1. **Until Time Runs Out: The Awakening**
   by Grayson Anderson

3. **Kernow**
   by Lucy Blincoe

5. **The Refugees**
   by Seema Clear

7. **Role of A Lifetime**
   by Rhidian Wynn Davies

9. **Doulun**
   by Nola d’Enis

11. **Under the Surface**
    by Rhiana Gold

13. **Biscuits with Blanche**
    by Michael Lawson

15. **The Holloway Men**
    by James Mott

17. **The Killing Season**
    by Janice Okoh

19. **out of the sky**
    by Freya Sanders

21. **Abscondia**
    by Stephan Schmidt

23. **mistress, mother**
    by Vasundhara Singh

25. **Nivya**
    by Deepa Somasunderam

27. **Behind the Curtain**
    by Catherine Till

29. **Dark Heart**
    by Nana Wereko-Brobby
When a meteor destroys all life on his planet, Cappa—born a cripple—is assumed dead. Five million years later, he awakens on an alien ship. With godlike abilities, he rescues the ship’s captain, Aluz. Bonded by fate they embark on a quest to discover what he has become. Cappa’s awakening does not go unnoticed. His destiny will change the face of the universe forever.

“Calm down, calm down,” Aluz tells herself wanting, but not daring, to check on her unexpected cargo sealed within pod 3. She sits at her desk and presses a sensor on the polished silver console. “Haice to base,” she shouts at the console in excitement. “Haice to base,” she repeats.

“Acknowledged! Has the cargo been secured?” the slightly irritated voice asks.

“Yes, Commander, no, Commander,” her excitement hurries her words.

“Is it yes or is it no? We have strict protocols, Captain, including radio silence. What —”

“I found something else of interest,” Aluz interrupts.

“Your orders are specific, Captain, have you got the ore?”

“Yes, but I’ve found an intact body which could give us answers about the inhabitants of Callios, possibly even information on how the civilization lived.” Aluz gasps as she runs out of breath from speaking so fast. “Commander, it’s fascinating. I’ve never seen anything like this before. “It’s —”

“Drop it!” It’s the Commander’s turn to interrupt her, his words cold and deliberate.

“What?” Aluz shouts, glaring at the monitor in front of her with a mixture of shock and anger. “But you don’t even know —”

“What I know, Aluz, is —”
“No Commander, you don’t know. The ore preserved the body, perfectly for five million years. Zero deg perfect. The subject is twenty foot tall and weighs 15 tons. The physics... the biology... you have to see it, we can’t just discard this. Imagine what we can find out.” She takes a breath. There is silence. She waits for a response. There is none. “Commander?”

“Oh, have you finished?” he responds calmly.

“Well Commander —”

“No, have you finished?” She hadn’t but she knew he had.

“Yes, Commander.”

“Good, I’m glad we got that out of the way. Now, we haven’t the facilities or the manpower to entertain such superfluous fancies. This is an excavation not an exploration. Leave it where it is and concentrate on the task at hand.” The Commander’s measured indifference to her find infuriates her.

“We’re scientists, this is our job. This is a huge discovery, surely you —”

“My job, Aluz, is to safely deliver processed calliosept. It is a job that pays me very well and allows me to pay you very well. If you do not do your job, I cannot complete mine. Now, I am quite sure I can find someone else to do your job, so I can continue doing mine. It’s your decision.”

“But, sir —”

“My superiors will not tolerate my failure and I will not tolerate yours. Transmission out.”

“Transmission out? Transmission out?” she shouts at the blank screen before banging her hands on the desk. She swivels recklessly in her chair; trapped between her wants and Commander Youl’s needs. He was right, she was replaceable. He was right, she was paid very well, but... if not now, when? When would she create her legacy? Calliosept was Youl’s big break. It was his certainty of being immortalised in Septition archives. This new find is hers, her discovery, her potential legacy. “My job, Aluz, is to safely deliver processed calliosept,” she mocks with her best Commander Youl impression. “Pusrif,” she swears under her breath in the knowledge that the ship had no doubt recorded her mockery of its creator. This posting had never been about money, it wasn’t just a job, it was a calling.
When the body of a refugee washes up on a bleak Cornish beach, Met detective Susie Varcoe is drawn to the case. On leave in her hometown with teenage daughter Nancy, Susie must grapple with her ex-lover Pasco, a narrow-minded community and the tragedy of her late-brother’s death. Digging into the town’s secrets, she reveals the last moments of the young Ugandan man’s life – and in doing so releases the sorrows of her past.

Susie made out Nancy’s adolescent figure, crouched on the cove’s furthest rocks, staring into the sea below. Her daughter’s cropped hair revealed the long pale nape of her neck; her thin legs encased in overlarge green wellingtons, the edges of her grandad’s raincoat trailing in a rockpool. The dog was barking; its four feet placed squarely in a territorial stance.

Nancy stood up with a jolt and turned from the sea. Her face, so similar in its delicate boyishness to Susie’s own, looked tight and drained of colour.

“Mum!” she called, and started to scramble down the rocks, losing her balance, her wellington-clad foot slipping into a pool of water. Susie ran towards her, jumping over heaps of kelp and storm-damaged branches until she reached the rocks and began to move as quickly as she could on the granite’s jagged edges.

“In the water,” said Nancy, pointing back to whatever had frightened her.

Susie inched around her daughter, leapt on to a flat rock, and peered over the edge. A long dark figure floated on the surface, his shoulder gently buffeting the cliff face. It was a young man, drifting on his back, looking up at the sky. His black skin had taken on a greyish pallor, his hair clung in tight wet curls to his face, a thin nylon anorak to his torso. A silver foil blanket had wrapped itself around his legs.

Susie fumbled in her pocket for the phone she had not used since arriving in Cornwall.
“He can’t have been there long,” she said, thinking his skin was not marked in any way.

Nancy was close to her now, crouched by her side, stroking the back of the dog’s neck, brave enough to look down again.

“How do you think he got there?” asked Nancy.

“That’s what the police will have to find out.”

“Should we try to get him out?”

“No. They’ll need to see him as we found him.”

“He’s beautiful,” said Nancy, staring down at the floating body.

It was true. The man had long dark eyelashes and high cheekbones, his ashen skin unable to hide his beauty. Susie glanced over at Nancy, trying to gauge how her daughter was coping being this close to death. She had brought her here, to this holiday destination for wealthy Londoners, couples on romantic getaways, food lovers, ruddy-cheeked families, to escape the dense, intense city streets. Her aim to shake off her daughter’s irrational fears of what lay beyond their front door – gangs, knives, boys who appraised, girls who judged with cold eyes, who tormented Nancy’s mind and made her narrow shoulders hunch forwards, her slender body fold in on itself. Nancy, who dressed without care, in oversized secondhand clothes, no labels, no makeup, borne of her desire to leave no trace on this Earth. Her mission to nurture her daughter – after years of putting work, promotions, earning money first – was already starting to unravel.

