

Grace Jones
Irenosen Okojie

Once the stray parts of a singed scene had found their way into the bedroom, onyx edges gleaming and the figures without memories had lost their molten heads to the coming morning, and she'd pressed her face against the space under the doorway crying, reaching for some untouched handful of earth as sustenance, the agency called, Hassan more specifically. She'd narrowed down the thing she planned to do that day to three options, stark, cold and clinical, on a creased receipt for a disco-light hued Roland Mouret jacket she'd worn only once. But the phone rang, shrill, invasive, demanding. Still on the floor, the wood cold against her skin, she crawled to the receiver tentatively, as if her limbs were tethered to a thread on the earth's equator, the thread bending and collapsing into the different stages of her life. She contemplated the ways she could delay each inevitable outcome on the receipt. She could swallow it, wait for its disintegration in her stomach, acid eroding the words into nothing. She could shit it out. Could you shit out paper? That would particularly encapsulate what it was: ugly. Or she could simply misplace it in the flat somewhere. Not outside. Definitely not outside. It would be gone forever then. She'd have to go through options again, add new ones, whittle it down. That process had left her brain frazzled overnight, her heart leaking through the bedroom keyhole, making a sucking sound as her hands turned to wax. The receipt would have to be misplaced indoors. That would give her the option of attempting to stretch the boundaries of time despite an internal wound the shape of a turret. In her mind, the draughtsman was God. He had placed the turret inside her chest. Earlier, he'd drawn her in various angles, electric blue lines delivering degrees of shock from the same incident. Each time she got up. Each time she felt the weight of the turret tumbling in the ether.

She picked up the receiver, cradled it firmly, careful not to let it slip from her grasp the way things had of late. For a few seconds there was silence at the other end. She knew it was Hassan. He usually waited several beats before speaking, as if allowing you time to adjust to a different frequency. He never introduced himself. He just expected you to know. And she always did.

Sidra, so there's a party tonight. You don't have to attend, might be fun, though. The guy's a big Grace Jones fan. I've texted you the address. Do what you do. Any problems, call me. Cool?

Bet.

She almost told him about the draughtsman then. She found herself wanting to do it at the most unexpected times. Instead she put the receiver down, hands trembling. She checked the table for the receipt. It had fallen onto the floor by the radiator, already misplacing itself. She'd forgotten to tell Hassan that she was considering taking an evening class one day a week. They were like that, so many things constantly left unsaid. She'd never asked him what a French Algerian man was doing running a look alike agency in London amongst other things. And he'd never asked what a girl from Martinique with a degree in forensics was doing moonlighting as a Grace Jones impersonator, the translated versions of themselves staring at each other silently from the opposite sides of a revolving door.

There was a building that remained a husk; a blackened, charcoaled carcass gutted from the inside out. The carcass leaned against the heavens in protest at its losses, at its snatched internal sky tainted with the fingerprints of one last daily procession, rituals of the living. And while the world slept, awoke, the cities hummed with chaos and order; rivers began in cotton pockets cupping slackened fists; the waters

undulated into lost reflections; the gods got high off the colours from the seas; the equator adjusted itself only slightly; the stars twinkled in haphazard collusion; the mountains dappled by hammer tan winds that became personal directions; the building remained, an artificial gut bathed in degrees of light, lodged in the stages of a day. The building was a hollow within a carcass within a husk within a world within a galaxy; a series of crooked boxes varying in size inside each other where the gift was always the same, always attached to a bottom that had gone missing. On each floor of the husk, Sidra was running backwards to the late afternoon of a day. It had been flat-packed into cardboard boxes sealed with Sellotape. On each floor Sidra peeled off the Sellotape, the sound a split in the air whose line couldn't be traced. She removed items from the box. The late afternoon that day was made up of ingredients for cake: eggs, flour, butter, sugar, tinfoil, a whisk, vanilla.

On each floor Sidra ran to the window where she stood in costumes made of tinfoil.

On floor one she was covered with eggs, screaming.

On floor two she was drenched in flour, howling.

On floor three she was soaked in butter, melting as a heat intensified while the whisk whirred ominously on the periphery.

And so on.

Grace Jones's 'La Vie en Rose' played on a radio that wasn't plugged anywhere.

Instead the plug sprang from the bottom of the building, like an untethered electrical root.

The husk shook.

