

## Mandala

### 1.

The organ pulses, like a heartbeat. It's Chopin. James hated Chopin. He liked Philip Glass, but that was about as far as his classical repertoire went. The organ player is either stoned, or very much an amateur. She's key-mashing like her fingers (or feet?) belong to someone twice her weight. I hope she is stoned.

I blink and get to my feet. They walk me down the lonely aisle. Heads turn. I feel like a bride, except I am walking the wrong way, I am wearing black and my fiancé is in a coffin.

The sky is a still and silent lagoon above me. Blue from horizon to horizon. There are blossoms and bird calls and wild flowers floating on the breeze. I take a bench at the far end of the churchyard. From my little black bag comes my MP3 player, earphones attached. I listen to Philip Glass, *Metamorphosis*. I have never read Kafka. From a hidden pocket in my bag comes a silver case that James gave me on my twenty-first birthday. There is a pre-rolled spliff hooked under the holder. I slip it out and in between two fingers. I have a zippo that matches the silver case. James gave it to me on my last birthday, my twenty-second. I flick it open and stroke the end of the spliff with a long flickering flame. I let the flame dance for much longer than necessary, watching it play. It is beautiful.

Every year I watch the unfolding of spring. I love to see the same things over and over again. I love repetition. Originality is ugly. Repetition is beautiful. Repetition is ever-lasting. Originality is progression and progression leads to expansion and expansion leads to millions of heads hitting a high ceiling. This world is beautiful because it is limited. Limitation necessitates repetition. There is only so much expansion that is possible within a limited system. Every year I watch the blooming of the cowslips, the primroses, the lady's smock. Then I watch them wither, die, rot. It is the same every year.

Except this year James is not here with me to watch it like he has for the past eleven.

My eyes scan the headstones that rise up out of the ground. Many of them are decaying, covered in moss and weather. I take my phone from my bag and smooth the screen with greasy fingers. My other hand brings the spliff to my lips. I kiss the end and suck, eyes on the phone screen. The name that reads is JAMES. I hook out one earpiece and click the green button, pressing the phone to my ear. It goes straight to the answer machine. James tells me that he is not able to pick up right now and not to bother leaving a message because he doesn't have enough credit to listen. I leave one anyway.

'I really need to talk to you,' I say. 'Something really shit has happened and I really need to talk to you about it. I don't know what the fuck to do.'

I take another drag on the spliff.

'Come on. Please. Where do I go? What do I do? Please.'

I end the call and throw my phone into my lap, glancing across at the headstones and the trees and the wildflowers. The breeze picks up locks of my hair and spirals it across my face like a veil. I tuck long blonde strands behind the Glass-plugged ear. The music haunts and rolls, incessantly, urgently repeats itself. I pick the phone up again. Incessantly, urgently, I repeat myself. The call connects.

‘What was it like to see the face of your own stability suddenly look away, leaving you with the dead and hopeless?’

‘What?’ I drop the spliff. It lands on my lap. I swear and scoop the smouldering stick up from the thin fabric of my dress. There is a small hole. ‘James?’ I ask my phone, distracted.

He is telling me not to leave a message because he has no credit to listen to it. I wait for the beep.

‘James! What the... you... this is driving me insane.’ I close my eyes. ‘I thought you just asked me a question. I really did. I thought you just spoke to me. This is driving me insane.’ I end the call and stub out the spliff, putting the earphone back in and letting the music calm me down a little.

He asked me a question, I’m sure of it. But I didn’t really understand it. I feel a gentle, cascading sense of unease that rots my stomach.

People start to come out of the church. They spill into the sunlight like a train of black ants. James’ mother and aunt walk towards me. I squint up at them. They are two giant silhouettes above me, pushed out of focus by the rude blue sky beyond. Their words are shaded. I can’t hear them. The words roll down me like raindrops on a window pane. I cannot hear them. I am only able to catch the drift.

It is so sad. It is so hard. You have been together such a long time. How old were you when you started to date? It was so cute, seeing the two of you holding hands as you walked to the park. How old were you? How long were you together?

‘Eleven years,’ I mutter.

