

## CHAPTER 7

*Windowpane // We Did Not Make The Instrument,  
The Instrument Made Us // The Essence Between Us //  
Heart of Gold*

\*\*\* Windowpane \*\*\*

The town of Sawley had never seen a child like Jean before. As she grew, she chose to play with toy cars instead of dolls, created moving contraptions with *Lego Technics* pieces instead of tea parties. Many mistook her for a little boy. She dressed in miniature overalls and played in the garden and would cry if her hair grew too long. And she was solitary. Patrick tried introducing her to other children, taking her to the local fair days in town, going on play-dates with other parents. But she always seemed disinterested, always ended up on her own.

For her fifth birthday—to which she wanted no one invited—Jean only asked for nail polish and a *Barbie* car she had seen in a catalogue: a pink Ferrari the size of a shoebox. *Finally*, Patrick told himself and thought she might be coming around, that his daughter might soon be like the other little girls at pre-school and he wouldn't get so many odd looks from parents and people in town. It hadn't been easy raising her on his own.

He withdrew some of the savings he'd put aside for this year and from Tesco purchased the nail polish, a resplendent forest green, and then from Hamley's in Blackburn purchased the Barbie car.

It's quite impressive, said the storekeep, examining the large box as he handed it over the counter. If only it came in other colours.

The box was heavier than Patrick expected. My daughter is going to love it.

That night, after sharing a candle-topped, double-choc-chip muffin as a birthday cake, Jean opened her presents. Patrick admired her as she carefully removed the clear sticky tape and unfolded the starry purple wrapping paper, placing it in an ordered pile beside her, leaving now only the car, and in the driver's seat, the nail polish. She fell silent in an awe for a moment before running over to hug him:

Thank you, she said and then was off, awkwardly carrying the car up the stairs to her room.

Jean was a voracious reader. She scanned letters and newspapers and read carefully anything that passed before her eyes. And feeding her interest, Patrick bought her books every month: *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Magic Pumpkin*, *The Jolly Postman*, *James and the Giant Peach*, and even *Goosebumps*; all of which she quickly devoured, her appetite seemingly insatiable. Recently, she had started reading *The Little Prince*, and a few nights before had told him, it was already her favourite. And so, because of this, as he went to tuck her in, there was no part of Patrick that thought his daughter would be doing anything out of turn or unusual. She would be reading or innocently playing with her presents. She was a good girl. She wouldn't put the nail polish on without his help. And even that wouldn't have been so bad. And the room was too small to do anything much with a toy car that big. He scaled the stairs and opened her door.

In taking in the scene before him, it all made sense: why she had chosen green nail polish; why she hadn't asked for any *Barbie* or *Ken* dolls to go with the car. On the floor scattered with her action figures of *Shera* and *Danger Mouse* and *GI-Joe*, the giant toy *Ferrari Testarossa* convertible was no longer pink, but a new slick and roughly painted green, and in the driver's seat was

her favourite soft-toy pig (called Piggy), which she was driving around on the floor with one hand.

Noticing her father enter Jean gasped cutely and froze. He saw nail polish all over her arms and ankles and face; all over her blue cloud pyjamas. She almost looked like a childish commando ready to dash into the jungle.

Patrick folded his arms in bemusement. What happened to the pink? he asked.

And Jean, with her rosy cheeks glowing through the dark smears answered simply and in a directness he almost admired:

I don't like pink, she said.

\*\*\* We Did Not Make The Instrument, The Instrument Made Us \*\*\*

And as Sirrius enters the field of debris surrounding the solar system, known as the Kuiper Belt, Jean finally takes her moment. She transfers control from Juno to her console and banks the ship eagerly. Her face scrunches. She banks again, does a corkscrew manoeuvre, stalks an imaginary Klingon bird of prey that is always somehow just out of reach. She imagines the view onscreen is her own vision, that prone as a Greek Goddess to a sailing ship, she is outside and guiding them onward whilst dust motes older than the Earth streak her face. Pluto, an ochre marble so close she could reach and hold it in her hand, watches. Two asteroids as giant nuggets of ore drift and clash together in applause and she ducks Sirrius below them and then corrects their course.