On each floor Sidra grabbed the whisk. Lost scenes fell out from the windows; water was inadequate. Hoses throbbed with adrenalin and burned hearts; death traps, the lifts became stuck all over again spewing fire fighters costumes like overgrown

fabricated insects. Like genesis on speed, everything escalated quickly. Ashes assembled into figures crawling on the skyline before colliding with traffic, which destroyed them all over again.

The equator turned a fraction.

The flames rose.

The bottoms of the crooked boxes were set alight.

Debris became glowing cinders that walked.

A dot appeared on the galaxy.

The draughtsman held a flame he angled like a stick of lead, like a tool that could change guises at any point.

Sidra had first seen Grace on TV. She must have been around thirteen at the time. She'd been chasing Carla and Dorian, who were playing with a set of screw drivers behind the sofa, darting forwards and backwards in a mock game of fencing, shouting "En guard!" sporadically, brandishing the screw drivers like long, elegantly carved swords. The washing-machine was spinning. The windows were open to hide evidence of her botched attempt at gumbo. The smoke alarm was broken. Half an hour earlier, it had beeped incessantly. In her frustrated efforts to silence it, she'd broken it with a broom. But none of that mattered because a woman who looked like her was on TV. Pulled to the screen by an instinct she didn't quite understand, she starred. It was on BBC1. She'd never seen a black woman so unapologetically dark on the screen. It was beautiful and she was hypnotised.

Dressed in an all black cat suit, the woman was tall, striking, other worldly, confident. Her mouth painted fire-engine red, her head was in an off yellow helmet shaped like a bee's nest. Sidra half expected a swarm of bees to hover over the woman's head, the

queen bee in action. She felt as if they'd shared the same womb, separated by a few decades and a trail of bees' fat with mutual DNA and womb lining.

Grace Jones, they said. *Grace Jones*.

She repeated the words aloud, feeling them roll off her tongue while the washing machine spun, while Carla and Dorian swapped the screwdrivers for Power Ranger toys starting wars in patois. The screen jumped, flickered, the picture vanished.

Grace had been brought to her on a signal from Jupiter. She grabbed the hanger on the floor behind the TV, stretched its curved head and inserted it into the television's aerial socket. The picture returned. Grace was gone, replaced by an item on an infected brand of milk. Her heart sank but the image of Grace was burned into her head as if with an iron. She ran to her mother's room, opened her make-up drawers searching through the lipsticks, pouting her lips. She flung the wardrobe door open, its mirrors multiplying her automatically. She dived in. In the dark, she heard the flutter of a wing. A bee with a fire-engine red mouth floated in a trail of static.

Sidra hopped into a cab to east Dulwich, the Roland Mouret jacket shimmering in the cold night. Her Yves St Laurent perfume mingled with a scent that smelt oddly like pot-pourri. Her red velvet, backless cat suit was warm and luxurious against her skin. In the back seat, she could make out the top of her face in the rear-view mirror; short back and sides, no fuss, good to go. Dangling from the mirror was a miniature golden Aladdin-esque lamp. She sank into the seat as the city unfolded, fingers tracing the possibilities of the inky darkness, picturing the lamp spilling gasoline into the hemline of a dress she'd decided not to wear. She rolled the window down as the driver talked non-stop about being a boy in Damascus. The cool breeze pricked her skin. She closed her eyes, the driver's ramblings seeping in almost subconsciously.

She hadn't been to east Dulwich for a few years. Not since she'd worked for a mobile massage company for one week. That first job, she'd found a slender, bespectacled man of average height sprinkling the green outside a large house in a silk, kimono-style dressing gown. He adjusted the wire-rimmed glasses perched on his nose intermittently as if out of habit. The house was like something from Wallpaper Magazine; futuristic, slightly incongruous in that leafy, suburban street. He abandoned the sprinkler, pleased at the sight of her, motioned towards the open front door. They walked in. In the hallway, he disappeared for roughly a minute then reappeared holding a towel. He handed her the towel, instructing her to change in the downstairs bathroom ahead, £150 for a topless forty-minute massage.

She got ready. Dressed in black panties, netted stockings, suspenders and a silver cape she climbed up the stairs where she found him in a neon wrestling outfit in the master bedroom, a pot of cream stood on a lovingly crafted small bedside table. They wrestled for ten minutes. Then she smeared the cream in his face, yanking his head down into the puddle of white on the wooden floor, forcing him to lick it.

Afterwards, stripped down on the bed, the light fracturing on the chandelier, she kneaded his hairy back. He groaned, complimenting the warmth of her hands.

