

I was never much of a runner, even at the best of times, and this is very much not the best of times, I might even say it is the worst of times, is that a thing, of course it's a thing, not only is it a thing but there's stiff competition for it, that particular thing, worst of the bad times, even restricting myself to the past twenty four hours I'm not sure this is the outright winner, whatever, it's definitely top three, or should that be bottom three, who gives a shit, Jesus, what is this nonsense going through my head, Sarah sweetie, get a grip, just concentrate on the rhythm

one two one two

keep it up, don't ever stop.

And don't look back, whatever you do.

I'm more of a dancer than a runner, at least I was, back in the day, a great glorious gurning goldfish-mouthed box-squeezing pill-head of a dancer, that's what I was, and yet here I am, wheezing away but running nonetheless, slogging through this overgrown field, one mud-caked foot after the other. The trees on the other side of the field are still stubbornly far away, and slightly uphill which doesn't help, a smudge on the slanted horizon of this ocean of tall thistles and rutted mud. They don't seem to be getting any closer, but that's an illusion, right, it must be, I am moving forward after all, bit by bit, stepping, stamping, again and again, burning legs, lungs fit to burst, my ankle twisting on the uneven ground.

There's movement amongst the trees. I clocked it as I was hiding out in the hedge. It was what got me on my feet and running across this open ground. People on the road. On their way to Banbury.

I want to throw up. But that would mean stopping and I mustn't stop. The boys are close behind. I can hear them shouting, all sorts of filth, what they're going to do when they get hold of me. The language, honestly, what would their mothers say. They are not going to get hold of me. They can't. They mustn't. Unthinkable.

Except now I've gone and thought of it.

Don't think of a banana. Don't think of death. Don't think of yourself, kicking, screaming, thrashing about on the ground ...

one two one

But Jesus how big is this bloody field, bigger than it seemed when I decided to make a run for it, that's for sure, a quick dash across open ground, that's what I thought, make it to the wood, get lost amongst the crowd, shake these randy teenagers off my tail.

'Come on darling, we'll show you a proper good time.'

His voice tumbling through the air. Reaching round my throat like a noose.

Actually, wood doesn't seem quite the right word, copse is better, but even that misrepresents, frankly, the distribution of the trees, which now I look more closely is more like a line, maybe two, one on either side of the road. All nice and green and pretty in the summer no doubt. But this is a bleak and bitter day in March, and the bare branches scratch at the empty sky.

What was it that Neil said? Cynical pomposity. My defence mechanism. Maybe he was right. Not that it matters now. I don't mean to speak ill of the dead and all that, but fuck him sideways with a rusty nail, it's all his fault I'm in this mess in the first place.

Now I've wiped my eyes with my arm, blinked my vision back into focus, I can see them all quite clearly. The people on the road. Lots of them it looks like. Refugees. Will I be able to lose myself amongst them? I'll just have to. It's my only hope.

One last push, sweetie, come on.

Keep it together.

one two

But my legs are so heavy and my chest feels like it's going to explode.

Jesus I could murder a cigarette.

I could just stop.

I can't stop. I know what that means.

A proper good time.

one

Don't turn around.

I turn around.

They're a bit red-faced and out of breath but they're young and horny and not to be put off, not now they've got it so clear in their minds, what's going to happen, what they are going to do. The lead one, Mr Proper Good Time I presume, has a dreamy and slack jawed expression on his face. I hardly need imagine what he's thinking. He catches my eye and blows me a kiss.

They're just doped up teenagers, that's all they are, playing at being soldiers, with their camouflage T-shirts and trackie bottoms, guns slung over their backs. PLAW. The People's Liberation Army of Wessex. One half of the Bristol-based Alliance. Last Christmas, they were probably grilling rats in some bombed out warehouse in Keynsham and pondering their imminent demise at the hands of the Foundation. Now the tables have been turned and it is the Alliance who are on the up, forcing us all out of the Cotswolds in front of their push towards Oxford. These kids are making the most of their unexpected reprieve, rejoicing in being alive and full of the joys of spring.

At least there's no sign of Bristol Geehaddy, the bloody BeeGees, although they must be around here somewhere, since with the PLAW they are the other half of the Alliance, and they would surely not pass up the opportunity for a bit of vengeance on the infidel.

Not that I'm a particular fan of either side. I've got more reasons than most to hate the Foundation. But at this particular point in time, it's not them that are on my tail.

'Come on darling. You know you want it.'

How very original of you, I want to shout back. Or, how would you know what I want you little prick. Or even just, fuck off back to Bristol.

But I don't shout anything. I haven't got the puff for that.

I turn back.

The trees, such as they are, are still so very far away.

My feet are so heavy.

There's snot trailed slug-like across my cheek.

I can hardly breathe.

The rattle in my chest trips over itself into a full-blown coughing fit that itself segues seamlessly into a sequence of heaving retches.

I stagger and come to a halt.

