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Dead Air

Iain Banks

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Extract

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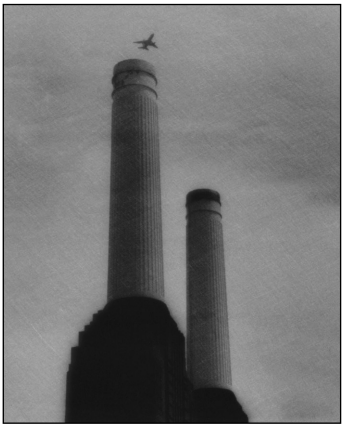
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One

‘B’ IS FOR APPLE



'You're breaking up.'

'—orry?'

'Never mind.'

'—at?'

'See you later.' I folded the phone.

This was three weeks before the stuff with the Clout club and Raine (sorry; the stuff with the Clout club and 'Raine') and the taxi and the road under the railway bridge and the window and the nose-biffing incident and basically the whole grisly West-to-East-End night experience when I realised some bastard or bastards unknown seriously wanted to harm me, or even – and this was according to their own threats – kill me.

All of which actually happened not far from here (here where we're starting; here where we're picking up our story precisely because it was like the start and the end of something, a time when everyone knew exactly where they were), all of it probably within sight, if not a stone's throw, of this raised *here*. Maybe; there's no going back to check because the place where we're starting's not there any more.

Whatever; I associate what happened in one place with

what happened in the other, with things beginning and finishing and – like the first tile in one of those impressive but irredeemably geeky record-breaking domino-falling displays that people stage in sports halls, where one tiny event leads to a whole toppling, fanning, branching cascade of tiny events, which happen so fast and so together they become one big event – with just stuff generally being *set in train*, being pinged from a rest state into restless, reckless, spreading, escalating motion.

'Who was that?' Jo joined me at the parapet.

'No idea,' I lied. 'Didn't recognise the number.'

She pushed a short glass into my hand. There was ice in the whisky and an apple squatting on top of the glass like a fat red-green backside on a crystal toilet. I looked over my shades at her.

She extracted a strip of celery from her Bloody Mary and clinked my glass with hers. 'You should eat.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Yeah. Precisely.'

Jo was small with very thick black hair – cut short – and very thin white skin – variously pierced. She had a wide, rock-star's mouth, which was sort of fitting as she did PR for the Ice House record label. Today she was looking vaguely Drowned World-era Madonna-ish, with black tights, a short tartan skirt and an old leather jacket over an artfully ripped T-shirt. People, not all Americans, had been known to call her cute and feisty, though not normally twice. She had a temper, which was why I automatically lied about the phone call even though I had no reason to. Well, almost no reason.

I hoisted the apple from the glass and took a bite. It looked shiny and great but tasted of nothing much. Jo was probably right that I ought to eat something. Breakfast had been some orange juice and a couple of lines of coke each. I did very little of that stuff these days, but I had this theory that the last time

you want to get coked up is late at night when you just make your body stay up way beyond the time it wants to and you therefore stand a good chance of missing the next day; snort during the hours of daylight instead and sort of slide off into alcohol as the evening descends, so maintaining something remotely like the body's usual rhythms.

As a result we hadn't eaten much of the wedding brunch at all and probably should force ourselves to eat a little, just to keep things on an even keel. On the other hand the apple was pretty unappetising. I put it down on the chest-high brick parapet. It wobbled and started to roll towards the drop. I caught it and steadied it before it could fall the hundred or so feet to the pitted asphalt of the abandoned car park beneath. Which was not, in fact, totally abandoned; my pal Ed had left his gleaming new yellow Porsche at one end, near the gates. Everybody else had parked in the almost unnaturally quiet and empty street on the other side of the old factory.

Kulwinder and Faye had lived here in the not-yet fashionable bit of London's East End north of Canary Wharf for a couple of years, always knowing that the place was likely to be demolished at any time. The red-brick building was over a century old. It had originally made stuff with lead; mostly lead soldiers and lead shot (which apparently needed a big tall tower to drop little spits of molten lead down into a big water pool). Hence the height of the place; eight tall floors, mostly full of artists' studios for the last dozen years or so.

