

# PROLOGUE

TO MAKE LIGHT OF PHILOSOPHY IS TO BE A TRUE PHILOSOPHER.  
BLAISE PASCAL.

## minus-one

He's lying on the floor, mouth open like he's sleeping, but with wide unresponsive eyes fixed on someshit above him. Inside my head I'm not in this club with the lairies and skanks, caught up in this brawl with someone I've never met. Inside my head I'm all alone and in silence. Fuck me, I'm thinking, in mute panic. I've fuckin killed the cunt.

The bedlam returns. Pumping beats. Throbbing bass. Guys and girls gobbing off, some of them unaware of what's gone on. Where are Colbeck and Ade? Must've made a sharp exit like. And where are the bouncers? Have they even had time to react? Time slows down in situations like this but it's probably only ten seconds since I delivered the final jaw-shattering kick to the face of this fucker. The sequence of events has yet to register in the minds of all the dolled-up ladies and stripe-shirted lads around me. Shock still clouds their judgement. Cuz most people hate to see a fight. I'm the same. I wince at the sound a punch makes when it connects with a fragile face. It's not like they portray in films. It's more of a thud than a cracking sound; a dull interface, understated in its subtlety, quieter than you'd expect but more devastating; a slab of raw meat thrown against a cold hard surface.

So how, then, have I ended up in a club full of the kinda people I hate, standing over the comatose form of a bloody-faced geezer whose head I've just mashed?

Before I realise I'm thinking this shit I'm in the corridor next to the bogs, then I'm forcing open the fire doors and I'm climbing onto the recycle bins and pulling myself over the wall with people shouting after me, and I'm away.

This is both the beginning and the end.

It is June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

## zero

### Shaun

There was the blackness, and it blanketed me, and then there was nothing. \_Nothing for days, and then the wall clock tick-tocking.

And here it comes, The Surfacing.

This is how it feels to be born. Unwombed and taking the first breath.

Voices in the distance, broadcast from miles away and floating towards me on the breeze, recognisable as dialogue but incomprehensible as language. And all I have is this inside surface of my skull where my thoughts dance like charged electrons trying to escape. And I'm coming up for air, ready to test my aching limbs, to uncurl from my foetal shell, to explore my flesh with curious fingers. And, gradually, as I emerge, I can count three different voices around me. Or is it four? There is something holding my legs down and my neck is aching. I flicker my lids, unable to open them. My surroundings are bright. I know this because behind my eyelids is a warm red, not a dead black: there is a light shining on my face. Or maybe they've laid me in the sun.

(

I think he's waking up

David, I think he's waking up

)

someone says. And I see white. Blurred patterns wax and wane through my focus as I absorb their colours. There is a pink smudge over me: it is my mother, and she's talking, mouthing words at me, her mouth opening and closing like a drowning fish.

Tiled ceiling, four walls, two strip lights. Nausea of confusion.

And here it comes.

The Surfacing.

# ZEITGEIST 2003

THE REAL LEADER HAS NO NEED TO LEAD – HE IS CONTENT TO POINT THE WAY.  
HENRY MILLER.

## one Duncan

I sat anxiously next to Ade on the settee – the faded blue one that we picked up from a charity shop for fifty quid – trying to suss out his thoughts as he held a wad of damp bog roll to his swollen top lip with one hand and gripped a can of beer with the other. When it seemed safe to speak I said something like, Why do you keep getting yourself in these situations, man? but he didn't offer any explanation other than, Well, Dunc, someone has to do it.

Sorel was out somewhere with some mates. It was a Friday night, early February, bout eleven o'clock. I was still getting used to the fact that Ade (only three years older than her and four more than me) could be the uncle of a twenty-year-old. I'd found out just a coupla weeks before that his dad was previously married and that Ade has a much older brother who has a daughter who I was proper hoping to cop off with. It was for the best she wasn't there that night though. It was the third time in four weeks and it always got her rattling to see Ade in a state. His behaviour's nothing new – there are loadsa people nowadays infected by the same anti-social disease whereby they mash up anyone they see fit – but Ade's philosophy was different. He'd go out with Colbeck, this mate of his who he'd known since primary school or someshit, and they'd hang around up town, lurking in the corners like shadows, waiting for shit to kick off and jumping in whenever it did to reprimand the offenders with fists and feet. They often came back to the flat with bruised knuckles, black eyes, split lips: physical testaments to the violence they'd willingly sought and dealt out.

Ade nudged me with a bony elbow and went, Oi, you ought to come out with me and Matt one night, Dunc. Fucking de-stress a bit, you know? When he says Matt he means Colbeck, his name's Matthew Colbeck like.

No way, I goes. You aren't getting me involved in that shit. You know I can't stand violence.

Same as me, then, he replied, taking a sip of beer and wincing as the alcohol stung the exposed flesh on his lip.