I'm bent double, hands on my knees, stitch like a knitting needle stuck in my side, a single string of viscous spittle connecting me to the earth, which, I suddenly notice through my once-again watery eyes, is alive with all manner of bugs and beetles and other scuttling things, crawling over each other in their pathetic determination to be anywhere other than where they are now. I'm sure I've

looked better in my time. In fact I was quite the looker back in the day, just a few short years ago, with my blonde dreadlocks and my tight nylon T-shirt, silver varnish on my nails and glitter on my cheeks, a whole different story to the scrawny and heaving harridan you see before you now, not that it seems to have put off the Bristol boys, who seeing me stop have slowed as well, closing the gap between us with a cocky swagger, Mr Good Time still out front, his lips turned into a thin smile, one hand cupped over his crotch, the other clasping his gun.

I don't know if there is a god up in that grey and filthy sky, but I raise my face anyway, just in case. What was the point of that then, I ask this god that may or may not be there, to give me the gift of life and then make it shitty in all the many and varied ways it has been? What lesson exactly am I meant to take from all of this? Not to become a subsistence farmer in the Cotswolds? That doesn't seem like much of a revelation to take with me into the hereafter. I would have hoped for something a bit more profound. Something you could imagine being shared as a meme on the Network, flowery typeface against a photo of the sea, or a picture of that Boody bloke, hand held up like a soldier at a checkpoint. Take life one step at a time. Be the change you want to see. Something deep like that. But I guess beggars can't be choosers.

The Bristol boys are fanning out around me. They exchange sideways glances with each other, establishing their complicity, making sure they really are all in it together. Not that there's anyone to stop them, but it's always good to have your mates on board when you are doing something that you know is wrong. They are taking their time. There's no rush now. I'm obviously not going anywhere any more. They're savouring the moment, enjoying the anticipation. Mr Good Time's Adam's apple bobs up and down as he swallows.

Behind them there's the rolling slope of the field and then the hedge I sprang from a few minutes ago in my desperate and futile bid for escape. There is a splash of colour amongst the dark green. My stripy hippy coat. It's my favourite coat. Alright, I admit, it's my only coat. But I do like it. It got tangled in the hedge as I got to my feet and now it is flapping cheerfully in the wind.

Like it's waving goodbye.

I hate to admit it but this does seem awfully like the end.

And then, suddenly, some strange creature rises up, out of the earth it seems, although I guess it was just hiding, covered in grass and twigs and bits of thistle, holding in its hands a gurt bit of wood with nails sticking out of the end, which it swings at Mr Good Time, smacking him square around the head, hard, and I hear the thud of the wood and the crack of his neck as his head snaps back. There's a softer and more sickening sound in there too, like smashing apples with a hammer, which is the worst part of it, and I see him swing round, Mr Good Time, blood and spittle arcing through the air, and I'm still panting and gasping, too out of breath to do too much except think, hello, what's going on here then, and he's fallen to the ground, and this whoever it is, it's a she though, I can see that now, a woman about my age, her skin coppered and wrinkled by the wind, she bends down and she picks up his gun, fires a short burst at the twitching bastard as he lays on the ground in front of her.

'Fuck me' I manage to wheeze, and she turns and smiles, showing a mouthful of broken teeth. There's more gunfire, from the other two PLAW boys. She flinches at the sound, but she keeps her eyes fixed on mine as she ducks and weaves. In reality, the boys are panicked and they are firing wildly, without aim, but in that moment it seems to me as if she exists in some altered time dimension and she is aware of and then dodges every bullet as it floats towards her through the thick and gloopy air, and I think she must be invincible, this woman, a spell-casting witch or a superhero, or perhaps even a divine emanation, One Love made flesh, sprung from nowhere to save my life.

At the extreme edges of my vision, I see that other figures have risen from the ground and are moving towards the PLAW boys, who haven't noticed that they are surrounded, so focussed are they on shooting at this strange woman who has suddenly appeared in front of them.

There is another burst of gunfire and the illusion is shattered as one of the PLAW boys finally finds his aim. It's now the woman's turn to spin around and fall to the ground, a look of surprise on her face, as if she believed in her invincibility too, just as her three mates leap onto the PLAW boys, hollering loudly and swinging their own bits of wood with a ferocity born of adrenalin and fear.

I have no idea who these people are, not PLAW obviously, but they don't look like Foundation either. I know better than most how fucked up the Creed Foundation is, but even it manages to equip its soldiers with more than bits of wood. These are just locals, I suppose, out to do over whoever they can. Not that I care too much. I could hang around and ask them, but they're not guaranteed to come out on top, and even if they do who knows, really, how friendly they might be. I decide not to wait to find out. I've got a bit of time all of a sudden to put some distance between myself and whoever the winners of this fight turn out to be, and that unexpected opportunity gives me my second wind.

