go with Dave.

But I'd lived my life on the basis of sense, and every path it took me had lead to nothing. So fuck it, for once, just once, I'd go against my better judgement. Something else was drawing me to Joe's path. A sense of the out-of-the-ordinary, the mysterious, the potential world of possibilities. And I also didn't really fancy getting in a car with Dave much.

'Dave! I'm sorry. I don't know what you're saying here. I know this guy seems like a bit of a tosser, but he seems to be offering me a pretty good deal. So I'm going to check it out. Don't worry. If its bullshit I'll be out of there as quick as you pull a pint of Guinness. I just need to know, that's all.'

'Is that definitely a no?' asked Dave.

'Definitely.'

'Well I can't say anything else to that now can I?'

'You can't.'

'Just don't say I didn't warn you. Remember, my door is always open, no matter what happens.'

And with that Dave drove off, leaving the grinning figure of Joe beckoning me down the other path.

'He's just jealous Rich, that's all. Believe me.'

'I don't really believe or disbelieve people Joe.'

'I like your attitude Rich. Very good. Disbelief is a very good way to start.'

'Good way to start what?'

'Your new life of course Rich.'

'Is that a fact?'

'Well no, it's not a fact yet. You've got to agree to it first.'

'Alright fine. Can we just get whatever it is over and done with then?'

'Not yet Rich. Not yet.'

‘What are we waiting for? Are you gonna give me a personal reading of Thus Spoke Zarathustra or something?’  
‘Nothing as highbrow as that I’m afraid.’  
‘Well, what then? It’s one o’clock in the morning on a Monday night for God’s sake.’  
‘Well I agree with the first half of that statement. But you’ve got to work on the second half if we’re gonna get on.’  
‘What?’  
‘Nothing, don’t worry about it.’  
‘So...’  
‘So Richard, Richard...?’  
‘Faust.’  
‘You’re kidding?’  
‘Fuck off.’  
‘Perfect. Absolutely perfect. Richard Faust?’  
‘Yes,’ I groaned.  
‘We’re going to go clubbing.’

I followed Joe towards CR's nightclub. There was still a queue formed outside, a line of badly dressed, inebriated sheep all too socially inept to enter the early stages of foreplay in an environment where they could actually hear each other. This was my worst nightmare.

'Don't worry Rich,' said Joe seemingly sensing my discomfort. 'We won't have to queue.'

And he was right. Without even the slightest compliance with decorum Joe walked directly passed the baying masses in the queue, gave the barman an incredibly condescending look as they attempted to reproach him and walked straight into the club. I rather apologetically followed and continued in this bemused fashion as we ambled our way nonchalantly to the front of the coat queue and then directly to being first served at the bar. Joe did not utter a word throughout the whole proceedings aside from the occasional wink and self-satisfied smile. Don't get me wrong, I still thought he was a complete prick, but one you couldn't fail but to be impressed by.

We alighted at a table just by the side of the dance floor.

'Okay Rich, there you go. Sorry to have to drag you in here but...well the reasons will become clear, I assure you.'

'Is this your kind of local or something?'

'Not really. I think I came here once before, about five years ago or something. But, you know, it had its different appeals then if you know what I mean.'

'So you haven't come here for about five years?'

'About that, yeah.'

'So how come that was so easy? How come we could just walk straight in here, through the queue and get served immediately, without anyone batting an eyelid?'

'Did we?'

'Yeah, of course we fucking did.'

'I didn't really notice.'

'Fuck off.'

'No really. But I suppose it just comes naturally to me, I don't even realise I'm doing it half the time. Let's face it; if you can't even get into a club for free, you've got to be doing something wrong right?'

'Right. What are you, some kind of magician or something?'

'There's no such thing as magic Richard. I'm sure you particularly must know that.'

'It's quite a nice thing to believe in.'

'Nice? Believe? What the fuck is wrong with you Rich?'

'What do you mean?'

'You know these words have no real meaning, no real application in the way we view the world.'

'They're a way of interpreting the world in a human perspective surely? I'd like to know of another way we could do that, but I'm afraid I'm not an alien, or a bat, or anything like that. They may not be perfect, like the chicken and the egg, but I reckon they're the best we've got.'

'And that's okay with you is it Rich? You're satisfied with 'that's the best we've got?'

'I'm a human. I'm never completely satisfied.'

'No, you're a pussy. A narrow-minded product of your naïve environment. You only won't believe it because you're too fucking scared to embrace whatever else might be out there.'

'Well fuck you. What are you, fucking God or something?'

'You're close Rich, in a funny kind of way, but also as far from the truth as you could possibly be.'

'What Satan then?' I asked jokingly.

Joe looked at me with that smug, ambiguous face.

‘You’ve got to stop thinking so black and white Rich? But yeah, I suppose, if that’s what you want to call me.’

‘What are you saying exactly?’

‘I’m just answering your question Richard.’

‘What, so you’re agreeing that you have some kind of satanic qualities? Or that you’re actually the devil in the flesh?’

‘Well, both really. I mean if I was the latter, I would really have to have the former now wouldn’t I?’

‘Well yes, I’ll give you that. But that is quite a big ‘if.’

‘That’s the straightest answer I’m going to give you right at the moment. I don’t really think you’re ready for anything else yet.’

‘I knew I shouldn’t have had that shot earlier.’

‘Are you thinking you’re just imagining this because you’re drunk?’

‘It would probably be the most rational conclusion at the moment, yes.’

‘Well, that suits me. At least it means you’re getting a bit more open-minded, whatever rationale you’re using to back it up.’

‘Yeah, well, yeah. It’s that or I’m going nuts.’

‘It’s all about perspective at the end of the day Rich. Assuming either way, can we still proceed what we’re here for? Or do you want to step up and leave? I don’t mind to be perfectly honest Rich. You’re another normal person at the end of it all; I don’t really give a shit what you do to be totally honest.’

‘I’d like to think I’m a bit more than that Joe. Or should I call you Lord of the Under...’

‘Just Joe’s fine thanks. You certainly want to be something more, don’t you Rich?’

‘Well who doesn’t, if they’re honest?’

‘Quite right. So are you willing to hear me out?’

‘Why not? This can’t get much more surreal, let’s face it.’

‘Good. Now if you don’t mind, I’ve just got to go for a quick piss. I’ll grab you another drink on the way back.’

‘Thanks,’ I replied.

What the fuck was I doing? I should have known, I should have fucking known. This is what happens when you try and do something different. There is a reason why I stay in my comfort zone. Even though I spend my whole time wanting to leave it I always secretly know there’s a reason why I don’t. And this was it. You end up in these kind of fucking situations - having a drink with some guy who thinks he’s the devil, and worse in this fucking nightclub. God he could have opened the gateway to hell in the mash or somewhere.

I lit up another cigarette and looked around the rest of the club - to the dance floor, a cacophony of gyrating bodies that contrasted vividly with the bizarre vacuum of open space my table seemed to reside in. However, in a strange way this slowly appeared to be lessening and lessening as the sweating morass of dancing teenagers, mainly female it had to be said, moved slowly, slowly towards me, their attention starting to focus away from each other and towards my gormless face, still gyrating seductively as they did so. I felt at once claustrophobic, but then slowly relaxed as my body submitted to their advances, almost touching yet never quite close enough to do so.

Through this physical morass came Joe, looking at me again with that smug grin, apparently oblivious to all that was happening either side of him. But then I looked back again. And nothing was happening. Yes there were people dancing, but it was the usual, average-to-ugly looking crowd, all dancing average-to-badly and certainly not paying the slightest bit of attention to me.

'Richie!' blurted Joe in his superior, powerful voice. 'You seem a bit distracted there.'

'Yeah,' I replied. 'Err no, not really. Just, you know, checking out the scenery.'

'Not up to much at the moment is it?'

'Very average,' I agreed dishonestly. 'And all a bit too young for my tastes.'

'I completely agree,' affirmed Joe not even bothering to look round. 'You feel like, you should, you could be enjoying something better, don't you?'

'I've never been particularly successful with the opposite sex, if that's what you're asking.'

'Why not? You're pretty good looking, if you don't mind me saying.'

'Yeah, I know.' I paused, realising how this sounded. 'Well, you know what I mean. But yeah, they've always just seemed to find me, a bit 'weird' to use the standard terminology.'

'Weird as in 'different,' I would suggest.'

'I suppose so, yes.'

'Richie, these girls are just saying that because they find you intimidating. They know that you're not quite like them, not someone they immediately know from their world. As Hugo said earlier, you're a fake Richard they sense that, and if there's one thing a woman finds unimaginably unattractive in a man it's a lack of honesty, a lack of integrity.'

'Somehow, the girls in my philosophy seminars...'

'Rich. You need women who can appreciate you, who can understand you, who can communicate with you as who you are, rather than who you think other people want you to be.'

'I hope that's not why we're in here?'

'No Rich. We're here because somewhere in your imagination you know this world does exist. And being in here helps you to access it. Now you just need to take that last step Richard. And it won't just be your imagination anymore. It will become your reality.'

Joe paused and took a sip of his drink.

'So what's this last step,' I began again.

'You just have to be honest with me.'

'That's it?'

'That's it, just about.'

'Just about?'

'We'll get there, you'll see. But you need to be honest okay, something that I know you rarely are. We're in a club, it's dark, no-one here knows you, I don't really know you, so it doesn't matter. You can talk to me. You can tell me what you really think.'

'Alright.'

'Good. What do you want to do?'

'What?'

'What do you want to do?'

'What, now?'

'What do you want to do Rich?'

'Stop talking to you, at this very moment.'

'What do you want to do Rich? Tell me Rich. Be honest.'

'I don't know.'

'Yes you do. What do you want...?'

'All fucking right! I get the picture.'

'So. Tell me Rich.'

'I want to, I want to...'

'Yes Rich?'

'I want to get out of here, and get out of this world. I want to be appreciated for how brilliant I really am. I want to have proper friends, not people who are just waiting for you to finish speaking. I want visceral experiences. I want life as an adult to be like I expected it to be when I was a teenager. I want to know everything. I want to know what to say all the time. I want people to appreciate what I think, not just dismiss it out of hand. I want to feel embraced by society, not repressed by it. I want the world to revolve around me not the other way

round. I want people to admit they're wrong. I want to feel certain, certain about who I am and certain that I want to keep it that way. I want to be content, I want to be happy, I want to like people and like that other people like me. And I still want to get out of this fucking club. Err, and that's about it. You asked me to be honest.'

'I did Richard. And thanks for finally being so.'

'Okay. I'm not so sure how entirely...'

'It was Rich, believe me.'

'But you can't always get what you want.'

'Ah Rich, but you can. That's what you've got to understand.'

'Really?'

'All of that. All of what you just said, so honestly, so unrepressed. I can give you that. I can give you that world.'

'Yeah?'

'Really.'

'And how are you going to do that?'

'It's not down to me Rich, not really. It's down to you. But you do have to grant me, just one small thing.'

'Yeah.'

'You have to accept that from now on, your soul belongs to me.'

'You what?'

'Your soul belongs to me.'

'Err, to be honest, I think I might have to pass. I don't mean to be rude or anything.'

'Okay, okay. That was probably slightly overdramatic. What I mean is, is that for this to work, for you to attain everything you want to be, you have to accept a few things, a few doctrines that your lifestyle choice will pretty much necessitate.

Number One – You've got to forget about this idea of perfection, this belief of an ideal in this world. There's no such thing and even an idea of it has absolutely no relevance in this modern world. You got that?'

'Okay.'

'Number Two – In this respects then you can replace such an idea by realising that you are essentially God of this world. You have the ability to do pretty much whatever you want, to manipulate anything to your own ends and to be whoever you want to be. There is no absolute you. You are a blank canvas upon which you can paint whatever picture you want.'

'It's liberating stuff.'

'Absolutely. Or not as the case may be.

And Number Three – You must fully accept this. You can't do this in half measures. That's why I say I you have to give me your soul. Because only by giving away the seed of your illusory view of the world, the source of all these conceptualised, absolute, bigger picture ideals you've been following - as a guide to some unreal 'better' place - will you be able to fully appreciate what I'm offering you. It's the only way you will be able to develop the ability to treat the world as yours for the taking unfettered by all the...and excuse my terminology here, bullshit that goes with it. It's the only way you will you be able to tolerate all the opposition that exists to such a worldview as the delusional madness that it really is. And that's it. That's all you need to know. What do you want to do? Leave now and head back to your comfortable, unchallenging, easy, monotonous existence? Or join me and become everything you've dreamed of being?'

Joe sat back and lit up a cigarette, slowly swallowing each drag before releasing that smug, magnetic smile.

He had me. He knew what I was going to say. I got the feeling he'd known from the first time he'd met me. And I knew it. The more I thought about leaving, to heading home and getting up again in five hours, to sell office furniture for another eight hours, to sit and play guitar in another shitty pub, it just seemed too horrible to comprehend. Alright even if this guy was the devil, surely hell couldn't be any worse than that?

‘Okay,’ I agreed. ‘How’s this going to work then?’

‘Oh there is one more thing Rich. After twenty four hours you can never go back.’

‘Let’s just get on with it then shall we?’ I answered, all too impatiently.

The whole dance floor started to move towards us again. I leaned back and accepted it all.

*Richard Faust had a hangover. He'd just woken up on the side of a pavement, with only his cheap leather jacket protecting him from the oppressive concrete surface he'd been lying on. The rest of the world was also arising with him, keys turning in locks, car windscreens scraped vehemently, milk bottles welcomingly drunk, briefcases snapped shut, and the commuters are beginning a long, weary trek to the office. It is a Tuesday morning. The weekly routine is back in full swing. And a scruffy looking man lying on the pavement is not welcome in this meticulously structured world.*

*As he sat up and looked around him, men in suits tutted with disgust, turning their noses up with disdain and started looking at their mobile phones. As he struggles up to his feet they pass him clumsily, refusing to lower themselves to anything close to an apology. Then as he walked past the entrance of the nightclub - the scene of the previous night's events - and then suddenly changes direction in recollection, they look at each other with a mutual irritation - that they are part of this less than exclusive club, and he is most certainly not. From pointedly trying to reject the world the world had now rejected Richard. He had to try and work out what had happened, and where he was going to go from here. And, strangely there was something about the way Richard turned and walked the other way, a confidence, a certainty that suggested that maybe he'd finally worked something out.*

‘Well that was different I suppose. Ask and ye shall receive Richie, seek and ye shall find. Open the door and the all the room will...will? What the fuck was all that about again?’

