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Opening Extract from...

Ostrich

Written by Matt Greene

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OSTRICH

MATT GREENE

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To my parents, to whom I owe everything
(at a relatively competitive rate of interest)

Prologue

I can tell my parents are unhappy by the way they smile at waiters. In that small act of ingratiation I can see the custody battle to come. It won't be fought in the courtroom but in HMV and Game. Stocks in Nintendo will soar as my affections are auctioned off to the highest bidder. My teeth will rot.

I can already feel them starting to decay as my mum orders from the Specials Board. It's obvious what she's doing. She's forming an alliance. She even does her French voice, singing along to the chalkboard like the accents are markers on a karaoke screen. (The hat accent on top of the A is called a circumflex. It indicates that something is missing. I think a hat always indicates this.) In history we are doing Entente Cordiale. If mum is the United Kingdom and the waiter is France then dad must be Germany.

Dad will only order from the Specials when the waitress is pretty. She is not so he gets a steak. 'Rare.'

'How rare?'

'Cooked long enough that his family aren't in denial but not so long that they're at acceptance. Anywhere between bargaining and depression. Just so long as it's seen the inside of a warm room.'

Rare meat aggravates my dad's Diverticulosis. He just really likes the joke. It's the same impulse that makes him introduce mum at parties as his first wife. He does

it even though he knows it may cause irritation. (He takes 'cow's juice' in his coffee even though he's lactose intolerant.)

I order number 28 because it is a perfect number and because I don't like talking any more than is absolutely necessary.

When the food arrives the only noise is the scrape of cutlery. The silence is familiar. It takes its place at the table like a second son. Then, when it realises that only three places have been set, it goes on to take the floor. (This is a metaphor. I will probably use some more of them because you have to in order to get top marks in Composition, which is what I'm practising for because it's what you need to get a scholarship. You should also say however instead of but and moreover instead of also, and, whenever possible, make sure that people exclaim and remark things instead of saying them. Moreover you should talk about past events in the present tense and use at least one semicolon even if you're not completely sure how.)

Silence is a game of chicken. Mum always says it's not the winning, it's the taking part. (Dad says you can't win unless you take part. ('Can't win the lottery if you don't buy a ticket.')) So it's not really a surprise when she cracks first.

'What did you learn at school today?'

In Science we are doing magnetic fields. It makes me think of divorce. I will be the iron filings and they will be the poles, taking it in turns to see if they will attract me or disperse me like a water cannon. What they don't realise is that the experiment is flawed because they are both like poles. I can tell this because they repel each other.

'La Paz is the highest capital city in the world.'

'Is that right?' asks mum rhetorically.

'Yes, it is,' I say (because I am my mother's son). And then, to further fuel the conversation, 'What does precocity mean?'

'Why?' Mum. Non-rhetorical.

'Because Miss Farthingdale asked if I knew what it meant and I said I did.'

Dad throws back his head. At first I think he is laughing at me (which he does sometimes) but it's the steak. He's given up chewing, gulping it back in chunks dolphin style.

'*Ms* Farthingdale,' corrects mum.

This time he does laugh. Mum doesn't. She does the opposite of laughing, which is like not laughing but more so.

'You'd prefer he grow up a misogynist like his father?'

She catches herself a second too late. The words slipped out by accident, like a glob of spit hitching a ride on a capital P. They drip down dad's cheek and for the first time since we've sat down she looks him straight in the eye, pretending not to see it, hoping he hasn't noticed it.

Grow up.

If he has noticed he doesn't show it.

'Don't you mean *ms*ogynist?'

He gulps back another hunk of beef as a reward for his trick and leans across the table to plant a kiss on mum's cheek. She recoils at his touch, like the sea from the ugly pebble beach in Brighton where we used to go on holiday. (We don't go on holiday any more. (Mum says being on holiday is a state of mind.))

'Ah, come on Lou, he's not so bad!'

*

Sometimes my parents will talk about me like I'm not here. (This is called the third person. (I think that's why they haven't had any more children, because they're used to me being the third person.)) Dad has been doing it more and more lately.

Is everything alright?

It's the waitress. On closer inspection she is almost pretty. If you were to describe a pretty girl to one of those police composite artists that they have in American TV shows she is what you might get. All of her features are correct but somehow they don't link up properly, like they don't belong together. Her hair is fuzzy, as though it's been drawn with a 2B pencil. She is frustrating to look at (like a wonky picture) so I don't.

