

Monday 21st June

Just as the plane hurtles into the White House, Hook is shanked awake by a sharp pain in the abdomen and opens his eyes on a world of fire. Orange sprites dance on the ceiling and pins of sweat puncture his forehead. He lies on his back dazed and spread-eagled as if nailed to the mattress by his own inertia.

Hook shivers. When he'd given up waiting for Monica it was too hot for sheets, but at some point overnight the building's mediaeval aircon had ground into action and now he feels exposed, naked and gleaming like a beached fish on a pebble strand. Fiery ripples wash over the ceiling like water on glass.

Throwing his left leg out of bed Hook steps on an upturned plug. With a yelp he hops naked to the window and pulls up the blind with trembling fingers. The room is dark; he has no reflection. Pushing the panes apart and sucking in the fetid summer air he looks out on the patchwork lights of London.

Beyond Canary Wharf and the Olympic stadium to the east, an ethereal glow flares brighter than all the streetlamps and milky stars in the light-tainted sky. Hook looks at the LED clock beside the bed, beneath the wedding photo on the wall – Hook and Monica smiling outside a country church, the words digitally imposed: *THE HONEYMOON NEVER ENDS*.

Too early for the sun: must be another bomb.

Impossible to say whether it's the liver-pains or the familiar

crump that jerked Hook out of his dream. From his eyrie the damage seems limited: a faulty car bomb or a quarantined suicide bomber, the latest in a line of hopefuls failing their audition.

Whenever Hook hears about suicide bombers he feels mildly vexed until he reminds himself of phosphorous sprinkled on Fallujah, bulldozers flattening Gaza. He feels sadness for the irrational, desperate act and for those left behind but he quickly moves on. Yet this morning he's hopeful this latest bomber has succeeded in his task of shutting down the city, shorting all the circuits, because then Hook won't need to go to work.

He rolls over towards Monica but there isn't even a warm hollow in the mattress to wallow in. So, ducking beneath the meringue duvet, he closes his eyes and the converging sirens and flashing lights of the various public services are sucked down into the languid vortex of his dreams. If Monica was here maybe they'd spoon sleepily as the sun rose, but she's out and about and, for all he knows, screaming in agony in some gutter as stray dogs fight over her entrails.

He's almost returned to his own secret place when Hook feels himself ripped back into the world by a sordid revelation. Monica's fucking someone else and there's nothing he can say or do to stop her guiding this faceless stranger deep inside. The images gain colour, setting, plausible plotline; he watches Monica unzip her own skirt and unbutton her blouse, hold someone else's cock, take it in her mouth and dribble seed down her chin.

He tries to refocus. Another side-effect of Hook's coerced sobriety has been an insomnia that seems to get worse the longer the heatwave sucks all the moisture out of the city. As Hook lies on his back listening to the slumbering giant rouse, he imagines the planet's a gigantic bowling-ball tumbling down a celestial avenue of stars; pre-PC Cherokees have

ripped off his eyelids and he's strapped to this turning world unwillingly ogling the orange haze on the horizon, praying it's a bomb but knowing it's the sun.

Hook calculates the number of spins behind him and those still ahead. He's survived 13,601 turns of the earth on its axis and 37 orbits of the earth around the sun, and (assuming he makes three score and ten) has 11,966 days and 33 orbits left.

The sirens fade like the end of a song, like the end of something good, leaving only that dawning silence into which Hook imagines omens. Maybe the sound that woke him wasn't a bomb? But of course it was: what other unnatural force sends orange flares and deadbeat crumps across the sleeping miles?

Now Hook finds himself fervently desiring explosions; then perhaps something will give, the storm will break. Why does it never rain? A few nights ago a great black cloud settled almost on the balcony, its smoky fingers prying open the windows, and there was cacophonous thunder. Yet not one drop fell against the dirty glass.

His alarm pips metronomically and now fatigue harasses him, like a guest Hook hoped would come to the party but only turns up as he's off to bed. Pulling on his gown he pads to the cold white kitchen, yawns, weighs and flicks the kettle. Hook has his finger on the radio button but then he notices Shelley's door is closed. He can't let his daughter see him like this, frazzled, missing, distracted by her absent mother, so he twirls the volume to a notch above zero.

The voices on Radio 4 discuss the failed bomber; he was driving a stolen gas tanker and exploded dismally and prematurely on an industrial estate – singularly inept even by recent standards. This is the latest in a series of incidents in which only the bomber has died: cue the mocking columns, the jokes on *Mock the Week*. Hook wishes the plot had worked, sucked a few commuters into its commotion, just to

wipe the smile off their smug English faces.

