Title Page

Dark Castle

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Abstract

This thesis comprises the opening five chapters of my memoir, dealing with themes of addiction, masculinity, class privilege and illness. The story begins at Hammersmith Hospital, the night before I was due to have surgery to remove a tumour on my pancreas. The prologue explores the consequences of that surgery in the present tense, causing me to reflect on the sum of my life as I become increasingly unwell and am confronted with my own mortality.

The subsequent chapters switch to the past tense and are written in a reflective and at times distanced style as I come to terms with the childhood influences that shaped my behaviour as a young adult. This includes an exploration of my family's immigration story and how my parents' differing relationships with Judaism shaped my father's insecurities with his own identity, as well as looking at learned connections between toxic masculinity and violence.

In the final chapters, I examine my school years, exploring the privilege of masculinity and class by juxtaposing my time playing for a local working-class rugby club with my experiences at a north London private school. I also begin to look at issues with mental illness, starting with my panic attacks and dealing with the public mental healthcare system, and my journey towards addiction, assessing damaging behaviours towards food and drugs.

As the story continues beyond the scope of this thesis, the memoir will chart my descent into heroin addiction, mapping a confluence of themes including masculinity, body image and sexuality before a recovery that came too late for the physical toll taken by years of abusing my body. At the end of the thesis, I have included an epilogue taken from the concluding chapters of my memoir, which ties back to the themes of illness which are explored at the beginning of the piece.

Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the university of Glasgow or any other institution.

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Prologue

I'm standing outside Hammersmith Hospital. It's two a.m. and this is my fourth cigarette of the morning. I pace around the courtyard of broken benches and crumpled sandwich boxes, where my only company is a heavyset patient gripping his vape, blowing thick clouds of nicotine and blueberry into the night. I usually smoke by the back entrance because my previous stays have all been on a diagnostics ward for rare diseases on the other side of the hospital. I prefer it there because I can watch the ambulances and listen to the soundtrack of screams from HMP Wormwood, even if I have to put up with desperate glances from old men in wheelchairs sucking at oxygen masks.

My IV is starting to snag, so I take the plastic bag out of my tracksuit pocket and give it a couple of pumps before securing it under my arm. I'm going to be fine, but I need to remind myself of this fact every two minutes. These nerves remind me of university exams, accumulating mugs of instant coffee as I stared at the library books scattered across the floor. It's not a great comparison, but I'm twenty-seven, unemployed, single, three hundred pounds, live with my parents, and I feel wholly unprepared for the demands of a tumour on my pancreas.

I say demands, but since my diagnosis I've done fuck all besides lying in bed, with the occasional trip to west London for the pleasure of having a camera shoved down my throat. There's a part of me that wants a scrap of paper so I can jot down a few notes that might help the surgeon with his procedure, but there's also comfort in the knowledge that there's nothing I can do to change the outcome of the morning. I suppose I could have tried to make it through the night without a cigarette but I'm nervous, and everyone's entitled to a smoke before they face the firing squad.

I crush my last Camel under the sole of my Adidas sliders and patter inside. The gift shop has its metal shutters drawn, the main corridor is silent, and I can't decide whether the peeling paint and flickering lights of this Victorian hospital in the dead of night are homely or haunting. I walk beyond the signs for renal, cardiology, hepatobiliary, and haematology, proud that I no longer get lost in this labyrinth of passageways, and spend five minutes slamming the button for a lift which never arrives before I pant up the stairs onto my ward. I worry that I'm in for a bollocking but, as always, the nurse by the

door doesn't look up from her iPhone and I creep back into my room, return my IV to its metal pole, and ease into bed.

Six months ago, the bed sheets, the disinfectant, and the incessant beeping of the infusions pumps kept me tossing and turning all night. I'm slightly mortified that Hammersmith Hospital now has the familiarity of a holiday home, but I wish I was back on the diagnostics ward where I know all of the nurses by name and expect my usual cubicle by the windows looking down onto the running track. Instead, I'm on the surgical ward which, having arrived yesterday afternoon and seen the other patients half-dead in beds held together by hundreds of silver staples, has forced me to confront the reality that I too will be turned into one of these Frankenstein's monsters.

My new roommates are worthy additions to this house of horrors and Harjindah, a baggage handler from Crawley, has a frighteningly large bag of what looks like Guinness flowing from his abdomen. The surgeons were unable to remove the tumour from his liver, and I can scarcely imagine going through all of this for nothing. Terry, a retired electrician from Heathrow, was moved to our room only a few hours ago, flanked by security and screaming, 'they're trying to kill me! They're trying to kill me!' He was just on a bad morphine trip and is now snoring loudly, but he's also a big guy and I've got enough on my plate without worrying about a lunatic trying to smother me in the night

I take my phone off my bedside table, where my recent history makes for grim reading. I've already studied the first forty results for 'pancreatectomy mortality', so I listen to one of the audiobooks I've just spent a small fortune on, starting with Anthony Beevor's *Stalingrad*. My desperately uncool love of military history has thankfully diminished since its heyday of stomping around my bedroom listening to the Red Army Choir; however, hearing about the 4th Panzer Army rolling across southern Russia soothes my eyes into closing, just as the sun is beginning to rise between the west London tower blocks.

Although I only get an hour's sleep, I leap out of bed and start shadow boxing behind my cubicle curtain. It's a scorching June morning and the ward is coming to life as the patients emit a synchronised groan from their beds. I stop punching the air and glance at the clock on the wall, which reads t-minus ninety minutes until a room full of strangers cut me open. I imagine their hands inside my body, which feels a bit personal because I don't even like taking my t-shirt off when I'm having sex.

I know that this could be the end, but I also know that the last nine months have been no life at all. Wrapped in a cocoon of pillows and duvets, venturing outside only for another packet of sausage rolls. A constant stream of right wing YouTube videos, nineties strategy games, and gay porn on the laptop pressed inches from my face. Whatever happens, I'm relieved that this purgatory has come to an end and I slip to the right and fire off a double-jab before I puff out and collapse back into bed.

At t-minus thirty minutes, a member of the surgical team asks if he can enter my cubicle; I'm grateful for the interruption as the earlier adrenaline rush has given way to sobbing over my ex-girlfriends and listening to Lana Del Rey.

"Sorry Oliver, I know we went over this yesterday but I've got more paperwork for you to sign," the surgeon says, handing me a pen and various waivers.

"A nurse is going to come and take you downstairs shortly," he says as I hand him my admin. "Hopefully, we'll get started right away, which means you should be out of theatre at around one o'clock. Have you got any more questions before I go?"

"Yeah," I mutter, aware of the arrival of my parents from behind the curtain. "What about…the risks?"

"Well, as you know, we're going to try and remove your tumour," the surgeon says, using his pen to stab at the various incisions he's about to make in my stomach while droning on about pulmonary embolisms and pancreatic fistulas.

"No," I interrupt, "I mean…you know?" He doesn't. "Death".

"I have seen patients die during this operation," the surgeon says, making me instantly regret asking, "but you're young and the risk is low".

I look out of the window and chew my fingernails, wondering if I have time to listen to *Long Slow Goodbye* by Queens of the Stone Age instead of *Live Forever* by Oasis.

"Don't worry," the surgeon says, exiting through the curtain, "you're going to be fine."

At t-minus five minutes, a nurse tells us that the operation has been delayed and I thank God, because I'm not remotely ready. My parents sit at my bedside and are all forced smiles, telling me they've found a Westfields to go shopping in while I'm in surgery. Nobody wants to tempt fate with declarations of love and forgiveness so our conversation remains light, organising the totally unnecessary details of my grandmother's visit in a couple of days' time.

"Oliver Gafsen?" the same nurse asks, barely ten minutes after her first announcement. "The surgeons are ready. You're wanted downstairs immediately." And fuck the NHS, because this is the one occasion where I'm happy to wait three hours for my appointment. There isn't even time for a nurse to take me downstairs, so I'm given the directions to operating room C, exchange a quick 'see you soon' with my mum, and trudge towards the lifts.

My perception of hospital has definitely been corrupted by too many episodes of *House*, but it still feels strange to walk into major surgery, especially when I get lost and end up on the wrong side of the hospital, filled with people slumped in their chairs eating mozzarella paninis and scrolling through Twitter. I wander up and down the outpatients' waiting room until a nurse snaps me out of my trance, leading me back in the direction I've just come from and wishing me luck as we arrive at a small door marked 'operating room C'.

"You must be the patient," one of the four anaesthetists remarks, as I poke my head into an anteroom which leads to the main operating theatre.

I sit down on a narrow rubber bed as instructed and watch everybody at work, feeling like I should apologise for causing such a fuss. This isn't my first surgery, but I realise I'm not having my tonsils out when one of the anaesthetists enters the operating room, swinging the double doors open and momentarily revealing a massive theatre full of masked technicians holding their glistening instruments up to the light. Despite the months of waiting, the endless phone calls, and the countless scans I had to struggle through in order to arrange this day, the voice in my head which has been whispering, 'fucking leg it' has now grown into a deafening roar, and I take a second to go through all of my darkest moments before concluding that I have never been more terrified than I am right now.

"Is something wrong?" the head anaesthetist asks.

"A little nervous," I reply.

"Don't worry, we can give you some of the good stuff," the anaesthetist says, attaching a syringe filled with clear liquid to the cannula in the crook of my arm, and I can't quite work out if he injects me with an opiate or a benzo, but either way, it's something I'd like to get addicted to.

The drugs do their work and I lie back on the bed without a care in the world, listening to the voices in the room fade into a white noise until the head anaesthetist comes forward with a second syringe and whispers, "okay, here we go".

I open my eyes in the blinding lights of the recovery room and can't feel anything below my neck except for wave after wave of pain. My surgery was supposed to take four hours and I look at the clock on the wall for confirmation. Annoyingly, the hour hand and the minute hand keep switching, an issue I try to resolve by tracking the speed of each hand's movement across the clock face, but I keep on passing out and forgetting which hand is which. When the hands finally settle down, they read nine o'clock at night, at which point I let out a long and loud "uuuurrrrrr".

"Is everything okay?" asks one of the nurses who rush to my bedside.

"What happened?"

"You've been in surgery."

"Where is my doctor?"

"Sorry, this is the night shift, everybody has gone home."

"What happened?"

"I'll try and find somebody to speak to you," the nurse says, running out of the room, returning ten minutes later to tell me that everybody is in a meeting.

I'm entirely ungrateful to be alive, and as I regain a modicum of movement in my arms the pain in my stomach intensifies, leading to longer and louder moans. There are only two other patients in the recovery room and both are staring at me. A nurse asks, "do you mind keeping it down?" and I resist the urge to tell her to fuck off because I've spent most of the year tolerating roommates snoring, farting, and complaining that there aren't any white nurses; I feel I've earned my right to a few minutes of highly justifiable moaning.

"Can I have morphine?" I ask, having practically broken the clicker that has been placed in my right hand.

"We've already given you morphine," a nurse replies.

"I know, but can I have *more* morphine?"

My request is granted and I'm reminded of taking too much Subutex when I was seventeen and vomiting in my parents' garden as I wretch, making me aware of a sharp band of pain extending across my stomach. I ask for anti-nausea medication but also need more morphine for the pain, so we spend the next half hour on this morphine merry-go-round where I ask for more morphine, and then for more anti-nausea medication, and then for more morphine, and then for more anti-nausea medication, until the nurses tell me that I've had the maximum of both and I can't be in that much pain because I keep falling asleep, at which point I let out a final "uuuurrrrrr" and doze off again.

At ten o'clock, a doctor arrives and tells me that my tumour has been removed, but so has my spleen and most of my pancreas. I ask if I can still go home in a couple of days, solely out of pride, because I'm completely fucked. The doctor says it's unlikely but they'll see how it goes. I'm the last patient to leave the recovery room, and as I regain my faculties, I apologise to the nurses, who smile and let me know that they're used to it before they wheel me back up to the ward.

There are tubes and wires all over my body. I have a catheter in my penis, a catheter taped to my nose, two surgical drains digging into my side, an IV on every available vein, bandages that have turned my stomach into a chess board, an oxygen mask, electrodes on my chest, and various bags of clear liquid hanging above my head with opposing bags of unspeakable yellow, pink, and brown fluid below my bed. I'm too afraid to move, which is just as well because I can't, and I consider the fate of my offending organs, especially my spleen, which I've carried my entire life and is now lying in some bin bag.

It's long past visiting hours, but the nurses allow my parents to come up and say goodnight. They tell me that my operation took nine hours and they were stuck in the waiting room on the ward with a bunch of old men who all had their surgeries cancelled on my account. Despite instructing one of the anaesthetists to "look after these", I've lost my Adidas sliders during the surgery so my mother promises to buy me a new pair of Birkenstocks in Westfield as she squeezes my hand and leaves the ward with my father.

I'm dog tired but I can't sleep because each time the pain subsides, it crashes over me in another wave and all I can do is stare at the clock on the wall and beg for morning. I try an audiobook but the slightest noise hurts my head, and I can only stand to listen to two minutes of the encirclement of the sixth army before I rip my headphones out and throw them onto the floor. I need peace but there is a man in the adjacent room who will not stop screaming, and once the five seconds of pity I have for him expires, I fantasise about tearing out my tubes, creeping to his bedside, and giving him a left-hook right-hand combination to the chops.

My surgeon comes to visit me during the morning rounds, along with a team of junior doctors who stand and gawk at me from the end of my bed. He apologises for the outcome of the operation and I tell him not to worry but I appreciate his contrition. A pain

doctor comes to see me soon after and it's a relief when he actually sits next to my bed instead of staring like I'm up for auction. The pain doctor is from Northern Ireland; he seems happy and our conversation quickly jumps from morphine to football. I wonder if I should tell him that I'm a Rangers fan but I've made this mistake before with a Celtic supporting driving examiner who gleefully failed me, and I'm worried the pain doctor will call me a Hun and prescribe me half a paracetamol.

Thankfully, the pain doctor supports Tottenham, just like my dad, and orders half of the hospital pharmacy for me, including regular doses of ketamine which prompts a withering look from my mother, even when the drug arrives in liquid form as opposed to chopped up lines on a CD case. The ketamine is disappointing and I guess that you need a much higher dose before you find yourself plummeting through strange new worlds. However, my morphine is doubled, which definitely takes the edge off and gives me something to look forward to every couple of hours, with one of my eyes constantly checking the countdown on the infusion pump.

At midday, a nurse comes to check my bandages along with all of my drains and catheters. She is young and attractive, and I feel obliged to at least attempt a witty remark but my belly was filled with gas during the surgery, causing me to almost die of shame when she has to call a colleague over to help lift the mountain of blubber obscuring the incisions around my groin. I have pictures on my phone from my final year at university, when I could still wear jeans which barely fit around my ankles, but the nurse is a professional and as she returns my belly to its resting place across my thighs, I reflect that she probably couldn't give a shit.

"Do you want fish in white sauce, or vegetable pie?" a worker from catering asks, taking advantage of the fact that I can no longer pretend to asleep.

"Do you have any fruit?" I ask, and a bruised banana arrives which sits on my table until my mother comes and throws it away, whispering, "don't worry, there is an M&S in Westfields".

Harjinder's wife has been bringing him aluminium containers brimming with home cooking all morning and although my stomach is in bits, the unmistakable whiff of butter chicken does enough to make my mouth water. My mother and Harjinder's wife seem to have developed a rapport while I was in surgery, especially after Harjinder's wife advised my mother that she could save three pounds an hour by using the prison car park. As a result, Harjindah and I strike up a friendship by groggily waving at one another from

across the room. India are playing Pakistan in the World Cup and my father acts as commentator, giving us blow-by-blow updates from the BBC website, and although the game is not competitive enough to distract me from the pain, Harjindah and I share a smile and a thumbs-up when Rohit Sharma hits a century.

After my parents leave, Max and Nat come to visit. I've read a lot of articles online, complaining about how exhausting it is to deal with the emotions of your friends, but since these are the only two well-wishers, I was able to muster, I reflect that I wouldn't mind a few more bleeding hearts weeping by my bedside. Still, Max and Nat have stuck by me since school, through what has been a lot thicker than thin, and watching them walk into the ward makes me feel lucky, even though I quietly wish I could visit one of them in hospital for a change.

"How you doing, Gaffy?" Max asks, as I cough a mercury like substance into a cardboard dish.

"Not good mate, not good…" I reply, droning on about my night of pain while my friends shift in their plastic chairs and look at the door.

"We've brought you some munch," Max says, reaching into his bag and producing a two-litre bottle of Pepsi Max, fizzy Haribo, and a multi-bag of Prawn Cocktail crisps, which I politely ask him to shove into the cupboard next to my bed.

"How about these nurses though?" Nat asks, at which point the conversation degenerates into a series of sex jokes that make us all cringe, but this is a shared crisis and perhaps we need to revert back to being thirteen-year-old public school boys to get through it.

I don't see Max and Nat go because my new medication is taking effect, allowing me an entire hour of sleep before I'm woken up by another a stab in the gut. I've been awake since my surgery and the rest is so welcome I scarcely notice that it has become more and more difficult to breathe. My lungs feel like they have been filled with water and by the early evening I'm only able to take in the smallest sips of air. The nurse in charge of my care soon has an expression of perpetual concern, buzzing around my bed, checking my blood oxygen levels, and giving me a new mask through which I inhale a sour steam.

The pain has subsided, but I actually feel worse than I did when I came out of surgery. What little function I was regaining in my arms and torso has gone, and I'm barely able to move my head from side to side. I had no idea that it was possible for a human being to feel this unwell, and my condition is only made bearable because my body

is half-dead already, like a meaty tomb inside which my mind is imprisoned. I'm so exhausted all I want is sleep, even though it's more of a drifting in and out of reality, with my eyes only open for moments at a time.

In the middle of the night a nurse checks the monitors by my bedside and runs out of the room to make a panicked phone call. When I open my eyes again, there are several doctors surrounding my bed, most of whom are in blue scrubs instead of oxford shirts. Blood is taken from my wrist, a massive camera on wheels appears in front of my bed, and pairs of hands prop my back up against a plastic board so a picture can be taken of my lungs. I can only catch snippets of the mile-a-minute conversation that is taking place around me, and I wish everyone would fuck off because I'm too ill to deal with whatever is happening.

"Hello? Oliver? Can you hear me? Oliver? Do you know where you are?" A doctor shouts in my ear, gently shaking my shoulders.

"In…hospital," I reply, needing a gulp of air between every word.

"That's good Oliver. How are you feeling?"

"So-so."

"Okay Oliver, what's happened is that your lungs have collapsed and you've got pneumonia. That means there isn't enough oxygen getting into your body. We don't have the equipment to look after you on the ward so we're going to take you down to the ICU, put you on a ventilator, and place you in a coma. Do you understand what I've just said to you?"

"I'm going…to the…ICU."

"That's right."

"When?"

"Right now."

"No…when?"

"A few minutes."

None of this news surprises me because what's happening to me is primal, a gradual slipping away. I keep repeating the phrase 'die with my boots on', hating the idea that I'm about to be put to sleep like a dog, and I wonder if it would be weird to ask for my Doc Martens right now.

"No coma," I ask the doctors as they prepare to wheel my bed down to the ICU.

"I'm sorry Oliver, you can't breathe by yourself anymore."

"Please," I repeat, trying to buy myself a few extra hours on earth.

The doctors peel away for a discussion and return to say, “okay Oliver, we have to take you down to the ICU and try and inflate your lungs, but as long as your condition doesn’t worsen, we can wait on the coma until morning.”

I’m taken into the lift and down to the first floor of the hospital, where I’m handed over to the team in the ICU. My whole body is on fire and sweat has soaked through the sheets and glued my skin to the rubber mattress. I’m wheeled between several towers of machines and the nurses and doctors go to work, stitching an arterial line into my wrist, attaching a tube that blasts burning hot air down my throat, and adding so many wires to my already impressive collection that I look like I’m plugged into the Matrix. The doctor leading the team is my age, and I reflect that this man has accomplished more in the last twenty minutes than I have in the last twenty years.

I can neither sleep nor stay awake, and my mind is tangled up in snippets of songs and clips from films, repeated over and over without context. The patients either side of me are bandaged like mummies and every so often an alarm goes off which prompts the scrambling of doctors and the swinging of curtains, with lifeless bodies being wheeled past the foot of my bed by ambulance crews throughout the night. A nurse tells me not to worry because I am now in the safest place in the hospital, but this is a terrible place to die and I am frightened that I’ll never see the sky again. Wondering if the doctors might wheel me out the back entrance and let me snuff it in the car park.

I’ve been contemplating death since my diagnosis but I’m no way near as scared as I thought I would be. That’s not to say I’m ‘at peace’ because all of my plans and ambitions are about to be incinerated in one final breath. Then again, twenty-seven is young but it isn’t tragically young. There’s not going to be a minute’s silence for me at a school assembly. I’ve definitely *had* a life. It was just short and shit and I did fuck all with it.

This is a bad time to be an atheist and I wonder if I would be better prepared if I’d spent more time in Shul and less time drinking in the park. I begin the process of looking back at my life now that it can be appraised in its entirety, and I question if it was all worth it. My first thought is ‘I wish I’d had sex with more women’, which is too pitiful, so I pivot to ‘I wish I’d had a proper girlfriend.’ I know that I have the love of my family but your parents are obliged to love you, and I’ve failed to convince someone who didn’t previously love me otherwise. I’m angry that I squandered a multitude of opportunities and if I’d

known my time was so rationed I might have treated Jamie, or Daniella, or Frankie a bit better. Then again, I might not have, but I do feel very alone and wish somebody was here to hold my hand because I'm bum company at the moment.

I go through a few more regrets, wishing I'd wasted less time in twelve step meetings and wondering if I should have spent the last five years partying in Thailand like my Facebook friends instead of freezing my bollocks off in Glasgow, even though I hate travelling, always arriving back at Stansted airport in a mess of sunburn and mosquito bites, grateful that I won't feel obliged to leave Blighty for at least another year. After a couple of hours, I decide to put an end to my laments because it's become too exhausting to put one thought in front of the next and I'm regaining just enough sensation in my fingers to gently grip the bed sheets as the rising sun showers the ICU in pale blue light.

Chapter 1

I was a strange child, but not in a kooky, paints-flowers-on-his-jeans, sort of way. My behaviour was anti-social and obsessive: hiding in cupboards at parties, eating leaves in the corner of the playground, staring out of the window while people were trying to talk to me, shouting *NO!* whenever I was asked if I wanted to leave the house, and replaying the same video tapes for hour after hour with an inexplicable fondness for one black and white Amelia Earhart documentary. My mother called me 'complicated' but my teachers at kindergarten were concerned, suggesting everything from Asperger's to Autism and ADHD.