“Are you OK?” Susie asked.

“Yes. Are you?”

She was like a mirror, an echo of Susie’s unquiet mind. She always had to ask how are you doing? How are you feeling? Nancy was not the sole reason they had left London. Susie had been signed off work indefinitely. She would have her Met colleagues believe she had come to Cornwall for her daughter’s health – Nancy needs to escape her room, find confidence, friends, purpose in the world – all true. But they had seen through her spiel. Susie had her own demons to face, not least the death of her police partner DS Robert Conlon.

“Hello?” said Susie into her phone. “There’s been an incident ... Pencurno Cove ... A body ... Yes, I’ll wait... It’s Susie. Susie Varcoe.”

It felt strange not to use her title. But it was not DI Varcoe’s role to investigate this man’s death. A local officer could take on that responsibility. This prepossessing man, from who knows where, was not her problem.
London, 2018: sixty-year-old Vidya’s life is blown open on the death of her father, Ramesh. Catapulted into her family’s past and their expulsion from Uganda in 1972, Vidya re-examines her history to redress the tensions of the present. Told from the perspectives of Vidya and Ramesh, The Refugees is a multigenerational novel that explores cultural identity, and beliefs across national boundaries.

CHAPTER ONE

LONDON 2018

The day Vidya’s father, Ramesh, passed away it was Holi. A festival of new beginnings.

‘An auspicious day to die,’ her aunt had said. ‘He’d had a good innings at eighty-seven,’ as though life and death were a game.

Vidya had been sleeping at her parents’ house several nights a week for a couple of years. The same old bedroom she’d slept in as a teenager. How cloistered and confined she’d felt then by Ramesh’s restrictions. Felt the loss of his affections for breaking the rules. As a young woman she’d incessantly looked for approval. How could she make reparations now?

Early retirement at sixty was no picnic in the park, no walks in the woods where she could lose herself or better still find herself. It was caring for her Papa.

Her mother’s snores emerged from the room adjacent which she now shared with Pari, Vidya’s sister. Since Papa had been relegated to a hospital bed downstairs it seemed the right thing to do.

An ominous dream had woken Vidya the night before and left her roiling. She’d checked on her father. He was breathing. The room reeked. He winced while she tuned him to change his soiled bed. She’d whispered, ‘It’s okay Papa, it’ll be done soon.’ Back in her bedroom she tried to doze thinking, she might not be a carer for much longer.
The early morning sliver of sun peeked through the curtains, a line of light on the artexed ceiling. Lying in bed, she looked up at the swirls, guilt squatted in the room with her.

She thought of her indomitable Papa of old: a proud man broken by their traumatic departure from Uganda some fifty years ago. For him to be expelled from the country of his birth, as though he was no-one, had felt like a betrayal. He had lost everything.

Vidya’s heart pounded like pistons in her chest. She lumbered out of bed and faced herself in the gilded mirror, tugging at the hip-hugging nightdress. Exhaustion pulled at slackened wrinkles around her mouth; her skin felt leathery because of all the roll-ups she’d smoked, a habit since Uni which she’d found hard to relinquish. She slotted her arms and head into a plain dress, pulled it down and slipped on her gold-rimmed glasses.

She padded bare foot into the kitchen, pulled a pan from a cupboard. Age hadn’t been kind to the yellowing tiles around the basin or to the greying stain on the ceiling.

She remembered the first day they’d moved into this West London three-bed semi, a family together. She’d stood on the porch with Papa looking at the paint-flaking avocado door exhilarated as she turned the key to their new life.

Vidya’s thoughts drifted as she mixed the tea leaves and diluted milk, she pondered if there were a soul and what form it would take? Did it re-incarnate? Her father had asked over and over ‘what now?’

She heard her father’s desolate whimper from the living room, dousing her insides. She sighed deeply and muttered, ‘Please God give me strength to love him.’ She walked into the room quietly, sat by the bed, took hold of his hand and whispered,

‘I’m here by you, Papa.’

He wrapped his hand lightly around her thumb and opened his heavy eyelids, his flaky lips parted, blowing weak air, trying to say something. She put her ear to his mouth.
Oliver Molyneux is a fading TV actor whose wife and former co-star, Jeannie, wants to leave him. But she can’t because he killed her two days ago. Their sinister solicitor-agent, August Avery, suspects Oliver and panics him into bolting from Hampstead to the Suffolk coast, embarking on a tragi-comic journey of self-discovery which ultimately sees him play the part that will define the rest of his days.

Once inside August’s dingy office, Oliver was struck by how the pair of them appeared to have wandered from wardrobe onto the wrong set. His own tweed jacket and moleskin trousers suggested he was off for a boozy, bitchy lunch at the Garrick. August, sleek suited and sober tied, was cast somewhere between optimistic oncologist and world-weary undertaker.

August ushered him into a chair, dripping platitudes about having a heavy heart and being the bearer of sad news, which Oliver ignored with a throaty grunt. Once seated himself, though, August made a very convincing lawyer.

“So, Oliver. What you’ve received is a standard separation agreement. Finding common ground now will help with the formality of a *decree nisi* and then the finality of a *decree absolute*...”

Oliver began to drift off. How would one describe August’s voice? He plumped for reedy. His mind breezed across the Suffolk wetlands. The warblers squabbling like radio interference, invisible but audible in the marshy thicket. The bolder buntings swaying higher up the rushes. The bearded tits... No, not the bearded tits. This was no laughing matter.

August peered through his half horn rims. “Are you alright?”

Oliver nodded, willing himself to concentrate and, above all, to stay calm.

August’s grey eyes lingered on him, their gaze dull yet penetrating, before they lowered to the paperwork on his desk.
“I do hope you’ve had a chance to review the draft agreement—”

“She won’t divorce me! She can’t.”

August raised a placatory palm. “I’m afraid she can, Oliver. You’ve been separated for two years and, according to the law—”

“We’ve been dividing our time,” Oliver barked. “Everyone knows that. It’s on bloody Wikipedia! Just because we’re not in each other’s pockets—”

“You agreed to spend some time apart,” said August. “That time ticked on and... well, here we are today. Two years later.”

“But I saw her a couple of days ago!”

“Did you?”