How are you holding up? Have you seen any of the others? What was it like to see the face of your own stability suddenly look away, leaving you with the dead and hopeless? Aren’t you coming to the burial?

My face is creased. ‘Oh. Um. Yes.’

‘Would you like to ride in our car?’

I shake my head and scope the churchyard for my dad. ‘No, that’s okay. My dad is driving me.’

‘You know the way? It’s not too far.’

Of course I know the way. I grew up in this place. I know the way to anywhere around here. I give them a small false smile and lift myself to shaky tired feet.

## 2

We are crowded around a deep geometric void in the earth, like an arc of rotting black teeth in an open mouth. The words of the vicar rise and fall in pitch and tempo, a symphony of five movements. His voice occasionally gets stolen by the breeze, sections of his sermon slipping out of frequency. I am reminded of the work of a modern composer called Basinski and his Disintegration Loops.

The coffin is sleek and dark. There are flowers of muted pale colours resting on the top. The coffin is being put into ground rather than into fire. I find this somewhat ironic.

My eyes lift from the circle of white petals, drifting through swathes of black. They find a calm scene across the cemetery. Upon a bench sits an elderly woman and a young man. They are sharing a gentle conversation. Their bench is in a little patch of shadows cast by looming blossoming cherry trees. They themselves sit in a pool of liquid sunshine, bright and glowing, their edges dappled and flickering.

Familiarity sticks to them, envelopes them. It is like I am looking at a photograph of myself at a very young age. My brain is trying to connect my current self to the self in the photograph. I am trying to remember a time where I knew who these two people were.

As I focus on my memory I feel a strange sort of rushing sensation, like the ground is lunging up towards me. I have felt this sensation before. It is often accompanied by a desire to do something spontaneous and random. It would usually be James who would grab my arm and ask me what I was doing. He would ground me back into reality, and the sensation would wither.

James is here and he is not here. He is not here enough to grab my arm and ground me back into reality. My feet shuffle. I peel out of the crowd and walk across the cemetery towards the bench. I dance in and out, weaving through the patterns of the headstones. I reach the old lady and the young man.

The lady grins at me widely, the contours of her smile forming canyons in her cheeks.

‘Hello, dear,’ she says to me.

I smile and say ‘hello,’ ducking my head and touching the big-toes of my shoes together, like Eskimos kissing with noses. I am still unable to place exactly where these two people fit into my history.

‘I’m glad to see that you’re finally rid of him.’

This was not something I expected her to say. I furrow my brow and cock my head. ‘What do you mean?’

I can see that her eyes keep darting across to the arc of black statues surrounding the void that James is being lowered into. ‘You have lost the stability that tied you to the world outside and forbade you to listen to the whispers in your heart.’

My lips curl and I stare at her with cautious eyes. Is she playing around? Is she winding me up? Am I meant to laugh? Am I meant to know what she is talking about?

‘If you take time to listen to the silence within, you will hear peaceful answers.’ The lines in her face fold in on themselves. Her skin is like layout paper; thin and fragile.

My attention flickers to the guy. Is he following any of this?

One brow is raised high above the other. A confident, almost condescending smile ruffles his right cheek and his head is shaking. ‘Please,’ he says to me very calmly, amusement flickering at the edges of his tone. ‘Ignore my grandmother. She is old. She is old and she is senile and she talks a lot of nonsense mumbo jumbo.’

The old lady is not put out by this slight against her character. Her smile beams outwards, unyielding. ‘My dear boy, you are too full of logic. There are things in this world that cannot be explained and will not be explained with reason or rational thinking.’

The man shakes his head and pulls a face, amusement and lightness sparkling in dark eyes. ‘Whatever you say, grams, whatever you say.’ He is humouring her. She knows it. ‘But you can’t go around talking in this way to girls who are attending funerals. There are certain rules, certain social etiquettes that dictate distance and sobriety at such occasions.’ He flashes those dark shiny eyes up to mine. ‘And for that reason I would like to apologise for my grandmother.’

‘I can talk for myself,’ she snaps. ‘And I make no apologies.’

