part one

NIA

There he is, in memory, standing behind the bar of the restaurant, pouring that vile drink he used to love, a sickly Martini from the long bottle with those big empty letters on the label. Kind eyes, imperious too, the leather trench coat all the way to the floor, its seedy sheen reflected somehow on his face. There is the face itself: angular, the brown depth of his colouring, black kinks of hair rippling to his shoulders like a soft perm, the bizarre gold hoop in the right ear. The hi-lo voice is there, insinuating itself through twists and turns like mercury in a barometer when he speaks – taking the temperature of things, divining the climate. All of this distracting the eye from his looks, which are striking, exceptional even, you would probably have to call him beautiful.

She is right there, in the same memory, about to reply, but a bit more blurred around the edges. It is likely that she was dressed up, she wanted a job of course: so it would have been the black jersey dress, tight on the bust, hemline a bit too short, and inappropriate shoes – the chunky maroon creepers with massive silver buckles. Aiming for 'voluptuous', but without quite the correct regalia of accessories. One of the three outfits she was circulating in those days, and the only one that could aim to satisfy the criteria of 'smart' in the advert. Sometimes she would wear a crimson Kashmiri shawl with it, lifted from her mum's cupboard, drape it over her shoulders, a bit of red lipstick to match, as though she was going to a formal winter event, like a prom in the fifties or something.

She can't remember if she had the shawl on but she remembers the feeling well – t hat she looked confusing, that

he was eyeing her with a curiosity that he didn't bother to conceal. Mostly, she can watch the two of them in this memory without rushing ahead, slip inside the vein that funnels the language between them, and marvel that it is happening, pretend she does not know what will come next.

'I do apologize,' he says, offering her a cigarette. 'Would you like some tea? Coffee? A glass of wine? Just . . . do let me know, lah! Some water?'

She is shaking her head. The attention is intimidating.

'Nah, I'm good,' she says. 'Don't worry.'

And that is when she first experiences his smile. She is just nineteen, lying her way through the world but telling him the truth for some reason, and he's thirty-three, thirty-four max, giving it the big patron act in the restaurant, lighting up a cigarette and funnelling the smoke through the side of his mouth as he raises his eyebrows and regards her at leisure. Tac! The palatal click of satisfaction as he taps the ash into a square vessel of smoked brown glass. His fingernails are fastidiously clean and she is curling her own away from sight in response.

He's good. Surely he is good? He is the altruist we need on each street corner. The one who's got your back, can help you stand up after the fall. He's wise: King Solomon capable of enough em pathy and hubris to decide who deserves the baby. He is a walking set of choices and consequences: love thy neighbour, the greater good, take your pick. This image of him – of them – filters and echoes through her memory, there are a thousand iterations or more. She can never be certain of its imprint or impact.

She tells herself the story as it unfolds from this moment. She does it to understand him, and so to believe in his cure.

SHAN

Shan is walking in Archway, cheered by the discordant heat as he moves alongside the massive dual carriageway outside his estate of residence. He stops at the traffic lights, lets the buses sear their crimson optimism onto his retina. Colour, his mother would say, brings joy, wonder, power.

He can see the kid who comes with his mama every day on the way to school. He fascinates him, this kid, he has long brown curls that bounce to his shoulders, pale flushed skin, he rides a beat-up blue scooter, four years is he, or five? Lifting his leg up behind him as he goes down the road, like a dancer, the same pride, the same demonstration of ease, someone skating on ice, not a narrow pavement next to a huge river of traffic. *Look, I can do this*, his body says silently, as he sails past Shan at the crossing, almost at exactly the same time every day. Today there is blossom in his hair, in Shan's hair too – the road is planted with mammoth trees that bestow leaves and the tiniest of white-sheened petals on them all, from on high. This is London, thinks Shan, this contrary indication of motor-loud madness and real, actual breathing life. Humans, trucks, petals.

The kid is staring at an older man in an electric wheelchair who sometimes joins them at this 8.34 a.m. confluence at the lights. The man: pink-cheeked, grey-haired, tidy short sideburns, is raised momentarily from the cautious expression that he tends to employ when he is motoring along, raised to smile at the boy, and up at his mother.

