

A Departure

Tom Ward

“a shockingly good debut novel about what happens when one world brutally ends and a new world begins. At its black heart, hope, humanity and a dream of escape. It will stay with you for long after you have read the final page.

Tom Ward is a prize-winning journalist, an accomplished novelist and quite possibly the best young writer in the country. The smart move would be to read everything with his name on.”

Tony Parsons, Bestselling Author of Man and Boy

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For Sue and Andy

The Author

Tom Ward is a 23 year-old British writer. He was named the recipient of the GQ Norman Mailer Award in 2012, in conjunction with British GQ. He also recently graduated from Newcastle University with a 2:1 in English Language and Literature. He has had short stories and journalistic works published on various websites.

Tom has been taken on by the Johnson & Alcock Literary Agency, and can be found on Twitter at @RenegadeViper

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Prologue

The sun covered them in its rays and made them golden. He held her hand up to the window, a slender silhouette against the glare from outside. Dust motes danced down her wrist and along her fragile arm. He sat up from the bed and gazed outside. A sycamore swayed lazily, the sky was a vibrant blue: a brilliant June day. The empty sky stretched before him like the empty days. College had become a hazy memory and now there were no obligations, except to each other.

She sat up beside him and slowly stroked his arm. The radio droned in the background, snatches of the news interlaced with their conversation.

“What are you thinking?”

“...A major volcanic eruption inside the Arctic Circle...”

He smiled. “I’m wondering why you always ask me that? As soon as you ask me I start trying to think about what I am thinking and then...”

“...first time this volcano has erupted in almost 4,000 years...”

Her fingers brushed his hand and his hairs stood on end. “Ok, what were you thinking?”

“...no way near as catastrophic as the Novarupta eruption of 1912, but nevertheless has raised concerns due to f...”

“I was thinking how everything is perfect. College is over, no more exams, I can drive...”

“...perts say this change in activity could be to do with global warming and the rising temperatures which the Arctic is enduring as a consequence, howev...”

“Yeah,” she smiled. “Well done. I’m so relieved, we’re finally free; as soon as we leave this bloody town we will be anyway. Do you think... do you promise we’ll still see each other?”

He looked into her eyes, staring up at him from under long lashes as sunlight burnt her cheek.

“...inclement weather, cold winds over the next few days coming down from the north, unusual weather for this time of year. Ha! And I thought it was summer, what a shame...”

“Of course we will. Durham is right next to Newcastle. Half an hour away. Not even that. I’ll be able to come up and see you all the time and you can come down and see me, it’ll be fine. It’ll be great when we’re both at uni, without our parents around...without your bloody mum...”

“...avy rain, no surprise there! Well who...”

“Hey, what has she done to you? She’s always been nice. She cooks for you...”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry. You always slag her off though.”

He felt her fingertips stand still on the back of his hand.

“Anyway, let’s not talk about that. You asked me what I was thinking, and I was thinking that everything is perfect at the moment... and I think the main reason for that is... is being with you.”

Something caught in his throat and his tongue felt too large for his mouth. “I love you.”

Her nails pressed into his skin and her eyelashes became thick and wet. A pair of tears fell from blue wells and slid like a slow avalanche down her cheeks.

“Hey, don’t cry...”

“I’m not... it’s because I’m happy.” She took his hand in hers and blinked her tears away. “I love you too.”

He could feel her smile in his chest.

“I’m so happy. We’re going to be together forever, aren’t we?” she asked.

Outside, blue skies stretched as far as he could see.

“Yeah, we are. Forever.”

Chapter One

Three days later

The car was smoother than his; quicker. He was going eighty-five but didn't notice. A mixture of sweat and blood stung his eyes and turned his vision red. A car stood abandoned in the middle of the road and he swerved around it, just in time. There was no driver to honk the horn. A body appeared on the road and he swerved again, but didn't quite manage to avoid the obstacle this time. The right wheels bounced over the macabre speed bump.

His house appeared suddenly to his left and he pushed the clutch down and hit the brake hard. He was hardly aware of what he was doing. Too fast for his own driveway, he hit the fence that separated the two properties. The wood buckled and splintered, the windscreen cracked and the car stopped, half buried in the wreckage of the fence.

The seatbelt would not come off. He began to panic, his hands slippery and not his own. Finally, he unclipped the seatbelt and pushed the door open. He lurched from the car, clambering into the splintered fence and grazing his ribs. "Fuck!"

The boy grasped his side as he stumbled over the snapped matchsticks that used to be the fence. He stood a moment with his chin in his chest and sucked air between his teeth. He took a deep breath and straightened up.

Cornfields stretched away across the far side of the road. There had always been a stillness, a peaceful presence in the air when he looked into those fields. The corn swayed lazily on a summer's day and was calm in the cold nights. Now, in the evening dusk, the corn was serene, there was no wind to trouble it. In the distance, behind the field, the sun burnt low in the sky, a fiery smudge in the dusk light. The boy wiped something warm from the corner of his eye.

As he separated himself from the fence shards, he became aware of a jingling in the silence. He looked around. There it was, the man from *somewhere* on his street, riding his bicycle through the emptiness towards him. The man had a ruddy face that was a permanent shade of red, perhaps from sunburn through constantly riding his bicycle, or perhaps from the broken capillaries that formed an alcoholic's web across his cheeks and scabbed nose.