‘...plans for a multi-denominational prayer of peace, which will take place at the Olympic Hall next week, seen by many as a symbolic and neutral venue where people can come together whatever their...’

Hook tweaks to zero. As he waits for the digital whistle, Hook inspects the two goldfish in the tank on the breakfast bar, christened Ken and Deirdre by Shelley: twins that fuck. He taps the tank lid and they rise blindly to the surface, mouths frantically popping. To Hook there’s something depressing about captive fish, the way they swim around in their own slime all day, waiting for the hand of god.

His hibernating laptop sits next to the fish tank, the pixelated fish of its aquarium screen-saver keeping Ken and Deirdre shallow company as it re-charges. As a teabag stains the boiled water, Hook logs on and, apart from the usual cries for help, sees a new message from Karen flagged red:

Chris has your pass arrived yet? Let me know if not URGENT.

His stomach rumbles, but the toaster remains unfixed and as there’s no gas he can’t make toast. Hook curses the bomber for spoiling his breakfast. He’s late for work and the longer he dawdles the greater his chances of bumping into Shelley – or Monica. He doesn’t need that: his cheating wife’s averted eyes and laddered stockings she no longer wears for him, bleeding someone else’s semen or, worse, fresh from someone else’s shower.

At least with sobriety, mornings are bearable. He likes the apartment at this hour, the rising sun sieving through the curtains to his left, the great blank screen straight ahead, and on the right-hand wall the Van Gogh self-portrait above the computer desk. Drinking black tea, brain blank, Hook looks up and Van Gogh’s haunted eyes stare back.

In the empty bedroom Hook dresses quickly in a white shirt

and dark trousers and decides to risk a shave. There's no hot water in the tiny en-suite so he carries the kettle through and fills up the sink. As he lathers his face Hook inspects himself sadly.

The stranger in the mirror has mileage: 13,601 turns on the clock. This time-traveller is tall, skinny, lips as thin as a rubber band. His hair's dark, shoulder-length, and unkempt, chin peppered with old stubble, his cuckolded eyes are bottle green and no longer shine.

Too bored to shave he washes off grey suds, threads a blue polyester tie beneath his collar and pushes the knot up to his apple, the tie hard with baked sweat, collars off-white. Grabbing the Librium bottle from the cabinet he returns to the kitchen and swallows two tablets with cold tea.

Slipping into his jacket and grabbing his essentials Hook walks to the front door, raps his knuckles on Shelley's portal.

“Shelley? I'm off. Time to stir, sweetie.”

He hears a body or maybe two shift on a mattress, sheets rustling, but no answer: nary a groan. Hook spots a real letter amid the pile at his feet, a reminder from the mortgage company in solemn red. Stuffing it in his jacket Hook slams the door, sees the lift down the corridor is cordoned off and walks tentatively down the echoing back stairs. He's always been bad with staircases and escalators: some minor vision problem that confuses his addled head.

As he exits Liddle Towers and walks through the drab gardens an urgent sensation makes Hook look up. A lump of concrete is falling towards him out of a clear blue sky and he dives out of the way as it explodes with a great boom on the pavement, inches from his cowering body.

Breathless, heart speeding, Hook backs away and squints up the tall building, but sees no-one lurking on balconies, no sniggering kids with time to kill. Left hand clutching his chest and taking deep breaths, he sits on the bench in the gardens

that skirts the twenty-storey block. The apartments are a few years old and already showing signs of neglect, but he's never heard of anything like this.

Maybe the residents' committee are taking revenge for his voting to admit refugees to the block. Or maybe this message hasn't come from the Towers, but from the heavens: he without sin, all that malarkey...

Holding up his left hand, weighted down by his heavy wedding ring, Hook sees he's shaking. On trembling legs he walks over to the point of impact. Concrete has spread in all directions like a Damien Hirst spin-painting, the block practically vaporised, and there's a strangely inconsequential dent in the pavement.

Hook glances over at a CCTV camera above the main entrance but it's still broken. Uncertain what to do, determined to do something, he pulls his BlackBerry from his jacket and takes a photograph; a fly lands on the lens. His heart still cutting his ribs, he shakes his head again and exits the shade of the gardens for the burning street, shivering with shock yet sweltering in his jacket.

Tasting blood, Hook hurries up the car-jammed high road selling international phone cards, newspapers, fast fried food. The heat makes the thin material of his trousers stick to the hairs on his legs. Hook's halfway to the tube before realising he's forgotten to thread a belt through his trousers; his arse sags with gravity as if gravity has nothing better to do than drag him down.