Once I reach the trees, I stop and peer round one of the trunks back out into the field. The blokes with the bits of wood have overpowered the PLAW boys. One of them is still busy swinging at somebody on the ground, another is collecting the soldiers' guns, the third is running over towards the woman, kneeling next to her, cradling her body in his arms, bellowing wordlessly at the sky.

For the past twenty four hours my only thought has been to get to Banbury. Now I'm nearly there, I realise I have no idea what I'm going to do next. Say what you like about subsistence farming, you always know what tomorrow will bring. Mind you, this last twenty four hours was a bit of a surprise.

I feel in the pocket of my trousers for the piece of paper. At least I haven't managed to lose that.

I lean my forehead against the tree, the rough bark rubbing against my skin. Keep on keeping on, eh Sarah, that's all you can do. One step at a time. One two one two.

The unmistakable feeling of a gun pressed to the back of my head.

I freeze.

'Turn around, my lover, and no funny business.'

I turn around.

The man in front of me has brown skin, black hair, and an unkempt and bushy beard. The yellow crescent on his black beret only confirms what I have already guessed.

Bristol Geehaddie.

A bloody BeeGee.

The BeeGee tells me to sit down against the tree trunk, which I do, while he peers round it and out into the field. He takes a few pot shots at the ambushers, who duck in response and disappear back into the grass.

On the road in front of me, and as far as I can see in either direction, is a solid mass of people, all trudging slowly towards Banbury. In amongst the crowd, there are horses, carts, trolleys, even the odd truck or car. A few people glance up at the sound of the gunshots, furtively, as if to take an interest in anything around them is to invite trouble, which it probably is to be fair. One small kid, who is being dragged along by his mother, stares at me, his eyes wide in his dirty face. I wave and he smiles. His mother notices and slaps him. Somewhere down the road, there is more gunfire, a woman screaming. No one reacts. That is behind them and so not important.

'Bloody bastards' mutters the BeeGee. He looks round at me, back at the field, up and down the road, then back at me again.

He is not quite what I had expected. For years the Network has fed the image of Bristol Geehaddie as sleek, maniacal killing machines dressed head to foot in black, bloodied swords in their hands, the severed heads of their enemies hanging off their belts, shouting 'ally ackbar' as they get ready to chop you into little pieces. This guy is wearing a grubby red T-shirt that doesn't quite cover his belly. The crack of his arse shows above his tracksuit bottoms. He has a Spiderman rucksack on his back. He looks at me with slow and shuttered eyes. I've seen this look in soldiers before. It says, I don't really give a shit, and it always gladdens my heart when I see it. It says the soldier in front of you is not a fanatical true believer in whatever bullshit cause he's been fooled into fighting for. It says the soldier in front of you is one of the sensible ones whose only interest is in getting to the end of the day without being killed. A noble ambition, by the way, shared by us all. I have no idea if this guy saw me run across the field, or if he thinks I just popped off the road for a quick gander at the ruckus going down. Either way, it is clear he has no interest in opening up a line of enquiry that might lead to him having to do something risky and stupid like running after a bunch of crazed locals he has just seen bludgeon three people to death. If only the officers were also like this, wars would be a lot less dangerous.

'Go on my lover' he says, jerking his head towards the road. 'Get back on your way. There's nothing to see here, just a bunch of hoodlums innit.' He nudges me to my feet with the end of his gun.

Perhaps there is a god who is on my side after all.

I lower my head and join the press of people on the road.

I walk through the crowd against the direction of travel, keeping to the middle of the road to avoid being seen by the soldiers who patrol the wooded verge, pushing past tired parents and children, old men with bits of string tied round the tops of their trousers, tight-lipped older women, rouged and blue-rinsed, their hands thrust deep into the pockets of their quilted jackets. All with their eyes on the ground in front of them. No talking. Like they've already given up.

That's why I am walking against the flow. I haven't given up. I'm looking for something. Anything. The next thing.

It's the animated conversation that first draws my attention as I walk past the muddy white pick-up. The tailgate is down and the two men sit with their legs dangling over the edge, leaning against the dark green tarpaulin that covers whatever it is in the back of the vehicle, furniture by the look of it, tables and chairs, a wardrobe, god knows what good they think all that will be. One of the men is in his late forties perhaps, wearing jeans and a pale denim jacket, a dark blue shirt, open at the neck to reveal a thin necklace of wooden beads. The other man is younger, a hollowed out and spooky looking kid in combat trousers and a hoodie, acne speckling his cheeks, a wispy moustache clinging for dear life to his top lip.

I have no idea what they are talking about.

‘That bit’ says Double Denim, ‘where it comes out of his stomach.’

‘Yeah, right’ says Spooky enthusiastically.

Double Denim leans back and arches his back as much as he can. He starts moaning and twisting, acting out, I can only presume, that bit.

Spooky laughs.

‘And that thing just comes out, don’t it’ says Double Denim, ‘and looks around, screeches like, and then fucks off.’

Spooky shakes his head. ‘Funny as fuck.’