The fire for him started in the bathroom with the draughtsman sitting at the edge of the tub wearing her silver cape, smiling encouragingly.

That week, the fires began in a different room each time; a basement, a study, a conservatory. Sidra would always remember that first one; the silken kimono flapping open to reveal an expanse of thigh, a line of hair creeping into his groin, the cuckoo clock with a tiny woman whose arms were the hands of time, whose cuckooing mouth was smeared in soot that would spread, the irony of the sprinkler still turning on the green as she left, watering kernels of afternoon secrets before lapsing into silence.

The cab pulled up to a Georgian mansion. Sidra paid, tipping the driver an extra ten pounds for his stories. She jumped out, crossing the large stretch of lawn dotted with pale tents draped with flickering lights, a hedge carved into the shape of a figure holding a chainsaw and a life-sized family of ice swans craning their necks towards each other, slowly thawing into the grass. She knocked on the door. A Marilyn Monroe look alike opened it, appropriately dressed in a bombshell blue polka-dot sixties dress.

“Welcome!” She announced theatrically. “You look fabulous.” She added, stepping aside to allow Sidra entrance. The waft of warm air smelled like expensive aftershaves, mince pies, perfume. The décor was classily understated, with colourful touches here and there. Sidra raised her head. There were three floors, from what she could see. Bodies everywhere, jostling, sliding and wriggling through as if they’d been let out of giant tinned cans slick and oiled in some saccharine sheen for excess, the sharp, opened-can ceilings edging closely to their foreheads as they moved. She took off her jacket, slipping it over her arm as a Rod Stewart look alike approached offering to take it. She declined, looking beyond him to a tray of hors d’oeuvres being served by a Pee-Wee Herman look alike in a grey suit, white brogues, topped off with a red bow tie. She assessed the guests. There were no other black people. She wasn’t planning on serving any hors d’oeuvres. *Fuck that shit.* She was used to being the only black female look alike at this sort of gathering unless Tina Turner showed up, cutting her out of oxygen and attention. Tina wasn’t there. Thank God.

Marilyn Monroe had smoothly grabbed her a glass of white wine. She took the hollow-stemmed flute. “You look so much like her.” Sidra said, offering what every impersonator wanted to hear.

Marilyn blushed. “My heart just jumped with joy,” she answered breathlessly in a perfect impersonation of her idol. “Luigi’s just through the other room.”

Sidra followed the sound of the piano to Luigi, their host, a squat, balding, jewelled, enthusiastic film producer, who made the phrase ‘larger than life’ inadequate in his presence. Celebrating his annual end-of-year soiree, he sat before a sleek, black piano, flanked by three Venuses feeding him miniature salmon slices topped with cream on tiny puffs of pastry. Delighted, Luigi pointed at her. “Pull up to my bumper, baby!” He bashed the piano keys dramatically. A crowd circled her. Sidra tugged her handbag strap up her shoulder. The small crowd were gasping, barely restraining themselves from reaching out to touch her, chattering over each other.

She smiled at this part of what was essentially a ceremony, a performance. This part always felt good. The bodies leaned in, clutching their wine glasses. The draughtsman appeared behind them holding two yellow-handled screwdrivers. There were tongues in the wine flutes, floating, then curling mid-scream, sinking to the bottom. Sidra closed her eyes momentarily as the humming in her brain began. She disappeared into her role: Grace Jones.

Several months back, there’d been another party, a masked ball in Paris in a former museum on the border of the Champs-Elysees. There on business, Hassan had informed her he may or may not attend. He was elusive that way. She never knew when he’d turn up to keep a distant but watchful eye on events. As the owner of the

agency he didn't need to; occasionally he materialised to keep his band of impersonators on their toes.

She'd left the mingling crowds, making her way through a maze of decadent rooms until she entered one right at the back of the building. Original surrealist paintings hung on the walls, tanks full of moon starfish slowly pulsed rhythmically in calm, contained, lit waters. A deep, Egyptian gold-trimmed coffin lay open. She'd been running her fingers over the trimming when she felt a hand on her back, a finger slowly circling. Something about that touch felt familiar. She leaned into it, ill-equipped to resist an unspooling occurring in her stomach.