“Yes. I pop up there every so often,” Oliver exaggerated. “It’s my place, too.”

“And Jeannie didn’t mention any of this?”

Oliver wrestled with his temper, his neck stiff and sinewy. “Not in so many words, no.”

August explained that the odd visit did not constitute meaningful cohabitation, before adding, “Jeannie lodged her instructions with me last month, to be executed upon the second anniversary of your separation.”

Oliver kept a sweaty silence.

“Now,” said August, “this agreement proposes a maintenance payment of one million pounds to be paid into this firm’s holding account and retained until your divorce is finalised.”

“A million bloody quid!”

August was firm. “Oliver, you can afford it. And Jeannie would almost certainly get more in a contested divorce.”

Oliver’s temper had him in a headlock. “She can’t have a divorce! SHE CAN’T HAVE A DIVORCE!”

August rose to indicate their meeting was over. “Have a good think about it, Oliver. You’re entitled to consult your own solicitor, of course. As Jeannie engaged me first, I’m afraid I act – and can only act – for her in this matter. But trust me, as your friend, you won’t get a better deal. You’re not in the right frame of mind for this today – understandably. Perhaps we could reconvene early next week, OK?”

Oliver agreed. But it was definitely not OK. Jeannie could never divorce him, whatever the bloody law said.

After all, he’d killed her two days ago.
The cold, dead clay under the small French town of Doulun churns with buried grudges, ancient curses and a thirst for retribution. The lives of three women – an impulsive expat, a spurned 17th century nun and a staid 1950s housewife – intertwine in a tale of murder, witchcraft and reckoning across the centuries. Little towns never forget.

CHAPTER ONE

JUDITH, 2019

Unlike his mother, Thomas didn’t die at his birth. Had he done so, it would have saved me killing him forty years later and spared us both a lot of bother.

Personally, I blame this place as much as anything else. To an outsider, Doulun’s just another small town in rural France where nothing ever changes. Fortunes and faiths have waxed and waned here. Roads have been built where soft-shod nuns once walked. Potatoes are grown where the wheat surely stood and perhaps a touch of merlot has improved the wine, but Doulun has not budged a stubborn inch since the day the town crawled, squalling and weeping, from the cold, dead clay.

The people here too, have resisted change. From generation to generation, sliding down the centuries, the children of the town watch, listen and learn from their parents. Boys will be boys, young girls say with shrewd little glances at their mothers.

And who could blame them?

And who could blame me? The locals, for a start: neighbours, friends, lovers – and their wives – all have an opinion on whether I’m guilty or not.
Let them talk. This morning, returning home from the Place du Marché – the bollard-poxed town square known both for its weekly market, and the vitriol of its gossip – I kicked off my shoes and went to sit outside with a well-deserved cigarette and the last of my purchases: a speculation-inducing set of matching underwear.

The stallholder, Michel, was a tall man of few words, who I’d never seen without a seeping cigarette. We had a nice little routine going: he’d regularly round off my purchases by toasting them with an imaginary glass and a nicotine-scented guffaw. I’d acknowledge the gesture with a bob of my head, and give that half smile I’ve got so good at.

The drab little woman next to me watched our petite charade, then turned and looked me slowly up and down. I could see myself reflected in her sunglasses, and behind my tiny image, a row of disapproving buildings that had seen it all before. I probably buy my lingerie at the market as much for the outrage it inspires as anything else.

I’ve always liked nice underwear and despite demure appearances, have drawers of the stuff. Lacy, seductive, practical, sedate – you name it, I’ve got it. My penchant for charming underwear probably began when I was about nine years old.

Clutching a broken wrist, I was taken to hospital to be undressed by a nurse who admired my pink beribboned vest and knickers, hidden, quietly pristine, under a filthy dust-bespattered dress. She exclaimed loudly at how pretty they were. The young doctor stopped his writing and came over to the cubicle. He admired the frilly ensemble whilst I wriggled with Lolitaesque pleasure, momentarily forgetting the injured limb. Coquette.

The memory stayed with me. I always wear good underwear, nothing greying, ill-fitting or unattractive, and none at all when nothing quite fits the bill. I stash my lingerie in frilly, overflowing piles, scented with soaps and empty bottles of perfume, burying my face in its scented mounds for a flash of Proustian je ne sais quoi.

Thomas, too, liked my underwear, way back when such things were of interest.

“Keep it on,” he’d say, reaching for me as I started undressing for bed. “Go on, keep it on.”
Nearly fifty years since the invention of the lab-born—humans genetically engineered to solve the declining population crisis—attitudes to family and relationships have shifted dramatically. But lab-born Stevie doesn’t fit the mould. After losing her internship, she applies for a carer job. Grant, an elderly man who abhors everything about the changing world and Stevie’s kind, forces her to confront the darker side of the new century.

The hospital had tried to reach Stevie twice on her mobile before she’d given in and picked up. Hair stuck in her eyes, a nose red from the unforgiving wind. She didn’t tell the receptionist that she was already there. That in fact, she’d never left. Instead, Stevie said she would get back as soon as possible. A white lie, ever so natural. As easy as extracting the grit from beneath her fingernails. Which she did, forehead pounding and arms hung around the vertical bars of the hospital rooftop. Mobile phone set to silent. She checked it from time to time nonetheless.

The bars surrounding the entirety of the rooftop were there just in case. An extra precaution against those who wanted to jump at one hundred and fifteen metres from above ground. It was a morbid thought and the spots of rust left marks on her skin, but Stevie felt calm there. Where the grey, towering buildings blended into the grey, murky sky. And as if contained by a huge, glass dome, the noise of the city was almost unnoticeable. Its people and honking cars forgotten. She was alone at last, peering out at nothing in particular.

Some time to think.

Stevie had originally climbed the dim-lit steps of the hospital staircase to make a call to work and let them know she was unable to make it in again. She’d gotten as far as the ninth floor when her manager had answered, succinct and slurping on a hot beverage. He’d fired her on the spot, tired of the sick father sob story.
‘No hard feelings of course,’ he’d said.

Of course. No hard feelings. Stevie had thrown up the box of chocolate almonds her father had given her that morning— too bulbous and solid to swallow himself. And then she’d kept climbing. Step after step, finding the last and final door on autopilot. An off-limits sign the least of her worries.