I still felt drunk. My thoughts were completely incoherent, as if half of me was blocking something out and the other half was contemplating something entirely new. Fuck I felt like I was gonna chuck...but...but no I didn't. Because what the fuck? What if I did pass out, or vomit, or lie on the street like a tramp? What did it matter? I had the liberty to do whatever I wanted. So why the fuck should I care?

I didn't have any civic duty, because civic duty didn't exist anymore. This was a capitalist paradise. This was the heart of the richest county in the fifth richest country in the world. We weren't supposed to be with each other, we were supposed to be against each other. We were competing, so what I was supposed to do? Help others? Help others become better than me? No fucking way. Because the moment you do that people can see your weakness. And when they see it, they can start to exploit it, and after that they'll walk all over you and you'll just end up at the bottom of the food chain. I was better than that. I was much better than that. I was a master of whatever vocation I chose; I had the world in the palm of my hands at this very moment. I didn't revolve around the world, the world revolved around me. This thing I sensed before was there to be manipulated, reformed like plastecine into whatever I wanted it to be. How long did I have left? One o'clock. One o'clock. I'm pretty sure that was when I shook hands with Joe. I'm pretty sure that was when this all started. What the fuck happened after that? Some more drinks. That girl. Those girls. That room.

An image flashed into Richard's head. A red room; writhing, copulating bodies; girls lying passed out on a sofa; two men smiling - his face, and...

I waited for the wave of guilt to flood over my brain. But there was nothing. Nothing at all. Just a feeling of complete blankness.

I don't have time to think about that now. I've got a day to discover the world. A day that finishes in, fuck, in about seventeen hours. Shit. I've got to get going, I've got to, I've gotta...well I better get out of work before I do anything else. If the world is a blank canvas you don't want someone sitting there telling you what to paint now do you?

*Rich sought refuge in the nearest phone box. Outside the plague of office workers was reaching epidemic levels. Rich knew that today his destiny did not lie with them. He smiled confidently as he dialled in the numbers.*

‘No Chip. No. No, I’m not going to make it in today.’

‘Why? Why? Do you have to have a reason? Of course, of course. There always has to be a justification for everything. We can’t just operate on caprice can we?’

‘No, that’s not the model I’m talking about.’

‘Chip, Chip, listen to me. Two years I’ve worked for you. Yeah, Two years I’ve sat there next to my phone and my computer, doing a job that entails me using one percent of the pretty small amount of my brain that I access throughout the day. A job to which I have never been late, never had a complaint against me, never asked for a pay rise, never been behind in my work. I’ve broken no rules, I’ve been the model employee and, not meaning to sound arrogant, the best fucking worker you’ve got by a country mile.’

‘Yes I am building up to something.’

‘No I don’t want a promotion.’

‘No, as I said, I want a day off. No, in fact I’m calling you to let you know that I’m not coming in today. I’m not asking, I’m telling. I think I’ve fucking earned it. And if you consider it, it’d probably be in your best interest to give it to me.’

‘Why? Because at the end of the day your main interest is in my monetary worth – the level of labour I provide of the company offset by my costs in term of wage. That’s it. Simple as that. And in that sense I’m worth enough to be given some temporary leave. It would mean that you recognise my value and, in effect, reward my ability to profit your organisation and more than likely encourage me to further my work level to even greater lengths, thus maximising my potential as an employee and, in short, making you more money. Which is the important thing isn’t it Chip? The only thing you might say Chip? Consider it an investment with which you’re speculating to accumulate. You’re an investor Chip, a master investor. A master investor in people. And you have the opportunity to cash in, more than you ever have before.’

‘No I’m not sick. Do I sound fucking sick?’

‘That’s the right decision Chip, the right choice. You’ve made your first sale of the day, right these. You won’t regret that.’

‘Yes, I’ll be back in tomorrow.’

‘Yes, I’ll see you then.’

‘Bye.’

It was all about speaking his language, that’s how easy it was. People are fucking easily manipulated as long as you play them at their own game. Don’t feel like you’re better than them for some reason, just look and sense what they want and what their desires are, and then play them around that. Some people want to think they’re funny, others want to be viewed as attractive, some like to think they’re intelligent, some just fashionable and cool. Chip? Well he was at work, and at work the most important thing was making money. His mind was in that ‘zone’ as he liked to put it, a zone governed by instant gain where the brain impulses sense money like they eyes sense light or the loins sense potential sexual contact. And he was also so thoughtless, that he could be convinced into doing anything if there was some propensity for profit involved. But he had the investment acumen of a lottery addict, that was why he worked for ‘Kraft Office Furniture’ and not the Bank of England. And yes he was my boss, but only because he was deluded enough to pertain to self-importance. I wouldn’t have lowered myself to a promotion, that suggested a level of commitment I didn’t deign myself to have in the furniture world. And that was also why he gave me the day off, why I knew he would. It was me doing something deemed as ‘wrong’ and let’s be honest, he was killing for me to do something of that nature. He could assume superiority, it made him feel good, it

made him feel better than me, it made him feel like he was doing something ‘important,’ punishing me for something that he knew was wrong.

I didn’t give a fuck. I wasn’t in a world of ‘wrong’ and ‘better.’ I was in a world where pleasure was the only goal, the true ethic that everyone really strived for if they were honest with themselves. I was grasping the pleasure stick, letting it imbibe me, throwing myself into it with as much force as I could muster. That was what I was here for now. Not duty, work, career, or building character. I was leaving all that to the proles, to the idiots, to the fools that walked mechanically passed this morning. I had more important things to do, a different life lead. If this was hell, then good morning Satan, I’m on my way down.

*Rich completed his creed to the world outside the phone box. The plague had now become regimented, manipulated, controlled. The lawyers, the insurance agents, the accountants, now just file passed one by one, like homogenous products on an assembly line. He opens the door and they stop, the while process stops just for a moment, and he walks through, through the gap to the other side, through to a different path, a different choice, Joe's voice ringing out all around him.*

‘Embrace the world Rich, embrace the world before you. Don’t create barriers, enjoy it for everything it has to offer, everything it is there to be. Think of anything that you want and the world is there to give it you. Anything you want. Anything you really want.’

*The panorama of the whole town lay in front of Richard, as he sat on the look-out bench on top of Semaphore Road, eating a McDonalds breakfast. From what he normally viewed as just a still canvas, a world was starting to jump out at Rich, a world to be appreciated and manipulated. The cathedral, once ugly and grandiose, now rose out of the morning fog like a grand castle, where oratories could be delivered, where great ceremonies could be held. The malignant fortresses of capitalism that were the huge department stores, Debenhams, H&M of Fraser, Alders, had become pecuniary paradises, where a man who knew what he was doing could gorge at luxury goods to his life's content. The inner city housing, once a blight on this utopian suburban vision, were making Richard drool lasciviously at the potential for debauchery, for easy kicks, for stupid, impressionable residents. All throughout the town a new life force was rushing around. Curtains were being opened, dark alleyways illuminated, quiet cul-de-sacs bustling with life, parks fill up with runners and courting couples, the whole world had awoken from its slumber. And overlooking it all, sat a quietly satisfied Richard.*

I will have visceral experiences. Life as an adult will be like I expected it to be when I was a teenager. I will be appreciated for how brilliant I am. I know what to say all the time. People will know they're wrong. People will know I'm right. I'm certain about who I am, and who I want to be. I'm embracing society. I don't revolve around the world, the world revolves around me.

*The world was at Rich's beckon call. He was conducting it, moulding it into his own image. A lone old man walked passed and, with a flick of Rich's fingers, raised both his hands up in the air, letting fly his bags of pilchards and prawns as he did so. Two pretty brunette girls, both in just about their early twenties, walked down the hill, studying their College of Law coursework studiously. Richard moved one of his hands to his chin and focused his stare towards them. They stopped, looked round, removed their glasses and blew him a kiss provocatively. A large fat man wheezing sonorously suddenly turned into a jogger and runs away. A car ran over a barking dog. A whistling builder was knocked unconscious by a low flying pigeon.*

I had it. I had the power to make anything happen, anything I wanted. It was this easy. It was time to see what I could really do.

*Fresh in the knowledge that the town was his to do with as he pleased, Rich walked briskly down the hill and into its bowels, into its guts, into its heart and into its soul. The Mash Tun pub still sat dark and unmoving as he strutted passed, a brief reminder of former, dormant times.*

*In the grounds opposite lay a portent of the future, beckoning Richard over with a coquettish wave. It was Reannan, his assiduous muse from the night before.*

‘Hey Rich! Rich!’

Shit. Fuck. It was her. What should I do? How do I look? How does she think I look? Who does she want me to be right now? How should I play this? Hang on a fucking second.

‘Hey Reannan,’ I replied walking over. ‘How are you doing?’

I went to cross the road, but was forced to pause while a line of cars passed by. This gave me a moment to think, and a moment to think, usually meant a moment to panic.

Why had I been so nervous, so fucking shit scared, so intimidated every time I’d spoken to her? It was emotion. Emotion based on the potential of love. A combination of fear and excitement that I wasn’t capable of dealing with, didn’t want to deal with and hence just wanted to escape and find a place back in my comfort zone. But now I didn’t feel this. I didn’t feel that excitement, because I knew. I knew what humans describe as ‘lust’ was just a sensation a brain. Sensation drawn from a chemical reaction in the body, whereby it realises that it is going to obtain significant pleasure from this person, and feels drawn to them as a result. This is then furnished by a few humanising conditions such as social standing, fashion, overall attractiveness, but still just boiled down to the same basic sensation at the end of the day. And when you realise that, it suddenly all becomes a lot simpler.

‘Hi Reannan. How you doing this fine afternoon?’

‘Hey Rich,’ she replied pleasantly. ‘Didn’t think I’d see you around here today. Don’t you have, stuff to do or something?’

‘Maybe. But you know. I thought I’d take a break for a bit. Enjoy the delights this place has to offer for a change.’

‘What, the Castle Grounds?’

‘Well, why not? If you look beneath the surface everything has something special to offer. You just have to know what you’re looking for, that’s all.’

‘Really Richard? I’d always thought this place was just full of underage teenagers drinking cider and old people admiring flowers and decrepit walls. But I’d be interested if you fancied proving me wrong.’

‘All in good time Reannan, all in good time. As I’m sure you know, the finest things in life take a bit of time to enjoy to the full. You need to steadily build up, stimulate each sensation a bit more at a time, get deeper and deeper into the experience, search each part out bit by bit, until finally you let yourself go, let your body become fully accepted, let your mind become completely open. The, and only then, can you appreciate the true pleasure of the world you’re in, can you transcend to a higher level of consciousness, can you truly feel the ecstasy, the overwhelming delectation of pure satisfaction that comes with it, that comes with losing control, with letting your true feelings take over.’

*Rich was expectantly locking his body in with Reannan's, mirroring her movements, penetrating the gaps under her arms, under her chin, in between her legs.*

‘Are you sure Rich?’

‘Yeah, I’m sure. I can show you how.’

‘You can, show me how.’

‘Yes.’  
‘Yes.’  
‘Yes.’  
‘I want you to. I want to go with you.’  
‘Want is good Reannan. Want is good.’  
‘I want. I want.’  
‘But not right now Reannan!’ I interrupted forcefully.

Reannan looked back at me with a sense of extreme determined lust, and then went back to her normal, perky self again.

‘You seem very different in the cold light of day Rich, has anyone ever told you that?’  
‘I...’  
‘Oh, no! That didn’t mean to come out as it sounded.’  
‘No I understand Reannan. I can see how I may seem different to, how I was.’  
‘Yes. You are. Very. But don’t get me wrong. Its not a bad thing or anything. You just seem, I don’t know, more confident I suppose.’  
‘It must be the sun. Maybe I’m solar powered or something.’  
‘Yeah, I suppose that must be it.’ Reannan suddenly sounded very aloof. ‘I don’t know. Don’t worry about it.’  
‘She wasn’t ready,’ I thought to myself. ‘She’s too trapped in her own environment. Not yet. Not yet.’  
‘So what are you going to do for the rest of the day Rich. I’ve got to o back to college for a bit now. Two hours of psychology. I can’t wait.’  
‘I’ve got a few things I need to do.’  
‘Oh well, yeah of course.’  
‘You know, trying to be a bit different somewhere.’  
‘Oh don’t be stupid. You know what I meant by that. That was a compliment for God’s sake.’  
‘I know, I know. I’m only joking. So you’ve got to go yeah?’  
‘Yeah, really do now.’  
‘Okay, fair enough.’  
‘But I’d love to hook up later. Give me a shout later on, alright?’  
‘Okay.’  
‘Okay.’  
‘Right.’  
‘I guess I’ll see you later then Reannan.’  
‘Yeah, Gotta go. I’ll see you a bit later Rich. I’ll give you a text.’

That was it. That was how easy it was. And that could have been anyone. Any of these girls here. It’s just a case of remembering what it’s all about at the end of the day. When you know that, you can do whatever, whoever you like. There’s no fear. There’s no intimidation. There’s just sex. Sex. Sex.

*If seducing Reannan had been the starter for Rich's existential leap into a modern life of want and desire, then his following ramble down Chatsworth Village High Street was unquestionably the main course - a main course of intense gluttony and excess. Instead of pointedly disdainning the enticing offers and alluring invitations that shouted out garishly from every shop front and flashing neon sign, Rich let himself be lead by them, giving in to the latent desire to consume that lies within all of us. And consume he did. Free credit and store cards provided the instant capital, with an interest rate that would apply too far into the future to be of any immediate concern. And a range of hugely expensive, ultra-fashionable gear was the result. From the bottom up he painted a quintessential picture of young adult grungy, under-retro cool. Minimalist trainers in white and red; sand washed, moth-ridden blue jeans; black t-shirt displaying the emblem of any band from the New Wave of British Heavy Metal; a pair of naturally made bracelets; some fake tan; bleach blond hair styled to be as unstyled as possible; and a new leather jacket, just for the hell of it. All yours for just five hundred quid, including the chocolate-based coffee drink and upper class sandwich that came along the way.*

From a scared kid wearing nothing but a supercilious attitude, I had become one of them. I looked the look, I walked the walk, I acted the act. It felt fantastic, it felt like I could do absolutely whatever I wanted, that wherever I went I would be accepted and appreciated, that everyone who looked at me would feel a sense of camaraderie and affinity, would see me as someone they wanted to be with. Women eyed me, men looked shyly in my general direction. My mind was now facing with the possibilities that lay ahead of me, all the things I'd yearned of doing were moving to the front of my cognition queue, instead of lying dormant under a weight of self-importance and humility.