I’ve slowed down as I walk past them, turned my head briefly and caught Double Denim’s eye. I don’t stop, but I do make sure I put a bit of a roll into my hips as I pass by.

‘Hello blondie’ says Double Denim.

Now I turn. Double Denim’s face looks kind, it’s crinkled in all the right places and his eyes shine bright above his warm smile. You don’t see a kind face too often these days. He’s still got all his teeth too, I notice. Not bad for nearly fifty. I catch the unmistakable smell of weed.

‘Alright boys’ I say.

Double Denim shifts over slightly and pats the floor between him and Spooky. ‘Why don’t you hop up here darling?’ he says. ‘Take the weight off your feet.’ He takes a draw on the spliff in his hand.

‘Help us smoke this, you know what I mean.’

‘Don’t mind if I do’ I say.

Double Denim helps me up onto the back of the pick-up. I squeeze in between the two of them. Spooky’s body tenses. His eyes run up and down my body. He leans forward, his hands clasped between his knees, staring intently at me, but he says nothing.

‘Nice wheels’ I say to Double Denim.

‘They’re not mine’ he says. ‘They belong to this fine gentleman here.’

‘Oh really?’ I say, turning to Spooky, who blushes.

‘Yes, well, it’s my mate’s pick-up, he’s driving like’ he manages to stammer.

‘We were just conducting a little bit of business’ says Double Denim.

‘Oh yeah?’ I say. ‘What kind of business?’

‘Let’s just say’ says Double Denim, tapping his nose, ‘we were arranging for the exchange of certain medicinal products of a herbal and chemical nature. Which reminds me. Where’s me manners. Here you go, blondie.’

He passes me the spliff.

The pick-up lurches forward about five yards before stopping again.

‘Jesus’ says Double Denim, bracing himself against the side of the pick-up. ‘Does your mate know how to drive?’

‘Yeah well he’s done a bit of it on the farm and that’ mutters Spooky.

It is so nice to have a bit of weed again. It used to be my bread and butter, I would have a smoke before I even got out of bed in the morning, but it has been a couple of years since I have had so much as a sniff of it. Ever since we moved to our bloody cottage in the Cotswolds.

‘Well, this is nice’ I say, looking in turn at the two men on either side of me. ‘Don’t let me stop you chatting.’

I smile at Spooky.

He smiles back. His teeth, on the other hand, are fucked.

There is a pause. Spooky eventually realises it is his job to end it.

‘Have you seen *Alien*?’ he offers.

‘What? Have I seen an alien? Do I look like a nutter to you?’

‘No’ he says, shaking his head. ‘The film. I mean the film.’

'No' I say. 'I haven't.'

'Oh you should. It's really good. There's a bit where the alien comes out of this bloke's stomach. It's really gross.'

'Urrrgh' says Double Denim laughing and miming the actions again.

'Sounds lovely' I say.

'No, it's great, you'd love it' says Spooky, enthusiastic again. 'You can get it on the Network. I could download it for you. You could watch it on your phone.'

'Thanks sweetie, that's really nice of you but I haven't got a phone.'

His eyes widen in a comic-book look of horror and amazement.

'Really?' says Double Denim. 'You ent got a phone?'

'No. Is that so bad?'

'It's just unusual, that's all. Whatever, blondie, it takes all sorts innit.'

Spooky nods sagely.

There is another pause in the conversation.

I decide to take pity on them.

'So boys. What's going on then?'

'What do you mean?' asks Double Denim.

'All this' I say, waving my hand at the crowd on the road behind us. 'Herding us out of the Cotswolds like a bunch of bloody sheep. Forcing us all into Banbury. What's that all about?'

Double Denim shrugs. 'Fucked if I know, blondie, just go with the flow, that's what I say. Keep your head down and don't ask too many questions. The secret to a long and happy life.'

'What you've got to ask' says Spooky, 'is why it is they want us all in one place.'

That threatens to be it, so I nod, encouraging him to carry on.

'Coming so far out of Bristol, through disputed territory like this, they've got to watch their supply lines, you know what I mean? If they can get us all out of the way, keep us in one place, then they don't have to worry about randoms attacking their convoys or anything.'

'That makes sense' I say.

Double Denim grunts.

'Makes it harder for the Foundation too' says Spooky. 'They can't hide amongst the population, right, 'cos there isn't one any more. Once the Alliance have cleared the place, then anyone they see walking around, they don't have to think about it, do they, just bang bang, no questions asked. Plus, there's a lot of hungry mouths to feed in Bristol. Cotswolds is prime farming land. They force everyone out, they can use it for themselves.'

The more he speaks, the more sense he makes. I'm surprised.

'One more thing, though' he continues. 'They could have sent us all to Chippy or Bourton or some field in the middle of nowhere. But they didn't. They sent us to Banbury. You have to wonder why that is.'

'And what's the answer?' I ask. 'Why is it?'