The path through the belt continues for another fifteen hours, some of which involves dodging gargantuan asteroids of ice, and sometimes holding course through monotonous stretches of absent space full of the microbial remnants of the birth of the Solar System. The gravity shield re-routes small and negligible debris around the ship, ensuring the hull is undamaged and the journey smooth. One day this debris might combine into a comet and cut

across the Milky Way, but Jean does not think of this now. She does not think of anything or even realise she is not thinking. She has melted into Sirius, become a being of pure utility, of action and concentration and will. If her father, Patrick was alive and by her side he might recount his love of digging a hole with a shovel or building a masonry wall, that what she is feeling, this squashing of time until it feels there is no time at all, is what mindfulness is. But she doesn't think of her father either. For those long hours time loses all friction and it is only when Sirius emerges from the Kuiper Belt unscathed, as the aching expanse of the galaxy stretches out before her and she lets go of the controls and rests back in her chair and from her water bottle drinks it dry and knowing they are safe then hands control of the ship back to Juno, does she feel it all and submit herself to thought and with it exhaustion. She checks her watch: It is four minutes past 2am on a Saturday morning, or on Earth what would be around 4am. She croaks her dry voice across the intercom:

Sirius, this is Jean do you copy?

And as though they'd been waiting, Ceylan responds immediately, Copy. And the Captain responds too, though a little later than Ceylan: Copy that, he says. Are we clear of the belt?

Swallowing, smacking her lips together and clearing her throat, Jean responds. Affirmative. We are now in interstellar space. I've reverted control to Juno and we're ready to push to cruise speed, over.

Roger, Dragan says, then instructs Ceylan to confirm hull and engine integrity. Ceylan quickly reports the hull is holding without issue and the engines, the twin gravity drives of quantum entanglement and applied gravity waves, are ready to amplify. Simultaneously Jean observes Ceylan's status checks and preparations onscreen, and herself while watching prepares the throttle ready to engage. She is aware soon, once they are at cruise speed, at 90 percent the speed of light and once the gravity drives have settled into an efficient pattern of oscillation, they will try and wake Handi, and she is

excited for this. She will see his face flush to life and hear the deep timbre of his voice that she could recognise anywhere, and she will ask him if he heard her. She will ask what it was like, if he had dreams. If it felt simply like sleeping and waking up. She will point in a fluid arc, a gesture that is theirs and theirs only, at her eyes and then her heart and then at him. She will. She will.

After a five countdown, Jean slides the throttle with a swipe of her finger and feels a further draining from within her as before. And with a breath she is suddenly more exhausted than she has ever felt in her entire life. So much so that in a matter of minutes, after switching off the intercom she unknowingly falls smoothly and deeply to a dreamless sleep in her chair.

Aboard Sirrius, the integrated computer system known as Juno—named so after the Roman goddess for protection—controls all onboard systems, including: water reclamation; the reprocessing and filtration of oxygen; the spin and oscillation of the gravity drives and other automated secondary processes, such as waste management, temperature control and the ambient lighting, which is dimmed and brightened every twelve hours to reflect a typical Earth day. Therefore, in what to Jean would be later that morning, at 10:21am, she wakes in her control room and except for the discomfort from once again having slept bent upright and in a chair, she feels re-energised and refreshed. She returns to her quarters and has a shower and then shortly after goes to the Mess. Dragan sits reading what appears to be a coffee-table book. She sees on the cover a photo of a dog bounding towards the camera: a brown-coated *Cocker Spaniel* smiling excitedly. What's that? she asks.

Dragan opens the book towards her, showing spread across the pages a giant Great Dane sitting in the sun proudly before a line of manicured grape vines. Winery dogs, he says, and returns to reading.

I never liked dogs, she says and continues to the dispenser where she makes herself a coffee. They used to scare me when I was little.

In Croatia, Dragan says. I had three dogs. Little ones: a *Jack Russell* terrier and two *Silky Crosses*. Cookie, Mary, and Abi. Abi short for Abigail.