I had the capacity to be a sociable, but only when I chose to be. My teachers thought I was a mute, but they had never sat me down to discuss the finer points of the Star Wars franchise, and on my fifth birthday I played cricket in the garden with boys my mother had invited from the shul – after she was able to coax me out of the wardrobe I had taken refuge in.

My idiosyncrasies were a puzzle that everyone was eager to solve, which is why I sat on the floor of a specialist's home office twice a week, playing board games designed for one while my requests for more cookies and juice were denied. These early therapy sessions (the first of many) were boring in the main, although I was fond of one, marginally insane woman with a brain tumour who made me dress up in toy armour and read Romeo and Juliet with her. When my parents picked me up at the end of the hour, the

feedback they received ranged from wild proclamations that I was the next Laurence Olivier to admissions that I was just ‘a bit slow’ for my age group and would hopefully catch-up over time.

The closest anybody came to an actual diagnosis was hyper-sensitivity, and a specialist instructed my mother to run a horse hair brush down my back while I bounced an inflatable ball on the floor to make me more comfortable with sensations and sounds. The treatment was somewhat successful when it came to wearing a wool sweater without having an anxiety attack, but brushes and balls did little to resolve the fact that before stepping into any situation, I was overwhelmed by every terrible outcome.

I descended flights of stairs by gripping the bannisters with both hands, murmuring “careful, careful, careful,” never mind riding a bike or climbing a tree. Large crowds were terrifying, and when my father drove me up to Old Trafford, I thought I was going to die every time United scored a goal. I couldn’t even watch Power Rangers because any insinuation that monsters existed was enough to keep me awake for weeks and for the entirety of my childhood I slept with the lights on.

The more I learnt about the world, the worse it became as real fears were conflated with imaginary ones. I looked at the adults around me and couldn’t comprehend their composure when faced with the constant threat of nuclear war, heart attacks, brain aneurysms, IRA bombings, plane crashes, gas leaks, loose slabs of pavement, bolts of lightning, and sharks that had found their way into the Finchley lido. Above all, I was crippled by the basic facts of my own existence, and as I clutched my teddy bears at night, I was tortured by the certainty of death.

My parents were confident that these were passing anxieties, frustrating to deal with but not unique amongst children who were able to grasp concepts they didn’t have the maturity to process. What did worry them was that my hyperawareness made social interactions too complex for me to deal with, and throughout kindergarten my mother drove past my nursery school to witness her child standing alone in the corner, playing with leaves. If I’d been happy as a loner then my parents might have been contented, but it was obvious that I wanted to be liked and wished that I was one of the popular boys.

I stared at their games with a quiet envy, until one break time, just as I was considering a rather delicious green and white fern between my fingers, the football

happened to roll towards my corner of the playground. This was my definition of a crisis (I usually sheltered in an empty classroom to avoid such eventualities), and without having time to think, I hoofed the bastard as hard as I could. Miraculously, the ball sailed through a dozen pairs of legs before it thumped neatly into the corner of our goal painted on the brickwork. I was immediately engulfed in cheers and high-fives; in a state of excitement, I abandoned my corner and continued to chase the rolling lump of leather up and down the rubber surfacing.

All evening I boasted about my footballing heroics, replaying the celebrations in my head. However, as I stepped out onto the playground the following morning, I paused to consider: what if I kick the ball again, and scuff it completely? What if everybody laughs at me and the good will gained from my wonder goal is squandered in humiliation? What if the other boys resent my intrusion into their game, reflecting that a single fluke is not enough to earn their acceptance? What if the ball smacks me in the face, knocks my teeth out, breaks my nose, blackens my eye, and I graze my knee on the floor? Defeated, I trudged back to my corner.

It would have been nice to blame my parents for my anxiety, and years later I would make every effort to do so. Unfortunately, they were only partially responsible because I grew up in a happy home, which we moved into in ninety-four, leaving our two bedroom flat at the bottom of Parliament Hill after my brother was born for a detached house on the Muswell Hill side of East Finchley. My father purchased our new home on Beech Drive from an old man with mental health problems, snapping up a *good deal* even though the building was in such disrepair it looked vaguely haunted.

The front of the property was surrounded by pine trees, shrouding it in permanent darkness, and the driveway completed the vibe with old cobbles behind a broken iron gate. There were rarely any signs of life on our street other than the morning scurry of designer suits climbing into German cars and the screams of one-eyed foxes at night. The bedrooms were vast, but I loved the garden most of all, which the former owner had allowed to grow into a spooky forest with crumbling Greek statues hidden in grass which extended above my head. I felt that the house had character, but my parents disagreed and over the years it was transformed by endless kitchen extensions, loft conversions, bathroom refurbishments, driveway renovations, and other deafening improvements which led to total war with the neighbours and lengthy legal battles over planning permission justified by my mother's need for *décor* and my father's mantra of *adding value*.

Family was central and Beech Drive became a focal point for kosher barbeques, rowdy Seder nights, and fancy dress parties for our cousins. On my father Martin's side of the family, the regular attendees included his parents, Peter and Patricia, his younger sister Debbie, his older sister Juliet, her husband Jeremy and their four children, Phoebe, Dominic, Cecily, and Dylan. On my mother Susan's side, there were her parents, Victor and Valerie, her older sister Jaqueline, her husband Peter, and their daughter Franceska.

As kids, the seven of us were all born within four years of one another, developing joint obsessions with The Lord of the Rings, Pokémon cards, and Warhammer armies. In the summer we put on a play, produced by Phoebe who, as the eldest, made the girls dress up as princesses while the boys were all orcs, inevitably ruining rehearsals once we started attacking one another with our plastic weapons. We were as close as siblings and Dominic was like my older brother, schooling me on Nirvana and Radiohead while showing me how to defeat Ganondorf on Zelda. Franceska was a sister and we spent our days eschewing sunlight to watch Disney films on my parents' shag carpet.

We were always given free rein to express ourselves because the adults were keen to move away from their 'parents are always right' generation. However, this self-awareness didn't extend to themselves, and their side of our family gatherings reflected a traditional doctrine where the men sat chortling over lamb chops while the women hurried around the kitchen, rotating between whipping the meringue and making sure the children were attended to. As a consequence, I was much closer to the constant affection provided by my aunts and grandmothers, never certain whether I was supposed to admire or despise my uncle's boisterous brand of masculinity.

Jaqueline's husband Peter had the appearance of a bear decorated with gold pendants and signet rings. He dominated conversations, fancying himself an expert in every conceivable subject, swiftly veering from being the life and soul of the party to a crashing bore. Juliet's husband Jeremy was an heir to a diamond fortune, garbed in Vivienne Westwood and always boasting of fantastic holidays at exclusive resorts for Europe's elite. They generally insisted on a strong demarcation between adults and kids, finding a games room to which we could all be confined whenever the family went away together. When they engaged with us, Peter insisted on a series of wrestling matches which he took great delight in winning while Jeremy sat us down for a game of Monopoly,

nominating himself as banker so he could engineer his children's, or more often his own, victory.

Although Peter and Jeremy jostled for the position of alpha, there was no question that my maternal grandfather Victor was at the top of the pyramid. He was a tall man with a Roman nose and was a veteran of bomber command, although it was doubtful whether he blew up any Germans. His great passions were golf, biographies of Winston Churchill, and his wife Valerie, who he treated like a maid for whom he had a quiet affection. When our family wasn't at Beech Drive we were at Victor's house in Wembley, where he made the Shabbat service on Friday night as long and arduous as possible. Victor never really knew how to deal with children, buying me a five iron for Hanukkah and making me watch the PGA tour, but his true feelings were never in doubt and in the summer we were taken to his flat in Marbella where we played Scrabble in the blistering heat and devoured bowls of deep-fried Boqueróns by the port, giving the stink eye to the Russian billionaires and Essex loudmouths who had recently supplanted the Jews of north London as rulers of the Costa Del Sol.

Victor was a Mendoza and my mother's family were descended from a proud line of Jews who had been booted out of Spain during the inquisition. They survived five centuries of English anti-Semitism, becoming outstanding figures in London's Jewish community who were able to boast of great names, including the hall of fame prize-fighter Daniel Mendoza who Victor would introduce as 'the first Jew to meet the king!' within five minutes of meeting anybody. The Mendozas had fought – and nobly died – in all of Britain's wars from Napoleon to the Kaiser, and Victor considered himself as English as apple pie, moaning about the cultural diversification of Wembley whilst stubbornly refusing to leave. He was a great man and a lifelong mason who inspired handshakes and invitations to golf weekends wherever he went. His role as our patriarch was beyond contestation, particularly as the heritage of my father's family was far less auspicious.

Unlike the Mendozas, who could trace their lineage back to medieval Spain, the Gafsen family name was created by my great-grandfather when he made the solo crossing from Lithuania to London in the early twenties. He settled in the Orthodox ghetto of Berwick Market, carving out a tough life through poverty, but his family was defined by a dangerous secret, which was that my great-grandmother was a Flemish Catholic and therefore none of their seven children could be Jewish. They kept up appearances, going to

synagogue and sending their children to yeshiva schools, but my great-grandparents weren't allowed to be married and their lives were based on a lie.

These early Gafsens were shrouded in obscurity because our only connection to them was through my grandfather Peter. He would not suffer his mother's name to be mentioned in his presence, and when it came to his father, Peter could never decide if the man who raised him came from Lithuania, Latvia, Russia, or Bulgaria. My grandfather ran away from home at sixteen, by which time his mother had died and his father had become abusive. He joined the army, missing the war by a couple of years and working as a signalman in occupied Japan. Although he had little in the way of education, Peter was a self-made man, teaching himself engineering by reading books from the library. After he left the service, he started his own contracting firm, meeting my grandmother Patricia on a project in south Wales. They eventually bought a house in the Jewish community in Finchley where my father and his two sisters were born.

I was much closer to my grandfather Peter than any of the other men in my extended family. The only time I voluntarily left the house was on Sunday afternoons when Peter would take me to the RAF museum in Hendon to look at the Lancaster Bombers. Afterwards we drove to Toff's in Muswell Hill, where we drank tea and ate cod and chips drenched in vinegar. My grandfather was a quiet and cautious man (it took years for him to trust me to do more than hold the glue when we pieced plastic Spitfires together), but I shared an affinity with him that was lacking in Victor and the proud Mendozas. Peter's attentions were valuable because they weren't ubiquitous, and he refused to spend time with his granddaughters on the grounds that it might be seen as 'inappropriate'. I also had to keep the details of our afternoons to myself because whenever I waxed lyrical about building planes with Pappy, my father responded with strained approval.

Judaism was in my blood, so I failed to appreciate my identity as a gift my father hadn't been given. History repeated itself when Peter married Patricia as my grandmother came from a small mining village and a family of devout Irish Catholics. Although a mixed marriage no longer resulted in being chased out of the ghetto with torches and pitchforks, it did cast the Gafsens' already questionable Judaism into further dispute and Peter was in turmoil over his faith. On the one hand, he respected his heritage, instructing his wife to convert and telling his children to only socialise with other Jewish children. On the other hand, Peter observed none of the most basic practices of the faith and his family

didn't keep kosher, didn't celebrate Shabbat, and didn't go to synagogue on the high holy days. My father was the only one of his friends who never went to Hebrew school and Peter wouldn't even give him a Bar Mitzvah, leaving my father frustrated by a Judaism that was purely superficial.

This conflict with his heritage wasn't the only baggage Peter had inherited from his father, because the doting Pappy I knew was only one side of a Jekyll and Hyde personality. Peter despised all forms of sexuality, spitting disgust at the women next door who wore short skirts and hosted parties with available men. He was insistent that Patricia could only ever be a housewife and considered his daughter's schooling an irrelevance, although the idea that Martin would want to go to university instead of becoming an engineer was considered an equal waste of time. Peter cemented his role as sole provider, but this position only made him resentful towards his supposedly 'ungrateful' family and my father's childhood was blighted by punishments that included withholding money and hiding the family car, followed by vows of silence which could last for months. Peter was always Pappy, the man who drank too many whiskies on Purim and danced to Cab Calloway's Minnie the Moocher, but family was a responsibility he was ill-prepared for and my father found himself thrown into the middle of battles between his parents on a regular basis.

Fortunately, the self-made drive that lead Peter out of the ghetto was also evident in my father who excelled at school due to the virtues of being a gifted athlete who captained the football, rugby, and cricket teams. He collected friends and relationships with ease and had a clear path forward professionally when he was accepted into Oxford to study law. My father was glad to escape the chaos at home; however, when he went to university, he found himself surrounded by sons from great families who weren't wracked with doubts over the men they were and knew what kind of men they were going to be. He felt like a nobody, and by the time he graduated was battling depression, having pushed his friends away, stopped playing sport, and gained considerable weight. After Oxford, my father was haunted by an obsession with becoming 'somebody' and quit the law a year after he started work at his first firm, taking on various jobs in the certainty that contentment was always a different career path away.

My mother was never a party girl and my father liked to joke that he 'saved' her from spinsterhood, but by diverging from the interfaith marriages of his father and grandfather it was Susan who gave Martin the self-acceptance that had been denied to the

previous generations of Gafsen men. The transition wasn't easy and as my parents drove home from their first Passover at the Mendoza house my father exploded in the car, ranting that he was being disrespected as an outsider. The fact that my mother's synagogue refused to marry my parents due to my father's questionable ancestry did little to dissuade him from the notion that the Jewish community would always look down upon him, and my father was on the fence with regard to committing to my mother and abandoning his secular identity.

Thankfully, Victor was a progressive by the standards of his community and felt satisfied that my father was Jewish enough for his daughter. Although marriage in the Reform synagogue was out of the question – with prayers in English and mixed congregations that were far too similar to evangelical Christianity – Victor was able to meet with rabbi Louis Jacobs who offered to wed my parents in his recently founded Masorti synagogue, which was something of a middle ground between the two denominations.

My parents wedding amounted to validation, not just for my father but also the entire Gafsen family who were given a new legitimacy through their connection to the Mendozas. Peter went to shul with Victor for the first time since he was a boy and the Gafsens celebrated Shabbat dinners at Wembley and high holy days at Beech Drive. They became part of our synagogue, whether forming a Minyan or volunteering with security. Most importantly, my father had two indisputably Jewish children that he drove to Hebrew school twice a week.

My mother met my father on holiday in Marbella when they were both in their late teens. They dated for about a year, but she found him 'chippy' and grew bored of outbursts over his inferiority complex. When they met again at a friend's wedding almost a decade later, my mother felt that he had mellowed and a relationship seemed like a good fit. They were both Jewish, both lawyers, and both middle-class, even if the Gafsens lacked the wealth and prestige of the Mendozas. They had dual goals of family and career; and for my mother, the latter was of equal importance to the former.

She had grown up under Thatcher, who inspired my mother with the belief that women could 'have it all' and that gender was no longer a restriction in the workplace. In the Jewish community of Wembley, a professional career was still the preserve of men but,

unlike Peter, Victor wanted his daughters to be successful in their own right, sending my mother to a competitive private school rather than telling her to ‘marry rich’.

Susan adopted the studious archetype Victor demanded, becoming a daddy’s girl who was always anxious to do the right thing in his eyes. It was a sheltered upbringing with few friends and a constant emphasis on hard work. My mother’s role as the good child was only compounded by her elder sister Jaqueline, a rebel by Wembley’s standards, who dated non-Jewish boys, smoked cigarettes, and dreamt of becoming an actress. This was a road Victor failed to comprehend, but despite their opposing worldviews, Jacqueline and her father were identical in their stubborn refusal to compromise, leading to screaming matches that dominated my mother’s childhood, forcing her to forever seek better grades to capture her father’s attention.

My mother didn’t get any more rock’n’roll at university and opted to stay at home during her law degree; however, by the time she graduated a lifetime of study was paying off. She was accepted into one of London’s top law firms, where she stood out amongst the trainees as willing to work the ridiculous hours which her colleagues demanded. By her mid-twenties, my mother had reached the position of senior associate and was only a couple of years away from being made partner when she married my father and decided to pursue her second ambition of starting a family.

There were no flexible hours at her firm and zero sympathy for women dealing with the demands of motherhood. When she had a miscarriage, my mother was forced to come to work, bleeding during a presentation, and after I was born, returned from maternity leave to find that her office had been moved to the basement of the building and all her files had been lost. She received little support at home as my father was insistent that her career should never take precedence over his own. When a recession hit in the mid-nineties, my mother’s firm offered senior lawyers a year’s salary in return for taking redundancy. My brother had just been born and my father had moved us into a house he could barely afford, therefore if one of them was going to take a step back and look after their children, there was no doubt as to who it was going to be.

My mother’s entire life had been built around focus and drive, and while she loved me and my brother, abandoning her ambitions and pivoting from solicitor to mum-in-the-park never sat comfortably with her. She was cut-off from the world as days at the office were replaced by hours spent watching Thomas the Tank Engine as the restless energy she

once devoted to her career was now poured into her children, who seemed to be the only remaining measure of her success. Henry was an easy child, socialising readily with others and tackling new challenges without difficulty, whereas I had been born with liver damage, spending the first weeks of my life writhing under the bright lights of an incubator. Therefore, as soon as she was able to take me home, my mother saw me as a boy in need of obsessive levels of care.

Her life was based around my every need as the two of us became intertwined in a deeply intuitive relationship. When I was taken to play at another child's house, she would stay to watch over me, and every night we would lie in bed together while she read me stories. All of my discomforts were pre-empted and my mother was responsive to my smallest nuances, carrying juice, snacks, books, toys, changes of clothes and video tapes, jumping in to rescue me before I knew that I needed saving. Her happiness was dependent on my own, and when we were together as a family, we would always play the games that I wanted to play, watch the programmes that I wanted to see, go to the places where I wanted to go, and leave when I wanted to leave.

Although she wanted to protect me from the world, my mother also recognised the importance of getting me out of my own head and made it her mission to make me the best version of myself that I could possibly be. On every night of the week I was taken either to fencing, swimming, tennis, dodgeball, karate, judo, Cub Scouts, or therapy, along with piano, guitar and flute lessons. I wanted to stay at home glued to my Nintendo, and while pleasing my mother was paramount, this divergence led to a highly-charged love-hate relationship.

The house on Beech Drive became filled with the noise of my mother and I screaming at one another. We argued over everything and anything, and I'd be watching cartoons when a whirlwind would come flying down the stairs, shrieking 'why is the television on so loud! Do you want to burst your ears! Who is going to look after you when you are deaf!' (a lifelong disability, or my imminent demise as a result of leaving the fridge door open were common themes). My mother was not a patient woman and she struggled with a child who was on his own planet, creating endless cycles of conflict when I arrived at school to discover that I had left all of my textbooks at home, or when she fished my mobile phone out of the washing machine for the third time in a month.

I was deeply averse to confrontation in all forms, so if one of my teachers gave me as much as a wayward glance, I would be devastated for weeks. However, I recognised that my mother came from a long line of screaming Jewish mothers, and just as she was an expert when it came to my needs, I was equally adept at pushing her buttons, knowing how to manipulate her into getting my own way more often than not. Above all, I knew that these arguments were meaningless, and after the two of us had stormed off to opposite sides of the house, we would reunite on the stairs in minutes with sheepish smiles, exchanging apologies before going into the lounge to cuddle on the sofa.

This special – and slightly weird – connection only existed between myself and my mother and I always had a sense that I belonged to her, whereas Henry belonged to my father. This was mostly born out of necessity because Henry was easy-going whereas I was highly-strung, and it was simpler for my brother to pair up with my father because my mother was the only one who knew how to calm me down. Still, I loved the fact that my mother had a dozen different nicknames for me while my brother was simply 'Henry', and when the three of us were together, I was the child who got what he wanted.

My relationship with my mother was matched by a strangeness with my father. He left for work before I woke up in the morning and returned long after I'd gone to bed, with business trips that took him away for months at a time. When we did spend time together my father struggled with all of my sensitivities and we couldn't find common ground, unlike my brother who went to White Hart Lane with my father every other Saturday, wrapped in white and navy bar scarves which were inevitably thrown to the floor in rage the minute they returned.

Despite our differences, my father made repeated attempts to bond with me, but these were always with activities on his terms, including a disastrous six months when I was enrolled in a Jewish football team called Alith. When he wasn't driving me to training, my father was taking me out into our garden, placing the ball at my feet and instructing me on how to short while he stood between our two magnolia trees. The more I practiced, the worse I got and once the coaches at Alith clocked my lack of ability, as well as the absence of any willingness to learn, they stuck me in goal where the strikers lined up to blast muddy balls at me from every direction. On game day I was always on the bench, subbed on at left back for the last five minutes if we were winning comfortably, a position where I tried to stay as far away from the action as possible, doing my best to block out the cries of 'come on son!' emanating from my father.

Neither of my parents were overly suited to young children, playing with Crayons when they would rather be sunbathing in the garden or taking a call upstairs, but my father's style of parenting was far less 'professional' than my mother's. Absences allowed him to play the good cop, and me and my brother associated him with armfuls of gifts when he returned from one of his trips, rather than dragging us kicking and screaming from our computer screens. My father was also a 'fun' parent, relaxing to a level my mother was simply incapable of reaching, and had a unique ability to turn everything into a game, coming home from work and shouting "look at this bloody mess!" as he pointed to our toys, chasing me and my brother around the garden while we threw more junk onto the patio to his feigned displeasure.

His efforts kept us in the lifestyle to which we were accustomed and by the time I finished kindergarten, my father was working in a senior position for a major corporation. While he was comfortable exercising a position of authority, my father never lost his unshakeable sense of right and wrong, exhibiting a serious respect for those who worked below him while being forever critical of colleagues who abused their power. Before he made any decision, my father made certain that his own gains weren't infringing on the prospects of others; his greatest fear was that his employees would not only think of him as a bad boss but as a bad man.

At times, this deference verged on paranoia and it drove my mother mad, leading her to accuse my father of bending over backwards for the benefit of strangers when he should be making more time for himself and his family. Although only a suspicion, my mother and I felt that my father's employees saw the best of him and when he hosted a work function at the house, we would stand and watch this polite gentleman checking on his guests, whispering "they must think Daddy is the easiest man in the world".

My father continued to struggle with his mental health after his children were born, seeing different therapists with varying periods of success, but his troubles reached their zenith in the late nineties when he decided to quit his job and start his own company on Bilton Road. It had always been my father's dream to become a CEO, partly because he was constantly measuring himself against the accomplishments of *this person* he had gone to Oxford with or *that person* who had grown up down the road (trying to convince my father that he was enormously successful in his own right was a complete waste of time), but mostly because those three letters would finally allow him to become 'somebody'.