'Hey Richie! Richie! Richie you fucking pretty boy! Over here my man.'

And something else had just added itself to the list. Anyone who wolf-whistled was not worthy of New-Richard's immediate attention, no matter who it was. And this was no-one who mattered.

'Richie. Richie!'

Okay, he was moving towards me now. It must be important.

'Whoa, hold up Rich, hold up.'

'Oh, good afternoon Hugo. I didn't see you down there.'

'Hey man. Shut the fuck up! You ignore me. Then you fucking call me short. Who the fuck? Who the fuck do you think you are man?'

'Easy Hugo, easy. What's up my man? You're sounding very touchy this afternoon.'

'Touchy? Motherfucking touchy! What the fuck does that mean?'

'That's a self-answering question Hugo.'

'Alright, alright. Bit early for that man, you know what I mean?'

'Mornings are when your brain works best Hugo.'

'I know man. That's when I'm asleep, dreaming of you dying in some horrible accident, or maybe just getting your hands amputated. But its the afternoon dude.'

'Alright, alright. Fair enough. You dream of me, I can understand. Don't worry, its not gay or anything like that.'

'Hey man. You're the one who's scared of women, not me.'

'You're not scared, because you're not interested.'

'I'm interested, don't you worry about that.'

'Well done.'

‘Patronising fucker.’

‘Closet homosexual.’

‘You fucking wish Rich.’

‘At least it involves fucking.’

‘Whatever man. Look Rich. I’m not in the mood for flirting with you this morning man. We’ve got bigger things to do my man. A bigger world to look for. And, and you should be fucking flattered by this, I want I want you to be involved. I want you to be a part of it.’

‘What? Playing the triangle during Freebird, something like that?’

‘Yeah Rich. Yeah Rich. That’ll be it. I knew it. I knew you wouldn’t be fucking interested. Seriously. I fucking told him. Fucking prick.’

‘No. I’m sorry man. Don’t start crying or anything.’

‘Hey fuck you man. I don’t have to do this you know. There’s a fucking million other people better than you we could ask. Seriously. But you know, we saw you last night Rich. Fucking spouting your philosophical bullshit. Seeing people in the corner of the room. And we thought you might need some help. A decent gig for once in your life. A chance to actually perform man, not just fucking masturbate on stage. But look if you’re not interested, then be my guest. Fuck off right now and crawl back into your gutter, I don’t give a shit.’

‘Okay Hugo, okay. At least give me the pitch. Then I’ll tell you it’s a hit idea.’

Hugo looked at me impatiently as if deciding whether I was worthy of his brilliant plan.

‘Okay Rich. I know I’m going to regret this but okay. Only because it’s you.’

‘I feel privileged.’

‘You should do man. You should do. Because tonight we have the gig, we have the fucking gig! The fucking chance to get out of here man, too hit the fucking big time. None of your usual open mic fucking Monday night shitpits indulging ignorant teenagers who chat through your whole set. No more of that shit man. We’ve got people coming to this gig man. People who know about us, who know about you, who know that Guildford ’s where it’s at at the moment man. Who want to cash in on our talents, who want to take us up to where we should be, who want to fucking sign us up and get our message out to the whole fucking world. Oh man, it’s too good to be true man, its, its, our dream man! Our fucking dream! Do you hear me Rich, do you hear me?’

‘You were talking about your dreams again?’

‘Rich. Seriously. Seriously.’

‘Look, I hear you Hugo. You’ve got a gig tonight. And apparently some kind of label people are coming down or something. And there’s a chance you might get signed up, get some kind of deal. Which is great news man, seriously fantastic news. I just don’t understand where I come into it, that’s all.’

‘Err, well Rich. Richie my man. You’re err, got to understand this man, this is not easy for me to say. But, it’s you they really want to hear. Apparently, and fuck knows where these deluded people get their ideas from, you’re the big deal. You’re the guy that everyone’s talking about. And the rumour also has it that if you can really deliver, really show them what you’ve got, stop pissing around and looking moody, then you’ve a shoe-in for a deal. No fucking around. This is the real deal man.’

‘Yeah, whatever Huges.’

‘You think I’d fucking make something like that man? Seriously?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why? The fuck? Would I want to do anything like that? You’ve got a big enough fucking ego already man, you don’t need anyone else bending down and sucking you off for fuck’s sake. Particularly from these fucking lips man.’

‘So why the fuck are you telling me this then?’

‘Because, because, fuck it, because we might be in with a shot as well. Its on your back I’ll admit, but you know, record companies get this bandwagon kind of thing don’t they? Menswear. Bush. That kind of thing.’

‘What, so you want to be the new Ocean Colour Scene or something?’

‘Maybe the new fucking Pearl Jam you fucking asshole.’

‘But...okay, I’ll take your point.’

‘So what Rich? What do you reckon? You got to be up for it, haven’t you? Or are you going to give us one of your fucking gay ‘I don’t want to be famous, I don’t want lots of money, I don’t want gangs of groupies’ bullshit. Because I don’t think I can take that man.’

I took a moment and looked at him for a second, trying to cognise everything that was happening here. This was my main nemesis, virtually begging before my eyes. This was a path to a new world opening up right in front of me. This was my whole potential existence shifting and remoulding and resetting itself while I, well, didn’t do anything really.

‘You’ve embraced the world Rich and the world’s embraced you back.’

‘What did you say Hugo?’

‘What? Fucking nothing man. Fuck you’re not going to go nuts on us again are you? We had enough of that last night Rich, really.’

‘Sorry, don’t worry about it.’

‘I am fucking worried about it man. Because the longer you stand there listening to voices in your head, the longer I think you must be going to stand me up, gonna fuck me over.’

I looked at him again, straight through to the back of his head.

‘Okay. I won’t let you down Hugo, you can trust me on that.’

‘Fucking right you won’t man. Fucking right you won’t.’

‘Alright.’

‘Right. So eight o’clock tonight. The Star pub. Get there early, for once in your life.’

‘Okay. Can I bring a date?’

Hugo turned and looked at me with pronounced repugnance.

‘You are fucking killing me man.’

And he was off. Back to sitting by the river playing those infernal fucking bongos.

That’s it. A potential record deal. A potential fucking record deal for playing crap covers to about half my potential fucking ability. A potential record deal for someone too shit scared to play what they wanted to play, or play how they wanted to play it. There was no way I could have got this. There was no way I could have possibly deserved this. It should not have happened and yet, it had, it was. But why should this surprise me? Why should I feel perturbed by this? This was a good thing. This was a fucking great thing. I was brilliant and people were finally recognising the fact. And there wasn’t some mysterious, worldwide, universal force that I had managed to gain access to. This was me going good, plain and simple, it had nothing to do with anything else. Joe really was right. The moment I’d stopped thinking about the idea of God, of transcendental ideals, then things were starting to happen. I was becoming my own God, a superman, an ‘ubermensch’ as Nietzsche would have called it. Its amazing what happens when you bring your head down from the clouds and into the real world. And I know without a doubt in my mind that tonight, those guys were going to sign me up in a second.

Rich lit up a cigarette and walked over to the side of the bridge, to consider the vista that lay in front of him.

I used to come here. I used to come here and wonder about how peaceful this scene was. The river flowing quickly below me, the eroded banks, still home to the occasional family of ducks and intrepid cyclists. The detrimental canoeists who possessed paddling passed rhythmically every few minutes or so. It was beautiful, tranquil, relaxing, a triumph of man living alongside nature.

Now I look at it and I’m bored. I see nothing there, nothing but a tired old stretch of water lacking any proper direction.

‘Richard. Richard my boy. How’s your day going there? Not the best time to be feeding the ducks don’t you think?’

I turned round to see the lofty figure of Joe looking down on me condescendingly.

‘Joe,’ I answered rather taken aback and embarrassed by my current status. ‘Still okay if I call you that I presume?’

‘What else would you call me Robert?’

‘I don’t know,’ I looked round at all the pedestrians walking passed. ‘Yeah, you’re probably right. Joe’s about right for the moment.’

‘Indeed it is,’ confirmed Joe. ‘For the moment anyway. So, how are things going Richard? Learning that a life of realism, practicality and well, possibly the slightest bit of hedonism is pretty damn good when you get used to it?’

‘Just slightly. In a funny way I can’t believe I’ve lived my whole life in such a naïve way until now.’

‘Well Rich. That’s good. The more you can’t believe it the further you’re progressing. It sounds like you’re following my advice perfectly.’

‘I guess it’s just a life ethic, isn’t it really?’

‘In many ways yes. And again you’re thinking about it the right way, it’s all about what really is. Seeing how things really work and then learning to appreciate them for all they can be. That’s what this way of life is really about.’

‘I’m seeing that Joe. I’m seeing that more than you can imagine.’ Most of all its, it’s just so god damn liberating isn’t it? You suddenly don’t feel trapped by what you should or shouldn’t do, the right or wrong way to act, how other people view you, are you good or are you not good. It’s just about knowing. Knowing who you are, knowing what to say and knowing how other people think.’

‘And that was one of the things you really wanted, wasn’t it Rich? To know everything, and for people to be interested that you do?’

‘Yes it was, yes it was. And before I just considered those all just to be mythical dreams I really did. I never believed that I had it in me to make it happen.’

‘But you can, can’t you? Because there is no such thing as myths, you know you can make it happen.’

‘I do. I really, truly do.’

‘So Richard. I’ve got to ask you. You have all this new found ability, new found perception of the world. And yet I find you standing morosely on the side of a bridge. You don’t have long left Rich, remember that. You have to make a decision. You have to make a choice. And remember it’s a simple one. You can carry on living how you are, how you are today, for the rest of your life. Or I can return you to how you were before, with all your existential yearnings, terminal neurosis and repressed ideas?’

‘Joe. I almost feel like I’ve made up my mind already.’

‘Richard. Richard. You still have the rest of the day. Don’t rush into anything. Remember so far you’ve only touched the surface. I want you to really feel what this world has to offer, really experience what your senses know is out there somewhere. It’s more than you can ever imagine, believe me, it’s more than you even think you can want.’

‘Okay, okay. I won’t say anything yet.’

‘But Rich, one thing you’ve got to remember. You can’t find this by just standing out here looking around. You need to be in there - in amongst the crowds, the people, where things are happening. It’s not all going to be as easy as your gig tonight, or your date with Reannan. You’ve got to look for it, seek it out, make it happen. And the more you do that Rich, the more you want it, the more you yearn for it... Then Rich. Then you’ll feel what you truly want, what the powers you have can do.’

‘Yes, yes. I know. You’re right. I was just collecting my thoughts for a moment.’

‘Your thoughts are your enemy Rich. Don’t think, do. And on that note I’ll hold you up no longer. Have a fun time Richard. I’m sure I’ll be seeing you at some point before the day is up.’

‘Yes, yeah. I’ll see you later...’

But before I could finish he was gone, with those last two words resonating in my head.

‘Just do. Just do. Just do.’

He was right. What the fuck was I doing? I could do a lot of things but I still couldn’t stop time. So I had to make the most of things. I had to take this opportunity and find out what this place had to offer. I had to go to where things were happening, where plans were being made, where the people really were. And there was only one place I could think of like that.

*The afternoon sun was still shining pleasantly as Rich entered the Live and Let Live pub. It was Tuesday, it was some time after lunch and it was almost completely deserted. The office phones were ringing again after the one o'clock lull; pensions had been cashed and spent on cigarettes, sherry and prunes; dosing students were absorbing the last few minutes of the first showing of neighbours; babies were being put down for their afternoon naps; and everyone else had decided to sit outside and enjoy the weather. Anyone who was sat inside this old, damp, badly furnished, smoky shithole had to have a very good reason. And Richard was one of those people.*

I hadn't been in here for ages. I hadn't wanted to come in here for ages. This, for me, was the epitome of a world of quick-fix, of instant gratification, of selfish pleasure. It was a haven for the hedonist, a den for the debauched, a place where the underbelly of society met up to discuss what they'd done and plan what they were going to do. This, as Joe would put it, was where things happened. I know it doesn't immediately strike you as one of those places. But this was Chatsworth Village remember, this was a suburban, middle-class world, and here the dark side of life was not suppose to exist. But if you looked hard enough it was there, like it was everywhere else.

A couple sat in the corner are chatting, in a romantic private clinch. They kiss each other on the cheek. But what's that in their hands, in their touching palms? Cash in one? A bag of coke in the other?

Well what about the cute blond girl behind the bar? The one with a smile so pure and innocent that it would make most angels feel a touch sordid. That can't be. That can't be her hand removing money from the till, furtively scrunching up a note in her hand. Can it?

Well, there's a good old chap sat reading the Daily Mail. He's surely not up to anything illicit. Probably just preparing to head home and polish his war medals, after he's finished rolling his cigarette. That he seems to be filling with a very suspicious crushed, greenish substance.

And I knew it wouldn't be long before I would find myself involved, before I was going to be invited to join the party. And I knew what my answer was going to be.

*Rich sat with a subtle smile on his face, the face of a man confident in his environment, confident that something was about to happen, something that he knew would take him closer to the pleasure ideal that he was looking for. That was what this place was all about. It was the guaranteed shag of public houses, a haven of instant gratification.*

*A few minutes later and two new figures walked abrasively through the front door, answering Rich's desires quicker than perhaps he even hoped. They walked with an arrogant swagger, they were dressed in baggy sweats and cheap jewellery, they talked in a loud, crude and verbose language, they didn't care what other people thought. They were precisely who Rich was expecting.*

'Yo what. How long we checking in here then?' began the first, Robbie, the taller, broader, more domineering of the two.

'Dunno man, dunno,' replied his accomplice Rafael, whose common tongue sounded rather more contrived, masking a distinct air of latent effeminacy. 'Nough time for a quick pint of numbers, don't you reckon?'

'Yeah, I reckon. Gotta while we're here haven't we.'

'Oh yeah, gotta be done. Gotta be done. We shouldn't need longer than that should we?'

‘We shouldn’t even need that man. It depends if our fucking man’s on time though doesn’t it Rob?’

