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Opening Extract from...

Communion Town

Written by Sam Thompson

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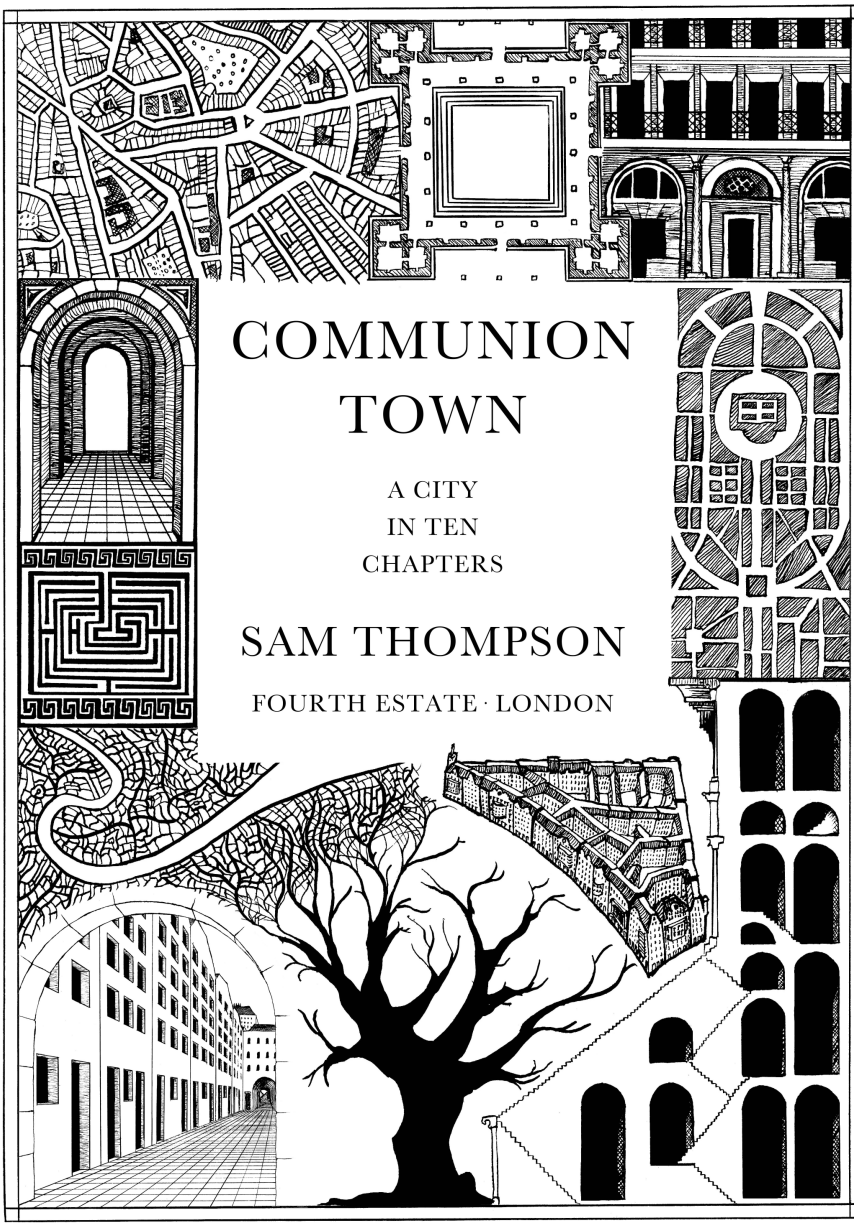


COMMUNION TOWN

A CITY
IN TEN
CHAPTERS

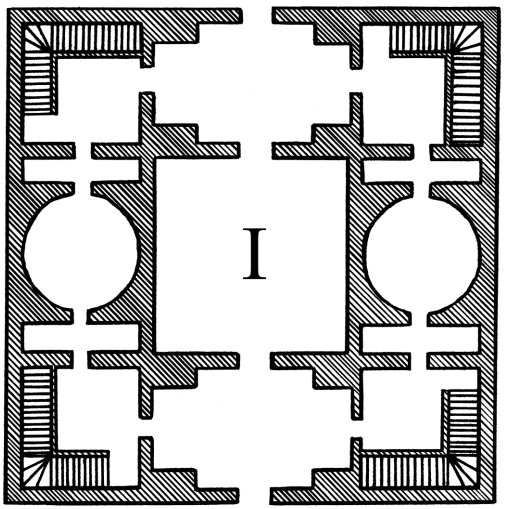
SAM THOMPSON

FOURTH ESTATE · LONDON

This city is Epidamnus while this story is being told:
when another one is told it will become another town.

PLAUTUS

CONTENTS


I

Communion Town

Do you remember how you came to this city, Ulya? Think back, because we need to agree on what happened right from the start. I want to help him out as much as you do, believe me. I know you're worried, and in your place I'd be the same – but I can promise you that conditions are actually quite tolerable in there. So let's approach this calmly. When I've said what I have to say, I'm going to offer you an opportunity, and I hope you'll feel able to respond.

