

STINK

I was a lout, a twenty-something young lad with no direction, waking horrified in a London doorway, a life left behind burnt to the ground.

I needed to sort something out.

Hangovers are when there is not enough water in the body to complete Krebs cycles. Such biology was for the smart kids in school. There was nothing in woodwork about Krebs cycles or eukaryotic cells or mitochondria. The *Alcoholism Explained* pamphlet taught me the whole lot.

I needed to sort something out.

It was my first time out of Ireland and I expected more, as though someone should have been handing out achievement certificates, not everybody sauntering about like it was normal.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen,’ a street performer shouted. He was in a straight jacket. I thought, you and me both, buddy. ‘This is how I make my living, performing escape feats all around the world for lovely people such as yourselves. If you like what you see here today, please show your appreciation at the

end with some coin. If you don't have money, that's fine, come up at the end and say *Thank You*. It's just as much appreciated. All right, here I go!

I felt my hangover revving up behind my eyeballs like a bulldozer.

The street performer pressed play on his stereo with his big toe. A grainy music full of uncomfortable bass began. He started to wriggle and I started to feel my brain drip out of my ears just watching the prick. I decided to put off the bulldozer for another day. I would sort something out tomorrow. Humanity was doomed and we were all going to die—drink time.

London was a beast. The wealth of the world had poured into it for as long as the Brits had ruled the world and the buildings wanted everyone to know it—mansions and palaces with Rolls Royces parked out front, stained glass, marble, gold trimming. Red double decker buses were going places I had never heard of before. There was fine dining all over, doormen in fancy suits and top hats and chaps, lots of chaps and they said *Oh, well done* to other chaps. A lot of Irish guys had a grievance with the English. I didn't. I admired those men in the easy chairs who smoked pipes and carved up the world for centuries, constantly setting the rules so that they won every time.

Even conversation on the street was different to Ireland. 'The people I nanny for,' one woman said to her friend, 'think that my name is too posh for a

servant so they've said they're calling me Lucy from now on.'

Seventeen-year-old young lads flew by in Lamborghini Murcielagos. Those things were the price of houses and the kids in them had hurt expressions as though they had asked for a Bugatti Veyron and all they got was a shitty Murcielago.

One thing London had going for it—stealing was easy. I picked up booze and walked out the shop door with it as though I owned the place, right in front of the staff and security. They were all so dazed by long hours and minimum wage that I could have stolen their shoes without them noticing.

'You're nicked,' a voice said from behind me as I carried a crate of beer out a front door. I was happy, like I was being taken off my own hands, like I was someone else's problem now.

I was disappointed to face a junkie when I turned. The junkies in Dublin had the same sharp look, the same gaunt frame. A bulging sports bag hung by a strap from his shoulder. He looked at me with sharp, glassy eyes then moved closer so that only my crate of beer was between our chests. His smell was in his breath and off his clothes, wafting up from him like it was throwing a punch.

'It is a pleasant day. A crisp breeze. A shining sun. Shall we frequent the park to drink your libations?' he said. And with that, on he shuffled, his eye not on me anymore but on the street and the people in it.

I followed him to the National Gallery when he spotted a group of Chinese tourists on their way inside. He came between the first of them and the door then produced a book of raffle tickets from his hoodie.

‘How many is in your party?’ he said.

‘Twenty-six,’ a Chinese lady said.

‘I will only charge you for twenty.’

‘Free?’ she asked, confused, searching for her guide book. ‘Free?’

‘Out of date information,’ the junkie said. ‘Information no good.’

‘How much?’ the lady asked.

‘Five pounds each is a hundred pounds, Madam,’ he said, tearing away twenty-six raffle tickets from the book and handing them to her. ‘Would you care to pay the entire amount and fix up with your party later? Just that it’s busy and I *am* doing you a favour.’

The lady was twenty pounds short. Her husband took out his wallet and made the hundred.

‘Thank you, folks,’ he said. ‘Enjoy.’

The lady handed out the raffle tickets to the rest of the group.

The junkie jogged on.

‘That was brilliant,’ I said on catching up.