‘Oh he will be, don’t worry. My suppliers are fucking cushtie there days, cushtie. Specially today man. They know it’s worth their while.’

‘You sure man?’

‘Oh I’m sure. For definite.’

‘You said that last time man.’

‘And I wasn’t wrong, was I?’

‘What. Dude your brain’s fried man. How the fuck can you not remember the...’

‘Look bitch. D’ya wanna tell fucking everyone? I mean, its not this is entirely legal in case you’ve forgotten.’

‘Bitch my fucking... who the fuck am I gonna be telling anyway? There’s no-one here for God’s sake. Apart from bloody Jimi Hendrix over there. But I think we’re okay with him, don’t you?’

‘Oh yeah, yeah. I know that guy man. He’s sound. Yo Richie!’

I gave him a respectful wink.

‘Hey, yeah dude. How you doing? Want a drink? My friend here’s just about to go and buy.’

‘Yeah, I’ll take a Krone please.’

‘Course you will, course you will. Three then Rafa please? If you can club that together on your own?’

‘Yes, I can fucking club that. Fucking asshole.’

‘Thank you very much!’

‘Fucking cunt.’

Rafael muttered something to himself and skulked off ruefully towards the blond waif at the bar. Rob looked at me and raised his eyebrows apologetically.

‘Ahh, right. Sorry about that Rich. Can’t get the staff these days, you know what I mean?’

‘Staff? Are you employing these days then Rob?’ I replied. You had to banter with these people. It was the only way to command mutual respect. Not that these clowns in any way deserved it.

‘Well, you know. Business is pretty brisk, this time of year and all that. I’d describe it as more of a partnership really.’

‘A partnership? Not being funny Rob but isn’t your trade more of a one-man industry?’

‘Not anymore. It’s not that simple these days Richie. The market’s flooded. You’ve got to offer more than just your basic product; otherwise you’ll never get anywhere.’

‘I had no idea it was so competitive.’

‘Oh yeah Rich, yeah. God it’s the world we live in these days man. Everyone still wants the instant pleasure and satisfaction, that’s not quite enough. People need it marketed to them as something special; it needs to fit into their lifestyle in a productive way. Pleasure itself; it’s not a good enough reason anymore.’

Rob was serious about this. For him this really was a business.

‘So what? If I want to but an eight these days, I should expect a free subscription to ‘Abs Monthly’ or something like that?’

‘I suppose you’re kind of on the right lines Dickie. It’s all part of creating an image, a brand identity, it’s all about having a gimmick. I mean, you wouldn’t just go to the shop and buy a packet of cornflakes, or a Mars bar, or a bottle of orange juice would you now?’

‘No I suppose not. Cornflakes are a bit boring for a start. I’d have to go for at least Crunchy Nut, or probably a cereal bar to fit in with my busy lifestyle.’

‘That’s right.’

‘And if I was indulging in the occasional pleasure of a Mars Bar, I’d be far more inclined to go for something a little more luxuriant and higher class, like maybe a Galaxy Riffle.’

‘Plain orange juice?’

‘Surely a pure fruit smoothie?’

‘Exactly. Anyway, to get to my point Richie. This is why I need a partner. And don’t get me wrong, I’m still the integral piece of this jigsaw, but I need someone else to make it a bit more colourful. Do you know what I mean?’

‘Kind of. So humour me then. If I was keen to engage in some of your latest merchandise, what would I be getting in return? Bearing in mind I’m slightly more sophisticated and discerning than your average cornflake buyer.’

‘Well, this must be your lucky day Richard my man. Because we’ve got our full events package ready for consumption right about now. Five star, no hidden extras; just a pure, unbeatable, sense-heightening, perception-altering, mind-blowing, fun-loving experience of a lifetime. The only way to lose that start if the week blues without the hangover the next day.’

‘Two pints of fucking numbers then in’it.’

Rob’s pitch was briefly interrupted by the returning Rafael, who immediately joined in with equal effusiveness.

‘What do you reckon Rich? Pretty fabulous isn’t it?’

‘Well, I’m not sure I entirely know what it is yet?’ I suggested.

‘Yeaah. Is it, what is it. Is it, what is it? What is it?’ replied Rafa incoherently.

‘Yeah man,’ agreed Rob.

‘Alright, that was my question, yes,’ I re-affirmed.

‘Yeah Raf,’ confirmed Rob. ‘I kind’a gave him an overview if the vibe, but I didn’t really tell him the details, you know what I’m saying?’

‘Well, what you saying? He wants to know the details. He wants to know the full, low-down?’

‘It’d be pretty hard to sell anything otherwise, now wouldn’t it?’ I suggested.

‘Oh I see. Because you need to be buying here my man. We don’t take too kindly to window shoppers here. This isn’t fucking Tesco’s. We got just one product, but it’s a product the like of which you can’t get anywhere else. Even a cute, pretty boy like you Richie.’

‘Leave it Rafa,’ warned Rob.

‘Hey, easy man. Just playing our young man here a compliment, that’s all.’

‘Its fine,’ I confirmed. ‘Now okay, I’m interested in buying. So do you want to tell me exactly what it is you’re got to sell?’

‘Okay man, okay. Check it out.’

Rafa places a ticket in front of me to something describing itself as ‘The Monday Worship’ at St David’s Chapel, Wanborough.

‘What the fuck is this?’

‘This, my doubting Richard, is your ticket to a new form of paradise, a revolution of rave, a coup d’etat of debauchery. It’s your entry to the entry of Monday Worship and you want to count yourself lucky. It’s exclusive entry only.’

‘It’s the full package Rich,’ added Rob suggestively. ‘That gets you physical entry and also acts as a ticket to wherever you want your mind to go as well.’

‘It’s all part of the service Rich,’ confirmed Rafa. ‘All part of the experience.’

‘Fifteen quid?’ I mused. ‘Suppose that’s pretty reasonable. Bit funny to have it on a Monday though isn’t it?’

‘I presume you didn’t hear me?’ conjectured Rafa. ‘This is a revolution Rich. The working week will never be the same again.’

‘Well yeah, I suppose. Because everyone will be calling in sick on Tuesday for a start.’

‘Will they though Rich?’ asked Rob enigmatically. ‘Will they?’

‘I would.’

‘But would you though Rich?’

‘On a fucking come-down? Probably.’

‘Look at the time on the ticket Rich,’ ordered Rafa proudly.

‘The revolution begins at 5.30pm. Return to reality by 9.45pm.’ I looked at Rob and Rafa.

They were both grinning smugly. ‘9.45? Isn’t that a bit early?’

‘That, Ricardo, is the whole motherfucking point,’ continued Rafa. ‘It means that Monday’s...Monday’s a whole new day. Ah, ahh. Hold your pity remarks just for a moment. Naturally, for most of the unenlightened nine-to-five workers of this world Monday morning is the nadir, the most depressing, soul-destroying moment of the week. And, to cope with this, these steady job drones find ways of dealing with it, they justify why they do what they do, they blame other people, they create fantasises of how they’re going to leave their oppressive existence, and then they’re okay again. They’re back in the routine. They’ve accepted their lot until Friday, when the manic behaviour of Monday meets its partner – the excitement, the ecstasy of the end of the week. But why do we have to wait until then? Why can’t we revoke that Monday feeling by saying to everyone that it’s okay to enjoy yourself for one more day, that don’t have to just stop the weekend, instead you can just warm down, still have a good time, maybe not go as heavy as you might do and, if you play by the rules, will still wake up feeling okay on a Tuesday morning.’

‘So you’ve cured Monday morning blues, by a bit of excess indulgence?’

‘We’ve not cured it Rich,’ explained Rob. ‘No-one cures anything anymore. It’s a treatment, like a nicotine patch. And the good thing about this is that as it’s a treatment, people are going to want to keep coming back.’

‘It’s like therapy?’

‘Precisely Rich.’

‘Nice. I like the way you guys think.’

‘Thought you would,’ perceived Rob. ‘You look like the type who’d understand.’

‘You do indeed,’ confirmed Rafa.

‘I certainly think it’s the way forward. Err, is it seriously in your local church?’

‘Yeah,’ admitted Rob.

‘It’s quite appropriate don’t you think?’ suggested Rafa. ‘The old home for those seeking a higher being, transformed into a modern version of the same thing. The highs are just bit different these days though, aren’t they?’

‘I know what you mean, my brother,’ agreed Rob.

‘You don’t know how true that is,’ I concurred. ‘Un-fucking believable.’

‘It’s pretty out-of-the-ordinary isn’t it?’ stated Rob.

‘So how the fuck did you manage to get a church anyway? I appreciate they’re trying to move with the times, but illegal raves?’

‘Raves?’ scoffed Rafa. ‘What is this, 1991?’

‘You get what I mean.’

‘It’s more practical than you think,’ said Rob pragmatically. ‘Now, I presume you don’t know this, but we have connections.’

Rafa nodded.

‘What? Rafa, I don’t want to know about you and Father Martin.’

‘It’s Father Ian,’ revealed Rafa.. ‘And I don’t know why you don’t want to know. He’s only my dad.’

‘You’re the son of a vicar?’ I asked slightly shocked.

‘Yes,’ replied Rafa.

‘Can they have children?’

‘Well I might have been the second coming. But what do you think Rich? God would have been pretty ironic if I was.’

‘Dan Brown would suddenly look a bit stupid, I’ll give you that.’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ replied Rafa, with exaggerated camp.

‘And on Mondays,’ confirmed Rob. ‘Father Ian is out at prayer meetings. Until ten o’clock. So when the parents are away...’

‘The kinds will play,’ elucidated Rafa.

‘Quite.’

‘And on that note,’ stated Rob. ‘We are going to have to take our leave. Last preparations to attend to and all that.’

‘Oh, alright then. Look, I think I’ll...’ I began searching through my pockets.

‘Tell you what Richie,’ interjected Rafa. ‘As you’ve expressed so much curiosity. Don’t worry about the money. Treat that as a free tester, to see if you like what you see.’

‘Oh, cheers Rafa. You can count me in then, for definite.’

‘Good, good. I’ll see you there then Rich.’

‘You will do,’

‘I’ll...’

‘Alright Rafa, all fucking right!’ interrupted Rob. ‘Any chance we can actually start charging money for some of these once in a while, for fucks sake. God you make me sick. If I wasn’t a good fucking Christian I’d make you fucking pay me for all your ‘free introductions’ you fucking gay cunt.’

‘Its marketing Rob.’

‘Yeah, marketing what?’

‘Marketing...’

‘Don’t even fucking tell me.’

That was how easy it was. I’d had a peaceful half an hour in a quaint, historic pub and I’d now booked myself a visit to one of Surrey’s medieval, rural churches. However, being the real world this also included an illicit party taking place in the afternoon, a coupon to some kind of chemical based cocktail and a slight hint of homoerotic flirting. You see at the end of the day the location does have an effect, your general demeanour will always be a factor, good timing always helps but still the one, the only true influence on what happens, where your path takes you, what decisions you make, is sex. It’s what drives us, it’s what decides for us, it’s what makes us who we are. I was starting to realise that this is what Joe had been getting at. It’s not about what your job is, or how your social life is, or what you’re doing with your so-called talents that explained our place in life. These were all just ruses, all self-created situations, facades to hide you from the real truth. The truth that we shy away from, we dare not think to question, that we keep behind closed doors and closed minds. The truth was that sex ruled everything we did and what everyone else did. Its shallow, its superficial, its narrow-minded but it is god-damn fucking true. And it was knowing that, feeling that understanding, that liberation, that freedom. It was knowing how the world how the world worked. And now I knew that, everything felt possible.

I didn’t really do drugs. Okay I smoked pot quite a lot when I was younger, like the rest of the fucking world, and I’d done coke a few times as an adult, like the rest of the fucking world, but that was it. I certainly wasn’t what I would consider to be a ‘druggie.’ It had always intimidated me. I’d always been scared as to what it would do to my mind. It had all seemed a bit metropolitan, a bit androgynous and a bit stylised. The ecstasy industry was marketing itself towards the young, free-thinking, open minded demographic, something that I’d aspired to be but had always been too insecure to do. I appreciated its motives, don’t get me wrong, but the idea of accessing a separate side of myself that I couldn’t control just scared the shit out of me more than anything else. And hey, without going into things too much, that was probably all about sex again at the end of the day, fear of perversion, fear of difference, that kind of thing.

But what did this kind of uptight morality mean now? Now I didn’t have that sense of an all-encompassing, dogmatic virtue that comes from always answering to a higher authority. I had the liberty to make my own decisions. It wasn’t wrong or right, or normal or abnormal, it was what I wanted and what I didn’t want. And if that changed after a few mind-altering

chemicals, then so what? If it seems right at the time, then it is right at the time, simple as that. There was no fear, no guilt, the world was revolving around me.

Rich stepped off the train at the converted shed that called itself Wanborough station to discover a sleepy Surrey village invaded. Invaded by pill-popping dance junkies. Robbie and Rafael had created a stunningly surreal backdrop. Groups of post-adolescent townies and student, glammed up in tight t-shirts and luminescent pants gathered in packs around three corners of the village - the farm shop, the church and the pub (which was closed). Residents seemed to cower indoors in fear, leaving these posses of strange gum-chewing aliens to their own devices. And in turn their visitors kept a pretty good level of decorum. Until they reached the queue amassing outside the church's entrance.

Here the excitement was building, drugs were starting to take a premature effect, music was echoing out of the church's imposing steeple, whistles were being blown, glow-sticks lighting up, yet everyone still maintained something of a controlled arrogance.

I knew it. Everyone seemed perfectly relaxed. They'd all done this a million times before. This was the hardcore. I was stepping straight in at the deep end.

But, remembering how Joe had done it, I walked straight, standing as erect and confident as possible, feeling my own sense of importance and grandiose, and the crowd parted like a line of obsequious servants, submissively embarrassed to question my outward appearance of authority. This was bought into the realm of indubitable proof as I was summoned by the event's organiser, with a shared arrogance of voice that only the personages of this world really understood.

'Yo, yo, yo Richie!' came Rafa's excited tones from somewhere at the front of the queue.

'Err, hello?' I queried, trying to discern his location amongst the mutely gurning faces surrounding me. 'Rafa?'

His elusive figure did not conceal its presence for long. Bounding passed my somnolent contemporaries came a rather wired looking character dressed in a figure hugging black T-shirt, khaki combat trousers and wearing dog-tags around his neck.