‘Rules and social etiquette are not things that I understand, don’t worry,’ I say.

He shrugs and looks up at me, his eyes snapping to mine and holding me there like a blade to a throat.

I feel a pang of hurtful loss. My eyes skip away from his. James, I want you here beside me. I want you to hold my hand and lead me back to the safety of your embrace. I want your warmth, your comfort.

They are throwing a spade-full of soil onto the coffin. I hear the slap as it hits. 'Are you here for a funeral?' I ask before I reconnect my eyes. He looks like he might be dressed for a funeral. She does not.

He's very dapper and elegantly dressed. If he weren't wearing jeans and black converse shoes I'd say he was definitely here for a funeral. He's wearing a tailored blue waistcoat with small grey squares decorating it in a geometric orderly grid pattern. Over this is a stylish blue blazer, the thin collar slightly raised up, perhaps a product of the wind rather than deliberate placement. His shirt is white with an open casual collar. Though these items are evidentially tailored to fit his shape exactly, he doesn't look quite as formal as I would expect someone in these clothes to look. Perhaps it is the dark jeans and casual shoes. Some feeling tells me that this is not the case. It's he himself that pulls his formal outfit into another, more relaxed, less fussy league.

His grandmother has her greying hair tied up in a bun with a fancy long pin holding it up. Little jade beads drape from the top of it like a loose strand of a dew-drenched spider's web. Her coat is oriental in style, probably Chinese, and very colourful and bright. Her trousers are voluminous silk, strapped to her ankles with pink ribbons. She wears dainty shoes like a ballerina or jazz dancer might. Even for an eccentric person, she is not dressed for a funeral. There are no other large groups of darkly clad people around. I already know the answer to my question.

The lady shakes her head. 'My husband died exactly a year ago today. We have come to visit the place in which his body is buried. I would sooner walk the hills he walked, because that is where I know he is. He isn't here. George prefers to associate his grandfather's resting place with the actual position in which he was buried. Young minds are very particular about things.'

'You said you didn't mind where we went,' the guy, George (?) interjects, eyes leaving mine.

'And I was telling you the truth. I don't mind. I like it here as much as any.'

There is a caesura, a pause in our air. I knock the toes of my shoes together and work my lips between my teeth, looking at my feet because it makes me feel safe even though I am cast aside, drifting, drowning.

'You're missing the good part,' says the old lady.

I glance up at her and then follow the line of her eyes. They take my gaze back to the place I left behind. James' father is speaking. I cannot hear his words, but I can see them. They are rainbow-coloured, spiralling and beautiful. They would have made me cry if I could hear them. I shake my head and look away, taking in the uniformity of the headstones. These are newer and cleaner than their counterparts back at the church. The grass is short and there are no wild flowers.

I want to cry.

'I know what you mean,' I say without looking at her. 'This isn't a place that good people would stick to for a long amount of time. Your husband is not here. He is hanging around in a much wilder place, I am sure. He is swaying in the blue breeze, brushing through the high branches of Ash trees and kissing the rain.'

I am crying. I turn away and let my feet take me to the car park. It is full of cars and empty of people. It is an echo of the cemetery within; dead and lifeless and uniform. The difference lies in the transitory nature of the car park. Tomorrow there will be different colours, shapes and styles of cars from today. Tomorrow the

headstones will still be the same shade, have the same words written on them, the grass will stay the same length. When the wild flowers grow they will be mown down right away, so that the place never betrays the permanence of the inhabitants' situation. But I know a secret. The inhabitants, one of which is James, are not in a state of permanence. They are forever changing. They have become something new and something different. I envy them for this. They are allowed to be as they are.

'Are you okay?' The voice drifts from the folly built across the path. It is an archway, made baroque with the addition of a slate roof, benches, mock-Tudor timber frame, gaudy oversized crucifix mounted at the gable.

George steps out into the car park. His hands are in his pockets and he walks with a confident nonchalance towards me. 'She's an old lady. She didn't mean to upset you. She doesn't know what she is saying.' He takes a hand out from his pocket and scratches his right temple with his index finger, a gesture that has little to do with a physical itch. He is itching something that is on the inside of his head.