Kulwinder and Faye had leased half the top floor and turned it into a big New York style loft; spare, echoing and vast. It was as white as an art gallery and it didn't really have many readily identifiable rooms; instead it had what stage people would call spaces. Mainly one big space, full of minimalism, but very expensive and artfully arranged minimalism.

However, some developer had finally got their planning permission and so the place was getting knocked down in a week

or two. Kul and Faye had already bought a place in Shoreditch. Buying seemed to encourage the need for further commitment so they'd got married this morning and Jo and I were two of the fifty or so guests invited to the wedding (I couldn't make it; show to do) and the subsequent feast back at the loft. Not, like I say, that we'd eaten much.

I frowned and dug into my glass to hook out the ice, dropping the glistening blocks on the wide brick parapet.

Jo shrugged. 'That's the way it came, hon,' she said.

I sipped cold whisky and looked out towards the unseen river. The roof terrace faced south and east, producing shadowed views beneath the scattered clouds floating over the towers of Canary Wharf and the unending cluttered flatness of Essex. A cool wind chilled my wet fingers.

I didn't like it when Jo said 'hon'. Thought it sounded like an affectation. She said 'daunce' sometimes, too, when she meant 'dance'. She'd grown up in a posh bit of Manchester but she sounded like she was from somewhere between Manhattan and Mayfair.

I looked at the slowly melting ice cubes puddling on the brickwork and wondered if there were similar little things about me that were starting to annoy her.

I flicked the lozenges of ice overboard, down to the cratered asphalt of the car park.

'Ken; Jo. How you two doing?' Kulwinder joined us.

'Fine, Kul,' I told him. He was wearing a cool black suit with a white shirt and Nehru collar. Skin as rich and glistening as dark honey; big liquid eyes, currently shielded by some silver-framed Oakleys. Kulwinder was a gig promoter and one of those annoying people who was effortlessly stylish, never more so than when they went back to some old fashion people had half forgotten but which – when picked up again by somebody like Kulwinder – everybody suddenly realises actually looks pretty good. 'Married life still suiting you?'

He smiled. 'So far so good.'

'Nice suit,' Jo said, touching his sleeve.

'Yeah,' Kul said, holding out one arm and inspecting it. 'Wedding present from Faye.'

Faye was a journalist/newsreader on the radio station I work for; she and Kul met at one of our after-show pub afternoons. I think I'm on record on air describing Faye as 'comely'.

'When do you head for NYC?' I asked. They were honeymooning in the States; New York and Yosemite. Just for six days due to Kul's gig work and the move to Shoreditch next week.

'Tomorrow.'

'Whereabouts are you staying?'

'Plaza,' Kul said. He shrugged. 'Faye always wanted to stay there.' He took a drink from the bottle of Hobec he was holding.

'You going on Concorde?' Jo asked. Kul liked to travel in style; drove a restored Citroën DS.

He shook his head. 'No. Hasn't started flying again yet.'

Jo looked at me accusingly. 'Ken won't take me to the States,' she told Kul. He raised his eyebrows at me.

I shrugged. 'I was thinking I might wait until democracy had been restored.'

Kulwinder snorted. 'You really don't like Dubya, do you?'

'No, I don't, but that's not the point. I have this old-fashioned belief that if you lose the race you shouldn't be given the prize. Getting it handed to you because of electoral roll manipulation, the police in your brother's state stopping the black folks from voting, a right-wing mob storming a counting station and the Supreme Court being stuffed with Republican fucks is called . . . gosh, what's the technical term? Oh, yeah; a coup d'état.'

Kul shook his head and looked at me with his big, dark eyes. 'Oh, Ken,' he said sadly. 'Do you ever get down off that high horse?'

'Got a whole stable full of them, Kul,' I told him.

'Shit,' Jo said, staring at her mobile's display. I hadn't heard it ring; she usually had it set on vibrate (which about six months ago gave me the idea for one of the show's more long-running and successful items. Well, long-running in the sense I still went back to it now and again, and successful by the perverse standards of me and my producer in that we'd had dozens of complaints about our crudity and obscenity rather than the more common handful). Jo thumbed a button, scowled heroically and said, with a totally insincere brightness, 'Todd! How are you? What can I do for you?'