'Richie, Richie,' it uttered garrulously. 'Glad you could make it man. Brilliant. I didn't think you'd come you know that? But now you're here. Great. Brilliant.'

'Alright Rafa. You've started early haven't you?'

'Don't know what you mean Rich, don't know what you mean. It is early yes, but that's the whole point, don't you remember? And I haven't started doing anything yet, just, you know, getting that natural buzz you get, from seeing it all come together.'

He looks over at his line of willing comrades, loosening up in readiness.

'Come on people, come on! Get inside, we've not got all night you know!'

'God Rich, I tell you. I know its Monday, but how bloody miserable do they all look? Jesus!'

'They're all trapped in a cage of coolness.'

'Richie, Richie. You have such a great way with words, have I ever told you that?'

'I've been opening up many areas of my brain recently.'

'Opening up Rich. Opening up. I like the way you're going with that. Hopefully we'll see a bit more of that inside, if you know what I mean?'

'It's a world of possibilities out there Rafa. I don't want to rule anything out.'

'That's the attitude Rich, there should be a few more like you out there like you. Anyway, I better go. As much as I enjoy your company you know, don't want to tie yourself down.'

'Share the love Rafa.'

'Always Rich, always. Hey Philly baby!'

Rafael left to talk/flirt with some other members of the waiting troupe. Rich paused for a moment to try and gather his cool and maintain that all-important image of superiority. He reached into his pocket for his ticket and to his surprise, found that two pills had been slipped in that were certainly not there before. They had symbols printed on their surface, brand names that gave them a sense of cool and a sense of familiarity, that immediately counterbalanced any feelings of illicitness and potential danger that the consumer may have been feeling. Rich smiled to himself and looked over towards Rafa. He smiled back knowingly and blew Rich a kiss. It was all too easy.

Don't get me wrong. I wasn't flirting to any intent here. I was appreciating Rafa's company like I would anyone else. His interests were obviously slightly different, but I wasn't going to shy away from this, take some kind of moral standpoint. Morality, it seemed, was an attitude, a way of thinking about others that ignored any kind of understanding, of considering what the other person's intention might be. Nothing can be entirely universally wrong so why not just think about each situation and the make whatever judgement you want to make from that, rather than putting someone into a meaningless, all-encompassing pigeonhole. In this case Rafa probably wanted to fuck me. Much like I want to fuck lots of other people. But not Rafa. And lots of other people didn't want to fuck me. But they didn't treat me any different. So I wasn't going to treat Rafa any different. Particularly when I could get free ecstasy out of it.

*Richard gulped and stepped into the arched entrance of the church.*

Rob and Rafa had been right. This was still a church, no doubt, still a place of worship. But it was receiving a message from a different God now. All the pews had been removed to make way for the main dance floor. The iconography, the crosses, the stained glass madonnas, the statues of the apostles, had all been covered over, replaced by banners, strobe-lighting, projection screens. And the altar, the focus of the Christian mass, was now home to the DJ booth; to the amps, the speakers and the mixing deck; to the new god that all the baying public outside bowed to.

At the side of this was Robbie, by the baptismal font. That seemed to be full of pills. The site by which the blessed were able to begin on their path to paradise, start their journey to the gates of the kingdom heaven, had been transformed into...well...something pretty similar.

‘Ah Rich. Good to see you old chap.’

Rob looked every inch the salesman - wide grin, confident patter, total belief in his own product.

‘How’s it going man? I caught Rafa outside. Business seems pretty brisk.’

‘Of course man, of course. What did you expect? Transcendental experiences are in pretty low supply at the moment. We’ve got the market pretty much covered.’

‘Is there a large market available?’

‘The whole of humanity? I’d say so yes.’

‘That’s a fair point I suppose.’

‘We’re all looking for it Rich. And save for the second coming, this is probably the only way anyone’s going to get it.’

‘It’s hedonistic nirvana you’d say.’

‘That’s a good way of putting it Rich. I’ll make sure to give you some credit when I steal that for our next flyer.’

‘God, easy on the compliments Rob. I’ve had enough gaying up recently.’

‘Well, you are quite the pretty one Rich, I can’t argue with you there. Rafa certainly seems to have taken a shine to you.’

‘I’ve noticed. And obviously I’m very flattered...’

‘Rich. Rafa’d try it on with my Grandfather if he’s in one of his moods. He’s just being friendly. A bit like when a dog starts humping your leg.’

‘And I thought I was the only one.’

‘Get over yourself. Did he give you some free samples as well?’

‘It depends what you’re referring to.’

‘The pills in your pocket, that you’ve come over to ask me about.’

‘Yeah. I take it this isn’t the first time he’s...’

‘It’s all part of the service Rich. It helps people take that first difficult step, it helps them open up a bit. Obviously this only applies on your first visit, so don’t think you’ll get this every time.’

‘Oh right. So my clever powers of manipulation...’

‘You’re not God Rich, not yet anyway.’

‘I’m not sure what that means. I think I’m myself and that’s about it.’

‘You didn’t come here for an existential debate.’

‘No. Err, so these pills?’

‘Yes.’

‘How should I take them?’

It wasn't complicated. Half now, a whole one later, if I needed it.

I wasn't nervous. I just considered what was about to happen, what the reaction was going to be inside my body, how my perception was going to change. There was nothing to fear here. Nothing in this world is entirely mysterious. I just needed to relax, I needed to let my body be taken over, let the heart start pumping, let the high enter my brain, let my body act and react upon it.

And quickly this began to happen. But, as much as I tried, I couldn't completely set my mind free to it. There was a part of my brain that didn't want to let itself go, that was still stuck in the world of the 'cannot' and 'should not.'

'I don't like dancing. I don't do dancing. Dancing is like juggling, or wearing big clown shoes or flashing your six-pack. Did Bob Dylan do that, Neil Young, Miles Davis? I don't fucking think so.'

'Get out there Rich. Get moving. I want to express myself. The beat, the beat. It wants you to go. It wants your legs, your arms, your hands. It wants you to express it.'

'I see now. I see why the ecstasy lifestyle is like it is. And it's not about sex at all. You just have this feeling, this fantastic sense of joy and happiness, and you just want to share it with other people. I just want to touch someone, hug someone, communicate this feeling with someone else. But I don't want to. I'm not ready to accept this. I still need to keep one foot in reality.'

'Do it. Go with how you feel. Release yourself, set yourself free. This is what you've been missing all your life, this is what you've always wanted. You don't want heaven, you don't want hell, you just want to feel, this, good, all the fucking time. Lose yourself in it. Let the high lead you, not you lead the high.'

'I can't stay here anymore. I can't stay still. I just feel too fucking good. I need to do, something. It's like being in love, so, so, so in love. When you can't keep it in. You need to let it out. It's so strong. Too strong. Fuck Joe, fuck Satan. If this is part of going to hell I'm getting a one way ticket right now and I'm never coming back. Fuck the world. Fuck work. Fuck everything else. Let me. Let me. Let me set this fucking feeling free!'

The ecstasy finally took over. My body submitted and lead me to the dance floor. And that was it. For the first time today I'd properly found it, the world that Joe was inviting me into. I had no inhibitions. I could be exactly who I wanted to be. I didn't have anything holding me back. And at this moment I wanted to dance, I wanted to touch people, I wanted to celebrate god! I wanted to share this feeling with everyone. The beat was controlling my legs; the peaks and crescendos forced my hands to reach up; the funk, the house made we want to be with everyone, they were all friends, I loved all of them. I danced with women, I gyrated against them, I put my hands over their bodies; they touched me, they kissed me. But it wasn't sexual. That wasn't what this was about. It wasn't that that was controlling this. The turn-on was from a different source. I saw Rafa and felt exactly the same thing. I danced with him, I embraced, I kissed him. Sexual feelings were completely removed. It was one great sea of androgyny, none of that mattered. We just all wanted to share the feeling, the collective feeling that we all had. And over all of this sat the DJ, controlling us, controlling this collective feeling, like an active God removing our free will, but a benevolent god taking us exactly where we wanted to go.

I considered, just for a moment. I had it. I had everything I wanted. I felt, almost perfect. Until...

I woke up in a cell. Me. One bed. A bucket with traces of vomit at the bottom. And a plain whitish, locked room.

What the fuck happened? What the fuck happened?

The moment my brain tried to think about this, a horrible stinging pain launched itself into the front of my forehead. It knew. It knew that when I remembered, I'd know I'd have to do something. When all it wanted to do at the moment was sleep.

‘What the fuck? What the fuck happened?’

‘What time is it? Shit! What time is it? Where am I? Is this hell? Oh fuck, I’ve missed. I’ve fucking wasted it. This is hell. Fuck, fuck. I don’t want to be here. I’ve made the wrong choice. I want to be back home. I want to be back home in bed. I want to be in my own, fucking, bed. Shit, shit, shit.

‘Right, right. I’ve got to do something. This isn’t hell. Get a grip Faust. You can work things out. No. No. It’s not about working things out. I need to make things happen. Hey! Hey! Hey, is anyone out there? Hitler? Stalin? Satan? Joe?’

The cell door responded to my increasingly desperate pleas and a policeman walked in, looking at me with that patented look of disappointment. He didn't need to. For a moment I'd had a feeling that he couldn't have possibly imagined, a feeling so bad, so all-encompassing in its potentially horrifying consequences, that nothing he could insinuate or say would make me feel any worse. Because for one second back then, when I remembered what had happened, I thought I might have woken up in hell.

‘Mr Faust?’

I looked back at him, almost disappointed.

‘Yes?’

‘Sling your hook.’

‘Err, okay. Where exactly am I?’

‘Chatsworth Police Station son.’

‘Shit. Right. What, err, what time is it?’

‘About eight o’clock. Sorry. Did you have a dentist appointment or something?’

‘No, err, no I didn’t. Right. So I can just go?’

‘Yes. There’s some guy outside who’s here to meet you.’

‘Oh. Good. What am I in here for?’

‘Possession of illegal substances. Christ, why, do you think you feel like you haven’t slept for seven days?’

‘You’re right. I do feel like that. Thanks.’

‘Right. No worries. Now get the fuck out of here.’

‘Okay, thanks.’

He waited a moment. Just to make sure I could still hear.

‘Fucking stupid posh kids...’

And he was right. I was fucking stupid. This had to stop.

*Rich emerged from Chatsworth Village police station knowing he'd made a mistake. As he looked up at the darkening sky, the cars passing ahead of him, the people walking down the pavement, he was filled with a huge sense of relief, a feeling so great that he almost became euphoric, he was almost ready to shout out, to punch the air in celebration, until he saw who the benign Samaritan who'd come to meet him was.*

'Hey, big guy!' came a booming voice from across the car park. 'How are things going?' 'Err, err, well,' I stammered as the sickening fear rushed straight back into me. 'I've been better to be honest.'

'No shit. You're pretty lucky I was around to help you out. Your boyfriends are still stuck in there.'

'My boyfriends? What? Hang on a minute. I've got a date tonight. With a girl.'

I needed an excuse. I needed to get away from him.

'Oh yeah. Well done on that. Seriously. That was quick work.'

'Hey, well you know, It didn't take much. Bit of personality, good looks, general magnetism.'

'That hadn't worked for you the previous two years.'

'Well, I suppose I must have just got lucky.'

'Or taken your chance?'

'I had a bit of new perspective.'

'You knew what to say. You knew who you were, you knew what you wanted to do.'

'Something like that. But, but, somehow I don't think it's a good...'

'Come with me Richard.'

'I don't. I don't really want to anymore.'

'Richard, Richard. Come on. I just got you out of jail. Surely you owe me just a slight bit of gratitude?'

'I don't owe you...'

'Come on Rich. You can't have it both ways. If you want me to take the amoral stance then you have to come with me now. You can't use it as justification for not coming with me.'

He was messing with me. I knew it. I wanted out of it. But for the time being, I had nowhere else to go.

'I...all fucking right. I've got a date in about half an hour.'

'You can be a bit late, she won't mind. You can use some of that general magnetism.'

'Look, okay. Where are we going?'

'We, Mr Faust. Are going to play some cards.'

'Yeah, okay. But that wasn't really my question.'

Joe looked at me, the vomit on the side of my mouth, the shirt drenched in sweat.

'Save your dicking around for the ecstasy nights.'

*Joe took an unwilling looking Rich to the nearest pub he could think of. He needed to get him back on the drinks, needed to tap into those parts of him that craved fun, craved consumption, craved excitement. And alcohol was the best way to get that started. Alcohol and attractive waitresses. Joe had made sure that this place had both in good supply.*

'What is it with these awful places you like to go?' I began looking around at the polished chrome tables, the ultra-comfortable futons, the dolly-girls smiling behind the bar, and the £14.00 double whisky and coke that sat inauspiciously in front of me.

'Awful? Awful?' answered an incredulous Joe. 'Rich what are you talking about? This is my nirvana, as you might call it. This is where everything I strive for comes to fruition.'

'Well, its better than CRs I suppose, if that's what you're getting at.'

'Only just though Rich, only just. If CRs was just a little bit more expensive...'

'As if you pay for anything anyway.'

'Oh I've paid Rich, I've paid. It's only when you truly pay, truly throw yourself in the deep end of capitalist exchange, that everything becomes free.'

'I see what you mean in a way,' I agreed suspiciously. 'When you realise that in an offer of goods, an invitation to treat if you will, it is just theoretically, one person trying to get something out of another person, then you start to realise how you can manipulate, use it to your advantage as well.'

'Money, sex, drugs. It all works on basically the same principle, yes you're right.'

'Its all about the middle of those three isn't it, at the end of the day?'

'I know where you're coming from, and as a man who's been considerably lacking in that department for some time, I can see why you think that. But I still think you've missed something, the very thing that I tried to enforce on your mind the first time we met.'

'What was that, some kind of hackneyed Nietzschean principle? Or just that horrible lemon flavoured beer you were buying in the club?'

'No Rich, no. Those were means to an end, yes, as I'm sure you realise. But not the bigger picture itself. You still believe its all about sex, because that is what you want to, most of all, in your current position, at the current point of your existence. I've made you feel less trapped, I've given you more confidence, I've given you self belief. So to these ends you feel like a god-damn walking erection right now don't you?'

'I...'

'You don't have to tell me. I can see it in your eyes, I can see it in the way you hold those cards, your posture. You can't hide from me Rich.'