Jean collects her breakfast, sits down at the table and begins eating her tuna and egg. After a time, Dragan places his book face down on the table. So I've checked Handi, he says and pauses, and Jean then pauses too, suddenly anxious, and she does not want to feel anxious. She focusses on what he is to say next but on focussing finds her mind a-wander, instead circling on fears mixed in with questions on why the Captain had called his dog Abigail. Why, of all things he had brought with him a book on wineries and other people's pets. She places her fork on the tray and waits, trying to seem calm. Dragan continues: Earlier this morning, he says, laying his hands flat on the table as if to say something very important, I began the process of bringing him out of the coma.

Jean's heart sinks, instantly forgetting dogs and names. She tells her heart: He is awake and she wasn't there.

Perhaps sensing her distress, Dragan says, He is not awake. Not yet. I have only ceased the anaesthetic and started withdrawing the medication keeping him under. His readings are looking good, and—

She wants to stop him from speaking. Why isn't he awake? Will there be side effects? Her bottom jitters on the bench-seat and the bones and tendons and nerves in her hands wish to dance and not be still. But she holds, tells herself to wait, let Dragan continue.

—he will gradually come to consciousness, he says. In his own time. We cannot force it. Generally, it should be a few hours, but could be days or longer. Ceylan is in with him now.

She should be angry, Jean tells herself. Why didn't he wake her earlier? Why was he casually reading, letting her sit there and eat like a muppet? She should be with Handi now, not Ceylan. But she is not angry, Jean realises. She is just there. And what would lashing out achieve but argument for

argument's sake?

Don't worry, Dragan says, once again reading her. Nothing is going to happen for now.

He taps his hands lightly on the table and then dog-earing the page he'd been reading, picks up and closes his book. Jean quickly finishes the last globules of egg and final morsels of tuna on her plate and asks: Is it alright if I go in now?

Of course, he says.

Around Handi's motionless body they gather together for two full days: Ceylan and Jean on one side of the medi-bed and Dragan on the other. Handi's chest gently heaves and subsides and the easy sound of light breath respire from his nostrils. His eyes are closed and his lips are parched and he does not wake. At night the crew rotate shifts in case of a change. In the morning, after routine system checks they return and resume their vigil. Meals are consumed sometimes by his side, sometimes in the mess or sometimes in the observation room among the passing flow of shifting stars. On the third day as they sit together by his bed, Jean remarks: Do you ever think about having a funeral song?

Dragan stops reading and lifts his eyebrows.

Ceylan tilts her head as if to remember. It has been so long, she says.

I always wanted, *Flowers On My Window*, by *Travis*, offers Jean.

Obviously, says Ceylan, we will not know each other's songs.

No, says Jean. Not likely.

Ceylan thinks for a moment. *To Live Is To Die*, she says. That is my song.

Jean asks: Not a Turkish song?

I grew up on western music, Ceylan says. That is how I learned English. I do love the old songs but they are for my parents and weddings and sad funerals. And I do not want anymore sadness.

Sitting up, Dragan says: If I had a song, it would be *Domine, Puer Meus* by *Ivan Lukačić*.

Jean asks, Is that Latin?

It is, says Dragan. It is a composition from the renaissance. It is the expression of a conversation between the son of God, our Lord, Jesus Christ, and a Roman centurion. It is very humbling, I think.

How can you stay so religious? asks Ceylan.

Dragan says, What else can I be? If I turn away, I am lost. He pauses. How can you not be religious in such a time as this?

Jean thinks of all she has witnessed, all she has lost. I've seen too much, she says. —lived through too much to believe in an all powerful God or design. She finds an urgency coming to her thoughts. —or that we all started with a perfect garden and a man and his rib.

You know that is not what it means, says Dragan.

Alright, concedes Jean. But then what is allegory and metaphor and historical account and fiction. Where do you draw the line? Is it at the parting the of the Red Sea? At the Ten Commandments? At the immaculate conception? At your Lord's resurrection?

They all pause.

I believe we are a lot like a song, says Ceylan. Our lives. That the song plays once and then not again.

Sure, says Dragan now closing his book. But to what do you say of evil, of justice, of suffering? Calling all of human experience and history a song is nice, but it is a very simplistic world view, don't you think?

I don't think so, says Ceylan. We start. We end. We draw our influences and come from somewhere before us but we make a new thing, you know, new music. Like in cells, entropy is from the simple to the complicated. Divide and adapt and evolve. And life is complicated. But to explain... like a cell can become a person, I think—I say, I believe we are a song and mean more. Do

you understand?