Being fired had been a shock to the system. Stevie had gotten the internship with the company less than a year ago and they’d cut the cord with very little to say on the matter. Not that she hadn’t seen it coming to some extent. Aside from the poor attendance, her timekeeping skills were dire, her attention to detail was lacking and she could never make a coffee to her manager’s taste. They’d told her she would improve with experience, that she would absorb it all like a sponge. But, Stevie wasn’t cut out for the office lifestyle. And that was what bothered her more than anything. Because Stevie was a lab-born, designed to be good at exactly that. Administration. Finance. Business. Project management. Her genes, selected and cultivated in a cold petri dish. Genetic engineering at its finest. It seemed to work for all the other millions of lab-borns. Each a shining, polished cog fixed into the right place so that society could function.

Yet, Stevie couldn’t help but worry she wasn’t quite like all of the others. In more ways than one. They were skilled at what they were born to do. Efficient. Perfect. Rigorous.

Stevie was none of those things. And even at an age too young to grasp, she had at least been hyper aware of such a distinction. Then again, Stevie didn’t feel quite accepted as human either.

Being fired had confirmed her harboured doubts. In any society, there are people who don’t succeed in their role as intended. A defective cog that might have a piece missing. Some might say, a pariah. And it was hard to admit for Stevie, but the truth was inescapable: she was one of those defective cogs. No matter how much you tried to get it to fit, it wouldn’t.

It couldn’t.
Fame is so fickle. One minute you’re Fergie, almost a member of the Royal Family, and then boom! Your body’s been possessed, your name is Blanche and you’re living in a high-rise in Salford and doling out advice to politicians and the great unwashed.

With a little manipulation, a fair amount of vodka and a good lashing of her acerbic tongue, Blanche builds a small but loyal army and sets out to sabotage the government. The only thing standing in her way is the spirit of her old pal and drinking partner, Cilla Black...

I was in the first-class cabin on the upper deck of a BA 747 from Jamaica to London when I choked on a custard cream, lost consciousness and died somewhere over the Bermuda Triangle. It was New Year’s Eve 1999, the turn of the millennium. I was in my prime. I had lived a colourful life of rags, and riches. At the time the murderous biscuit got lodged in my throat I was the happiest I’d ever been. The bitch of an air hostess half-heartedly performed the Heimlich Maneuver on me. She was more concerned about creasing her scarf and smudging her make up—that she’d put on with a trowel four hours earlier—than bringing me back to life.

Cilla, you know the one, Scouse, buck teeth, bloody awful voice—she was my partner in crime. Cilla was unconscious after downing a bottle of White Lightning in our hotel room before we left for the airport. Then she had the obligatory champagne to give the paps a photo opportunity in the airside bar. She staggered up the aircraft steps and greeted the cabin crew with her usual cheery ‘Fuck off.’ She had a reputation of loving the finer things, but she was never happier than when she was scoffing a Frey Bentos Steak and Kidney pie and washing it down with a bottle of cheap cider. Even when the Senior Cabin Crew made an announcement for a doctor, she didn’t flinch. When we landed in Heathrow, myself now a corpse, she stood up, collected her two hundred Benson and Hedges from the overhead locker, stepped over my lifeless body, and fucked off into the daylight.
We’d been in Jamaica as Cilla was filming a *Wish You Were Here* special. She got fired when the showrunner walked in on her doing a shot of Lenor and a line of Daz all White. We still had a bloody good time though. We reminisced about how we met and the adventures since. Inseparable for the best part of forty years, we were forever having quarrels—she got very jealous of my friendship with Princess Di and I couldn’t stand how she idolized Thatcher. We’d only just got talking again before the trip; she’d sent round a team of naked butlers to apologise on her behalf—she knew all my weak spots.

Now, I won’t hold back just because I’m dead. Me mam always said I had a gob like the Mersey Tunnel, which is ironic as we lived in Salford. Not the rough part, but not the nice part either—if it did have any nice parts in the ‘40s. Don’t try and imagine it, just look at a picture by Lowry, though he wasn’t very good at staying between the lines. What a life I had; my only regret is that I didn’t outlive Thatcher. I did meet her a few times in the living life, never crossed paths with her in this ghostly one. Mind you, would I be able to tell the difference—dead or alive she had no heart. In fact, she’s why I ended up residing At Her Majesty’s pleasure.

Anyway, I was stuck on that aircraft for eleven years. Flying around in an aluminium tomb. It was enjoyable to begin with, I could never have dreamt of travelling the world when I was growing up. The furthest I’d been until I was ten was Fleetwood. I was twelve when we went to Scarborough, oh, it was a whole new world. The only downside of being onboard was the passengers. You could have made a Channel 5 documentary on the falling standards of the social classes the way some of them behaved and dressed. I find it inconceivable what the girls wear now. A size 18 squeezed into a size 10 boob tube, rolls of fat spilling out over the sides. You can hear the fabric screaming from the strain: mutton dressed as shite. People used to make an effort to travel, wear their Sunday best. Now they chuck on the first thing they find on the floor—you’re very lucky if it has a crotch.

I loved nothing more than having a sneaky rummage through the passengers’ belongings. In the early days I just used to make things fall over, then I mastered the art of being able to move items. I once swapped a vibrator from the bag of a girl on a hen party, on their way to Malaga, with a Filofax of a businesswoman who was closing a multimillion-pound deal in the Costas. I thought the C.E.O. would be furious, but when she returned a week later, she was grinning from ear to fanny.
DI Robert Bramadisso’s career is already on life support when a simple job keeping the peace between environmental protestors and partying London commodities traders goes badly wrong. A corpse on his hands and a stolen Rembrandt, Robert must confront his past and find the connections linking organised crime, a government cover-up and a hidden key to the cosmos before someone kills again.

December howled into the jaws of Monument Underground station as the staccato progress of old commuter trains sucked the cold wind down onto the platforms. Among the city workers fighting their way to the surface a tall, unhurried man leant forward, bowing his head as he passed through the ticket barriers and climbed the steps up into the grey morning. A glance at his watch told him there were fifteen minutes to go. Forty and thickening, he was handsome enough for a smile from the barista as she passed him a double espresso and his change, which he pocketed, nervously gripping his warrant card before reaching into his beaten-up Barber for a tobacco pouch. Finding shelter twenty paces away under the pillar that marks the seat of the Great Fire, he paused, rolled a cigarette and registered the fact that last night’s drink was still on him and in him.

Cutting through an alley way by the side of the station, he reached the north side of London Bridge and the familiar neo-Georgian façade of the Metropolitan Police’s Specialist, Organised and Economic Crime Command. Entering the revolving door, he approached the reception desk.

‘Detective Inspector Robert Bramadisso,’ he said, addressing the civilian receptionist, ‘here to see Chief superintendent Hodges.’ Moments later, he exited the lift on the tenth floor. Opening the door to the Chief’s office, he clocked the reassuring bulk of Mike Hodges rounding the desk and striding towards him, arm outstretched for the handshake.