The secondary school across the gang-banged high street is half-term silent. There's something desolate about an empty playground, Hook decides – a no-man's land where warring postcodes meet to powwow. Shelley never speaks to the glowering hoods who loiter beneath the stairs of the main block but it doesn't keep her safe: nothing does, apart from her father's money, the same magnet that draws them close.

‘Taxing’, the hoods call it: reparation for injustices inflicted upon their ancestors by Shelley’s privileged bloodline. Hook has always found this notion shocking but now feels indignant; when are the Algerians paying up for our Cornish lassies, where should he post the invoice?

Between his building and the tube there are two pubs, two wine bars, three dedicated offies and a constantly-changing number of supermarkets, newsagents, kebab shops and cafes which sell alcohol. Hook counts them as he does every day, but for some reason he doesn’t feel the usual virtuous pride: he feels a deep shame that he’s given up.

Outside the derelict Woolies, cops have erected knife arches like the ones in airports. From this angle it seems that if he steps through one he might enter another dimension. Hook walks towards the barrier and a cop waves him through. But when he gets to the other side and opens his eyes he’s still in north London.

As he crosses at the lights he fishes in his pockets for change for the garrulous kid with *Big Issues*. For as long as he can recall Hook has given the kid two pounds for a one-fifty magazine that’s worthless and which he leaves on the tube unopened. Somewhere along the way the kid’s smile of appreciation became a surly nod; he suspects if he now handed over the cover price the kid might get angry.

Hook’s so busy feeling in his pocket for the right coinage that he slips in some dog shit and twists his ankle. This is the moment all the minor irritations of his life combine to become something deeper, more substantial; at this revelatory point the sum of all his miseries and frustrations are concentrated in his throbbing joint. Hook feels something must give.

The boy holds out an upturned palm.

Hook gives.

Swiping his Oyster, Hook joins the headlong rush underground. The lift's out of action so he teeters down metal spiral steps with yellow edging, a day-glo constrictor cork-screwing its way into the planet. Hook descends cautiously, one hand on the rail, as grumbling commuters fall past and warnings, announcements and regulations tumble from loudspeakers above.

The walls are decorated, dogmatic proclamations in vivid colours. Halfway down someone has scrawled, in large red marker: *Boycott Hotel Ukraine!!* Beneath, in thoughtful blue biro, Hook's added: *To be honest it doesn't sound like the sort of establishment I'd wish to frequent on a regular basis anyway.* He's beginning to think it would have been funnier just to write *OK*.

Near the bottom, tube-noise echoing, ankle throbbing, Hook sees something that makes him smile: a banking advert has recently been removed as another lost cause; the brickwork exposed for the first time in decades and there's a symbol, a cross between a CND sign and the sign symbol for 'anarchy', all sharp edges and arrows; and beneath it a teenage punk has scrawled:

Hook.

In the thirty seconds or so it's taken him to descend from street level at least three messages have been broadcast from the PA: don't smoke, forgotten bags will be vaporised, have a nice day... Hook's oblivious to it all; he's thinking about the spiky child he once was, before he was jemmied into suits, followed orders from above.

When he finally squeezes into a train Hook notes men in plain clothes with bulging trousers looking for someone to shoot. An Asian boy makes the mistake of wearing a rucksack in a public place; the seats either side of him remain empty despite the crush so Hook sits down. The kid isn't grateful, maybe he prefers having his space. Hook can relate to that. At

Moorgate everyone raises their paper as the kid's pulled off the train.

The DLR is closed due to a security alert. It's a relief for Hook to emerge into hard sunlight at the centre of the whirlwind that is the City. In the shade of a building resembling a root vegetable he swipes at the flies landing on his nose and turns on his BlackBerry, but there are no messages to say work's cancelled. A line of buses avail themselves; Hook boards the most relevant and drowns on the top deck. When he resurfaces he's floating on his invisible ship through the crystal canyons of Canary Wharf, like Hook sober and on the twelve-step programme after decades of extravagance.

When the bus stops at a temporary light Hook watches a young, business-like couple walk along the pavement beneath a monumental glass building; in its reflection he sees an escalator inside the foyer and his bus on the street, Hook gazing into space with a blank, urban expression. Then the woman ascends the escalator, the man walks along the street. Hook decides to get his eyes tested.