She shook her head and sneered down at the phone while Todd – one of her bosses at Ice House and allegedly deeply inadequate in every way – talked. She held the phone away from her and clenched her jaw for a moment, then turned and put the phone back to her ear. 'I see. Can't you deal with it?' she said as she walked slowly along the broad terrace. 'Right. No. I see. Yeah. Yeah. No, of course . . .'

'So, what about you, Ken?' Kul asked, leaning on the parapet and glancing at Jo, who was a few paces away now and giving the finger to her phone while still making noises into it. 'Jo going to make an honest man of you?'

I looked at him. 'Marriage?' I asked softly, also glancing at Jo. 'Are you talking about marriage?' He just grinned. I leaned on the parapet too, looking down at the gradually browning flesh of the apple. 'I don't think so. Once was enough.'

'How is Jude?'

'All right, last I heard.' My ex was currently shacked up with a cop in sunny Luton.

'Still in touch?' Kul asked.

'Very occasionally.' I shrugged. Slightly dodgy territory here, as Jude and I did meet up now and again and on a few of those occasions had – despite all the bitterness and recriminations and other usual failed-marriage stuff – ended up falling

into bed. Not something I wanted Jo to know about, or Judith's boy in blue. Not something I'd talked about with any of my friends in fact. Also not something that had happened for over half a year, so maybe that was over at last. Probably just as well.

'You must have been seeing Jo since about when Faye and I met up,' Kul said. Jo was on the other edge of the terrace, leaning on the parapet facing south, still on the phone and shaking her head.

'That long?'

'Yeah; about eighteen months.' He drank again, looking past me at Jo. 'I guessed you'd either be settling down or splitting up,' he said quietly.

I showed the surprise I felt. 'Why?'

'Ken, your relationships rarely make it past the year-and-a-half mark. A year is probably the average.'

'Jesus, Kul, do you keep notes on this sort of thing?'

He shook his head. 'No, I just remember stuff, and I can see patterns.'

'Well,' I began, and would maybe have half admitted that perhaps Jo and I weren't going anywhere, except she shut her phone and came marching over to us. 'Trouble?' I asked.

'Yeah,' she said, almost spitting. 'Those fucking Addicta wankers again.' Addicta were Ice House's latest hot band. Happening; their time was very definitely now. I kind of liked their music – melodic English grunge with oases of surprising wistfulness – but had come to hate them in a vicarious, solidarity-inspired way because they were, according to the usually reliable source that was Jo, such total and complete arseholes to deal with. 'That fucking useless *cunt* needs me to go and hold their fucking hands while some fucking precious snapper drapes them across a fucking Bentley or something. Supposed to happen yesterday but the fucking dickhead forgot to let me know.' She kicked the parapet with one Doc Marten. 'Cunt.'

'You're upset,' I said. 'I can tell.'

'Oh, fuck off, Ken,' she breathed, heading for the flat's interior.

I watched her go. Chase after and try to smooth things, or let her go, not make a bad thing worse? I hesitated.

Jo stopped briefly to talk to Faye, who was heading in the opposite direction with some people, then she was gone. In a moment Faye was smiling at me and introducing these people and the possibility of pursuit and attempted mollification had gone.

'Ken. Thought you were avoiding me.'

'Emma. As if,' I said, sitting beside her on one of the main space's two chrome and black-suede couches. I chinked glasses. 'You look great,' I told her. Just jeans and a soft silk shirt, an Alice band in her hair, but she did look good. It's a few drinks later here, but it definitely wasn't the drink talking or looking. She just raised her eyebrows.

Emma was married to my best pal from school days in Glasgow, Craig Verrin; Craig and I were our own little two-guy gang for fifth and sixth year, before he left for University College London and within a year was settled down with Emma and a baby girl. Meanwhile I – viciously scapegoated by my teachers and examiners on some trumped-up charge of not having done the necessary work to pass my exams – left to make tea and score drugs for the more lazy and dissolute DJs on StrathClyde Sound.

Emma was smart and funny and attractive in a delicately blond way and I'd always loved her to bits, but things had become a little spoiled between us because we shared the guilty secret that, just the once, we'd slept together. She and Craig had been going through a bad patch when it had happened after Craig had strayed and been found out, and they were split-up again now – had been for a couple of years – so it somehow seemed not quite as bad as it could have been

. . . but still. My best pal's girl; what the hell had I been thinking of? The next morning had been probably the most embarrassing of my life; Emma and I had both been so ashamed it had been pointless trying to pretend to the other that what had happened had been anything other than a colossal mistake.

