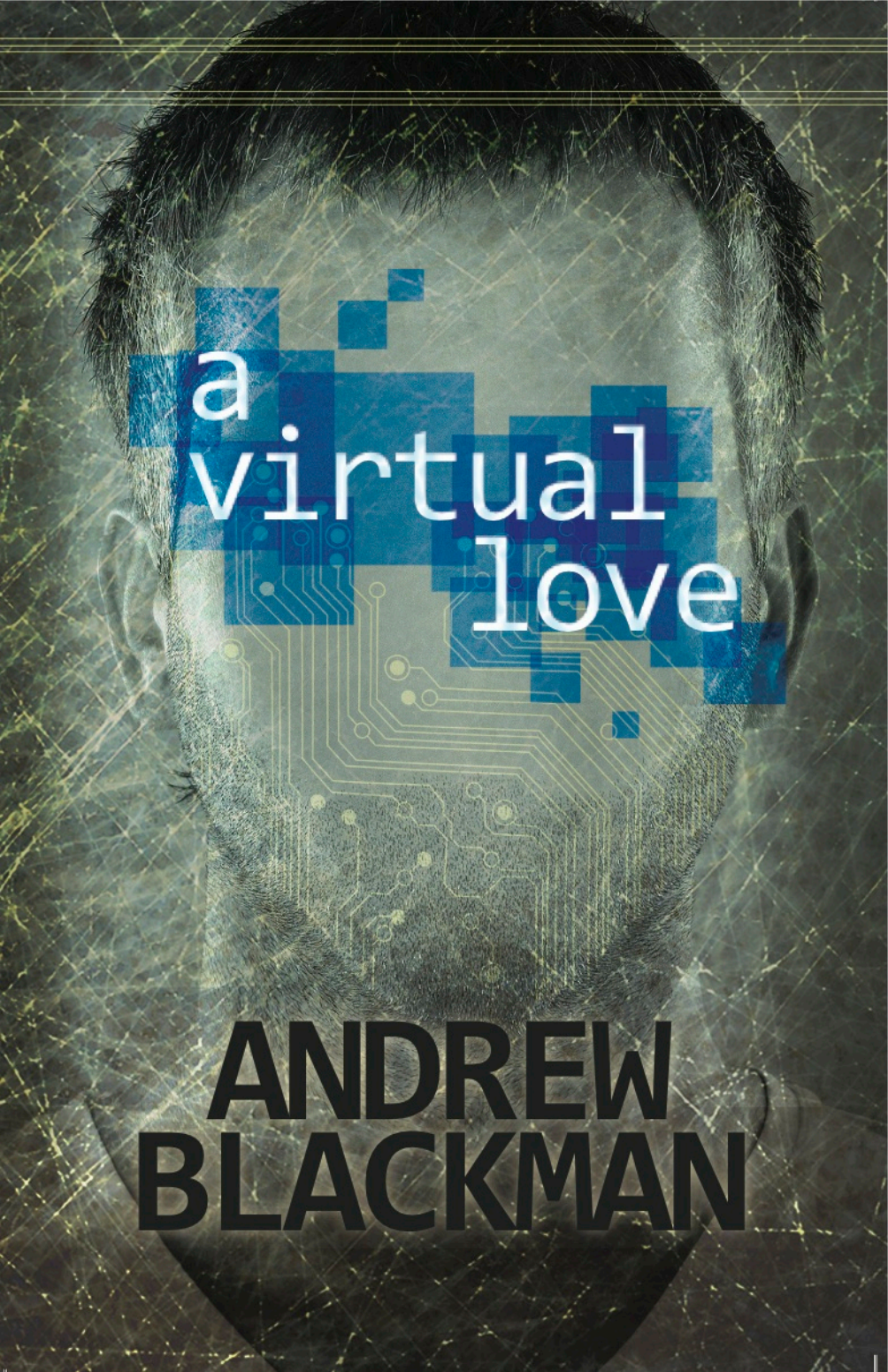
a virtual love
ANDREW BLACKMAN

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# a virtual love

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*To all those who demand the impossible.*

# Chapter 1

The clock ticked loudly in the silent front room. We looked at it, so that we didn't have to look at each other. The hands of the clock were all that moved, apart from some fine particles of dust swirling in the still, warm air. I know you always hated that clock, but you watched it anyway. The movement of the hands was imperceptible, but we knew that if we looked long enough, three o'clock would become three fifteen, three fifteen would become three thirty, and then an acceptable time would have arrived for you to make your excuses and leave.