While he's at it, he vows to get the full MOT offered by the private family health insurance Monica took out against his will – or, as he'd put it, over his dead body. Hook's teeth feel tender and loose, his hair damp and itchy and his ears buzz with tinnitus, his liver panel-beaten by some demented mechanic. It's a bad sign he can feel his liver at all, squatting under his ribs like a troll beneath a bridge.

One morning last autumn Hook was standing in his line manager's office shaking uncontrollably, sick on his breath and guilt on his conscience.

Karen sighed and smiled. "I had a dream last night. I dreamed you were dying."

He'd dismissed it as wishful thinking and they laughed nervously before moving on to important business like how to

promote equalities among binmen. But since then the pains inside have increased in frequency and intensity; today it feels as if it's caught between an anvil and a cheese-grater, dispensing melancholy flames and squawks, and though Hook's daytime side laughs it off as psycho-schematic his night-time aspect, the side he listens to, knows Karen's right.

Hook checks his BlackBerry again: seventeen new messages, none from his wife. He's tempted to read the Trojans and trackers with clean, innocuous names like *C-lop* and *xxxsearch*, anonymous death threats from suburban warriors, spam add-ons and Nigerian Laureates: at least they show someone cares.

Monica went to a meeting at her newspaper yesterday morning, Hook's protests about it being a Sunday unheeded. She then text to say she was on a story and not to wait up. He'd gone to bed before Shelley came home from teenager land. He's gone almost a spin of the planet without speaking.

As the bus crosses the moat into East London proper and the drawbridge raises behind him Hook grabs one of the free papers that clog up the city's tubes. The heading reads: *What does your screensaver say about you?* Rather than find out Hook gets off the bus and limps to work.

The council block towers above an identikit high road: cloned charity shops, sports bars, pickpocket delis. Gangs of men hang round street corners in indigenous groups bellowing bellicose epigrams. Outside the boarded-up bank, yobs cluster round a prone body and push each other around, ululating harshly, creating more mess.

Hook looks upward, contemplating the vast building in which he's worked for over a decade. He's startled to find that the block has had its windows tinted: he's never even noticed the scaffolding, the workmen, the darkening interiors. The security door's propped open by a swivel chair but there are still barriers to the lift. The shaven-headed security guard in a

black polo shirt raises his huge, bushy eyebrows, and Hook has to fish the Oyster holder from his pocket and go through the ancient ritual of swiping his biometric ID.

The barriers beeps and won't part. Hook curses. It astonishes him that anyone would go to the bother of breaking into an office, but then he's never been so desperate that the motherboard of a PC could change his life.

He walks towards the lift lobby, but the security guard, a Canning Townie who regards people from North London like they're from another planet, shakes his head and holds up his hand, shutting him out.

As he places a huge hairy hand firmly on Hook's chest (Hook closing his eyes a microsecond, relishing human contact), the guard utters one word that tells him all he needs to know about his day:

“No.”

From the security guard's terse verbal report (his eyebrows providing additional emphasis) Hook gathers the town hall is closed due to the terrorist incident. He'd been anticipating his brie sandwich from the trolley. Some sadsack who can't get a girlfriend has deprived him of his breakfast not once but twice: his feelings towards the bombers undergo a paradigm shift.

There's no point arguing with the guard. He'll still get paid next month and today's pay-day for months gone by. All he has to do is fill the hours of freedom ahead. On the bus Hook removes his tie and breathes easily. Then his BlackBerry pings and he reads a message:

From: Jack

Subject: meet

Message: Fancy meeting in town tonight?

As if for the benefit of unseen observers Hook frowns. This

in itself is nothing odd; he and his brother meet every six months or so *sans* better halves, somewhere private where they can talk about the old days and swear good-naturedly. But it's only a fortnight since their last drink (if that's the word, as Hook's on the wagon and Jack rarely drinks to excess) – and that was so dull he'd almost taken his own life in the toilets. But right now he's yearning for a conversation with anyone who'll listen, even though Hook has nothing to say. He texts back:

Make it lunchtime?

As the bus sails regally through Canary Wharf, parlous now, devoid of that cocksure confidence, Hook checks his watch: not even ten – hours to kill. He could swim the Thames; take in a gallery or museum; money in his pocket and London with so much to offer a broad-minded adult weighed down with urbanity. Hook doesn't want any of it: he just wants a cluster of balloons to lift him Pooh-like into the blue.