'Banbury is as close as you can get to Foundation territory without actually being in it. It's right on the border innit. The border between settled territory and disputed borderlands. That's fact number one. Fact number two, the Alliance have only just captured the place. There was some pretty heavy fighting, so I heard. But they just steamed out of Bristol, headed right here without stopping, pretty much.' He swallows several times, hard. I don't think he is used to speaking so much all in one go. 'Now, what I think you have here is an evolving situation, where the Alliance's original plan is in the process of being superseded.'

'What do you mean?' asks Double Denim.

'They dropped those leaflets, telling us all to get the hell out of Dodge and make our way to Banbury, on, what was it, the twenty second, right?'

I don't know what day of the week it is, leave alone the date, but I nod anyway.

'According to my sources, the Foundation didn't even start to attack Banbury until the twenty fourth, and didn't take it until the twenty fifth, yesterday.'

I frown. 'But -'

'What do you mean, mate' says Double Denim, cutting me off. 'Sources? You some kind of spy or something?'

'No course not' says Spooky, swallowing again. 'It's just people I know on the Deep Network, we share information about what's going on and that.'

'The Deep Network? Now that's some seriously illegal shit.'

Spooky shrugs.

'What people?' asks Double Denim.

'Eh?'

'What people do you know on the Deep Network?'

'Just people.'

Double Denim holds up both his hands. 'Alright mate, take it easy, forget I asked. This conversation is straying deep into conspiracy nut job territory, that's all I'm saying.'

'Think what you like' mutters Spooky.

'It makes no sense' I say. 'Why would the Alliance send us off to a place they hadn't captured yet?'

'That' says Spooky, 'is the right question.'

He pauses for effect.

'Well go on then' says Double Denim. 'Since you know all this secret shit. Tell us what the fucking answer is.'

'I think the plan was to use us as part of their strategy. Have a whole bunch of refugees turn up, then drive us into town to give the Foundation a bit of a headache. Or use us as cover for their main attack. You know, let us get shot to shit as they advance. Cannon fodder. But they miscalculated. They took Banbury quicker than they thought. And now we're all turning up and the party's over.'

'So what does that mean?' I ask. 'For us, now?' I don't know how seriously to take what this guy is saying, what with all his sources and strategies and evolving situations, sources on the Deep Network, all that malarky. Double Denim is right, this is prime conspiracy territory, but I know better than most that just because something sounds like a conspiracy theory doesn't mean it's not true. Bitter experience has taught me the Foundation is capable of anything.

'This is what I mean by an evolving situation' says Spooky. 'Think about it. What have you got pretty much right next to Banbury? A dirty great big tarmac road running all the way to Oxford.'

'Shit' I say.

'I think they're gonna do the same thing they were planning to do here, just in Oxford instead. Drive us along the road with the soldiers kind of mixed in. Give them some cover. Make the Foundation pause a bit before they shell the road. Not that it will stop them in the end.'

'You think?'

He nods. 'It's the right decision innit. Militarily, I mean. It's a bummer for us, obviously, but otherwise the PLAW and the BeeGees will just walk right into Oxford won't they.'

'Fucking hell, mate' says Double Denim, 'I think that wizz has gone to your head.'

'Think what you like. I don't care.'

'But if that's what you think is going to happen' I ask, 'what are you doing trudging into Banbury with everyone else? If I thought what you think, you wouldn't see me for dust, I would be legging it so fast in the opposite direction.'

'That's exactly what I said to Dave. Come on mate, I said. We've got a pick up and a couple of gerry cans of diesel. Let's fuck off to anywhere but Banbury and take our chances there. But where will we go, he said. We're bound to run into PLAW or the fucking BeeGees and they'll just chop

your head off as soon as look at you. And even if they don't get us, we're out on the open road in bandit country without any way of defending ourselves. But Dave, I said, at least that way we've got a chance, this way we're just walking into certain fucking death. But he wouldn't have any of it. He's got that herd mentality, you know what I mean? He thinks as long as we are part of a big group like this, nothing can really happen to us. What can I do? He insisted.'

'What can you do?' asks Double Denim. 'You can bugger off, that's what you can do, leave him to it, stupid bastard.'

Spooky frowns, like this is really the first time he's considered this. 'But we're mates' he says. 'Besides, I'm the one with the money. He wouldn't be able to manage without me.'

I glance at Double Denim and clock him glancing at me.

Double Denim laughs. 'Jesus Christ' he says. 'That's loopy, mate.'

'Yeah, well, it's what mates do innit. They look out for each other.'

'I think that's very noble of you' I say, patting his thigh. 'We could all take a leaf out of your book.' He looks at me and smiles.

'Well' says Double Denim, 'for what it's worth, I think what you're saying is all bollocks. This is all just like, we're coming through the Cotswolds and we don't want you in our way. Mark my words, they'll keep us all in Banbury for a week or so, then, once they've all gone off down the road to attack Oxford, they'll forget about us and we'll all be able to fuck off back home again.'