The clock is an old family heirloom, of course, although nobody can remember quite whose family. There's an engraving on the face: Noakes & Sons. At one time I'd planned to track down the company and so, perhaps, to deduce which long-dead person had one day walked into a shop with several months' savings and emerged with a fine, modern timepiece to impress the neighbours. But now it hardly seems to matter.

I still wind the clock every Sunday morning, though, just as I have wound it every Sunday morning for the past fifty years. The sound of the old iron key cranking in the cog soothes me as much now as it did on those faraway Sunday mornings in the old house in Tunbridge Wells, when I snuggled beneath the eiderdown and listened to my father winding the clock out in the hall. Immediately after that, my mother would come in and pull the eiderdown back, exposing my small body to the cold, damp air and say, 'Come on Arthur, get a wriggle

on or you'll be late for Sunday school.' Soon bacon would be sizzling in the pan while porridge bubbled on the stove, and my parents would talk softly through the steam rising from their tea, and then it would be the long, cold walk to the big, cold church for hours of listening to things I didn't understand, and home again for lunch and homework and piano practice and dinner and bed, and then back up again in no time for Monday morning and another week of school. I sometimes used to imagine that if one Sunday my father forgot to wind the clock, this strange round of activity would never begin. It would always be Sunday morning, and I would always be an eight year old boy snuggling under the warm eiderdown, listening to the quiet. But my father never forgot.

When he died, the clock passed to me. He never told me where the clock came from or why it was so important to him. All I had was the vague label of 'family heirloom'. Still, for fifty years I have taken care of it with a devotion that, I hope, would have made him proud. Only recently has the memory of those mornings in Tunbridge Wells returned to me, and on some Sunday mornings now I am seized by the puerile urge to stay in bed and see what will happen when the ticking stops. But sense and habit always win, and I get out of bed at the usual time and shuffle downstairs to wind the clock.

'What are you thinking about, Granddad?' you asked.

Your sudden intrusion made me jump. At my age, of course, jumping has long been out of the question, but my body did jerk up a little out of the soft armchair, and I could feel my pulse quickening and my breath becoming momentarily short. Then I saw you sitting across from me, remembered who you were and who I was, and softened my face into a kindly chocolate-box smile. 'Just listening to the clock,' I said.

The only sign of your frustration was a slight tightening of your fingers on your knee, making the rough denim crinkle upwards to reveal a grey sock and an inch of pale, hairy ankle. But I noticed this and knew the cause. You've asked

me so many times how I could spend hours just listening to the ticking of a clock. The idea seems to threaten you. I've noticed that, in the silent times between conversations, you often shoot murderous glances at the poor old clock. I could understand such a sentiment in someone my own age: once you've passed eighty, the ticking of a clock can sometimes come to sound like clods of earth dropping steadily onto the lid of your coffin. But you are young. You have all the time in the world, and yet it never seems to be enough for you.

I still blame your mother, God rest her soul. TV would educate you, she said, and video games would develop your reflexes. But she never understood that if only bright colours, flashing lights and noise could hold your attention, then simple pleasures like the ticking of a clock, the flow of a river or the passage of clouds across the sky would always be foreign to you. You would always have to be doing something, even if there was no purpose to it. As a child you could never sit still, and as a teenager it was worse. When your parents died and you came to live with us, you said it was as if you had died as well. Our house was boring. We were boring. There was nothing to do. You buried yourself in your computer, and when you were forced to spend time with us, you just kept looking around, waiting for something to happen. It was the same this afternoon, as you perched on the edge of the sofa, your fingers fidgeting with the fabric, your foot drumming on the carpet, your eyes roving the room for something to grab hold of. I always think it must be rather sad to live that way, unable to exist without either entertaining or being entertained. Once you even turned up on my doorstep attached to earphones, only removing them hurriedly as I started to speak. I asked you somewhat shortly, 'When did you last experience complete silence?' You looked at me as if I were senile.