When he finally reaches the West End he withdraws a hundred pound from an ATM, which also advises him to shop a benefit cheat. With no balloons on the horizon his options are limited. He could take in a bistro or brothel, get a tattoo or gonorrhoea; but nothing offers him the oblivion he seeks, so in the end he finds a gloryhole cinema off wheezing Leicester Square and watches Meryl Streep in *Mamma Mia!*

Leaving the cinema a good deal more depressed than when he entered Hook checks his watch, curses. London's gasping, the heat and insects sending people crazy, invading orifices, sapping souls: the great freeze of a few months ago just a melting dream. Entering the Coach and Horses he sits at the bar with a juice, remembering the argument he had with the aggressive barman, Norman Something; Monica explained he was *paid* to be rude.

Due to an incident in Uxbridge or somewhere similar, out

on Romilly Street an army check-point has been set up on the cobbles; a soldier peeks into the bar, gun at the ready. Hook emails Jack to bring forward the meeting and gets a quick reply. His brother doesn't mind: what else does he have to do except sit in his big house all day counting money?

Before leaving the Coach Hook turns on his 'out of office assistant' and feels much better. When he arrives Jack's sat at a small round table with his half of bitter and a book in his usual get-up of blazer, shirt, jeans and brogues: more *Top Gear* than *Top Gun*. His trimmed blonde beard's wet at the edges, his eyes nauseatingly merry with faith and the newfound joys of heterosexual love.

Hook and Jack's childhood was messy, fun and a little insecure. Home was a chaotic terrace off Holloway Road with their father, Frank, a wiry builder from some bumpkin hamlet in the Fens, who was both too young and too old-fashioned for his mother, Vanessa – a London-born grammar-school girl, liberal, wild and erratic.

Frank and Van, an odd couple who met at a Vietnam demo, were told they'd never conceive. Jack was their little miracle; then five years later, along came Hook. He sometimes has the feeling he's gate crashed this miraculous party, made it less special in a way none of them can define.

After the blazing day the pub's dark, quiet and as cool as autumn woodland. Hook cocks his hand in a drinking gesture and raises his eyebrows: smugly Jack shakes his head. He never drinks to get drunk and considers this a virtue. Hook limps to the bar, annoyed, and orders the juice of some fruit from the blank-eyed barmaid.

Carrying his pap to the table Hook perches on a tiny stool. Clearing his throat with bitter, his brother speaks in that deep, posh, confident voice: the accent their parents bought for

Hook, only to have it thrown back in their faces.

“I have Mum’s Will.”

“Oh.”

Hook sips sour juice and winces. The business of the Will has dragged on for years: there’s been the sale of their parents’ house, delayed by a naive idea the market might improve; solicitor setbacks; attorney arse-aches; finally, at a vital moment in the labyrinthine proceedings, the executor, some pedantic uncle on their mother’s side, inconveniently died.

Pulling a bulky envelope from his jacket pocket Jack wafts Hook’s nose. The hairs on his beard shimmer corn-like and the entrance to his mouth is like seaweed, like wet heather. Men, women and in-betweeners are always throwing themselves at him, literally, yet Jack has eyes only for Maya, the medic who nursed their mother until the end while weaning Jack off boys.

Hook takes the envelope in both hands and, noting it’s been opened in haste, pulls out the top sheet, so full of legalise jargon it might as well be written in Welsh. Shrugging, he passes it back to Jack, who he now sees has been reading Naomi Klein; her told-you-so face stares seriously from the book’s back cover.

“What does it all mean?”

Jack grins through his beard, hazel eyes shining with amusement. In them Hook sees himself squatting on his stool, knees touching the table, waiting for scraps. To his brother’s credit, his voice when he speaks is serious, any hint of mirth, of victory, well concealed.

“It’s... as we thought. Mum left me everything. I’m sorry Chris.”

“Ah well.” An elderly queen at the next table slurps on Guinness, creamy and black. Hook’s hungry and doesn’t feel like eating. His stomach roars; his ears whistle new songs.

“Not that it matters,” says Jack, smiling broadly. “I’m giving you half. That should sort out your mortgage. Maybe

you could take that cruise you were on about, some quality time with Monica.”

Hook looks round the pub then back at his pontificating brother, set up for life even without the new money: out of the banking world before the crash, savings invested in gold, frankincense and Maya. Jack takes a sip of bitter and smiles again, a hint of authority in his eyes, that awful confidence.

“...And maybe you could do something for Byron: give poor Karen a rest, get him into a proper home. You do realise he turns twenty-one this year? I read about this place in Kent where they use some new therapy that seems to work – to a certain extent. Expensive, but hey, who’s counting bruv?”

Hook nods wearily, puts down his juice and sticks out his hand. When smiling Jack goes to shake it, he smiles too, wider, broader, deeper, and raises his middle finger.

