

FOUR
MANCHESTER
TOWER
STORIES

I DEEPER THAN

When I was a kid I could see the hills to the north and east from every part of the city - across the end of a street, or between warehouses, through park trees. There was only one tower that rose above Victoria Station, my landmark, I was nearly home. The city was lighter and lighter then, more sky and less weight. Like the mass of floors above me all pressing down on my neck in this pasta bar I've been told to try at the foot of our newish home, the tallest of the forty, fifty, sixty-five floor towers.

When Cee was missing it would have been unthinkable to eat out. Now I know, I avoid the apartment in the evening. It took a week for the submersible to be prepared and flown from one side of the continent to the other, a week for the support ship to reach the area where they thought the *Beetham* went down, and a week for the sonars, the remote craft, then the divers in the submersible to find her flipped over, superstructure buried deep in loose motile seabed. Her hull a lozenge of rust and grey. Her propellers and rudder facing the opposite way to their last known heading.

I order aubergine penne, white wine. The kitchen is open and noisy, as are the group of young people I can't work out - friends or colleagues? Colleagues. The other tables are pairs of adults and children they've just moved in for university. Cee and I are surrounded by rentals, on floor twelve of sixty-five, mostly young professionals or students. In our concrete square, the young professionals shiver in gym gear between the new saplings, while their

tiny dogs strain to shit on the thin yellow strip of fake grass. When the students are quiet they are very quiet, when they are noisy they are very noisy.

Other sounds keep me awake at night, the rush of water, everything shifting, the deep revolving ocean echo in which, if I could dip a sonar in the right place, I'd hear the *Beetham* go down.

Cee decided she'd be more ecologically sound not to fly to New York, but sail on a cargo ship that took passengers and a stack of branded but anonymous containers. Cee decided things. That having no kids, we should retire early, move in from our home and bright garden five miles out to this tower from where we walked to cinemas, concerts, restaurants. I liked suddenly being in the thick of things, to decide and be there in a few minutes, then wander. From the apartment I can see between the other towers and cranes to the hills east and to the south the suburb we moved in from. I used to track my wanders from the window. Now if I'm not careful, I realise I'm staring at my reflection, thinking of Cee's body, time, water seeping through metal and mud.

The pasta is not as good as people said, but the staff are friendly. Outside, looking up between the towers, I like to think the electric blue dusk sky is the ocean and the edges of the towers the coast. For all their height, they reach nowhere near the depth of Cee and the *Beetham*. Their weight steel glass compacts up through my shoes, bones, into my knees. My tower crumbles from it's own mass, bits of our apartment falling through the floors below, furniture, papers, pots, pans, the duvet, all Cee's

shoes. The door to the roof will be open, I take the lift up past the twelfth floor, past our still intact home.

I began coming up here at night when the sea sounds got too much. Not quite the bright green garden we left, but I've planted small trees in pots and grown herbs in old cans. The city breathing sixty-five floors below soothes me, traffic, sirens, distant people making their late way home, the bigger hum of everything right out to the hills and their flat urban skirt. I've watched, felt the way the wind revolves around the towers, then narrows and accelerates between them, meeting the warm thermals rising from the city's air conditioning and body heat.

I open the old travel trunk under the bench I brought up here. The suit fits easily over my clothes, I tighten straps, buckle, I've become thin boned. The many times I've done this in my head I was never this dizzy, sitting on the edge the drop sheer to bright concrete, pin-like saplings. I can't get a breath in, no body below my sternum, like sudden cold water.

Sex is not what I miss. What I miss is afterwards, us lying sticky, the smell, breathing slowing down and everything sounding in the distance, massive and make believe.

I jump into wind cramming my ears, roll buffeted, ripple, flap for currents of heat, gasp, for air, for balance, to see, no time, the concrete too close too quick and then the tug up on my shoulders, the chords to Cee tighten, everything slows, stops spinning, the dangle of my legs as I rise.

II CARE

The lift buttons look heart shaped, or tears maybe, they're the same lift buttons as at the Care Home where my wife Anna lies all day in her room on Floor 2. They haven't moved her down to Floor 1 yet. There's a notice in the lift there that tells you not to let patients get in from Floor 1 without a member of staff. Floor 1 is where you go when.

The code for the care home lift is my date of birth.

The buttons may look the same here but there are sixty-five of them, not three, and I've no idea which one to press. The roof of the lift is a mirror, I need a haircut, there's a white mark on my jacket shoulder, chalk, brushed off, where did I get chalk from? I can't see myself in the lift wall, there are no notices here, at the home the notices in the lift are about staff meeting, washing hands, someone doing something to raise money for. And not letting residents of Floor 1 out.

I'm having one of those moments. All the buttons.

There's light, noise, people coming into the lobby so I press the top one, 65, the doors close in time and we're off up, same lift as the home but much faster, a whoosh in my belly, but we stop like a rocket's false start at 2 and I have to put my hand on the wall, leaving a cloud mark.

Doors open. The girl who looks like she makes her face up with flour and kohl, red top, glittery blue tutu sticking straight out, black tights no shoes her arm stretched back handcuffed to the boy, I think a boy, jeans, a tight bandage under his vest arms, blue fingernails, and toes, toenails.