So now I am always sure to avoid such confrontations. I want you to keep coming. I enjoy your visits, and I know that Daisy does too, despite what the doctors say. Never mind all their

degrees and qualifications, they don't know Daisy the way I do. To them she's an object to be studied. When they decided there was no hope of recovery, they lost interest and passed her along from hand to hand like an unwanted complaint letter. There was no upside for them. No miracle cure, no grateful relatives. There was just 'palliative care' as they called it, filling her with pills to dull the pain ('make her more comfortable') until the day, quite soon, when she would die. But I know Daisy. I've known her for fifty years. I know that she's still with me, even if she can't speak or smile. On the days when you're due to visit, I know she gets excited. Then when you're here, sitting across from her sipping tea and chatting, she looks different. To anyone else she'd appear the same, her eyes still gazing unseeing at a point in space, her chin lolling idly on her neck, her swollen legs sprawling inelegantly across the worn threads of the Persian rug. But as I lean over to wipe spilt tea from her chin, I see her mouth trembling slightly and know that she is trying to smile. At the end of the afternoon, as I help her into her wheelchair to go and wave you off, I sometimes feel a slight extra pressure of her fingers on my forearm. These are small, unimportant things to busy doctors and grandsons, but I know they are real. I suppose that, just as silence gradually attunes the ears to distant, small sounds, so my long days of inactivity endow small things with a reality that others may miss. I never speak of these things, of course. I know perfectly well that everyone thinks I'm too old to be looking after her. For Daisy's sake, so that we can stay together a little longer, I keep my knowledge to myself and agree with whatever nonsense the doctors tell me.

'So how's work?' I asked.

You sipped your tea, and glanced again at the clock. 'Fine,' you said. 'I might be promoted.'

'That's good, Jeff. We always knew you'd do well, didn't we, Daisy?'

You put your cup down a little loudly on the saucer and looked around at the old, fading furnishings as I sipped my

tea and Daisy stared at the ceiling, her head lolling on the armchair's soft back. 'You sure you're coping okay?' you said finally.

I smiled sadly. The question came every Sunday afternoon, as predictable as the ticking of the clock, and I always had to smile to cover my anger. If I were to say the wrong thing then maybe, one Sunday afternoon, you would not come walking up the path. I wouldn't see the trembling of Daisy's mouth or feel the slight pressure of her fingers. She would have worn her best blue dress and her favourite pearl necklace for nothing. So I smiled and said, 'Yes, fine, thanks.'

'You'll let me know, won't you, if it ever gets too much?' you asked, as always.

I replied, 'Yes, of course. You're a good boy, always worrying about us.' And you smiled and took another sip of tea.

I drained my cup and, knowing that the pot would be empty by now, stood up to put the kettle on, stopping along the way to help Daisy sit a little straighter in her chair. As always, you followed me out to the kitchen and peered anxiously over my shoulder as I tried to light the gas without letting my hands shake too much.

'I can manage,' I insisted. 'I make tea when you're not here, you know. Go back to the living room and keep your grandma company.' When you left me alone, I allowed my shoulders to slump over and leant on the counter to catch my breath. For a moment I felt the panic of suffocation, and then gradually my breaths started to become deeper and more regular. It's not normally that bad, you know. When you follow me, it makes me feel rushed. If you hadn't stood over me like that, I'd have been fine.

When I returned with the teapot and a plate of custard creams, you were sitting on the overstuffed sofa gazing at Daisy who, with her head now propped up on a cushion, appeared to be staring back at you. The low, watery afternoon sun had just meandered round to this side of the house and

your profiles were outlined in yellow. Particles of dust hung in the air. For a moment I felt as if I had walked in on a conversation. I stopped in the doorway, waiting for you to continue, but of course you didn't. There were just two vacant gazes and the steady ticking of the clock. I noticed that the clock's oak casing was a little dusty, and that the glass window covering the face could do with a polish. But cleaning it was a job for the first Sunday of the month, and that was not until the following week.