It was early morning, remember, when you and Nicolas arrived. Did your spirits lift at the first sight of what you'd travelled so far to reach? A world of grey dawn twilight and blackened stone above, rainwater dripping from the girders, pigeons sulking in rows and strangers spilling from carriages to gather on the concourse, disoriented. Even at that hour the Grand Terminus was full of migrants anxious to enter the city. They formed queues for processing, shambling in their soiled clothes, their heads twitching at the noise of the tannoy.

I picked you out of the crowd right away. You weren't like the rest: with most of them it's obvious, you can see it all in their faces as they offer up their papers for inspection, clutch their belongings and steal glances at the carbines of the watch.

You and Nicolas, though, you were different. I have an instinct for these things, and I'm seldom mistaken in the end.

You mustn't be surprised if I seem to know a good deal about your life over these past months: maybe more than you know yourself. The fact is I've been here all along. You won't have seen me, but I've kept a discreet eye on your progress. So why don't I go ahead and talk you through the way I see it? Then you can correct me on the finer points, fill in the details, let me know your side of the story. How does that sound?

No one wants to spend the first hours of a new life in an interview room, so let me apologise for what you went through that morning. I hope you feel you were treated with due sensitivity and respect. After they'd taken your photographs and left you waiting for a while, the door was elbowed open by a short man fumbling with a sheaf of papers. He had a preoccupied, officious manner, I'm afraid, and I certainly wouldn't have chosen him to welcome you to the city with his damp scalp, his rumbling stomach and his tie that kept twisting around to expose its underside. He didn't even introduce himself. As for you and Nicolas, you avoided eye contact and kept your answers minimal. Who could blame you?

It's unsettling, isn't it, being asked to tell your story over and over, when as far as you're concerned it's perfectly straightforward. The little man never said he didn't believe you, but I know you felt that he was listening for a contradiction, waiting for you to slip up. He sighed as if your responses were somehow disappointing. He left the room, then came back, and you had to try again: Where have you come from? How did you travel here? Do you have friends, family, means of support? Can you prove that you have reason to fear immediate danger in your place of origin? Thoroughly tiresome.

At last they issued you with temporary permits to remain in the city, and a list of appointments to attend in the coming

days: to apply for your identity cards, to request help with subsistence and accommodation, to make sure we didn't lose track of you. By the time they let you go, you must have been hungry, thirsty and aggrieved – I know I would have been – but neither of you showed it. Now, you might think this wasn't much to go on. But I've learnt to trust my intuitions, and I could tell that you and Nicolas were going to need my help.

I realise this is all very inconvenient, and I appreciate your patience. You can't imagine what involvement he might have with Communion Town, but that's all right – we'll get there. Would you like a glass of water before we continue? You need only say the word. Everything now is strange and uncertain, Ulya, I understand this, I really do, but keep in mind that you and I can help each other if we choose.

For what it's worth, I think you did just about everything you could. You tried gallantly to hold it together, but there were certain aspects of your life in the city that you could not have foreseen. It's always clearer in retrospect. Think of the first time you walked into the apartment you had been assigned out in that half-empty tower block in Sludd's Liberty. I'll admit it wasn't everything you might have wished for, with the stains on the ceiling and the smell of blocked drains. There was no furniture. Nicolas prodded with his toe at the great chrysalis of ripped-out carpet lying in the middle of the room, then gave it a kick, releasing an odour of damp.

You were uneasy, of course, seeing the reticence he had preserved so well at the Terminus already beginning to come apart. You had an inkling he would need to exercise more self-control in future. I have to say I agreed. Yes, I was there with you – at least in the sense that matters most. I'm good at not being seen, and in my job locked doors aren't a problem.

What could you do? You were concerned about him, naturally, but you had your own adjustments to make, as every newcomer must. Nowhere is exactly as you think it's going to be, and when you settle in a strange city you soon find out there's more to learn than you suspected. You know what I'm getting at. You remember it: the day you saw your first monster.

You had been at the Agency all day, trying to see someone about your claim. You'd reported at nine a.m. sharp, as instructed, then queued until four in the afternoon to have an irritable clerk glance over your documents. Afterwards you crossed town to the depot in Glory Part where you queued again to redeem your food stamps. Then, burdened with cans of preserved meat and UHT milk, you rode the city metro west to the end of the line and a forty-minute walk through Sludd's Liberty.

They have an unfortunate reputation, those banlieues where the old streets are overshadowed by never-completed tower blocks stalled midway through the process of being torn down. Most people I know wouldn't venture out that way. On your route home stood one half-demolished high-rise with the open sockets of bedrooms and bathrooms visible from down in the street. Another tower, still whole, was trussed up in scaffolding, and the wind sang through the structure of metal poles, wanting to fling pieces down at you.