The swaying of the bike indicated the latter was the cause of the man's complexion. He approached the boy, the sky behind him mixed from a melancholy palette; deep blue stretched away from either side of the setting sun, the sun itself canvassed in crimson as though it was bleeding the last of its warmth into the western sky.

The man was almost there now. All the boy could do was wait to meet him. The only other option would be to run into an empty house. And the boy did not want to be alone, not yet.

The man's mood seemed juxtaposed against the darkness of the sky behind him as strains of a song echoed down the street. "Run, rabbit run, rabbit, run run."

The man was fat. A trilby hat just managed to balance on his head, and a dirty white vest held in his beer-bloated stomach. His face was decorated with white muttonchops and a moustache bristled above his top lip. He looked like a Jim. The boy decided this was his name. He could call him whatever he wanted to, what did it matter now?

With, "He'll get by without his rabbit pie," Jim reached the boy.

The boy expected him to draw level and stop his bike, but instead Jim seemed to suddenly stop still; one minute he was sitting on the bike, the next he was standing there with his legs apart as the bike continued, wavered momentarily, then crashed into a lamppost.

"Never mind, eh?" Jim said. He drew close to the boy, his eyes darting quickly over the wounds on his face.

"How are ya? Fine night for it, hey?" With this, Jim half pirouetted, half spun around, gesturing

behind him and towards the setting sun. He completed his dizzy circle, swayed, and then regained his balance. The air between them had turned to alcohol.

“How are ya then lad? How’s yer dad? Where are they all?”

The boy ignored this. He did not offer any conversation to the man. He was not so sure his name was Jim now and he realised he only knew the man by sight. Now, especially, he had no reason to be polite. He waited for Jim to answer his own question.

“Who cares, eh? We have the place to ourselves! I’ve just been down to the pub, there’s no one there! Empty! You want to join me fer a drink?”

“No, thank you.”

“Fine. Hey, you know what we need? A car like that!” Jim jabbed a swollen finger in the direction of the car half buried in the remains of the fence.

“We could go anywhere in a car like that, what do you think? I don’t know that my bike is much good anymore, do you?” Jim gestured past the boy to his bike, the boy followed his nod, but before he’d even had half a second to turn his head, Jim started up again.

He drew closer to the boy and lowered his voice to show he was serious. “It’s our world now mate. Let’s take your car.”

“Erm, no, you’re all right. I’m going to stay here for a while, see what happens.”

“Then I’ll take it! I’ll have a ride round, then bring it back.” Jim’s eyes bulged as he laid a fat hand on the boot of the car.

The boy wanted him to leave, but he couldn’t let him have his father’s car.

“No, this is my car, get your own. There are loads on the roads, all the way back from Hull. There’s no one to drive them and no one cares about them.”

Jim laughed. “I don’t want one that’s all smashed up; I want a nice new one.”

“This one *is* all smashed up! Can’t you see the windscreen or these broken shards of fucking wood all over it?”

Jim patted him on the shoulder again. “Calm down son, just give me the keys and I’ll be off, don’t worry.”

The boy’s eyes began to water. He took a deep breath, attempting to stay calm after the trials of the past few days. He mustered his last reserves of energy for a final show of defiance, hoping that after this, the man would piss off.

“Look, this is my car, not yours; there are plenty of cars abandoned on the road, with no one to drive them, so go get one of those. This one is mine, I’m sorry.”

Jim seemed to suddenly sober up. The mist in his eyes cleared and he coughed up a ball of black phlegm that he spat to the ground, leaving a black string hanging from his mouth.

“I don’t think you understand lad, give me your car!”

Wild eyes now and a flash of silver. A six-inch knife appeared in Jim’s hand. The boy was too tired to be scared and was almost ready to give up to death, to go meet everyone he cared about, but he knew he could not give up that easily.

Jim lunged. The boy ducked to the side and found a broken fence post in his hand. He swung it into Jim’s skull and the trilby spun away as the wood cracked. A fat fist hit the boy’s cheek and he landed on his back. Jim launched himself on top of him and the boy rolled out of the way at the last second.

His fingers touched a stone and he closed his hand around it desperately, striking Jim a blow across the side of his fat face. They were sprawled side by side on the ground now. Jim lay face down, groaning into the concrete and then slowly, he began to rise. The boy saw this and threw his weight on top of the man and stayed there for some time, staring out across the fields. His eyes stung, his lungs were burning and he was hardly able to breathe through the pain.

Jim did not move and the boy remained on top of him, adrenaline shaking through his veins.

Sweat weighed his T-shirt and his hands were clammy. After what seemed like a lifetime, he found the strength to get up.

He knew Jim was dead; that he had killed him, but it had been in self-defence. He couldn't get in trouble for it and, besides, who was there around to arrest him? Who was there *alive* to arrest him?

The boy was calm as he turned the body over and did not flinch when he was met by Jim's stony eyes, no longer full of drunken mirth. The white vest was tie-dyed red and the knife stuck out from Jim's gut. He wondered whether to take the knife. What should he do with the body? There was no one around to see it, but supposing someone did? Suddenly, he was scared. He was eighteen but felt like a helpless child. He stood up on shaking legs and walked away from the corpse lying in his driveway.

He had imagined what it would be like to kill someone: video games, action films. He had never been sure how he would feel if he were ever in that situation, but he hadn't imagined this feeling of emptiness, almost impartialness. Was killing that easy? Suddenly he doubled up and let forth a great green-black splurge of vomit that coated his jeans, leaving a long wet trail hanging from his mouth. He slid to the ground, kneeled in the puddle formed there, and vomited again and again.