Ironically, I saw less of my father when he was working out of an office about a mile from our house than when he had been flying around the world for a multinational corporation, and I was only taken to see this vastly superior competitor for his attention on one occasion. I was shocked because I had always imagined him working on the top floor of one of those glass and steel skyscrapers which were appearing all across London, yet instead he was proudly showing me around a grubby little building in Finchley, squeezed between a betting shop and a post office, with a torn brown carpet, no windows, and boxes stacked from floor to ceiling.

Around the time he started working at Bilton Road, my father bought me a bright red BMW for my birthday. It ranked as one of my favourite toys and, on top of the blue and white BMW logo that was glued to the bonnet, the car had pedals, a steering wheel, a handbrake, and even a rudimentary gear stick. The patio at Beech Drive was a near perfect racetrack and I spent entire weekends slaloming between deck chairs and potted plants, allowing my brother to stand on the chassis while holding on to the back of my seat as we sped around the courses we spent days designing. One evening my mother and I were having tea in the kitchen when my father came home from work, hung his blazer on a chair, rolled up his shirt sleeves, walked out into the garden, lifted my BMW high above his head, and spiked it into the ground. Shards of red plastic flew in every direction as the car crashed into the patio, and my mother and I watched through the window as he lifted and smashed it again and again, roaring into the cool summer air.

These explosions of anger were always unpredictable, but during the Bilton Road years they also became less and less exceptional. The physical transformation my father underwent during these episodes was even more terrifying than the acts of violence themselves, and nobody would believe that this five-foot seven Jewish man, with messy hair, thick glasses, and a quick smile, was capable of becoming a red-faced monster with muscles tensed, teeth bared, and eyes glaring. If he was in a particularly foul mood my father was capable of sulking in his study for a day or two, but usually returned to normality as quickly as he had left it, and sometimes it was only a matter of minutes before the sound of his laughter penetrated the house.

My father apologised for his outbursts, but never directly and it was my mother who would find me cowering in my bedroom, softly explaining that “Daddy is in the kitchen, why don’t you go downstairs so the two of you can make up?” I was made to say

sorry first because I was the one who left my car in the garden, and then my mother would beckon me into my father's arms, who would wrap me in a hug, confessing that he had 'overreacted' as we both promised to 'never fight again'.

I wanted to accept my parents' narrative around these so-called 'arguments', as well as the collective amnesia that prevented any meaningful acknowledgement of my father's behaviour. However, as time passed and promises were broken, it became harder and harder for my mother to force me into my father's arms. I realised that I wasn't offering him forgiveness, I was giving him absolution, and after every explosion, I made a solemn vow that this time there would be no apology and I would make him pay. But by then we were back to playing happy families, where any refusal to apologise would result in more cajoling from my mother while my father stared at me with mournful eyes, shifting the guilt of disrupting our harmony squarely onto my shoulders.

My father was never a tyrant and when the Bilton Road venture collapsed after a couple of years, he returned to being the quiet and caring man the outside world knew him to be – most of the time anyway. I also understood my mother when she explained that 'Daddy isn't upset with you; he has to work very hard so we can have lots of nice things'. That said, I infinitely preferred our love-hate relationship over the uncertainty of guessing which version of my father was going to walk through the front door and whether I should laugh and jump on his back, smile and give him a hug, or stay the hell away. I loved my father and was desperate to cure him of his anger, but as I sat at our kitchen table, trying to eat my fish fingers after being humiliated into yet another apology, I couldn't help but feel my own constricting sense of rage.

As a Mendoza, it was always going to be down to my mother to decide on the religious direction of our family. She remained conscious that there was a limit to what my father felt comfortable adopting, but their marriage also gave her a certain freedom that she would not have had with a 'proper' Jewish husband. Since she'd left home, my mother increasingly viewed the customs of her parents as outdated, oppressive, and, above all, a pain in the arse.

Consequently, she decided on a Judaism that was observant but not devout and when we went to synagogue on Shabbat, my mother was happy for us to drive there. During Passover she removed all chametz from the house, but we never hired a special man to check the dishwasher for breadcrumbs or purchased the exorbitantly priced kosher-

for-pesach bottles of water. If they ate meat for dinner, my parents only waited one hour before pouring milk in their tea, and we treated the minor festivals as low-key affairs, eschewing Shul on Sukkot and going over to my grandparents where we stood shivering in our jackets as Victor waved the Lulav and Etrog around the back of his garage. Valerie occasionally reprimanded my mother with a tut or a sigh if she let slip that she had been at the tennis club on Saturday morning, but if my mother did experience any feelings of remorse, these were more than outweighed by her desire to only keep two sets of dishes instead of three, and she certainly wasn't going to ruin her new kitchen by having a second sink installed.

Although mother might have allowed us to take liberties with our religion, Judaism was always our way of life and the faith provided the framework for the bourgeoisie bubble I was raised in. All of our friends were Jewish and all lived within a couple of miles of Finchley and Golders Green. The children went to the same schools/private schools dominated by Jews and attended the same Jewish Scout troops and swimming clubs. We had a shared experience with summer flats in Puerto Banus, winter skiing in Les Trois Vallees, and afternoons of golf and hot cross buns at Dyrham Park Country Club.

It was a wholesome environment where nobody drank, nobody smoked, nobody got divorced, and nobody had parties that went on after ten o'clock. If there were any dramas, they were divulged in hushed tones and disasters were kept strictly below the surface. As kids, we were given every advantage in order to follow in our parents' footsteps with the freedom to be either a banker, a doctor, or a lawyer. We were obviously sheltered and non-Jews were foreign to the point of being frightening. However, our lives came with an implicit understanding that if we didn't want to engage with the real world, then we wouldn't have to.

Even our synagogue had an air of aloofness, and from the street our Shul was just a high brick wall patrolled by security with buildings behind that were obscured by beech trees. The only entrance was via a full height turnstile, leading into a checkpoint where a man with a radio attached to his bomber jacket would either recognise you as a regular or ask for your driver's licence, along with a brief interrogation, before opening yet another metal gate which broadened out into the Sternberg Centre. This was an eighteenth-century manor house purchased by various Jewish groups in the early eighties and now shared between several institutions including our synagogue, a primary school, a rabbinical

college, the offices of community organisations, and a small museum about Jewish life in Britain.

The synagogue itself was austere and unimpressive, constructed as an extension to the manor house on what was clearly a tight budget. It was primarily accessible through the school and a cavern of corridors covered in finger paintings that took you down into a basement filled with blazers before leading you up into a bright yellow hall large enough for a few hundred people at a squeeze. There wasn't much to look at, besides the stacks of plastic chairs which surrounded a minimalist Ark and Bimah, but the room had an undeniable energy and wasn't a place where I wanted to spend even a second alone (especially after watching the first Indiana Jones film).

The Shul was able to function at capacity on Shabbat (although the price for arriving late was spending three hours standing at the back), but we had a rapidly expanding congregation of thousands and on high holy days the entire complex was utilised, with a ballot system that directed you to a number of services held in the school's assembly hall, a marquee that was set up on top of the playground, or, if Hashem was particularly irked, in an overflow at the Holiday Inn by the North Circular.

Beyond Shabbat and the major festivals, I attended the Sternberg Centre every Wednesday night and Sunday morning for Hebrew school from kindergarten age. We were mostly taught how to recite basic prayers, whispering The Shema, moaning L'cha Dodi, and chirping along to Adon Olam, with various ditties in English about Moses smashing the commandments. When it came to scripture, we all learnt the Aleph-Bet, but the focus was on the stories rather than the texts and I spent most of my time drawing pictures of Jewish rebels firing arrows down at the Romans advancing up Masada. I was struck by the violence of my religion, and hearing about God blithely flattening ancient cities seemed somewhat at odds with my grandmother's kneidlach balls and chicken soup. However, there was always a disclaimer that the bible was meant to be taken with an extremely large pinch of salt and our synagogue was proud of its progressive attitudes towards same-sex relationships, female rabbis, and inter-faith marriages. At any rate, I wasn't complaining because hearing about plagues and battles was much more exciting than the writings of Maimonides and all the Rabbi Eliezer-said-this-but-then-Rabbi Yehoshua-said-that tedium.

As I grew older, Hebrew school moved away from arts and crafts and towards gearing us up for our Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, replacing the Torah we hadn't studied with the

Talmud we couldn't understand. The large classrooms of the manor house were swapped for the rabbinical offices along the perimeter wall, where we spent evenings listening to a junior rabbi explain the laws of Kashrut, doing our best to stay conscious as we were shown yet another Venn diagram about fish scales and cow hooves. I became well versed in the various terms and conditions that came with being Jewish, but it was hard to appreciate any larger narratives and I was frustrated by my teachers, who did little other than interrupt my readings to blurt, 'no Oliver! Not bur-*uch*-oo! It's bur-*och*-oo! You wouldn't say, I'm *geeing* to the shops would you?'

Although I could recite dozens of prayers in Hebrew and English, I was never actually taught *how* to pray and having a private relationship with God always felt awkward, on a par with having an imaginary friend. I tried cupping my hands together on a couple of occasions, emulating the Christians I had seen on television. However, the discomfort was palpable and from the age of ten I began to entertain serious doubts as to whether the man in the sky was anything more than a collective delusion. God didn't seem like the sort of bloke you wanted to get on the wrong side of, so I decided to play it safe and give him the benefit of the doubt. However, when I ate my first bacon sandwich on a school field trip I realised that I wasn't afraid because I was about to be turned into a pillar of salt, I was afraid because I had broken the rules of my community, which was divine law in a far truer sense.

There was very little guilt over my burgeoning atheism because our Judaism was primarily cultural, with a vague sense of heaven and no concept of hell. It was a religion of customs and traditions that used songs, festivals, and above all food to foster a sense of history. We never had to worry about questions of identity because we already had structures in place that allowed us to direct our energies elsewhere, and I never felt as though I had rejected God because my own idea of him had always been manifested through rituals shared with my family: squeezing apple slices into miniature pots of honey on Rosh Hashanah, gathering around my father to watch him struggle with a box of matches on Hanukkah, and listening to our rabbi recount the story of Esther and Mordecai on Purim, booing Haman and barging past one another to be first to the trays of Hamantaschen.

If I had to imagine a higher authority, then I pictured him as not unlike our senior rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg, who was only a middle-aged rabbi but already had an impressive grey and black beard, carried himself with a holy stoop, and dressed in either a

cheap suit when he was on duty or worn hiking gear on his off-days (the rabbi's treks were legendary and he traversed entire continents with nothing more than his dog and a walking stick). Rabbi Jonathan's Shabbat sermons almost made the preceding three hours' worth sitting through, and if you were lucky he would ascend the Bimah, reach into his pocket, and bring out Schmendrick, a toy mouse he expertly animated with his hand. Schmendrick collected various friends over the years, and they were always getting themselves into moral conundrums, using everyday difficulties to make sense of the scripture we had just spent the morning dozing through.

Wittenberg's combination of intelligence and boundless compassion was almost daunting, and if he ever made his congregation feel guilty, it was only in the context of taking our privilege for granted. His sermons ended with an appeal for the synagogue's charitable drives, with causes for Jews and non-Jews alike, and my parents were always making me bring in boxes filled with my old toys, clothes, and books for victims of the Chernobyl disaster (when some children from Chernobyl visited the synagogue to thank us, I was both relieved and disappointed to discover that they weren't four-eyed mutants). Above all, Rabbi Jonathan expressed a Judaism that valued service over superiority with an enduring respect for all faiths. Unfortunately, this was a message that was confused and diluted by circumstances beyond his control, so by the time it reached the fringes of our congregation, many had chosen to simply ignore him.

I can't have been older than seven when my Hebrew teacher sat our class down on a Wednesday night and solemnly passed photographs of cattle cars next to piles of naked bodies frozen together. I wasn't directly related to any survivors and I found it difficult to reconcile my experience of Waitrose and Lego Land with jackboots and gas chambers. However, in the nineties the Holocaust was still a vivid memory for many and the message from my Hebrew teacher was clear. These petrified corpses were us and we were them, and it would be our generation's responsibility to prevent this cycle of violence against Jews from happening again, as if the Germans, the Russians, or the Egyptians were going to come storming up the Finchley Road any day now.

This post-Holocaust lens was only magnified by the events of the early two-thousands and it was hard to perceive a Jewish identity that wasn't defined by people who wanted to kill us. Although we were far from alone in having friends and family who lived in Israel, the Second Intifada went beyond a concern for our loved ones and an attack on Israel was felt as an attack on Jews everywhere. The adventures of Schmendrick were

replaced by services for victims of suicide bombings, and on Shabbat we read the names of captured Israeli soldiers, praying hopelessly for their return.

Rabbi Jonathan was a humanitarian even before he was a community leader and he urged us to see these atrocities in an apolitical context, but there was little he could do to stop the waves of misinformation which only strengthened an unhealthy support for the state of Israel. 'The Muslims have all their countries, and we can't even have one?' were mainstream sentiments and a racism emerged that not only sat hand-in-hand but was justified by our liberal values. After September 11, it seemed as though the entire western world was both mirroring and vindicating our worst prejudices as part of some 'us versus them' clash of civilisations.

The majority of Jews were like my parents and mostly resented being put in a position where they had to take a position, especially over a situation that was so objectively ugly by leafy north London's standards. However, it was difficult to ignore the fear and the hatred, and when a Muslim came to our synagogue to give a presentation to my Hebrew class on the similarities between Judaism and Islam, we were all quietly terrified that she had a bomb under her Hijab. Despite making deals with God when my parents told me that we were spending the summer visiting friends in Tel-Aviv, anti-Semitism fostered a measure of pride, epitomised by the joke that every Jewish holiday can be summarised as 'they tried to kill us, we won, let's eat!' However, I couldn't escape the sense that despite my comfortable surroundings, being Jewish was a risky endeavour because people didn't like us, and there must be a reason why.

It was generally accepted that children from my synagogue went to one of the major north London private schools after kindergarten, which would see them all the way through to university. Unfortunately, seven-plus entrance exams were required and these proved an unmitigated disaster. At Haberdasches school, I got lost on my way back from the bathroom and ended up wandering around their game fields trying to find my parents. At City of London school, I left half-way through the test because another boy told me that we only had to answer half of the questions, while at Highgate I defecated in my shorts and was quietly escorted out by the examiner once I was identified as the culprit. My heart was mostly set on going to UCS school, but it was down to my mother to evasively explain that I was 'on the waiting the list' whilst trying to convince me that the school I *really* wanted to go to was Lyndhurst House, where the exam had been nothing more than a ten-minute chat with the deputy headmaster.

Lyndhurst was only a prep school, so my parents were hopeful that I would at least get another bite at the apple in seven years' time. It was a converted town house situated on a residential street in Hampstead where the bedrooms had been turned into classrooms, the basement into a cafeteria, and the garden covered with asphalt, now functioning as a playground. The school was small and relatively unknown with only one class per year and fifteen boys in each class. In many ways its size proved serendipitous because the teachers were able to take an individualised approach with each of their students; however, my problems at kindergarten only worsened as I moved through the independent education system.

I routinely came home carrying tests with scores of one or two out of twenty-five and was bottom of the class in every subject as staring out of the window remained my major preoccupation. Unsurprisingly, sports were not my salvation and I was one of only two boys who weren't even considered for the football team. When we played cricket, I was sent to stand out on the boundary, sweltering in my whites, and came dead last in cross country, squelching over the finish line while the other boys were already showered and eating their sandwiches on the bus. My relationships with my classmates were no better and I was bullied on a daily basis, mostly by the Keisner twins who both suffered from terrible eczema and would sit either side of me with scabbed and bloodied smiles as they stabbed me with sharpened pencils.

My only reprieve came in the form of a shaggy blonde Irish Catholic boy called Ruaraidh. As a gentile, I was a little wary of him at first but when neither of us were picked for the football team, it became clear that we had much more in common than had divided us. Ruaraidh was also a Star Wars aficionado, so at break time we hid behind the science department and played 'Space Adventures', cutting our way through stormtrooper armies with imaginary lightsabres.

My mother was delighted that I'd finally made a friend, but she hadn't sacrificed a promising legal career for me to become a Jedi Knight. The highest levels of academic attainment were supposed to be a non-negotiable part of childhood and our synagogue was filled with mothers crowing about their sons and daughters winning maths competitions and being flown out to America to attend summer camps for gifted children. Years of appalling grades made my future a mounting concern, but my mother was mainly

frustrated because there was plenty of evidence that I had potential beyond a parent's hopes and delusions.

My teachers complained that I dozed off at school every two or three minutes, although my attention problems were clearly selective because I could play *Age of Empires* without remembering to use the bathroom. I was still struggling with my five times table at an embarrassing age and was reliant on my fingers for multiplication; however, just as my mother was on the verge of despair, she would open my bedroom door to find me engrossed in my father's copies of George Orwell and Graham Greene. Half of the problem was finding a way for me to translate the mayhem behind my eyes because although I filled entire notebooks for my essays, a combination of atrocious spelling, scrambled grammar, and illegible handwriting made the contents look like a mixture of Chinese characters and Viking Runes.

At parents evening, my maths and science teachers sighed and reflected that at least I was well behaved; however, my English teacher Mrs Dicks was increasingly hysterical, repeating 'if only he applied himself!' as she pondered solutions for enticing me out of my own head. My mother's answer was simple: tutors for everything, and while I was grateful to take a step back from my flute lessons and martial arts commitments, I was less than thrilled about spending my evenings and weekends being ferried back and forth between retired teachers' houses in north London.

The academic pressure was relentless and years later I found a tape recording of my Lyndhurst revision notes, punctuated by the sound of my mother screaming at me for failing to remember the capital of Pakistan. However, I thrived under the personalised approach my tutors provided and had an especially strong relationship with my maths teacher in Highgate. She was an old Scottish woman who recognised that the key to my learning was plying me with chocolate digestives, nudging my arm every time my eyes drifted towards the window, and having the patience to explain long division several hundred times before it finally sunk in.

Over the following year, I went from being at the bottom of my classes to the top, although becoming a straight-A student was a double-edged sword. I missed the days when I awaited test results with dull resignation because there were now multiple parties to disappoint, from my parents to my teachers and tutors. It was a an A-plus existence, and my new definition of failure was only scoring twenty-three out of twenty-five when Adam

Robinow scored twenty-four. However, any negatives paled into insignificance as my role as a high achiever was about more than good grades.

I'd always hated the fact that I was bad at everything I tried my hand at, stumbling around the dojo during my orange belt kata and fumbling at the sweaty piano keys as I failed my grade 2 exam. I also hated the fact that whenever I met other children their first impulse was to bully me, and that even the adults in Cub Scouts felt a certain amount of name-calling and mud-throwing was warranted. Most of all, I hated the fact that I was constantly letting my mother and father down, giving them nothing to cheer for on sports day and nothing to be proud of at parents evening. Now I had a new favourite game, where I would flop into my mother's car on the day we received our test results and stare out of the window with a blank expression, listening to her plead, 'tell me Oliver, how bad was it?' before a broad smile crept across my face.

It took me seven years but I finally found my feet at Lyndhurst – just as I was due to leave. I was made deputy head boy, my silver and blue badge pinned to the lapel of my blazer as I took prospective parents on tours of 'our cutting-edge science department, as you can see, we have all sorts of equipment for our experiments'. My imagination was now being referred to as a gift and I wrote a theatre adaption of The Lord of the Rings for our school play, mostly as an excuse to dress up as Aragorn (although I almost walked away from the entire project when Mr Hempstead cut my three-and-a-half-hour epic down to forty minutes). On prize day, I won the Creative Writing trophy that was newly established in recognition of my efforts and boasted that I was going to be the next Peter Jackson – who had quietly replaced George Lucas after I'd sat through Attack of the Clones with a crushing sense of betrayal.

My self-worth was still tied up in my report card but my interests were now spreading beyond schoolwork and the teachers at Lyndhurst were enormously influential in drawing me out of my childhood shell. Mrs Dicks saw me as her protégé, lending me her copies of Carson McCullers and John Steinbeck which I devoured as quickly as possible so we could discuss them the next time she was on playground duty. Since my father had bought me a Walkman and a couple of U2 albums, I'd fallen in love with rock'n'roll and at lunch I went to the music department to hang out with Mr Hayward-Peel, who played me Iggy Pop songs and taught me the chords to *The Passenger* on his electric guitar. Lyndhurst was like a family, and even my PE/History teacher Mr Steane, who generally

preferred to talk football with the sporty boys, allowed me to ambush him in the corridor on his free period for a twenty-minute chat about the Romans in Britain.

Ruaraidh remained my closest confidante, but after six years of enduring Geography field trips, charity raffles, and stale casseroles with the same fifteen boys, I was growing less reliant on Space Adventures. Handball had inexplicably overtaken football as the most popular game on the playground and I was joining my classmates out on the asphalt, jostling one another for the opportunity to slap a tennis ball into a brick wall. On the weekends I no longer sat alone in front of a computer screen and asked my mother to take me to rock concerts, paintball parties, film screenings, or even to a couple of highly stressful school discos where I glugged apple juice and watched my friends dance with girls from the local independent schools.

Socialising remained fraught with difficulties and my paranoia within the circle was equal to my paranoia outside it. I obsessed over what other people were thinking and, on more than one occasion, my mother was scolded by our headmaster for confronting boys in my year over grievous offences they genuinely had no recollection of committing. My days were filled with perceived slights and imaginary injustices; however, for the first time in my life, I was actually excited to jump into my mother's car in the morning. I was getting along with all of my classmates (even the Keisner twins had repented for their old pencil stabbing ways) and, more importantly, my classmates were getting along with me. I told jokes which made people laugh, spun tall tales that made my friends buzz with approval, and was always carrying new albums I'd found perusing the shelves at HMV, leading me to believe that Oliver Gafsen was actually a pretty cool person to be.

By the time I was thirteen, Lyndhurst was starting to feel like a very small pond, but there was a sense of superiority that came with being the eldest boys at the school and my year relished the shared experience of entering adolescence. Childish enthusiasms for Gameboys and trading cards were replaced by Dijon Ellams re-enacting the plot of Bad Boys II, playing both the Martin Lawrence and Will Smith characters while exclaiming, 'that mama rat, is fucking the shit out of that papa rat!' Isaac Epstein brought in chocolate cigarettes which we pretended to smoke when the weather was cold and William Barakat was usually able to tear out the third page of his father's discarded copy of the Sun. I loved my first glimpses of this adult world and my natural caution was practically inverted when it came to matters of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll, leaving me both excited and somewhat frightened by the strength of these new and forbidden desires.