'Okay, okay. I...'

'But this is just a transient thing. You can't always want this, you can't always think this is the most important thing in the world. Like when you were tripping the light fantastic earlier in the club. Somehow sex didn't seem so important then did it? You had found another means of entertainment, another way to enlighten the blank canvas that is our lives. And tomorrow it will be something else, then something else, then something else, and on, and on, and on. And that's the wonderful thing Richard. Its infinitesimal. We live in a world of almost infinite variety. You're constantly enjoying, constantly having fun, having experiences, enriching your life with different feelings. That's what life is all about Rich, of course it is. You're not going to get shot, or starve to death, or be sent to the army. You are bound by nothing. So get out there and do it, and keep on doing it, and keep on doing it. That's what its all about Rich. And yes, there is quite a lot of sex included in that deal.'

'Total entertainment.'

'The panorama of experience.'

'Living for now.'

'As opposed to living for what?'

'A life of self-indulgence.'

'Who else are you going to indulge?'

'I'll admit, earlier today I bought this. It made sense. I could do whatever I wanted and it didn't matter, and for that reason I felt like I really could do things I couldn't do before. But waking up in that cell. It made me feel that there's something not entirely right about it, some reason why that kind of life just isn't possible in reality.'

'Richard, Richard, Richard. You're still a bit intimidated. I can understand that. Its not easy, you're still slightly concerned about what other people will think, how others will perceive your actions. "You shouldn't do that" "You haven't thought of the consequences" "You'll end up hurting others and yourself." But you know, you know deep inside why other people do that, why people will look at you that way. You'll know because for the last four or five years that's what you've been doing.'

'Trying to justify my own repressed existence?'

'Precisely. That's what people do. They start to not do things, for the sole reason that they can look down on other people who are doing it, because they know, they can be sure that they are above them in a some kind of rationally skewered way. And you know Rich, you know how fake that is, you know that that is the beginning of the path to normality and anonymity, and to structured, formalised, vacuous, monotonous mundanity. And you're too special, too important for that. You're better than that Rich and you know it.'

'I'm not so sure.'

'Keep that thought Rich, keep that feeling and insecurity. Relax for a second...and now think about it again. Think about it again...'

I acquiesced.

'...seems ridiculous, doesn't it?'

'Yes, yes it does.'

'That's it Rich. That's it. That's how easy it is. Don't let yourself get bogged down by 'them' again. You know who I mean. Keep your thoughts on yourself, on reality, on what you're going to be doing that evening. And never, ever, feel like you shouldn't do something. Try it, experience it, and make a conscious decision. If you don't like it then do something else. Just make sure you concentrate on that something else, not about what you're not doing. That's the way o what life truly is Rich. You've said yes once, now don't start doubting that again. Just remember, there's always something else to do, something else to enjoy. Nothing's perfect, but in the same way nothing is imperfect. There's always something to be taken, some experience to be gained, some sensation to be stimulated in some way.'

'Okay, okay. You're right. That's what it is all about. I've just got to keep things different, keep a variety, keep things changing.'

'If you consider the opposite Rich, its got to be the better option hasn't it?'

'It's the spice of life, as they say.'

'Or a better cliché. If you haven't done it, then you haven't lived. Another drink my boy?'

'Nah. I still haven't quite got over the sex thing yet.'

'Oh, don't let me keep you Rich. That's still the best of the lot as far as I'm concerned. Just remember, it's not the only thing.'

*Rich was alone again. He'd escaped Joe's presence again, but not his rhetoric. He'd decided to take a short cut to The Star pub through the church graveyard. This was death. This was all death was. He hadn't realised but he'd come here to comfort himself, to remind himself that death was just the final act in a human life, where the inevitable material decay that affected the body as soon as it hits adulthood, had finally reached its conclusion. This was all that happened. This was it. There was no point in worrying about it, because once you died, there was no way of worrying anymore. That was just it.*

*This gave him the strength to make another decision.*

‘What do they say? “It’s better to live life and go to hell, than not to live at all.” Well that was it. That’s was it now. Joe had given me the power, he’d given me the belief, now he’d given me the knowledge, the ethic, the way to live. I thought back to the church, the police station cell, and realised that I’d just been naïve, that I’d been given a gift and I had to understand how to use it. Don’t get me wrong, it wasn’t my actions that had been wrong. It had been my thoughts, my panic in the prison cell. I had gone back to the world of absolutes, I’d thought that I was stuck, that the position I was in was, I don’t know, impossible, inescapable, leaving me with no choices or decisions to make. Now I know there are always choices, there is always something else you can do - it is just a question of what you want. And while I was alive I still always had the ability to choose.’

The Star was waiting for me; the punters were starting to queue for the gig, starting to queue to see me. But I had something else to do first.

The interior of The Star was already busy. This was Tuesday night, their gig night, and this was where they played proper gigs. No fucking around here. Any band who'd made it from these parts had played here, it was the only venue around the anyone really took any notice of. The Strangers, A Hundred Reasons, Eric Clapton in his early days. And tonight it was the turn of Richard Faust. Whoever he was.

Amongst the gathering of cool musician types, in their musician uniforms, carrying guitars on their backs, smoking cigarettes moodily and drinking cider, was Reannan, sat on a table on her own, looking anxious. Perhaps Joe wasn't the only one who had a portent into the future.

'Hey, hey Reannan. Sorry I'm late. You know, just had to get prepared. You know how it goes.'

I kissed her on the cheek. She smiled back and softly reciprocated. I was late, this was fair enough. I had some groundwork to make up.

'Oh don't worry Rich. I know you musician types, you have to get prepared, talk to yourself in the mirror, do whatever it is you have to do.'

'I suppose you're right, yeah.'

'So are you, ready for it tonight then? Are you in the zone? I knew Dave always said you get a bit nervous before you go on stage.'

'Dave said a lot of things. But yeah, I feel good tonight. I feel, I don't know, like I really want to do it. I want to play as well as I can, not just, you know, play as well as I feel like.'

'That's good Rich, that really good. Because, you know, you really are brilliant. Its just everyone seems to know it but you.'

'I think I've always just been a bit scared of being liked too much, do you know? I always took a certain comfort in being against everyone else, it somehow made me feel superior in a way.'

'Yeah, I...'

'But no, no! Don't worry. I've moved on from that now. I've had a bit of advice, and I want to live more in the real world now. Anyway, let's not go on about this all night. Can I get you another drink or something?'

I walked towards the bar, through a sea of smiling people I didn't know and back-slapping idiots who I knew had always hated me before, to find Charlie and Hugo standing, nervously drinking bottles of cider. It took me a moment to even register who they were; they felt like different people to me now.

'There he fucking is. There he fucking is. The big man himself. And you were just saying to me he wouldn't show up Charlie, shame on you. You should have had more faith in this guy.'

'That wasn't me who was...'

'Hey Richie my man. How you doing?'

'I'm good Hugo, I'm good.'

'Yeah man, nice. That's what I like. You see Charles, positive mental attitude. That's what it's all about. That's why this man, he's attracting the big guns tonight. That's why he's here with the hot fucking chick. That's why he's looking as smug as a post-fucking-coital Cheshire cat. And why we're single, second on the bill and looking pretty fucking unattractive right now.'

'That's hardly positive thinking,' suggested Charlie.

'Oh for fucks sake, what do you want me to be, fucking blind? Fucking content with everything, fucking happy with playing shitty little gigs for the rest of my life? Well its not

gonna happen Charles my man, not gonna happen. You may not see this, you may just sit there blissfully unaware in your satisfied little world, but there is more out there man. More than just this pub, this bloody town, this scene. And we're not going to get out there without realising our faults; we have to admit that there are some things we're not quite perfect at, particularly you I might add. Now do you want to get out of here, do you want to be hitting the big time, the girls, the money, the fucking articles in GQ? Because if you don't, then say it right now. Say it right now and I'll find someone else to play with, someone who does have some belief, some motivation, some remotely decent attitude.'

'I was just saying that that's not really positive think...'

'Charlie, Charlie. You are fucking killing me. You see me? I'm this fucking close, this fucking close to walking out here right now. If it wasn't for this man, if big Roch wasn't with us tonight, you'd be finding yourself a new fucking percussionist. And I am not fucking kidding, do you hear me!'

'Right.'

'Right?!'

'Right.'

'Okay.'

I went to order my drinks from the bar, thinking it was probably best to leave these two unenlightened individuals to it. Sadly Hugo, as ever, wasn't ready to quite let it go just yet.

'So Rich, Rich.'

'Yes, Huges?'

'So what's happened to you man? All of a sudden things seem to just be taking off. You got the record interest. The new clothes, the new chick, hey particularly the chick man. We were starting to think, you know, there might be some reason why you didn't have a girlfriend man, if you know what I mean? Don't get me wrong man, I'm not dissing it or anything, I just want you to tell me where I can get some of it.'

'I sold my soul to the devil.'

Hugo looked at me, serious and incredulous just for a moment.

'Hah, hah, hah! Oh man you crack me up man you really do. What, what was it all that Robert Johnson you were playing the other night man? You took off from the last whiskey bar and met the devil at a crossroads, something like that?'

'Well yeah, it was a bit like that yeah. It was just outside CRs nightclub.'

'Really?' replied Hugo entirely disbelievingly.

'Yeah, seriously. Although I haven't quite done it yet. I've got until midnight tonight to make my full decision.'

'Okay, right man, I see. Was there also a rabbit with a fucking watch there as well? And what, did you get a ride home with Father Christmas?'

'No, and no. And yes I didn't entirely believe it either. But I don't know, I feel like I've somehow gained a new understanding, a new power to see the world how it really is. And if that's what the devil is all about, then I'm thinking of going for it, I really am.'

'Oh yeah Rich, yeah. Do it. Join the dark side. Ha, ha, ha. You crack me up, I'm serious.'

'Hey, you asked me what had happened.'

'Yeah, yeah,' replied a still amused Hugo. 'And you told me didn't you, you really did. Look if you could maybe get the four horsemen of the apocalypse to come out for an encore later - that would make for a pretty good finale. Now you and Satan are mates now and all that.'

'That's not really how it works Huges my man. Anyway look, I better get back to Reannan man. Don't want anyone to start questioning my sexual credentials again now do I?'

'Oh yeah Rich, Course not. I'm not sure that should be your biggest worry now, but there you go.'

'You're probably right. Good luck with your set, I am that. I'll make sure mine's something pretty special, I promise.'

'Oh good Rich, good. However you need to motivate yourself man, do it. Just don't fuck up later, that's all I ask. This is our ticket out of here remember, for all of us. Make sure you play them what they want to hear.'

'So none of your stuff then presumably.'

'I'm serious Rich.'

'I'll see you late Huges. See you later Charlie.'

'Yeah. Later Rich.'

I went back to Reannan who was patiently smoking a cigarette. She seemed happy now. I knew she was happy now. I knew what she wanted from here.

'Thanks.'

'No problem,' I confirmed.

'So how are they, what's their name, Hugo and Kevin?'

'Its Hugo and Charlie. I can understand why you wouldn't remember his name. He's not the most charismatic person you'll ever meet.'

'Yeah, I've noticed that. How come he never speaks? Is he just a bit shy or something?'

'Have you heard Hugo talk? I don't think he can really get a word in edgeways most of the time.'

'Ahh, I think that's quite sweet really.'

'I think it's just for show really, to kind of emphasise their whole double-act thing. Hugo's the energetic, garrulous, annoying one and Charlie's the whole enigmatic, brilliant musician type.'

'So which one are you then? I always thought enigmatic, brilliant was your thing really. Until recently that is.'

'I guess I was more purposefully shy really, if that makes any sense. I didn't talk to people much, because I didn't really want to talk to people much, it was as simple as that. It wasn't a façade, it was just a lifestyle choice.'

'You'd rather let your music do the talking?'

'Not even that, really. It wasn't as if I was really expressing myself through the music either. It was mainly just playing what people wanted to hear at the end of the day. It was just the musical equivalent of good manners.'

'Well sorry we held you back Richard. And there was me thinking you were pretty good.'

'Oh no, no, no. I'm just saying that was how I felt at the time. I used to think that everyone one else was deluded and naïve liking all the stuff I played. But now I've realised that I was the one who was deluded, not them.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well I always thought I could do something better. I had this idea, this ideal of artistic brilliance that I kept trying to find. Like I knew there was something more out there that I could be achieving, but I couldn't find because I was too concerned with impressing other people. But now I know that was wrong, I was striving to find something that doesn't exist. Something better than perfection, which I now realise just isn't out there. So I've decided to appreciate what I have more instead of torturing myself wanting something I don't. Its all about embracing life really.'

'So am I part of this new, existential epiphany you've had?'

'I'd like to think so, yes. Or I'd hope so. I guess that's up to you now really.'

'Is that your way of asking me out?'

'I'd like to go out with you, I wouldn't be here now if I didn't want that. But in terms of asking you, let's hold that for the time being if that's alright. I think there's better ways of doing it.'

'Saying what I want to hear?'

'Something like that I suppose.'

'It's a means to an end isn't it?'

'I'd like to think all actions have a reaction. And the more impressive the action, the more impressive the reaction.'

'So you'd hope.'

'Well we've all got to aim for something.'

'But it has to be obtainable right?'

'It has to exist. That's all.'

'If it exists then it has the potential to be something?'

'If it exists to me, then it must have the potential for me to interact with it in some way, otherwise it doesn't exist in any discernable form.'

'That's the most romantic thing anyone's ever said to me.'

'Incredibly Kant was never married.'

'That's amazing. I find his categorical imperative such a turn on.'

'I hope you're being metaphorical.'

'I'm telling it from my own perspective.'

'How else could you tell it?'

'I could just say what you wanted to hear.'

'Well then the answer's yes.'

'What was the question again?'

'That's what you'll find out later.'

'I can't wait.'

'I can tell you now then?'

'No, I'm fine to wait for later.'

'Good.'

'So are we just going to talk in riddles all night?'

'No, no. I hope not.'

'Good.'

I lit up a cigarette.

'So how's the psychology going?'

'Oh yeah, good, you know. Lots of this impulse, that reaction, does this lead to that...'

'And then we want to shag our mothers.'

'Yeah, that kind of thing, yeah.'

'Do you think it makes you a more rounded person in a way? You know, you don't have the same kind of insecurities and worries as other people, because you know it's some impulse in your brain?'