With what felt like his last reserves of strength he pulled himself to his feet, using the still-standing shards of next-door's fence as a purchase for his slick hands. The splinters did not register.

The boy half-ran, half-limped around the side of his house and dug in his pocket for his key. Seeing the keyring felt like someone had punched his heart with a defibrillator. It was a small bear holding a heart, inscribed with the words '*Ti amo.*' His girlfriend had brought it for him as a souvenir from her holiday in Sicily. It was the last thing she had ever given him, a relic from an ancient time.

He stood motionless for a moment until a noise startled him into action. A dove taking flight. The key clattered in the lock and fell to the ground; the bear brushed his sick splattered jeans.

"Fuck!" His curse was a desolate and lonely noise that soon became swallowed by the empty evening. There was a certain heaviness in the air, as though the grief of the past three days was a tangible weight, asphyxiating the familiar stillness. The boy shivered and tried the lock again. This time the key found its place and the door opened.

Once inside, he slammed the door shut, locked it, drew the bolt and threw down the blind. His first thought was to put the lights on, but he was afraid someone would notice from outside. Maybe there was someone who had seen what had happened to Jim; or even another Jim, wanting to kill him and take his car. However, if he left the lights off, he would not be able to see if someone lurked in the shadows of his home, waiting with equally hostile intent.

"Get hold of yourself."

The boy took a breath and waited for his heart to calm itself. He knew that no one was in the house; they had locked it when they left that morning and it had still been locked when he had returned.

Try the lights. He hit the kitchen switch and the lights surged and then fell back into darkness with a crack that told him the fuse had gone. It was the same in the hallway. He opened a cupboard. Where were those fucking candles? Matches. Of course the first didn't work, nor the second. He let the snapped sticks fall to the floor and managed to light a candle with the third.

The light bobbed and cast shadows around the room. They were more pleasant than eerie, reminding him of bygone Halloweens, dressed up as a bin-bag witch with the house lit by candles. He would never see his family again. He forced these thoughts to the back of his mind, he had to overcome the feelings which ripened in his stomach; he had to keep busy.

He shook these thoughts from his mind, then dashed around the empty house and closed all the windows, drew the curtains and checked all the locks.

Moonlight shining through the window illuminated the bathroom mirror. The moon was fat and

lit the room like a lunar floodlight borrowed from an empty football pitch. The boy studied the face staring out at him from the cold mirror. Deep lines of black shadow marked his features whilst the moon picked out his cheek and eyebrow along one side of his face. He seemed to have aged years, decades even.

His face was smeared with blood, dust, dirt, sweat and tears, a patchwork of grief detailing the hardships of the past three days. The face staring back at him was not his; the reflection did not even seem real. The boy reached out a hand and touched the reflection in the mirror, expecting it to dissipate like a ghostly fog, but it did not, and when he retracted his hand and touched his actual face, the reflection did the same.

He closed the blind and brought the candle in from the hallway. He had left it outside, afraid to leave unguarded darkness behind him. The candle added warmth to his reflection and seemed to banish the ghostly imitation created by the moonlight, which was now safely shut outside.

He paced about the bathroom and decided to try to wash, but only a thin gurgle of tepid water escaped the tap and all he succeeded in doing was spreading the dirt around his face. He stood in front of the mirror, not knowing what to do next and realised that he was alone in this house. Completely and utterly alone. There might not even be anyone left in any of the houses on the street. Was that a good thing? This was his home, he should not feel afraid, except now, in darkness and candle light, everything seemed foreign and unfamiliar. His life in this house seemed like a distant memory, only half recalled. Now there was no life to make it his home; it was simply an empty house.

Practicality took hold and he went downstairs into the kitchen once again, the candle sending shadows racing ahead. He was reluctant to take the knife from the drawer. He knew he should feel repulsed after what had just happened with Jim, and he also thought that some sort of attack was unlikely, but a few days ago he had thought it unlikely that England, that the World, could be plunged into such catastrophe. Tucking the kitchen knife into his belt, he headed back up stairs and into his bedroom.

He did not recognise that room either. Clothes lay across the floor and his desk drawers had been flung open. It seemed more than fifteen hours ago that he had hastily packed as many of his belongings as he could fit into his old college bag and loaded it into the car, saying his goodbyes to this place, for what he thought was going to be forever. It was a mournful occasion, being reunited with his belongings again, his books strewn across his desk, his guitar resting against the windowsill; even the sight of his bed filled him with a sense of loss. It was like seeing an old friend again, but not having enough time to talk with them, and knowing that you'd never see them again, not in your entire life. He felt stupid, ashamed. People had died. He had lost his family and his friends and now he was upset about leaving his belongings behind.

Grief over the loss of his family re-surfaced in his mind but he pushed it back, saving it to deal with at a later date. Keep busy. He tore the quilt and pillow from the bed and trailed them through to the bathroom. It was the only room with a lock. After he had shut and bolted the door he felt safer, hidden away in this stronghold. It was the same feeling he had felt as a child, making dens; in here his solitude was almost impenetrable.

The thought of sleeping in the bath crossed his mind, but he dismissed the notion almost as soon as it appeared, he would be safe enough sleeping on the floor. No one would be attacking him with mortars or heavy artillery, if anyone attacked him at all. It was probable that no one even knew he was in there, and even more probable that whoever did notice would have their own problems to deal with. However, the boy did not entirely believe this, and he blew out the candle as a precaution against a telltale glow being seen from outside. The candle had offered him warmth and had bolstered his morale, but it had to be sacrificed to ensure his safety.