‘Your notion of brilliance is misaligned, Irish,’ he said. He was the first person to call me Irish.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Stink,’ he said.

Stink pulled the same trick outside Ripley’s on Piccadilly Circus and the Royal Academy of Art. His walk was a hunt. He handed out directions for pound coins and collected money in the crowd for street performers during their performance, the street performer completely unaware he was doing it.

‘Show your appreciation, folks,’ he said and the people gave him money just to get him away from them. He plucked lights from bicycles like they were ripened fruit and shoved them into his hoodie along with handfuls of postcards he grabbed off the racks outside newsagents. Anything not nailed down was fair game.

We entered a park, picked a bench in front of a lake and cracked open a bottle of beer each. Stink sank his in one then cracked open another.

We were there a while, saying nothing much when a man approached, a respectable type in a cardigan. He stopped beside us, looked around then said, ‘You get the books?’

‘In the bag,’ Stink said.

‘All of them?’

‘I couldn’t get the Mayan one. Out of print apparently.’

‘I need that one.’

‘We all need something.’

The man picked up the bag, threw Stink a fifty then was off. Stink shoved it in his pocket with the rest of his cash. He must have made three hundred pounds in two hours.

‘You steal books for that guy?’

‘I am his biblioklept.’

I didn’t know if he was being ironic or what with his words. Maybe he was a scholar. A junkie scholar. The thinking about it pressed my hangover. I was about to tell Stink that I’d go for vodka if he gave me a twenty but he was preoccupied with rooting out tinfoil and a cylindrical pipe from his pockets. He unwrapped cloud-yellow heroin from cling film, pinched some off and sprinkled it onto the centre of the tinfoil.

‘Stop looking at it,’ Stink said. ‘It will ruin you.’

‘I already feel ruined,’ I said but Stink was not listening. His lighter was in flame and held to the underside of the foil. The heroin sizzled and released smoke. He sucked it with his pipe then kicked back like London had stopped. I wanted that feeling. The beer was not working and I needed escape.

‘It’s my reason, see?’ he said with a fleering grin.

I felt out in the cold with Stink tucked up so nice and tight in his heroin.

‘Can I have a bit?’ I said.

‘No.’

‘Go on.’

My forcefulness was wrecking his buzz. He shrugged. He had warned me, what more was there to be done? He sprinkled more onto the foil.

‘Just get as much smoke as you can. Hold the pipe close and when it’s all in, hold it.’

And just as this could all have been a different story, or no story at all, Stink spotted something behind me. ‘Just wait a moment, Irish,’ he said, shielding everything from sight.

A lad cycling a no-ordinary bicycle rolled passed us. It had three wheels, a backseat and an elderly couple sitting on it, enjoying the park and the sunny day.

‘What’s that?’ I asked.

‘Rickshaw,’ Stink said.

‘What? They give people lifts on them?’

‘Mostly night labour when the tube’s not running and homeward bound’s a battlefield. They pick up scraps that are too drunk for the cabs or the tourists so incapacitated they forget what hotel they’re staying at. Tough toil. Good customers for bike lights though.’

‘Do you need a license for it or what?’

‘You need to be a particular brand of crazy.’

‘Is there a test?’

‘Only the cabbies have their little test. *The Knowledge* they call it! The knowledge! If it’s one thing not to equip a cabbie with, it’s a test that they can pass called *The Knowledge*.’

‘I’d like to do it,’ I said. The lad seemed free and in-the-know, like he had things sorted. No boss, no fixed hours—have a few drinks, ride around the city, stop, drink, go again. It was perfect.

I handed the pipe back to Stink. I liked that the idea of the lad getting the elderly couple to where

they needed to go. I liked that he was maybe bringing them home.

And I really needed to sort something out.

‘Where can I get a rickshaw?’

‘The poppy was a safer choice,’ Stink said.

FIRST DAY

Rickshaws were to the back of the underground car park, hundreds of them, cable-locked through their front wheels like horses tied to a saloon rail. Crunched energy drink cans spilled from the bins and the sticky floor ripped at the soles of my shoes like Velcro.

There were two guys up ahead talking rickshaw.