You walked by vacant lots behind chain-link fencing and under the arterial flyover. You passed a cherry tree in blossom, and an off-licence like a bunker, locked down with steel shutters. You skirted a rubblescape where mechanical diggers scraped the ground and a builder in a fluorescent jacket trudged along with a hod on his shoulder, while another picked his way over heaps of bricks, slowly and helplessly, as

if it were the wreck of his own house. Three more sat in a circle, like practitioners of some ancient folk industry, using hand-tools to chip mortar off bricks.

You did notice these things, didn't you, on your daily trek through the outskirts? It's important we pay attention to the details, because I want to understand what it was like for you in those first days and weeks. I want you to persuade me of it, Ulya. I really think I'd be letting you and Nicolas down if I didn't try my best to see things from your point of view.

As you neared the tower block, you became aware that something unusual was happening. Most of the time the inhabitants of Sludd's Liberty went about their errands furtively and alone, but now a group had formed on the dilapidated high street: women and children from the high-rises, men from the bar on the corner, some of the youths who hung around in the recreational areas and a couple of the homeless people who frequented the district. A city watchman was there, too, and the doctor who ran a clinic here once a month. In spite of the group's diversity, something united them, a recklessness sketched across all the faces. They had clustered around the entrance to a short blind alley that ran down beside a fast-food restaurant, their body language tense.

Drawing closer, you caught sight of what they had cornered. I'm sorry you had to go through that, but I suppose in truth it was a rite of passage into our city more significant than any Agency interview.

Can we try to describe what you saw? We could say it was pale and ragged, that its movements were oddly askew and that you felt sure it was broken or deformed in a way you couldn't quite identify. We could say that your stomach turned, and you grew dizzy as the urge to stamp the thing out of existence struggled against the need to flee as far away

from it as you could get; that you would have done anything rather than let it touch you. But in the end all we can say is that what confronted you was *wrong*, so intrinsically wrong that just by being there it was committing an outrage against us all. It stared back at you with ghoulish immodesty, clutching a lump of rotten matter which it had fished out of the bins.

I know you recognise what I'm telling you, Ulya, because I've had those encounters myself. You might spend a lifetime in the city and never glimpse one, if you're lucky, but few of us escape the occasional reminder of their presence. They're bolder in areas like the Liberties, but even in Cento Hill or Lizavet or Rosamunda you can never be sure they won't slither without warning out of the crevices where they hide. Walking to work you might hear a verminous scrabbling underneath a bridge. Travelling on some deep line of the metro you might catch fleeting sight of an ill-fitting parody of a face, smeared and pallid in the dark beyond the glass.

There are several names for what they are. Some people call them ingrates or the abject, the *pharmakoi* or the *homines sacri*. But you might as well call a monster a monster.

For a long moment the people of Sludd's Liberty confronted the thing. Then someone groaned, and someone else threw a stone that crashed into the bins. The trapped creature giggled and cowered and the watchman finally fumbled at his holster as the others cast around for weapons. But then it leapt forward, and as the crowd recoiled it slipped past with loathsome speed to vanish into the nest of alleys towards the foot of the tower.

After that there was nothing to be done except lay down the stones and sticks, exhale, shake heads and trade reassurances. Everyone was voluble at once, talking and laughing, eager to tell everyone else the story of what they had just

witnessed. They turned to you, inviting you to join the conversation.

But you didn't, did you? That was a pity, I think, because for a person in your position it's worth taking every chance to become more integrated with the community. Still, you'd had a shock. Under the circumstances, no one could really hold it against you that you ignored their exclamations and hurried away alone, back to the apartment in which you could hear several generations of a large family quarrelling on the other side of the wall.

All right. He's on your mind, so let's talk about Nicolas. There's a strong resemblance there, did you know that? The same dark eyes, always watchful, never telling.

You may find it difficult to believe, but I have a good idea of how it hurt when you realised you had lost him. I wish I could change it, I really do. And I know you can't help holding the city a bit responsible. You can't help feeling that if the two of you had never come here then everything would have been different. I just hope you won't let it colour your impressions unduly – because there's so much to celebrate about this place, and we mustn't forget that. Of course sometimes it can seem excessive, too huge, with its fathoms of brick and iron and its endless capacity to churn out litter and exhaust fumes, and too sad, with its sleepers in stairwells and Cynics plotting in respectable suburbs. But that's the price we pay for the sheer vibrancy that surrounds us. I don't think I could ever leave.

You know what I like to do? I like to go out running. It's so easy to lose touch with the simple, indispensable things, just the world around us, but running keeps me in the city in a fundamental way: the texture of the ground under the feet, the flow of the air around the body. I run first thing every

morning. You can picture me lacing up my shoes in the dim space of my flat with dawn coming up in the windows. My place is over in Loamside, so I head past shut shops and cafés and across the park, I dodge the gangs of men hauling crates along the streets as the gaining light scribbles colour and texture into the world, and soon I smell brine and I'm on the seafront, buffeted by gusts of wind, with crows blowing around above the mud like cinders off a bonfire.