“Fuck you, Jack.”

Standing so abruptly the queen splutters on his Guinness, Hook goes to the bar, smiles at the unsmiling barmaid.

“Double whiskey.”

The sparkling glass levitates beneath the tap and amber fluid splashes round the bowl, then floats to his hand and to his mouth. Hook takes a deep breath and swallows the measure whole, gasping with pleasure as blood rushes to his cheeks. He counts out some coins, leaves his brother sitting there with his nursed half and that same stupid smile like he knows everything, before pushing open the door and plunging into the sun.

Hook can’t go home and as he’s had one what the hell so he limps through Soho looking for trouble. Entering the Pillars of Hercules he takes a swift pint then takes another at the Blue Posts on Berwick Street; his liver nudges him so he nudges right back.

Back on the street he looks north and sees the post office tower, its restaurant back in business and spinning slowly, so diners can look down as they nibble on blow-torched otter. Hook spits at the building, falls short. Holding up his hands he sees his fingers shaking and he puts them in his ears as if to dig out the ringing noise, then walks toward another swinging sign.

Outside a tattoo parlour Hook leans his forehead against the glass and looks at the dreamy drawings of large-breasted women and snakes, crosses and lightning. As his eyes adjust he becomes aware of a middle-aged rocker looking out, frowning through his beard. The man raises his eyebrows: Hook shakes his head and in the Magpie's cool cellar takes three pints of cider in quick succession to shut out the sun.

Why has he never had a tattoo? Never wild enough, he supposes: even as a fourteen-year old scrote on the Holloway streets he was too afraid to permanently mark his own skin, to do anything that might leave an indelible reminder of childhood.

Darkness is falling but many of the streetlights stay off. Some of the shops are brightly lit but some have metal shutters over the entrance so that it isn't clear if they're even in business. It's rare that Hook comes to Soho now. He's always felt safe in this neighbourhood but today he's shocked by the menacing figures lurking in doorways, the expletive-riddled shouts and angry conversations, the prostitutes. A young woman in a mini and fishnets stands outside a shop smoking; as he limps by a smile passes over her lips like a cloud over fields. Hook stops; if he had a tither he'd tip it.

"How much?"

The woman's face is transformed; Hook has never seen such loathing, such utter hatred. He backs away, almost tumbling over a pile of rotting vegetables.

"I'm so sorry, I –"

The woman screams. Hook runs painfully, certain he's being followed by Albanians or vampires through the narrow, bustling streets. After several corners he slows, his ankle a knot of pain, and catches his breath. Hook wipes his brow and his eyes and leans against a wall, trying to gather his wits as midges congregate on his forehead.

After a final drink in Molly Moggs Hook feels he's had enough. At Leicester Square he descends into the bowels, liver spiking and weeping. When the northbound tube thrusts through, Hook hops into the quiet first carriage and pulls out the fold-down by the driver's door. Newspaper headlines fill the empty seats but his eyes water too much to read so he stares down the carriage, chest heaving, one hand ensuring the BlackBerry is still in his jacket.

As the tube accelerates out of the station he watches all the light, noise and dark being sucked out of him like a long intestine. The past isn't a foreign country, decides Hook, it's another world, where people don't just do things differently but become their own guilt-edged ancestors.

As Hook emerges from the tube he sees the gang of youths outside the kebab shop and knows he must pass them or look weak. He tries to push by but the men murmur angrily and one pushes him in the back. Hook ignores him and walks on, hearing scuffling steps. Instinct tells him to turn round but instead he strides quicker, footsteps close behind. The street is eerily empty, Liddle Towers a beacon of false hope in the dusk.

Hook turns at last to find six or eight of the men walking quickly behind him, hands in hoodie pockets, scowling. Hook runs. Opening the gate he jogs as swiftly as he can through the scorched-earth gardens, not even seeing the mark where the block almost killed him. At the block entrance, as he pulls a

mattress away from the doors, he glances back fearfully but the jobs have stopped at the road where they cluster laughing, swapping high-fives.

The foyer of the apartment block is dark, ghastly: in order to make the building more environmentally sound the communal lighting has been dimmed. As he waits for the lift Hi-NRG mozzies blitz his ears like atomic engines; Hook hears distant screams, breaking glass, and shivers in the sultry night.

Liddle Towers was erected at the peak of the boom and they'd paid peak prices to escape from the Georgian terrace off the Cally. This is meant to be their safe nest from which to look down on a city that has at some point become strange to them.