I cross my arms loosely. 'She didn't upset me. My fiancé dying upset me.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Why are you sorry? Did you kill him? You didn't kill him.'

His Adams Apple bobs and he looks away for a moment. 'It's a turn of phrase. I can relate to how you feel.'

I am unconvinced, but I don't say anything. Instead I head across to a bench. I wonder why there is a bench in the car park. There is a memorial plaque on it. *In Loving memory of Francis Gerran*. Perhaps Francis preferred the transitory nature of the car park over the stability of the cemetery. I sit on Francis's bench and duck my hand into my little bag. Out comes the silver case and zippo. I place them both beside me and fish out my pouch of baccy, pack of rizlas, packet of weed and blue grinder. I try to place a rizla on my lap with the filter in place while I pull out some tobacco, but the breeze lifts the paper and steals it away. My patience has worn too thin. I try again. The paper lifts, curls and flies. I growl at it.

George sits besides me and takes a new rizla from the packet. I watch him as he expertly does it all for me, his hands familiar with the motions. He takes my zippo and flicks it open and then closed. 'Nice.'

'It was a gift from my fiancé.'

He places the spliff onto the corner of his lips and talks around it. 'Your fiancé had good taste.' He flicks the zippo open again and torches the end, starting it off. 'Here,' he hands me the spliff.

I take it and wrap my lips around it.

He takes another rizla and repeats the procedure. He repeats it three more times until my silver case has three perfectly rolled spliffs ready and waiting, secured under the holder. He closes the case and closely inspects the engraving. 'Very good taste. Exquisite.'

I hand him the spliff. 'Things that have been crafted by the hand of a human are generally more beautiful than the perfection of a machine and its pattern.'

He nods and takes the stick from me. 'I think I know what you mean. Perfection is flawed.'

'Yes. Nature is flawed. Repetition is beautiful, but repetition does not mean exact replication. I can't understand the mentality of mowing wild flowers out of a lawn.'

He exhales a blue cloud. 'I'm afraid I don't quite follow.' His words are compressed and shaped with smoke, making his voice tight and small.

'Do you miss your grandfather?'

A flicker ruffles his forehead and he places the silver case on the bench beside the zippo. 'He was full of zest and life. I miss him, of course. My grandmother misses him terribly. She's always been eccentric. She has been pushing the boundaries of eccentricity since he died. This concerns me. I am very close to her, but I think she might be drifting away from me. I think she might be drifting away from the world in general.'

'My fiancé has done the same thing.'

'By which, you mean he has died?' he passes the spliff back. He waits for a reply that will not come. 'Grams is not dying.'

I watch the glowing end and cross my eyes as I take it to my lips and inhale. I hold the smoke in, and then exhale. 'Everything is dying.'

He raises a brow and sits back languidly into the bench, clearing his throat. 'I can understand your point of view. Your fiancé is being buried today. Of course you feel that way. Of course. But in time things will get better.'

'Time is why everything is dying.'

'Well; that maybe so in your opinion. In my opinion everything is brimming with life.'

I answer with a flick of my wrist, 'Oh sure, sure. You are right. You have missed my initial point. It doesn't matter anyway.'

We share a splintered silence. A crow screams overhead. They imitate sounds they have heard other birds make so that sometimes I think I hear a buzzard but it is actually a crow. Then I see a real buzzard. The crow is bombing the buzzard.

Out of the corner of my eye I can see George is watching me. He is reading me. His eyes blink and rove. 'Ever since I first saw you walking across the cemetery I have had this feeling that I know you. Are you at Westminster?'

'No. I am in a cemetery car park.'

I can feel his smile. 'I meant are you studying at Westminster Uni?'

The buzzard screams and swoops. The crow is gone. The buzzard is gliding alone.

'No. I just graduated from the Arts Institute at Bournemouth.'

'Huh,' he says it like I said something revealing and amazing. He shifts his position so that he is facing me a little more, his arm resting up on the back of the bench, his head loosely resting in his palm. 'Well you sure are familiar to me. Do you live around here or something?'