‘Why is that man in a chair that moves along like that?’ says the boy, curling back against his mother’s body, suddenly shy at the man’s smile. His voice is high, sonorous, the sentence dances like the melody on a bansuri, an up-turn of curiosity at the end.

Like tha-a-at? He is sweet, thinks Shan: some kind of pale honey skin he has, long lashes, a dream-sweet.

‘Because maybe his legs don’t work right now,’ says the mother, crouching down so she can hush up her voice.

‘Why his legs doesn’t work?’ sings the boy’s voice, dancing over the articulated lorries, the tangled chain of cars and bikes. And again, the descant high, louder, when he gets no response:

‘But WHY his legs doesn’t work? Why, Mama, why?’

She hides a smile and instead of answering tucks some dark blonde strands back into her ponytail, fingers at her collar, one hand is enough for the job, the other is on her kid, getting ready to guide him with his scooter. The lights change and they walk across quickly. Shan can hear the boy still shouting on the other side.

‘WHY DOESN’T HIS LEGS DOESN’T WORK?’

Give him an answer, thinks Shan, also smiling as he watches the boy reattach himself to his scooter and flamboyantly sail off, right past the charity shop and always-empty optician’s to the roundabout, where he halts, obediently, for his mother to catch up. Surely you can make one up. Stop his anxiety, really? There are so many reasons why someone’s legs wouldn’t work. You could choose the most benevolent, make something of it, use it to teach the kid something.

His own son is a couple of years older. What is he doing right now? The question assails Shan without warning, pollutes him with despair, a toxin that is suddenly in his lungs as he crosses the same fat zebra path and walks to the tube

station. It's his own fault. He relaxed too much, didn't guard against it. The mind betrays when you loosen control.

His mother comes to him again, wringing out wet clothes during an afternoon in Jaffna, giving him the eye of concern. If you wash a cloth, over and over, it becomes bleached out, she's saying in this memory, relishing the chance to impart life lessons when presented with such useful methods of illustration. Such is the test that life throws at your honour. Your honour is the colour of the self, it should be steadfast. To be dishonoured, to be found out, to be revealed to be false – it is to be leached of all your colour as a person, to watch it dissolve into the water and slip away through the gutter down the alley.

His mind surges with a mix of sayings from his mother. *Love your neighbour, but don't take down the dividing wall. In a treeless country the castor plant is a big tree. Dig your well before you are thirsty. During the daylight a person will not fall into a pit that he fell into during the night. The poor search for food and the rich search for hunger*.

When well united and together, one plus one equals eleven, thinks Shan. But he and Devaki are apart.

'Mama!' shouts the boy as Shan walks past them. The kid is staring back at the display of frames in the optician's window.

'Can I have a eye test, Mama?' he shouts, little voice in an agile somersault over the traffic. And then, again, high flute of a sound.

'CAN I HAVE A EYE TEST! A EYE TEST!'

Shan closes his eyes against the force of memory, takes the free newspaper at the underground ticket barriers and returns to the bus stop. He is still early enough to eat something in the kitchen before his shift at the restaurant begins. The sky is viscous and turquoise: the hot, demented turquoise of a day filled with promises.

NIA

In those days they were all a bit in love with Tuli, everyone who worked for him in the restaurant. They couldn't help it, somehow it came with the territory: a solid admiration leavened with a kind of vulnerable unrequited romance. Nia considered this oddity often: she really did mean all of them – male or female, front of house or in the kitchen, take your pick – the waiting staff (Ava from Spain), the gaggle of South Asian cooks (Shan, Rajan, Guna, Vasanthan), even Ashan, the clipped French Tamil guy who shared the lease with him, purveyor of crucial expertise from working at 'the Pizza Express'. This is how they appeared to her, even though, or maybe because, Tuli was so infuriating and endearing in equal measure. It wasn't just because they were beholden to him. You could argue that he had rescued everyone who was there from something or someone, but this was more to do with his manner, his way of being.