(I am starting to notice these things, which makes me think that perhaps I am my father's son after all.)

My parents beam at her as though she's the sun and they are solar powered. I notice that dad doesn't look directly at her either.

'Are you needing for anything?'

'Just the recipe!' says my mum, who doesn't cook.

'And how's that number twenty-eight?' She flashes me her teeth. They aren't quite white. The French word for white is *blanc*, which is a better one for her teeth. They are blank and she is unfinished.

'Perfect,' I remark.

No one knows that I am being clever (and funny). Question: If a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, does it still make a sound? (Answer: Yes. (Obviously.))

I excuse myself.

The picture on the door of the Men's has got no neck. His head just floats there above his shoulders, totally unconnected to the rest of his body. I decide to use the disabled loo instead because the only thing strange about this man is that he's sitting down, which I find more relatable than having been decapitated.

I open the door by taking my middle finger and pressing as hard as I can down on the part of the handle closest to the doorknob until the blood pools under my fingernail and my palm starts to ache. Another thing we learned in Science is that a door handle is a First Class Lever and that levers are actually machines (even though we have them in our bodies) because a machine is just something that changes the size or direction of an applied force. (Levers are a way of lifting a heavy load over a small distance by applying a small force over a bigger distance. They work by using a fulcrum, which I like to think of as being a bit like an equals sign. (Imagine you're reading a book out loud and you come across the number 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 and you don't know how to pronounce it. This is when you might want to use a fulcrum. So instead of struggling with such a heavy load you could just call it a billion billion, which takes a bit longer to say but is easier than knowing the word quadrillion. This is exactly the same principle behind levers.)) By pressing down here though I'm basically doing a manual override. This is how I know that no one else has touched this part of the handle before, which makes it much more hygienic.

I use my elbow to lock the door behind me and turn on the tap and then I stare at my reflection until it becomes

unfamiliar. Usually I can make this happen with less than a minute of actual, concentrated looking (I only need to repeat my name 22 times before it sounds like someone else's) but today it isn't working. I try taking off my hat.

David Driscoll says I look like I lost a bet which he should know about because his dad has a gambling problem and he's had to wear the same trousers since Year 6 even though he's had a growth spurt and he claims he has to shave now. He calls my hat my gay-lid, by which he means it locks the gayness in rather than being gay itself. (It's a white baseball cap, and white is only gay if you refract it through a prism.) I think he thinks homosexuality is like body heat and that you lose 80% of it through your head. (I saw an 18 once where the homophobic bully turns out to be gay, which is called Overcompensation, but David Driscoll isn't gay because he's always talking about sex with girls. (I mean the sex is with girls, not the talking. (He never talks to girls.)))

It works. A stranger stares back at me from the mirror. I hold his gaze, being careful to keep perfectly still because I am in screensaver mode and the slightest movement could break the spell. We burrow into each other's eyes. (There is no sign of recognition in his either.) Then I notice something protruding from his head.

Someone has written something behind him in the space between the paper towel dispenser and the help cord:

ɘɾɘh ꙅɑw ꓕ

It makes more sense when I turn around.

I was here

The message slides down the wall, starting at *I* and ending at *e*. (If the help cord is a y axis and the top of the towel dispenser is x then it displays a relationship of Inverse Proportionality.) The letters are jagged and sharp. Some of them start off normal and end up in italics and the W looks like an underwater shark. When I take a step towards them I can see that they aren't written at all. Someone has carved them into the wall with a knife, which seems like a lot of effort to go to, especially if you know that *I was here* is a tautology. Whoever left this can't know about tautologies because if he did he'd have known that he was wasting his time. He might as well just have scratched *I* or *was* or *here* (or even just a full stop) because any one of them would have meant exactly as much. (A tautology is when you say the same thing twice, like *safe haven*, or *tuna fish* or *I thought to myself* (because it's impossible to think to anyone besides yourself (unless you believe in telepathy (which I don't))). You can lose marks in Composition for tautologies but people use them all the time in life because they like the sound of their own voice.)