Actually I'm a serious runner. Not one of your fair-weather joggers, anyway: you'll find me out there every morning without fail, heatwave or hailstorm or dead of winter. I'm never going to win any marathons but, you know, that doesn't matter. It means something to me. When I think back, I get the feeling I've spent the better part of my life in this city pounding the pavements and river walkways and cycle paths, pushing through the pain barriers, keeping up that steady rhythm on one unending run, looping from Three Liberties to Green Stairs, from Syme Gardens to Glory Part, never stopping, with first light setting the pace.

This morning it was very fine. I ran along the path with the sun breaking through the mist, and I paused to catch my breath, paced up and down, leant on a bench and stretched my calves. Further down the seafront a pair of forms thickened out of the visual hiss and shot by me, one before the other, freewheeling. The light was lifting off the water in nets and chains of dazzle, and a gaff-rigged sloop was cutting around in the bay, jammed in between the elements, gearing the sea and the wind together, taking the strain in its ropes and the hands of its crew …

I'm digressing, aren't I? You'll have to forgive me. I think you know what I'm trying to say.

* * *

When someone means that much to you, you don't have many choices, do you, much as you may pretend you're free to do as you like. That other person is threaded into you as deep as your own soul – you hold his image in your mind, always, and you hope he keeps an image of you, because in the end that's the only place where you can live secure and complete. You know that if you were to vanish from the world it would be in that person's thoughts that you lingered, for a while at least, after you were gone. So I understand what it was like, those times he went off alone into the city without quite explaining his plans. Do you remember the night, less than a month after you arrived, when he came home late with two black eyes and a bloody nose? You were frightened for him but he shrugged off your questions. Already he seemed to be breaking away.

It's true he didn't reveal much, but I do feel that I came to know him, in my fashion, in the time we had. Have you noticed how each of us conjures up our own city? You have your secret haunts and private landmarks and favourite short cuts, and I have mine, so as we navigate the streets each of us walks through a world of our own invention. And by following you into your personal city, I can learn a great deal of what I need to know.

Of course I can't approve of his decision to seek out unlawful employment. I have to make it very clear I think that was the wrong choice. But at the same time I understand how people in your situation can find themselves facing an unenviable range of options, and so I watched with some sympathy as he crossed the city every night for his illicit shift in the kitchens of the Cosmopole. I can assure you, incidentally, that the relevant authorities will be taking a keen interest in working practices at that particular establishment.

Nicolas's personal city was dingy and utilitarian – he would always take the fastest route to his destination, however squalid or threatening the streets – but there was an honesty about it, and a certain pride as well. He lived in a city populated exclusively with his equals. If he never acknowledged the grand department stores on Vere Street or the fin-de-siècle facades of the Palace Mile, it wasn't because of his broken shoes and four-day beard but because he found their hypocrisies unacceptable. Once, in the Esplanade, a motorcycle tore past him along the pedestrian precinct, sounding its siren to clear the way for a cavalcade of police jeeps and VIP cars to roar through, followed by more bikes carrying more weaponised, shiny-helmeted men. The passers-by formed naturally into lines of spectators, but Nicolas swore under his breath at the arrant incivility of it.

He preferred cutting through the back streets of the city centre. In those alleys, which seem to contain all the litter that has been swept out of the boulevards, he knew where he was going: his stride became longer and easier and he'd nod to the waiters out for a smoke or slip the odd coin to a sleeping drunk. After work at the Cosmopole, most days, he stopped off to treat himself to breakfast at a place called the Rose Tree Café. Did you know that? Then he'd walk to the Communion Town metro and disappear into the underground crush to fight his way back to Sludd's Liberty. Half his wages must have gone on metro tokens but there was no alternative if he wanted to snatch a few hours' sleep each afternoon.

Communion Town: strange, isn't it. Nowadays it's hard to remember a time when those two words weren't loaded with horror. The season has hardly turned since it happened, and yet to think of the days when Communion Town was merely the jostling heart of the Old Quarter, and its baroque subter-

ranean maze of a station nothing more than the hub of the city's transport, is to recollect another era.

I was nearby at the time of the event. There's no denying the diabolical ingenuity of what the Cynics did that day. The city was unprepared because no one had imagined they could go so far. At the moment they chose, the station was flowing with the usual early-evening mob of shoppers, revellers, hipsters and tourists – ordinary people, self-absorbed and carefree, sunburnt from the first real day of summer we'd had. It doesn't bear thinking about, does it, finding yourself trapped down in the guts of the metro and slowly realising what's going on.

I thank my stars I was above ground myself, walking through another part of the Old Quarter to meet friends at the cinema. Have you ever been on the margins of an event like that? The awareness that something was wrong came over us like a change in atmospheric pressure. Without quite knowing why, strangers turned to each other, asking for explanations and swapping instantaneous rumours. There's a certain thrill: you want to know what's happening, but more than that you want to know if it might still be going to happen to you.