The day after Hook had put down a substantial deposit on the flat, Monica warned him blocks like these would one day be high-rise slums. Back then it had a concierge, potted plants in the corridors, and the lift smelled of scented water. Despite these enticing amenities, only two-thirds of the apartments (Hook can never bring himself to say 'flats') have ever been occupied. As a result there were soon calls by people who didn't live there to move in families from the council's bulging waiting list. Monica campaigned against the proposals; Hook secretly voted in favour. He won. At least the concierge hung around for a while; the perfumed water dried up after a week.

As Hook exits the lift and walks to the front door, holding his key out like a torch, he hears noises within. For a moment he stops, leans his forehead against the cool metal, listens to the sounds of mother and daughter relaxing, existing and coping without any trace of Hook, the man of the house, the provider.

Twisting his key Hook pushes open the door of the cramped apartment. Shelley's door to his immediate left is ajar, her

room in darkness. The voices seep from one of those ghastly radio plays Hook can never listen to without wanting to run amok with axes, with swords...

His wife's in the galley kitchen cooking something vegan and waves brightly enough when he enters. Monica's still lithe with the flawless skin and perfect teeth American dollars can buy. Her long, auburn hair's tied back, exposing a high, intelligent and easily-furrowed forehead; her pale blue eyes look tired and troubled lately. But she looks good in her tight black skirt and thin purple blouse, padding about in her tights. Hook stoops and they kiss; her mouth tastes of garlic and he doesn't linger. Frowning, she wrinkles her nose like a child.

"Chris, have you been *drinking*?"

Her soft Boston accent stretches out the last word like silk and he shrugs, too drunk to feel shame.

"I had a couple."

Monica turns back to the dinner; her hair looks concerned, somehow.

"I thought you were... taking it easy for a while."

Hook drops his bits on the breakfast bar and gulps at Ken and Deirdre. It's not sorrow he feels, contempt, even sympathy; it's hatred, of their dependency, their supplication, their stupid gaping mouths. Sometimes he over-feeds the fish, knowing that's just as cruel, but it doesn't seem it.

"I haven't had a drink for months Monica, give me a break."

"But didn't the doctor say —"

"Fuck the doctor."

Hook expels the words forcefully and Monica winces. To ease the mood he glances sideways into the open-plan living room, which is empty, the vast plasma screen a black hole in the wall, a frame without a painting. The curtains are drawn: why does she do that, all the way up here? Who'd want to spy on *them*? As if in answer Monica goes over to the curtain and

whips them back. Hook is confronted by a wall of cardboard and yellow tape.

“What the fuck?”

“The end of the balcony gave way this morning. You must have gone out. Shelley came home and went out there and damn near fell off.”

“Shit.”

“The place is falling apart, Chris. The surveyor said we can’t go out there till it’s all been repaired.”

“How long will that take?”

“Who knows? Weeks.”

Hook is about to mention that morning’s incident but something stops him. Instead he nods at Shelley’s open door.

“Where’s Shelley?”

That damned hypocrite Monica pours herself a glass of wine from a bottle he notes is two-thirds empty. The first stirrings of an erection trouble him and Hook tries to cast aside his snap reaction to Jack’s offer. He’s in need of affection and understands that turning down a hundred thousand or thereabouts isn’t the way to find any.

Reaching up into a cupboard on tip-toe Monica holds out a clean glass with a resigned air. Hook has difficulty working out her reaction: she hates him drunk but more so sober; at least drunk he doesn’t care. He takes the glass, concentrating on his shaking fingers. Monica’s eyes examine him then she shrugs, returning to the simpler business of dinner.

“Shel’s stopping with a friend.”

When he sucks on the wine he winces. It’s good but combined with all the other tastes of the day it makes Hook’s stomach turn. Grabbing the bottle he backs away towards the safety of the blank HDTV, but his arse meets a high stool and he’s stranded. Unchecked words babbled forth.

“What – again? Who is this ‘friend’?”

When she turns from her chopping he sees now there’s flour

on Monica's cheek and trails like she's been crying. In web talk she'd be a MILF, but Hook finds that hard to accept because that makes him a middle-aged dad and he's not ready for slippers and the Telegraph yet.

"Katie, from the drama school. She's fine. I've met her parents, they're people like us."

Hook bites his tongue, and the wine filling his mouth tastes of blood. Monica knows he hates her snobbery; the only time her decadent airs turn him on is in bed. She returns to her chopping, mashing, blending: all that energy to create a woodburger. Why does he eat this tofu, this *bean*?