He arranged his pillow and quilt and laid down, wondering what to do with the knife. Should he

keep it tucked into his jeans, or take it out and lay it nearby, perhaps under the pillow? Comfort won and he took the knife out and laid it next to the pillow, within arm's reach.

As recently as three days ago he had always gone to sleep with the knowledge that he would be safe in the night and would wake up again in the morning. Now, as he closed his eyes, Jim's stained vest appeared before him and the bruise on his face began to throb incessantly.

He shook his head as though chilled by a sudden draft and turned onto his back. He tried to keep his mind busy, tossing and turning and thinking happy thoughts. He remembered how he had tried to sleep in the bathroom once when he was younger, the idea seemed stupid to him now, but then it was an adventure. His father had almost tripped over him as he came in in the middle of the night and he'd shouted and told him he was an idiot for sleeping there. After that he had abandoned his camp and gone back into his own room.

Thoughts of his family continued to linger in the forefront of his mind, and he continued pushing them away, playing tennis with his memories. He did his best to keep his mind occupied and resist the thoughts he did not wish to entertain. But it was impossible to fight against his exhaustion and, as he began to surrender to sleep, his emotions crept over him.

Before, he had been a wind-up car, running without any thought and on limited energy, an empty vessel, but now he felt a crushing weight as everything came surging back. He had not been able to properly accept what had happened over the past three days before now. It was impossible that it could have happened: that over two thirds of the country could just drop dead. His friends, his family, almost all of them, had died over the past three days. He had watched some of them die.

He remembered walking through town with his friends on Saturday, three days, and yet a lifetime ago. Families shopped, mothers pushed prams, college girls in short skirts giggled, a tramp busked and a couple hurled insults at each other from opposite ends of the street. Rubbish blew lazily and the sun painted over the dismal grey of the town with fresh warmth. The college girls shrieked and held their skirts down as the breeze blustered about them and the tramp began to shout in their direction, his vodka bottle outstretched in offering. A crowd of pigeons hobbled about a woman on a bench, scattering into the air as a young man in a tracksuit ran past, glancing over his shoulder.

The wind picked up and rubbish flew now, given life and wings by the wind. Skirts blew freely around the waists of the girls and the pigeons ducked and weaved in the air. Glass shook in the windows of the shop fronts in a rattling melee and a baby began to cry.

The gust became a gale. The tramp, resplendent in a suit jacket and jogging bottoms, had the cap blown from his grime-caked scalp. The wind grew to a crescendo, rubbish forming an almost solid wall as it churned and flew in the air and then, as suddenly as it had started, the wind abated and the day was calm, rubbish dropping from the air as if someone had suddenly pulled the plug.

Along the street, people stood for a moment as though frozen. Then they began to fall. They did not trip, putting their arms out for protection; they fell lifelessly, straight down, like trees being felled. Some fell like dominos, knocking over those next to them. Some fell into shop doorways and confused the automatic doors, which opened for them and then shut, and then opened again, the bodies awful doorstops.

A teenage girl screamed at the still forms of what had, minutes ago, been a squabble of her friends.

The baby's cry had been replaced by her mother's. "My daughter! My daughter, someone help my daughter, please, she's not moving!"

The tramp glanced around in bewilderment. He took a gulp of vodka and limped off down the street after his hat, moving as fast as he could go. The boy was left standing there, surrounded by unmoving bodies, surrounded by the still forms of his friends as a few people milled about the street in shock, not knowing what to do, like dazed survivors on a battlefield. An old Indian woman cradled her husband's head in her arms, begging him to get up.

“Michael, Michael!” His mother’s voice. “Come on, we have to go. We’re leaving today. We’re going to a safe place. Come on, you can sleep on the boat.”

“Ok,” he said aloud, half opening his eyes.

Of course, it was a dream. That was how his mother had woken him that morning. He lay there on his bathroom floor and the fog of the dream hung over him.

Slowly, he began to realise where he was, to remember what had happened. He was alone in the night. As a child he used to wake up in the night, scared, but it would be all right because his mum would come, and then the morning would come, and he would be fine. Now his mother would never come to him again and the morning would offer no protection. The morning would only shine a new light on the horror of the past days.

Tears flooded Michael’s eyes and ran down his cheeks. He felt no shame in his tears and there was no one around to judge him, anyway.

He lay there desperately alone and let out a meek cry in the night. “Mum.”

But he knew she would not come. There were times when he had hated his family. He had spent long hours hating how mundane their lives were, how depressing and how stifling this town had been. He hated their choice to have children there and to live there instead of seeking somewhere exciting, exotic. He had been jealous of his friends, whose parents were richer and could afford holidays abroad, and he felt guilty now for condemning his parents for their complacency in life.

Michael realised now that none of that mattered. There had been so many stupid arguments and disagreements that he could never apologise for. He knew his resentment had been normal, but that did not alter how he felt now. His family were gone and he would never get a chance to tell them how much he loved them.

He fell asleep thinking of his sister when she was eight. Of how her mouth was full of toothless gaps and of how she had cried because she was scared of monsters. And he thought of how he had told her there were only monsters on the other side of the world, trying to cheer her up, but had only managed to upset her more.