The clock ticked a few more times and you still hadn't noticed me standing in the doorway. I remember feeling pleased. It gave me a chance to observe you without noise and movement. For a moment or two you looked the same as your grandmother somehow. I can't really explain how; physically of course there's no resemblance. But as I looked at the two of you, I found myself remembering Daisy as a young woman, full of energy, and I saw you as an old man slumped in a chair. I saw your past and future self, quite distinct from the flurry of youthful activity in which you're currently embroiled. I saw you as part of something much larger than yourself. I saw your mother and father in you, I saw Daisy, I saw myself, and I saw the unknown man who walked into Noakes & Sons one day long ago and bought a clock. I remembered you as a baby and as a child, and the thought merged with my memories of your father and even of my own childhood, and I thought of you having the eiderdown pulled back on cold Sunday mornings in the old house in Tunbridge Wells and stumbling off to church. I thought of your own future senility and death, and of your sons and grandsons and countless future generations, their lives and deaths seeming to last no longer than a moment. I suddenly felt breathless and a custard cream slid from the edge of the plate. You rushed across to help, fussing over the dropped custard cream as if it were something important, while all I could think about was that brief trance set in motion by a moment of stillness in the low

afternoon sun. Yes, I know it was just a fleeting feeling, but somehow it seemed as real as those faraway Sunday mornings when I pictured my father setting the world in motion with the key of a clock.

'I had a letter from that cousin of mine in Canada,' I said after you'd helped me back to my chair, and embarked on a long recitation of family news designed to convince you that my memory was still sound. It seemed to work, for you prompted me with questions and sipped your tea, the concern over the dropped custard cream gradually fading from your face as you relaxed into a familiar pattern of conversation. As I talked, I stole glances at you over the edge of my teacup, searching for signs of what I'd seen before, but of course it was gone. Your flushed, animated face bore no real resemblance to vacant, wrinkled, liverspotted Daisy. Sometimes, to be perfectly honest, you even seemed like a stranger, but I kept talking because I could see that for you the opposite was happening: you were rediscovering the Granddad that you recognised. Your happiness is always more important than mine, because if you are happy you will return next Sunday afternoon, and Daisy will see you walking up the path, and the hint of a smile will cross her old, broken face.

Eventually, though, there was no more family news to draw on. Silence blanketed the room again, interrupted only by the ticking of the clock and the faint, high-pitched shouts and screams of children on a distant field. 'Must be playtime,' I said, and you smiled back absently, not seeming to have understood.

'You know,' you said finally, 'you could at least set it to the right time.'

I looked down at my plate and picked up a few biscuit crumbs. The subject of setting the time was another one that came up regularly on your Sunday afternoon visits. You often managed to hold your tongue, but still the question, or accusation, emerged with the steady, regular rhythm of the clock itself. Sometimes I've tried to answer you honestly, but

it's impossible. I can never really describe, even to myself, why I've wound the clock obsessively every Sunday morning for fifty years but still let the old mechanism fall a little further behind every year. I know why, but there are no words for it. Whenever I try to convey the idea to you, a chasm seems to open up between us. So this time, I steered carefully around the topic. I simply said that the gradual slowing of the clock's mechanism over the decades didn't bother me. 'I'm used to it. I translate it automatically to the real time. If I reset it, I'd be confused.'

As usual, you tried to tell me that it confused my guests to have to add five and a quarter hours to get to the real time, and as usual I replied that all my guests have wristwatches, and as usual a frustrated silence ensued.

In the silence, the sudden ringing of the telephone shocked me. I was also a little confused, because the ring didn't sound quite right. In fifty years I have come to know every sound in the house, from the flop of letters on the mat to the creak of each step on the stairs and the nocturnal clanking of the central heating. Although I still think of the telephone as the new one, it must be thirty years old by now. I know its ring just as well as all the other sounds in the house, and something about it sounded a little different. Then I saw you shifting yourself off the sofa and digging in your pocket, and realised that it was your phone, spewing a tinny electronic imitation of a real bell.