Monica addresses him through her sheeny hair. "Anyway, how did it go?"

Hook takes off his jacket and hangs it over the desk chair. Van Gogh scowls through his ginger beard, hair swept back like a greaser.

"How did *what* go?"

"With Jack."

Hook frowns at his wife's bobbing behind. When does a quickie turn to rape? What are the signs? Is she too drunk to consent? Is he too sober to fuck?

"How did you know I went to see Jack?"

Monica looks over her shoulder, cheek pinking. "You sent me a text, remember?"

He doesn't. Hook sips his wine before risking a reply. "I thought you didn't have your phone?"

Monica stops chopping and looks back at him with increasing exasperation. Why not move round the table? What's she *hiding*?

"What is this? I'm just asking, okay? Still no news about the Will?"

Hook watches her behind as she bends to the oven. No, no signs. Yet he's her husband – what sign does she need to send out, what pheromone telegram? Should he just take her now,

right there on the floor, or would that be crossing some line? According to an American professor he's read, women sometimes orgasm when they're raped: it's down to evolution. Women who don't get wet get hurt. Do rapists kiss their victims? That seems worst of all, somehow, that self-deceit...

"Not yet," says Hook, acclimatising to the wine.

Now Monica practically has her whole head in the oven. What with her accent and her tights it's like chatting to Sylvia Plath. What does that make *him*?

"Why so long?" Her voice echoes metallicity. "It's been months. Doesn't he have any idea about timescales?"

"I think he does, yes."

Walking backwards from memory Hook slumps on the sofa and sees the standby light on beneath the TV screen. Kicking off his shoes he stretches out, looks up and examines the spreading brown patch on the ceiling. Monica comes over, stands in front of the TV and looks at him earnestly, pushing a straggly fringe out of her eyes with one hand, raising her glass with the other, multi-tasking.

"The money would come in useful, Chris. We could pay off the mortgage and sell up."

Hook was always being harangued by his mother for being sexist when she was alive and he'd always agreed. Now he feels like a row.

"With no fucking balcony? What the hell would we sell up for now?"

"I was talking to Gonzales on the City Desk; he said the market's still plummeting. We should get out while we can. This place is going downhill. Did you see that mattress beside the garbage chute?"

"No," lies Hook. Two lies in two minutes: one for luck. He nods towards the little building site on the kitchen table.

"No dinner for me, I've eaten."

Monica stops dead, glass almost to her lip as if playing

statues; any remaining music leaves the conversation and she rushes to the en-suite. Hook zaps the remote and looks through his window on the world.

The main news is all about the failed suicide bomber, a recent convert to Islam. Hook smiles at the idea of this rabid fanatic, unable to wait, prematurely ejaculating into barren space. How disappointing, to wire yourself into your bodybag basque with trembling fingers, go in search of company, swarming with impotent fury. Then to appreciate at that final moment you're going out all alone, your intestines will splash onto empty concrete and brick, no *kafir* will make the journey with you to that honey-trap heaven you were promised by old men in safe houses.

Monica takes a pointed bath. Hook decides to get a beer. Pulling open the safe-sized fridge door he curses: nothing. When he slams the door it exhales an asthmatic groan. Now Hook's confronted by the calendar and curses again. Written in red ink on tomorrow's box he's written *INTERVIEW*.

Getting on his hands and knees on the sticky lino Hook roots through the recycling box and finds last week's edition of the council rag. Slapping it on the floury table he leafs through page after page of smiling councillors and long-serving traffic wardens. Near the back he finds an irresistible trailer:

Next week: as part of his series on community cohesion our man Hook goes behind the scenes at the Olympic stadium!

Sighing, Hook looks up at the patch on the ceiling; he'd forgotten about the story till now. There's wine left so he takes a few deep draughts. Monica emerges from the bedroom with a spare duvet, before going back in and and shutting the door. Hook decides he's drunk enough to read the letter from the mortgage company. Pulling the envelope from his jacket pocket he rips off the top and inspects it, wincing. Thinking about money his addled brain boggles and, unsure what to do,

he calls Jack. Jack doesn't return his call: nobody ever does. He's disappearing and no-one's noticed; he's becoming the invisible man.

He doesn't like checking his inbox last thing because his messages are becoming more frequent, more ominous: the virtual threat of beheading, stoning and numerous other threats from people he's never even met. But something compels Hook to log on and a bold message catches his eye:

From: Ulrike Nechayev

Subject: victimisation

Message: Hello, I have a story for you.

In some desperation Hook presses 'reply' and writes:

Tell me more.