You've seen the news footage of that day. I can't decide whether the television stations should have been allowed to release the images to the public at all. Perhaps we need to see these things, but it made me uncomfortable that just because the Cynics had managed to feed us those pictures, we went meekly along with it and watched, powerless to intervene, as the horrors unfolded in exactly the way they had planned. Sometimes I think that was the worst aspect of what they did – showing us. Who can make sense of the mentality?

In the days afterwards the weather was superb, deep skies pouring down hot light so strong that the parks stiffened

with vegetation and the streets seemed unreal. We had slipped into a strange kind of time: a kind that, instead of passing, accumulated. I remember pausing one afternoon in a small triangular park below an office block, nothing but some trampled grass, a drift of daisies and a rusted-up fountain, and having the most curious sense that as long as I stayed on this spot the city would remain poised and safe, not a mote in the air moving. When I passed that way again I couldn't find it.

We all did our best to return to normal life – to do so, we assured each other, was nothing less than a principled stand – and soon enough the commuters were again streaming in and out of the ornate arches of the Communion Town metro. The city doesn't stop, however appalled. But I had a suspicion that the busy citizens were no longer quite so convinced by the performance in which they were taking part. I couldn't shake a sense of – what? I suppose the fragility of everything we were about.

On the streets the city watch were swollen with seriousness, their automatic weapons perched high on their chests and their eyes scanning. Life was less convenient than before: it was common to have your way blocked by bulky torsos and protuberant holsters, and to be instructed to take an alternative route to your destination. Most frustrating. I don't pretend that my experiences correspond with yours, Ulya, but we all have mixed feelings about how things have been lately.

The watch stopped me once on Impasto Street when I was already late for an appointment, and I swear they enjoyed making me wait. They were lumpish types, two big raw hams in uniforms, and when they saw I was getting impatient they visibly settled down to savour their task. They took their sweet time establishing where I was going and why. I showed

my identification, but they ignored it, conferred for a while, then told me to touch the wall and patted me down. I barely restrained myself from asking ironically whether they thought I looked like a Cynic; who knows where that might have led. At last one of them laid an oversized palm between my shoulder blades and pointed back the way I had just come.

'You see that street, sir?' he said. 'Would you mind walking down it?'

I spent the whole night going over those words. I took a late run to calm down. Maybe it doesn't hurt to be reminded now and then that the city can clobber you whenever it likes, but the odd thing, it occurred to me as I pushed myself forward with my head bowed under the streetlamps, tarmac filling my vision and grit scraping between my soles and the pavement, was that just for a moment I *had* been on the side of the malcontents. As I had walked away I'd been half-mad with resentment. That can't be right, can it?

I ran through the small streets around my place, encountering cars, dark and crouched with their headlights up, waiting, their intentions obscure. It was one of those stifling nights when the lamps only smear the murk and, run as I might, my past opened up underneath my feet: I found my legs working in emptiness and I drifted like a balloonist over the depth of my personal time, seeing straight down to the bottom. Long ago, I felt, I had been the victim of some fleeting violence, of no great importance to the perpetrator but enough to leave me bent and scarred, sculpted casually into what, now, I'd always be.

When I got home I was glad I'd left the flat in darkness. My eyes had adapted, so I opened the windows and left the lights off while I drank a bottle of beer, listening to warm rain beginning to fall. The spattering steadied to a hiss, spreading coolness through the air and releasing the smell of school

football pitches from the park across the road, and as it grew heavier it made a sound-map of the trees and glass roofs nearby. I swigged a cold mouthful and placed the bottle on the table: a bubble swelled and broke at the lip, and a tiny catastrophe of froth worked itself out in the neck.

I'm telling you this because I want you to see that in the end I'm like you, Ulya, trying my best, getting by, hopefully getting it right sometimes. I'm not some faceless administrator. I'd hate you to think of me that way, because we have the potential for so much more, you and I.

If we're to make sense of the predicament in which Nicolas finds himself, we have to try and imagine his state of mind in the months and weeks prior to the events at Communion Town. I hope you don't find it impertinent, me telling you this. I feel I'm claiming to know more about him than you do yourself. His motives were basically good, I do believe that, but the fact is he was reckless on occasion.