Back at the table it's obvious mum and dad are arguing because that's the only time they're polite to each other. The way they fight is to see which of them can keep the calmest, because the calmer you are the more rational you're being. Even from a distance I can see that dad is winning on points. He's doing this thing where he measures out his words between his palms like he's boasting about a fish he caught which he thinks makes them sound precise and authoritative (but which I think makes it look like they're in brackets). I edge closer until I can hear them.

'I appreciate that, I hear what you're saying, Lou, I recognise its validity, and for the record here no one's actively disagreeing with you.'

'I wouldn't suggest you were. I apologise if you got that impression. That said, if you'd let me finish—'

'You're right, I will, I'm sorry. However, before you do, let *me* first just say this …' He takes off his glasses and pinches the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, like I do when I get a nosebleed. 'It does him no good to see you like this. It doesn't do any of us—' Over mum's shoulder he spots me. He stops mid-sentence so I know him is me. A smile cracks open his face. 'Bloody hell, if it isn't Titus Oates! D'you get lost? We were about to send a search party. Don't forget to change your watch back.'

I sit down, adding Titus Oates to my mental To Google list. (I don't ask dad about these things any more, not since I embarrassed myself in English by telling everyone that a Palindrome is where they race Michael Palins.) The plates have been cleared. I hadn't finished. Mum has something in her eye, which is a little red. Dad tops up my Pepsi and throws an arm round my shoulder.

'Well, now you're here, Alex, you can settle a debate.'

Mum lowers the napkin which she's been using on her eye and shoots him a look.

'Who's tighter, your uncle Phil or your uncle Tony? Because Phil serves soup on plates but your uncle Tony buys time second-hand.'

And then the lights go out.

The room inhales. The walls contract.

I see the flash before I hear the clap because light travels faster than sound.

If you count the seconds between seeing and hearing and divide it by five then you can calculate how far away the storm is. But there's no time for that because it's already upon us.

'I don't know what I've been told, no I don't know what I've been told but someone here is getting old, oh someone here is getting old.'

The waiters march out from the kitchen in procession. Ours is in the middle, holding aloft an ice cream sundae, sprouting sparklers (the sundae, not her). By the way she's carrying it you'd think it were the Olympic torch. She leads the chorus, singing the song against its will.

'I don't know but it's been said, no I don't know but it's been said, someone's face is turning red, yeah someone's face is turning red.'

Dad starts clapping along and mum spills a laugh down her shoulder as she cranes round to see what's going on. I appear to do nothing but actually I'm busy empathising (which is like sympathising but better, because you actually put yourself in the other person's shoes). I want whoever the storm is headed for to know I feel their pain. I try to implant this thought in their mind but I don't believe in telepathy so it proves difficult. I want them to know I won't laugh at their discomfort. I'll do the opposite. Maybe if they're really embarrassed I'll even act. I'll stand up.

'It's *my* birthday!'

Maybe it will catch on. Maybe everyone will want a free dessert. It will be like the end of that film.

'It's *my* birthday!'

'It's *my* berfday!'

'It's *moy* boithday!'

The sundae lands in front of me.

'The good news is we sing for free, the bad news is we sing off-key.'

Blood races up towards my head so quickly for a second I think I might black out. My face turns red and my eyes turn green with envy for everyone else in the whole world in this exact moment right now. (I'm an effing traffic-light.) The waiters form a semicircle round our table. Everyone is watching. It's nothing like the end of that film. I look to mum for help but she's laughing tears. I look at dad.

'Don't look at me.'

'Happy birthday, happy birthday to you!'

It is not my birthday.

Finally mum steps in.

'I think you may have the wrong table.'

Our waitress beckons mum towards her and whispers conspiratorially.

'It's the only way they'll let us comp desserts.' She nods towards me. 'We didn't want to draw any, you know, *attention*.'

Then she says this to me: 'But we want you to know how brave we all think you are.'

We don't tip.