Sorry, says Dragan. I'm not following.

Jean tries explaining: She's saying what she is saying is representative. That like  $E=mc^2$  is a simple equation for the very complicated proposition for energy and mass being equal, her explanation of life as a song is similarly both simple and complicated. Right?

Ceylan considers and answers: Yes, and no. I do not mean to say life is a song as an explanation for where we come from. Then who is the singer? I am saying the song, life, you know, should not be repeated. When you hear a song, like a melody, it is not as good as the first time. It is never the same. Hear a song once and it changes your life, even the way you think, and we change the world. Hear a song over and over to eternity and you will wish you never listened. I do not see a point in heaven or an afterlife, you know. I prefer to think of our time alive as a song; to be heard once and then not again. Little songs everywhere.

And then before another word is spoken, from the bed scrapes a sudden groan followed by a slow shifting of sheets, and in a croak Handi utters: What. Is. Going. On?

\*\*\* The Essence Between Us \*\*\*

There's water behind you, says Dragan.

Where? says Jean.

There, says Dragan.

Oh.

She collects the water bottle from a shelf over her shoulder and holding it steady presents the nozzle to Handi's lips. He drinks fully and Ceylan and Dragan stand in anticipation. Is that okay? Jean asks.

Handi nods between gulps and then shortly after touches his hand on hers to stop. A kiss of electricity shoots up her finger and across the top of her palm as she pulls the bottle away. The sensation spreads around her wrist and then up her forearm to her shoulder, then her shoulder blade, and then to within her core where it disappears leaving only a warmth.

Thank you, he says, and Jean realises she is whole again.

You've been in an induced coma for six days, Dragan says.

Where am I?

In the infirmary, Jean says.

It is good to see you awake, Ceylan says.

Jean feels the warmth in her core flush to her face at what she wants to say

but cannot express. She tells her heart to slow down, to be still, to focus on the details. There is a science to this. There must be.

You almost died, Dragan says. You suffered a significant head injury when the missile exploded near your tower.

Handi reaches to the patch of regrowth on his scalp and gently fingers at the stitches.

He carried you from your control room, Jean says, feeling herself settle more with each word crossing her lips. Ceylan helped. Dragan did the surgery too.

Closing his eyes and rumpling his brow, Jean realises her love is struggling. This is his trivia face, his study face, his face when he normally tells her to give him some time to himself and she should leave him without complaint or issue, to which she always does as she knows what it is like to need to be alone sometimes. Eventually as if under a great strain he asks his second question: Where are we?

Right now? Jean answers. Three days into cruise speed to Atrus. We made it. We're on our way.

Handi tries sitting up in the medi-bed and winces in pain at the effort. They all make to stop him, but raising his hand he says: No, it's ok. I'm ok. And he continues and sits up straight and then turns and swings his legs over the edge, the white bed sheets twisting over with him. He squints and pushes the heel of his hand into his right ear as if trying to massage an ache or ringing. What's Atrus? he asks.

Jean looks to Dragan who seems to reduce a little at this. It is where we are going, Dragan says. Do you remember?

Handi concentrates. I'm. I'm not sure, he says. Is it a port in Greece? Is that where I'm going?

Seating himself on his chair, Dragan slides in closer to the medi-bed and clasps his hands together. Tell me, he says warmly. What is the last thing you

remember?

After a moments thought, Handi answers: I remember being on the ocean. I remember rolling waves, a stuttering announcer. I was sitting on a chair with someone and looking out the window. And then... and then... I don't know. I was here.

There is a question on Jean's mind she is afraid to have answered. She should have suspected this: that her love might wake and not be the same. But she must know. Do you remember us? she asks.

Handi studies her slowly, traces her features with his eyes, but she sees they are blank, searching. He looks to Dragan, then Ceylan.

Resting her hand on his, Jean says, Do you remember me?

Back to her. He blinks. He tries thinking but doesn't pull his hand away. Were we travelling together? he asks.

Yes, she says.

To Greece? he asks.

No, she says, wanting to run away.

Where were we going?

Dragan interjects. Jean, he says softly. Can I talk to you outside for a moment?

Broken, she nods and they leave.