That café of his was a run-down warren, crammed in around the back of Communion Town station; and cheap food or not, I would have preferred not to see him spend his time there. Grease clung to the plate-glass window, deposited by the clouds of steam that filled the interior, and you could tell at a glance that the plates would be grubby and the bacon and eggs swimming in fat. Even so it was always packed in the early mornings. Nicolas sat down to his breakfast elbow-to-elbow with students in dishevelled finery after a night on the town, tram drivers and rickshaw kids at the end of their shifts, backpackers fuelling up between hostel and railway station, civil servants heading for the offices of the Autumn Palace. There were immigrants who had just finished cleaning those same offices, or who were on their way to the building sites across the river; there were men with nose-rings and women

with shaven heads who looked to have been up all night, dancing violently in cellar clubs or publishing underground magazines. There were less identifiable types, too. A lot of talk went on in there and I found it impossible to make out any single conversation above the spluttering griddles and clashing cutlery. But I knew it was not what Nicolas needed, given his propensities. Too often through that clouded window I saw him in impassioned discussion with some near-stranger, their heads together. It bothered me, I have to tell you. I could never quite decide what he was thinking as he swigged his tea and walked out to Halfmoon Street, vigorous and stern-faced, to plunge back into the metro.

Communion Town station itself was a city in miniature, with a specialised urban ecology flourishing in its tunnels, a functional society from the ticket sellers and engineers to the lavatory attendants and platform-arabs. Daily, after his night's work and his grease-soaked breakfast, Nicolas shouldered his way through the station's Upper Hall to board the ancient lifts down to the platforms.

Most people on the metro will look straight through their fellow commuters and out the other side, but that was a skill Nicolas didn't seem willing to learn. He studied the traders of the Upper Hall with tight-lipped intensity; he made no attempt to hide his interest in the sallow man with the too-small suit and the dabs of tissue paper stuck to the shaving cuts on his throat, who tirelessly informed the commuters that the misfortune soon to come upon them would be a punishment for their degenerate lives; or the personable youngster in the cagoule who handed out leaflets advertising walking tours of the Old Quarter, saying welcome, folks, you're very welcome to our fine city, but make sure and look to your valuables, ladies and gentlemen, there are criminals about so make sure your valuables are secure! – so that hands

moved for assurance to certain points on bags and bodies, and the leafleteer's beady-eyed associates, slouching nearby, knew where to concentrate their attentions.

At least I can set your mind at ease about the night of the black eyes. He'd been foolhardy, nothing worse. He had witnessed a more or less everyday spectacle in the Hall, a gang of roaring boys who had encircled another youth and, amid laughter, were spinning him around by pricking his behind with their knives. Well, you know what Nicolas is like. He had waded in to put a stop to it, and had been rewarded with a crisp headbutt and a discharge of abuse from the bullies, in which their victim joined.

That didn't put him off, though. Whatever he saw, he took it personally. I couldn't quite make him out; he would scowl at the skinny youths who hauled their rickshaws past the front of the station to pick up rich couples. He'd give filthy looks to such harmless types as the five middle-aged monks who strolled through the Hall in their saffron robes, all with close-shaved heads, rimless spectacles and digital cameras, or the undergraduates complaining languidly to one another about the length of the cashpoint queue: 'This is *abzurd*.' On the other hand, he always had a friendly word for the two smartly dressed women who ran the cosmetics kiosk, and for the leather-tanned, tattooed guy who could usually be found patrolling the Hall with a can of cider in one hand and the other thrust down the back of his tracksuit trousers. I can admire it, the instinctive conviction with which Nicolas responded to all that jostling life, but I'm sorry to say that it served him badly in the end. It's all part of the story of how you lost him to the city.

I wish his judgement had been better, we both do, but there was something wilful in his conduct. It was as if he wanted to put himself at risk. He had taken to buying break-

fast every day for one of the other patrons of the Rose Tree Café, a person who it pains me even to describe to you. I knew his sort well, and I could not have imagined a less desirable companion. It's strange. I like to think I'm pretty tolerant, but with some people you just can't help how you feel.

He was often to be seen around the streets of Communion Town, this one: he was no older than Nicolas himself, but his face was ruined, a mask of putty on a skull, and he made a show of walking with a limp, cautiously, as if he were favouring a hidden injury. Nicolas, I think, had mistaken him for a genuine casualty of the city, taking pity on his sickly look, his unwashed clothes and scrawny frame, and perhaps on his attempts at dandyism: he actually affected a carnation in the buttonhole of his jacket, and his long hair had been clumsily bleached. As he sat down opposite Nicolas, he combed his fingers through the oily locks as if folornly hoping to be mistaken for a member of the opposite sex.

I could understand why Nicolas felt sorry for him, but he failed to see the arrogance behind the frailty. The fellow wolfed down his plateful each morning without a word of thanks. Then, after another mug of coffee, he would launch into a tirade, staring at Nicolas greedily and plucking at his cuff as he spoke, like someone imparting urgent secrets. He was a fraud, of course: in spite of his appearance I would not have been surprised to learn that he had a trust fund to support his loafing, his radical posturing. Now and then you saw him plaguing the shoppers around Vere Street, going from person to person like a beggar and delivering his spiel with an unnerving show of anguish. He held the sleeves of his targets as if his life depended on getting them to believe whatever line he was spinning.