Is that meant to be a joke? I went. Every time you go out you come back bloody.

He shook his head and looked at the floor with his jaw clenched tight like he was proper gonna boil over or someshit. Then, after a few seconds on simmer, he spits, You just don't fucking get it, do you? You think I'm a fucking thug!

Course I don't, I retorted. I wanted to justify the statement by adding more, but I couldn't think of anything else to say; not cuz I was lying or anything, but cuz the debate contained a much larger grey area than he was inclined to admit.

He screwed up the sullied bog roll, threw it on the coffee table and took a cigarette from the crumpled pack on the arm of the settee. He didn't offer me one, though. He never does.

Where's Colbeck tonight, anyway? I asked, trying to avoid some sorta dialogue that I didn't want to be part of.

He went home.

Oh?

Bird's got him on a tight leash.

He lit his cigarette and inhaled deep, sinking back into the settee as the nicotine rushed from lung to tributary. I can't imagine anyone having Colbeck under the thumb, I said.

Don't be fooled, he went, holding up his cig between his forefinger and thumb and observing it. She's got him by the swingers, mate.

What's she like? I asked.

Doesn't talk much. Real condescending bitch.

No, I goes, I meant what does she look like?

Oh. Bit of a horsey face, y'know. Cracking pair on her though.

That's the main thing, I said, but I didn't mean it. Ade's the type of person who doesn't know the difference between someone who's fit and someone who's beautiful, or between someone who's tidy and someone who's just got a nice rack. Don't look at the mantelpiece when you're poking the fire, he used to say, and I never challenged him about it cuz I never dared. Which brings me to an important point about Ade: always agree with him when he chats to you, whether it's about the state of the world or just about his opinions on trivial shit. Cuz if you don't then the most insignificant comments can escalate into incredibly long and drawn out arguments.

His mobile buzzed in the kitchen.

Get that for us, Dunc, he said.

Get it yourself.

Don't be a dick. My kidneys are killing me. I'll be pissing blood for days.

A slight exaggeration, maybe, but it's not nice seeing your mate in pain, even if it is his fault. So I got up and fetched his phone for him. The screen said 1 missed call from Matt, Matt Colbeck like.

I picked up the newspaper from the table on my way back to my seat and looked at the crossword – I'd filled in about half while Ade was out earlier. It was him that got me into them. He does the cryptic ones, which I'm no good at. He's explained to me a few times the different ways that the clues work, the fact that there's hidden meanings, anagrams, ambiguity, wordplay, *et cetera et cetera*; but I couldn't get my head around all that shit. I did the quick ones instead, the ones that Ade refers to as *crosswords for bedwetters*, and I rarely finished even those fuckers. Anyway, I'd planned on having a nice quiet night in with a few cans and the paper and a cheeky smoke from Ade's stash, but I should've known he'd come steaming in before midnight, gobbing off about the appalling state of the nation and telling me that my passivity was more dangerous than his aggression.

While he got back on the phone to Colbeck, I tried to fill in some more blanks. Eight down: false or incorrect, nine letters. Second letter R, last letter S. I stared at it for ages, trying to suss it out, hearing half of Ade's convo at the same time.

She's done what? he was saying. Nah mate. No way, you don't wanna put up with that shit. Serious, come over. Yeh no worries. Just come over now. Fuck her man, y'know. Honest, it's cool. Just come over here. The night's still young. Bring beers.

He put his phone on the coffee table.

False or incorrect, I goes.

What the fuck are you on about?

This clue here, I said, tapping the tip of the pen on the page. False or incorrect.

Any letters?

It's nine letters altogether. Second letter's R, and it ends in S.

Fuck knows.

He took a last drag from his cig and dropped the jeb-end into an empty can on the table.

What's gone on with Colbeck? I asked, not looking up from the paper.

Argument with the bird, he went. He's coming over.

Shit, I thought. That meant it was gonna be a heavy one tonight. I wasn't up for that at all, not tonight, but I was in no place to make my opinions known to Ade cuz the flat was his and he was letting me stay with him rent free until I found somewhere else, which was unlikely to be anytime soon.

I'm getting a beer, I said. You want one?

Yep.

I went into the kitchen and opened the fridge.

Hey Dunc, Ade shouted.

Yeh?

I got your clue, false or incorrect. It's erroneous.

I knew he'd get it in the end like.

## two Colbeck

The little bitch.

That's all you can think at the moment: the little fucking bitch. Two and a half years of your life up her snatch. Better to have loved and lost? Bollocks, mate – better to have sat at home and wanked.