Well, it was just one of those things you wished you could delete from reality. I supposed we'd both done our best to forget about it, and just the passing of time made the guilt less sharp, but sometimes, when Emma and I looked each other in the eye, it was like it had been only yesterday, and we both just had to look away. I lived in intermittent terror that Craig would find out.

I suppose it was sort of similar to but different from when Jude and I fell into bed. And it was another relationship I couldn't talk to anyone about. Come to think of it I couldn't talk about most of my relationships/liaisons/whatever you wanted to call them, for one reason or another. I certainly couldn't talk about the other big one; the one with Celia – Celia the svelte, Celia the sexy, Celia the slinky as a seal – either. Jeez, a shallow person could come away from a review of my private life with some sort of idea that I liked a frisson of danger in my dalliances, but that particular one was not just dangerous, that one could get me very seriously hurt, or worse.

In my darker moments it sometimes occurred to me that these entanglements – or one of them – would be the death of me.

'Haven't seen you for a while.' Emma was leaning towards me, talking quietly, voice nearly lost in the party's hubbub.

'Things have been hectic.'

'I bet. I saw Jo storming out.'

'Well, no; that wasn't quite a storm. It wasn't a common walk, either, granted. Somewhere in between; more of a flounce.'

'Something you said?'

'Remarkably, no. No, that was a work-related flounce, or storm. Where's Craig?'

'Picking up Nikki.' She glanced at her watch. 'Should be here soon.'

'And how is the gorgeous—?'

'So,' Emma broke in. 'How's your programme going?'

'You have to ask?' I pretended to be hurt. 'Don't you listen any more?'

'You lost me when you were banging on about how only criminals should have guns.'

'That's not quite what we were saying.'

'Maybe you should have been more clear. What were you saying?'

'I can't remember,' I lied.

'Yes you can. You were saying criminals should have guns.'

'I was not! I was saying the idea that if you took hand-guns away from ordinary law-abiding people then only criminals would have guns was a crap argument for keeping guns.'

'Because?'

'Because it's the ordinary law-abiding people who go crazy and walk into primary schools and open fire on a class of kids; compared to *that*, crims use guns responsibly. To them a gun's just a tool, and something they tend to use on other crims, I might add, not a gym full of under-eights.'

'You said criminals should have guns; that's a quote. I heard you.'

'Well, if I did, I was just exaggerating for comic effect.'

'I don't think it's anything—'

'You probably missed the way we developed that,' I told her. 'We decided only extroverts and nutters should get guns, crims or not. Because it's always the quiet ones that go mad. Ever noticed that? The shocked neighbours always say the same things: he was very quiet, he always kept himself to himself . . . So; guns for nutters only. Makes sense.'

'You're not even consistent; you used to argue everybody should have guns.'

'Emma, I'm a professional contrarian. That's my job. Anyway, I changed my mind. I realised I was on the same side as people who argued that the States and Israel were havens of peace and security because everybody was tooled up.'

Emma snorted.

'Well,' I said, waggling the hand that wasn't holding my drink, 'the statistics aren't that clear-cut. They have a lot of guns in Switzerland, too, and not much gun crime.'

Emma watched her drink as she swirled it in her glass. 'You wouldn't last in the States,' she muttered.

'What?' I said, mystified.

'Somebody would shoot you.'

'What?' I laughed. 'Nobody's shot Howard Stern.'

'I was thinking more of jealous husbands, boyfriends, that sort of thing.'

'Ah.' I knocked back my Scotch. 'Now that's a different argument entirely.' I stood up. 'Can I get you another drink?'

In the long, gleaming gallery that was the kitchen, Faye was sweeping up a smashed glass from the slate floor. The caterers were unpacking more food from cool boxes. I squeezed through a group of people I vaguely knew via my pals in advertising, saying Hi and Hello and How are you?, smiling and patting, shaking offered hands.

Kul was leaning against the puce-coloured SMEG fridge while a suit with a flushed face and holding a slim briefcase tapped him on the chest.

'. . . us have to go to work this afternoon you know,' the suit was saying. 'We have meetings.'

Kul shrugged. 'I put on gigs, man. I work at weekends. This was the first day we could both manage.'