Over the summer I had my Bar Mitzvah, which was the culmination of a year's worth of Monday and Thursday evenings sat in my Hebrew teacher's musty living room in Hendon. Hunched over old books, I moaned into a tape recorder I would have to play back countless times at home if I wanted to avoid a strongly worded scolding the following week. Ascending the Bimah as Rabbi Jonathan placed the Yad in my hand and guided me towards my Torah portion was hardly relaxing; however, as I listened to my voice reverberate off the walls of the packed synagogue, I no longer felt a boy but a more fully fledged member of my community.

My family were over-joyed and at the afterparty held in a marquee in our garden, as I played Stairway to Heaven on my new black and gold Fender Stratocaster in front of everybody I'd ever met, there was a sense that the boy who used to eat leaves and hide in cupboards could now do anything. However, my crowning achievement that year was nailing my common entrance exams and defeating hundreds of applicants to get into UCS. My brother Henry was already there, having passed the seven-plus exams that I had failed, and I could barely wait for the summer holidays to end as I imagined donning my new red and maroon blazer come September.

Chapter 2

UCS was barely a mile from Lyndhurst, another all-boys private school on a quiet street in Hampstead, but that was where the similarities ended. Whereas Lyndhurst had less than a hundred students, UCS had well over a thousand and my classes were double the size. Assemblies were held in an oak hall illuminated by gold chandeliers where our headmaster Mr Durham ascended a wooden plinth and boomed the announcements of the day. Departments occupied entire buildings that were scattered behind the original red brick construction as part of a sprawling campus and comprised a four-hundred seat auditorium for drama, a six-storey workshop for design, computer labs, music rooms, a language centre, and games fields with a dozen full-sized football pitches on the Finchley Road.

Lyndhurst had felt like a home with its splintered cricket bats mummified in tape and rusted Bunsen-Burners which failed to ignite. We did PE on a waterlogged park in Wembley and our textbooks routinely fell apart in our hands. We exchanged gifts with our teachers, swapping boxes of chocolates for bottles of wine at Christmas, and our headmaster Mr Spielberg was always interrupting his day to help us fix awkward studs to

our boots. By contrast, UCS was cold and imposing, and I quickly grew to fear the polished stone floors patrolled by gangs of sixth-formers in navy suits.

I arrived at UCS still riding on the crest of a wave from Lyndhurst, already contemplating a sequel to my production of The Lord of the Rings and keen to add badges to the lapel of my new blazer. However, I was horrified to find myself at odds with the faculty, and barely a day went by when I wasn't reprimanded with, "Gafsen! You do not address a teacher by his surname! You lower your voice and call him sir!" The punishments I received were hardly severe, and I was mostly made to spend my lunch breaks collecting discarded trays from the cafeteria; however, I had just spent the last year being deputy head boy and the fact I was being disciplined at all was keeping me up at night.

During my interview, Mr Durham had struck me as a generous, modern man and I expected his school to be run accordingly, but he clearly failed to control a cohort of teachers who had been at the school for upwards of thirty years, ruling their departments like separate fiefdoms. This old guard promoted an education that was practically Victorian, and it was hard to imagine playing Iggy Pop or writing short stories with teachers who threw chalk at pupils, shoved them into pedal bins, and sent boys out to Hampstead in the middle of a lesson to go and buy them a latte. All of my idiosyncrasies were ruthlessly exposed, and whereas my daydreaming at Lyndhurst had been interrupted by a gentle, 'are you still with us Oliver?' I was now being hauled up in front of the entire class on a regular basis, desperately searching my memory as Mr McAra made me conjugate all the Latin verbs I had spent the morning dozing through.

If UCS had been uniformly authoritarian it might have been an easier institution to adapt to, but the teachers also engaged in behaviour that was weird and confusing. At midday I watched staff go off with sixth formers for a liquid lunch at the Holly Bush, staggering back down Frognal an hour later with their eyes fixed on the pavement. The front gates were always packed with teachers and students cadging cigarettes off one another and there was plenty of 'harmless' flirting, especially with the more effeminate boys who were called 'sluts' and 'cocksuckers' and faced tongue-in-cheek accusations of 'selling your arse on the heath' if they arrived late.

The UCS students loved their teachers because they were like 'mates' and I wanted to love them as well. I wanted to laugh at the images of shirtless teachers dancing with

shirtless pupils on social media, dismiss the members of staff who dug their fingers into your backside as ‘a bit handsy’, and ignore the boys who were given ‘private detentions’ for dropping their pencil on the floor. UCS’s liberal brand was what had attracted me to the school in the first place, and it was this same permissive attitude that gave UCS boys the freedom to grow curls cascading down their shoulders (my first order of business was to cease all visits to the hairdresser), while boys at nearby public schools such as Highgate were stuck with crew cuts. When my father was at Mill Hill school in the seventies, UCS boys had a reputation for being long haired stoners and little had changed in the following thirty years, with the penalty for getting caught smoking a joint equivalent to having your top button undone.

However, the UCS definition of liberalism had become outdated at best (not helped by the fact that all of our teachers were white, unmarried, middle-aged men, with only a handful of ethnic minority students in each year), creating a hypermasculine atmosphere that I’d never encountered before. It was common practice to bully what few female teachers there were, making lewd gestures as they passed us in the corridors and taking pictures of their chests and backsides on our mobile phones. If anybody complained, they were killjoys, discredited with the catch-all umbrella of ‘boys being boys’, and the male teachers not only endorsed our behaviour but participated in it, sharing dubious pieces of staff room gossip.

A few months earlier, my greatest concern was that the standard of education at UCS would be too high for me to handle. Instead, I was cleaning up half-eaten chicken drumsticks at lunch, dodging Dr Plow’s wandering hands in German, watching Taxi Driver in English because Mr Hawley’s breath was sour with whisky, and shifting awkwardly in French as Ms Postaliane burst into tears after one too many cat-calls. Nobody was ever expelled or even suspended at UCS, and while Lyndhurst had taught me about hard work and self-belief, UCS was teaching me that once you learnt to game the system, you could do whatever you wanted.

I wasn’t the only boy who joined UCS at the thirteen-plus entry. There were over forty of us, coming into a year of eighty boys who had been at school together for the last seven years. This sudden influx threw the pieces of the established order high in the air, leaving the old boys scrambling to secure their position in the new hierarchy and the new boys desperate to prove themselves to the older hands. Despite some run-ins with the faculty, my first couple of weeks at UCS were everything I’d hoped they’d be, eating lunch

on the top tables and getting milkshakes in Hampstead after school, with the jokes and stories that had curried favour during my final year at Lyndhurst proving equally successful at UCS.

However, I failed to see the target on my back because, unlike Lyndhurst, UCS was a dog-eat-dog environment and for the first time in my life I was introduced to the concept of 'weird'. If you didn't wear the right trainers, didn't listen to the right music, didn't hang out with the right people, then you were 'weird'. I wanted to be popular but struggled to love the latest shit indie band that 'you probably haven't heard of yet' and didn't understand an environment where boys who spent all day talking about Star Wars couldn't be friends with boys who spent all day talking about football.

Although there were a few boys who had the swagger to defy the major trends, my confidence was still in its infancy and although I'd learnt to control the worst excesses of my sensitivities, that didn't stop me from bursting into tears when Bradley gave Timmy the next turn on his PSP after he'd *promised* it to me, while I protested that, 'I don't know why I'm crying! I promise, I don't know why I'm crying!' The quickest and cheapest social currency at UCS was bullying, and for some of the new boys who felt that I had taken a position in the hierarchy that could and should be theirs, my obvious insecurities were a signal that I was all too ready to be taken down.

I had a stammer as a child, but these problems were resolved at kindergarten after sessions with a speech therapist, so I was surprised when George Brodie pointed out that I 'talked weird'. I turned to my new friends for support, but as George did a nasal whining impression of my voice the classroom burst into laughter, with more boys noticing, 'you're right! He does talk weird!' I later reflected that maybe I should have swung a punch or joined the hysteria, killing the joke then and there, but instead I offered a weak smile and stammered, 'I sp-speak p-perfectly thank you very much!'

George's impression spread in a matter of hours and by the end of the week I was catching boys I'd never met laughing as they shared his nasal whining accent with one another. My status plunged and my former friends were my worst tormentors, keen to demonstrate as much distance from me as possible. The teachers understood petty violence as part of 'boys being boys' and rarely intervened when I was attacked with glue, paint, and other art supplies used as projectiles. My name was changed from Oliver to Gaffy, and homophobic songs were shouted at me as I walked through the corridors. By the end of

September, I was crying in my mother's car every morning, begging her to let me move to a different school.

My problems with food didn't start at UCS. At Lyndhurst, I had always been a boy who 'liked his lunches', staying in the cafeteria for seconds and thirds while the rest of my year was already out on the playground. My behaviour underwent a seismic shift when faced with the prospect of sugar, and at my maths tutor's house in Highgate I waited until she went to the bathroom before rifling through her kitchen cabinets, cramming chocolate digestives into my mouth and pockets. It was unpleasant to observe my body changing as my school trousers tightened and my face broadened into a rosy cheeked circle. However, fat or thin, I was equally shit at sports and being overweight at Lyndhurst elicited little other than the smile of Mr Spielberg, who would exclaim that we were his "growing lads!" as he watched us approach the lunch ladies with our empty dessert bowls.

I'd actually managed to lose some weight after my common entrance exams, mostly at the behest of my mother who didn't want my Bar Mitzvah photos ruined by my belly. However, after my early struggles at UCS, dark impulses dominated my thinking and I escaped my battles with the teachers and students by hiding in the tuck shop, gorging myself on bags of Doritos and Waitrose cookies. My eating got worse when my mother returned to work as a part-time support lawyer, giving me money to take the tube and buy myself tea instead of collecting me from school.

I always had more cash than I needed, so when I walked into Starbucks for a tuna sandwich, I was overwhelmed by the siren calls of the chocolate pastries and sugar-coated doughnuts sitting beneath the glass checkout counter. When I arrived home my school bag was close to bursting and I sat in front of the television in our empty house, gorging myself until I felt sick but somehow finding room for more. My parents kept a health-conscious home so there were never any treats on offer, but on the weekends I raided the kitchen cabinets, eating bags of icing sugar with a spoon and covering slices of brown bread with thick layers of salt and margarine.

These binges always took place in secret; however, my family noticed that I was putting on weight, not to mention the pang of fear I experienced when items were discovered missing from the kitchen. I was especially resentful of Henry, who ate what he liked and remained effortlessly thin, and I soon faced restrictions at mealtimes along with simultaneous efforts to make me more active. A treadmill was installed in the kitchen,

where I spent my evenings puffing and wheezing on the rotating band, ignoring the cries of ‘five more minutes!’ from my mother as I pulled the emergency stop cord and collapsed onto the floor. Hoping to circumvent the need for exercise, I ordered a plethora of pills and powders online, which promised six pack abs and bulging biceps but did little other than taste like chalk, and spent the next five years hiding under my bed.

It wasn’t just parental pressure that was making me more self-conscious; UCS was giving me every reason to hate my body. While other boys were experimenting with skinny jeans and Breton shirts, I had to settle for the baggiest clothes I could find, anything short of a plastic sack to hide my torso in. The worst experience was on Friday afternoons, when the boys from my year congregated at the top of Hampstead High Street to flirt with the girls from South Hampstead High School. My interest in women was already an obsession, but I could only stand back and watch as they were drawn around the tall boys with angular jaw lines: I wondered if this was the fate that awaited my love life.

I tried to source confidence through other means and met plenty of guys who wore their weight as part of a big personality; however, I couldn’t escape the thought that being fat was the worst thing in the world and my body felt like a trap there was no way out of. I was desperate to find the strength to resist the temptation of food and my days at school were spent pushing back needling thoughts of ‘it’s been a tough day; surely, I can have *just one* bag of crisps.’ However, these new dawns never lasted past the East Finchley High Road where I caught my first glimpse of the glowing green mermaid, smelt the warmth of sugar mixed with flour, and ended up back in front of the television in the midst of a record binge, promising myself that ‘this is the last time, this is the last time’.

If somebody had told me that sports would be my salvation, I’d have presumed they were insane. It was business as usual when the new boys gathered on the game fields for football trials and I was placed in the E-team reserves: the lowest classification, deemed too useless for even the E-team who did little other than get trounced by the D-team in preparation for the D’s one game a year. The majority of the E-team reservists were, like me, overweight and asthmatic with borderline mental health issues and two left feet. We were coached by Mr Barnish, an insect of a maths teacher, who led us as far away from the other boys as he could before dropping a bag of footballs at our feet and standing like a terracotta soldier for the next two hours as we kicked them in wild directions.

I'd hit puberty earlier than most of the boys in my year, but at Lyndhurst it had amounted to little other than patchy facial hair which I refused to shave in the hope of cultivating a beard. However, after a few months at UCS, my body began to change. My belly fat receded a little, my shoulders widened into a shelf of muscle, and my legs were thick and steady. I had a strength which came from nowhere, and although I submitted meekly when boys half my size confronted me in the classroom, the E-team reserves provided a space where I felt comfortable testing my new powers.

Throughout the autumn term I became a specialist in red card offences: slide tackles, scissor tackles, takedowns, elbows, knees, and studs. Barnish was quick to blow his whistle and send me to the changing rooms, which was dandy because I could sit by the radiator and train my Pokémon instead of standing in the freezing rain. I always apologised to my fellow reservists when they joined me in the warmth, somewhat disturbed by my new proclivity for violence, and was asked if I'd ever played rugby before. When I replied 'no', the boys cradling bruised limbs would mumble, 'you're going to like it'.

There were no try-outs for the rugby teams because it was presumed – often, correctly – that if you were rubbish at football, then you were going to be rubbish at everything else. The biggest – and consequently the best – rugby player in the E-team reserves was a boy called Adam. During our first training session, Mr Barnish handed the ball to Adam and the rest of us took turns trying to tackle him. Every boy either 'missed' the tackle, flopping onto the ground with arms and legs spread to demonstrate that they had at least made a go of it, or clung onto Adam's shorts for a few seconds before being shaken free. When it came to my turn, I charged into Adam and flattened him with ease. My first instinct was that *I must be doing it wrong* and I turned to Mr Barnish, who told me to tackle Adam again. The third time Adam picked himself up off the ground, Barnish took mercy and ordered me out of our corner and up to the main fields to train with the D-team.

I was a conundrum for my new coaches because I could barely even hold a rugby ball without watching it slip through my fingers and I was slow, even for my size. However, I was strong and brave, and could win a ruck and drive a maul single-handedly. I was obviously a forward and got bounced around various positions in the pack until we were due to play the C-team, when our coach asked 'Gafsen! Have you played prop before?' A couple of weeks earlier I hadn't even known what a prop was, beyond the papier-mâché swords I'd made for my Lyndhurst production of The Lord of the Rings, so I was taken down to the scrummaging machine and taught the basic bind-crouch-touch-

engage. When it came to put my new position into practice, I burst through the C-team scrum like it wasn't there, wondering if maybe it was against the rules to use *all* of your strength. As we trooped off the field to get water at half-time, my coach barked, 'Gafsen! Go and see Mr Cook. You're training with the A-team.'

There was confusion when an E-team reservist arrived on the top field, and even Mr Cook appeared to be waiting for me to inform him that Mr Barnish had broken his glasses and somebody had had an allergy attack. I still hadn't processed the fact that I was in the D-team, and I was certain that I was about to be *found out* and sent back to where I belonged with jeers and smirks. That afternoon, the A-team was practicing its scrummaging on the B-team in preparation for their game against Berkhamsted School at the weekend when Mr Cook told one of the B-team props to take a break from being thrown to the ground so I could have a go instead. We scrummed several times and the result was always me standing over the biggest and most popular boys in my year with an expression of *I'm really sorry about this, guys*. The following Friday I was sat in the cafeteria, ploughing my way through a third bag of Doritos when a boy from my class shouted, 'Gaffy! Come downstairs quick!' I knew that the team sheets for the Berkhamsted game were in the hall and I was suspicious that this was all part of some cruel joke until I saw 'Gaferson' scrawled under 'A-team' in Mr Cook's barely legible handwriting, at which point it took every ounce of control to stop myself from bursting into tears.

In just a few weeks of rugby I achieved years of social climbing, and it no longer mattered that I 'talked weird' or spent my free time learning the alien languages from *Stargate*. George Brodie told me that he was 'sorry for being a dick' and the same boys who threw paint and called me a fag were now stopping me to crack lame jokes and give high-fives. I never ate lunch alone again and, no matter what time I grabbed a tray and proceeded to my corner of the cafeteria, there was always a table of boys who shouted, 'hey Gaffy! Over here!' I wasn't 'popular', rising to no more than a middle-ranking in the school hierarchy, but after months of crying in my mother's car every morning, it was more than a relief to be accepted by the UCS boys.

My parents were as surprised as anyone, and although my mother briefly entertained dreams of watching me become a tennis player (even though my hand-eye coordination usually left me swiping at mid-air), rugby was truly left field. I was supposed to be afraid of everything, and at thirteen I still ran away from bumblebees, yet now I was being applauded for my ability to dive head-first into a storm of violence. I didn't have a

rational explanation for it either, and when I jumped into the shower after training, the purple stud marks, red gashes, and black bruises which covered my body were all evidence of a good day's work.

My father had long abandoned any hope of watching his eldest son play sport, and while he applauded rapturously when I won the Creative Writing award at Lyndhurst, rugby didn't just make him proud – he was genuinely impressed. My position in the A-team allowed us to believe that perhaps we were related to one another after all, and there was no question that we had finally been gifted the common ground that had been denied to us for so many years. My father came to all of my matches for UCS, and while I wasn't a rugby 'fan', I enjoyed the sport enough to sit on the sofa and watch the Six Nations with him on the weekends, even driving up to Cardiff when my father managed to secure Wales tickets through work.

Rugby soon became the core of a new identity, and although this came at a detriment to my creative pursuits, I didn't particularly care because now I was the best at something which *actually mattered*. It was as if the UCS faculty had turned around and said, 'Gafsen! We've decided you're not completely useless after all!' and I loved the perks that came with my new position, from my special A-team tracksuit with 'OG' stitched in gold underneath the school crest to being in Latin when our captain's head would poke around the door and shout, 'Gaffy! Team meeting in five minutes!'

I'd never thought of myself as a man before, despite reading from the Torah and growing hair on my chest and balls. When I looked in the mirror, the boy staring back at me was too awkward, too chubby, too Jewish, and too in love with his mother. The best future I could hope for seemed to be as a neurotic playwright with a skin condition, and although my childhood heroes were all macho types like Hannibal Barca and Han Solo, it was clear that I just didn't have the minerals to be a *tough guy*. Suddenly, I wasn't just a rugby player, I was a prop. One of the toughest positions in one of the toughest sports, and the only asset I sought to nurture was strength.

During my first season of UCS rugby, we lost eleven out of our twelve games. This came as no surprise because, other than some middling results in cricket, our sporting endeavours were infamous. On Monday morning, Mr Durham announced defeats of forty and fifty nil to the assembly hall, and the loudest cheer was reserved for the team that lost by the most embarrassing score line. UCS was the kind of school where everybody got a

badge for participation and the competitive nature of sport never really gelled with this ethos. However, the problems with its rugby teams went even deeper. UCS wasn't affiliated with any religion and on Rosh Hashanah what few students there were in attendance just sat around watching television with the teachers. Consequently, boys from rival independent schools sarcastically referred to us as Jew-CS. This Ashkenazi gene pool proved beneficial when it came to producing Oxbridge graduates but was severely limiting when it came to contact sports. At five-foot-nine I was one of the largest boys in the team, and although I was happy to put my body on the line and endure a black eye or a bloody nose, I was one of the few to do so.

We mostly played against schools in Hertfordshire whose top teams were filled with gentiles who easily cleared six feet, but getting battered nine times out of ten didn't diminish my love of rugby. I was grateful to be representing the school at any level, let alone the highest level, and donning my A-team jersey and jogging out onto the field to the cheers of hundreds of students, parents, and teachers was all the validation I needed. Besides, I was now friends with everyone on the team and, although we were on a sinking ship, there was a camaraderie in plunging beneath the waves together.

Most of the boys on the UCS team were deservedly beaten, but as I learnt my trade it became clear that my abilities as a prop weren't just special, they were unique. I was collapsing every scrum I came up against, even when we played against elite level schools who annihilated us without breaking a sweat. As a prop I never experienced the glamour of spinning through tackles or dancing over the try line, but for eighty minutes I watched the opposition pack doing everything they could to deal with my power, switching their players around and geeing themselves up with roars and punches. I was always targeted by boys stamping on my knees and ankles during the breakdown, but when the final whistle blew, and I watched the opposition props trudge off the field in stark contrast to the celebrations of their teammates, I struggled to match the emotions of my own side, containing my delight until I jumped into my father's car, beaming as we recounted all of my individual victories.

Unfortunately, UCS only played one term of rugby instead of two. I'd only started to find my feet as a player and my A-team tracksuit was already being relegated to the back of my wardrobe. I briefly hoped that I might also have become magically gifted at cricket; however, following an afternoon of dropped catches and hitting my own stumps I was back with the E-team reserves, lying on the tennis courts and playing Snake on our

phones, having come to an accord with Mr Barnish where we would only pick up our rackets if another teacher walked by.

My father was unhappy but exploring club rugby was as much my idea as his. My closest friend on the UCS team was a boy called Will Orchard, a rugby fanatic who played for London Welsh on the weekend. At Monday training he regaled me with stories of stunning wins against Wasps and Saracens, and I felt that if I wanted to call myself a *proper* rugby player then UCS had taken me as far as it could.

My nearest rugby club was Finchley RFC, on the *other side* of the North Circular. I was nervous because I knew that you had to be a *tough guy* to play club rugby, but rugby was a private school endeavour and while I wasn't expecting a bunch of kids who didn't want to get their shorts dirty, I thought I was going to meet a lot of guys like Will: a little bigger, a little harder, and a lot less Jewish. However, when my father drove me through the gates for the first time, I wanted to grab the steering wheel and send us speeding home.

There were no freshly painted clubhouses with French windows and silver trays of cucumber sandwiches. No lime green pitches neatly arranged in rows where coaches were lining up tackle shields and mothers were asking "tea or coffee?" Just a hulking concrete terrace looming over a marsh where men were scattered in twos and threes, sipping cans of lager and smoking fags. I stayed five steps behind my father as we walked, trying to hide every time he asked a passer-by if they knew where Gareth was, until somebody replied, "short bloke, down the bottom field."