‘Bram, good to see you, old man. Just an informal chat before we get you back onto operational duties. Let me say how delighted I am that the Inquiry made no finding against you. Never any doubt in my mind...’
‘Nor mine,’ responded Bramadisso, a little too drily for his superior’s liking. Hodges sniffed and moved back to sit behind his oak desk before responding. Behind him a picture window gave out onto a sombre looking Thames. He gestured for his guest to take one of the two chairs facing him and spoke deliberately.

‘Let’s get something straight. Libor was the biggest financial scandal in years. All six of the defendants walked because of documents leaked from the investigation. Those documents were also highly embarrassing to the Government. You were the officer in charge. So whoever let the cat out of the bag, you were going to be looked at.’

‘Suspended for a year,’ corrected Bramadisso.

‘Let’s hope it gave you the chance to re-charge your batteries. OK. Well, we’ve been contacted by a company called NRAC Plc. who have concerns…’

‘NRAC? It sounds like a brand of antidepressant.’

‘Natural Resources and Commodities. They’re a multi-national; trade gas and oil, even a bit of coal, on the futures markets. Massive turnover with a big head office in St James’s. The government likes the fact that they’re based here, Brexit notwithstanding. Shows the country’s open for business, although I don’t suppose they pay much tax. They’re not quite so popular with the environmental lobby. In fact, they’ve started getting threats from PX. Heard of them?’

‘Planet Extinction, isn’t it?’ Hodges nodded and Bramadisso continued. ‘They’re a protest group. Sit-ins and flash mobs at arms fairs and airports. Not exactly a radicalised home-grown terror cell, though. It’s a hoax, surely,’ This is what he’d expected – one step up from traffic duties.

‘The company’s Directors are spooked. They’ve got their Christmas shindig tomorrow night which is where you come in.’

‘You want me to go to St. James’s and babysit city boys getting drunk on expensive champagne.’

‘That’s it,’ nodded the senior officer with a twinkle in his eye. ‘Except it’s not St James’s. They’ve hired out a big place up in Highgate. Go and do a recce later today. Kenwood House. I’ve assigned a Sergeant to you; her name’s Iulia Dumitrescu. She’s bright, you’ll get on. She’s meeting you there at 2.00pm. Any trouble tomorrow there’ll be a TSG unit in the area all night. They can come and knock a few heads together if any protestors turn up. Job done.’

On second thoughts, give me the traffic duty, reflected Bramadisso as he took the lift back to street level.
Nigeria 2022. Olori’s four-year-old child, Frieda, disappears during the run up to Governor state elections. Everyone suspects that Frieda is just one of many kids kidnapped for ritual sacrifice at the behest of powerful men. But Olori, thinks the suspect is closer to home – her British Nigerian employer, madam Nikki, who cannot have a child of her own.

CHAPTER 1

“I’m really sorry,” the madam said.

Olori stood in the middle of the extravagantly furnished living room watching the madam as water spilled out from her eyes. She looked as if she was crying but Olori knew that she was not.

Heat seared Olori’s body despite the cool gusts that hit her from the wall-mounted air conditioning. The fact that they, the oga and the madam, were sitting; the fact that they, the oga and the madam, had not offered her a single sip of water before they had told her that Frieda was missing, was why she did not believe that they were telling the truth. Her daughter had not simply vanished.

“We looked everywhere. Really,” the madam said.

Normally, Olori considered the oga strong, thick-thighed and handsome. But, now, as she watched him rub his wife’s bony shoulders and kiss her cheek as if she was not in any way at fault, Olori saw him as weak. Her madam was still wearing the swimsuit and wrapper she’d left the house in to take Frieda to the hotel pool to swim. Frieda hated to swim. She did not know how. Olori stared blankly into the madam’s broad face, the only thing interesting about it being her mouth – a gash of expensive red.

“After we swam,” the madam said, “Precious took us to see my father’s land.” She went on to explain that she had wanted to tend to her parents’ headstone. So the woman had thought it correct to take my four-year-old child to visit a piece of wasteland? Again, Olori felt that the woman was lying.
Olori had not wanted Frieda to go swimming with her but the madam was obsessed. Had wanted to take Frieda everywhere. Parade her about like the designer handbags she loved and Olori had been unable to object. If she had, she would have been searching for employment elsewhere.

“We have called the police,” the oga was saying. Olori had not caught any of what he had said before that. “They will find her. Don’t worry.”

“The police? Oga, I want to look for her myself. I am sorry but madam did not look for her well. Please, I beg, let me see the place.”

“There’s no point,” the madam said. “Let’s just wait for the police.”

*I beg, shut up your crocodile tear mouth!* Olori wanted to shout. But she held back. Instead, she turned to Precious, the driver, who was standing in the doorway. “Friend, I beg, show me the place.”

But Precious avoided her eyes. As if he knew that whatever the oga and his wife were doing was wrong but did not want any part of it.

“Samson,” the madam said, her mouth close to the oga’s ear as if she were about to chew on it, “we should all just wait here. Tell her to wait here. The police will know what to do.”

Olori stared at him, mouth ajar. She approached. “Oga, please, why your wife dey stop me? Dis one no be her pikin.”

At that, Precious stepped into the room, hands up, palms facing her, as though he thought she was about to harm them.

Olori’s eyes glittered, defensive. Her heart beat in her ears. “If you touch me, two of us go die here today!” She really believed that she would fight the man. Claw at his eyes despite her small self. Despite his lumbering size.

“Let the police come,” the oga said again.

And again Olori stared. She could no longer hide her contempt – *a big man like him under a woman’s spell.* Giving up, she sucked her teeth at all of them, pushed past Precious and ran out of the house.

The afternoon heat hugged her as she hurried down the stairs and into the yard of the oga’s walled compound. “Dipo, open the gate!”

The sleepy houseboy jumped up from his resting squatting position. “You find am?” His concerned eyes were large in his child-like face.
out of the sky is an anti-bildungsroman: the story of a boy who doesn’t get to grow up, and a young woman who does, but doesn’t want to. Set in Cambridge, Lyon and London, it follows a family falling apart after an unexpected death, amid a wider social circle fascinated by it. The living appropriate the dead, perfect lives prove empty, and a question surfaces: is adult life worth it?