When Nia started working there she was proud of the fact that he didn't affect her, but soon enough this indifference to his charms was undermined by the fact that she envied him – she wanted to *be* him rather than the object of his affection. He was so expansive, a bit arrogant with it sure, but that heart . . . To possess such a heart, to look outward like that, rather than inward to the hidden pockets of the self as she did. An audacious heart. It seemed to thud against his lanky frame with its own strength and vibration, exulting in a freedom from the scrutiny of others.

Oh, it was an emotional time of ups and downs and she would often veer from her happy chatty persona at work to such a loneliness when the sun went down, as though the whole of the day's cheer had been an elaborate gossamer web

and now the web was ripped, there was nowhere to hide. She would spend her days off without speaking to anyone and there was a kind of bruise in her speech when she tried to talk upon return to the restaurant. But it was always there, solid and accommodating, happy for her to slide back in once she had pinned her apron and hair.

She stared at everything and everyone in the beginning, ignoring the veneer of detachment that protected other commuters in the mornings. It was the summer of 2003 when Nia joined the restaurant, and that particular part of south-west London was just beginning to gear up for gentrification. You could see the bankers – male and female alike – dipping their toes in, walking past the burger joints and chicken shops with appraising gazes, bodies taut with the effort of remaining open-minded. Tentatively making it down to the imposing residential squares they had heard about, and staring up at the red-brick and stucco mansion blocks and sliding timber sash windows. They would go up to the hushed communal gardens that lay at the centre of these squares, and lean on the railings, not worried by the locked gates that always caught her out. Instead they seemed to be practising for a lifestyle that appeared to be entirely up to them. She saw them on her way to and from the restaurant and marvelled at this idea radiating out from them, that the responsibility of shaping a life was all down to the choices you might make. They seemed full to bursting with choices.

She had loved the place instantly, in fact she loved the whole process – w alking from the tube and turning down the small road, past the greasy spoon, the betting place, the Australian pub on the corner, till she was right there, standing at the panelled glass doors and looking up at 'PIZZERIA VESUVIO', each word hammered in gold and angled to form two sharp mountain slopes. They were warm days at the start of that summer, and these huge baroque capitals would be

flashing with reflected sunlight against a vermilion background, whilst underneath you had all the offerings in a humble white font: ‘Caffè, Restaurant, Pizza, Pasta. Vesuvio: Your home from home!’

Inside, the space was laid out pretty traditionally: twenty small square tables on the ground floor with the till, counter and wine racks at the back, near the kitchen. Diaphanous white tablecloths,

small accordions of folded paper printed with photos of diners and the splashy headline: 'Welcome to the magic of Vesuvio!' One candle per table, along with single stems in water – a pink rose or carnation usually. A spiral staircase at the front led up to a function room, with the bar at one end and leather sofas at the other – this was the area where Tuli entertained guests, unless it was hired out for a private party, but also where the staff mostly had their meals between shifts.

Some of the Sri Lankan cooks lived above this first floor in a flat that Nia had heard about, and she'd witness them disappearing at the end of the night through another door near the bar. She'd watch them go through a dark portal into relative privacy, one or two guys at a time, catch a glimpse of an impossibly steep flight of stairs, register the knitted warmth of their murmurs after the door was locked from the inside and they were no longer visible. There was something fascinating about the definitive way in which they sealed themselves off. They were different from her, in that they had a clear end to the day, some place that they wanted to go when work was done, even if it was just upstairs.

In contrast, she always lingered when her hours were through, unsure as to what she should do next. There was a perk for staff: on your day off you could come to the restaurant with a friend and both eat a meal for free – you knew not to choose the steak of course, and to stick to pizza or pasta, at most a glass or two of house wine, but it was still pretty generous. Nia was aware that she didn't have anyone to bring with her on these days, but Ava would swing by with a different friend from a different country each week for lunch it seemed, before heading out to comb the sights and sounds of London. The cooks preferred to avail themselves of the promised meal at night – hanging out and chattering on crates in the kitchen as usual, directing those on duty to cook their favourites. Sometimes Tuli would send in a bottle of

whisky for those who were off duty and everyone would be happy.