'I hope you're right' says Spooky.

'Of course I'm right. So don't you go spending all that money of yours buying wizz from the likes of me. You're going to need it later.'

'Yes dad.'

'Fuck off. It's good advice. And' adds Double Denim, wagging his finger at Spooky, 'if you've really got a wodge like you say you have, then you make sure you hide it good. Stick it up your arse or something, somewhere where the pickpockets can't get to it.'

I notice how Spooky instinctively pats the far pocket of his trackie bottoms. I also notice Double Denim noticing the same thing. I further notice that Double Denim doesn't notice me noticing him. Well bad luck sunshine. That was a good play, but I'm the one sitting next to the poor bastard.

'Well, I think you're onto something' I say to Spooky. 'It makes sense to me. Your analysis of the situation. Very clever. You're obviously a smart cookie. Loyal too. The way you're sticking with your mate, it's admirable. There should be more people like you, then the world would be a better place, you know what I mean?' I shake my head sadly. 'But as much as I'd like to stick around and get to know you better, I think after all you've said, I'm going to take my chances out there in the fields. Nice meeting you boys. Go well. Peace, One Love, all that jazz. I'm off.'

'No' says Double Denim, half-heartedly.

'Do you have to go so soon?' asks Spooky intently.

'I'm afraid so sweetie' I say. I lean over and kiss him on the lips. He is surprised, bless him, but he doesn't let it put him off for too long. He kisses me back and his hand moves up to my tits. I let him have a grope for a few seconds before I pull away. 'Sorry sweetie' I say, 'gotta go.'

I pat him on the thigh and jump down off the tailgate, turning to wave at his disappointed face as I push my way through the crowd.

He might look disappointed now, I think to myself, but not half as disappointed as he will in a moment when he discovers I lifted the roll of notes from the pocket of his trackie bottoms while he had his tongue down my throat.

It's a relief to be in possession of some cash I can tell you. I had to run from the cottage with nothing but the clothes on my back. And my stripy hippy coat of course, not that I've got that any more. That is a little worrying actually, the more I think about it. Although it is not too cold right

now in what is, I would estimate, getting on towards evening, it is only March and the nights still have a bite to them. I'm not sure exactly how far away we are from Banbury, but the speed this lot are going there is no guarantee we'll be there by nightfall. If I still want to get there at all that is. I have options now. That's what cash does. Makes choice possible.

I'm not stupid enough to get the notes out of my pocket and count them, but I ruffle the edges of the roll with my fingers as I walk along. It feels reasonably thick. I estimate about five hundred in tenners. Not bad. Enough to keep me going until I make alternative arrangements.

After a minute or so of walking, once the pick up has disappeared behind me and I am sure I have melted into the milling crowd, I turn around and make my way back, with rather than against the flow this time, more surreptitiously, keeping on the other side of the road from the pick up and staying as hidden as possible. I risk a quick glance as I pass the pick up and I see Spooky standing, red-faced and angry, scanning the crowd and swearing loudly. Double Denim is nowhere to be seen. Off to find someone else to scam, no doubt, after I beat him to Spooky.

I remember when I was little, Dad took me down to the river. Out in the country somewhere, I have no idea exactly where, I can only have been five or six maybe. Already it felt unusual that he was actually taking me somewhere. He was normally too drunk to spend quality time with his daughter. To be honest, he was normally too drunk for anything except shouting and fighting. Anyway. It was a sunny day and we stood on a bridge with the sun behind us, staring into the water. Look at all them fish, said Dad. What fish? I said. I couldn't see any fish. The water was clear and not very deep and I could see the bottom no problem, the stones and the sand and the weeds rippling in the current, but I couldn't see any fish. I thought he was having me on. Just keep looking, he said. There's loads of them. So I kept looking like he said. And then suddenly, I saw one, as clear as day, just floating there in the water, dark against the sandy bottom. And then, like magic, as soon as I saw that one, I saw another, and then another, and another, until I realised that Dad was right, there were loads of them, and now that I could see them all I couldn't understand how I hadn't been able to see them straightaway.

It's the same with the grifters and grafters here on the road. Double Denim was the first one I clocked, but now I can see them all over the place. They're the ones moving quickly through the crowd, eyes not on the ground but darting all around, on the look out for the next opportunity, their movements quick and purposeful, energy still in their bodies. The ones who have not given up, but who have decided to take hold of whatever scruff is left on the neck of their destiny to see what they can shake out of it. That little kid, eight or nine years old, he's one, in his grubby T-shirt and baseball cap, gently pulling at the zips of the backpacks as he pushes past their wearers. The two girls in their early twenties, with their red lipstick and their cleavage on display, they're ones for sure, the way they are pressing themselves up against those lads and laughing loudly at their jokes. The two teenage lads with a length of hose and a plastic bucket, working away with a screwdriver at the petrol cap of that ludicrous four by four marooned in the middle of the crowd. The bloke with the canvas bag stuffed full of cigarettes slung over his shoulder, shouting 'get yer genuine Oxford ciggies here'.