'I don't know. I don't think so really. I think it gives you an ability to analyse what other people do, how they act, how they react. But when it comes to yourself, it's never just that simple, you know, you can't just think in such simple terms. You can never view yourself as you do others, the same solutions just don't work. I guess that's what psychology is there for in a way, to help you communicate your problems, that tends to solve most things.'

'The simplest solution is normally the right one.'

'That's generally right yes. But sadly that's not going to pass my exams is it?'

'Otherwise we'd all be psychologists.'

'Well we all have a brain.'

'And we all have hair, doesn't make us hairdressers.'

'Alright smart-ass. You wanna do my course for me?'

'No not really. I'm done with education these days.'

'You don't want to learn anything else?'

'I'm always up for learning. I just don't fancy doing it in the ten thousand word dissertation type way anymore.'

'I don't blame you. Do musicians do dissertations these days? That's not very rock n' roll.'

'Tell me about it. Why do you think we all look the same? You have to get a rock star kit – you know, clothes, haircut, attitude.'

'The sense of irony.'

'That's an added extra in my case.'  
 'I feel privileged.'  
 'You should do. Musicians have a bad habit of taking themselves far too seriously.'  
 'And you don't?'  
 'What's the point? Rock n' Roll's about having fun, enjoying yourself, isn't it?'  
 'Maybe there's music involved as well?'  
 'Yeah, I suppose. But what I do is not exactly hard.'  
 'I get the impression that you're one of these annoying guys who everything comes easy to, who can just do things without having to try. Hence its quite easy for you to sit there, not taking things too seriously.'  
 'It would surely be worse if I did take it seriously, if that were true?'  
 'So what is worth taking seriously?'  
 'In general, or for me?'  
 'A bit of both I suppose.'  
 'Well, in a general perspective, not causing pain to others is probably a good way to start. But there's not much else really. I suppose it's the old cliché really, if its not a matter of life and death, then how important can it seriously be?'  
 'I think that's probably a good way of thinking. But a bit simplistic.'  
 'Well you did ask me to be general.'  
 'So what about you then? What's important to you?'  
 'Right now?'  
 'Nothing in the moment can be that important.'  
 'Maybe I only live in the moment.'  
 'But you don't do you? You might like to think you do, but you're too much of a thinker for that.'  
 'I've thought about it, and I've decided to live in the moment.'  
 'Right. So you're not serious about music? Or talking about yourself?'  
 'Emotions. My own emotional side. Love. Desire. Passion. Completely unfettered yearning for another human being. When you feel that, that's when you know that nothing else is really ever going to be worth taking seriously again.'  
 'Ah, so you're a romantic?'  
 'Seriously romantic.'  
 'I guess that's right, yeah.'  
 'You wanna go out with me now?'  
 'Seriously?'  
 'What! After all...'  
 'Unlike you, I can still joke about this kind of thing Richard.'  
 'Think you can give me a serious answer?'  
 'I don't know. Let me think about it.'  
 'Seriously?'  
 'Yes, seriously! Not every girl just wants to jump in bed with a musician you know.'  
 'And the musician may not want to jump straight in bed with any girl he meets.'  
 'But you're not really a musician are you?'  
 'So what's the problem?'  
 'I'm tempted but, but not yet. Lets talk later. You've got a gig to play first.'  
 'Well, that doesn't really matter does it?'  
 'Yes it does Rich. You've got other people relying on you remember.'  
 'Yeah, but...'  
 'And if you don't go on to play, the answer's a definite no.'  
 'So if I do...?'

I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Hugo, the interfering bastard.

'Rich. Rich. Rich you motherfucker. Stop fanning around and get backstage. I know she's fit man but we've got more important things to sort out right now. You know? You remember?'

'Alright Huges, alright. I'll be there in one second.'  
'Rich!'  
'Go Rich. Don't worry about it. I'll see you in there.'  
'You sure?'  
'Yeah, I'm sure. Good luck.'  
'Okay. Thanks. I'll speak to you later on.'  
'Yeah. You will. Don't worry.'

I submitted to Hugo's verbal prodding and headed down to the backstage area. The fucker didn't care about me of course. He was purely thinking of himself. Quite right as well.

'Hey, seems to be going pretty good there man. You seeing her after the gig eh?'  
'Yep, I reckon.'  
'Getting a little bit, loved up maybe?'  
'It's all part of the program Hugo, all part of the program. Sexual attraction. Emotional attraction. Sexual interaction. Cause and effect. Cause and effect.'  
'Oh yeah, okay. I still reckon there's a bit of the love there from you Richard. Bit of the love Rich? You know what I mean?'  
'No Hugo. I don't know what you mean.'

*Rich sat backstage in a corner on his own. Outside the crowd were listening to the end of Hugo and Charlie's set. They weren't getting the usual positive reaction. This was a discerning audience, a critical audience, an audience who weren't just going to stand there and listen to any old shit. For these people you needed to be able to play, you needed to be able to play decent songs, and you needed to be able to play these songs with an individual style, with something a bit different. Otherwise you might as well go home. This was everything Richard had wanted, for all this time. This was his audience and he knew what he needed to do. Just about.*

'Right. That's it. That's two minutes to go. Hugo always starts that last stupid beat, that clap-bongo rhythm, sounds like something by Kenny Loggins. It was this point that I normally started getting nervous. Not really because I was nervous, but because it was the right thing to do. Everyone got pre-gig nerves. It made you play better; it made you, more emotionally involved, didn't it?

'But I wasn't nervous. I wasn't nervous because I had other things on my mind. I wasn't sure what I was going to play for a start. Was there something else, something else I could look for, something that I could touch upon to really blow this crowd away?'

I looked out at them, all of them standing looking impatient, wanting more, wanting me.

'No, no of course there isn't. I know what these people like. I know what impresses these people. And its nothing new, its everything I already know. Remember, these are people who consider themselves to be cool, to be open-minded, to be the elite of musical society. So they'll hate it if I do anything different.'

I looked at the suits at the back, making their notes, ticking their boxes, not listening, not really listening.

'And they certainly know that. They know the trends, they know how to manipulate these people better than anyone. So stick with what you know, but do it the best you can. Make sure they love it, make sure every ounce of cool flies out in each movement, in each look, in each shudder of your voice. Sell out. Sell out like you've never done before. Because that means success. And success means fame. And fame means wealth. And wealth means sex, means drugs, means idolatry.

*Rich stepped out on stage. This was his moment. The crowd cheered. He looked out at them, nonchalant, disinterested. His eyes met Reannan, stood staring at him adoringly...and ignored her. They looked around at the rest of them, all the baying punters, all those who'd never given a shit about him until now, and who he saw he had in the palm of his hands. All except one stood at the back, stood silent, statuesque, but with a resonance greater than all the rest of them combined. It was Joe, staring and smiling. They'd all been following him, he'd built the crowd into their stupor.*

*He gave Rich one final wink and then walked out of the back door, leaving him to make his own decisions.*

It was up to me now. This is where it really begins. I know what I'm going to do.

I stepped up to the mic.

'Good evening Guildford!'

They cheered raucously. I looked back and gestured at three young pretty girls in the front row, who promptly obliged by screaming louder and louder.

This was going to be easy.

*Rich emerged from backstage to a clamour of contrived congratulations, sycophantic applause and forced handshakes. He smiled humbly for a moment, but made sure he maintained the nonchalant, dismissive character that he'd decided to create for himself. He'd known that you never give people everything they want. Because people don't really want that. They never want to be entirely satisfied. They always want to be left wanting more.*

'Yeah thanks, thanks, yeah.'

'Yeah, I'll see you later, yeah.'

'Cheers, yeah. Yeah thanks.'

'Richard. Richard. Great performance out there. We'd really like to talk to you for a bit. Maybe a bit later? Take my card. We'll have a chat.'

'Okay yeah, great, yeah. Speak to my agent.'

'What? That guy?'

'Yeah. Black guy over there. You might have seen him on stage earlier on.'

'Oh right. Err, okay. Look sorry, if you'll excuse me.'

'Okay, no problem.'

'Rich! Rich!...'

I quickly made my escape to the front door, where Reannan stood waiting for me. The rest of these people could wait. I'd not done it for them. She was all that mattered for the moment.

'Hey, hey, hey. How you doing?'

'I'm good Richard. Very good.' She smiled at me, almost embarrassed, like she was twelve and I was some guy from the Backstreet Boys. 'They all loved you didn't they?'

'Well of course, of course. What did you expect?'

'I don't know, I don't know. No seriously, I'm really pleased I am.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yeah, of course. Its what you always wanted isn't it?'

'It's a beginning, yeah.'

'Good. Its good to see you're doing something, something that you're sure about.'

'Yeah, yeah. It's a good feeling, yeah. I think you have to be sure about things don't you, to really want to commit?'

'You certainly seemed sure of yourself up there.'

'I guess I was in a pretty focused frame of mind.'

'Really? And what might have bought that on?'

'I don't know. Might have been the new venue.'

'Yeah?'

'Or all those record producers in the crowd.'

'Nothing else?'

'Hugo and Charlie's...'

'Shut up Rich.'

She leaned over and kissed me, passionately and forcefully. The ball was in my court now. I had her. I had her and I could do whatever I wanted with her.

'You wanna head outside for a bit?'

'Okay, okay, maybe stud. Give it a bit. We're not in any hurry are we?'

'I suppose not. Are you suggesting we've got a bit more time to spend together then?'

'Maybe, maybe. If you've got time for me that is?'

'Of course I have, of course.'

'I don't know Rich. You seem in a hurry now, you're gonna have a lot of temptations, you're gonna be a busy, wanted man.'

'I can still do what I want Reannan, I can still be whoever I want, right now.'  
'But I know what you want, what you really want. And it's this world in front of you. Excitement. People. Rock 'n Roll. Music. Parties. As I've got to know you, I've understood that, you're not just happy with the simple life.'

'What makes you say that?'

'You've got a mind, that needs to be interested, that needs to be stimulated, that needs variety. Simple matter-of-fact things bore you. That's why you're so interesting, so interesting to talk to and so interesting to be around. But, I don't know, maybe...look can we talk properly later on. You've got things to do first.'

'Yeah, okay. Later yeah? Don't you go anywhere.'

'Don't worry Rich, I won't. But you, you do your stuff for a bit.'

'Okay, okay. But I'll be back, alright?'

'Alright.'

I kissed her briefly. She kissed me back but then decided to push me away.

'I might see you later then,' she said, raising an eyebrow before turning and walking away.

I stared as she went.

What the fuck? What the fuck happened there? I'd done it. I'd done everything right, everything that Joe had taught me. I was embracing life and the world, I was embracing others and they were embracing me back.

I loved the hangers on, the fakers and the wannabees, the way they smiled at me, giving thumbs up, not really giving a fuck who I actually was.

I loved the record company guys. The guys who wanted to exploit me, own me and entrap me for as long as they possibly could.

I loved the groupies. The half-attractive drunk girls, who'd had most of my friends already but had never been interested in me until now.

Christ, I even loved Rafa. He was probably five times more faceable than the capricious groupies.

And I loved Hugo. Hugo, who right now wanted to be me more than anyone else in the world.

I loved them and they all loved me. But Reannan, she didn't seem to love me back. She's losing interest.

Everyone else had played by the rules except for her. Why? Had I not got this part quite right yet? I'd not been weird, not been disingenuous. I've not procrastinated, I've made it pretty clear what my intentions are. I've been cool, I've been confident. I'm about to be successful. I'm everything that Joe told me to be, fuck I'm a walking talking tick sheet of bachelor eligibility! How can she not want that? Does she still love the old Richard? Richard Faust. She, and it pains me to say it, she seems to want old Rich back. Richard Faust. Nervy, insecure, brooding, depressive, lonely, bitter Richard Faust. Surely he was just a bad memory? An anachronism. A casualty of the world of success, the world of sex, the world of infinite possibilities. He was the millstone around my neck and he wasn't coming back. No matter what happened.

'Evening Ricky,' interrupted another sycophantic sounding voice.

'Hi, hi, how's it going?' I muttered vaguely.

'Depends if your ignoring me or not?'

Hold on, this wasn't just nobody.

'Fuck, Dave!' I exclaimed. 'How you doing? Sorry I was miles away there.'

He smiled at me and shook hands with warm enthusiasm.

'Pressures of fame already?'

'Something like that,' I admitted.

'Well, I doth my cap to you Rich. You were great tonight, you really were. I didn't think you had it in you I really didn't.'

'Oh come on Dave. You always knew I was bigger than just the pub didn't you? After all, you always said I was wasting my potential.'

'Yes I did and don't worry, you were. But I don't know, I kind of always thought you enjoyed that, that that was where you wanted to be; living in that safe world where you could feel important, superior and above everyone else, yet be unsuccessful enough that no-one really tests you or makes you change your beliefs or your dreams.'

'Maybe I was. But I guess you can't keep on thinking like that forever. Soon it all starts to become a bit, pointless I suppose.'

'You start to forget what you believe in?'

'You realise that you were hoping, rather than believing. And hope's never going to get you anywhere.'

'But without hope Rich...'

'There is a life of knowing not to hope, but to do.'

Dave shook his head with disapproval.

'Surely you do things, in the hope that they'll lead to something better?'

'There's no hope involved. Just cause and effect. I act to achieve certain ends, simple as that.'

'That's it?'

'What else is there?'

'Dreams, Aspirations? Relationships? Love?'

'I'm not deluded anymore!' I vociferated. 'I know that these are just pointless, meaningless concepts.'

'Only if you're living without a soul.'

'I'm living for the moment.'

'Sounds fun.'

'It is.'

'Hence the new found success.'

'I don't waste my time, thinking about my "soul."'

We paused for a second to catch our respective dialectical breath.

'I saw you were pretty close with young Reannan?' renewed Dave. 'That part of your living for the moment "thing"'

'Absolutely.'

'You sure?'

'Unequivocally.'

'So how's that going?'

'It'll go however I want it to go.'

'How do you want it to go?'

'I'll tell you when it happens.'

'How's it gone so far?'

He could tell I was being defensive. I wasn't getting away with it this easily.