We descended the steps away from the grandstand and down to the reserve pitches where various matches were taking place amongst the junior age groups. My father pointed me in the direction of a toad-shaped man in a blue onesie and wished me luck. As I approached Gareth, I realised that he was the most frightening man I had ever met. His face was smashed into a pulp of scar tissue, leaving two imperceptible slits for eyes. He had a broken nose, cauliflower ears, and no more than five yellow teeth scattered across his mouth. My entire life had been a succession of trips to dentists and orthodontists, with regular seminars for hygienists on the intricacies of flossing. I'd endured braces, retainers, headgear, and my bathroom cabinet was a cornucopia of prescription mouth washes with an eighty-pound brush that instructed you on which sections of your mouth to clean and for how long. What had happened in Gareth's life that had left him with five yellow teeth?

"Huh?" I replied, as Gareth emitted an indecipherable growl in my direction for the second time.

"WHAT… POSITION… DO… YOU… PLAY?"

"Oh, right. I'm a prop."

Gareth raised what was left of his eyebrow and told me to go and warm up because I would be coming on in the second half.

Finchley were losing, but as I jogged up and down the touch line doing my plyometric stretches I had no doubt that they could give UCS a pounding. The game was moving at a pace I'd never encountered, and the Finchley backs moved the ball with dexterity while the forwards smashed boys off their feet as they tackled them. However, the differences between UCS and Finchley went beyond a matter of strength, speed, and skill. I was the only boy with long curls, whereas most of the Finchley players had either shaved their heads completely or left a lonely mound of hair on their crown. When the referee blew his whistle for half-time, a mousey looking kid who had overheard my conversation with Gareth approached me and asked, "oi mate, how come you don't speak cockney?" I scrambled for an answer until one of the larger Finchley boys shouted, "he's fucking posh! That's why!" The mousey boy then stepped backwards with an expression close to disgust.

"Oliver!" Gareth barked at the end of the break, "you're coming on for Jack."

I swapped my England shirt for Jack's red and white hooped Finchley jersey and ran onto the field with the rest of the boys to receive the kick-off. I was rarely nervous when I played rugby and always threw myself into the first tackle I could find with particular abandon, hoping to receive a knee in the face that would get my adrenaline pumping. The exception was the kick-off because I was haunted by the knowledge that I couldn't make a catch from five yards, let alone thirty, and whenever the opposition kicker sent the ball sailing into the air, time froze as I was crushed under the weight of hundreds of eyes, waiting to see where it would land. To circumvent this problem, I always stood on the far side of the ten-metre line, meaning that even if the kicker did decide to sacrifice field position and play it short, he ran the additional risk of putting the ball into touch if he tried to place it on top of me. Unfortunately, Jack had got his Finchley jersey stuck around his shoulders and by the time I got to the far side of the ten-metre line there was already a boy there, shouting, 'fuck off, I stand here!' This left me running around my own half, desperately searching for another place of safety until the opposition kicker saw my panic

and sent the ball soaring high above my head. At this point I shut my eyes, raised my arms high in the air, and hoped for the best.

I played *okay* for the rest of the game, but that didn't matter. When we trooped back to the changing rooms, I was barraged with 'we've got butterfingers on the team!' and 'why don't you fuck off back to Buckingham Palace!' Suddenly I was back to being a frightened Jewish boy again, and as I turned to Gareth for support, he shot me a glance to let me know that this was *my* problem and if I couldn't handle it, then Finchley wasn't for me.

I didn't have the heart to tell my father that our first foray into club rugby had been a disaster, and even if I had, I wasn't convinced that it would have prevented him from driving me through the gates for training the following Tuesday. Including our match on Sunday morning, I was taken to Finchley three times a week, and any hope that I might be able to win round my bullies as I had done at UCS quickly evaporated. I seemed to have spent my entire life on a different planet to the Finchley boys, and it was hard to believe that we all lived within a couple of miles of one another. I had never heard of their schools, and they had never heard of mine (how could anyone not know UCS?) and when I tried to explain where Hampstead was, I was met with blank faces.

I'd never had cause to reflect on my class before, and I became acutely embarrassed about showing up to training with the latest Under Armour shoulder pads and matching compression leggings while boys who were twice the player I was wore old football shorts and had to borrow pairs of boots. After practice, when everyone either took the bus or walked home, I climbed into my mother's solitary four-by-four waiting in the car park; even the smaller differences, like my father drinking coffee out of a Marks and Spencer thermos while the rest of the dads sipped the clubhouse tea from Styrofoam cups made me ashamed.

Besides bursting into laughter when I was made to repeat the word 'garage' for the tenth time, the abuse that the Finchley boys gave me was mixed with a genuine intrigue, and I wasn't sure what made me feel worse. When my father bought a Prius, everybody crowded around the car to listen to its electric engine silently crunch across the gravel, shouting, "it's the fucking Batmobile!" and whenever my dog was taken to our matches, there were always questions such as "that's like, a royal dog innit?" A part of my brain

yearned to say, “actually, Jasper is a Setter, and the queen owns Corgis,” but I knew that my best course of action was always to just *smile and shut the fuck up*.

The Finchley boys might not have known what Corgis were, but when it came to the experiences which *actually mattered*, they made me feel like I was seven years younger. I’d only just had my first kiss and they were already bragging about getting blowjobs in pub toilets. I knew that some of these stories were just changing room bravado, but I also knew that I would gladly trade a year of eating pizza and watching X-Factor with my friends from the UCS team for a single Saturday night with the Finchley boys. It was strange, because although I felt guilty about being a *posh cunt*, I was enormously envious of the Finchley boys, increasingly asking myself what the point of a big house and a top private school were if neither of these things made me happy.

By the time I joined Finchley, there were only a few games left in the rugby season and I barely featured in any of them. I knew that I was the best prop in the team, but Jack’s father was on the board of directors and taking his place was going to be an impossible challenge. Truthfully, I was glad because I had perfected the art of blending into the background, marching out of the changing rooms still covered in mud the second Gareth finished his post-match analysis and nodding my head when I needed to give an affirmative in case my accent reminded everyone that I was a *posh cunt*. As a result, the bullying gave way to disregard and I had no desire to stick my head above the parapet in case the Finchley boys decided to start kicking it again.

Finchley was ruining rugby for me, and I desperately wanted to quit and find another club or only play for UCS. My biggest obstacle was my father. He wanted to watch his son play sports at a high level; he didn’t know what it was like to be in a team where getting through training without being picked on was the only definition of victory you could manage. I never explicitly stated ‘I’m going to quit’ because I had only just won his respect and I knew how disappointed he would be if I dug my heels in and forced the issue. He felt that Finchley was a test, but that didn’t stop me from flopping into his car with the dejected expression that had got him to pull me out of Alith. My father was obviously conflicted, gripping the steering wheel as he watched me stare out of the window; thus, when the rugby season ended, I had every reason to hope that Finchley would be chalked onto our list of forgotten failures.

Chapter 3

The collapse of my extended family took place over the course of a decade, but it was still a shock to look up from my chicken soup on Shabbat and notice that a table which was once set for eighteen now only had five places. Ironically, my uncles provided the greatest reason for this break-up, even though they had taken the least responsibility for my upbringing. After a get-rich-quick scheme went awry, Peter was forced to take his family and flee to the middle of the Californian desert, where they lived off handouts from Victor. My mother and father were initially committed to flying over every year so I could see my Franceska, but it didn't take long for us to abandon these 'holidays' without the need for an explanation. The heat was unbearable, trapping us in the house for weeks during which we played poker with Peter, who would bluff every hand and announce that we were 'moving on' once he lost all of his chips. As for Jeremy, he became embroiled in a messy divorce with my aunt Juliet after the reality of his 'business trips' was discovered. Juliet and her children continued to live only a short drive away in Golders Green, but my aunt struggled to cope with the family gatherings which had been a part of her old life and weekly visits soon became monthly visits, until I was lucky to see Dominic once a year. However, our families era truly ended with the death of Victor.

Towards the end of his life, Victor had a list of cancers and we had already said goodbye to him on three separate occasions before the final farewell. His death felt like a mercy and the funeral was no way near as upsetting as five years spent watching this once commanding figure turn into a frail old man with sunken cheeks and dark eyes, picking at his food on Shabbat and mumbling incoherently before being carried upstairs by Valerie. Victor's final act was to stage a great escape from the hospital, and when I was told to go to his bedroom and speak to him for the last time, I reflected that we'd never really had a personal relationship as I stood by his grey body while he struggled for breath, stumbling through a few platitudes about how he had made me a 'better man'.

My father was probably a better patriarch than Victor and took over the family finances, making sure Valerie was moved to a flat in Hendon so she could be closer to us in East Finchley; however, the atmosphere had changed. My grandparents Peter and Patricia didn't join us at the Shabbat dinners at our house, partly because Patricia was in poor health and Peter had to stay home and take care of her. The main reason, however, was that, following the death of Victor, Peter seemed to have once again lost confidence in his Judaism and the connection between Gafsen and Mendoza was broken. Whereas I

might have viewed Victor's death as a mercy, my mother was overcome with grief. The religion which had previously underpinned our family values was now a source of unbearable pain and every festival was 'without Victor'. When we went to synagogue on a Saturday, it was only a matter of time before my father, my brother, and myself would hear my mother wailing from the other side of the congregation, which was our cue to express our apologies and quietly shuffle to the car.

My life at school had become more important than ever, but while I'd been grateful to gain any measure of acceptance through sport, towards the end of my first year at UCS I noticed a sense of dissatisfaction with my friends on the rugby team. I'd left Lyndhurst with an appetite for adventure and instead was forcing myself to feign interest in endless conversations about Alex Ferguson. The closest I ever came to sex, drugs and rock'n'roll was drinking WKD alcopops, listening to Coldplay, and going to parties where the girls stood ten feet away from the boys.

The Trendies (as the guys on the rugby team were known, due to their pastel Ralph Lauren polos and Lacoste trainers) were never *my people*, and their primary currency was an immaturity that was grating at the best of times. Bragging about our penis sizes and boasting about which female teachers wanted to fuck us seemed poor compensation for the fact that we were all petrified of women, and although I had been excited by the thrill of bullying boys from 'lesser' cliques, once the adrenaline faded, seeing their contorted faces after I had slammed them up against a locker reminded me that *I know how that feels*.

I'd already made one failed attempt to ingratiate myself with the Junkies (who disappeared behind the drama department at break times and returned with blood shot eyes) when I arrived at UCS. Everything about their clique just seemed *older*, as if they were going about the business of being adults while the rest of us were still shoving blocks of Lego up our noses. They rarely bothered with lunch, hanging out in the music rooms and jamming on the school's electric guitars, and when I saw them in Hampstead on Friday afternoons they were in the company of *actual women* with curves, smiles, and dyed blonde hair.

Fortunately, I had ample opportunity to engage with the Junkies before registration because half of them were in my form. None of them cared about my exploits on the rugby field but I was now a face and a name at UCS. I could no longer be bullied or wilfully ignored. It was rare for anybody to cross so brazenly from one clique to another but I was

still a new boy, which allowed me a certain latitude, and after I managed to suck down a Silk Cut without coughing, pretending I'd done it all before, the Junkies quietly agreed that Gaffy was 'on the level'.

The Junkies didn't slam people against lockers, but that wasn't out of deference. It was born from a belief that the other UCS boys weren't worth a single second of our time, and the culture of bullying within the Junkies was merciless compared to the relative camaraderie of the Trendies. We adhered to a strict hierarchy that dictated everything, from who smoked the top of the cigarette and who was left chewing on a filter to who was allowed to play the guitars and who was left shaking a maraca. Even our weekends differed, and while hanging out on Hampstead Heath was a general admission event, only the boys at the top of the group were 'allowed' to go and meet up with the girls on the high street.

It was easy to relax with the Junkies on an individual basis and the hierarchy no longer applied when we were in twos and threes, but as soon as we came together, groupthink took over. We all wore the same Joy Division t-shirts paired with a grey H&M hoodie and difference was the greatest social sin. If you were at the bottom of the hierarchy, blending-in wasn't as straightforward as adapting your clothing, and having a big nose, funny hair, or a strange way of speaking were sources of endless tyranny. Bullying acted as a system through which the boys at the top were able to reinforce their power, egging on the boys in the middle to pick on the boys at the bottom, and making the right people laugh was the easiest way to improve your standing in the group.

To a certain extent, we all had our characters to play. Zyad was the alpha, Alex was the player, Max was the stoner, George was the bohemian, Hal was the intellectual, Robbie was the comedian, Nat was the roadman, Josh was the fool, Ben was the snob, and Oliver was the geek. 'Gaffy', however, became a creature of exaggerated proportions. My personality shift was initially a way of moving to the middle of the hierarchy, inoculating myself from the bullying by being my own worst tormentor and making the voice I spoke with and the comments I made *even weirder*. However, I was soon stuck in an all-consuming role as 'the monster' who told the dirtiest jokes and made the most inappropriate comments imaginable in any given situation.

Being 'Gaffy' had severe limitations outside of UCS. When we did meet up with girls Zyad and Alex prodded me for one of my anal sex gags, leaving me smiling in silence

while the women in the room glanced nervously at this new boy sitting in the corner. That my jokes had a target was a reality I didn't want to consider, and my character was so extreme I knew that I'd receive nothing but disgust beyond our all-male bubble of privilege and casual misogyny. I'd much rather have been the player, or the bohemian, even the comedian, but becoming Gaffy wasn't without its own merits. My position on the Junkies roster was secured and at break time Zyad always poked his head around the door of my classroom and gestured two fingers towards his mouth. After a year of social climbing, I was finally part of the in-crowd, debating the differences between Marlboro and Camel with the sixth formers in the alley behind the drama department, and when we broke up for the summer, I was invited back to Max's for one of his fabled smoking sessions.

I'd spent my entire life suffering with a brain that ran at a thousand miles per hour, but that afternoon in Crouch End changed the game. One minute I was crammed onto the floor with the rest of the Junkies, filled with my usual anxieties about whether my position nearest the door denoted my status in the group, and the next I was lying spread-eagled on Max's bed, listening to Portishead wail on a pair of crackling speakers. All of my reservations about betraying my parents or destroying my life evaporated with those first few tokes and I was excited to discover a hobby that not only *felt great* but was also *fucking cool*.

When we broke up for the summer holidays, all I wanted to do was hang out with the Junkies and get high, and over the next three months I was largely successful in that goal. Max turned his attic into our private opium den which we nicknamed 'the womb', with a shoulder high ceiling, fairy lights, and a floor that was entirely made up of mattresses and pillows. Once inside, the hours blended into one another as we all rolled around in senseless laughter; my only fear was that at some stage, I would have to leave.

The frightened Jewish boy within me began to disappear and I was relieved to take my first steps into manhood. There were an abundance of old-school boozers in north London that didn't mind serving kids and so, during the day, we sat in the corner of beer gardens downing pints, sharing cigarettes, and embracing the collective camaraderie that came from embarking on this new chapter of our lives together. We welcomed the look of scorn from adults trying to calculate our age and smirked at the thought of the Trendies and their pizza parties as I staggered around Crouch End with blood red eyes and a snout pressed between my lips.

Broad shoulders weren't the only gift that had come with puberty, and at a time when our group was *obsessed* with weed and beer, I discovered that I was able to drink four or five pints while the rest of the Junkies struggled with two or three. I was equally proud when people would comment, "you never seem like you're drunk Gaffy," even as the beer garden was spinning out of control, and the plaudits I received for my hard drinking were quickly adopted into the Gaffy persona, as yet another pint of Kronenberg was slammed in front of me with cries of "the Gaf man loves a fucking drink!"

Gaffy wasn't just a man I was becoming comfortable with, he was a personality I was beginning to admire, but I was a long way off the finished article. The Junkies were really a subgroup of a burgeoning social collective made up of boys and girls from several north London schools, both private and state. There was practically a party every night, held either on Hampstead Heath or at a highly coveted 'free yard', often with well over a hundred people in attendance. These parties felt like the places I *needed* to be, where boys were able to become overnight legends whose exploits and antics were shared for weeks to come.

I knew that I was never going to be crowded with admirers, but as I approached the hordes of vodka swigging teenagers, I experienced complete paralysis compared to laughing and joking in the pub. I craved popularity but was overcome with the fear of saying or doing the wrong thing, joining conversations only to laugh and smile when appropriate. A part of me wanted to grab hold of somebody and shout, "I promise, I'm a really fun guy once you get to know me!" and by the time I grabbed my vomit covered jacket and took the morning bus home, I was torn between 'they're all a bunch of arseholes' and 'I'm a fucking loser'.

Alcohol was of little help, and while I experienced a small bump in confidence after two drinks, I was unable to stop myself progressing to three or four, at which point I sank into ugly ruminations. Weed was even worse, and although I was able to reach nirvana when I was smoking with the Junkies, a joint also had the potential to kick my anxiety into overdrive. If some of Max's friends from another school joined us in the womb, I immediately became aware of the position I was sitting in, contorting myself into weird shapes out of fear that my appearance was unflattering.

I was definitely growing up but at a rate that seemed infuriatingly slow, and London wasn't always kind to thirteen-year olds taking their first steps into the city. The police were far less of a concern than groups of older teenagers in dark tracksuits rounding street corners and approaching us with purpose. The guys who robbed us were always weirdos and I was practically grateful when having my phone nicked was just a physical assault followed by a quick getaway. Many insisted on mad games, such as the time when I was caught walking alone through Childs Hill by a couple of guys who made me rap for twenty minutes, filming me on their phones and correcting me when I got the name of their crew wrong before apologetically grabbing my wallet. I wasn't mugged nearly as often as my friends were, which I put down to being a *tough guy*, but we were all vulnerable, scattering like gazelles when our group was approached which only made us easier to pick off. I was always embarrassed by running away (the Finchley boys would *never* run) and these early tastes of London seemed to confirm my fear that private school kids were all cowards and that being a real man and a UCS boy were a contradiction in terms.

However, my biggest problem was my parents. I was caught smoking weed by my father when I had yet to work out the logistics of leading a double life and stepped into his car after a session at Max's still reeking of hash. When we got home, my father sat me down in the kitchen for 'a talk', which was a shock because our family avoided awkward conversations at all costs (a chat about 'the birds and the bees' had been a biology textbook placed on my pillow one night). He said that he wasn't angry and spoke about his troubles with weed at university, which I struggled to follow because I was really fucking high. After an eternity I was allowed to go to bed as long as I adhered to two conditions: firstly, I wasn't going to tell my mother because she wouldn't understand (and would completely lose her mind). Secondly, I had to promise never to smoke weed again.

At the time I was grateful to avoid a bollocking; however, as I continued to test the boundaries of my family, my parents felt more and more like jailers. My friends in the Junkies were allowed to wander in and out of their houses freely, not needing to explain absences of two or three days. At first, I thought this level of irresponsibility was shocking, but gradually I found myself wishing that my father could be more like Max's dad, who entered the womb with a tray of chicken kebabs "for your munchies lads!", and that my mother could be more like Zyad's mum, who smoked cigarettes with him in their kitchen while they chatted about the girls he was dating.

My phone was the only one which pinged every ten minutes, with messages asking: *'How are you? Where are you now? Are you still at Max's house? What time will you be home? Do you want me to make you dinner? Why are you not texting me back? Do you need me to come and get you? Are you in trouble? I'm really worried Oliver, text me back. Oliver, me and daddy are in the car and we're coming to get you.'* And every night ended with my friends in the Junkies watching in confusion while I made a series of panicked phone calls about how the bus was delayed or the taxi never arrived.

I'd always kept secrets from my parents due to a base reluctance to divulge the details of my social life, even when I was going to the cinema to watch Ocean's Eleven at Lyndhurst. However, the advent of drugs and parties turned me into two different people and I was forever afraid that my friends would discover 'Oliver' and my parents would find out about 'Gaffy'. Elaborate webs of lies needed to be spun to cover my tracks and I never left the house without carrying a change of clothes, extra-strength chewing gum, eye drops, and deodorant. Keeping track of these fictions was exhausting, but worse was my fear of telling my parents anything other than what I thought they wanted to hear.

Although the year nine summer holidays were transformative, I was grateful to see the back of them. A few of the Junkies including myself had started to leave the safety of the womb, buying high-grade skunk off a dodgy dealer called Dez and getting fucked out of our minds on Hampstead Heath. Skunk was like a different drug and I was excited by this next phase of experimentation, having grown frustrated by Zyad pontificating over the right amount of hash to put in a joint while I awaited a smoke cut short by cries of "send it here Gaffy!" However, our highs on the heath were marred by paranoia, ditching our drugs and breaking into a sprint every time Alex thought he heard the crunch of an approaching footstep, so returning to the regular rhythm of the school run was like being able to breathe again.

Year ten began with a two-week French exchange to Paris, where a large contingent of the Junkies joined me on what was surely going to be a fortnight of smoking Gauloises and trying to speak to French girls without my mother looming over me. We met our exchanges outside their school; however, my dreams of a European romance were scuppered when I was paired with a mousey looking boy called Jean. His social anxiety eclipsed even my own and I was annoyed to observe that the rest of Jean's schoolmates treated him with total indifference while Jean stood at the back of the group, using his feet to kick piles of twigs together.

After we all shook hands and smiled awkwardly, Mr Hawley announced that it was time to get settled and we departed with our exchanges to go back to our respective homes. It was clear that Jean wasn't going to bring me to any house parties, but I was confident in using my connections on the English side to benefit both of us and dreamed of turning Jean into an angry stoner by the trip's end, even though the language barrier limited us to basic greetings and our only interaction so far had been Jean asking "football?" before being crushed by my reply of "non".

Gradually, the pairs of exchanges turned and departed for neighbourhoods resembling my own, with detached houses on driveways surrounded by trees, until Jean and I were alone, walking quietly along a motorway, going down into an underpass, and arriving at a row of massive yellow tower blocks springing up out of a sea of concrete. Jean's mother greeted me at the door to their flat; she was a large woman in a dirty smock with charcoal hair pulled in a tight bun and a moustache which left me itching for the electric beard trimmer in my rucksack. Although her English was no better than Jean's, we muddled through with nods and smiles and sat down to a dinner of roast beef which definitely wasn't kosher and tasted awful, even though I left my plate sparkling.