In the hall Dragan holds Jean's shoulders as if he is holding her together. This is normal, he assures her.

No, Jean says. This is not right.

Letting her shoulders go, Dragan says, Handi is disoriented. His memory will return. It is normal to have a level of amnesia after coming out.

Dragan, she says. He thinks we're on a boat to Greece.

I know, Dragan says. We need to be careful.

She notices his angular face shiny under the low wattage halogen

downlights in the ceiling. She rubs her forehead and remembers science fiction films and wishes somehow along with harnessing dark matter and gravity waves that the Sirius mission could have worked out a way to do this better. Maybe invented hyper sleep or a way to launch from Earth straight to cruise speed. They could have avoided the missile. Could have in hibernation skipped to only the best bits. None of this would have happened and by now they'd be waking up at the end, in the Alpha Centauri star system where Atrus would be found habitable and mankind would be saved. I don't know what to do, she confesses.

Just give him time, Dragan says. Allow Handi to remember things at his own pace. Be honest but firm. There are things, questions to be answered at the right time. For those, we tell him it is better to wait: He is injured and needs to recover. But I promise you, he will remember.

So what now? she asks.

Let us go back in, he says. I will tell him who we are and for now we will lie and say we are on a ship on the sea. Just follow my lead. Then we'll get him some food, maybe even some fruit from the biosphere. Dragan thinks. — and we'll play cards.

Puzzled, Jean asks, You brought cards?

Do know UNO? Dragan says.

Jean laughs in surprise and then mimics Dragan's deep voice and accent: Do you know UNO? she says and then says it again. You remember the ad?

No, he says, missing the joke.

We always used to call it, YOU-NO, she says, enunciating the vowels. You know?

There is silence.

Dragan says, No, it is not that.

It takes several days until Handi is able to leave the infirmary. He begins

with accompanied walks to the mess. They inform him in stages they are on a ship, then a space ship. The walks get longer: after the mess, then to the quarters, where he is shown his bed and possessions brought with him from Earth. At a photograph of his parents and him as a child, he folds over and asks to be alone, and later from the redness about his eyes Jean can tell he has been crying. Finally he is taken to the observation room and explained how it is they are there and what the Sirius is charged with achieving.

The first discovery set off a chain reaction which lead to the disruption of the magnetosphere, Jean tells him sombrely. And with the magnetosphere acting as a shield, and with its degradation over time, solar winds will cast the atmosphere into space, meaning eventually all oxygen dependant life and life on the surface will be unable to survive.

Handi stands resolute watching out to the stars.

On the Fourth of July 2022, continues Jean, it was announced to the world what would be happening. There were mass riots, a backlash against science and scientific study. The announcement and its aftermath came to be called The Discovery. Though it was the second step in the process, the second discovery if you look at it.

So it's all ending, Handi says.

Finding the moment somewhat bittersweet, Jean answers as jovially as possible, Pretty much.

And we're... together? he says.

We were, yes, she says.

They sit down on the stools on the far wall and watch the passing starscape. This must be very hard for you, he says. I'm sorry.

Jean shrugs. What can you do? It's not your fault.

I know, he says. But still.

A breath. In silence they wait and watch for a what seems an eternity and Jean tells her heart to be glad he is safe and alive, to remember what Dragan

had said. Together they sit, the two of them as if this was always the way it was meant to be. But it is wrong, twisted. They are not together. There is an unspeakable, immeasurable distance between them. Like an awkward date or meeting an old friend not seen in decades for a pint.

On the observation wall the stars dissolve and Jean sees a familiar street-lit footpath in Moscow, as if watching a movie. Her and Handi exit *Kill Fish* bar and promptly shake hands awkwardly, and they exchange a facade of half-smiles and then in realising the awkwardness decide to hug, which is even more awkward. They say together in unison as if scripted: We should do this again soon. But they don't laugh at the jinx-worthy moment. There is a sadness. And then they part different ways down the street and then the street is gone and there is only the black void of space and they are still silent. After a time the static nothingness becomes too much. No, she cannot do this.

It's nice weather isn't it? she jokes, hoping for him to joke back. Jean realises her hands are freezing.

Handi laughs and says. Yeah.

A heartbeat.