"Hassan?" She turned around. The man didn't speak. He wore an intricately designed silver mask. There was no way to make out his face. Dressed in an exquisitely tailored midnight-blue suit, which complimented his skin tone, he reminded her of Hassan. He was similar in height, stature, tall and lean, possibly Arab. He had the same unruly head of curly hair. A smell like Cuban cigars and spirit-lined edges emanated from him. He possessed the same amused glint in his eyes. Instead of answering her, he took her hand, led her into the silk-lined coffin. He reached under her bulbous terracotta-coloured ball gown skirt, took off her panties. He parted her arse, burying his tongue there, licking and sucking greedily, groaning as his tongue circled, darted and fucked her rectum as though it was an edible orchid. He fucked her in that coffin without taking off a stitch of clothing. They were realigned, cushioned by folds of material. Sidra revealed her secret as she came, unable to understand how it had emerged from a burrow within her. He didn't react, as if he hadn't heard her. Stepping out of the coffin, their silence was a shared language. He kissed her neck tenderly before leaving. The moon starfish exited their tanks, floated towards her, running out of time.

Back in the main space, she scanned the crowds dribbling in different directions. He'd vanished. She headed outside to catch her breath in the courtyard. The moon starfish became mushrooms falling from her skin.

Three weeks later in London, Hassan invited her to a working-lunch meeting. He was immaculate, of course, in a teak-coloured Oswald Boateng blazer, black polo neck and slacks. He had a way of making instructions sound like casual suggestions, though with an undertone that made it clear he was absolutely serious. In between his briefing, she caught an unexpected expression on his face. She'd been reaching into her purse to pay for half the bill. He was watching her as if he knew her intimately. It was a warm, mischievous look, so fleeting that afterwards she thought she'd imagined it. Then, his eyes became hooded, his expression darkened. "It's an easy gig. No matter how inebriated you get, avoid leaving with anybody you don't know. I don't want a fucking heart attack in my mid thirties. And stay away from stuff with traces of peanut. You're allergic. Remember that time your face swelled up? You looked like the elephant woman." He chuckled.

Sidra cringed internally at the memory. Of course he'd remember that embarrassing incident. He told her about his trip to Greece, his work providing for and coordinating the refugee relief there. He spoke passionately at some length, relaying amusing tales fondly of some of the characters he'd encountered, the children in particular, how crazy the camps were, the camaraderie formed despite the desperation of their situation. She hadn't expected that level of generosity from him. The truth was, she knew very little about him beyond their working relationship. She suspected even his occasional revelations were calculated, though she was unsure as to what end.

"Is there something you'd like to tell me?" he asked. "Anything you're unhappy about work-wise?" He nudged gently.

One hand in her purse, Sidra held the perfume bottle. The draughtsman materialised, standing beside Hassan with smoke curling from his clothes. His drawing instruments were snapped in his hands. Sidra's fingers trembled.

"I have to go." She stood abruptly, knocking a plate containing the last remnants of an omelette. She started grabbing cash from her purse. Hassan scowled.

She put the purse down.

Marilyn Monroe sashayed by holding a tray of diced blue cheese. Sidra grabbed a piece by the staircase, popping it into her mouth; she savoured the taste to submerge the sick feeling rising in her stomach.

The fire which started it all had been an accident, so she'd been told. That day, her mother Marianne, having swapped shifts with a colleague, returned to their flat late afternoon. Often misplacing her keys, she'd rung the buzzer, kissed them, briefly admonished Carla and Dorian for the puzzle pieces of ninja turtles strewn on the hallway floor, passing Sidra in the kitchen rummaging through the cupboards, ingredients laid out on the table. "Hope we're having more than cake for dinner," she said, smiling, before peeling off her nursing uniform then crawling into bed. At the kitchen table, Sidra scribbled down a brief list. They'd run out of vanilla extract, the flour wasn't enough, no icing sugar left. She slipped on her jacket, trainers. She double-locked the flat door with her keys, as she often did if she needed to pop out, briefly leaving her siblings alone. The lift smelt of piss and sweat, groaning all the way down fourteen floors, shuddering as if it would spit her out onto an exit beyond the confines of the building. She departed, remembering she'd knocked the roll of tinfoil onto the kitchen floor, left the fridge and cupboard doors open, Carla and

Dorian arguing about a broken toy plane. She'd recall those details later. She'd weigh them in her hands, wrap them in tinfoil, pass them through the expanding hole in her chest, watching their arrival on a periphery, bloody, misshapen despite their thin veil of protection.