The last time I saw Peter, I crossed the street to avoid him. It’s not hard to hide in Cambridge, when the centre throbs with tourists. This was in the summer, the August before my year abroad; he’d graduated from Oxford in the July. We’d never spoken—we never would—but I knew that he lived on the main road that runs from the heart of the city to the hospital south of the suburbs. His childhood home had three storeys, eight bedrooms and an annex the size of the two-up two-downs near the station. After some of the girls at school went to parties there, they reported that there was a rose garden behind the kitchen, and a special fridge just for wine. My brother visited once, when he was about ten, and came home demanding a trampoline.

I knew, too, that Peter had fulfilled—perhaps better than any of us—the ideal that our outstanding private schools had sold to our parents. His exam results could not have been better; even if he’d dropped a subject, Oxford would’ve had him. There, and at school, he excelled at the most civilised sports: hockey in winter, cricket in summer, rowing and squash year-round. He sang well enough, aged ten, to win a choral scholarship, which knocked a thousand pounds off his annual school fees. He was Form Leader, Student Prefect, Head Boy. Pretty, clever girls crowded round him like horses impatient to be fed. I knew he’d dated a few of them.

What I didn’t know, when I saw Peter walking towards me on Trinity Street, was whether he knew who I was—or, if he did, whether he’d acknowledge me. If I said hello and he didn’t recognise me, I’d be embarrassed. If I blanked him and he waved at me, he’d think I was rude. But if I replied to his greeting, or he replied to mine, it would
feel strange. We’d never been introduced. The dilemma was irritating, like any reminder that my university town was also my hometown, though I’d come in specifically to see a friend from childhood. And so I crossed the street, and when a few minutes had passed, I got out my phone and texted her: “just saw peter walking past trinity in case you want to avoid him lol.”

Noorah replied when I was halfway home: “lol thanks”.

It was the last time I saw her, too—for a year, at least. But she was the first person I thought of the night before Christmas, and when I woke in the morning to Elliott’s angry voice. My brother’s bad mood soured the day; I hadn’t wanted to spoil it further, with the news. But in the afternoon, while we were wiping down the kitchen, Mum asked why I was quiet and I needed to tell someone: to see their face and hear their reaction.

“Have you heard of Peter Galbraith?” I asked.

She laughed. “You say that like he’s famous. He was just a boy in Elliott’s class, wasn’t he? Didn’t he go out with Noorah?”

“He died a couple of days ago,” I told her. Her hand went to her heart. “He died in the Alps.”

After our parents had gone to bed, Elliott watched me Google ‘boy dies Alps’, but the only news results were weeks old. Then I realised my error, and corrected it, typing ‘man dies Alps’, but still nothing. I tried ‘skiing accident’, ‘skier killed’, ‘British ski dead’, tacking ‘Alps’ on the end of each, but none of the victims matched Peter’s profile. I scrolled through pictures of men who all looked alike, white skin and whiter teeth, eyes hidden by reflective sunglasses, bodies wrapped in expensive jackets—all of them dead now, buried or burned.

I opened Facebook, and there he was. Not smiling, just looking straight at the camera, one arm round a young girl who looked just like him, the other on the shoulders of a schoolmate of mine. They were standing on a hill, the countryside rising behind them, their waists interrupting the uneven horizon. The picture was tagged: Stanage Edge, Derbyshire. Less than ten miles from where Elliott and I were sitting, staring at it.
The best thing about money? It’s fungible. Why waste it on a Master’s degree in New York when you can spend it abroad writing The Next Great American Novel? When the money runs out and your Ideal French Girl tells you to get lost, just slink back home, get another soul-sucking job, and start all over again. Fitzgerald was wrong. This is America, Land of Second Chances.

No cloud is brave enough to challenge the authority of the September sun, which shimmers up there like a camera flash from some Divine Paparazzo. You search in vain for signs of rain. Nothing. The little tingling in your bones tells you something is coming, though. Suffering through all those sticky Midwestern summers gave you a sixth sense for sniffing out storms.

The beer is cold and you take a sip and someone asks if you speak English.

Finally.

It comes from behind you, slightly accented but in words you know very well. You turn around and a dream appears through a thin cloud of smoke. Still the only cloud in the sky. She’s sitting at the table right behind yours, surrounded by the paraphernalia of the Leisure Class: empty coffee mugs and cigarette butts and literature.

You’re at risk of cardiac arrest as you take her in. She’s wearing these blue eyes, all iris like a Modigliani, deep like a bottomless well, shining from all the pennies tossed in over the years by fools wishing she’ll make their dreams come true.

Her shirt... you’re sure there’s a specific name for it but it eludes you in two or three languages. There are two straps slipping off the shoulders ever so slightly, as if in reverence to the collarbone, grazing it gently like un bisou. They meet in a V at the breastbone where four buttons run down the center, two of them tastefully undone. Her tortoise shell sunglasses sit in the divide, spoiling the view.
You take a deep breath as your stomach riots, like it’s being scooped out by some macabre melon baller. You summon the French you’ve learned. All in the mouth: pursed lips pushed forward, tongue steering clear of diphthongs. Oui, you say. But not out like wee, oui like way, because you want to portray a firm grasp of casual French. She laughs, points at your book, asks what you’re reading. In English, mercifully. And from the looks of it she’d like to know very much.

Here comes the Turning Point, like changing seasons, inevitable but somehow surprising. You thought this would come, but not so soon. It’s only been four days since you left Paris for the south with visions of glory and someone else’s money in your pocket. Like a taller but less talented Van Gogh. The next several months hang in the balance. Maybe the next couple decades.

So think it through. You can make one of those grand gestures and say something charming, something very romantic comedy, very Hugh Grant on the front porch. Or you can play it cool and mysterious. Or you can just say none of your fucking business and avoid all the agony.

“Fitzgerald. F Scott Fitzgerald,” is all you can muster, holding up a slim, tattered copy of ‘Trimalchio’ for inspection. Her face shimmers with recognition as you say it, then loses its lustre. She’s confused about the title.

Since you’re such a nice guy, you help her out. “It’s like The Great Gatsby. Just… a different version.” You’ve been telling yourself for so long that you like it better than the original but you aren’t sure you even know the difference. It just seems more obscure, invites more questions. One must always consider the cultural significance of the book one chooses to bring out in public.

You stand to introduce yourself like a proper gentleman. She takes your hand, says something that sounds like Emma, from a mouth shaped differently than yours by a lifetime spent using all those tantalizing words. You’re grateful she didn’t go in for a few of those little air kisses.

Now you get a better view. Whatever the shirt is called, it’s loosely tucked into jeans. Light blue jeans. The same color as the twenty-euro notes in your wallet whispering spend me, spend me into your receptive ears. The jeans start tight at the top and stay that way all the way down. Though not too tight. Just right.