Jean and I shared one of the two bedrooms, with a camp bed put up next to his own. He seemed keen to impress me with several books of football stickers, flicking through the shimmering pages and occasionally stopping at "Messi!" or "Ronaldo!" while I tried to appear as excited as he was. The next two weeks were obviously a bust, but Jean and I were developing a rapport and I was already planning his trip to London, imagining his face when I introduced him to high grade on the heath and free yards filled with girls vomiting vodka into rose bushes.

Unfortunately, my relationship with Jean's mother was descending into total war; it was as if God had observed me complaining about my own mother and now I was being punished accordingly. The only time I got to see my friends was outside the gates after school, but I would talk to them for no more than five minutes before Jean started glancing at his phone and shifting nervously. Finally, he would mutter to one of the French speakers, who translated that "Jean must go home now, and you must go with him". I hoped that this state of virtual of imprisonment might be relaxed on the weekend but Jean's mother barely allowed him beyond the threshold of their front door, relaxing the rules around television time and unlocking the board games cupboard by way of compensation.

I only had a few days of exchange to survive but was desperately homesick and there were text messages piling up on my phone: Alex was drinking wine at his exchange's house with some of her girlfriends, Max had managed to score some hash and was smoking in the park with George, Ben was at a bar in town and his exchange was taking him to an indie gig. I tried to rally Jean to my cause, but at the mention of defying his mother he smiled, shook his head, and returned to his stickers, so I confronted her alone. We screamed at one another for a good ten minutes, her in French and me in English, until I recognised that I was getting nowhere, and since walking out the door was a step too far, I retired meekly to my bedroom. I felt like an arsehole, particularly when Jean refused to look me in the eye, but by that stage I hated him for being so submissive and eternally grateful for the smallest charities his mother gave him.

The following morning I woke up with a knot in my stomach. The flat had shrunk to half of its original size and no matter how I shifted my body on the camp bed, there was no position which provided any measure of comfort. I tried listening to music and dozed in and out of consciousness but my body was becoming heavier and heavier, coupled with a strange premonition that something terrible was about to happen. The following fifteen minutes were a blur. One moment I was in the flat and the next I was staggering down the stair, tears running down my cheeks as I wondered if I was having a heart attack. By the time I regained lucidity, I was lying in the foetal position in the car park outside Jean's flat with Mr Hawley's hand resting on my shoulder as my breathing gradually returned to normal.

When I returned to London the following morning, my parents had a battery of tests waiting for me. Mr Hawley had described me as having 'some kind of fit', so I was made to lie down in roaring MRI machines and sit in dark rooms with electrodes on my forehead while blinding lights were flashed in my eyes. I was already drawing my own conclusions between my summer of drugs and what was quite clearly a panic attack, and part of me hoped for a brain tumour that would explain all of this away. However, nobody could find any physical problems, so I was sent to a psychiatrist, who easily diagnosed me with anxiety disorder.

I wasn't prescribed any medication but was instead enrolled as an outpatient in the Royal Free Hospital's child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), where I saw an elderly psychologist called Dr Berelowitz for an hour every Wednesday after school.

This wasn't my first stint in therapy, but my previous sessions were so long ago I had spent them sipping Ribena while playing Snakes and Ladders. I was hopeful that Dr Berelowitz would be able to provide a cure for the increase in chaos that had taken place since I'd become a teenager.

During my early sessions with Dr Berelowitz, I spoke at a mile a minute, cursing myself on the bus home if I'd forgotten to divulge any vital pieces of information which might aid in the building of a complex psychological profile. It was a relief to speak honestly with a person who wouldn't get me into trouble or think any less of me, and revelations of anger towards my parents and distress around my friends made me realise how much dissatisfaction I was bottling up inside. Dr Berelowitz rarely replied to any divulgence and mostly sat with his legs crossed, offering an occasional, 'and how does that make you feel?' I was a little frustrated because I came to therapy looking for answers, but I was confident that this was the beginning of a process and that in a few months' time Dr Berelowitz would rest his notepaper on the floor and say, 'okay Oliver, this is what you need to do'.

Needless to say, Jean cancelled his visit to London, which was just as well because my episode during the French exchange wasn't a one-off. Two weeks later, I was taking the bus home from school when I felt the same lead weight on my chest. I managed to make it off just in time to collapse in an alleyway in East Finchley, but a month later I wasn't so lucky and had a fit in the middle of the UCS games fields while I was playing football, with teachers and students rushing over to find me lying in the grass. The reason for my panic attack in France seemed obvious: I was homesick and trapped in a strange and hostile environment. By contrast, my subsequent episodes had very little rhyme or reason, and my mind now had the power to disable me without warning.

Dr Berelowitz wasn't concerned because after I confided that I smoked weed, he felt that my case was closed. All of our sessions now began with a lecture on the connections between cannabis and mental health until, eventually, I lied and told him that I'd quit drugs and never planned to use them again, if only to shut him up so we could get back to the 'real issues'. In truth, I had curtailed my using, mostly because I was back at school and I wasn't the only Junky who was feeling a bit shagged out after our summer binge. My friends were a little concerned about getting high with me again, offering an "is this okay Gaf?" that was more for their benefit than my own, but it was easy to separate the

Oliver who went to CAMHS from the Gaffy who got high with his mates and I was largely successful in hiding how frequent and debilitating my panic attacks really were.

I didn't live in total denial and was worried that I'd already broken my brain at the age of fourteen, leaving CAMHS and murmuring, "never again Oliver! Never again!" after one of Dr Berelowitz's cannabis lectures. However, it wasn't just my love of being high that made me betray my well-being as well as my parents and therapists who were investing time and emotional effort in my recovery. I'd just entered the adult world, my adventures were only beginning, and now I was being asked to take a step back and become a little kid again, causing me to conclude that this was my own life and I could fuck it up if I wanted to.

When I started having panic attacks, I toyed with the idea that mental illness made me *special* and *different*. However, going to CAMHS and sitting in the waiting room with children thrashing in their parents' arms and teenage girls dressed in black with a lattice of scars made me conclude that I was a normal guy who did normal stuff like going to the pub with his mates; I didn't want to be in the same category as *these people*.

My sessions with Dr Berelowitz quickly degenerated, especially after I started lying to him, which seemed to completely defeat the purpose of therapy. I grew annoyed by his lazy nods and half smiles, wondering why I should share my secrets with some out of touch old man. I was embarrassed the first time I fell asleep in Dr Berelowitz's office, leaping out of my chair and apologising profusely. The second time it happened I was less bothered and, once the rugby season started, would arrive in his office and exchange a brief 'I'm fine thanks' before placing my school bag on the floor as a pillow and nodding off while Dr Berelowitz put on some whale noises and did his reading, shaking me awake at the end of the hour.

Chapter 4

In the autumn, I dusted off my A-team tracksuit and returned to UCS rugby, larking about in training on Mondays and Wednesdays and taking the coach to various private schools to get thrashed on Saturday mornings. After a full year at UCS I was no longer a new boy and my status in the team was secure, participating in the concoction of ridiculous trick plays that inevitably resulted in a howl of anguish from Mr Cook when the opposing team stole the ball, ran down the field, and scored. Nobody particularly cared because we preferred to

think of ourselves as a group of mates having a kick-about in the park, and if we ever needed a confidence boost, we could always thrash the B-team on Monday morning. Unfortunately, the club season was fast approaching and, despite leaving the room every time my father mentioned the word 'Finchley', successive UCS defeats made it even clearer that I would be returning through those metal gates in a matter of days.

There was a degree of surprise that the *posh cunt* had decided to come back for another year, but over the summer most of the Finchley boys had forgotten I existed and treated me accordingly. Gareth continued to show zero interest in putting me in the team; however, I was still a 'substitute' and had to attend our games in my shorts and short sleeved Finchley jersey, jogging up and down the touchline in the rain. Furthermore, I experienced the overlap of school rugby and club rugby for the first time, with at least three hours of training every day of the week and competitive matches on Saturday and Sunday.

I didn't mind the UCS training because it was effectively a mess around with a rugby ball thrown in the mix, but when Gareth arrived at Finchley he was all business, shouting, "too many missed tackles on Saturday lads, fucking embarrassing," even if we had won. Afterwards, we ran twenty minutes of laps around the field while Gareth worked his way through a pot of tea and a packet of biscuits, and then we were straight into drills, standing inside a narrow corridor of cones and attempting to flatten someone charging at us with a ball in their arms, with lifts to hospital when boys were knocked unconscious.

Gareth was proudly 'old school', singling players out for humiliation and giving us the hairdryer treatment in the changing rooms every time we lost. I felt conflicted about the abuse because the Finchley boys were wild men and maybe a degree of fear was necessary for this five-foot-four Welshman to bring all thirty of us under his control. However, I struggled with the collective punishments, and while Mr Cook allowed me to gather the ball off the floor when I dropped a catch in UCS training, Gareth immediately roared, "fifty press-ups, you can thank Oliver!" at which point I would be surrounded by growls of "next time, I'm going to fucking kill you Ollie!" as the entire team dropped down into the mud.

Training at Finchley didn't start until seven thirty and Gareth would keep us as late as eleven o'clock. That hadn't mattered the previous year because I'd joined the team in late March, but as the days grew shorter and the nights grew colder, Finchley became a

true test of endurance. It was pitch black by the time we arrived and there were no floodlights on the reserve pitches where we trained, meaning players were darting in and out of the darkness, occasionally illuminated by the long shadows cast by the lorries on the North Circular. Before it was a rugby club, Finchley had been a landfill site and the drainage was non-existent, with puddles the size of cars that froze into sheets of ice when December came around.

When Gareth finally dismissed us, I was so tired I was in a kind of trance, flopping into my mother's car and devouring the pasta and meatballs left in the microwave before dragging myself up to bed. My entire body ached and screamed for more sleep when I was shaken awake for school the next morning and I was constantly falling asleep in lessons, now spending my lunch breaks snoring on the floor of the UCS basement instead of smoking behind the drama department with the Junkies. I did take a perverse pleasure in the knowledge that while the rest of my friends were at home watching television with their parents, I was scrambling around in the frozen mud, fighting through a world of knees and studs. However, I was questioning whether any of it was remotely enjoyable, and rugby was starting to feel like an all-consuming enterprise I couldn't quit for reasons I didn't understand.

Gareth saw his role at Finchley as going beyond the remit of a coach. There was fighting at all of our games, and while the entire team gladly charged into any altercation, the worst of the violence was always started by the same seven boys. It was common knowledge that the club was putting pressure on Gareth to suspend these 'troublemakers' because our year group was notoriously problematic. I would have quietly celebrated had he done so, not only because the fighting frightened me, but also because it seemed painfully unfair that I was being punished with fifty press-ups for dropping the ball in training whereas Ricky was being defended for running off the substitutes bench to break an opposing player's nose.

However, many of the boys at Finchley came from difficult backgrounds, especially the troublemakers. I never saw their parents at our games, and when Brendan's dad did show up, he spent the entire match screaming, "not good enough Brendan! Not fucking good enough!" even though Brendan was arguably our best player. Gareth was like a father figure to these boys and was enormously invested in their development, picking them up for training in his van, buying them shorts and boots, and taking them out to a local café to make sure they all got a decent meal.

I experienced nothing like the personal struggles of Gareth's troublemakers, yet towards the new year Gareth began to take a similar shine to me. This was partly down to his recognition that I was a gifted rugby player and that if certain aspects of my game could be improved, I would be an invaluable asset to the team. However, Gareth's impression of me seemed to go beyond a question of ability. As a *posh cunt*, Gareth had expected me to take one look at the Finchley changing rooms, with showers flooded in urine and wires hanging from the ceiling, and run a mile. There were plenty of rugby clubs in London, full of other *posh cunts*, but I had chosen to stay and withstand the bullying along with Gareth's torrents of abuse. I'd stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the rest of the Finchley boys in the freezing rain and never shied away from a tackle, never complained that I was injured, and never asked to go home early.

There was no need for Gareth to buy me lunch or source me kit, but with increasing frequency he left the team in the hands of his assistant coaches so he could take me up to the scrummaging machine for one-on-one tutelage. Gareth had been a prop himself and spent hours teaching me the tricks of the trade, barking encouragement as I wrestled him backwards with increasing ease. We never discussed personal matters and my part in our conversations consisted of nodding dutifully while Gareth gave further instructions; even when we returned to training with the other boys, my name was always on Gareth's lips, shouting, "Brendan! Oliver was right behind you! Look out for him next time".

Taking Jack's position as the first-choice prop was an obstacle Gareth had yet to help me overcome, purely because of Jack's father, but he divided the games equally between us with Jack playing the first half and myself playing the second. Now that I was actually in the team, I started to become familiar with the Finchley boys and most of them also committed my name to memory. Vinny was our captain, a shaven-headed, light-skinned man's man with forearm tattoos who could easily pass for being in his early thirties. He was a leader in every sense, getting us pumped up for games with legendary team talks and standing above us like a sergeant when the action started, making sure the tackles were being made and bollocking anybody who was trying to hide. If there was any beef between the guys, Vinny was on hand to squash it immediately, and while the other Finchley boys ignored me when I walked through the metal gates four times a week, Vinny always stopped what he was doing to put his arm around my shoulder and say, "safe Ollie, you good bruv?" He was always sure to do this in front of the rest of the Finchley boys,

and I knew that, rather than an attempt at friendship, Vinny was sending out a message: if anybody fucked with me, they would answer to him.

The other big personalities were the seven troublemakers: Brendan, Reece, Rory, Ricky, Ed, Jimmy, and Benny. They varied in ability from Brendan who was a professional athlete in waiting to Ricky who was just a thug in a jersey, but all had been at the club for years and were the heart and soul of our team. I was still a little wary of the troublemakers because the bullying I endured when I arrived at Finchley had been orchestrated by them, but as I became a mainstay at the club a mutual respect began to form. When an opposition flanker planted an upper-cut in my stomach during the scrum Reece always responded with a quick left-hook of his own, and if violence was a language the Finchley boys were now speaking it on my behalf.

Then there were the quieter boys like Ray, William, Patrick, and Sandy, who didn't feel the need to brag about the FHM models they had fucked at the weekend but laughed along all the same. They were my natural bed-fellows and tended to come from more stable environments, with my father and Patrick and Sandy's fathers becoming friends on the touchline and sharing the duties of driving the three of us to and from our games. I sensed that the quieter boys shared my concerns surrounding the hazing of new boys and the casual violence, and despite their endorsing smiles in the changing room, they just wanted to play rugby without the added gang-warfare. Still, nobody complained, partly because it wouldn't do us any good but mostly because we were all Finchley boys and our unity was beyond doubt.

My addition to the team wasn't the only factor in Finchley's development and over the start of the year we became a truly formidable side. The success of our forwards was mostly down to the fact that we were just a bit bigger and a lot tougher than our opponents, and I was powerful enough to win most of our scrums and rucks while Benny and Vinny were able to smash through multiple tackles and carry the ball over the gain line. However, our real weapons were our backs, Brendan, Sandy, and Ray, who were already spending some of their training sessions with Finchley's first fifteen, and while we forwards liked to think of ourselves as the hard men, our real job was to secure the ball so somebody could pass it to Brendan, who danced down the field with Sandy and Ray for the score.

It was a bizarre reversal where every Saturday I lost forty-nil playing for UCS while the following morning I won thirty-nil playing for Finchley with the result that,

gradually, my perception of both teams began to change. The UCS players were still my friends in a manner that the Finchley boys never would be, but I quietly started to loathe my games for the school team. We were a bad joke and other schools would strut into our clubhouse like it was their own, smiling like toads as we politely stepped aside to let them through. They would then trot out onto our games fields like they were participating in an exhibition match, and their confidence was routinely justified, breaking through our defence and scoring in the opening few minutes.

It no longer seemed to matter that I played well, because even after I had snapped a couple of vertebrae winning a scrum against a much larger opponent, I would look up to see our scrum half pass the ball straight back to the opposition, thinking *if you did that at Finchley, you'd be a dead man*. The attendance at the A-team games only served to make our humiliation public, and all of our parents, teachers, and girlfriends stood watching as the opposition walked over the try line again and again, high-fiving one another and shouting "hey! Let's give the ball to Rob next time! He hasn't scored one yet!" After the game, instead of giving us the bollocking we richly deserved, Mr Cook made some pathetic comment along the lines of "great effort today lads, a few things to work on in training, but we can hold our heads high," while we could hear the noise of the opposition laughing at us through the changing room wall.

I would have continued to accept our defeats if they happened purely because we didn't have a Brendan or a Ray in the team, but my growing anger towards UCS went beyond a question of skill. We had no fight, no balls, and I was now embarrassed to put my special tracksuit on. The UCS captain, a blonde haired, blue eyed boy called Johnny Mills epitomised our problems. His use of obscenities stretched to "dammit guys!" and the pre-match routine he led us on consisted of elaborate stretches closer to advanced yoga poses, which I always suspected was just an excuse for Johnny to show off his flexibility to the girls on the touch line.

He couldn't have been a starker contrast to Vinny, who gathered us all in a huddle, blatantly ignoring the cries of the referee who had been trying to start the game for the last ten minutes. "You see them over there," Vinny snarled, taking his position in the centre of the huddle and pointing over our heads towards the opposition. "They are fucking your girlfriends" (I didn't have a girlfriend, but I was still pissed). "They are taking your women and fucking them up the arse," Vinny said, grabbing an imaginary pair of hips and pumping his pelvis, "and you're gonna let them get away with that?" The huddle tightened

around me and I could hear a low growl along with the grinding of teeth. “I don’t want you to beat them. I want you to hurt them. I want you to fuck them up. You’re fucking lions and I want you to kill. What do I want boys?”

“Kill! Kill! Kill!” the huddle roared in unison, descending into an orgy of headbutts and punches before we ran out to take our positions on the field. The opposition were watching us with stunned faces, trying to figure out what they had done to make us so angry, and although I felt a little sorry for them, I could also feel the hatred pumping through my veins. After the game there was no laughter through the changing room walls because the opposition usually fled to their coach as quickly as possible, disappearing up the A406 to escape us lunatics.

I was never as comfortable with the violence as I wanted to be and when I watched Reece get sent off for stamping on a boy’s rib cage, I was mostly glad that he was on my side instead of theirs, but I loved the maverick element to our Finchley team, which was completely out of place in a sport that was patronisingly middle class and stuffy. Gareth was happy to let us disregard any notion of sportsmanship as long as it didn’t interfere with our performance, refusing to rein us in when we went to other clubs, and one half of the team flirted with the opposition’s girlfriends on the touch line while the other half snuck into the changing rooms, returning with sports bags filled with mobile phones.

Nobody was entirely sure what our position in the London youth league was, but one afternoon Gareth announced that if we beat Wasps in our final game of the season, we would be promoted to the first division instead of them. This was a massive deal for the club because Finchley was small fry, with most of its teams languishing in the fourth division or lower. However, we were all aware of the enormity of the task because Wasps were an internationally recognised name in professional rugby and were the only team to beat us comfortably when they had come to Finchley earlier in the season.

On the whole, the Finchley boys were careful to pretend that they didn’t give a shit about anything, but in the weeks leading up to the Wasps game a new kind of intensity surrounded our training sessions. Nobody fucked about, not even Reece, and dropped catches or missed tackles were met with howls of anguish. The club let us train on the top pitch, relegating the first team to the marshes by the A406 and it was clear that everybody wanted this, and wanted it badly.

When Gareth told me that I was unlikely to play a part against Wasps, I was neither surprised nor upset. All of the Finchley directors were going to be in attendance, which meant that Jack was always going to get the nod over me. Furthermore, because so much was invested in the Wasps game in terms of emotion and endeavour, I knew that if we lost, the fall-out would be calamitous. There was sure to be an inquisition, and if I fucked up in an obvious way, like dropping the kick-off, my position as an outsider and relative newcomer made me a likely scapegoat.

By half-time, we were losing, but not by much. The biggest surprise was Brendan, who had misplaced a pass for a Wasps try and shanked two straightforward penalty kicks wide of the posts. All of our best moves were reliant on Brendan and if he couldn't pull himself together then we were fucked, but he wasn't the only one struggling. Jack was getting annihilated in the scrum and he had been wheeled, collapsed, and lost the ball on almost every put in. As I watched from the touch line, I had been content that at least I had no part to play in this disaster, but as I studied the opposition prop, I became obsessed with the singular thought that 'you can take him'.

The Finchley boys were already full of recriminations, shouting at one another and narrowly avoiding a scuffle as they trudged off the pitch. We all gathered around Gareth, waiting for one of his "you are a fucking disgrace!" team talks, but instead he was a picture of calm, only looking up from the crumpled sheet of notepaper he had spent the last half hour scribbling on to hand us a bag of haphazardly sliced oranges, which we had never seen before and would never see again. "Fuck off! These are for players only!" Rory shouted, slapping me away as I attempted to reach for my orange before cramming a fourth slice into his mouth.

There were only minutes left before the restart when Gareth finally put down his notepaper, which out of the corner of my eye looked like the doodles of a paranoid schizophrenic. "Brendan," Gareth snapped, "you're moving out to the centre". Ray was replacing him at fly half, Sandy was swapping wings with Rory, and "Oliver…where is Oliver?" Gareth asked, as I politely shoved my way to the front of the circle. "You're coming on for Jack". Jack was furious and immediately ran to his father who looked sufficiently embarrassed, but Gareth wasn't perturbed and gave my buttocks a squeeze as I ran onto the pitch with the rest of the boys for kick off.

All hope that I could drift through the game anonymously disappeared within minutes when a Wasps player knocked the ball on for a Finchley scrum, and although I'd managed to recover my reputation since *butterfingers*, I could feel the eyes of every Finchley boy burning into the back of my neck. The Wasps prop was one of the ugliest individuals I had ever encountered, with black hair matted across his forehead and a face full of dozens of pimples ready to burst. I quickly realised that Jack wasn't struggling for nothing and during our first engagement I was shoved backwards hard and fast, barely managing to keep the ball by bending my knees and digging my studs into the turf. The second engagement was an even contest, but by the third, I had the measure of my man.

There were only seconds remaining on the referee's watch and a single try separated Finchley from defeat and victory. We had been attacking the Wasps goal line for the last five minutes, running the ball forwards again and again while they held us back with desperate tackles. The spectators of both teams were roaring on the touch line and I was certain that somebody would manage to break through when Benny juggled a bad pass for a knock on, to a collective groan from everybody in a red and white hooped jersey. Now all Wasps had to do was defend their own scrum on the five-metre line, hoof the ball out of play, and the game was over.