I don't mind admitting that Spooky's theory has freaked me out a little bit. It all sounded plausible enough, but then maybe he just got it all from some film or computer game or something. I'm not sure it makes too much difference even if he did. He, and the money of his that is now gracing my pocket, has clarified something for me. I don't want to go to Banbury any more. I've had my hairy times out in the fields, but any comfort I might feel being part of this crowd is false comfort. That feeling you always get when you are around a load of people, that nothing really bad can happen, that everything is going to be okay, that feeling is a liar. Terrible things can happen to big groups of people just like they can happen to people on their own, and I would prefer to feel in control of my

own destiny rather than be part of a passive herd. I've got what I need from them, now it's time to fuck off.

Well, not quite time actually. I should probably wait until it gets dark. In the meantime, I would quite fancy finding somewhere I can take the weight off my feet a little bit, perhaps even have a quick nap.

An old bloke gets out of the driver's side of the four by four and walks round the back of the car towards the two teenagers, shouting and waving his hands about. The teenager with the screwdriver ignores him and keeps working away at the petrol cap, while the other teenager walks up to the old bloke and pushes him in the chest. The old bloke staggers back, but the teenager now grabs him by the front of his checked shirt and pulls him in close, whispering something in his ear. I can't hear what he says obviously, but the old bloke holds up his hands and nods. The teenager lets go of him and the old bloke scurries back round the four by four into the driver's seat again, engaging the central locking which gives a solidly audible clunk. I can see the face of his wife in the passenger-side rearview mirror, anxiously watching the teenagers work away.

I walk over to the two lads.

'Oi oi' I say to announce my presence and they look up briefly. The one with the screwdriver carries on while his mate steps towards me. I've had more than enough of swaggering, cocky teenagers for one day, so before he can do anything else I head butt him, hard, and as his hands go up to his bleeding nose, I kick him in the balls. He goes down and his mate looks up again, a little more concerned this time. One thing I have learnt over the years is that if you are going to steam in to something, then steam in hard and fast and make sure you finish the job, so I slap the screwdriver out of his hand and slam his head against the side of the car. As he staggers back from the impact, momentarily confused, I pick up the screwdriver from the ground, grab him by the back of his hoodie and push him against the car window again, his cheek pressed hard into the slobber and blood from his previous brief encounter with the glass. I press the screwdriver tight under his jawline. Snot bubbles from his nose. He's pissed off but there's not much he can do just now.

The other teenager struggles gingerly to his feet, stooping and stepping from foot to foot, his nose already swelling. 'I don't give a shit what you and your mate here do' I shout towards him, 'as long as you fuck off and do it to someone else, alright?'

He nods.

'Good' I say.

He bends down and picks up the bucket and hose, dropped when I nutted him, not taking his eyes off me.

'Go on then' I say. 'Fuck off, there's a good boy.'

He scurries past me, the hose and bucket in one hand, the other cupping his balls.

I push the screwdriver a little harder. 'How about you, sunshine?'

Bubbles nods and says something which I can't pick out because it is hard to talk clearly when one side of your face is pressed up against a car window and you've got a screwdriver stuck under your jaw, but it sounds vaguely affirmative. I give him a shove that sends him sprawling onto the ground.

'Off you go then' I say, and off he obediently goes, scrambling after his mate.

I can see the old lady's wide-eyed face in the rearview mirror. I put the screwdriver into my pocket because, well, you never know, then open my arms wide, nodding towards the back seat of the four by four. How about it?

She glances at her husband then nods briefly.

I hear the clunk of the central locking and open the back door, slipping gratefully onto the back seat.

'Thanks' I say. I pull the door shut behind me and there is another clunk as the central locking engages again.

The inside of the car is spotless and still has that new car smell. It looks like it has hardly been used. The old man sits rigid in his seat, holding the steering wheel at ten to two and staring unblinkingly at the road ahead. The old lady turns round and looks me up and down. Her face, framed by a flowery headscarf, is a picture, caught between revulsion, fear, and greeting. Her whole head trembles as she tries to work out what etiquette demands of her in this circumstance.

'We didn't expect the roads to be so busy' she manages finally, as if we are on a trip to the seaside or something.

'It's probably because of the school run' I say.

I smile. She doesn't. 'Not on a Sunday, dear' she says.

Silence descends. You can practically see the gears grinding behind her glassy eyes as she tries to think of something to say.

'Would you like a sweet?' she asks.

'Sure.'

She takes a tin out of the glove box and hands it to me. I prise it open. The sweets inside are all stuck together, like they've been in there a long time. I'm not fussy. I break one off and pop it in my mouth. Barley sugar. I hand her back the tin.

'Thanks.' Let no-one say I don't have my manners.

'You look tired' she says.