‘She wants me. But she’s not sure about having a relationship with me.’  
‘Big rock stars don’t have relationships.’  
‘Exactly.’  
‘So how do you feel about that?’  
‘It seems fine to me. Perfect you might say.’  
‘Meaningless sex, potentially?’  
‘That’s all it should be.’  
‘Let’s hope that’s all it is.’  
‘What do you mean?’  
‘Let’s hope that nothing else comes from it. Like ‘emotion’ of ‘feelings,’ or, dare I say it, ‘love?’ Because if that happens your deal will be off. And you’ll have to go back to being Richard again.’

I stopped and stared at him, the anger reflecting from my face.

‘What deal? What are you talking about?’  
‘I think I know how it works. If you’re going to do it, you have to do it 100%. No compromises. Otherwise you might as well not bother at all. I’m guessing that’s how Joe put it.’  
‘How, how the fuck do you know about that?’  
‘Let’s put it this way. I basically know everything.’  
‘How very modest.’  
‘So what? You’ve got an hour left to decide. Before you sell your soul?’  
‘About that, yes.’  
‘And I can tell what you think you’re going to do.’  
‘I think I’ve made my decision.’  
‘Of course you have. Joe can certainly be very persuasive.’  
‘Don’t insult my intelligence. It’s my choice at the end of the day.’  
‘Yes. You’re right Rich. It is. And I know I’m supposed to stay out of it. But I like you Richard, I really do. So I’m gonna have one last crack at getting you back.’  
‘Good luck,’ I muttered, preparing myself for the usual trawl through Dave’s shady past.  
‘You’ve decided a belief in God, or the soul, or whatever you want to call it, encompasses all the problems you feel exist, with yourself, with other people and with society as a whole. It’s all about not doing things, of abiding by certain rules, of obeying a particular decorum, it’s all about relying on unclear, unproveable truths in the hope they might be right. You have to try and be ‘good,’ whatever that is, you have to try and respect other people, no matter how stupid and asinine they probably are, you have to limit your behaviour in certain ways, which is difficult, repressive and gives you the constant feeling that you’re not reaching your full potential. So yeah, I can see where you’re coming from. Suddenly deciding that this is all false, all total bullshit, and that you really can do whatever you like can seem refreshing, liberating and let’s be honest, infinitely more plausible.’  
‘You’re not entirely selling this to me so far.’  
‘But you’re forgetting so many things. It’s not just as simple as just obtaining complete liberty. You’ve made a choice and, by the definition of this, you are also rejecting certain things.’  
‘Sure, I’m rejecting repression, thus obtaining liberty.’  
‘But it’s not that simple is it? You’re rejecting your soul. You’re rejecting the very thing that makes us human. What makes us imperfect. As you know very well Rich, life can never be perfect without some kind of imperfection, without some factors that you cannot control, you cannot know everything that going to happen and how to make it happen, its more unpredictable, more imprecise than that. Life is all about saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, losing your keys before you leave in the morning, feeling miserable, feeling happy, being in love, being out of love, wanting to be alone, needing the company of others. That’s

what you're rejecting, living life like a human being. But if that's what you want that's fair enough. If you're happy with that, then there's nothing more I can really say is there?'

'Well you better not say anything else then.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'You're going to give away all of it, for your own selfish needs?'

'For all your platitudes Dave, yes I am. All you're trying to do is mask what's really true by language. Bullshit language. Human. Love. Selfish. Life. They're just words, words created by the same people who live their lives based on achieving some kind of idyllic life after they die. People who exist in a world of 'don't,' 'shouldn't' and 'bad' for this very reason. People who live in sad, lonely, limited existences. So you say my version may seem infinitely more plausible? You're damn fucking right it is infinitely more plausible. More plausible, more successful, more satisfying a therefore, as you might put it, more of a life. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got to go and see about a girl.'

I walked briskly passed him and over to the other side of the bar, not looking back for even a second.

'Rich! You've still got an hour left! My door will still be open, for that time. You can still change your...'

He was gone. Him, Richard Faust, the whole of that fucking place. It was just me now. Me and her.

Richard marches purposefully into the back room to find Reannan again. He seems to have retained a new arrogance, the arrogance that you can only achieve through a belief as your self at the centre of the universe.

'Hey,' he says to the back of her conversing head as she is stood, chatting to one of Rich's old audience from the Mash. He grabs her by the waist and pulls her round to face him.

'Hey' she replies. 'How are you doing?'

Rich kisses her and she complies, but a little submissively now. He realises this and strokes her hips lightly and seductively.

'Yeah. Yeah I'm good. Look do you fancy getting out of here for a while?'

Reannan looks back for a moment with dubious interest, but then smiles widely and truly.

'What's the problem superstar? Getting fed up with all the attention already?'

'Most of it. Its distracting me from the attention I really want to be getting.'

'Oh really?'

'Yes, really.'

'Well, Hugo's free now if you want to go and give him a 'high five,' or whatever it is you do.'

'Oh is he? Okay, well I'll see you in a bit then.'

'Come here.'

She dragged me back and kissed me, properly this time.

'Okay then stud. Where do you fancy going?'

'I know a great place, just down the road. Where we can have some privacy.'

'Okay.'

'Okay?'

'Let's go then, rockstar.'

*Richard Faust felt happy. He was sat on his bench, in his own private Garden of Eden, and it was quiet. There were no sounds from the town that lay outside these gates, no couples arguing, no kids crying, no bottle smashing, no adolescents shouting. The overhanging trees still masked any excess light coming from the clubs and bars of the town centre, the running water washed any lingering stresses or irritations from the rest of the day, the dormant, silent, soulful pool below him still reflected nothing but the infinity of space and stars that covered the whole scene like an immense cosseting blanket. This was nature, pure and unfettered - a glimpse into divinity, a chance to look back into the rudiments of the self and the infinity of the soul, a place to consider, to think and to wonder.*

*But Richard Faust noticed none of this. All he could see, all he had eyes for was the girl sitting next to him. The girl who in a few minutes, would be helpless with desire for him.*

‘God, you know I’ve lived here for ten years, and I’ve never known this place existed.’  
 ‘I know, its great isn’t it? I don’t know, I just feel like a freer person here. You can sense the town just there, its close enough for you to hear it, and smell it, but also to know that you’re away from it. You don’t feel isolated, you feel aloof. It’s like a social purgatory.’  
 ‘There’s no heaven and hell. There’s just us.’  
 ‘You and me.’  
 ‘Yes. You and me.’

*Rich moved across and kissed Reannan, who accepted passionately. She was ready now. She felt she knew Rich, as someone she could spend time with and someone who she could desire, and desired overwhelmingly at this moment. He led confidently, kissing her neck and moving his hands across her waist. She complied without thinking - her pores opening, her eyes dilating with lust. Rich grasped her palm tightly and they moved as one, towards the raised bank of lush grass beside them.*

Suddenly it all changed. I didn’t feel cold, calculated and logical. I wasn’t just thinking about this in terms of a sensation, a chemical reaction in the brain. This was different. I wanted her. I wanted to touch, I wanted to feel her. But I wanted more than that as well. The more we went on, the more I just wanted to be with her, to be with her, to be part of her all the time. I felt a huge sense of openness, like I wanted to share everything I had, everything I could offer, all of myself, my brain, my heart and my soul. And it wasn’t the Richard of the last 23 hours I wanted to give to her. It was the Richard of the last 23 years before that. Richard who set fire to his bedroom when he was six, Richard who had a phobia of ice cream, Richard who didn’t have sex until he was nineteen, but lied about it for three years before this. Richard who now didn’t care about being brilliant, manipulative, successful, idolatrised. Right now all I cared about was her.

I was coming. He was better now, he seemed more human, more like the Richard I knew, he, he... wasn't so calculated. He obviously wasn't that experienced but you could tell he was trying, considering, working on what he was doing. I felt his emotions, I felt him wanting me, and wanting me to experience the same thing. I did. I did. I...I...

All the issues, all the egotism, all the self-doubt, all the frustration, torment, drifted away from Richard as he made love, as he climaxed inside Reannan.

They lay next to each other and smiled, embarrassed yet euphorically happy. They have both given their true selves, their strengths, their weaknesses, their certainties, their doubts.

For the first time, possibly the first time in my life, I felt truly, helplessly content. I looked up at the moon, moving slowly and inexorably across the sky and tried not to think about anything.

‘Oh Rich. I just want to stay right here.’  
‘I know what you mean.’

I wanted to as well, I really did. I wanted to say ‘Yes. Yes I do too. I want to stay here forever.’ I wanted to look up at the moon and see it looking back at me, proud, impressed. Showing that mutual feeling of satisfaction and respect. I wanted to feel that time could not intrude on this moment, that I was suddenly at a level that wasn’t affected by the minutes passing, or the air I was breathing, or the space I had to move in. I wanted to feel like this was something infinite, something eternal, something that would stay with me for the rest of my life, that while people came and went, work stopped and started, homes were set up and taken apart, my body grew and shrunk and matured and deteriorated; that this moment would remain with me for however long I had left to live, that it would remain in my mind and in my soul. That was what I wanted to feel. That was what maybe one day previously I would have felt.

But now, as I lay there looking up at the moon I sensed it moving, I sensed time passing, I sensed the wind pushing through the trees, the noises of the people and cars and society, fucking society. I didn’t want to, I really didn’t want to but I knew I had no choice, knew that there was nothing else I could do.

‘Hmmm, hmmm, Richard? Don’t move. Stay with me here a bit longer.’  
‘I’m sorry. I can’t.’  
‘Really?’ she sighed.  
‘I’m sorry.’  
‘What? Why?’  
‘I can’t, I’m sorry. I’ve got to go.’  
‘You’ve got to go?’  
‘Yeah. I...I...’  
‘Where have you got to go to Rich? Don’t go. Stay here with me.’

Reannan leaned over and looked at me, her eyes open wide, earnestly pleading to me. I didn’t flinch. This wasn’t going to work now. I just stood up, ignored her and did my trousers back up.

‘I’m sorry. I want to. I just, I just, I can’t,’ I explained.  
‘Come on Rich. Just stay. A bit longer.’  
‘I’m going. I’ve got to go.’  
‘Oh I see Rich, I see. This is it is it? You’re doing the whole rock star thing now are you? Getting in training for the groupies you’re going to be shagging.’  
‘No.’  
‘Well what then?’  
‘Nothing.’  
‘Well tell me. You’ve got to give me something. You can’t just get up and go, fuck me then leave, without even some attempt at an excuse. God, I thought you were better than that Rich. I thought you were different. I thought you had a bit more too you...’  
‘I’m sorry. I’ve just...’  
‘What?’  
‘I just...’  
‘What?’  
‘I...’

I looked down at my watch. That told me all I needed to say.

‘I’ve got somewhere I’ve got to be that’s all.’  
‘You’re gonna have to do better than that Rich.’

I stared into her eyes. This wasn’t fair, I knew that. But the longer I stayed, the more unfair it was going to get.

‘I love you, I’m sorry I really did.’  
‘Well I’m glad you had some affection for me,’ she scoffed. ‘Otherwise, oh I don’t know, I might be feeling slightly used right now.’  
‘I didn’t use you, really.’  
‘So stay! Talk to me.’  
‘I can’t. I’m going.’

*Rich turned round robotically and began to walk away.*

‘Oh right. Goodbye then Rich. Will I, see you again perhaps? When you feel like it?’  
‘No. I’m sorry.’  
‘You’re sorry?’

She stood up and began to walk after me.

‘You’re sorry you fucking bastard!’  
‘Look. I don’t want to do this to you! I don’t want to get you involved. So I’m just gonna go. Okay?’  
‘Rich. What are you talking about?’  
‘Look, I’m sorry. I thought I loved you okay, I really did. But I’ve realised that, I don’t know, that love doesn’t really exist anymore - that there’s no real place for it in this world. That the world’s too set in its ways on other things, on pleasure, on excitement, on sensation, on sex.’  
‘You noticed that very well.’  
‘But I promise you, I didn’t want to. I didn’t mean to use you. You were something more than just sex. And you were, you really were. I felt that, I felt that difference with you. But that’s what did it. That’s what made me realise.’  
‘Realise what?’  
‘I just don’t believe in it anymore - any of it. God, the soul, heaven, perfection, faith, feelings, emotion, passion, family, love, most importantly love. It just, it just doesn’t seem relevant anymore. It’s nothing to do with the world down there. And that’s where I’ve got to go. And I truly am sorry.’  
‘Rich. Rich!’

Her eyes were fervent now, fervent with desperation. She was starting to believe me, starting to see what I was doing. This was why I was leaving. She didn’t need to know, she didn’t want to know. It was better for her to stay as she was. Bitter, annoyed, frustrated, but still with her soul intact. Me. I had other things to think about now.

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about. Its Joe isn’t it? He’s turned you; he’s turned you away from yourself.’

*Richard walked away determinedly, leaving Reannan standing and shouting. He showed no response, he had no emotions left with which to respond; he just walked on and on without looking back. Reannan ran after him and started grabbing at his back - pulling the back of his hair and clawing at his leather jacket - but to no avail. Rich walked on and pushed her like she was nothing but a fly; a small, pathetic, blood-sucking parasite to swat away.*

That was it. I knew what I had to do. And I wasn't sorry. No-one really is, are they? You apologise to try and get rid of your guilt, not because you're remorseful, not because you really cared. And I had no-one to apologise to now. Not to Reannan, not to my family, not to God his fucking self. I had my like to lead, my world to enjoy, my existence to take wherever the fuck I liked.

*Rich raised his head up superiorly, opened the gate and walked directly out of his other secret world for the last time. He had a new place to feel at home now, a place where other people lived, where there was a proper life, with love, money, sex, fun, power, success, variety, a world where he could find everything he wanted, everything he'd secretly always wanted, everything that we all really want.*

*He walked passed the Mash Tun, the place that represented all the wasted life, the procrastination, the deluded thoughts of the last few years. There was no sign of Dave, or anyone at all in fact. Its windows were black, its doors were locked, it was as if as Rich closed it off in his mind, it in turn was closed in his world.*

*Finally he reached the crossroads, the place where he'd first made that decision to go with Joe, where he'd finally had the sense to consider other possibilities, to open his mind to new opportunities. The way home, back to his flat, back to his crappy job, was pitch black. The light came from the other side. There was the noise of an excited, queuing crowd; the smell of cheap perfume and of sweating bodies, redolent with expectation; the look of the three girls that were waiting for him, beckoning him over to join them; and finally there was Joe, standing tall, looking over everyone, smiling.*

*Without pausing for thought Richard went to join them, stopping for a second while a car drove passed, down the road and into the dark.*