Nobody was expecting a miracle, but as our scrum bound together I almost jumped when I felt Reece's hands rubbing my shoulders and he whispered, "come on Oliver, you got this". The referee stood between the two packs, giving the order to "crouch…touch…engage!" and I smashed into the Wasps prop, angling my shoulders up into his chest and pushing with every ounce of strength I had, not relenting even after I watched the ball disappear beneath my feet. We all went tumbling into the earth and I raised my head just in time to see Brendan receive the ball from Vinny and slip one tackle, spin through a second, and then, with the arms of a third Wasps player wrapped around his knees, dive over the goal line for the winning try.

Brendan was the hero, as always, but everybody knew that our victory was as much my responsibility as his and I'd barely picked myself up off the ground when Reece smiled and punched me in the stomach, Vinny crushed me in a bear hug, Jack rushed over to shake my hand, and Rory put me in a headlock, which was his way of apologising for our altercation over the oranges. Even Brendan gave me a rare high-five once he had finished soaking up the glory, and by the time the Wasps players were back in their changing

rooms, we were already on our fourth lap around their field as Vinny led us in a chant of "Who are we?" "Finchley!" "Who are we?" "Finchley!" "Who are we?" "Finchley!"

Although the rugby season was over, Gareth told us that he wanted the team to continue to come in for training three times a week in preparation for the first division. I wasn't too bothered about sacrificing my summer holidays because rugby was my life now, and my only real plans were getting high in Golders Hill Park while scoffing down aluminium containers of cold noodles and sweet and sour chicken. However, I wasn't the only one who didn't want the season to end, and even though the rest of the Finchley boys had girlfriends to fuck and parties to crash, nobody missed a session.

Gareth said it was too dangerous to play contact rugby, and while it was true that the muddy pitches had hardened into a concrete crust, that hadn't stopped him in the past and it didn't betray the fact that Gareth was treating us differently. There was a real buzz around the team but instead of cracking down on the laughter Gareth was the first to take the mick, showing us his toothless grin when he told Reece that all of his FHM girls never left the magazine under his bed. We knew that we were only getting this extra leeway because it was the off-season, but as Gareth applauded while we spun the ball back and, forth in the July sun, I sensed that he was proud of what he had accomplished and it gave him untold joy to watch the men that we were turning into.

Because there was no contact allowed, which included scrummaging, our work was exclusively on passing drills. Only a couple of months earlier, lining up to receive the ball had made me physically sick, but after the Wasps game I had a new confidence in my abilities. By the end of the summer I was sprinting down the field with the wind in my hair, cutting inside and screaming "here Brendan!" as I took his pass, before flicking in onto Ray, who spun the ball out to Sandy who ran in for the score. It was doubtful that Brendan would ever choose to pass the ball to me instead of Ray, but I relished the fantasy and, as I turned fifteen, began to quietly nurture ambitions of becoming a serious rugby player.

During our final session of training, Gareth hosted an awards ceremony where I won 'most improved', collecting a trophy of a metal stick man diving beneath some posts while all of the Finchley boys whooped and cheered. Afterwards everybody went to the local for a pint, but my father was waiting in his car and, although I was welcome to socialise with the Finchley boys outside of the club, nobody was ever quite sure how to

ask. When I got home, my new trophy took pride of place on the mantlepiece next to my creative writing awards from Lyndhurst, and although I was a little nervous about moving up to the first division, I was the only one because, as far as the Finchley boys were concerned, we were the best rugby team in the world.

Chapter 5

We lost our first three games in the first division, which was a horrible crash back to earth following the optimism of our summer training. I didn't mind the defeats because losing for Finchley was nothing like losing for UCS. We were now playing against the strongest amateur sides in the country, filled with boys vying for positions in professional rugby academies. The score lines were never embarrassing and I was now Finchley's first choice prop, playing the full eighty minutes and going toe-to-toe against truly phenomenal opposition.

However, some of the Finchley boys viewed our new reality differently and, although nobody would dare suggest it, I suspected that more than a few of them wished they were back in the second division. They missed hammering teams by thirty points and doing stupid dances on the try line. Boys like Benny, who were used to crashing through tackles, were now being floored with ease but, more than anything, the Finchley boys missed the simple satisfaction of winning.

The changing rooms, which had all too recently had a party atmosphere, were deathly silent and after our dressing down from Gareth everybody quietly put their trackies on and filtered out one by one. These early defeats garnered a sense that rugby just wasn't *fun* anymore and the toll of playing in the first division was physical as much as emotional. Getting tackled was like being hit by an oncoming train and during our third game, play was halted by the referee due to the sound of a high-pitched scream. I turned around to see Ed lying on the ground with tears pouring down his face and his shin bone clearly protruding from his leg.

Ed was supposed to be one of our tough guys, and not long after his injury I noticed that Vinny was becoming less and less vocal during our matches. I was a little annoyed because we needed our sergeant now more than ever yet, instead of leading the charge, Vinny was lingering on the ground and jogging slowly around the back of the team to avoid getting involved. We all put his hesitation down to one too many bottles of Grey

Goose with whatever model Vinny was shagging that week, but against Saracens I grabbed the ball out of the back of a ruck and prepared to spin it out to Vinny when I saw genuine fear in his eyes.

Before long, Vinny was turning up to training in his jeans and muttering something about his ankle. Nobody questioned the mysterious injury because Vinny's word was golden, but as the weeks passed Vinny took on more of a coaching role and became evasive, even angry, if anybody asked when he was coming back. We had no need for another coach and, although I admired Vinny, I smarted at the hypocrisy of watching him scream at players for missing their tackles. The weather turned, and while Vinny continued to come to training three times a week, he was no longer willing to stand in the freezing rain and bark orders with Gareth. Instead, he gave everyone a brief greeting and walked straight into the Finchley Club house to drink warm Carling with the regulars, occasionally trotting outside to slur encouragement while he smoked his cigarette. Unfortunately, there was no obvious candidate to fill the void that had been left by our captain and our leader.

Attendance began to dwindle amongst some of our oldest serving players and Gareth was furious, telling us time and time again that anybody who missed a training session during the week would not be considered for selection on Sunday morning. This policy was deeply divisive because it was never applied to indispensable players like Brendan or the troublemakers Gareth was supposedly mentoring; it was a punishment solely aimed at boys such as myself and Patrick, who were more loyal to the club than many during this difficult period, but who the team could ultimately function without.

The relationship between Gareth and the Finchley boys deteriorated further around December because, despite his new ultimatum, Gareth himself stopped showing up to training. We were all stunned because I hadn't seen Gareth miss a session in almost three years, even when he was unwell and stood on the touchline wrapped in a red Wales rugby scarf, blowing his nose into a soaked hankie. The official line was that Gareth was 'on holiday', which would have been insulting if it were true because we were in the middle of the season, but at least it allowed us to crack jokes about Gareth sunbathing in Benidorm and laughing at the rest of us stuck in the dark by the A406.

Gareth's replacement was Keith, a South African giant who wore his short-sleeved Springbok jersey in all weathers. Keith was our assistant coach and had been at the club since I arrived, usually running drills with the forwards while Gareth worked with the

backs. I was eternally grateful to Gareth for building me up as a player and giving me my shot in the team, but on a personal level I was a lot more fond of Keith. He never indulged in the abusive behaviour and mind games Gareth liked to play and was conscious of respecting his boundaries as a coach.

There had always been something unhinged about Gareth's relationship with the Finchley boys, including a few glaring oddities such as his insistence on getting changed with us, sometimes giving his post-match briefings completely naked. I was more immune to these quasi-sexual displays than most because at UCS, when a middle-aged man felt you up, that was just code for *job well done*. However, I also realised that I didn't receive anything like the personal attention boys like Reece got, and although I couldn't imagine Gareth doing anything illegal, there had always been a strange atmosphere around the troublemakers he was supposedly mentoring.

Nobody had fucked around when Keith was the assistant coach and, despite his flaws, Gareth's absence was clearly a disaster for the side. Training sessions were a joke, even worse than UCS, and some of the Finchley boys were arriving an hour late, if they bothered to show up at all. We then stood around chatting, ignoring the cones and tackle shields Keith had carefully set for us, and there was nothing he could say or do to bring us under his control. If Keith tried to be kind, the Finchley boys just told him to fuck off; if he tried shouting, everybody burst into laughter and sat down on the ground, turning him into an even more ridiculous figure. Gareth's troublemakers were the worst offenders, apologising to Keith and pretending to comply with training just so they could hoof the ball into the bushes once his hopes were up. I hated my complicity in their behaviour, imagining that somewhere in South Africa there was a green rugby field bathed in sunlight, full of obedient boys deserving of Keith's genuinely good coaching.

Our lack of discipline in training soon bled into our matches and the on-field violence became extreme. Against London Welsh, Rory had engaged in a seemingly minor spat with his opposite number but waited until London Welsh formed the customary tunnel of applause at the end of the game before turning around, grabbing the boy by the collar, and knocking his front teeth out with a headbutt. Gareth's troublemakers had always engaged in a little GBH here and some minor drug dealing there, but if changing room gossip was to be believed, boys like Reece and Rory were now engaged in serious criminal activity and, although I had fantasised about going for a pint with them over the summer, I couldn't escape the fact that I was genuinely terrified about what they might do next. I

knew that the notion that I was their teammate who won the scrum against Wasps was probably counting for less and less.

The following three games were abandoned because of fighting, but I wasn't the only one who was unhappy over the direction the team was taking. There was particular anger towards boys like Ricky, who never came to training and were only interested in going to matches just so they could run onto the field and swing a punch. By spring, the Finchley squad was divided into two camps, one of which consisted of Gareth's troublemakers along with a few of the regulars like Jack and Benny. As far as they were concerned, the team belonged to them and if they wanted to ruin training by fucking around, or get us suspended by starting fights, then it was their right to do so. In the other camp were boys like Sandy, Patrick, and Ray who just wanted to play rugby and I also found it hard to accept that nine hours of training a week were being squandered by a single act of mindless violence.

A year earlier, nobody would have given a shit about what Sandy, Patrick and Ray wanted because although they were important players, they were peripheral personalities. However, word had spread of our promotion to the first division and over the winter new boys had been coming into the club, all intent on playing rugby at a high level. The majority had taken one look at the chaos that was Finchley and left, but more than a few stayed, swelling the ranks of Sandy's rebellion. This was at a time when attendance amongst Finchley's old guard was dwindling and Gareth's troublemakers were increasingly threatened with the prospect of losing control of the team.

Training sessions were now divided, with the two cliques conducting separate drills on opposite sides of the field because they refused to pass to one another until, one evening, the inevitable went down. Reece confronted Sandy, who bravely refused to back down, and soon the squad was engaged in an all-out brawl, with first team players running off the top field to separate us. I stayed on the side-lines because although Sandy had never called me a *posh cunt* or slapped me in the face, I had spent so long earning the respect of Brendan and Rory that taking sides against them was difficult to countenance. If Vinny had been present there might have been a chance at reconciliation, but nobody had seen him in weeks and, despite a spiky handshake between Sandy and Reece, it was clear that nothing had been resolved.

After training that evening, I reflected that the brawl was more evidence that the tide had turned in favour of the boys who just wanted to play rugby, but the worst of the violence was yet to come because our next game was against Harlow. The real reason the fighting at our matches never truly escalated had nothing to do with our restraint. When the Finchley boys started throwing punches, the opposition were too naïve to respond, pushing and shoving as they got smacked around with ease. However, Harlow was the only team in the league that had a reputation equal to our own and they wouldn't take a beating so lightly. A temporary truce was called between the two Finchley cliques and an intensity re-entered our training but, unlike the Wasps game, there was no onus on winning. This was a territorial contest of north London versus Essex.

The weather was unseasonably warm for March and when we arrived up at Harlow, even the air I was breathing didn't feel quite right. One look at the Harlow boys told me that they had also spent the last week talking about how they were going to fuck these London cunts up and I felt a panic attack coming along. However, none of the Finchley boys knew about my disorder, and attempting to drop-out minutes before our heavyweight clash would have been viewed as an act of extreme cowardice, so I sucked my anxiety up and told myself that it was only a game of rugby and that I had managed to survive this far.

There were only minor skirmishes in the opening ten minutes and Finchley were playing well, allowing me to believe that maybe our big beef was just a lot of hype. I didn't see the flashpoint take place because I was on the floor after a tackle, but I got up in time to see Brendan punching a boy in the face and the same boy's father running across the field and slamming into Brendan. Soon Brendan's dad joined the fray and within minutes I was witnessing a battlefield, full of boys and men kicking the shit out of one another.

The referee blew his whistle for match abandoned, but that hardly mattered now. Keith was trying to restrain Rory, who turned around and hit him in the face, Reece and Ricky were chasing after one of the opposition coaches, and a group of Harlow boys were ignoring Patrick's pleas for mercy as they pummelled him into dirt. The sounds of chaos were quickly drowned out by the noise of sirens, and soon police officers were running onto the field from multiple directions, wrestling fathers and sons into handcuffs. I turned to my dad and we both ran back towards the car, taking Sandy and Ray with us. Despite being a careful driver, my father didn't take his foot off the accelerator until we reached the safety of the M25, at which point we breathed a collective sigh of relief. My father lent

his phone to Sandy and Ray so they could call their parents and tell them they were safe, but apart from those strained conversations, we spent the trip back to Finchley in silence, with me and my father occasionally turning to one another and wondering *do we really want to be a part of this?*

Gareth returned after the Harlow game with no fanfare and zero explanation as to where he had been. His first act was to expel Reece, Rory, and Ricky because as far as the club was concerned our team had just turned from an embarrassment to a liability. There were already talks about suspending us from the first division and the Finchley hierarchy was threatening to disband our year group altogether unless they saw significant changes.

The battle of Harlow was a low-point for everyone, but it was also a last hurrah for Gareth's troublemakers. Those who weren't expelled quit the team, and only a considerably subdued Brendan remained. Ray was made captain, with Sandy as vice-captain, and the old clique that had once controlled the side was broken into pieces. There were no further disciplinary issues for the remainder of the season, and with Gareth back in charge, training resumed its focus to the point where we even managed to pull a few wins together over the spring.

Finchley now resembled the well-ordered rugby team I had sought to join three years earlier and with the expulsion of the troublemakers I was a veteran of the side, with new boys coming in and seeking to gain *my* approval. However, something was missing because there were no big personalities in the dressing room anymore and no characters for the side to rally around. Finchley's heart and soul had been torn out, and it made me sad to realise that after all the effort I had poured in to winning their respect, I would never see Reece, Rory, or Ricky again.

I mourned the loss of the old Finchley team, but not for long because I soon had serious problems on my hands. Gareth was a different man upon his return, far less vocal, and often missed training. I sensed that he was toying with whether he really wanted to coach us or not, and whereas he had once singled me out as his protégé, he was now ignoring me completely. At first, I attributed his behaviour towards me as part of his bad attitude, but over the coming weeks Gareth's approach to the other boys warmed and I started to recognise that he was genuinely angry with me. I was desperate to discover the cause and made repeated attempts to reach out to Gareth, but my mere presence seemed to

repulse him and any conversation ended with a growl that he was busy or with him barking me back into formation.

Gareth was just one obstacle to overcome as my career as a rugby player was in jeopardy for reasons that were even further beyond my control. As a prop, I was highly skilled but no amount of technical ability could overcome the position's need for size and strength. I'd had my major growth spurt when I was thirteen and, even then, was a little too small to play prop. Three years later I'd barely grown an inch and, judging by the size of the family, this was unlikely to change. I looked like a child compared to some of the props in the first division and although I was still disproportionately powerful, throughout the season I'd become increasingly reliant on Gareth's not-strictly-legal tricks of the trade merely to hold my own.

I fantasised about moving out to flanker, but prop was the only position I could conceivably play as I wasn't fast enough to be anywhere else on the field. Although I'd spent the last three years working on the other areas of my game, once you took away my scrummaging, I was a below average player. One Sunday, we were at home to Harpenden and the prop I came up against was nothing short of a monster. Every week the opposition props seemed to be growing by another inch, but I wasn't worried because when the referee blew his whistle for the first scrum of the game, this monster looked like he had never played rugby before. Both teams had to wait five minutes for the referee to help the monster get his bindings right, and I silently scoffed that I was practically a professional compared to this idiot. However, when we came together, my legs were pedalling backwards at a mile a minute and I soon found myself lying in the dirt, staring up at the monster with the same hopeless expression I had seen in the eyes of dozens of boys since my journey into rugby began.

The Finchley boys were stunned. This had never happened before and at the next scrum they were all slapping my back, shouting "come on Oliver! You got this!" but the result was exactly the same. I tried cheating and even though this made no difference the referee still took me to one side, screaming at me as if I was the arsehole who had never played rugby before. I wanted to tell him that it wasn't my fault, I just wasn't strong enough, and every time he blew his whistle for another scrum I felt sick. By the end of the game I had lost every single put-in, and as I staggered off the field, I wanted the ground to swallow me whole.

If Gareth needed another reason to cut me from the team, he didn't have to wait for long. The Finchley squad was unrecognisable compared to a year ago because superior players had arrived and replaced the old boys in almost every position. There were always new faces at training and I sank to my knees in thanks when they announced their position as lock, number eight, or flanker. Until Danny joined us. Danny was bigger, stronger, and faster than I was and his ball-handling skills were excellent. When we lined up for drills, Danny was able to spin, side-step, and crash through tackles, playing deft passes between Brendan and Ray and operating with a confidence that would always be beyond me. Worse still, Danny came from one of the local estates and within two weeks he had forged the kind of relationship with Gareth and the Finchley boys that continued to elude me after three years at the club. When Danny announced that he was a prop, I knew that I was fucked, but I didn't believe that I was more deserving of a place in the team when he was clearly the superior player. My real problem was Jack, who would always get game time because of his father. Consequently, I was demoted from first choice prop to third choice at a stroke, and despite training three nights a week and spending my Sundays travelling up and down the M25, I would be lucky to get ten minutes on the field.

My final game for Finchley was on a wet, cold April morning. Danny was starting, which was no longer a surprise, and I stood with the rest of the substitutes watching the match. By half-time we had secured a thirty-point lead and I was excited because it was an unwritten rule that such a margin allowed the second-string players to get a run around. Gareth told Danny that he was coming off for Jack and I jogged up and down the touchline, warming up for what was now a fairly rare appearance in a red and white hooped jersey. However, with only ten minutes left to play, Gareth still hadn't called my name. I was concerned that he might have forgotten about me, so I broke into sprints and did some jumping jacks, anything to demonstrate that I was ready to come on. With five minutes to go I was getting desperate and considered doing something I'd never done before. I swallowed my pride and walked up to Gareth, about to ask him to put me on when, just as I opened my mouth, he flashed me a look that said, 'don't you fucking dare!'

I could no longer control myself and, as I returned to the substitutes area, I sat down in the mud and started crying. They were big, loud tears and I could feel the cold water from the ground soaking through my shorts. The dozens of Finchley players and parents standing on the touchline were stunned, but their silence quickly turned into murmurs, then snickers, so I buried my head further between my knees, unable to witness my reputation being torn to shreds. Eventually I felt two hands hook beneath my armpits

and hoist me to my feet and I turned around to see my father, wrapping my shoulders in his jacket. I was unable to stop my sobs as he held onto my body and we walked slowly around the pitches and away from rugby forever. By the metal gates, we passed Brendan's dad along with a few of the other fathers who had obviously been getting pissed at the local and were staggering back to witness the end of the game.

"What's his problem?" they snorted when they saw my tears, laughing to one another.

"Nothing," my father replied.

Epilogue

"Let me guess…I'm fine" I tell the doctor, trying to smile as I clutch my stomach.

"The X-ray has ruled out a pneumothorax, but you've got a broken rib and we think you've lacerated your liver. We won't know for certain until you've had a CT scan. How is your breathing?"

"Better."

"Have they given you anything for the pain?"

"A couple of codeine."

"Did they help?"

"Not really."

"A nurse is going to move you to resus. We'll put a line in and get you on something stronger. Do you have any questions?"

"I wasn't hit that hard…is it this rib?"

"No, the other side."

"When am I having my scan?"

"Right now. Sorry for the wait…there was a mix up."

"Don't worry, this isn't my first time with the NHS."

The young doctor pretends he doesn't hate my joke and exits the ward, leaving me bent over in a chair with my jacket wrapped around my naked shoulders. I've spent the last five hours plotting my return home, shuffling around the cubicle to demonstrate some kind of wellness, but now I adjust to the reality that I'm stuck here for the foreseeable future. It's actually a relief, because until the young doctor arrived, I was the pussy who had to have an ambulance called to the gym because he got winded. Now, I get to leap back into

the ring like a fucking hero, pretending that I'm not terrified of the next heavy blow to my body.

I replay the round-and-a-half of sparring in my head, still hearing the *wap wap wap* of Wiktor's gloves slamming into my abdomen as I failed to manoeuvre around his reach advantage. I'm angry that my guard was too high, and angry that I was lunging forward in an attempt to land impossible combinations, but I wasn't lying when I told the doctor that I'd been hit with worse. Though there is one shot that keeps coming to mind. A piston-like punch under my rib cage that produced a sickening bump to my liver, but it wasn't followed by that painful surge of electricity, and it didn't send my knees to the canvas. There was just a slow fire, spreading from a strange location.

In between the rounds my chest tightened so I turned my back to Wiktor, embarrassed that I was in the early stages of a panic attack, and when the bell rang again I went into survival mode, firing jabs off the back foot and pedalling along the ropes. Wiktor started letting his hands go and my eyes were darting towards the clock, but as it became harder to breathe my legs stiffened, my gloves began to drop, and with over a minute left on the round I swallowed my pride and waved Wiktor away from me.

"You need air," Wiktor announced when he realised that I'd lost my ability to speak, and I kept my back straight as we walked across the gym floor, hoping to hide my condition from the coaches. The cold night was an improvement on the suffocating heat of the gym and I was swallowing as much oxygen as I could, but while my breathing returned to near normal, the fire spreading through my body was only getting worse, and after I'd staggered up and down the car park for twenty minutes in the freezing rain, I ignored Wiktor's instructions of "come on Ollie, keep moving!" Stumbling back into the gym and collapsing on top of a running machine.

"What happened?" Damian, the young ex-professional who was leading the class asked.

"He says he can't breathe," Wiktor replied.

"I don't need an ambulance," I choked, as the other coaches saw trouble and abandoned the training session to loom over me.

"He looks like he's getting better," Mandy, the gym's secretary offered, starting a hushed conference which Walter – the senior coach on the night – won by arguing "we can control what happens to him here. We can't control what happens to him when he leaves."

"Trust me, you don't want to take any risks with the stuff," Damian said, crouching beside me while an ambulance was being called.

“This doesn’t feel right,” I winced, shaking my head.