It was the vanilla extract that delayed her. They'd run out of it practically everywhere in their area. She'd had to walk all the way down to the cash- and- carry at the end of the main road to find a bottle. Forty minutes was all it took to lose everything. She arrived back to find their block engulfed in flames. The fire was ferocious. People jumped out of windows from the lower floors; babies were thrown out in duvets; bed sheets were used as inadequate ropes. The popping of fire, the screams of panic strangled her internally. She spilled the shopping on the horizon, the icing darkened by a trail of soot, the vanilla bottle breathing smoke, the flour dousing trees, windows, hands on car wheels steering, fingers jamming in ignitions instead of keys. It didn't matter which element of the scene she stumbled on unexpectedly, her mother, Carla and Dorian were trapped. The fire raged on. Her brother and sister died in their mother's arms. Powerless, Sidra had stood on the pavement looking up, screaming, a chipped chess piece floundering between the fire fighters, hoses, the crowd.

She'd locked her family in to protect them. She'd locked her family in, killing them. The parts of that memory always assembled into the same inevitable ending.

She'd brought out the keys, her hands shaking uncontrollably, her mouth babbling mother, cake, fridge, lift, uniform. She tried inserting the keys inside their names as if they were locks that would open, materialise them in her arms so she could breathe again. Instead the keys stuck, refusing to turn. They jammed in every opening, every possibility of rescue. In the years that were to follow, Sidra would encounter her actions that day again and again. And the draughtsman started appearing.

The party continued, a barely contained beast sprouting various heads while the skyline unfurled. Pee-Wee Herman knelt in the garden doorway drinking Dom Perignon from another man's shoes. Luigi had disappeared from his own celebration. A silver-haired contortionist lay sprawled atop the piano, twisting then curling her body into astonishing shapes as bright ties spilled from her mouth. People were doing lines of coke on the staircase, in the toilets, on the pantry floor. In the ground-floor bathroom there were bodies in the tub, clothed mannequins blinking at the harsh light, knocked out by their debauchery and excess. There were people fucking in the tents on the lawn, the cold air mottling their skin, the small decorative lights jangling as if indicating the tents might collapse, folding into bodies as part of the thrill.

Inside the kitchen, Sidra thought about the sharp instruments that found their way into the margins of her life, how they blunted against her body. She reached for a plum from a bowl of fruit on the grey marble island top. Instead of cores, in her mind's eye the fruit had miniature, blackened vanilla extract bottles spilling elixir for multiple deaths. She held up the plum. The draughtsman took a bite. She glanced at the hallway. There were bodies all the way up the banister shedding alligator skin, mouths holding their vices between knocked-out teeth, feet leaking watery reflections. The draughtsman finished the plum. Sidra took another swig of wine, looked up at the patterns of swirls on the white ceiling, longing for some entity to pull her through rust, wood, metal, bone, perform an excavation that would leave her changed. She felt hollow, gutted. She'd become acclimatised to scenes of this nature, adjusting herself in degrees like a heating dial.

Before the tower block became a burnt husk there stood an old print house in its place. Before the print house were raw materials to build it. Before those raw materials was a draughtsman named Alrik, armed with a vision. Before the vision there was a perilous journey crossing the Atlantic Ocean to England by ship. Alrik had left behind a young son and a spirited wife, whose plans to join him in London spurred him on while he searched for work. But his wife and son died of Cholera making that same journey, which for him had been loaded with hunger, curiosity and wonder at the potential of his new life. Their bodies were flung into the cold, thrashing sea. Broken-hearted and forlorn, Alrik spent time numbing his loss in the opium dens of London. It was in one such den that the image of the print house came to him, a building where men printed endless trails of paper, a building topped off with a turret, a kind of signature, a reference to his travels beyond the Americas. The image was ingrained in his memory that night at the den in Lime house, floating alluringly between curls of smoke. Roughly a month later, Alrik got himself a job at a construction company. He worked his way up. By the time the print house was built in 1920, he'd married a grocer's daughter named Bethany. They had three sons. He went on to draft designs for other projects but the print house remained his favourite because it came to him during a period of great pain, its lines somehow made indelible in his bloodstream, constructed in memory of his first wife and son. Before he died, Alrik was grateful the building would outlive him. In 1970, his beautiful print house was knocked down, having been a barely used museum for years, and replaced by an ugly tower block of flats. Resurrected from the rubble, Alrik began to wander through the tower block regularly. He entered people's flats, breathed against oven doors, sources of electricity. He searched for his departed reflection in their mirrors. Resentful, angry, he set small accidents occupants would

absent mindedly feel responsible for. Dissatisfied, over the years he began to plot a bigger accident worthy of his loss. At first, he simply fiddled with the wiring of the building, ensured the lifts malfunctioned now and again, and removed the fire extinguishers. Over time, his acts of malice grew. The draughtsman cultivated his appetite for destruction.