She, the first girl says, 'Going up?'

I want to say, *I have no idea where I am going.* I want to be the boy girl in her cuff.

'Yes.'

'You live on the top!'

'I-' The lift pings arriving 65.

'Cool.'

And they're off out as if they weren't really interested if I did or not. I try to remember their faces. I'm staring at tear heart buttons, I know the buttons are round not hearts or tears, their intense light changes the shape of things.

I want to pee.

Neroli. The couple's smell. Coil hair oil. Incense. That acid at dry cleaners.

1 Oak Road, 20 Church Street, 40 Meadow Avenue, 42 Rye Lane, Yewtree Cottage, 10 Main Street, 14 The Fields, 3 Well Row

and then a blank. I know why we came, sold Well Row, downsized, moved into the city, saved the house money for our children but in the last two years the Home has taken all that and now they're after me.

There are 65 buttons. 67 if you include the underground floors. Off the north coast of Iceland there's a stone ball on an Island, Grimsey that marks the Artic Circle which, as the Earth tilts, moves north every year so in 2047 they'll roll the stone into the sea. Grimsey. Grimsby, Grimsby Gateway to Niagara.

I'm falling.

Someone's called the lift. I pass mine, whatever floor it is. Doors open. Ground floor. Two round men, sweaty from running, always wear bright matching bandanas, a small yappy dog. They step back for me. Outside is colder than when I came in, a wind's barreling between the towers. I look up and try and to spot the level of the view from my window on the tower opposite. Count windows up my block. Does 14 sound right, 14c, 15c?

The man who lost his wife in that shipwreck comes home. Nods to the security guard swaying from side to side, hands stuffed in his hi-vis jacket, hunkered under his black beanie. Mo, Mohammed, during the day he's doing college, business administration. He was born in the flats across the ring road. If I lean against the glass in my

apartment I can just see them. Triangulation. I count the windows up.

"You alright mate?"

I've closed my eyes, I'm looking out of the lift along the hallway of brown doors, the numbers, my key sliding in and opening onto my green vase sitting against the glass screen full of light from the window.

Sometimes I arrive at the care home much deeper down than just Anna being there. What depresses me in the Uber out, is all the Union Jacks and England flags flying at half lamp post and round roundabouts. A flag I should be proud of made tribal, excluding. If I won the Lottery I'd buy flags of all the good, goodish nations, hire a cherry picker and string them high above their ignorance full mast.

I don't know what the people who put up flags are scared of. The people who care for Anna are from all over. The people who have siphoned off everything I earned are, as far as I can see, profiteers who bankroll politicians who look just like them. The people ex-politicians go and work for. We have given them everything. Everything that was good. To make money out of. Buy their boats. And because that makes everything crap and expensive we blame the people from all over who are holding us up.

Mo grips my arm. "14c right? You should tag it on your key mate. Goodnight."

"Goodnight Mo, thank you." I knew he'd come.

Oak Church Meadow Rye Yew Main Fields Well. I should tag it on my key, or a piece of paper, or on a flag, 14c. If I screw my eyes the light makes the heart tear buttons go round. I press 14 and the doors close.

In the home, it's not called Floor 1, it's called the Churchill Suite.

II UP HERE

he comes up here

he comes up

doesn't mind us

though here is kind of his. We talk

his wife was in that ship

we don't talk about her

We talk

about the names in those pots

herbs, we pretend not to know them.

About how up here you only get seagulls

he's scared of birds

the feathers

touching them.

We talk about what he calls our costumes

do we make them ourselves?

they cheer him up

Failure!

He doesn't mind us smoking

says maybe he ought to try one day

one day

we talk about one day

he likes talking, then you know

he wants you to stop talking

sat on his bench, his *let's stop talking face* on

that gnarly hands thing

between his knees

twisting

We go.

We've sneaked back

watched him stand

by the edge looking up, swaying

arms out

rocking knees like he's skiing.

Once he got the box underneath the bench out

put his baggy white suit on

like a cartoon all he needs

is one of those flappy hats and goggles

but he had a backpack, straps

lots of tightening

then he kind of pats himself like he's lost something

his phone

unstraps

climbs out

all back in the box

under the bench.

He's coming now.

He's got his *let's stop talking face* on

we

go

IıII SECURITY

I smoked a lot of weed before I got into security but I'm sick of the stench round here. Delivered. Like Amazons and take-outs.

I'd have to start smoking again to survive living in one of these boxes where they can't open the windows to let the air in or smoke out. And you'd be pissed off if you'd bought a sunset across the city and two years later you're looking across a wind tunnel at a girl doing her make up, on her phone, drinking coffee. Any combination. All at once.

From here, where I stand this time of night, in the narrow second floor window, Goth Girl daubs herself white, and from Handcuff's elbow flicking in the mirror and dangling Elastoplast, I know they're binding like I reckon women footballers do to play. I saw them out normal when I did club doors.