Write this down: Goldilocks jeans.
Bhopal, India. Gayatri’s Papa is dying. His young mistress, Anita, comes to live with him and his daughter and wife. Sitting on either side of his comatose body, Anita and Gayatri become friends. After his death, the women: Gayatri, Anita and Ma, form an unusual camaraderie—Chile, Hare Krishna, Milk. There is one problem that remains: Anita is married and must return to her husband.

We are at the table, sloppily eating ladyfingers mixed into rice and lentils, lunching with our hands. Anita lets her bites, yellow and grainy, drip down her chin and wipes it clean with the back of her hand, only to lick it off, a moment later, before it drips down her arm. Why can’t she eat properly? Why can’t she eat as I do? Measuring each bite, making sure it fits, without soiling either my mouth or my arm, in the cup formed in between my thumb and fingers. And why can’t her fingers scoop up the food off the plate with a turn? Why does she have to pick up her extra-large bites as if she were an engineer bolstering up stones from a construction site? And she is doing it again. Her fingers claw the rice into her cupped palm, the lentils dripping down each of her fingers—drip-drip-drip-drip-drip—pausing at the crooked wrist, her eyes alarmed by the landslide, her tongue lashes out and mops it clean.

‘You know you could use a spoon,’ I say, but she hasn’t heard me, for she thrusts a photo towards me, the edges almost dipping into my plate. What now? I want to say. Instead I say, ‘yes?’

‘This woman,’ she points to the right half of the photo where a woman, middle-aged with a perm, stands at Anita’s side, both women holding gift boxes wrapped in purple cellophane; both women draped in sarees in shades of orange; their eyes shaded with bumblebee goggles; both women smiling sugar-white smiles.
Anita continues, ‘She was our neighbour, Mrs Rajshri. Oh, she was always so excited to attend these kitty parties. She would dash inside the house (Anita’s yellow fingers push the air before her), force me to dress up and when I did, she asked me if this kurta or sari was the right choice for the occasion. Then she’d dash inside my bedroom and pick out a sari that went along with the kitty party’s theme (her palms THUMP on the table, a few grains of mushy rice stick to the tips of her hair) Oh, and can you believe it? These kitty parties always had a theme, a theme! Do you want to guess this theme?’

She dangles the photo in front of my face so that their sugar-white smiles and purple cellophane blur and bleed and blend.

I see the orange of their draped yards. How can I not? And say, ‘sunset?’

Anita claps her slobbered hands.

‘Yes! You’re spot on, sunset! That’s what it was. All of us, fools, dressed in sarees of orange and red. At one point, I thought the theme was carnage instead of sunset.’

I laugh and place her arm quietly to her side.

‘Eat now,’ I tell her. ‘we can look at these photos later.’

She nods, giggling and resumes—clawing, dripping, licking—each bite. I can’t help but think, this is what a happy carnage must look like.
Tamil Nadu, 1991. Twelve-year-old Nivya’s charmed rural childhood in Tirunelveli is shattered when her grandfather dies and she learns the secret of her heritage. As she navigates her new normal, her parents’ marriage falls apart leaving Nivya to question the meaning of her life. Written from Nivya’s perspective, Nivya is the first novel in a trilogy examining three phases in her life.

Henry arrived on the first of December at twelve noon. He was the smartest auto rickshaw Nivya had ever seen, ready for his first day at work.

He had been newly blessed at the temple, a white jasmine garland hung on his front nose with three lines of sandalwood, kungumam and vibhooti on his forehead. He was a vibrant emerald green, the fresh paint smell still strong. Written in thick white letters on his rear: CHANGE YOUR LIFESTYLE.

Uncle Niven got out of the tuk tuk looking nervous and said, “Do you like it?”

Her brothers shrieked in excitement and rushed towards the tuk, running their hands over its body.

Her uncle’s eyes were twinkling. “Shall we name him, baba?”

“Henry. Let’s call him Henry.” Nivya had always wanted to get a pet and call him Henry. She had wanted a dog first, then a cat and then she had suggested a small fish but her mother refused all the options. “I don’t need more work at home.”

A few weeks ago, Uncle Niven had mentioned he might quit his job. He told them he had enough work experience to run his own business and wanted to own a fleet of tuks. He would start on his own with just one tuk. Then he would buy more tuks and hire drivers to build an on-call service for all the nearby villages.

“There is no such thing as a tuk fleet.” Her mother was vigorously kneading chapati dough for dinner when she acknowledged this passing fancy. But as her parents stepped onto the street, looking stunned, they realised he had been serious that day.
Nivya climbed into the front seat of the tuk. So much cooler. She wiggled her bottom on the seat. Cushiony. Her brothers climbed in, both small enough to fit half a bottom each onto the seat, holding the steering wheel tight and trying not to fall off. “Shall we drive? Vroom, vroom,” they roared, doing their best with their tiny throats. Nivya joined in. They were in an imaginary race, swerving, overtaking other vehicles, their eyebrows furrowed in concentration. By now, another tuk had appeared in front of them, slowing them down. They began shouting, “Get out of the way,” and tooted the horn. It was a delicious sound. A shrill, satisfying honk. They tried one, two, three, four, five times.

“That’s enough. OUT,” her mother screeched, dragging the three of them back onto the street. They squirmed out of her grip and started chasing each other around the auto, a new game of catchers quickly replacing the stationary auto chase.

“Inside. Now. And please, get out of the sun, Nivya, you will only roast even more.”

Nivya rolled her eyes but obliged. Once they were seated back in the cool shade of the thinnai, Amma and Appa turned back to Niven.

Appa went first, his voice laced with a touch of pepper. “Such a big business move.”

Nivya was surprised. Appa rarely gave such opinions.

“Do you even know how to drive an auto?” Amma asked. “It’s not the same as a car, it is different.”

Nivya felt a bolt of anger. She didn’t understand why Amma couldn’t just support Niven. Mr Vethachalam, Maya’s father, always said big risks paid off in business. And he should know – he owned such a big sweet shop.

Niven hung his head down and said quietly, “Muthu was going to show me how to drive.”

“Yes, great mentor he is!” Amma scoffed. “He must be an expert having driven an auto around for the last ten years, you can see what a big business that has become.”

Looking embarrassed, Niven climbed back into Henry and started the engine to park him in a comfortable spot just outside the house.