'Or something.'

He cocks his head and gives me a gentle tap on the arm. 'Come on, this is really bugging me.'

'Do *you* live around here?'

'I grew up here. I live in London now.'

'What school did you go to?'

'The comprehensive in town. You?'

The stump of the spliff is small and hot between my finger and thumb. I inspect it. 'I almost went to Westminster. The photography course there is very good. David Company is an excellent photographic writer and theorist. But the action of taking a photograph is more important to me than the theories behind it. I chose to study in Bournemouth instead, whose alumni are varied and inspiring.'

He blinks and clears his throat, then itches that patch on his right temple. He uses his index finger to do so. 'You read photography?'

‘I take photographs. It is not a passive action. I take photographs in order to capture the way I feel about the present moment. I live in the present moment. It is the only way to be because it is the only thing that is real.’

‘I think I can relate to that.’

‘I photograph things in order to hold an aura so that I can refer to that moment again and re-live that moment over and over. Each re-experienced moment is different from the previous because I bring new ideas to it. The present moment turns into a past moment straight away and, as such, I am constantly striving to understand the present moment in relation to past moments and bring the two into one concept.’ I tap my feet and watch the movement as I speak, afraid to look at him because I am not done yet and I think he would probably want me to be done. ‘I destroy photographs that simply freeze the moment, that fail to invoke that moment and project it back into the present. I like repetition because I like to experience things in the moment, and therefore repeating actions extends the moment and changes it.’

There are people coming out to the car park. I know many of them but I don’t give them my attention. I am not finished with George yet. I think he is nearly finished with me. I think I have worn his patience to the bone. He is uncomfortable. He is drowning in my confusing inability to communicate myself in a clear and succinct manner. I apologise to him and try very hard to reconnect myself to the conversation. ‘How old are you?’ I ask him.

‘Twenty one.’

I have stubbed the spliff out. Now I take the zippo and silver case and drop them into my bag. ‘Were you born before or after September?’

‘Before. My birthday is in August.’

‘Yes, I went to the same school. We must have been in the same year. That is where we recognise one another from.’

He cocks his head. ‘You recognise me too? You must be right. I can’t place you at the school. I can’t place you and the school as being related and coexisting things.’

I survey the contours of his features. Pictures play in my head like a Super 8 film being projected through an old dusty projector. I laugh and close my eyes. ‘There is a young girl walking with two friends; another girl and a boy. They are seven or eight years old. They have been playing in the recreation ground but their game has been spoilt by some older children dominating the climbing frame. The three friends walk up the hill, along Abbey Walk, over the road and across to Castle Hill. Here they sit on one of the benches and together they watch the view. It is expansive. They can see for miles and miles and miles. Fields and woods and vales stretch out like a hastily thrown-out quilt. They imagine that the horizon is so far away that beyond it lies some other great Kingdom. The boy is very confident and says one day he’ll be the king of the lands beyond the distant hills.’

George stares at me with knitted eyebrows. I can tell this without having to open my eyes. He does not remember.

I open my eyes and skip over some of the story, the part he does not remember. ‘I can place you and the school together. I can place you everywhere. Every school play. Every concert. Every event, party, gathering. You buzzed around the common room lapping up everyone’s attention. You were a socialite without the heritage.’

He laughs with his nose and nods. ‘You might be right there. I was an active member of the student body.’ He squints at me. ‘No. I really can’t place you, though you are definitely familiar to me.’ His eyes go out of focus and his face falls. He has

placed me. ‘*Rachel!*? Rachel Reid. Fletch’s Girl.’ He points two index fingers decisively. ‘You were James Fletcher’s girlfriend. Shit.’ He seems to make another connection. ‘Was this his funeral? Of course. I had forgotten it was today. Shit.’

‘I was James Fletcher’s fiancé.’