PART ONE

it's raining, it's pouring

one

In assembly last year we learned about Rosa Parks who was the black woman who sparked the Civil Rights Movement in America because she refused to move to the back of a bus. I think it's great that black people are equal now and we don't have racism any more but I honestly don't get why she was complaining in the first place. On our bus sitting at the back is a privilege that is only afforded to the most senior pupils. It has taken me nearly four years to earn this position (during which time I have matured from the bright-eyed nine-year-old who arrived at Grove End with a song in his heart and raisins in his lunchbox to the worldly and cynical almost-thirteen-year-old I am today). Middle school was only meant to be a stopgap. The bus thing is pretty much the only advantage of still being here after all this time. So when I see a Year 5 stumbling hesitantly down the aisle towards me, I know exactly what's going on. A mix of Fear and Excitement struggles to articulate itself on his face. He chews the inside of a cheek with a set of primary teeth and looks up at me, his eyes round with hope. (He knows who I am but I don't know who he is. That's the way it works. School years are Semi-Permeable

Membranes. (Moreover, everyone at school knows who I am.)) I decide to help him along.

'Yes?'

He rehearses one last time in his head and then asks what he's meant to ask. 'How are your mum's piano lessons going?'

For a second I feel sorry for him. He's so small. (It's hard to believe I was once that young, even if it was three whole years ago.) He has no idea that he's about to learn a lesson he'll never forget, a lesson that will strip him of a faith in humanity he's so far never had to question. However, it's a lesson we've all learned in our time. I know my lines. I tear up a little, which I can do on demand. 'My mum hasn't got any arms.'

A breath dies in his throat. It's my second cue.

'Why would you ask me something like that?'

Now his face has no trouble with ambiguity. Terror sweeps across it, freezing his features in place and pricking his tear ducts. At the front of the bus David Driscoll pops up like a Whac-A-Mole and blasts him with a 'Waaaaah!' I knew he'd have had something to do with this.

Your Mum's Piano Lessons is a simple game that requires three players, Older Boy 1 (the instigator), Older Boy 2 (the accomplice) and New Boy (the mark). It works like this. Older Boy 1 sidles up to New Boy on a bus trip or in the playground and asks him if he wants to be part of a really brilliant joke. New Boy, eager to please and slightly star-struck by Older Boy 1, who he instantly recognises and reveres on account of his seniority, discerning a valuable opportunity to associate with a social superior (and perhaps recalling from a nature documentary he's seen the levels of protection afforded to those

tiny birds that clean crocodiles' teeth) gratefully accepts. Older Boy 1 then points out Older Boy 2 (who may or may not have been previously briefed, depending on his familiarity with the game) and tells New Boy that if he goes over and asks him how his mum's piano lessons are going Older Boy 2 will break into hysterical laughter and everyone will live happily ever after. Then what just happened happens (the crocodile snaps his jaws) and New Boy scurries back to his seat or his corner of the playground and when anyone asks why he's crying blubbers something about the high pollen count.

Except this one doesn't. He couldn't move if he tried. He's staring at my head, transfixed.

'What happened to your hair?'

I'm the only one in school who's allowed to wear non-religious headgear (there are four turbans in our year and Simon Nagel wears a skullcap in the colours of Watford Football Club) because some of the younger kids don't understand why I'm bald and sometimes it's easier to hide things than explain them. I get a lot of looks but it's okay. Once in Year 6 I forgot to wear my own clothes on mufti day and for the whole day I was the only kid at school in uniform so I already know what it's like to feel ostrichised, which is a better word for excluded (because ostriches can't fly so they often feel left out). I took my sweater off and undid my top button but that still didn't stop people staring at me. It's weird how you can wake up one day exactly the same person as the day before except the world has changed around you and now you're the odd one out.

Being ill is a bit like forgetting mufti day.

*

(Analogies are also important in Composition because they help people relate things they don't understand to their own experiences (and to tell a good story you need to write about things that not many people have experienced). Metaphors are just one type of analogy but there are loads more you can use. Sometimes people don't even realise they're using a metaphor because they've heard it so often that they've forgotten that they're trying to relate to something they don't understand. These are called dead metaphors and there are some examples below:

1) *Running* water
2) *Head* Master
3) Flower *bed*

Dead metaphors prove that we can only understand the world around us by pretending that it's human and it behaves like us (which it isn't and it doesn't). That's why we pretend that chairs have arms and woods have necks and we're so used to doing it that we've forgotten that that's even a slightly weird thing to say (which is why you don't get extra marks for using dead metaphors in Composition).