You told her that, but she was having none of it. All she said was she's made up her mind and this time it's over. Testosterone being as insidious as it is, this declaration makes you fucking suspicious. She's surely got some other fucker ready and waiting for her – an updated model, minus all your jaded wisdom and opinionated remarks and the horror of the deeply ingrained routine that blights your relationship like barnacles on the hull of a wrecked ship. The catalyst for this latest in a series of fall-outs was when you told her that the only reason you moved in with her was because she wanted you to; and that before she'd put the old emotional blackmail screws into you you'd been perfectly happy living with your mates and seeing her in the evenings and at weekends. 'Oh yeh,' she replied waspishly, 'don't try and make out that you didn't want us to get our own place.'

Yeh, right. The main reason you agreed to all this shit was – as is so often the case with stagnant relationships started as teenagers and falling prey to the steady decay of adulthood – to avoid an argument. You weren't particularly chuffed about leaving your own house and thereby forgoing the late-night drinking sessions with the lads and snubbing the cheap rent that comes with house-sharing to move in with her: a moth that hadn't then, and still hasn't now, let you fuck her in the arse. But, of course, this bint doesn't see it like that. She's got it into her head that she's saved you somehow. Fucking saved you? From what?

'From those waster mates of yours, for a start,' she says. Now that's a fucking laugh. At least your mates don't all live with their fucking parents. She says that you're jealous because her friends have money. So would I, you feel like telling her, if I hadn't wasted so much of my life with a materialistic bitch like you.

'You're such an idiot when you've had a drink,' she insists. 'Look at the state of you. Why do you always have to throw your weight around? For someone who's supposedly intelligent, you seem pretty stupid to me. Beating people up isn't big and it isn't clever. What is it that you're trying to –'

'Shut the fuck up,' you tell her, slurring slightly. When she bitches at you and you're in this state of mind all you want to do is put your hands round that whining throat of hers and rattle the life out of the cunt.

She says that tomorrow she's going to start moving her things out of the flat. In that case you're going too, you tell her, and you aren't taking any of her shit with you either. It can stay here and if the landlord seizes it when he finds out you've pulled a fast one then it's her problem.

'You're so selfish,' she says, shaking her head in disbelief. 'I was hoping we could at least be friends but you've really blown it now.'

You laugh so hard you nearly shit yourself.

'I'm selfish?' you say, your voice on the tightrope that divides rage and hilarity. 'You think I'm selfish? I'll tell you what selfish is: selfish is making me watch fucking RomComs every time we go to the cinema. Selfish is making me pay for your fucking gym membership even though I earn less than you. Selfish is taking up the fucking bathroom for forty-five minutes every fucking morning. Selfish is –'

'Just shut up!' she shouts. Flecks of her saliva pepper your face. 'Why does every conversation with you have to turn into an argument?'

Fuck it anyway. She's insisted on staying in the flat tonight, and you've been relegated to the sofa. Fuck that. There's no way you're sleeping on the sofa in your own fucking gaff. You're going to Ade's. He knows how to have a good crack. Whoever it is that she's left you for, well, you feel sorry for the cunt. Of course, she insists that there is no one else. But it's obvious that there is. She'll have one hand on the next branch, for sure, before she lets go of yours. You're not sure who it is yet, though. It could be that fucking geezer Danny who she works with; the one who rings her for late-night chats and who uses the word 'brunch' as a verb. Who talks like that in this country? This isn't fucking Sex and the City for Christ's sake. When you told her that, she said you were being pathetic, which is her answer to every remark you make that she's unable to challenge with a valid counter-argument. If it isn't Danny, then it might be Toby. Or is his name Tony? Anyway, he works with her too. He gave her a lift home from a staff night out once, and he had the most fucking ridiculous car you've ever seen: a proper fucking prickmobile. They'd make a good pair, them two. Or, if it's neither of those, then perhaps it's that fucking waiter she fancies at the Mango Tree. Fuck knows what that greasy spick's name is but no doubt she'll namedrop the cunt when she feels like making you seethe a little. Anyway, The Replacement could be anyone with a cock and a pulse. And you're sick of the torture.

She's locked herself away in the bedroom now on the phone to someone – probably her fucking mother who hates you anyway because the batty old cunt's got it into her batty old head that her daughter can somehow do

better – and you can hear her whingeing on about how this time it's over for real. You've tried knocking on the door, not because you want to reason with the stupid cow but because you want to grab a spare pair of jeans for tomorrow, but she won't open it. You consider kicking it down and pretending it's her face, but you soon realise that in the morning, when the beer's worn off and you have to face facts, you'll be even more irate because it'll be you who has to pay to get the bastard thing fixed.

So instead you grab your crate of Belgian beer from the fridge, and shout a theatrical goodbye to her as you slam the door behind you and head down the stairs. It's much colder outside than you expected, but you take the crate over to the wall in front of the flats and you sit and call a taxi. You crack open a beer using the opener on your key ring: a present from her. How sweet and fitting that you now use it to open the drink that toasts her departure from your world.

Your life has a habit of moving in circles.