‘Arman?’ I asked the smaller with the beady eyes.

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Stink said you might have a rickshaw for me.’

‘This is my cousin, Zahir. He will start on the rickshaw tonight.’

Zahir was dressed in a suit two sizes too small for him, probably the biggest the shop had. He was eager, chomping at the bit for work. A big guy like him should have had a crushing handshake to show what a tough bastard he was but it was soft and barely there.

‘I see you last night,’ Arman said. ‘You were shouting on Leicester Square. You are dumb.’

‘What’s with the suit?’ I asked Zahir.

‘He wants to make good business,’ Arman said. ‘Look good for customer.’

‘I want to make good business,’ Zahir said. ‘Look good for customer.’

‘Come, come,’ Arman said, walking away. ‘We will see Vasily.’

Zahir made sure he was ahead of me in the follow. He had a lunging walk, his thighs and shoulders too big for the rest of his body. They were both powerhouses and I was fat and drunk.

‘Bullshit,’ someone was shouting. ‘Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit.’

‘This will be Vasily,’ Arman said. ‘Very angry. Lights stolen from all rickshaw last night.’

Vasily was in his mid-twenties, barefooted and shirtless, leaping over the rows of rickshaws, kicking shredded tyre and throwing mangled wheels from his path. He picked up a vice grip and flung it into a shelf to explode washers and screws across the ground. A nest of mice ran for cover and Vasily kicked at them.

‘Bullshit, how can I make business with this bullshit?’

On the walls of his enclosure were snapped chains hung from nails. There were shelves holding boxes of latches, hinges, cable ties, rubber mouldings, batteries, cable, and scraps of aluminium. There were bunches of Allen keys, wrenches, rolls of duct tape and Vasily the Russian thrashed through all of it.

‘Who is this?’ Vasily asked, pointing at me but not looking. Arman shrugged. I was on my own.

‘I’m looking for a rickshaw,’ I said. ‘To rent.’ Vasily was suspicious. ‘Where are you from?’ ‘Ireland.’

‘No Ireland guys do this job, mate,’ he said. He watched how I held myself, came close, looked at my blood-burst eyes then sniffed my chest. ‘You drunk?’

‘No.’

‘Yes. You is drunk. I have bullshit enough with business. I give you bike when you is drunk and I will have bullshit one hundred times. No way, mate.’

It was a bluff, a false piece of morality for the record. This guy loved money. His Grandmother had been sold years ago.

‘Who else rents rickshaws around here?’ I asked.

‘You have first week’s rent and deposit?’

‘I’ll give it to you at the weekend when I make it from working.’

‘Jesus Christ,’ Vasily shouted. ‘You see fucking red cross on front door?’

Arman shook his head and laughed.

‘I’ll pay you everything at the weekend. Sunday—the whole lot. If I don’t have it by then, what have you lost?’

‘I might lose bike.’

‘You won’t.’

‘If I give you bike, and you do not come back with it, I will not chase you, I will call my friend who will chase you, and believe me, he will leave you where he find you. Do you understand?’

‘I’ll have the money by Sunday.’

‘So Sunday, one hundred and eighty pounds?’

‘No problem.’

‘You will have to buy light—this junkie Stink bullshit bastard stole all this. You have this one,’ Vasily said, slapping the rear end of a rusted shit-bucket, excommunicated from all the others, not even locked. Its handlebars were fucked and there was duct tape holding it all together. ‘I call her *Big Bullshit*.’

Arman unlocked one of the shining rickshaws, speakers in the cabin corners for music, cushions and blankets all set up inside like a genie’s lamp.

‘You don’t want to see my passport, get some details or anything?’ I asked. I was trying to delay getting up on it, nervous, wanting some coaching, some anything, not just, *on you go then, good lad*.

‘Passport? I can get you passport for fifty pounds,’ Vasily said.

‘Any tips then or what?’

‘You have to watch the street and wait,’ Vasily said, kicking bubble wrap out of his way. More mice hightailed it for safety. ‘It like fishing. You can wait for big fish or catch lot of little fishes. Follow Arman and this new guy, see how they do business.’