He shakes his head and looks off at the folks gathering in the car park. ‘You were together a long time.’ He swallows down. ‘I remember when James joined Primary school in year five. At first I hated him. I hated him for being this cool kid from another town. I hated him because he pulled you away from us. By the time we moved up to top school the two of you were stitched together at the hip. You faded away. It was as if you and I had never spoken before. We started top school fresh and clean. No history to tie us together. Liz went off to private school. You went off with James. I networked until my old threesome friend group tripled in volume with only one original member. And you... you changed. You became very quiet and in the background of things, clinging to him, hiding behind him, letting him talk for you.’

My cheeks prickle like a nettle rash and my stomach feels like a waterfall is raging within it. Inside my head there is a yellow road sign with black lettering. There is an arrow and a circle shape and the words *Diverted traffic*. I look straight at him. ‘You have this way of speaking that defies the rules of punctuation. If I were to transcribe a soliloquy spoken by you, then I would find it difficult to know where to place the full stops. Should I put the full stop where you pause, or where your sentences become complete? You don’t pause between sentences. You pause. Between them running into the next idea, the next sentence. Without breaking for breath.’

He brushes his lips together and looks at me with sidelong eyes and a hovering uneasy smile. ‘I don’t even...’ His eyes are stolen by another pair.

Looming above us is Mr Fletcher. ‘Rachel, the wake is taking place at the social club. Are you planning on coming along?’

‘Yes, I will be along shortly.’

Mr Fletcher’s eyes return to George. ‘George. Well now, how are you doing?’

‘Very well, sir,’ he says, getting to his feet and shaking hands with Mr Fletcher firmly.

Mr Fletcher’s smile does not reach his eyes. ‘Ah yes. I got your party invitation, thank you. As I said on the RSVP; I shan’t be attending.’

‘I perfectly understand, Mr Fletcher.’

Mr Fletcher swipes his hand back and forth. ‘I appreciate the gesture. I appreciate that you kids are marking James’ passing in your own way. I think it’s terribly important. When a young kid dies us stuffy oldies can only react in our fussy archaic ways. This whole ceremony and the wake are things that James wouldn’t like to attend himself. It gladdens me that he’ll have a more appropriate youthful sending off in parallel to this fuddy-duddy formal stuff and nonsense.’

George gives a confident single nod and smile. There is a gulf of silence, a fuddy-duddy formal sort of silence.

Mr Fletcher breaks it with an enthusiastic tone of voice that seems oddly flat, as if it were a vibrant colourful painting photocopied in cheap black and white.

‘How’s Westminster?’

‘Great, really great. I am in my element.’

‘Oh, I’ll bet you are. The London lifestyle is certainly one suited to someone like you, George. I am terribly jealous of you.’ He seems to clock something and adds, ‘Did you graduate this year?’

‘No, I’m at the end of my second year.’

‘Ah, yes. I remember, you took a gap year, right?’



George slides his hands into his back pockets. He is very smooth and easy in his mannerisms. 'Right. Six Months assisting at a boarding school. Six months travelling.'

James' dad nods, that big false smile tacked to his lips like a bad Photoshop job. 'Great. Great. What a life, eh?' There is a pregnant pause. 'Are you coming to the wake?'

'I'd love to, but I'll have to see how it goes. I'm here with my grandmother...'

'Oh of course, Freddie died this time last year. Terrible.'

'He was old. It was his time. As for James; words cannot describe. I am so deeply sorry.'

Mr Fletcher nods and looks at the ground, his hands edging around a crumpled prayers leaflet, a copy of which is folded into many parts in my bag. 'Thank you, George. It means a lot to me. I know that you were not strictly in the same circle as James at school, but your circles crossed and I secretly wished he would make the move into yours. Kids will be kids, eh? I hope to see you at the wake. It's at the club.'

'Right.'

'I understand if you can't make it. Pop around sometime for a tea. You're welcome any time.' He bobs his head in farewell and almost forgets to say a word of parting to me. 'See you later then, Rachel.'

'Yes.'

'Good to see you again, George. Send my regards to Ruth and look out for her. You're a good kid. I know you will.'

'Will do. Bye, Mr Fletcher.'

I shift my position and tuck strands of hair behind my ear. I level a stare at George, one brow raised above the other.

'I didn't know you and James were *that* close.'