'Well, okay, let you off this time,' the flushed suit said,

swaying. 'But don't let it happen again.' He laughed loudly.

'Ha ha,' Kul said.

'Yeah, don't let it happen again,' the suit repeated, heading for the front door. 'Na; it was great. Great. Thanks. Thanks for the invite. Been brilliant. Hope you're both very happy.'

'Thanks for coming. Take care,' Kul told him.

'Yeah, thanks. Thanks.' The suit bumped into somebody, spilling a drink. 'Sorry, sorry.' He lurched round to wave to Kul, who had already turned away and was headed for the loft's main space. I poured myself some more Glen Generic then saw that somebody had brought a bottle of cask-strength Laphroaig, so abandoned my first glass and poured another of the Leapfrog and went to the fridge for some water.

'Hey, Ken.'

I closed the fridge door and saw Craig, official best pal (Scottish). Usual faintly diffident grin and sloppy-looking, thrown-on clothes; wee round glasses beneath a shaven head. When Craig still had visible hair it was black like mine; maybe a little curlier. We've both always had the same medium-slim build and since third year in High School I've been a couple of inches taller. We used to get mistaken for brothers, which both of us thought unfairly flattered the other. Our eyes are different; his are brown and mine are blue. Alongside Craig was his daughter Nikki, balanced on a pair of crutches. A few seconds were required to take in this vision.

I hadn't seen Nikki for over a year, when she was still at school, all gawky, awkward and blushing. Now she was as tall as her father and as beautiful as her mother. She had long glossy auburn hair half hiding a slim, pale face that just shone with youth and health.

'Craig! Nikki!' I said. 'Kid, you look fabulous.' I looked down at the freshly plastered leg hanging at an angle from her boot-legged jeans. 'But you've broken your leg.'

'Football,' she said, shrugging as best she could. Craig and I

hugged and slapped backs in full-on hail-fellow-Caledonian-well-met style. I embraced Nikki rather more tentatively. She sort of leaned into the cuddle and nodded against my cheek. She smelled of the open air, of somewhere fresh and perfect a long way from London.

'Heard you're about to start at Oxford, yeah?' I said, shaking my head as I looked at her. She was nodding.

'Uh-huh,' she said, then, 'Yeah, just a water or something,' to her dad.

'Chinese, wasn't it?' I asked.

'Yup.' She nodded.

'Brilliant. Good for you. You can teach me how to swear in Mandarin.'

She giggled, suddenly, briefly a child again. 'Only if you promise to do it on air. Uncle.'

I sucked air through my teeth. 'Favour; don't call me Uncle, okay? Make an old man happy while we're together and pretend you just might be a trophy waif I've picked up.'

'*Ken!*' She kicked out at me with one crutch.

'Hey,' I said, rubbing my shin. 'I've a reputation to keep up. Or down-hold. Whatever.'

'You're *terrible*!'

'Come on,' I said, offering my arm. 'Let's get you a seat. Craig; we're through here,' I told him. He waved. Nikki nodded me to go ahead of her. 'Hobble this way,' I said and pushed through the pack of people towards the main space while Nikki clumped after me. I looked at her again as we got clear of the kitchen crowd, and sighed. 'Oh dear, Nikki.'

'What?'

'You are going to break *so* many hearts at Oxford, youngster.'

'Organs, rather than bones. Good idea.'

'Mm-hmm. Football, you said?'

'Girls do play it nowadays, you know.'

'Golly, you don't say. Don't you find the long skirts get in the way? Ow! Will you stop *doing* that?'

'Well . . .'

'What position?'

'Striker; I was scythed down in the penalty box. On a hat-trick, too.'

'Disgraceful.'

'Nikki, Nikki; here. Oh, Nikki!' Emma had jumped up. She hugged her daughter tightly, eyes closed. I hovered for a bit, but there was no room on the sofa once they'd got settled, and Emma seemed to be deliberately ignoring me. I waved to Nikki and wandered off. Time for another line or two, and/or one more quick session on Kul's PlayStation 2 (if that last bit makes me sound like some kid whose parents won't or can't buy him a games machine of his own, I have to plead half guilty to the childishness charge; I did have a PS2 of my own but I got annoyed at it one drunken night back in the summer and threw it overboard. I live on a houseboat so I can do that sort of thing).