The sound of his voice trails off in an echo Jean wonders if anyone else could hear if they were there. Maybe he's different now, she tells her heart. Tabula Rasa. Maybe we are our memories. She tries not to glance at him but it is impossible. Slightly hunched, he stares out blankly at the observation wall. Jean follows his line of sight and stares too, hoping to read in there some of what he might be thinking. How would she have reacted to this? What would she have done?

Not this, she tells herself. She would have trusted him and their relationship, would have tried to find a memory in his physical embrace, in his kiss, in how he held her; her body would remember. She would be talking to him now, about anything, everything, wanting to know more. She glances again: he is still staring out.

I'm sorry you woke from a coma to find the world is ending, she says. That's pretty epic.

Yeah, he says and then pauses, shifts on his stool to face her. Do you know that feeling when you sleep in too much, or when you have a nap in the afternoon and you wake after dark?

Jean says, Oh, I hate that!

Imagine that times a billion, he says. I feel almost permanently lethargic. And worse is the amnesia. It's like there's a world of knowledge there just looming beyond my grasp. Like the stars outside. I know they're there, but I can't get a hold of them. I want to reach out and clutch them and ask them, What the fuck? What the fuck?

Jean falls into his eyes now alive and watching her, seeing her, really seeing her. She says without thought, jokingly: And to find out you're stuck on a spaceship with a crazy old woman... Jean stops herself. Why did she say that? She closes her eyes and winces inside and waits for the awkwardness to return.

Hey, he says.

She opens her eyes. He is watching her with an interest she was not expecting.

He says: Don't be so hard on yourself.

Another heartbeat.

He says: Can I ask you something?

Hesitantly she answers, Of course.

He asks: Can you tell me how we met?

Oh God, she thinks, surprised he would ask her this. But then again, maybe she could remind him. Oh God, she thinks again; this is normally a story he helps her with. Jean tries remembering but the memory seems blurry as if obscured by years of their two tales being intertwined. Was it in Munich? Berlin? Was it snowing?

We were ice skating, she says eventually turning thoughts to words. It was Christmas in 2024, and I was terrible; I couldn't stop. I ran into you. Or did you run into me? Either way it was because of me. You helped me up and introduced yourself, I'm Handi, you said, and I said, You *are* very handy, and you laughed and I almost fell again and you asked me out for a drink.

And you said yes, I'm assuming, Handi says.

Well, yeah, she says.

Handi flushes a proud smirk. Smooth, he says.

Jean sighs, And that was almost ten years ago.

In Europe? he asks.

Germany, she says.

What was I doing there?

Gallivanting, of course. On the *prowl*.

No really.

You don't believe me?

Handi thinks for a moment. He says: If I've got things right, that would have been two years after the Discovery. So, yeah, no.

Well look at you, she says. Mr Smarty Pants.

So what was I doing in Europe?

I told you, she says and laughs. You were gallivanting.

Come on, he says.

But Jean knew why he was there, why they were all there in Europe, and what they spoke about over that drink, and the lives they had lived until then, and as much as she desperately wanted to keep this going, there was something in her that knew it was time to stop.

That's for later, she says. Let's get out of here. I've got to show you Juno and what you'll have to learn in the meantime until you get your memory back.

Sure, Handi says and hobbles to his feet where she takes him by the arm

and they leave, and Jean thinks, This will do for now. This will do.

\*\*\* Heart of Gold \*\*\*

Into pre-adolescence Jean grew reluctantly. She entered primary school where her interest in dinosaurs and steam trains found her friends in Simon, a small, restless child with sun-kissed hair and a stutter, and Kevin, a large, quiet boy with an anxious smile and an alcoholic father. When not in class they went to the forest and imagined being stranded on a deserted island. They created little forts out of found rope and plywood and a lorry wheel it took all three of them to roll from the road. Simon climbed trees while Jean and Kevin watched scared from the ground and debated which was better, the British Garratt, or the Clyde Engineering 3801 from Australia.

Hey! Simon would wave from the highest bow he could climb to. Look at me. Look.

And they would wave up and whisper to themselves on how hurt he would get if he fell.