I mounted Big Bullshit, clicking back gears hard like I thought I should then pedalled for half a turn before the chain fell loose.

‘Stop, stop, stop. Don’t change gear when bike is stop, Jesus Christ,’ said Vasily, reaching under my leg to put the chain back on. ‘Slowly.’

I took off again and crashed the back end into the lined-up rickshaws.

‘Back is wider than the front with this bullshit.’

I pedalled up the ramp and out onto the street. I was banjaxed already. I wanted to stop for a drink and regroup. The front wheel hit potholes and pedestrians thought about crossing in front of me, stopped then made a break for it at the last second—traffic lights, signs, one-ways, cyclists, car alarms, big red buses. Arman was smiling back at me from on up the street, his pedalling solid, steady, and his back straight. He slowed to allow me catch up.

‘Where’s the other guy? Your cousin?’

‘He has a lift. I will meet him in Soho.’

‘He got a lift already? He’s been doing it thirty seconds.’

‘He is very good at business.’

Arman pedalled like he could have done it blindfolded and backwards. His angles and timing were all perfect as he weaved through the traffic, the backseat swishing on tight angles like a tailfin, ringing his bell to tease out a customer, asking everybody on the footpaths, literally everybody—*Anyone lost, guys? Anyone need a lift home, guys?* He stood high on the pedals, a head above the crowd to allow an easier spot until he caught a fare from two women who wanted to go somewhere I never heard of before. They jumped on the backseat, excited. The hang of it was not just pedalling. It was a whole other thing.

Arman cycled off and I found myself alone on Big Bullshit in the middle of London, knowing one street in the whole city—Oxford Street—because that was what the sign above my head told me it was called.

And streets only led to more streets. As soon as I had decided on one turn there were two more streets to chose from and the people kept coming and going, millions of them, the whole lot of them surging about in a direction of their choosing like it was no big deal.

‘Anyone want a lift on this with me?’

Everybody kept going.

A double-decker bus roared an inch from my front wheel, so fast that its tailwind sucked the rickshaw forwards. The bus driver sounded the horn, scaring the bejesus out of me.

Fuck it, I jumped off and stood on the footpath looking at the thing, not knowing what to do next.

‘Sorry, lad—these things fast?’ a man asked to my side with a pure white head of hair, his accent Scottish and noble, a voice that let it be known it did not want a single bar of crap, its owner a grave and booming man.

‘Very fast,’ I said.

‘We’ve to be at our car on Martin’s Lane in ten minutes before it runs out of time and we get a ticket—can you do it?’

‘Do you know where it is from here?’ I asked off the cuff, hoping the question did not sound too stupid, as though it did not really matter, as though I was

just making sure, hoping he would offer to direct me, turn-by-turn, inch-by-inch.

‘I don’t know, lad—look—can you get us there or no?’

I looked at him like he was on television, not saying yes, not saying no, wondering how the situation would unfold.

‘This lad says he can do it, darling,’ the Scot said to his wife who was trying to hail a black cab. She looked at me the way women do to detect bullshit, found it and told him so with a look.

‘Come on now eh, quickly,’ the Scotsman said.

She walked over with refinement, rushed for nobody, her heels hitting the ground like a hammer hitting glass, looking in my eyes to tell me she knew, and that time would tell.

We all got on the rickshaw.

‘Ok, Martin’s Lane here we come,’ I said, trying to pedal but finding the rickshaw rooted. The back wheel was lodged against the curb, stuck by the new weight. I tried to walk-start it. The cabin rolled over the back of my ankle and trapped it underneath the weight.

‘Bollocks,’ I roared, the couple looking on, my foot in a serious amount of pain. I tried lifting the handlebars but the whole thing was heavy. Very heavy. ‘Get off, get off, get off.’

‘Us?’ the Scot said to his wife. ‘Does he want us to get off, is it?’

My ankle felt sprained and cut. Arman passed with new customers on his backseat. ‘Never push start. You mess your ankles.’

‘Are you all right?’ the Scot asked.

‘Yes,’ I said, clearly not.