A fraud, but a dangerous fraud for someone in Nicolas's situation to associate with. I fumed to see him deceived, and

wanted to tell him that this personage was laughing up his sleeve at the fine joke of it. Nicolas could be so unworldly. I watched them through the grease-fouled window, hazy figures leaning seriously towards one another. I could only guess what lies were being told in there, but, if what happened later was anything to go by, I fear very much that he believed them.

You saw the nature of the situation better than he did. I'm only sorry you couldn't help him understand. I'm thinking of the afternoon you took him picking blackberries down by the canal. The brambles beside the cycle path were dense with shiny black flesh, so you and Nicolas took plastic supermarket bags and struggled in among those alien castles full of cobwebs and dead matter and tiny sharp barbs, threaded through with nettles and loaded with decayed, insect-ridden fruit, some of it soft enough to turn to pulp at a touch and much of the rest pinkish and shrivelled. You walked home scratched and stung but your bags were heavy and wet with purple juice. I often think of you like that, the two of you, blackberrying in a revealing light that lay longways across everything, stirring up the colours of the hedges and the banks and resonating off the water. Sludd's Liberty had retreated from you. The evening moon was up, and behind the city and the trees the sun was setting in a sky like a sheet of cold copper marked with the single dent of a hammer. One of those sunsets that looks to be changing the world and no one is noticing.

I wish Nicolas had been able to learn that kind of lesson. But looking back, it seems now as though it was only a matter of time until he was mixed up in an incident like the one that followed.

One morning, as he crossed the Upper Hall of Communion Town metro station on the way to his shift, he noticed a figure

sprawled on the tiles, full-length, with its body twisted, the side of its face flattened into the floor and its arms thrown loosely over its head. The sparse hairs of its beard stuck to the tiles, and its parted lips were within kissing distance of somebody's footprint. There was no sign of life. The prostrated form looked for all the world as though it had fallen from the rafters. Probably it had just dragged itself out of the shadows in the night – suffering, perhaps, with one of the diseases to which its kind is prone.

Where it had come from didn't matter. There was no doubting what it was. The commuters stepped around it without registering its presence, and those breakfasting a few feet away at the aluminium tables of the Transit Café never gave it a glance.

Nicolas, though, not only looked openly at the comatose thing, but stopped and squatted beside it. I felt my innards reorganise as I watched. Even at a distance I could smell the foetor of the overalls and army-surplus jacket it wore. He felt for its pulse and leant in horribly close to its face. His movements were competent, and an idle part of my mind speculated on whether he'd had some medical training back where you came from. He brushed his fingertips lightly against the creature's eyelashes, and it stirred.

This was lunacy. Cursing my sluggishness, I broke in on the scene, hauled Nicolas bodily to his feet with more strength than I usually possess, and steered him away through the Hall. My heart was lunging and I had a sudden headache. He stared as I explained to him, as if to a child, that you couldn't *do* that – never, and certainly not in a public metro station. Through good luck no decisive line had been crossed, but I was genuinely angry at the position he had put me in. I hadn't intended for us to meet face to face like this. Fortunately, he didn't seem inclined to wonder who I was; but I couldn't

conceal my indignation at his conduct. What, I asked him, had he been thinking?

Nicolas didn't answer. The creature had woken now, and he watched with what might easily have been taken for solicitude as it scrambled out of sight. He twitched his shoulder free of my hand and glanced in my direction before he walked away, but he didn't really notice me at all.

I want to be generous, and perhaps we can allow that in those early days he simply did not appreciate the implications of his actions. No doubt he was misled by the company he kept. In a sense he was guilty of nothing more than a failure of imagination: but if so, then the events that came soon afterwards surely granted him all the insight he could have desired.

What the Cynics did at Communion Town was simple in conception, intricate in execution, a nightmare in its outcome. At five-fifteen p.m. on the first Friday of the summer, the conspirators – a cell of only ten men and women, as we now know – took control of the mechanical and electrical systems of the metro station, and crippled the lift shafts. At the same time, down in the station's innards, they caused a series of ancient fire doors, six-inch slabs of iron which had been out of use for a century, to grind shut. Twenty-seven members of the public were imprisoned, unable either to return to the surface or to escape on to the platforms. They had been sealed without food or water into a buried tangle of tunnels lit by stuttering bulbs. The city above could watch them through the security cameras that the saboteurs had left operational, but all other lines of communication had been cut. The emergency services were baffled by the obsolescent structures that had been layered down through the generations of Communion Town's growth beneath the city. The wiring had fused and melted, the doors were impenetrable, and any

incautious attempt to dig out the trapped citizens was liable to cave in the entire catacombs.

These developments should have been enough to show Nicolas that the city contained more dangers than he had supposed, and stranger motives. But it was only as Saturday passed with minimal progress towards a rescue, and a second midnight approached, that the true nature of the Cynic design became clear. The citizens waiting down there in the tunnels, who by now must have been exhausted and dehydrated and their psychological condition increasingly frail, would have heard the first mutterings, rattles and scrapes, and would have seen the first flutters of movement at the edges of their confined world as, in greater numbers than anyone can have witnessed outside their ugliest fancies, from the ventilation ducts and drainage grates and disused access hatches and all the other dark corners and cracks in the surfaces of things, the monsters arrived.