So I spend all night outside stacks of places I couldn't live in. I've not got windows overlooking my back, just trees and a patch of field everyone's forgotten. In winter, from my bedroom, the horizon of red warning lights, towers and cranes, new ones sprouting.

Mo knows all the residents' names, their flat numbers, but from heading balls in Sunday League, butting the odd out of order, to me they're all jumble, I call them Goth Girl, Handcuffs, the Ghost Dog Woman. She comes out first light and again just before sunset, rain or shine, red

leash folded in her hand, walks like a small dog's running around her heels, doing pet-speak across to a tree where she waits a while then the same walk back into her block. The Sweat Balls have a real dog that yaps round their pink and blue strapped ankles, knees, yellow bandanas today, always matching bandanas, they really shouldn't be running. Impact. Weight. No warm down, just a bit of jogging on the spot, arm stretches. Pleased with themselves.

Mo even knows the names of the Sikh boys who trundle in a cage trolley piled with boxes of right-on ready-meals twice a week - Simmer and Prep Kitchen, Call Off the Herd. Untamed. The Mindful Chef. Planthood. I bet they'd kill for a Pot Noodle.

I grow carrots, leeks out back and tomatoes on my windowsills.

Clare on CCTV purrs over the radio, *The kids are up.*

Goth Girl and Handcuffs used to worry me, messing about on top, their getups, make up, the height up there, I'm not one of those people who can stand on the edge, you wonder when you're bored what a person hitting the ground would sound like. Body contact in my line is short, sharp, cracks, kerfuffle, panting. But we know now all Goth and Cuffs do is lie on the bench Roof Man put up there, with his herbs in cans. They smoke weed and watch shit on their phones. Handcuff's parents are The Heron Couple, from their knee step, their out elbows, they bend to listen to Mo, then lope on in. Lawyers of some sort. The Goth's mother is just the Goth's Mother,

even though she's not goth at all, she's short crop smoker blonde and I thought for a while of calling her Tennis Ball. The Goth's Mother is a sound engineer in that big new art place. Mo'll tell you their real names. Flat numbers.

The Goth's not the only make-up artist, there's The Clown, arrogant, ignores me, wears a business suit, carries his curly carrot wig with a briefcase, full face clown make-up, always pissed, does a street act after work over in Market Street, gives away sweets, the only resident Mo doesn't do Mo with, keeps his distance, Mo said once, *He's not that impressive, he's just a twat in make-up.* The guy's a planner in the Transport Department, working out the timing of traffic lights. To cause maximum disruption from what I see. Sometimes he's The Clown, most times he's The Twat in Make-up.

I got all types of twats on club doors. Some from here, coked up, obnoxious, barred some, threw others out, The Model, Butter Wouldn't, Under Armour, Miss Persia, none of them would behave like that here, where they live, chatting with Mo like the MDMA wouldn't melt in their - we've others, like the students, look, I say Chinese, I know they're not all Chinese and yes Mo knows, Malay, Korean, Singapore, to me Pink Cat, Snow Boots, Suitcases, Bond Specs, they nod, smile. Polite.

Roof Man comes back from eating in the pasta place round the corner. Since the sinking he's been Roof Man, brackets, (Who Lost His Wife in the *Beetham*). Maybe because his wife drowned, he walks like he's wading. The other old loner, Floor 14, gets out of an Uber from

visiting his wife and I see Mo clock him but Floor 14 walks right past. He'll be back.

Mo's a good boss. I've worked for some bastards, jumped up owners, managers, twats in suits, thieving agencies, good guys who get promoted and become little nazis. Most bosses on a job like this, if they were here at all would be glued to the heater, Mo's about, people like him, I like him. And daytime he studies. If he wasn't Mo he'd be Good Lad.

Foxes have built a set in the bushes at the bottom of my garden and their digging has spread across the grass. My wife wants rid and because she has read somewhere that male urine discourages them she encourages me to piss on their mound. I'd rather seed it, make a feature. It's hard to think of that happening round here, nature changing the shape of things.

If I walk between the blocks there's a bridge over what was a canal but now's standing brown water, a shopping trolley, a floating metallic party number seven. Two geese sip algae.

The Old Luvvies arrive back in a black cab, two stiff men in suits, their wives's necks glow, more cocktail than opera, clutching their programmes they heel clack chattering into their block, I can still hear them waiting for the lift. The Sweat Balls and their yappy dog lumber up, don't stretch or jog on the spot enough, limp into their block and Floor 14 comes out, Mo intercepts him this time. We try and get him to write floor 14c down but he says *I'm fine until I have to think about it.*

In five hours I'll be on my bike. When I ride home in the dark or first light I feel the towers on my back and only when they're lost behind the redbrick houses do I feel things opening up. I stand in my window looking through the trees at the warning lights and think of the residents all around me now in their boxes.

A purple glow from Goth Girl's room, she and Handcuffs, no handcuffs, dancing. Mo guides Floor 14 into the lobby, presses the lift button and gives me the thumbs up.

Vertical rows of windows, some dark. Most light, all that electricity.

A flash and up between the blocks, something, white, a big bird, swan, but pulsing, high twisting in the wind, a cloud a club laser a plastic bag maybe, gone over the towers.