When my doctor, Mr Fitzpatrick, explained about my treatment he used an analogy. He told me to imagine that a suicide bomber had taken a group of innocent people hostage in Gamestation and that if we didn't stop him he was going to blow up the whole of the Harlequin Centre, which is the biggest shopping centre in all of Hertfordshire. And then he told me that if we sent in a Specially Trained Armed Response Unit they would be able to 'neutralise' the terrorist threat however they

couldn't necessarily guarantee the safety of the hostages (who might accidentally get shot), but if we did nothing the terrorist would kill them all anyway, as well as everyone else in a 10km radius.

'And that's why we're sending in the SWAT team,' he said. 'That's why we're telling them Shoot to Kill.'

And when I asked him why we didn't try negotiating with the suicide bomber first he shook his head slowly like a cricket umpire and said, 'It is our country's policy never to negotiate with terrorists.'

(So I asked him what were the bomber's demands and he told me he didn't have any, which I told him was bullspit because the whole point of taking people hostage is getting your demands met, and if you didn't have any demands there would be no reason to take hostages in the first place. So then he told me that the terrorists hated our freedom and that actually the suicide bomber did have some demands after all, and did I want to hear what they were, because all they were was the systematic destruction of Western culture and the entire American way of life (because Mr Fitzpatrick is American).

'And besides, even if we could negotiate with him – *which we will not do* – it wouldn't do us any good anyway because let me tell you something about the terrorist mentality, let me school you here a second, son, the terrorist believes he has God on his side. The terrorist *actually believes* that when he gets up to heaven-knows-where there's 72 virgins waiting for him, and every last one of them, they're big-time murder fans – and do you know whose side they're on, cos it sure as bacon ain't Team Infidel.'

(And then I asked what a virgin was because this was two years ago and I was young and naïve (and Mr

Fitzpatrick told me that a virgin was a really good friend with a PlayStation 2). (Being a virgin is like growing up Caucasian in Hertfordshire. You are one long before you know there's a word for it.))

So then I asked Mr Fitzpatrick why they had to shoot to kill and why they couldn't use rubber bullets and shoot to disarm, which would ensure the safety of the hostages, and he told me that the terrorist has a thick hide like a rhinoceros and that the rubber bullets would just bounce off him (which I took to be an insult to my intelligence so I asked him where exactly he thought the terrorist was from, because if he was threatening everyone in a 10km radius that would suggest he had nuclear capabilities, which was extremely unlikely, unless maybe he came from North Korea in which case he'd most likely be a Buddhist and not believe in heaven. And Mr Fitzpatrick just said, 'Exactly.')

But even then I didn't understand why we couldn't just try talking to him because after all, even if the suicide bomber did believe some weird stuff and even if he did have Weapons of Mass Destruction (which I sincerely doubted), at the end of the day he was still a person. And that's when the analogy stopped working, because my tumour is not a person.)

The Year 5 is still there. I tell him to get to fuck, which is not in the script.

Normally I try not to swear. I learned to swear when I was seven in Wales when we went to stay with Uncle Tony and he dropped a frozen leg of lamb on his foot. A few weeks later I was watching football with dad and his team conceded, so to empathise I said 'Shit!' Dad washed my mouth out with soap (because it was 'dirty' (which

suggests he doesn't understand metaphors)). But that wasn't half as bad as the time mum heard me call Pete Sloss a cocksucker on the way to the cinema. She didn't get angry with me but that night when she was tucking me in she asked if I knew what one was. And when I said no she said she didn't have a problem with me using rude words if I felt they were necessary to express myself but she'd prefer I didn't use words I didn't understand. So she explained it to me. She told me about oral sex and foreplay and lubrication and even flavoured condoms (which I had previously thought meant vaginas had taste buds), and finally when she was finished she made me repeat it back to her. After that she kissed me goodnight, which made me feel queasy.

I can swear in 67 different languages. But I can only apologise in three, which means I could get beaten up in 64 countries.

One of the languages I can do both in is French, which is my first lesson on a Monday. In French class we're not allowed to speak English. Instead we have to do everything *en Français*. There are a lot of things I do en Français that I'd never do in English. For one thing I help out around the house a lot more. Every weekend I spend a minimum of one hour passing the hoover in my bedroom and each night I set and clear the table before and after dinner (respectively (obviously)). I have a younger sister who calls herself Marie-Clare (who has nine years (whenever anyone tells you their age in French it sounds like they have a terminal disease) and enjoys horse-riding) and what is more an older brother (Serge) who likes to play football. Moreover, I have a diet that consists exclusively of the potato in its various incarnations

(plates of chips, bags of crisps and baked), a father who is a doctor (because I don't know the word for a driving instructor) and a mother who works at home (because I don't know the word for Sexism (or Legal Secretary)). Every summer the five of us go on holiday without fail and always to the same place, La Rochelle, where we practise windsurfing and pass a fantastic week with each other and our dog who calls himself Sausage. I even have a different name in French. (Madame Berger made us each choose one at the start of the year and explained that in her class that is what we would be known as. At first it felt a bit like we were losing our identities, like we were going into prison and being given a number, but actually now I quite like my French name.) It's Marcel.