He clears his throat and scratches his temple. 'Well, you know, I worked at the social club in town for a while. Mr Fletcher frequents the establishment, particularly the bar. I was a bartender.' He nods and flicks his eyes across to mine.

'Is that George!?' This voice comes from Mr Clare. I twitch my nose and tap my feet up and down as I am immersed in the same conversation regarding Westminster, gap years, London and six months of travelling. The buzzard is swirling up above us. The screech drowns out human words and bounces off the landscape.

I am distracted back to the car park by my father, who is leaning over and trying to get my attention. 'You okay?'

I nod.

'What time do you want to head to the social club?'

'In a small while. I just have to say goodbye to George,' I say.

'I'll wait by the car.'

Mr Clare says his goodbyes and walks off. Yet another middle aged man comes and greets George, this time Bob Selmon. George remains seated throughout this conversation and Mr Selmon sits on the end of the bench, meaning that George now has his back more or less to me.

George is part way through telling Mr Selmon about India when I sigh and swiftly get to my feet. I feel a warm firm hand clasp around my bony wrist.

'Please excuse me, Bob, I have to talk to Rachel before she goes, if you don't mind?'

Mr Selmon does not mind. He waves a cheery goodbye.

‘Sit down a moment,’ George squints up at me and scratches under his chin with his index finger.

I sit down again, resting my bag in my lap, holding a posture that means I am only perching here a moment. My patience has run out. I am tired. I don’t want to be around people anymore. I wait, expectant.

‘Listen, er, Rachel,’ he says my name with emphasis. ‘A bunch of folks are gathering together tonight at Castle Hill. It’s a sort of party in James’ honour actually.’  
‘And I’m only just getting invited now?’

He shakes his head like a toy dog on a car dashboard. ‘Listen, Rachel, I had fallen out of contact with James. The guy was cool. I liked him. Andrew failed to mention that you and James were still an item. I’m sorry. I feel really raw about this.’ He shrugs off his responsibility. ‘I really didn’t know James was engaged to be married, let alone to a local lass, let alone to Rachel Reid. He didn’t... we didn’t talk a lot after leaving for Uni.’

I tuck strands of hair behind my ear and knock my knees together, hugging my bag to me and staring at my shoes. ‘Who’s going?’

‘Well... there’s Andrew, of course. Danny, Pete, Linda, Joe, Steven said he’d come by after work, Phil and Adam will be there, as will Mike and Polly.’ The list goes on. It doesn’t stop here. He lists names that are distantly familiar, names that I have never heard of, names that I had forgotten, names that I know too well.

‘I don’t know.’ My lips brush together and I peer across to my dad leaning against his battered white Peugeot. Cars all around are sparking their growling engines into life. Wheels throw up small gravel stones and crunch as they roll towards the road. ‘That’s a lot of people. I’m not great in crowds of people. I think I want to be by myself for a while.’

George’s grandmother is walking out towards us. She hobbles a little, but not so much as many women her age. I can remember her from my past quite clearly now; Mrs Harris, Ruth Harris. She and Freddie Harris lived at George’s parents’ house. She would play with me when I went over to visit, tell me stories. What I remember the most about her is that she would always be asking me questions. At the time it felt strange because usually it was me asking adults questions, not the other way around.

She comes up to us and sits beside me so that I am in-between two generations. She takes a while to settle herself and get into a position that is comfortable for her.

‘I was just telling Rachel about the party on the hill tonight.’

‘Oh yes! It will be fantastic. The sunset is striking up on the hill. It arcs around the whole vale and turns the land to golden mud.’

‘Ah, but Rachel says she doesn’t want to go,’ he says it with raised brows and a cheeky smile. ‘Rachel says she doesn’t like crowds of people. She would rather be alone.’

‘She is only just waking up now. Her light is dim and flickering.’

He rolls his eyes and shoves hands into his pockets, gazing across to middle distance and shaking his head. ‘Nutters on each side.’

‘She has spent a long time under a blanket. The blanket was warm and comforting and shielding. But something pulled it away and now she is exposed. She wants to find her way back under the blanket. She is searching desperately for a suitable replacement but she doesn’t quite know where to look and the more she looks the more of the world she sees.’ She says it with a steady smile and a glint in her eye.