‘Where are your lights?’ asked the wife in a fine English accent that had sent men to the gallows in a previous life.

‘Martin’s Lane,’ I said, summoning all my strength and pushing the rickshaw off my ankle.

‘Is he all right?’ asked the Scot.

‘Physically or psychologically?’ the wife asked back.

I chose a direction and away we went, my body flashing up sweats from the exertion. I had absolutely no idea where I was going. I looked to each street we passed, hoping *Martin’s Lane* would appear somewhere in big neon lights. Two minutes passed.

‘There should be theatres all around, eh,’ the Scotsman said.

I took a left for no reason other than I had not turned in a while. Then a right. Then another right, turning back on to the street I had turned off.

‘You sure you know where you’re going, eh?’

‘Yes, that’s Bloomsbury Square there,’ I said, pointing to a sign that said *Bloomsbury Square*. I cycled harder, thinking the more of London I covered, the sooner I would come across Martin’s Lane. I clicked up the gears in one daring twist to show I was a serious rickshaw rider, professional, knowing all about

gears but the jump was too much for Big Bullshit to cope with and the chain fell loose. The pedals went limp.

‘Ah lad, lad, lad. What’s going on, eh? What are you doing? Where are we?’

‘It’s fine, everything’s fine. I just got to put the chain back on.’

‘This ticket expires in two minutes.’

‘No problem.’

The rickshaw came to a stop in the middle of a three-lane street. I got off and crouched under to pull the chain back on as Vasily had done earlier. My ankle needed ice and elevation.

‘Get out that map,’ the Scotsman said to his wife.

A double-decker bus came around the bend. Its horn roared.

The wife screamed.

‘Christ Almighty,’ yelled the Scot.

The bus slowed to a stop an inch from the front wheel and the bus driver pressed on his horn without release.

I got the chain back on, standing up to find the Scot getting off, telling his wife to do the same.

‘It’s just around here,’ I shouted over the horn.

The Scot got back on the rickshaw, wanting to believe me. I cycled on, taking a madcap right turn down a road called *Gray’s Inn*.

Horns sounded instantly.

‘Fucking wanker,’ shouted a cab driver out his window.

I wondered how it would look if I braked, got off and ran.

I could feel their stare on my neck and the beer was getting heavy in my stomach from all the pedalling.

Fifteen, great, big, lumping minutes passed. I became a bastarding ball of gag. The beer boiled in my stomach and gulped to the bottom of my throat. The crunched ankle was starting to stiffen and swell. I was practicing coming clean with an excuse like, *I thought you said St. Mark's Lane*, when a feeling like an electric shock shot up my hamstring and into my arse.

'My arse,' I shouted, grabbing it hard. It felt like a cheek had been ripped off. I forgot about steering and we swerved across the road into oncoming traffic. A car screeched to a sideways stop to avoid a collision.

'Just stop. Just FUCKING stop,' shouted the Scot, sounding as though he had not sworn in years. My face was burning. I leaned over the handlebars and dry- retched. I was winded with a sprained ankle and a paralysed arse. One of the pedals broke and my body fell with it, slamming my balls into the crossbar. I groaned like a dying cow.

'Are you drunk?' asked the wife.

'I've had one or two wine gums, Madam,' I said.

The driver of the car had made his way over and was screaming *wanker* in my ear. He wanted a punch-up but I didn't have the energy. The Scotsman got out as thunderously as he could, bashing off everything,

the whole rickshaw shaking with anger. He helped his wife out and they stepped onto the footpath, turning around to see me spitting a long strand of sticky spit out the side of my mouth.

'An Englishwoman, an Irishman and a Scotsman all got on Big Bullshit,' I said then spewed up hot beer with the fizz still in it.

DIRECTIONS

Two riders sat on their rickshaws outside Covent Garden tube entrance. They must have been there for a reason. I braked to rest, to have a look and a slug of vodka. Beer was bad for pedalling. Vodka was better.

Both of the riders stared.

‘It’s for my arse,’ I said. ‘It’s killing me.’

One said something to the other in Bengali. They both laughed.