“You’re not even the first one who’s gone to hospital tonight,” Mandy said as she held the phone to her ear, reminding me that when I arrived, there was a man sitting in the office with a face that was covered in blood.

“Is this yours?” Wiktor asked, holding my water bottle as he hurried around the ring, packing my scattered gloves and head guard into my gym bag.

“I’m sorry,” I croaked.

“You’re all good man,” Wiktor replied, squeezing my shoulder.

“Your name is Oliver Gafsen, date of birth nineteenth of May nineteen-ninety-two?” Mandy asked, acting as intermediary between myself and the emergency call handlers.

“Yes.”

“Do you have a cough?”

“No.”

“Do you have a fever?”

“No.”

“Have you been to Denmark in the last two weeks?”

After the young doctor leaves a nurse arrives with a cannula. She tourniquets my bicep and searches for a vein, positioning the needle above the crook in my arm. I prefer my cannula’s in my hand or my forearm, because they don’t send the infusion pumps beeping in the middle of the night, even if they are more painful to insert. However, my main concern is the nurse, who is clearly going to miss the target, and although I’ve been clean off heroin for several years, I still have the compulsion to brush her aside and spike my own vein.

“You’ve got too many tattoos!” The nurse exclaims.

“What about that one?” I offer, pointing to one of the old go-to veins on my forearm.

My body gives me a hit of endorphins when the needle pierces my skin, followed by a brief despair when the rush of drugs fails to materialise. After I’m cannulated a porter arrives and I’m glad I didn’t attempt the journey home, because I need the help of two nurses to clamber into the wheelchair. My body is deteriorating, and the temperature of the hospital plummets causing me to shake violently. Lacking a mirror I look down at my hands, which are the colour of wax with concerning shades of blue, and I realise that I might be in trouble. I’ve already discarded my sweat soaked t-shirt, and my only other

items of clothing are my boxing boots, my gym shorts, and my Columbia jacket, so a nurse brings me a stack of blankets, and when we arrive in resus I'm shuddering inside a hastily assembled cocoon.

"What's this?" I ask, when one of the resus nurses arrives with a syringe.

"Morphine, for your pain," the nurse responds attaching the syringe to my cannula.

It's an improvement on the codeine, but it's no way near enough, and I need to stay totally still with my head between my knees to keep the pain at a tolerable level. The CT scan takes an hour to materialise and I spend most of that time lost in hallucinations about Diego Maradona, which is ominous considering he died a few days ago. Resus is empty, but I can hear the nurse talking about a potential roommate on the phone outside the ward.

"Suicide apparently," the nurse says, "with a Stanley knife…no, the cuts are everywhere…no, it's not just his wrists, it's all down his arms too…"

I'm expecting the arrival of a sad old alcoholic with floppy trainers, silently willing his body into the beyond, but a seventeen-year-old boy is wheeled in with a grin on his face. There is something familiar about the kid, because while I never had a pink mohawk, the Slipknot t-shirt and the Doc Martens could have been taken out of my teenage wardrobe. What's worse is his smile, because I remember that smile. It's the same smile I had ten years ago, lying in A&E after another overdose. It's a smile that says *don't worry about me because I don't give a shit if I'm hit by a bus tomorrow*. I feel sorry for the kid, until I remember that I'm here too, and I'm angry because despite spending the last decade 'doing the right things', I can't escape the sense that I've now come full circle.

"What's happening?" My mother asks, after I pick up my phone for our call.

"Well everything's fine…but I've broken a rib and lacerated my liver."

"I'm so sorry…how are you feeling?" My mother asks, reminding me that in moments of genuine crisis she is not the hysterical Jewish woman I love but the calm, English mother I need.

"I feel fine. They're taking me for a scan so we should know more then."

"Do you need anything?"

"I'm fine for now," I reply, feeling guilty because my parents are about to have another sleepless night because of their eldest son.

I wonder if I can ring anybody else to keep myself distracted, but calling a friend from hospital at one in the morning feels melodramatic. The coaches asked me to keep them updated, but since none of them could be bothered to accompany me in the

ambulance, I decide that they can get fucked. The fever starts to take hold, and Diego's giant head calls me to join him in heaven as the pain spreads down towards my groin. A nurse arrives to see to the kid and as he sits up I get a view of his arms, which are covered with thick, crimson lines. The nurse has a stapler, and as she begins the *punch punch punch* of metal thwacking into flesh, the kid grabs his phone and snaps pictures of the carnage. I'm already nauseous, and I want to tell the kid to lie down and chill the fuck out. Fortunately, the porter arrives, and he helps me escape this grim scene by wheeling me off for my scan.

There are two patients in front of me when I arrive at radiology, and I exchange a nervous glance with both of them before I look down at my phone and go back to messaging Shane. My battery is about to die and I should be saving the power to update my parents, but trying to control my shakes for long enough to punch in a WhatsApp message is the only thing keeping me sane right now. Shane isn't an old friend, but every few years I meet a man who has some unknown role to play in my life, and his latest message is a video of an Asian transexual fucking him in the arse.

Shane: This one is really fun she's got a friend.

Shane: We could both go and see them at their weird little fucking flat.

Shane: Flat is weird as fuck but they basically get hnh all the time and constantly fucking in there.

I was only introduced to Shane in the morning, which feels like a fucking lifetime ago, on one of those Grindr hook-up's where every instinct was telling me that this was a bad idea. I woke up at about eleven, and I went through my routine of checking for any overnight messages on Hinge, Bumble and Tinder before I finally went on the grid. Amongst the usual detritus of middle-aged men begging for this and that, there was a message from Jas, a Thai transexual I'd fucked in a high-rise off the Edgware Road a couple of weeks earlier. She was with Shane at his flat in Holborn and they were looking for a top to come over and join them.

I asked for pictures, and my first problem was that I didn't really go for guys like Shane. He looked well-built almost to the point of being squat, with a thick beard and hard eyes. My second problem was that they were both on tina, and since it was early I could only assume that they'd been getting on it all night, and I'd show up to find two sweaty gear heads in a darkened room full of empty bottles and rolled up bank notes. I lay in bed masturbating and scrolling through the grid, hoping that my desire would diminish or I'd

find a better offer. I showered and shaved but I was still thirsty, so I told Jas that I was on my way, recognising that this was a moment of addiction, and if the traffic was okay I would be home inside of an hour.

When I arrived at Holborn, Shane was waiting on the corner by a pub outside his block of flats. During my fight through the roadworks and attempted short cuts that ended with enforcement cameras and one way streets, I told myself that pictures could be deceptive, hoping that Shane might even be camp in the flesh, but the opposite proved to be the case, and Shane was the kind of man whose presence made me feel small.

"Jas tells me you're a boxer," Shane said, greeting me with a Brummie accent and a firm handshake.

"Yeah," I replied.

"You in the pro's?"

"No, just the amateurs."

"How many fights have you had?"

"Two," I lied, remembering that I had told Jas that I was a carded fighter, because after six years of concussions and broken noses, I felt an increasing need to distinguish myself from the Crouch End mother's who showed up for their boxercise class on a Friday afternoon.

"I was ABA champion back in twenty ten," Shane said.

"Do you still fight?"

"I had to stop in my early twenties, detached retina. The doctors said I'd go blind if I kept going."

"What about training?" I asked, noticing that under his loose fitting tracksuit, Shane had a body with serious stopping power.

"Home workouts mostly. I still go down to my old gym and move around with the prospects whenever I'm back in Birmingham."

"You should come train at my gym sometime."

"I might take you up on that," Shane said, buzzing us through a private gate, and leading me towards a row of new builds that told me Shane made more than a good living.

The curtains were closed as predicted, but Shane's flat was surprisingly clean, and I deduced that this was probably a session that had started abominably early rather than those final, desperate chapters of an all-nighter. We entered the living room where bisexual pornography was playing on the television, and I greeted Jas who was sat on the sofa busily messaging on her phone.

“What do you fancy?” Shane said, as we sat down and Jas pulled out a baggie of green pills in the shape of the Barcelona FC crest.

“I’m fine,” I replied.

“You sure? These pills are fucking strong,” Shane said, scratching his head in a manner that suggested that drugs were one area of expertise where I had the advantage.

“I’ve got shit to do today.”

“There’s a bit of coke if you prefer to take it easy?”

“I’m cool.”

“Can I at least get you a beer?”

“Thanks, but I’m driving.”

I knew that I was being a kill-joy and I felt sorry for Shane and Jas, who exchanged an anxious look when they realised that they were going to be judged by the company of sobriety. Once upon a time, I would have left my car to get a ticket and messaged my father with some bollocks as to why I wasn’t making the meeting to discuss the collapsing roof on one of our flats in Eastbourne. However, my drug addiction had lost all remnants of lustre, and I was in no mood to face the gram of cocaine I needed to climb over that initial hump of despair, followed by at least one sleepless night and a week of shuffling around my flat questioning the details of my life.

“How about some water?” Jas asked, offering me one of the glasses on the table.

“There’s tina in it,” Shane interrupted, confirming my golden rule of *never drink the water*.

Shane’s phone rang, and I was startled when he answered in fluent Mandarin. “Sorry about this guys,” Shane said, offering us a hand of apology and taking a seat at the dining room table, where a lockdown workstation of three computer screens had been assembled. “You crack on without me, I’ll be able to take my lunch break in about an hour,” Shane said, and not wanting to attempt a conversation, Jas and I started kissing, before I pulled my tracksuit bottoms down my thighs after the minimum polite length of the time.

Shane: It’s on for tomorrow son

Shane: She’s keen

Shane: Talking to her about when she’s free now

Shane: Friday evening?

As well as our meeting with the transexuals, Shane has organised a threesome with a girl called Klara for the upcoming evening. I wonder if it will be possible to have sex in the amount of pain I'm in. As long as Klara stays completely still and I move very slowly, it might just be manageable, although that will be more than a let down after the sadomasochistic orgy she's been promised. Shane sends me photo's of Klara's body with his name scrawled across her breasts in lipstick, and I'm glad her face has been cropped out, because I still can't decide if we're participants in Klara's sexual liberation, or if Klara is being bartered between two arseholes who treat women like trash.

Me: What's she into?

Shane: Everything

Shane: Just wouldn't mention bi and Grindr

Shane: Say we met at a boxing gym

Me: Guessing we're keeping away from each others cocks?

Shane: Yah probably although I'm going to tell her it's a cuckold thing and see how she does

Shane: You could take it one step further and say shall I make him suck dick

"Oliver Gafsen?" The CT technician says, gesturing the porter to wheel me into the vast room where the scanner resides.

I rattle through the safety questions with the technician on the mutual understanding that it's late and this is not my first time inside this machine. The technician returns to her office behind a viewing window, but she can't begin the imaging, because although the porter has managed to grab me under the arms and heave my body onto the plastic bench, all I can do once I'm up there is crunch up in the foetal position moaning with pain.

"You need to lie flat Oliver," the technician says, communicating with me through a microphone.

I clench my teeth and roll my body upright with my head between my legs, and using my hands I slowly shuffle my torso backwards until I'm in a seated position. From there I begin my slow descent, but as soon as I pass the ninety degree angle there is a sharp explosion from within my stomach. It's a level of pain I've never experienced before and I tell myself that this is just a matter of courage, but after several attempts at lying flat on my back I'm forced to accept that my body is simply unable to follow my instructions.

"I'm sorry, I can't," I groan, hoping there is some special, upright CT scanner around the corner that can accommodate my needs.

“So what do you want to do?” The technician asks, sounding tired.

“I don’t know,” I reply, prompting a stand-off.

“If you don’t have the scan you have to go back,” the technician replies, leaving her office and towering over me with her arms crossed.

“I’m really sorry,” I reply, angry that I’ve been made to apologise.

The porter wheels me back to resus and I’m relieved to see that the kid has chilled the fuck out, softly singing to the music on his phone. The kid has a portable charger with him and when I ask him to hand it to me I feel a pang of sympathy, because the charger is brown with the kid’s dried blood. In return I offer him my tobacco, because he’s been searching his pockets for cigarettes since he arrived, and as the exchange is made there is a moment of solidarity which we both desperately needed.

“You need this scan Oliver. There is no other way,” the young doctor says, appearing more upset than annoyed as he sweeps into resus.

“I can’t lie down.”

“The scan takes five minutes, can you manage five minutes?”

“I’ll try,” I reply, remembering the amputation scene from *Master and Commander* and wondering if I can have a piece of wood to stick in my mouth.

“We’re going to up your morphine and start you on paracetamol,” the young doctor says, rushing off to put out the next fire.

The resus nurse flushes my cannula and adds paracetamol to the antibiotics and saline already hanging above my head. Then she hits me with the morphine, but instead of questioning the dosage I need to grip the arms of the wheelchair to stop myself from falling onto the floor. My head starts nodding, and a smile creeps across my face because I feel like I’ve very sneakily taken heroin again. At my request the young doctor accompanies me to hold my hand for the second attempt at the scan, but his presence proves to be unnecessary because I’m able to lie on my back with relative ease, and as the iodine dye is pumped through my body and the machine whirls around me, I almost manage to get a couple of minutes of sleep.

When I’m returned to resus, the kid has disappeared. I tell the nurses that he was going for a cigarette, but that was half-an-hour ago and the chances of the kid returning seem slim. There is a moment of concern from the nurses as they call around the hospital asking if anyone has seen a boy with a pink mohawk, but the manhunt doesn’t last long because a bloke who is having a brain haemorrhage gets wheeled in. I don’t like the idea of

the kid going up to suicide bridge to finish the job, so I tell myself that he's probably gone to meet a mate for a drink and a smoke, and I imagine the sickening moment the kid is going to have in the morning when he wakes up and looks down at his arms.

It's now four o'clock in the morning, and although the pain continues to twist my stomach the morphine has done is work, because my shakes have stopped and I haven't seen Diego's giant head in hours. I even manage to get to my feet and beach myself on the rubber bed beside me, where I'm able to worry about things other than pain, like how I'm desperate for a shower, and a change of clothes, and a pair of headphones so I can block out the sounds of the hospital with TalkSport. I'm about to wave down a nurses and ask for one of those bags with sachets of shampoo and a plastic comb, when the young doctor returns with the swagger of a man whose seeing his last patient before heading home.

"Oliver."

"Hello."

"You had a distal pancreatectomy in 2019?"

"Yes, I had an insulinoma that was removed laparoscopically," I reply, although the young doctor is no way near as impressed with my medical jargon as I am.

"After the surgery, there was a cyst that was being monitored by the surgical team at Acton Hospital, is that correct?"

"Yes, I went in for a scan a few months ago."

"That cyst has burst."

"So it's not my liver?"

"No, but the cyst is full of acid and that acid is burning through your body. There's already damage to your liver and your kidneys but we're mainly concerned about your intestines. There should be a layer of fat protecting them but that's been completely burnt off."

"What happens now?"

"You're being handed over to the surgical team. They're having a meeting about you now. It shouldn't be too much longer."

"Okay."

"You can save your questions for the surgeons, they know a lot more than I do."

"Sure."

"Goodbye Oliver," the young doctor says, cracking a joke that makes one of the resus nurses laugh as he disappears through the open doors.

I barely have time to process this news when I get hit with another massive shot of morphine which leaves my head against my shoulder and one of my arms dangling off the edge of bed. A lacerated liver was a lot more heroic than a burst cyst, and I was enjoying the prospect of a new war wound instead of this old demon that refuses to fucking die. After her fifteenth back surgery, one of my friends told me that 'surgery begets more surgery' and I wonder if I'm on the road to sharing her fate. Stuck in an endless cycle of morphine and misery, watching more years of my life tick by from underneath a duvet with the promise of a fix-all procedure always around the corner.

I want to spend more time feeling sorry for myself, but I can't because I'm not here because of some pernicious mutation slowly growing inside of me. I'm here because of violence. I'm here because I've once again put my body in harms way, and I feel like crying as I picture my organs bursting and breaking under a bombardment of punches. Boxing was supposed to be some kind of solution, even though I never really knew what the problem was, and as I look down at my threadbare boots I wonder who the fuck I'm trying to be. The idea of getting back into the ring after this feels like insanity, but I tell myself that this is not the time to be worrying about my future as a fighter, because the surgeon has arrived wearing a face you would use to tell someone that they have thirty seconds to live.

He grabs the curtain of my cubicle and makes sure that we are completely obscured from the other patients in resus. The gears of the NHS are now moving at pace, and I reflect that this is not necessarily a good thing. The surgeon has an accent, possibly Turkish, and he repeats what the young doctor has just told me in detail, and although my condition is a lot more grave than initially suspected, I'm grateful that I'm being dealt with by someone who hasn't got one eye on the end of their shift.

"We have three choices," the surgeon says, "the first choice is we wait. You will stay in resus for the next few days under observation, and if your condition is stable we will move you up onto the ward. If you improve we will discharge you, and once you are strong enough you will go back to Acton and they will remove your cyst with an endoscopy. The second choice is we cut a hole in your stomach, and use a drain to remove the fluid from your abdomen. There is a risk of infection but this is still a good choice. The third choice is emergency surgery. We will wash your organs with water, and remove any organs that have been damaged. This will be very dangerous. Emergency surgery is always dangerous because we do not know what we are doing until we have opened you, and we

have no time to prepare."

"I like the first two choices," I reply.

"There is going to be another meeting about you in half-an-hour. It's difficult because what is happening affects many different organs, so we need to speak to five different departments and it is very early in the morning."

"If you decided to do the surgery, when will I have it?"

"You will have the surgery as soon as our meeting is over."

"Do you think I need the surgery?" I reply, causing the surgeon to exhale with uncertainty.

"Right now I am looking at you and I am thinking that this man does not need emergency surgery. If you were sweating and shaking then I would say that we do not have a choice," the surgeon says, making me thank Christ that he wasn't here two hours ago, "but I need you to understand that if we do this surgery, it is very dangerous."

"Okay."

"No Oliver, I need you to understand what I am telling you."

"Sure."

"It is very dangerous. The risk is very high."

"I understand," I reply, wishing the surgeon would use a bit of traditional English understatement instead of hammering *you're going to die* over and over again.

"Do you have any questions?"

"Where will you cut me?" I ask, and the surgeon takes a pen out of his pocket and points from my sternum down to my groin.

"Is there anything else?"

"No," I reply, wondering whether he will let me keep my boxing boots on during the operation, because they might help and I have a thing about dying with my boots on.

The surgeon leaves for the meeting and I decide that I need a second opinion, consulting Dr Google by typing in 'ruptured pancreatic cyst'. The first result reads 'the rupture of a pancreatic pseudocyst to the peritoneal cavity is a dangerous complication leading to severe peritonitis and septic conditions. It requires emergent surgical exploration that is often of great technical difficulty with important morbidity and mortality'. Those last four words go down like a bucket of cold sick, so I put my phone by my side and try and make some kind of mental preparation.

I think about my family, until I realise that there isn't much point because my family won't know that I've been thinking about them, and neither will I if I'm obliterated

into particles of dust. Instead I think about morphine, and the irony of getting clean only to spend the final hours of my life on opiates. I've spent years self-flagellating for all of the things I did while I was using, certain that it was evidence of some unspeakable evil inside of me. However, seeing the kid, taking morphine again, and my relative calm when I should be freaking out, makes me realise that I wasn't cutting myself enough slack for the fact that I was just a fucked-up seventeen-year-old, using a drug that numbs any real emotional response, and that feels like a pretty decent note to end my life on.

"How are you feeling?" The surgeon asks when he returns from the meeting.

"I feel fine," I reply.

"So we have decided to postpone the surgery, but this does not mean that the surgery will not happen. We will monitor you and if your condition changes we will have to operate."

"What about the second choice?" I ask, warming to the idea of a giant needle sucking all of the pain out of my stomach.

"The problem is that we do not know you Oliver. This is a very complicated case, and we have to check all of our decisions with Acton Hospital. They know you at Acton Hospital, and they have better departments for dealing with these kinds of situations. It is too dangerous to transfer you now, but it will be better for everyone if you continue your treatment at Acton."

"Okay," I reply, annoyed that the surgeon seems happy to pass the buck, and I want to tell him that it was the arseholes at Acton who spent months telling me that I didn't have a tumour, and it was the arseholes at Acton who fucked up my surgery and left me with half a pancreas, and it was the arseholes at Acton who said that it was safe to fight while I was carrying a fragile ball of corrosive acid in my stomach.

A nurse hooks me up to an oxygen mask and sits in a chair beside me, looking at the readings on the machines that are attached to my body by a colourful array of wires. I think that they must be keeping me in resus because the ICU is full of people dying of covid, which is upsetting because resus only has those shitty rubber beds that don't have any pillows. Fortunately, the nurse hits me with another massive dose of morphine before I can get too worked up about my bedding, and I doze into that opioid space which is somewhere between asleep and awake. I no longer have the energy to worry about my mortality, so I drift between junky thoughts, wondering when painkillers were invented and reflecting that serious injuries must have been an absolute bitch for most of human history, although cavemen didn't have to worry about pancreatectomys, just broken bones from fighting with dinosaurs.

“Where are you babes?” The man with the brain haemorrhage shouts.

“Your girlfriend is at home, she is very worried about you,” a nurse replies.

“I need to get home and see my babes!”

“You’ve had a brain haemorrhage, if you go home you will die.”

“Let me go home babes!”

“If you go home you will die.”

“Please babes, why won’t you let me go home?”

“I’m not your girlfriend,” the nurse says.

The man with the brain haemorrhage is staggering up and down the ward in his Stone Island puffer jacket, and I’m satisfied to learn that he cracked his skull in a pub fight. A couple of burly security men arrive in resus but Mr Brain Haemorrhage doesn’t take any notice of them, trying to find the exit which is right in front of him. There are two doctors and three nurses trying to persuade Mr Brain Haemorrhage to calm down, but his mind is stuck on some kind of loop, and every time a new member of staff makes a breakthrough and convinces him to sit quietly in his chair, Mr Brain Haemorrhage leaps to his feet, whips his jacket on and starts shouting “I need to go home! I need to see my babes!”

This noisy nightmare continues for days and Mr Brain Haemorrhage is no better in the evenings, shouting in his bed so none of us can get any sleep. I’m desperate for one of the doctors to turn around and say “fine, fuck off then!” imagining Mrs Brain Haemorrhage’s horror when Mr Brain Haemorrhage stumbles through their front door screaming “I need to get home and see my babes!” My parents aren’t allowed to visit because of the pandemic, but they drop off a bag with some headphones so I can listen to TalkSport, and I find myself growing increasingly concerned with Tottenham’s backline in the upcoming north London derby as I’m transferred up onto the ward.