Of course, I am accustomed to mobile phones by now, but the idea of them ringing in my own house still bothers me. It diminishes my role as host. I'm used to the idea that in my own house, everything is under my control. If the phone rings while I have company, I can decide whether or not to answer. Now it's out of my hands. You bring your own world into my front room, and I am reduced to the role of a passive observer. I have to watch you flip the phone open with one hand as you hold up the other in half-hearted apology. I have to listen to your voice become artificially slangy, almost American in its

slurred consonants and upturned sentences. I have to watch your face become more animated than it ever is with me, your hands making elaborate gestures that your friend will never see. I have to watch your brief transformation into a different person, and ask myself who it is that you perform for. Me, or the person on the other end of the line? Or both of us?

After the conversation was over, you apologised, as you always do. 'No need,' I said. We looked at each other for a while, and then you said you should be heading back, before the traffic got too heavy. We took refuge in the familiar rituals, me fetching your coat, you helping me get Daisy into her wheelchair, me helping you on with your coat and saying that you seem to grow taller every week, you replying that it's me shrinking, and both of us laughing and shaking hands and saying goodbye and smiling and parting and then each of us, you in your car and me in my hallway, letting out a small, secret sigh of relief.

# Chapter 2

Being an American in London definitely has its upsides. Every time you open your mouth it's like people think you're some kind of movie star and fawn all over you. One guy even told me I looked like Marilyn Monroe, which is just screwed up. I mean, if you tried to think of someone who looked like the opposite of Marilyn Monroe, you'd come up with something like a picture of me. But it didn't matter to this guy. It was all in his head. And that's where the downsides come in. You get the attention, you get guys coming onto you 24/7, but none of it's real. Or maybe some of it is, but you never know how much. I'm always afraid that some guy would be making love to me and I wouldn't know if it was really me he was seeing or Angelina Jolie or whoever. Being someone's fantasy is not great when it comes down to it. Somewhere along the line the magic dust wears off and he starts to see you as a real woman, and then he moves on.

I guess maybe some of it's my fault. Maybe I like being the centre of attention for once, and maybe I play it up just a little. Maybe I become what people want me to be: an outgoing, glamorous, party-loving American chick. Maybe that's why I only meet guys who want the fantasy, and probably scare off the ones who might want the real me. Who knows? Anyways, the result is that after a couple of years in London I had what everyone thought was a great life – certainly my friends back home sounded pretty jealous whenever I talked about it. I had

a job I loved, an apartment in London, and plenty of friends who I hung out with most evenings at the Chestnut Tree Café. Secretly, though, I felt... I don't know, lost maybe. Sometimes I just fell into a funk that took weeks to get out of. Once I burst into tears in the middle of Oxford Street, attracting an awkward crowd of people who lingered close but not too close, hoping I'd stop so that they wouldn't have to say something.

Maybe that was why I started skipping the pub crawls and going home early from the Chestnut Tree Café to curl up in bed with my laptop instead. I started writing a blog, at first just for something to do, but after a while I really started to get into it. On the blog, it was like I could start over and be someone else, someone more like who I really was. There was no judgement about who I was based on external bullshit – it was all about what I had to say. And believe me, I had plenty to say. I wrote furious blog posts on everything from animal rights to climate sanity, and met people from Bangkok to Des Moines who thought the way I thought. And then I met you. At first I never thought too much about you, the real person behind the blog. But as I read your posts in bed every night, I began to feel like you were speaking to me. The more I read, the more I felt like I knew you better than the people I saw every day.

When I told my friends about you, they teased me. 'Find a real man, Marie,' they'd say. 'There's no shortage.' But, of course, you were real. You did exist, I just hadn't met you yet. I'd already visited your blog, though, and left comments on it, and even emailed you. I'd scoured the web for pretty much everything you'd ever written, from the longest blog post – a three-page essay on the folly of the Iraq war – right down to the one-word replies on tech forums. I knew your views on politics, the environment and all the major issues, but I'd also seen you asking for help with your Linux interface and commenting on a recipe for blueberry and apple pie. I felt like I knew you much better than I knew a lot of the friends

who denied your existence, and certainly better than a lot of the men who swarmed around me, attracted by my long black hair and my California accent but not really seeing me. You were real to me in every way except the physical, and surely that's the least important. If I loved your mind, then of course I'd love your body too. All that remained was to find a way to meet you in the flesh, and so I kept dreaming at night as if, by dreaming, I could conjure you into what my friends in the Chestnut Tree Café so narrowly defined as reality.