“Good luck, mama,” Nivya said loudly from the thinnai. He grinned, giving her a thumbs up. Someone from the family needed to encourage him.
In Soviet-occupied Hungary Tamás leaves his wife Mária for another woman. As he stumbles through further marriages, and Mária fights her bitterness, daughter, Rika, defects to the West, while son, Gábor, sabotages his own talents and spirals into addiction. Unfolding during the second half of the 20th century, Behind the Curtain asks the question: How can you pursue your own happiness without destroying the lives of those you love?

Rika sits bolt upright next to the window in the compartment, her lower legs, clad in bell bottoms with sharply ironed creases, are at 90 degrees to the seat and her thighs. Like a seated figure in Egyptian paintings, she muses, trying to lighten her own mood. The express train has left the outskirts of Budapest, making its way westwards at a speed that belies its name. This is becoming a very long two hours. She hopes to maintain her posture and hold herself together as long as necessary. She has to concentrate, she has to make her story believable. If they started questioning her, they might not accept her excuses. If they searched her, all would be lost.

Numb from sitting like a statue, Rika rocks in her seat to ease the pressure on her bottom. Can she risk standing up and walking to the toilet? She scans the faces of the people in the compartment. Engrossed in her own problem she hasn’t paid any attention to them. Would they tell on her? She cannot discern sympathy from their demeanours, so to be on the safe side she stays put. Anyway, it won’t be long now, the last station they trundled through was Gyor, they will soon be at the border. She gets out a sandwich from her satchel, thinking the food will soak up her nervousness. Halfway through her munching the train comes to a halt.

She cannot see much around the track where the train has stopped, no buildings, no trees, only a line of look-out towers crossing the near distance. They have reached ‘no man’s land’, the strip of ground between the borders of Hungary and Austria.
Outside the train window she can just make out armed soldiers marshalling Alsatian dogs and she spots a man being escorted off the train. She hears the voices of people coming down the corridor inspecting the compartments. She wraps up her unfinished sandwich and puts it back into the satchel, her fingers struggling with the buckle. Her mouth is dry and she fears everybody can hear her heart beating in her throat. She tries to take deep breaths without attracting attention to herself and dries her palms on her jeans.

The railway ticket inspector and two burly, armed border guards appear at the door: ‘Passports and tickets, please!’ They shine a torch under the seats, looking for stowaways. They methodically check the passengers and their documents. The smell of sweaty bodies in slept-in uniforms hits Rika’s nostrils. She watches as they scrutinise the passport of the woman next to the door, rummage through the luggage of a young couple two seats away and aggressively body-search the long-haired man sitting opposite.

Seeing the thoroughness of the inspections Rika is convinced there’s no chance she could slip through. They will spot the one-way ticket and the winter clothes in her suitcase, find the extra dollars she’s bought on the black market and her university record book stitched inside the back crease of her flared jeans. She will be charged with trying to defect and put in prison. With all her strength she concentrates on not fainting.

At last her turn comes. She hands over her passport and train ticket, and waits for the inevitable.
CHAPTER 1

Alexa, stop.

It’s 6am on December 29th and I’m expected in the office. When I say expected, I mean there is nowhere I would rather be. This time of the year is a festival for the work-shy. I relish the peace and quiet. No actual consulting to be done, lots of boozy lunches with colleagues to juggle, and an excuse to miss Harry and India’s pre–New Year’s Eve party, because...well, you know how it is, work.

*I think you might be the poshest black man I’ve ever met.*

I wake up and I look forward to these moments alone at Marlow Kurtz. I build baskets of camel coats on Mr Porter that I don’t have the balls to check out. I map out flight routes for holidays I don’t plan on taking. Killing time.

London looks dead from the 22nd floor, save the occasional ant that scuttles into Molton Brown to buy an apology candle for a mother-in-law they told to fuck off during the final moments of Christmas dinner.

This morning there’s not a doubt in my mind that I’m waking up at home. Not in a Hilton. Not in a client’s bed in Basel. Not on a plane. Irrespective of that I go through the motions of getting my bearings, just to be sure. The room. The city. The country.

Emma stirs beside me.

I thought I’d left her on the floor of the party last night but she seems to have made her way back to our flat. Oh I’m certain that creep Hugo made sure she got home OK. She always did, with or without the leches. No matter how blackout drunk or slappy-slappy in the face she got, friends and strangers seemed to take pity on her, because every time, there she was, deposited safely on our front stoop with the keys she needed to get in, just not the coat that would have made her appear decent. I dread to think of the feral furs running around the city with
her name sewn into the collar, a juvenile habit from boarding school days that she seemed to find quirky, but I found incredibly basic.

I often wondered who these kind people were who didn’t rape her but instead helped her out. If I’m honest, I’m not entirely sure it didn’t make me question her sex appeal when she came home intact, apparently too sloppy to even bother violating. Nine lives extended to forty-five, and not a cardigan button off its hook.

Emma was beautiful, yes, in the way any twenty-five-year-old spoilt London girl could be. Her uniform of choice tended towards black skinny trousers with fussy zips or frills, gift wrapping her gorgeous little legs all the way down into clunky Balenciaga boots, accented with a trashy YSL bag and a no makeup look that took her 90 minutes to prepare under the halogen glare of bathroom lighting that cost the earth. Her long blonde hair was parted with a hard line down the middle that dared you to challenge the perfect symmetry of her feline face. Yes, she was attractive but, as I found out months into our relationship, when the thrill of the dinner party parade had worn off, she was prickly, insecure, frigid, and just a little mean. Now I really think about it, if sex starved and presented with her knobbly inebriated form on the streets, with not a passerby in sight to witness my sins, I’m not entirely sure I’d bother either.

I can see she’s close to waking up – fuck you, Alexa – so I unplug the device and slip out of bed into the bathroom. It takes me 19 minutes, bed to door and then I’ll be safely ensconced in the Swedish coffee house below our flat, sipping a flat white and waiting for my Uber.

The car pulls up, I get in and put my earpods in immediately, somewhat extravagantly to make sure the driver clocks that I’m in no mood to talk. I know from the scar across his cheek he is Ashanti, same as me. I’m always in cabs with Ghanaians.

He welcomes me in warmly, looks at me closer, leans back again, and then FUCK I’ve been rumbled. I take out an earpod in anticipation.

“Wait. Eh. Ghanaian?”

Gah. “Yes. Yes I am.”

“I could tell ooooo. And you have family there? You go there?”

“Yes, my father lives in Accra. But I moved back here with my English mother when I was eight.”

“Ehhh,” he says, checking his maps while shuffling into a driving position that will angle him in just the right spot to keep turning his head back in conversation.

“I have family in the North but know plenty plenty people in Accra,” he boasts. “What is your family name?”

“Osei,” I say, and wait for it.