A drink or two later, a couple of lines and various conversations to the better, I was standing on the terrace again, admiring the view and breathing in the fresh autumnal air. With Jo gone I felt a sense of freedom and even opportunity and promise, the afternoon and evening stretching ahead invitingly. I had a couple of Evo 8s with me and pondered taking one. Loved up for the rest of the day. This would mean, though, that I'd be out of synch with Jo, assuming we reconnected before the day was over. With Addicta involved, probably we wouldn't, but then you never knew.

An arm slipped round my waist. A body against mine, a kiss on my cheek and a voice purring, 'Herr-lerrr.'

'Amy. Well, hello indeed.'

Amy was a friend. One of Jo's friends, originally, though I

suspected she and I got on better these days than she and Jo, who seemed to have cooled towards her. Amy was nearly my height; she had fine, shoulder-length dark-blond hair with a natural curl. She also had very long legs and a *figure*. There was something slightly time-warped about Amy altogether; she was actually younger than Jo by a year but she dressed and acted five or ten years older. PA to a lobbying firm.

'You look well, Ken.' Amy leaned back against the parapet, arms along the stone. She wore pearls, a blue blouse, a mid-length skirt and a long jacket; court shoes.

'And you look delectable as ever,' I told her, smiling. Amy and I met up for lunch every now and again. We'd been flirting and joking about having a torrid affair for a year or so but we both knew it wasn't going to happen. Well, probably. It was Amy I'd been on the phone to earlier when we'd got cut off.

She smiled slowly and looked around. 'Jo here?'

'Was. Had to go. Work.'

'Was it her Addictive Band lot again?'

'The same.'

She held a glass of white wine and took a delicate sip. 'What was the wedding like?' The wind produced a tiny gust, moving her hair across her face. She blew it away.

'Don't know,' I said. 'Couldn't make it; show to do.'

'Ah-hah. Ken, do you have any drugs?'

'Some coke; couple of Es.'

'Think I might have some of the Charlie? I don't know why. Just feel like it.' She wrinkled her nose. 'Do you ever get that?'

'Every day with a "Y" in it.'

There were a couple of children at the party and at least two print journalists I didn't trust, so we found a room off the loft's only corridor. It had been Faye's office but now it was full of packing cases, ready for the move.

Back on the terrace a little later, the two of us talking up a storm, she picked up the part-eaten apple still lying on the parapet, twirling it in her hand.

'It's all right,' I told her. 'It's one of ours.'

She threw it to me. It looked pretty unappetising, all brown around where I'd taken my single bite out of it. I leaned on the brickwork and held it over the drop to the car park. Amy leaned beside me. I let the apple go. It tumbled very slowly, almost disappearing.

It hit the asphalt and exploded in a highly satisfactory manner, all little lumps of whiteness bursting out across the dark surface.

'Excellent!' Amy clapped her hands. We looked at each other, our chins just off the brick parapet. I felt, suddenly, like I was a schoolboy again.

'Hey,' I said.

'What?'

'Let's drop more stuff.'

'That's just what I was thinking.'

'I know.'

Which is how it came to pass that we ended up chucking what seemed like half the contents of Faye and Kul's loft over the parapet. We started with more fruit. 'They've got far too much food in anyway,' Amy said as we loaded up on oranges, bananas, a melon and more apples.

We stared at the asphalt a hundred feet below. 'That was disappointing.'

'Was a bit, wasn't it?' I said, looking down at the squishy mess produced by a couple of oranges. 'I don't think citrus fruits are the way to go. They just don't fragment in a satisfying manner.'

'Or bananas.'

'Agreed. Let's go back to apples.'

'Then the melon. That might be good.'

'Yes. I have high hopes for the melon.'

'Let's do two apples at once; one each.'

'Good idea. On three. One, two, three . . . Oh yes. Very good.'

'Well synchronised. Let's do four this time. Two each.'

'We've only got three apples.'

'I'll get another one. No dropping the melon while I'm gone.'

'Wouldn't dream of it.'

'Ere, wot are you two up to?'

'Ed; hi. Hope you don't mind. Dropping fruit onto the car park. S'okay; nowhere near your car.'