'Marcel?'

'Oui, madame?'

'Qu'est-ce tu as fait le weekend dernier?'

At first the question confuses me because I don't know if last weekend means the weekend that's just passed or the weekend before that. Both are in the past. I can tell that because I'm in French class.

'Le weekend?'

'Oui. Le weekend *dernier*. En *passé composé*.'

In truth it doesn't matter which weekend. Madame Berger was only trying to be helpful. But in French I do the same thing every weekend: 'Samedi j'ai joué au foot avec mon frère et dimanche j'ai lu un roman.' (I am a much more active person in French and I only read novels because I don't know if the internet is masculine or feminine.)

'Ah, oui. C'est vrai?'

This is une question rhétorique. However, I decide to

answer anyway because Marcel is a keen conversationalist. 'Oui. C'est vrai.'

'Et pour aider tes parents, tu as fait quelque chose?'

'J'ai passé l'aspirateur dans ma chambre pour deux heures.'

'Comme un bon fils, n'est-ce pas?'

(Marcel is a good son. I take some vicarious pride from this, which is when you experience something as a result of something someone else has done.) Madame Berger is beaming.

'Et est-ce tu as fait quelque chose *hors de l'ordinaire,* peut-être?'

I pretend to scan my brain for an irregular past participle but really I knew the question was coming. 'Oui, jai ri à un film.'

(In many ways my life is so much simpler in French. I don't get headaches or déjà vu in French because I don't know the words for them. Moreover I don't worry about my parents' marriage or my own mortality or why I haven't had a wet dream because these are emotions I am not able to express. Sometimes I'm jealous of Marcel. I think that if I moved to France I'd be a completely different person. (For one thing I'd agree with people a lot more and for another I'd spend much more time in libraries and swimming pools.) Do you know what the French call a Lost Property Office? They call it a Found Property Office. (But then again they call a Potato an Apple Of The Ground.))

'Et qu'est-ce tu *feras* le weekend prochain? Dans *l'avenir*.'

I don't know the French for brain surgery. So I cheat.

'La même.'

*

Our next lesson is the one I've been waiting for. English. Miss Farthingdale hands back our Compositions in reverse order, starting with the worst and ending with … Simon Nagel's. *Effing eff-word!*

I come third with 16 out of 20 behind Simon and Chloe Gower. As punishment I decide I have to coat my forearm in the fluid from the white end of my ink eraser pen and rest my nose on it for the whole lesson. (It's made from pig urine.)

Simon Nagel is an Alkaline Jew and his grandfather was in a concentration camp (I forget which one. It's definitely not Auschwitz but it would be one of the other top answers in Family Fortunes if they ever did that round). He always finds a way to write about the Holocaust whatever title we get set, which is why he always wins. Chloe Gower is an albino and comes from a Broken Home. Her skin is the same colour as the Tipp-ex she uses to write *Manic Street Preachers* on her rucksack and her parents split up a year and a half ago (which is about the time she dyed her hair black (which is not a good look for an albino (because it makes her face look like apartheid))). Every few months when her dad picks her up from school in his convertible there'll be a new woman in the passenger seat. They always look roughly the same, like younger, prettier versions of her mum. It's a bit like her dad's casting for an American Remake of his life. I tried to talk to her once about the Manic Street Preachers because I quite like that song they do about being tolerant but when I told her this she sneered and told me she only liked the early stuff. Then she gave me one earpiece from her minidisc and played me a song called 'She

Is Suffering' and asked me what I thought. I think that being a Manic Street Preachers fan who prefers 'She Is Suffering' to the Tolerance Song is like being a Christian who prefers the carpentry to the miracles. But I told her it sounded cool and now when we cross each other in the corridor we nod.