When I did finally meet you, of course, it was way weirder than anything I'd imagined. I was dressed as a clown, and you were in a wetsuit. We were in the middle of a vast concrete plaza in Canary Wharf, surrounded by shiny glass buildings soaring up into the cloudy sky. I think it was a Native American rain dance that we were supposed to be performing. I'd argued against it from the start, by the way, especially when I found out we'd be dressed as clowns, the whole idea struck me as pretty disrespectful. I mean, these are ancient rituals that actually mean something, or meant something, to a lot of people, and I didn't think it was right to make fun of them. But nobody listened to me. So I went along with it and, like everyone else, I wore my clown nose and clown shoes and blew my whistle as loud as I could. Meanwhile you and Marcus circled us in your wetsuits and snorkelling gear, miming the breast stroke. Of course, at that moment, I didn't know it was you. You were just the quieter one of the two guys in wetsuits. If Marcus hadn't broken his wrist like that, I'd probably never have met you.

I'm not sure if any of the office workers got what we were doing. I barely got it myself. Mostly they just scurried past, eating their designer sandwiches wrapped in oceans of planet-killing plastic. A few of them stopped to watch for a while, looking neither approving nor disapproving, neither interested nor bored. Impossible to tell what, if anything, they thought of the whole thing. For them, I think, it was just a show, no

different from *Downton Abbey* or *Match of the Day*. It held their attention for a few minutes and then they hurried on, checking their BlackBerrys.

Then it happened. It was hardly surprising, really. All that whisky the two of you had been knocking back on the train. Then the tight wetsuit, the dirty, scratched goggles and the large, ungainly flippers. It was inevitable, really, that eventually you would step on one flipper with the other and go toppling over onto the concrete. Your snorkel came out of your mouth and you just sprawled out on the ground, one flipper on and one off, laughing your ass off. A few of the clowns joined in, but although it was quite comical I didn't laugh. We were there to do a job, not to screw around like amateurs. A bit of fun and laughter was part of street theatre, but it couldn't go too far. I mean, we were trying to save the planet, after all. I tried to start up another chant to keep things on track, but things were going downhill fast. Then Marcus, who had swum ahead of you, noticed the clowns laughing and turned back to see what had happened, and that made him topple over too, and as he fell he put out an arm to break the fall and a sharp crack echoed like a gunshot across the concrete plaza. Even a couple of the security guards winced.

It was lucky, really, not just because it gave me a chance to meet you, but because the security guards had now moved in, and the police had been called. You and Marcus may have been too drunk to notice or care, but the rest of us were scared. We had jobs and futures to think about. I had my immigration process. We didn't want to be arrested. The security guards had suddenly gained some confidence and certainty from whatever their radios had told them, or perhaps it was from seeing that we were just a bunch of young amateurs, falling over our flippers and laughing our asses off.

Whatever the reason, they moved in and formed a tight black circle, forcing us back to huddle together around our makeshift tepee. Then different ones started speaking from

different parts of the circle. Canary Wharf was private property, they said. We were trespassing and would be prosecuted. The snorkelling gear made them particularly angry. Covering your face was an offence under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, they said. The clown wigs and red noses could also be grounds for prosecution, one of them added. The others backed him up, although they looked more doubtful on this point. By now, though, Marcus had gone white and vomited on the concrete. He was holding his right arm in his left, the wrist dangling at a strange angle.

'We have to get him to a hospital,' I said, so loudly that the threats briefly stopped. One of the guards started to argue, but I quickly shouted him down. Loud, rude, obnoxious, I was happy to confirm every American stereotype in the book, as long as it kept us out of jail. I'd already pulled out the act from time to time anyway, for lesser causes like getting on the Tube in rush-hour or jumping the line in the Chestnut Tree Café. It wasn't all that different than the act I put on the rest of the time.