Chapter Two

The next day was a scorching example of what June should be. The sun burnt the dry earth and birds flapped drunkenly from tree to tree. Light slanted in through the closed bathroom blind and cut Michael's face into alternate strips of shadow and light. The previous night's tears had left his cheeks streaked with the sweat, blood and mud that marked his face.

He awoke slowly as the light crept over him. His eyes burned and there was a steady throbbing behind his forehead. His mouth was dry as he staggered to the sink. Still no water. He tried the bath taps. Clear liquid splurged forward as pipes creaked inside the walls and Michael hurriedly gulped mouthfuls of the warm water from his cupped hands. The water ran for a few seconds before spluttering and gurgling into brown, watery mud, which splashed back at him and over his face and T-shirt.

Michael took the T-shirt off, wiped his face with it and stood, studying himself in the mirror. He felt and looked hung over. The lines he'd noticed in the mirror last night were now clearly pronounced in the daylight and the corners of his eyes looked red and sore. Stubble had grown around his chin; the only place he could grow it. A few days ago he would have been checking the rest of his face for new black hairs, but he did not think of that today. His skin felt greasy and he tried to think of a way to get clean. There was plenty of shower gel and shampoo in the cupboard, but without water, they were useless.

He scanned the room for something of use or an indication of what he should do now. The knife glinted at him from beside his pillow and he remembered the previous night's fears. In daylight, the knife seemed an unnecessary precaution and Michael was almost able to convince himself that the past few days had been nothing more than a bad dream. The lurching of his guts told him it had not and the image of Jim lying dead flashed across his mind. He slid the knife into his belt, taking no chances.

He made his way downstairs through the dormant house, past his sister's bedroom where goldfish floated at the top of their tank. Downstairs, the house was bathed in shadows, as if waiting for everyone to wake up. Light crept in at the edges of the curtains and the letterbox hung still. No post today.

A layer of dust had settled over everything in the kitchen and flies buzzed over unwashed pots in the sink. Michael opened the fridge and was met by darkness. The smell told him it must have turned itself off sometime after they had left the previous day. Cooked sausages on a plate looked edible enough and he salvaged them along with a bottle of Coke, which he hurriedly opened and held to his dry lips, the brown liquid spilling over his chin and making his eyes water.

Michael almost finished the whole bottle, then put it down on the counter and burped loudly. He began to laugh, but stopped himself as his eyes met a photograph of his sister on the kitchen counter. He would never be able to laugh at anything again.

He continued his search for food and found bread and Coco Pops in the cupboard. The bread was fine but when he took the milk from the fridge it was sour, so he left it on the side and put the Coco Pops back. Toast and sausages for breakfast, then. The toaster didn't work; neither did the cooker, nor the lights, nor the TV in the next room when he tried them. The electricity had finally run out. His father had said it would, acting like he had been in this situation before. Now it looked as though the power stations had either finally shut down, or the electricity was being siphoned off elsewhere.

Michael pulled out a chair from the kitchen table. The chair legs scraped loudly across the stone floor and set his teeth on edge. He sat down and began eating his dry bread and sausages and washing them down with warm coke. It wasn't the best breakfast he had eaten.

He thought of his girlfriend and how they had lain in her room four days ago. The world was

perfect. Now, he would never see her again. She was another person to add to the list of those who had left him. Who did he know now? His friends had all died or left town, but left for where? He didn't know. They had left into the unknown, just as his own family had tried and failed to do yesterday.

Michael chewed the dry bread slowly and thought suddenly of his mother's face, the eyes unmoving. How could it have happened? They were *soldiers, British soldiers*; not some rag-tag group of African rebels, drunk and stoned, but professional British soldiers.

The telephone rang and he came back to the present, except it wasn't the telephone but a dove warbling outside, perhaps the same one that had scared him last night.

"Fuck off," he said under his breath.

He glanced sideways without turning his head as though trying to direct his curse at the dove through his eyes.

"Cooo." The dove was not troubled by the boy's response; it was only a bird and the troubles of humans were not its own.

"Fuck off!" Michael yelled, and with this, he stood and upturned the kitchen table, sending his plate skimming through the air to smash against a cupboard. Outside, the dove had departed and silence had descended.

Michael stood on weak legs and brought a hand to his forehead. His headache had worsened. He raided the cupboard and tins and packets spilled forth until he found some paracetamol, two of which he washed down with the warm coke. What the hell was he going to do now? He had no one, nowhere to go. Yesterday, driving back from Hull, the radio had said that United Nations had ordered Britain be quarantined. All channels. An emergency national broadcast. After repeating the message for an hour, the radio had ebbed into silence and there had been no more voices on any channel.

The few days after Michael had been witness to his friends suddenly dropping like wilted flowers to lie at his feet had been pandemonium. On that first day he had stood in the middle of the high street for what had seemed like hours, trying to comprehend what had happened, the situation too surreal to understand. There had been the sound of a ringing phone then as well, and after a while he had realised it was his phone, and suddenly, he was holding it to his ear as his mother's voice brought him out of his daydream.

"Michael, Michael...are you there? Answer me...Answer m..."

"I'm here...what, what's happening?" he said, hesitating, stammering.

"I don't know love, are you okay? We're all fine. We're all fine. Dad's just gone to get your sister; she's been at Natalie's house... she's so upset."

"Mum...what's happened?" he asked, and he tried not to look at the bodies lying in the street like fallen leaves.

"I...I don't know love. I don't know. Come home... please." As she said these last words, her voice had cracked and wavered and then there was silence for a moment.