Nia was pretty sure that Tuli was a Catholic even though he wasn't often at church; he was all bound up with Patrick, the priest from Laurier Square. They had a thing going on Fridays at closing where they gathered leftover sandwiches from the supermarkets and bundled them with a batch of pizzas from the restaurant, leaving by midnight to distribute the goods on the streets. One time she even found herself going to Tuli in a state of chaos, asking him to help convert her to Christianity. He sent her on her way, shaking his head in mock sorrow and ruffling her hair at the nonsense of it.

'Are you mad?' he said, laughing with an edge to it, the way you do when confronted with an insult of some sort. 'Nia, what do you take me for? Bounty hunter, marking out my place in heaven type of thing? Scalps hanging from a satchel as I'm walking into the sunset? Really? What about your Hindu blood, can't you mainline some more of that into your veins at least? When you come from so much, why would you look elsewhere?'

It made her smile. There was something undeniably funny about this, even though he did mean what he was saying. Something to do with 'Hindu' sounding so exotic, the way he pronounced it with his questioning twang. And that it was directed at someone who looked like Nia. 'An affront' was how her mother had described her relationship to her skin. She wasn't far wrong – it was no secret that Nia wished for more of her father's colouring. People around the restaurant mostly mistook her for Italian with her permanent bisque tan and dark hair. In fact, she was quite sure that was one of the reasons Tuli hired her.

'Where are you from?' he'd asked at that very first meeting, minutes after she'd swung through the door to ask for a job.

‘I grew up in Newport,’ she said. ‘Welsh mother, Indian father. Mostly Welsh mother without Indian father.’

‘Ah,’ he said, as though he understood everything necessary from that clutch of sentences. ‘Got it. Come.’ Pulling out a chair in front of the bar. ‘Please, do sit down.’

Often Tuli would come back from the nightly rounds with a single oddball of choice – an unshaven man in thready denim with a smell to match and a bag of loud opinions, or more of a smarter guy in a white shirt – s omeone clocking off from a shift stacking shelves at Tesco, say, or even the red-eyed halal butcher from two doors down. One regular, a white guy in a battered brown suit and brogues, a hovering impatience in his face, was a pimp apparently. Tuli had revealed this to Nia after the man had left, mainly because she asked him the question directly.

By this time she had figured out that although Tuli operated on a need-to-know basis, he didn’t lie; this seemed to be part of his personal code, a pact he had made with himself. She had the idea that she could find things out, providing he was in the mood to respond rather than evade. It was all about coming up with the right question, the correct code to unlock the safe. And she was very curious about all of it.

He’d sit them down, these finds of his, at the front of Vesuvio where they’d smoke and talk while Nia was spraying the counters or polishing the bevelled glass at the front of the bar with newspaper, and she’d bring them a free pizza of some kind usually, but also leftovers to nibble with him – bruschetta with tomatoes and garlic, or sticky giant olives rolled in a blood chilli sauce. She was attractive to a certain kind of man, and she’d often get a nod of approval, maybe a grunt of acknowledgement for the bust and hips in front of them, their eyes lingering at her waist, cinched in with an apron. She, in turn, wasn’t sure if they expected her to giggle

like a naughty milkmaid in response, but she took it in her stride, it was no big deal. Sometimes these stragglers would play chess – by candlelight, no less, with Tuli always making a point to put Bach on the stereo – and there would be something almost regal, timeless, about the two faces in concentration when set against that music, seemingly blissful in shadow as they moved those wooden pieces to oblivion.

Every now and then he would disappear to the back to check the freezer contents in the kitchen for the next day, eye up the pizza oven or get that pale serpentine bottle labelled 'Martini' from upstairs, a huge carton of Marlboro Lights to go with it. Sometimes, it was just some cash from the plastic bag that was always hanging behind the counter. While he was gone, his guests would stare at the theatrical masks on the walls, try to make sense of the framed gondolas sliding through pastel sunsets, the strangely erotic quadrants of lace that he had pinned up too, in the name of building 'character' into the place.