As always, it worked. The security guards stood around awkwardly for a while, consulting their radios, and then grudgingly let us leave. One of them said he had video footage of the event. If we returned, he'd have us arrested. We quickly gathered our things and made our way back to the Jubilee Line. Along the way, a little boy pointed at me and tugged at his mother's arm, asking if the clown could make him a dinosaur balloon. We hurried past, smiling our apologies as a siren wailed in the distance. At the station entrance we parted, most of the clowns taking the Jubilee Line back to central London while you and I took Marcus to hospital.

Even then, I didn't really 'meet' you for a long time. We'd been sitting in the waiting room for a couple of hours at least, and I was on the verge of getting up to leave. I didn't even know why the hell I was there in the first place. After I said those words, 'We have to get him to hospital,' it just seemed to be assumed that I would be the one to go, even though he was

your friend, not mine, and it was your sorry-ass antics that had gotten him hurt in the first place.

After a couple of hours in that waiting room, though, I was done. You just sat there saying nothing, while Marcus pulled out his cellphone and tweeted with his one good hand. As always in these places, the ceiling was far too low, making the windowless room seem even darker. I felt as if I could reach up out of my plastic chair and touch one of the grimy grey tiles. They looked sticky, somehow, and made me think of all the germs that must have floated up out of diseased larynxes or infected stab wounds over the years and settled up there in the layers of dirt. I must have shuddered, because you asked me if I was cold.

I remember I looked up at you in surprise. It was the first thing you'd said in almost an hour, and I'd almost forgotten you were there. 'You're kidding,' I said. 'It's like a fricking sauna in here.'

'Well, that's the great thing about the NHS,' you replied. 'In America you'd have to pay for the hospital treatment, then pay for the fricking sauna afterwards. Here it's all free.'

Yes, I remember the exact words you used. It made me smile a little bit, although the way you said it was kind of creepy, like a cheap chat-up line. I remember thinking I didn't want to give you any encouragement – I just wanted to get out of that place. So I made my smile as thin and sardonic as it could be, and just said, 'Cute.'

'Look, I probably should be going,' I said. The way you looked at me was weird, kind of like I'd hurt you. It made me feel guilty and so I gave you my mobile number. 'Text me your contact details, we'll stay in touch.'

I was halfway down the hall when your text came through. I stopped suddenly. People swerved around me, tutting. They didn't know my life was changing, right there in that hospital corridor. I ignored them and stared at my phone, reading the name again and again. I turned and went back to the waiting

room as fast as my clown shoes would allow.

'I love your blog,' I blurted out as soon as I was within a few feet of you. Hey, the way I was dressed, playing it cool would've been pointless. You didn't say anything, so I tried again, standing in front of you now. 'I can't believe you're really Jeff Brennan. I mean, I read your blog like every day. I mean, you know, it's like I get up, brush my teeth, read your blog.' I laughed too loud. It sounded harsh and shrill in the stagnant air. You looked uncomfortable now, you didn't know what to say. I tried to calm down, to soften my voice. 'I guess you don't like to talk about it, right?'

'He's quite a private person,' Marcus said. You shot him a sharp look, reminding me for a moment of the disapproving receptionist.

'I understand,' I said quickly. 'I mean, that comes across from your blog. You never look for the limelight.'

'He's not like the others,' Marcus said. 'Attention-seekers, most of them.'

'Totally,' I said.

'Totally,' Marcus replied in a mock-California singsong, like he was automatically superior to me because he'd been born in London instead of Beechwood.

I tried not to let myself care about him, though. I was nervous enough at meeting you, and didn't need to feel self-conscious about my accent on top of everything else. For once, my 'gregarious American' act dried up, and I just looked at you, willing you to say something. But you stared at your fingernails, picking at a piece of loose skin. I knew I should leave you alone. You didn't want to talk, that much was clear. I'd blown it. You were a private person. You wanted me to know you as just a guy in a wetsuit. Now that I knew who you were, I'd ruined things. I always ruined good things, and attracted liars and cheats instead. I wanted to cry, and then thought what I would look like. Images rattled around in my head from old movies or TV shows. Smeared makeup, misery

beneath the painted smile. Tears of a clown: wasn't that an old song my grandma used to play?

'I'm more into issues,' you said suddenly.