Michael wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "I will, don't worry... I love you mum."

"I love you too son, come home." More sobs, and then he had hung up, embarrassed and alone in the street.

He did not know what to do now either. For a long while, he stared out into the garden and was not even aware he was staring. His mind was blank, subconsciously absorbing the beautiful day outside. Small, quick movements captured his attention like a ripple spreading outwards on the lake of his consciousness. A bird alighted from a tree, excreting a trail of black faeces that hung in the air momentarily, before falling earthwards and landing in the centre of the trampoline in the garden.

The impact brought Michael back to reality, his head clearer now as he moved away from the window. He knew what he had to do. He could not stay there, it would be pointless. There was

nothing in this place for him anymore. He was not waiting for someone; no one was coming, certainly not his family. He did not want to stay there on his own either, what sort of life would that be? He did not want to live like some sort of vagrant in a dead town, scavenging for food like a feral dog.

The only option was to take a car and leave. His own car would never last and his parents' was not in the best condition. He would have to take an abandoned car from the streets and just drive away and never come back. He did not have an exact plan, but he thought perhaps if he got to Dover there might still be a ferry across to Calais, or some soldiers to help. He shook his head, no, not soldiers, he should avoid them at all costs.

It was decided. For the first time in four days, Michael felt good about something; he had a plan and a direction to take. Surely there would be a boat at Dover, perhaps not a ferry, but maybe something small. Something. Perhaps the French were helping survivors to escape. '*Survivors*'. He hated that word, as far as he was concerned he had not survived anything, he just wasn't dead. Perhaps the French would be helping the 'Not-dead' to safety. They had said Britain was being quarantined, but surely they would help him; he wasn't infectious. There must be thousands of 'Not-dead' all over the country, all wanting to escape. 'Not-dead'. That wasn't much better than 'Survivors'. It was too close to '*Un-dead*'. Perhaps 'People' was the only title he could use and he wondered why he had not thought of that before.

For the second time in as many days, Michael found himself rushing around his house collecting his belongings for the last time. Much of what he would have wanted to take, he had already packed the previous day and taken to Hull, leaving it behind in the commotion after the panic had started, abandoning his belongings to their fate beside the river.

The loft hatch opened with a creak. The ladder swung down and hit the floor with a bang, narrowly missing Michael's feet. He climbed up and gingerly plugged in the light, trying not to touch the exposed wires which looked like they had been gnawed at by a rat. He flicked the switch, forgetting there was no electricity. Of course the light did not come on and Michael was left feeling foolish as he stood half in, half out of the black hatch.

The meek daylight, which crept into the house from around the edges of the landing curtains, just about penetrated the darkness of the loft space, providing enough light for Michael to look around. The air was more dust than oxygen and he coughed as he pulled himself into the ceiling space, then crouched for a moment, wheezing in the semi-darkness. The air was warm and thick and he felt his skin prickle in the stuffy heat. After a few moments, his lungs became accustomed to the loft space and he set about his search. He quickly found what he was looking for, an old holdall that no one had used for years, covered in dust behind the Christmas lights. It was the only bag left in the house after his entire family had packed away all of their belongings yesterday.

Michael dragged the bag out from behind the lights and dusted it off with his hands, the rising cloud of dust sending him into another coughing spree.

He was about to climb back down when he noticed a box of photo albums resting on the floor just inside the loft hatch. He took one out and began to flick through its yellowed pages. His childhood filled his eyes and brought a tear to each.

He paused on one picture; his family and his grandparents on holiday in Cornwall. Remembering that holiday now, he felt like it was only two or three years ago, but realised it must have been more like seven or eight. In the picture, the sky was blue and they all stood huddled together against a stone wall behind which lay the beach. His grandmother's hair was still an auburn brown, his father looked slimmer, his mother had less wrinkles and his grandfather looked strong as he lifted Michael's sister in his arms. Michael saw himself, standing at the corner of the image, frowning.

The photograph shook something from the corners of his mind. His grandfather was supposed to

have come with them the day before.. Michael remembered standing in the living room, waiting with his bags beside him, his mother on the telephone, the muscles of her jaw quivering as she listened to her father's voice. Slowly, she had replaced the receiver and picked up her bags. "He's not coming."

That had been the end of the matter. How could Michael have forgotten him? Michael had lost his grandmother with everyone else, but his grandfather had refused to come and stay with them whilst they waited for the government to help them, and he had refused again when they realised there would be no help and decided to leave. Michael would not leave him a third time. He would go and see him now. Michael would make him come with him, and together they would leave.

He ran downstairs and picked up the telephone. No dial tone. No electricity. Did phones need electricity? Even if they didn't, Michael knew that, by now, the networks would all be down with no one to man them. Even if they were still capable of operating, surely the phone companies would have shut them down, rather than waste money and energy supplying a country where two-thirds of the population were not able to pay their bills. Michael put the phone down. His visit to his grandfather would have to be a surprise.

Michael dashed about with renewed vigour and began packing his holdall. He had packed most of his clothes the previous day and now he had only one pair of boxer shorts left. They would have to do. He changed the ones he had on for the fresh pair. He put his jeans back on and pulled on a new T-shirt. He knew it was too hot for his jacket, but he thought he just might need one along the way and he put it on. He had the Converse shoes he had been wearing, a hole appearing now in the heel, but they were his only pair and would have to do. Hopefully, he would not be doing much walking.