One of Nia's long-term jobs was to conceive of a cosmetic makeover for Vesuvio, sort the decor out. Although it grieved Tuli to admit it, he knew it didn't quite work and she knew he wanted to give her a project that might prove satisfying. The *dee- cor* she would call it, only knowing this word from books she had read. It was an unexpected tic, to have these aberrations in fluency, even though she'd grown up with books around her, a tic that fascinated him. And he was usually ruthless in response.

'Sorry, but just checking, Nia – w hen I interviewed you, I had a sense that English was your first language, lah?' he said once, ramping his accent up the ladder of South East Asia with this emphasizing word he liked – 'lah!' – whenever she stubbed her toe on one of these boulders.

'Yes, but I didn't grow up with ponces.'

‘You grew up with whom exactly? The salt of the Welsh and Bengali earth?’ A pitying look for her predicament.

‘The former.’

‘And you got yourself to Oxford by your bootstraps.’

‘Yes, good, you’ve got the picture.’

‘Because it’s not easy being a nurse’s daughter. Too busy keeping it real in the green grass of Wales?’

‘I’d have thought you wouldn’t be obsessed with pronunciation like British people. Did they bother with that sort of thing when
you were growing up in Singapore?’

‘Oooh. Oooh!’ And then with naked joy, ‘Trying to analyse me, is it? Aren’t we fancy when we get on our high horse!’

And he got out this teddy bear he kept behind the bar – b ig beige nylon-furred thing the length of his forearm – a nd made it dance on the worktop while he hummed a melody for it.

Always, in these exchanges, Nia would throw something at him at this point: a scrunched-up crimson napkin, her ballpoint pen with the nib extended like a dart, or the whole notepad she used for taking orders, while his shoulders shook with silent laughter, hand over his heart as though, dear Lord, there was no way to contain it.

SHAN

‘He has become obsessed with Jesus Christ,’ says Ava, presenting her phone to Shan. ‘He love him. I say, look Theo, you are just five years, when you are older I will answer your questions then. He say no, answer me now, why did Jesus Christ have such bad friends that they kill him? What am I to say then?’

Shan smiles and shrugs sympathetically. Ava looks after this child for just two afternoons a week, when she is not working at the restaurant, but she has clearly become very attached to him. There is something endearing about her when she describes his tics, something in the indulgent tone of her voice.

‘His parents, they really don’t like God,’ she continues, ‘they don’t like all this Jesus talk, really the father is main one, he wants everything to be exactly how he says. But I can’t control him, Theo, he love Jesus Christ, whenever he see a picture of Jesus or a book about it or the cross, anything, he go to it, and he just stand there, staring at it, with this big eyes, I tell you, is crazy! I say don’t ask me all this now, wait until you are older and then we can talk about it, OK?’

Shan takes the phone from Ava and looks at the picture, begins composing an appropriate response to this pious child. He likes it when she bashes the parents, it is oddly relaxing, a kind of balm of mundane patter that smooths itself right over him. Instead of an image of devotion he sees a small brown-haired boy holding a fluorescent toy gun, making a fierce face at the camera. Shan frowns instinctively, takes a sip of his coffee, distracts himself by looking up at the watercolour scenes adorning the walls, the tearful clown puppets and ridged, lacy fans. He relishes these morning moments at the

restaurant, with the other cooks yet to swarm in, soaking the air with their assertions and accusations.

'But Shan, why you making a face like that!' she says, taking the spray from the shelf and squirting small circles of foam over the bar counter between them. 'You look at it – is made of plastic! Is just a toy! He get it because he complete his reading, after two weeks of reading one book, is a reward for him. Come on!'

Ava takes her cloth and wipes down the wooden surface with an enviable vigour. He is still waking up, really.