People exploded out of the ticket hall—a crowd relentless and torrential, gushing, making the audiences across the West End, filling the pubs and clubs, a crowd that jostled, crammed and shoved past, that sucked the ATMs out of service. The two riders were there for some of that cash.

‘You get nice office job, boss,’ one said. ‘This bad job for you.’

‘Fat, drunk bastard,’ said the other.

‘I appreciate the honest feedback, fellas,’ I said. ‘Thanks.’

People stood looking around for direction for so long that space could not clear fast enough on the footpath and there were bottlenecks, packing the crowd back through the turnstiles, down the staircases and onto the platform below to delay trains.

Everybody was looking for somewhere, trying to find something; the theatre, the pub, a place to eat that wasn’t too expensive but nice, a place where they could just sit down without loud music, a place *with* loud music, a jazz place, a pizza place, a metal bar, an open-mic night, a little Italian place with all the wine bottles on the wall—it went on and on. The lost all wanted help and I was bursting to oblige, bursting to know stuff, to have the expertise and capacity. I tried to make eye contact, to tell the lost I was there, a pleading type of look.

I straightened up and attempted to look knowledgeable and slim and happy and fit enough to pedal someone somewhere but I was obvious, as bamboozled as the rest of them.

Zahir rode past, a couple with deep tans on his backseat wearing *Notre Dame* sweatshirts, looking around at all of the lovely buildings, taking photos, enjoying themselves.

‘Excuse me,’ a nice old lady to my side asked. ‘Is the Poetry Society Café around here?’

It was like Denise Dunne asking me behind the bike shed after school once—I was flattered she thought I was someone who knew something. I

hopped off the saddle and took a look at a public map. ‘We’re facing this way so the Poetry Society Café, from here, would be down that street, a right, a left and then a right,’ I reckoned, not too sure but vodka-brazen.

And with that, she walked away.

‘Don’t you want a lift?’

‘Fuck off,’ she called back.

London was tough.

There were people looking up to the tops of buildings to get a bearing, people on Google maps figuring out the way. An irritated girl was on her phone. ‘Repeating the name of the street over and over is not helping me, Jonathan,’ she said. ‘No, stop repeating Langley Street. What’s it near?’

The two Bangladeshis rolled away with people-filled backseats, confident and strong as though they had already arrived at their destination.

‘Excuse me,’ somebody said to my side. And on it went—some lost people admitting right off they did not want a lift, just directions. They smiled after I pointed to Leicester Square and said—‘*Thanks very much, have a good night.*’ Some said, ‘*Excuse me—Covent Garden Piazza?*’ They did not break pace, wanting only reassurance that the direction in which they were walking was still good. They did not say thank you. Some people pretended to want a lift, asking off the cuff—‘*Just which direction is Leicester Square so I know?*’ Others gave you a choice—‘*Lion King mate, that way or*

that way?’ Others thought of the direction-inquiring process as a much more confrontational affair.

‘Nearest tube,’ said a lad who got right up over the handlebars and in my face.

‘That’s a tube station just there.’

‘Not that one. Tell me where the nearest tube station is.’

‘Just there. I don’t know any others.’

‘Like fuck you don’t,’ he said. He was big with a long reach. I’d have to take him down by surprise and pummel him quickly.

Out of nowhere came Stink, ‘Need any help with directions, sir?’

‘The nearest tube that’s not *that* one,’ the lost and aggravated lad said.

‘Straight down Long Acre here,’ Stink said. ‘Cross the intersection and Leicester Square tube station entry points will be right there. Could you spare a pound towards a bed and blanket, sir?’

‘Are you’re sure it’s down that way?’

‘Indeed, one hundred percent. A pound to help me out, sir?’

The aggravated lad walked down Long Acre like Leicester Square was in big trouble, whatever it had done.

‘Some lost folk get embarrassed,’ said Stink. ‘Don’t get involved. It’s only when we are lost that we truly find ourselves.’

Stink got back to the crowd. ‘Anyone lost there, folks? Anyone lost and need directions, folks?’ People

stopped and got where the Lion King was from him, handed him some coin and walked on.

‘Anyone lost?’ I asked the street.