Michael looked around his room and wondered what else he might need. Not his digital camera, guitar or mobile phone charger. He tore a picture from the wall, of his girlfriend smiling in his arms, and folded it up, putting it into his jacket pocket along with the photo he had taken from the album in the loft.

He had his house key in his pocket and wondered if he would ever need it again. It felt wrong to leave it behind, a memory of this place where he had spent his childhood and it was attached to the keyring his girlfriend had bought him, still covered in black and green sick. He tried to wipe off as much as he could on an old jumper, and then put the keys back into his pocket.

His car keys were on his desk but he knew he would not need them. He glanced out the window at the ancient blue grey car that stood there rusting and decaying like an elephant gone to the elephant's graveyard to lie its bulk down and begin decomposing. He would definitely need a new car, or at least one in working condition.

Satisfied there was nothing else he could take from his bedroom, Michael headed downstairs to gather other essentials. Food was paramount. He would not get far without it. He crammed as many tins and packets as he could into his holdall, and then filled carrier bags with what remained. He only left a tin of mincemeat, a festive relic out of place in the summer season.

The fridge was a write-off and there was nothing that could be salvaged, save the Coke, which he had already drunk most of. He took the remaining bread from the side where he had left it and put it in one of the bags along with the Coke. He found matches, candles, and a torch hidden at the back of the cupboard, along with a few batteries and assorted pills, which went into a side pocket of the holdall. There was nothing else he would need; plastic cups and empty vases would not come in handy.

He zipped up the holdall and gathered the bunch of carrier bags. He had everything he might need. He looked around the kitchen. Was this really going to be the last time he would ever see this house? The last time he would ever set foot in it? Four days ago all he had wanted was to leave, to get out of this town. He had been looking forward to going to university, to making something of

himself, so he did not have to live in a place like this, but now his house was bathed in melancholy.

Michael realised then that this house had not been the source of his frustration; it had been more of a safe heaven from the banal town which rested close by like some grey animal of oppression. He would not miss the town, only some of the people who had lived in it.

So, farewell to this house, his home of eighteen years. Without his family to make them real, his memories of the place were dead, and if they were dead, they existed only in his head, where they would remain for ever. He need not feel guilty about leaving this place.

Michael decided to leave the curtains drawn as a sign of respect, keeping the house covered up, preserved in case he ever came back. He swung the holdall over one shoulder, gathered up the carrier bags and made his way to the backdoor.

He was about to leave when he remembered he had not packed a map book, something which he thought might be somewhat essential, and so he raced back upstairs, anticlimactically passing the empty rooms he had just said a sentimental goodbye to. Eventually, he was ready and he gathered up his bags once more and stepped out into the daylight.

As he shut the door and turned the key in the lock, he felt like a curator closing up a museum, a capsule for the future, one that anticipated a time when explorers of the future would come across it and open it up. They would wonder who had lived there and how they had lived.

Michael placed the key beneath a plant pot, leaving the tiny bear to guard his home as a sort of promise that he would one day return. He walked down the drive and looked over his parent's car, which he had expertly parked in the neighbour's fence. It did not look so bad, just a few scratches. He could always drive it for a little while, and then swap it for another one abandoned on some road.

He circled the car, checking its condition. His eyes saw a crumpled and bloody heap on the ground, and he swept them away to his neighbour's driveway, where he caught a flash of silver half-hidden behind the wooden ruins of the fence. It was a brand new Jaguar and it looked to be in fine condition.

An old Bengali woman lived next door and the car was her son's. Michael did not know what her son did to be able to afford a Jaguar, but it was the nicest car anyone living on his street had ever owned. He couldn't just take it though, could he? No, he couldn't; it belonged to someone, someone he knew, or at least someone he had occasionally nodded at over the fence.

Michael put down his bags and clambered over the ruins of the fence. He walked down the neighbour's driveway and around to the back door. The door stood ajar and it was dark inside the house.

He rapped lightly on the open door and whispered, more than called, "Hello?"

No one answered and Michael tried to pretend there was a possibility they might just be sleeping.

"Hello," he called again, louder this time. "It's Michael, from, next door...I just wondered if..."

He cut himself short. He knew they were dead. He had not *seen* them die, but if they were alive, there was no reason why they would still be there. If there were alive, why hadn't they taken their car and left?

Michael stood on the threshold and he knew there was nothing for it but to be a man and go inside to look for the car keys.

Gingerly, he placed first one foot and then the other inside the doorway. He hesitated on the threshold for a second before passing inside into the darkness.

The house had exactly the same layout as his, but in reverse, and so he stood once again in a dark kitchen. He felt as though he were trespassing and, even though he knew there would be no answer, he decided to call out one last time. "Hello!"

What was intended as a loud and assertive shout escaped as a hoarse whisper. He was half-glad

when no one replied, embarrassed by this feeble attempt.

The living room too was shrouded in darkness, but an odd green light seemed intertwined with the gloom, as though it were both a part of it and a separate colour all at once. Michael stepped further into the room. Heavy green curtains were drawn across the windows. He took another step into the room and all other thoughts were beaten from his mind by a stale odour which he could taste in his mouth and feel on his skin. It battered his nostrils and burned his eyes. It was the smell of rotting meat or eggs, but he knew the cause was neither.

Tears brimmed in his eyes, a combination of the stench and fear. He gagged and cupped both hands to his face, protecting his mouth and nose. He imagined breathing in small particles of dead flesh floating in the air and it was all he could do to stop himself vomiting.