'Sunny!' She sings with a coaxing tone to her voice, as if to lure him back into good humour. It is the song from the sixties, the one by Stevie Wonder. She sings it as though it is written all for him, a private joke of some sort, this pet name. 'Sunny!'She makes a face at him, tips her head to one side and makes herself cross- eyed to suggest she is losing her mind.

Shan laughs. He is fascinated with the defiant bulge of muscles in her small arms, he can see them as she leans over to complete the job, her whole physicality is streaked with the force of these tight lines of feminine power. She is a woman who defies categorization in terms of age: long grey hair in waves down her shoulders, pinned back at the front with grips, youthful angular face with lightly tanned skin, a few lines barely framing the eyes and mouth, her black apron tied meticulously around narrow hips. Conscientious, small and strong. A woman who tells him that she saves up the scraps of money that she doesn't send back to her family in Valencia (her sister needs it mostly, for her kids, has a delinquent drunken husband she needs to kick out of her home) for her own, very odd idea of luxury: a monthly visit to a climbing wall in some big mall complex in west London.

He says her name to himself. Ava Amada. She has a brusque, no-nonsense manner about her that suggests an

incontrovertible history: some kind of extracted wisdom that makes it pointless to argue. There is something relaxing about her particular brand of conviction, he thinks, as he mops up some olive oil with the remainder of his bruschetta, sucks on the pieces of tomato, attempts to assess the experience with the blunt narcissism of a customer. They've been trying out the recipe at the restaurant with less garlic, have added tiny weathered particles of capsicum, which Shan knows to be a mistake, knows it definitively now that he can feel them on his tongue. But he is new, he knows the deal, keep your thoughts to yourself.

She returns to the bar and begins polishing glasses.

'Do you need help?' she asks, moving her towel over a glass so that the squeak repeats itself again and again, in a satisfying rhythm. Her eyes have mischief in them. Green now, grey before, a gentle change with the light. At her neck there is a crystal, a tiny rose- coloured dagger of stone, hanging from a black leather necklet.

'I mean, is that why you are here early today?' says Ava. 'Did you come to see Tuli for help?'

'No,' says Shan, disguising his annoyance with a cough. 'I'm OK.'

She laughs and a quick glint of silver is visible in her mouth, like bullion.

'What did he do, to help you, in fact?' asks Shan, turning the question back on her. 'We never discussed that.'

His tone is sharper than he intended, but Ava does not find the question to be an insult.

'What didn't he do?' she says, crouching down with a piece of cloth to polish the tiling display on the floor, large glossy hexagons in terracotta and jade, flanked by a mosaic border. 'You can say I have a big debt for how he has helped me but he does not mind that I cannot repay him. But I will be a friend to him always.'

How old is Ava? he thinks, as he watches her eyes refract the light back to him: olivine fragments of a meteorite, set forward like that in her tanned skin. Thirty-five? His own age. Forty? Forty-five? Even fifty, it is possible, with that long soft waterfall of grey hair, rippling with curl. It is impossible to say but he watches her pert behind, snug and righteous in stonewashed jeans, tied up like a present and topped off with the black bow of the apron strings, as it leaves the room and disappears through the door to the kitchen.

Ten minutes later, he is in the kitchen alone, slicing chicken, stacking the neutral oblongs of flesh on a crumpled cellophane skin, when he hears raised voices in the main space. He frowns. There is something of an aggravated quality to the discussion, and one of the voices belongs to Ava.

'Calm down, Elene!' she is saying, as he comes through the door to stand near them at the countertop and till. 'Just calm it now, Elene!'

Elene is hysterical, her face is wet with tears behind her spectacles and she keeps pulling at the fringe of her chunky dark hair. She is the Georgian waitress who works in the Polish café three doors away, and often comes over for a coffee or bite to eat with Ava. She usually has an air of girlish good humour about her, chuckles away and whispers surreptitiously during their meets as though she has escaped from school lessons rather than an adult job, for a coveted break. Today, however, she is panicked and it has the unnerving effect of making her seem older, less naive than usual.