'Fucking ell, mate, I hope not. Only got it last week. Cost me seventy grand.' Ed was my official best pal (English). Slight of build with a face that always reminded me of a black Mark E. Smith; hard and soft at the same time, the phizog of a pliable bantam-weight bruiser. Club DJ; sort of in-demand guy does two gigs a night and catches a helicopter in between. The Porsche probably constituted a week's wages.

'It's a beautiful car,' I told him. 'But *yellow*?'

'That's a fuckin traditional Porsche colour, that is.'

'Traditional? How can yellow be traditional? Blue, or green; those are traditional colours. Even red, but not yellow. Yellow is traditional for JCBs and Tonka toys. Even lime green at a pinch; Kawasakis. But not yellow.'

'Wot a load of shit,' Ed laughed. 'Wot are you on?'

'Hi, Ed,' Amy said, returning with another apple. 'Here.'

'Thanks. Fibre,' I said to Ed, holding the apple up to him. 'I'm on lots of fibre.'

'Ready?'

'Read— hey,' I said indignantly, 'there's a bite out of this apple.'

Amy nodded. 'Ya. Somebody was eating it.'

I looked at her. 'What are you loik?' I said in my best Dublin accent.

She just shrugged and got ready with her two apples, poised to drop. 'Ready?'

'Ready,' I said.

'Wot you doin this for?' Ed asked as we let the apples go. 'Eh? Ken?' Ed said, while Amy and I concentrated on the fruit falling to its doom. 'What's the—?' The apples duly splattered. 'Aow, yeah!' Ed said.

'See?'

'That's why,' I said.

'Cool, man.'

'Melon?' said Amy.

'Melon, definitely,' I agreed, hefting it.

'Let me!' said Ed. 'I want to drop the melon!' Amy and I exchanged looks. 'Come on!' said Ed. 'I haven't got to drop nuffink yet.'

'That's the test,' Amy said, sternly. 'You have to bring something worth dropping to the party, or it's no entry.'

I nodded. 'You haven't been initiated.'

'I'll get sumfing!' Ed started towards the apartment, then stopped. 'Old on; let's see the melon go first.'

I held it out over the drop with both hands and then let it go.

Amy whooped and we high-fived. 'Outstanding!'

'Fucking yeah, man!'

'Fine sport.'

'We need more fruit.'

'I'll find some, I'll find some.'

'You'll be lucky.'

'Yeah, something of a short-fall situation on the fruit front.'

'I'll find sumfing else.'

'What?'

'I dunno; rubbish, junk.'

'Have you seen this place? Their living-room's like an operating theatre; they don't have junk.'

'They're movin, man. They must have stuff they're frowin out.'

'Good point. See what you can find.'

'Let's all see what we can find.'

'Even better.'

'What's going on out here?' Kul asked.

'The very man!' I said. Kul had a bit of a sheen on him; looked a little glassy-eyed. It never did take much to get him drunk. 'Kul; you must have *loads* of stuff you were going to throw out, haven't you?'

'Umm, well . . .'

Most of the people at the party were taking turns to throw things over the parapet. For a dedicatedly minimalist couple, Faye and Kul had a surprising amount of stuff they weren't going to miss when they quit the loft: quite a lot of old kitchen bits and pieces, like bowls, plates, jars, a broken juicer, a defunct Thermos flask, some outdated goblets, a bilious green fondue set . . . then a handful of ornaments they'd been given by Faye's parents, which they'd never liked or ever displayed but had kept in case the old couple ever came to visit (the ornaments were, like Faye's parents, pretty hideous), followed by bigger stuff as Faye and Kul got into it and people started to cam-cord what was happening: an old hi-fi system, a bust TV, a misbehaving radio, and bottles; lots of bottles.

'Me fuckin car!' Ed wailed as half a dozen carefully released wine bottles plummeted to their destruction. A big cheer went up as they shattered, more or less simultaneously.

'The wreckage is going nowhere near the damn car, Ed,' I told him.

'You can't be fuckin sure, man. What about me tyres? Those are fuckin brand new tyres. They cost a bleedin fortune. Plob'ly.'

'*Bean* bags?' Amy laughed as one of Kul's promoter chums

heaved through the crowd clutching two of the things over his head like giant brown scrotums.

'You have – you ever *had* bean bags?' I said to Kul.