I nod. 'Yep.'

I lay back on the backseat, my muddy boots on the pale cream leather. A look of panic passes over her face, quickly suppressed.

'The traffic wasn't too bad to begin with. We've never known anything like this, have we George? And on a Sunday too.'

'They should get out of the bloody way' says George and bangs on the horn with the heel of his hand.

'It won't make any difference George, no-one's paying the slightest bit of notice.'

There is a tartan blanket in the passenger side footwell. I pick it up and drape it over me, covering my head in case Spooky comes by. The blanket smells of lavender. My eyes start to feel heavy.

'Honestly' says the old dear, her disembodied voice strangely restful to me in my tartan cocoon.

'You don't know whether you're coming or going these days. First it's one lot then the other. I just wish they'd make up their minds. That's the trouble with you young people these days. You're all so flighty. It might be the Alliance now, but last year it was the Foundation, off to conquer Bristol. Well, that didn't last very long did it? In my day, if you decided to invade Bristol, you would jolly well stick at it until the job was done. Nowadays, you can't get anything done. No attention span that's the trouble. And it's us in the middle who suffer because of it. I've always said, I've nothing against these Bristol people, not even the ones with the funny beards, I'm sure they are all perfectly nice people once you get to know them, but now it's their turn, they're just the same, waltzing through without a care in the world, oh you've all got to go to Banbury, and they never think do they, if it's convenient or not. We were meant to have the grandchildren coming to visit this weekend and now we'll have to rearrange and May is just completely full up, so it will end up being June and we haven't seen them since Christmas. We're from Chipping Norton you know. We don't mind the drive. We always like a little drive, don't we George, on a Sunday afternoon. We thought we could do a bit of shopping while we were there. We don't get to Banbury very often, I don't know why, it's not that far really is it, and it's such a delightful little town, especially the centre. I don't like all those modern houses so much, I don't know why they do that, spoil a perfectly decent little town by building all these houses. But you never know when the roads are going to be open, do you. I know

they need the element of surprise and all that, but would it really kill them to let people know when they are going to close the roads? They could put it in the local paper, or even on this Network thingummy, my husband gets it on his phone, don't you George, I don't see the point of it myself, but they say it's very good. We didn't realise there would be so many people. Banbury will be packed. I do hope we'll be able to park alright.'

As the old dear witters on from the other side of the blanket, I drift off to sleep for the first time in thirty six hours.

There is a loud banging on the roof of the car.

I sit up, instantly awake. My first thought is that Spooky has somehow found me and wants his money back.

I look around. We are still on the same road, but it looks as if we have moved a bit. The clock on the dashboard tells me I've been asleep for just over an hour.

There are a bunch of soldiers around the car, BeeGees and PLAW. Nothing to do with Spooky then. Thank god for that. My fat lazy BeeGee friend from earlier is nowhere to be seen though. This lot look a bit more serious than that.

The old dear has wound down the window, and one extravagantly bearded guy is talking to her, conspicuously holding his gun in front of him.

'The thing is' he is saying, 'you need to get out of the car.'

'But why?' she is saying. 'I don't understand.'

'You don't need to understand, my love. You just need to get out.'

On the other side of the car, George is still gripping the steering wheel, staring straight ahead, desperately ignoring another soldier tapping on the window with the end of his machine gun.

Time for me to go. I pull the door handle. The central locking is still on. I lean forward.

'Oh hello dear' says the old lady. 'Are you awake? Did you have a nice sleep?'

'You need to unlock the doors' I whisper quietly to her.

'Don't do it Marjorie' says George. 'They're all bloody hooligans.'

'Who are you calling a hooligan, Grandad?' says the soldier at Marjorie's window.

Even though the soldier is more amused than annoyed for now, this is unlikely to end well. I really don't want to be in this car when the soldiers' patience runs out.

I see the button that controls the central locking, just behind the gear stick.

'We'd rather stay in the car thank you all the same' says Marjorie to the soldier at her window. 'It's a little too busy out there for us.'

The soldier at George's window continues tapping on the glass.

'Fuck's sake' sighs the soldier at Marjorie's window.

I lean forward and press the button.

At the sound of the clunk, George looks round, panic and confusion on his face.

As the soldiers pull the front door open, I open the rear passenger door and slip out. While the two soldiers are busy hauling George and Majorie out of their respective seats, I turn my back and walk away from the car.

I hear someone, one of the soldiers I presume, shout 'oi you there, stop' but there's no way I'm going to do that. I should be able to disappear into the crowd pretty quickly. It's not as if they will give too much of a shit, not now they've commandeered the car, which was obviously what they were after in the first place.

I carry on walking.

There is the sound of a shot, then shouts and screams. Everyone around me crouches down and moves as far away from me as possible, which is not that far given how the road is so crowded but which still leaves me standing there like a missed skittle.

‘You come back here now’ shouts the voice, ‘otherwise the next shot won’t be into the air.’