‘Oi,’ Stink said. ‘Find your own comically existential sales pitch.’

‘Excuse me,’ a girl in her early twenties said to my side. ‘Would you do Kings Cross for a tenner?’

‘Do you know where Kings Cross is from here?’ I asked.

‘I’ll direct you. For a tenner, yeah? Vicki, this guy’ll do it for a tenner,’ she said, making eyes at Vicki to stop looking so surprised. I was excited and ready-to-go. There was a place ahead of us called King’s Cross where the three of us wanted to be, somewhere behind us where we did not want to be, and me pedalling worked in favour of both agendas. The girls giggled and whispered and I was probably the one being taken for the ride but I did not care.

‘So tell me more about Roland,’ Vicki said.

‘Well, he’s in television. So that’s kind of cool. But he’s just green—romantically.’

‘That’s cute,’ Vicki said.

‘I’m too old for all that now. I need someone trained up already. You know? Take a right here, Rickshawboy.’

I pedalled on hard.

‘This is Kings Cross,’ they said eventually, gave me the tenner and hopped off.

I felt purpose and reason. Getting them to where they needed to go felt good. Then I looked around

and all the streets looked the same and I couldn’t remember which one I had come from. I picked a direction and charged for it, making madcap turns, lefts and rights until I was lost. I braked for a pick-me-up, spotting a Rastafarian inside a telephone box across the street. He was smoking a cone, the whole box cloudy dark. He drank from a can of high percentage lager in the same hand as the joint. Four empty cans of the same brand were aligned in a neat row on the shelf beside him.

‘You know which way the West End is from here?’ I shouted over to him.

He opened the telephone box’s door and said, ‘All roads go the same place.’

‘Philosophically?’

‘Yes,’ he said then drank from his can.

I had my first pint when I was fourteen years old, sitting in the snug of Phelan’s like a big man, sleeves rolled back, all the ale-drinking aul lads around, saying that the apple never falls too far. In Phelan’s there were black and white photographs of all the dead and buried men of Ballybailte hung up on the walls, creamy pints of stout in front of them, looking at the camera the way men ought to look, coming from a time when men were men, put up by old Gerry Phelan to point you in one direction—a life drowned in drink. And by the dead and buried’s faces, you’d think maybe they all had the right idea, slog it back, worry about it later.

I went upstairs after my fourth pint and jumped out the top window of the pub just for the laugh. I met Joanna Kennedy out on the street and we went up to the tennis court to kiss. I escorted her back down to the chippers afterwards and had a fight with Seany Lee because he used to go with Joanna. Seany was two years older and harder than long division. He had dropped out of school a year earlier to chain-smoke and drive tractors. He gave me a black eye with a huge punch that started life back at breakfast. I watched it coming and went down like a sack of spuds. Joanna started to slap him across the face and told him it was definitely over. It was the most excitement I had ever had in my whole life. I wore the black eye around like a badge of honour for the next week in school.

‘Out in Phelan’s having a pint,’ I told the lads in woodwork. ‘Went off with Joanna Kennedy then Seany Lee went mental.’

‘Jaysus,’ they said, wanting my story for themselves so they could tell people something, anything. That’s how drinking started—excitement. I couldn’t remember there ever being a choice about it. Lads who didn’t drink, didn’t have mad stories to tell in woodwork. The amount of pints one drank on any given night was a big talking-point as well as vomiting in unusual places, ending up in unusual places without memory of how you got there, and to drink other, more seemingly experienced drinkers under the table was the big one. If you didn’t know all the

Gardaí and the town’s juvenile liaison officer on a first name basis, you were a mug. And then drinking all started to feel like a fall.

I could not remember when I first slipped.

I could not remember when it all got bad and then got worse.

I could not remember when beer became spirits. I could not even remember how long I had been falling. Days had span on into months that span around and around into years.

I was drinking to avoid hangovers, my life was burnt to the ground and I was lost on a rickshaw somewhere near King’s Cross, trying to get away from it.

The Rastafarian lost interest, closed the telephone box door and slid a finger inside the coin drawer to check for forgotten change.

I cycled on.