'But she's there right now,' she says, urging Ava to listen by grabbing her arms, gulping her breath as she speaks. 'Woman police, she's there now, right now, telling Krystian to sign a paper and he won't sign it, he keeps saying, "The

man in kitchen is just washing his hands. He is my friend." Keeps on saying this. "He is my friend. Washing his hands." And the lady police is speaking in her walkie- talkie all the time. What is going to happen, Ava? If he signs it he will have to pay thousands and thousands fine, people are saying? And what about Tendai? There's a big van outside, he's sitting in there with the hoops and silver chain on his hands? On the back seat? Lots of people from the street standing and watching, Ava, you don't know – there's another police at the driving seat too, a man, asking the crowd questions out his window of the car, pointing at the Chinese shop, I mean he is even pointing here to Vesuvio—'

'OK,' says Ava, taking Elene's elbow and walking her to the door. 'Thank you. Is good you came here. Now go back, Elene.'

Elene nods and starts crying again. Ava firmly manoeuvres her out the front, turns the girl's body so that she faces left and puts both hands on her back with a gentle nod and murmur of consolation, masking the fact that she is literally pushing her down the street.

She shuts the door, pulls down the blinds and comes back to Shan. 'Go,' Ava says to him, gesturing towards the back door of the kitchen. She comes up close to him. In the sudden darkness of the room, her voice is a terrifying, scouring rasp of a whisper. 'Go now, Shan.'

Outside, there are people shouting: thick voices pummelling against horns. A door is slammed, and then they hear a car alarm singing up and down, see-sawing madly through his head.

Ava keeps her voice deep but raises the volume, as if to shake him into action.

'Just *GO*! This is the direction, Shan. Is all set up by Tuli. Anybody comes, then is you, Rajan and Guna – you three must to leave from the back before they get past us to the

kitchen. Me and Nia – w e keep them talking. The other cooks, legal ones, stay – they got their documents upstairs.' She points again, thrusting her hand to urge him out.

And then, the shouting seems louder. He thinks he can hear expletives. FUCK YOU. FUCK OFF. But he can't be sure if it is in his head, he can't separate the noise out into words. Can Ava hear it?

There is something in him that rejects the fact that he has to leave. The problem is, if he accepts that this is for real, then it is to shake hands with a pestilent understanding. The acceptance will actually be crippling for him, because it will be an acceptance of the total instability of his life. And that way lies a terror that he must not encounter. So, what then? It can all crack open and swallow him like this at any moment? Really? Is that what it is to live, now?

'Shan, bloody stop . . . standing,' says Ava, her eyes glistening now with a ferocity that is turning hostile. He is endangering them all with his inaction. 'What, you worried about Tuli or something?' He shakes his head and begins unpinning his hat.

'Shan, I am telling you for last time,' says Ava, fixing on him with what he has to accept is real, obstinate rage. 'You go. NOW. THROUGH THE BACK. What you want, a practice for this bloody thing like is fire alarm drill or something? You can see I am here. I am doing the restaurant care, what you waiting for, just go!' He turns and walks through the kitchen, keeps going, out through the rear doorway, past the pipes, the belching fumes and vapours, hoists himself over the small brick wall that borders the yard. After the murky quiet of the restaurant, the sun is agitating his eyes. His heart is like a defective gun that is shooting off all over the place.

Where to go now? He stands on the corner of the back road and removes the offending garments, folds the hat and apron

till the thick white squares of cloth are almost small enough to fit between his palms and outstretched fingers.

He looks out at the high-rise buildings in the distance, thinks of the anonymous inhabitants, the families who are living out their lives in these grids in the sky.

Here he is, saving himself again, rather than those he loves. Now that he is out of there, he feels a sudden desire to scream. A single note, over and over. Where do people go to scream in privacy? His legs are shaking as he walks, he is tripping over his feet as he tries now to run, so that he falls over in the alley itself. He hits the pavement on his side as an image of a dead body comes to him, the same body as always, wrapped in white, dark blood blotching the fabric with the remnants of life. *Ratatatatat* go the bullets in his chest, faithless and worthless. *Ratatatatat.*