The barbarism of it is hard to credit. The imagination baulks. We'll never begin to guess what it was like for the victims, but what choice do we have except to go over the details, transfixed by the fate that was engineered for them, trying and failing to grasp its reality?

When I last spoke to Nicolas, I asked him what he thought about the conspirators and the way the city dealt with them after their arrests. As for myself, and I'm not very proud of this, my first instinct was that they were being treated far too kindly – but then, of course, I know that's not good enough. I know it's by extending to the Cynics the respect and decency they deny to others that we show our difference from them. We offer them the chance their victims can never have. We don't cast them out, however abhorrent their point of view may be to the values that underpin our way of life. Instead,

we take them in. We engage with their ideas and challenge them through vigorous rational debate. We let them know that, in spite of what they've done, we're with them, and we won't give up on them until we have helped them find a way out of the error in which they are mired. Patiently we show them that we'll never let them go until they understand, and until they have been understood.

We tell their stories.

I said as much to Nicolas, when I faced him across the table in a room not unlike this one. I said to him what I'm saying again now: I can help you, but I need your help. I want to believe that you're on our side, that you're serious about embracing the welcome this city has offered, but I need you to make me sure. All you have to do is convince me, I said, and this is your opportunity.

But what was the response? None. He had nothing to tell me. He lowered those dark brows as if he were embarrassed on my behalf.

The sad thing is I wasn't entirely surprised. I hate to say it, but I've spent a long time watching over you and Nicolas, doing all I can to help you make the adjustment to your new life – and what have you given back? I ask myself that, Ulya, and to be honest I don't have an answer.

I'll tell you something. You'll find that there comes a point when you can give up on the regret, at long last – on the hurt of not having kept what you had. But then you hesitate, because letting go means giving up the last piece of ground, and if you did that you'd be surrendering, you'd be allowing yourself to turn into a different person. I can't help you make that choice. Each of us has to decide for ourselves.

Think of Communion Town. Can we say how we would have behaved, if it had been us in the place of the citizens as they were surrounded by those things? Things that, in spite

of what they were, gave the uncanny impression of having a coordinated and even a compassionate purpose. They were carrying plastic canisters of clean water and packets of all-but-fresh food pilfered from the refuse bins of supermarkets. They offered these gifts with nods of encouragement and gestures of hospitality.

I don't think any of us are in a position to moralise on what ensued. All we can do is state the facts as we know them: that after a night and a day trapped underground, every one of those people accepted food and drink from the monsters without hesitation. It's clear in the security footage. You can watch, if you have a strong stomach, as an overweight man still wearing his jacket and tie crams his mouth with a hunk of bread that has been torn for him by one of the *homines*, and as a young woman cups her hands, the most natural thing in the world, to catch the water that one of them is pouring for her.

They must have known the consequences of what they did. By the time the would-be rescuers succeeded in bringing the lifts back to life and prising open the fire doors, there were no human beings left in the tunnels for them to save. Nothing was left down there except the pests, the meaningless creatures that slink with the stray cats and cockroaches in the underparts of the city, and those were fit only to be driven off into the dark with oaths and stones. There are twenty-seven more of the wretched things now than there were before.

I'm not going to hide my disappointment with Nicolas. He had the chance to improve matters for himself and he turned it down, in the petulant, deliberate way that he has. For reasons that frankly elude me, he prefers to leave everything up to you. But I'm not too sorry, because, it occurs to me now, you were always the one who fascinated the most.

Nicolas had his pleasing qualities, certainly, but you, Ulya, you've always been the mystery. You know, I believe that since you came to this city you've not shown anyone a glimmer of what goes on inside. Did you give yourself away, perhaps just once? I don't believe you did.

But you've been holding yourself apart for too long now, refusing. I'm here, but I can't help unless you let me. Think of this as your true arrival in the city. Do you remember how, once, soon after that first glum morning in the Terminus, you spent a long time by the seafront, lost in thought? I was with you then, too, though you didn't notice me. A storm was setting up offshore, and you must have been cold in that cheap plastic raincoat, but you walked there for an hour. I don't know what it looked like to you, but to me the sky was a cavernous auditorium, its hangings dark and threadbare and its plasterwork falling apart before our eyes. The sea was full of the anticipatory movements of an audience; rustling programmes, shushing itself, waiting for the spotlight to snap the boards into existence under your feet. I sniffed the chilly, promising air and felt a tingle of excitement, and I was on the point of calling out to you. But I knew it wasn't yet time, and so I waited, and now at last the chatter has turned to attention and the hush is beginning to stretch, and you have to decide if you're a singer, a magician or a clown.

We can make a beginning here. Yes. I feel a special moment approaching. I'm hanging on your words. Now take your time. Breathe in.