Michael did not know what the right thing to do would be, should he leave now, or continue into the room and possibly find the car keys? He felt like a thief now as he realised he would be stealing from a grave. Maybe they would not mind though, maybe they would want him to take their car, after all, they were dead and did not need it, and it would be a huge help to him.

Michael was tired of thinking about making decisions and decided to just make one. He stepped inside, his hands still cupped around his mouth. The room was L-shaped like his own living room and he had to round the corner before he found the source of the smell. He immediately vomited into his hands and fell to his knees. Why had he come in here? He had known they were dead and there they were, mother and son together.

The old woman and her son were sitting in front of a blank TV; both slumped in their chairs, as if asleep. Their skin looked drawn over their sallow faces and their cheeks were sunken pits. The smell was even worse here and, as Michael knelt and retched, small flies rose from the corpses, buzzing angrily at the disturbance. Michael looked away and out of the corner of his eyes he caught an insect of some nature crawling over the son's shoe.

Michael rose on shaking legs and steadied himself against the back of a chair. He had come this far, he had to think about this logically; they had the car keys he needed. They did not need them and couldn't use them now. They were dead, they did not care what he did, and they would not have minded anyway. It was simple.

Michael took a step nearer the bodies and retched again. A small puddle of yellow splashed onto the carpet to be absorbed and rot there, and then he was only retching; he had nothing left to vomit.

Wiping his mouth on the back of his sleeve, Michael tiptoed towards the bodies. He felt guilty that he was there, interrupting their peaceful sleep, as though he were reading the names on other people's gravestones. He remembered zombie films and vampire films and expected the bodies to rise at any moment and sink their teeth into his neck.

The son was dressed smartly in a shirt and black trousers: surely he would have the keys. The shirt pockets did not look like they had anything in them, so Michael moved his attention to the trouser pockets. The man's stomach was bloated and the pockets looked tight against the flesh of the thigh. Michael would not have fancied searching around in the pockets near a man's crotch if the man had been alive, but now the situation was a thousand times worse.

He was going to have to do it quickly; count to three and then plunge his hand in there. He stood panting as his heart hammered in his chest, one arm outstretched, ready to dart forward like someone trying to catch a dangerous animal.

Michael counted out loud. "Ok...one...two... one, two, three!"

He lurched forward an inch, then rocked on his feet like a stalled car.

"Come on, don't be a coward," he said to himself.

He began his countdown again. "Come on, one, two, come on, say three, say three... one, two, three!"

His hand was in the dead man's right pocket and then the left. He fished around thoroughly, not

wishing to miss anything, and only wanting to have to do this once. He could feel nothing but a wallet and a rectangular shape, which he guessed, was a packet of chewing gum. No luck there.

Michael looked around in the half-gloom of the room and his attention came to rest on the man's suit jacket laid over the back of his chair. The jacket was pinned to the chair by the dead man's weight. Michael was hesitant to touch it; was it right to touch a dead man's suit jacket? He decided it was no ruder than rummaging through his trouser pockets and he reached out and gave the jacket a slight tug, but it remained wedged where it was.

Michael did not want to have to move the body, but whatever he was going to do he would have to do it quickly; he did not think he could stand the smell for much longer.

"Fuck it."

He grabbed the jacket and dragged it out in a single sharp movement, like a magician pulling out a table cloth from under a dinner set. The body rocked forward in one stiff motion, then slipped to the side so that it rested half on and half off the chair. Until a few days ago it would have been the most unnatural thing Michael had ever seen; now it was just one of many.

Michael quickly checked the pockets, not forgetting the inside one, and found them all to be empty. Frustrated now and wanting to leave, Michael put his hands inside the jacket so that they were covered, like someone using a plastic bag as a glove to pick up something unsavoury, and pushed the man's body back into its previous position. It felt like touching stone through goalkeeper's gloves. He left the jacket draped over the head. That was the respectful thing to do, was it not?

The old woman sat there staring at him with open eyes behind half moon glasses and a gawking mouth that housed a blackening tongue. Michael gagged and glanced around, ready to abandon the search for the keys. It was not worth looking through dead people's pockets for car keys.

He stumbled backwards away from the dead woman and banged his leg on the corner of the coffee table behind him. "Shit!"

Michael hobbled around to better see where he was going and saw, there on the table, almost laughing at him, a set of keys with a Jaguar keyring laid beside an empty saucer. He laughed bitterly, snatched up the keys, and limped to the door.

He paused involuntarily when he noticed the dinner table, covered by a yellow cloth. Michael ripped the cloth from the table in a single movement, sending flowers crashing to the floor, then dragged the cloth across to the woman's corpse in a daze. There was no disgust now, only sympathy for this woman. She had not been a friend of his; Michael had not made the effort to get to know her, but he was sure she did not deserve to be left exposed to the world, looking like a hideous and gawking caricature of the woman she had once been. He threw the cloth over her, then turned and limped from the house, leaving the scent of death behind.

Michael unlocked the Jaguar and stuffed his shopping bags into the backseat. He turned the key in the ignition and the engine roared into life. The gears were strange and he put the car into fifth instead of reverse, before correcting his mistake and reversing at speed out of the driveway, bumping over the path and into the empty road where he found first gear and sped away, tin cans spilling from the bags into the back foot wells.

He did not glance out the window as he left his home behind; it was a place that existed only in his memory now. He sped away, swerving past abandoned cars, headed for his grandparents' house.