I can see her grandson's eyes in hers, or perhaps the other way around. I can see their mannerisms as being repetitions of each other, not replications, but repetitions.

George's forehead furrows and he takes one hand from his pocket, using his index finger to tackle an itch on the inside of his head.

I glide to my feet and take one step away before turning back to these two people I once knew so well, and now they are shadows, flickers, strangers. 'It was nice talking with you again, George.' I bob my head, turn my eyes to the old lady and do a small courtesy. 'Nice to see you, Mrs Harris.'

'The dead are never far away. They swim through all of us so that we constantly see their symbols and signs. George sticks so closely to the exterior, objective, world that he fails to share his life with the dead.'

'Grams,' he cuts in with an objectionable slice.

She ignores him. 'You both have the capability of seeing their signs, of living in harmony with them.' She smiles with sadness. 'But Rachel, you have draped a blanket over yourself. You have allowed it to stick to you and shield you from their answers. George, you drown them out under your heady hedonism. The both of you are deaf and numb and blind.'

I glance towards my father. He is leaning against the car, smoking a cigarette or a joint. There is only one other car left, an old maroon Rover that has been well looked after.

'The way we live today is very different from the way most of the dead lived. In the total and complete history of our ancestry, a vast majority of human beings lived without the same hopes and dreams and aspirations of grandeur that are expected out of people today. The vast majority of people who have died before us have lived out simple, basic lives. These dead people swim through living people and cause us discomfort because we are not using their advice. We are ignoring their presence, the things that they know about the world. We have deemed their advice as irrelevant without taking the time to really listen to them.'

George laughs and takes his grandmother's arm. 'Okay,' he elongates the O, so that it sounds like "Ooooooh. Kay." 'I think it's time to go home for a nap, grams.'

Mrs Harris takes her arm from him and calmly realigns the sleeve of her coat. 'Chasing the tail of dogma. Chasing the tail of smoke and reason. It's time to open your eye.'

George looks at me, faked amusement making lines in his cheeks but not beside his eyes. He sticks a thumb out and gestures it towards his grandmother, speaking his words to me. 'She's tired. She doesn't know what she is saying.'

'Let the waters kiss and transmutate these leaden grudges into gold. Let go. Leave behind this place so negative and blind and cynical, and you will come to find that we are all one mind, capable of all that's imagined and all conceivable.'

George manoeuvres his unwilling grandmother to her feet. 'Okay Grams. Time to go,' he coos this like he is talking to a pet or a young child.

Her words carry across as she is lead away to the lonely maroon Rover. 'Let the light touch you. Let the words spill through. Let them pass right through, cast aside your hope and reason.'

I remain exactly where am, unmoving. Her words bleed and creep through me. A small pocket of air rises up and sticks to the place just between my eyes. She is helping me answer James's question. I have realised this too late. I jog across to them.

George has packed her away into the car and is lowering himself into the driver's seat. With screwed up, too-focused features he fiddles with the clutch. Then

he spots me standing there, so rolls down the window and peers up at me. 'Sorry, Rachel. I really have to get grams back home. Please come to the party tonight?'

'Can I talk to Ruth for a moment?'

He glances to his grandmother and then back to me. 'Not right now. She's all wound up. I told you before, she's drifting out of this world into a different world inside her head. It's not good when she gets all excited like this. She needs to take her medication.' The engine sparks. He gets into gear and drops the handbrake.

'Reunite and both move on together.' Her voice only just reaches me above the sounds of crunching gravel and the old struggling engine. I watch as the orange light blinks and then the car pulls out and away.

I blink. I pull out and away.

The roads are clean and empty. Dad's car smells like metal and moss.

'I don't think I want to go to the wake.'

'Really? But...' he tries and fails to fish for what he wants to say. After a while of silent cruising he speaks, eyes glued to the road. 'What do you want to do instead?'

'I think I'm going to cycle around town for a while, and then maybe go to Castle Hill.'

'Like old times.'

I smile and nod and echo. 'Like old times.'