One day on a weekend, they strolled along Laneside and then the main road to the ruins of Sawley Abbey, where for the hundredth or so time they were going to explore the flat grass nooks once rooms and climb the rough and smooth stone once walls. This time however, in the far corner of what would have been the refectory, there was a scaffold erected. This was new.

Jean imagined anthropologists studying the walls, completing floor plans of the immense structure the ruins would have once been.

Kevin pointed, That wasn't there last time.

Wh...Wha...What do you think it's for? said Simon.

They ran over. The scaffold was lined with a white canvas and scaled the full height of the old walls in an L-shape configuration hugging the corner.

Probably restoration, Kevin said, gazing up.

Maybe they found something arc... archal... Simon struggled pronouncing the word. —Arch-ae-o-log-i-cal, he said eventually, separating each syllable. Without hesitation he darted through a split in the canvas to the lower section of the scaffold. Jean was proud. She had taught him that word and he was getting better.

Following him, they discovered in the dappled shade two featureless steel toolboxes nestled on the far wall and secured with padlocks. On top of the right-most box were a curled pile of *Mayfair* magazines. Several of them.

Festy! said Simon, claiming the magazines eagerly and then leafing through the pages.

On the covers were women Jean had never seen before, without clothes, wearing only bras and see-through underpants and what she considered unusual straps around their waists and over their thighs as if about to go abseiling but the straps were too small.

Hanging back, Kevin said nothing.

Give me a look, said Jean.

Simon passed one over. The not yet mouldy cover was stiff and crisp and danced in the refracted light spilling through the canvas. This woman, she noticed, had red straps. Jean liked red, a lot; almost as much as green. Opening, she saw there were pages of tiny compressed text and more women, some with nothing on their bottom halves, their legs splayed facing the camera or bent over as if they'd dropped something and just found it. They

had hair where she had none and some had trimmed their's into shapes like strips and lines and love hearts; some were very hairy and reminded Jean of her father's ginger beard when he had tried growing it once.

That's disgusting, remarked Kevin from over Jean's shoulder. Put it back or I'm going home.

No, don't, Jean said.

Yeah, come on, said Simon. This is c...crazy, check it out.

He thrust one of the magazines at Kevin who let it fall to the ground with a muffled slap.

Simon accused: What are you, gay?

Kevin sighed. I'm going outside to play Knights of the Round Table.

You can't play that alone, said Simon absently, still flicking through the pages, holding, looking close and then flicking again to another picture.

I'll be all of the knights at once, Kevin said. A chimera of Sir Lancelot and Sir Lamorak and Sir Boris and Sir Bedivere and King Arthur and all the rest, you just watch. And he huffed through the split of canvas to outside.

Wait! said Jean. I'm coming too.

Later, on the walk home, Kevin confided in Jean he had found similar magazines in his father's bedside drawer and he knew what they were. *Naughty sex magazines*. He had tried to hit his father over them, accusing him of not loving Mother anymore and his father had subdued him and beat him with his belt for being disrespectful.

A car came, illuminating the dusk in twin spotlights. Simon darted briefly into the darkness and adjusted the magazines under his shirt. Just ahead and after the car had passed, he squared up and walking backwards tried to look casual. Can you sss—see them. The magazines? he asked.

I can see the outline, Jean said.

Ugh, said Simon then joining them, the three in a line; the triple threat crew

they called themselves. Jean was the brains, the plan-maker, the engineer. Kevin was also the brains, but more the brawn: could lift heavy things and throw things really far. And Simon was the daring, so they were never bored. Walking, Simon fidgeted and flattened at the page corners making twin nipples under his shirt.

Kevin said nothing.

And after a time Jean told Kevin: My mother died when I was a baby.

How did she die? he asked.

A car accident, she said.

Kevin thought for a moment. He said: I wish my father died in a car accident.

No you don't, Jean said. Knowing is better than not knowing. I wish I had my mother just to know her.

You wouldn't say that if she was like my Dad, he said.

I'm sorry, Jean said.

I'm sorry too, Kevin said.

Simon jumped ahead on the road in front of them again. What about now? he asked.

And Kevin and Jean answered in unison: It's still there!

B...bugger, said Simon, then pulling the magazines from under his shirt and throwing them to the side of the road, where strewn on the grassy berm they opened and fluttered in a beautiful vulgarity as if to the breath of a light breeze.