Sidra had met the real Grace Jones once after her concert at the Royal Albert Hall, for which Grace had been fashionably an hour late. She'd cornered her at the end by the backstage entrance, fighting through other bodies jostling to do the same. "Grace!" she'd hollered, overwhelmed by excitement. "People tell me I remind them of you."

Grace, decked in a tight see-through chiffon dress, purple knee-length boots and white three-D glasses smiled patiently, tolerantly. "Dahhhling, imitation is for pagans but you are divine."

Sidra found Luigi strangling one of the Venuses in the secret garden behind an initial smaller, more standard looking garden. It ran length ways. Venus was so out of it, she could barely fight back or scream. Her feet kicked limply. Her soiled, sequined dress's train was a fish tail moored on the wrong Garden of Eden. A little unsteadily, Sidra set her jacket down. She leaped onto Luigi pummelling his back "Leave her alone!"

Venus's underwear was gone; there were bruises already forming on her thighs. For a rotund, shorter man, Luigi was surprisingly strong. Barely recognisable as the charming host she'd encountered several hours earlier, he wore a chilling, cold

expression. “Fuck off, you cunt.” Turning around, he punched Sidra in the face repeatedly. Venus starred blankly at a night sky that wouldn’t rescue her. Sidra fell backwards. The wind left her body. Her head spun; her handbag went flying. She felt the weight of the perfume bottle slide as it moved. Blood trickled from her nose into her mouth. Her face throbbed. She looked at her Roland Mouret jacket, half expecting it to morph into a parachute, a dizzying, shimmering distraction from the ache in her head, which felt like it would fracture. Then, there were four other Grace Jones look-alikes dressed exactly like her. They all reached for her purse, for an item that accompanied her constantly; petrol in a perfume bottle, a beating heart liquefied. The draughtsman resurfaced and all his fingers were flames.

The fire at Luigi’s was voracious. Just like all the others. It swallowed the once glorious building, tore through the roof. It puffed black smoke, spat screaming bodies out. On the front lawn, Sidra coughed from the smoke in her lungs. Luigi, engulfed in flames, ran erratically, a wind-up life-sized toy, attempting to put himself out. The pale tents empty of bodies were on fire; the ice swans’ heads had melted, the remains of their figures thinning mockingly; the giant hedge man had lost his chainsaw. Ambulance and fire engine sirens screamed in the distance.

A familiar figure ran towards her. Hassan. He looked dishevelled, half panicked, a tight expression on his face. This man who was always cool, calm and assured grabbed her in relief. “Thank God! This was on the news. I was out of my mind with worry. You’re going to give me internal injuries before I hit forty.” He cupped her battered face. “Who did this? I’ll kill him.”

She tried to speak but couldn’t. What she wanted to say was: couldn’t somebody hear her silently screaming inside for years? Couldn’t somebody in this fucking world get

their hands bloody reaching into her guts to find something jagged and beautiful she could hold up to the light? Couldn't somebody see that she disappeared into Grace Jones because the pain, the guilt, the loneliness of being herself was unbearable? Couldn't somebody remind her of her favourite thing about being alive since she'd forgotten? Couldn't somebody find the bright yolk she'd lost in the back of a cab on a rainy afternoon, then present it to her as a new beginning? Couldn't somebody just be tender?

She stuck her hand into her jacket pocket. A receipt poked out, it fell. She hadn't remembered slipping it in there but she must have done. Miraculously, it had survived the fire. She'd taken the inside creature outside, disguised as a creased receipt. She wondered if it would anger the draughtsman. Hassan held the receipt, gazing at the three options she'd written down. Shaken, he stared as if holding a grenade pin with the world attached to it. He ripped up the receipt, its pieces fluttering in the cold air as the fire raged behind them.

"When you're ready, tell me what you've been scared to say," he suggested. She started crying then. He held her, pressed his mouth against the pulse in her neck as if it was a light travelling, as if it would be mercury by the time he finished knowing it. He held onto her. They braced themselves for the weather in the cracks, for the draughtsman's next stroke.