He shrugged. 'Promise you won't tell.'

'What's the point?' somebody shouted. '*They're* not going to shatter.'

'Now,' the promoter chum said (he meant 'No', but, like Ed, he was from Sarf Landin). 'But I was finking that if you, like, dropped eavier stuff on top of them . . .'

'Brilliant!' I yelled, deeply impressed at such forethought.

'Kul?' Faye said, laughing but sounding a little unsure. 'I thought you *liked* that chair.'

'Yeah, well, not that much,' Kul said. 'Give me a hand here . . .'

We got the big metal and wood chair up onto the parapet, a whole bunch of us positioned it where it looked like it would drop onto one or both of the bean bags, then we let it go.

Very big cheer for the chair; direct hit on one of the bean bags resulting in an explosive spray of white polystyrene beads splashing out across the now fabulously wreckage-strewn car park like a giant snowy feather pointing towards the chain-link fence.

'Hey, if we dropped this fish tank, would the fish experience weightlessness? I mean, like, double weightlessness? Just kidding.'

'Faye, do you want this old table?'

'I found more bottles!'

Faye looked at Kul, her eyes wide. She clicked her fingers. 'That case of awful Cava my uncle got cheap from Tesco! Remember?'

Kul took her face in his hands and kissed her. 'Knew it would come in useful for something. You certainly can't drink the stuff.' He set off towards the interior. An unsteady stream of

bottles of various sizes whistled to the asphalt, each getting a small cheer as it hit. People were calling out marks for technical merit and artistic achievement.

'I bet you started this, didn't you, Ken?' I turned to find Nikki perched on her crutches, all grumpy glare.

I held up my hands. 'Guilty,' I said, surprised at her expression. 'Why? What's wrong?'

'Throwing perfectly good food away is wrong, Ken,' she said, shaking her head as though at a child who needed to be told that scrawling on the walls with crayons was bad.

'It was only a few bits of fruit,' I said. 'It would probably have been—'

'Oh, Ken,' she said. She shook her head and stumped away.

Kul came back with a cardboard box full of bottles of Cava and started handing them out to the many grasping hands. 'Just for dropping,' he told people seriously. 'I beg of you; whatever you do, don't drink it.'

I half-heartedly considered trying to get to within bottle-handing-out range of him, but the press of people was too great.

I turned to Amy and held up my hands.

'Never mind,' she said.

We leaned back against the east-facing parapet. She put out her hand to shake. 'Good new game, Ken.' She looked flushed, excited.

'I don't know,' I said, keeping hold of her hand. 'I liked it more in the old days.'

'Really?'

More big cheers as the full Cava bottles hit with satisfyingly loud thuds and booms. 'Shake them first! Shake them up first!' somebody was shouting.

'Yeah,' I said. 'Call me a purist, but I feel the soul kind of went out of it when we switched from fruit and lost our amateur status.'

'You can't live in the past, Ken.'

'I suppose.'

'We should be proud we were there at the start.'

'You're right. Was it my idea or yours?' I asked.

'Maybe we had it together.'

'Indeed.'

'Absolutely.'

'Great minds.'

'Idea; time had come.'

'Not about ownership; about result.'

'Destiny.'

'–'s Child.'

'Synchronicity.'

'The Police,' I said, just as my mobile went (I keep mine on vibrate, too). As I pulled it out of my jacket, Amy's ring-tone sounded; something classical I knew but couldn't name.

'Ha-ha,' she said. 'Synchronicity indeed.'

I laughed and looked at the display on my phone; my producer, calling from the office. I heard one or two other phones going off around the place and thought I could hear the landline in the apartment too and wondered hazily whether for some bizarre reason everybody here had something urgent they had set alarms for, a little after two o'clock on a Tuesday in September.

'Yo, Phil,' I said. Amy answered her call too.

'What?'

'*What?*'

'New York?'

'The what?'

'Where?'

'The World Trade Center? Isn't that—?'

'A plane? What, a big plane, like a Jumbo or something?'

'You mean, like, the two big, um, skyscrapers?'

Kulwinder was walking back through the crowd of people

as more phones went off and faces started to look puzzled and the atmosphere began to change and chill around us. He was heading for the loft's main space again, talking to somebody on his phone. 'Yeah, yeah, I'll put the TV on . . .'