I barely heard you, but I agreed quickly and took the opportunity to sit down next to you. I couldn't believe I was actually sitting next to Jeff Brennan. Your blog had more readers than some newspapers. Your opinions could shift a prime minister's poll ratings, put a company out of business or catapult a nobody to fame. Yet you were so quiet, so modest. I shivered slightly. It was impossible for you to be so perfect. Other bloggers, like myself, dreamed of being you. We vied for the honour of being first to comment on your latest post, and the spike in traffic that it would bring to our own blogs. A link in your sidebar was the ultimate prize, coveted by thousands, achieved only by a select few (you had integrity, sound judgement, it wasn't like you linked to just anybody). I'd been trying for a year now to get you to notice me but with no luck, apart from a couple of polite email replies with a disturbingly generic feel. And now, after all the calculated attempts had failed, after all the late-night dreams had come to nothing, here I was in an East London hospital waiting room with a couple of half-assed eco-anarchists, and one of them turned out to be you. 'Jeff Brennan.' I realised too late that I had uttered those last two words aloud. You smiled slightly, and looked at the floor.

'Sorry,' I said. 'You must hate this.'

'No, it's fine.'

I tried to think of something else to talk about, but all I could think about was the blog. I thought about mentioning the protest, but it seemed so irrelevant now. It failed, what else was there to say? I looked at you, hoping you'd help me out of my misery, but you looked equally tortured. Amazing that it started like that. Marcus, meanwhile, looked like he was stifling a laugh.

'So how long have you been involved in the movement?'

you asked in a quiet, uncertain voice.

This was the moment when I first felt close to you. Somehow, out of all the questions you could have asked, you hit on the right one. Answering it, I was on familiar ground. I could talk about it for hours. 'My whole life, really,' I said. 'I mean, environmentalism runs in the family.' I babbled on about my parents, who were in at the beginning: Greenpeace, Rainbow Warrior and all that. Then my grandparents, who I always include as greens, even though they didn't really have a word for it back then. Flower power, that was the first environmentalism. They started an organic farm way before anybody had a clue what organic farming was. They were just following their instincts. After that I really did start babbling – about the ancient Eastern religions they followed, and how most traditional ways of life have respect for the environment, and after a while I saw your gaze wandering and realised I'd been talking too long. 'Sorry, I'm getting off track. I do that a lot. Point is, I was brought up in this stuff. Never ate meat in my life, never wasted anything that could be re-used.'

'That's great,' you said.

'Yeah, they taught me a lot. I mean, you wanted a milkshake in my family, you didn't just open a pack of Nesquik. We used fruit from hedgerows, milk from soy beans, and mixed it in a blender powered by an exercise bike.'

'Wow, they were... '

'Fruit loops,' Marcus muttered.

'Committed,' you said.

'Should have been,' Marcus said. 'I mean, imagine making a child pedal for her milkshake.'

I felt my defensive hackles rise up. Sure, I could see where the guy was coming from. Believe me, as a teenager in Beechwood, California, the very last thing I wanted to do was pedal for a fucking milkshake. I hated my parents for being different, for being the kind of people that Mrs Roberts and her cronies gossiped about after church. I hated them

for throwing out a pair of jeans I'd saved my own money to buy, just because of the 'Made in Indonesia' label. I hated them for dressing me in hand-me-downs and not giving a shit how bad it made me feel, for caring more about people in Indonesia than about their own daughter. I couldn't wait to get out of there. But anyways, if I do still hate them a little bit then as their daughter I guess I'm entitled. But hearing some smug English guy making fun of them is a different thing completely. So I shot him a venomous look that made him recoil a little and draw his arms into his body, like he was afraid I'd snap his other wrist. 'My parents have always lived their beliefs,' I said. 'People have always called them crazy, but what's more sane? To drive an SUV to the gym, pay to use an exercise bike, drive back home and make a milkshake out of powdered chemicals in a blender using electricity from coal-fired power stations? That sounds like crazy to me.'

'I understand,' you said gently. 'I don't think they were crazy.'

You seemed so perfect then. So understanding. I gave you a grateful smile, and went silent for a while as I tried to control the fluttering in my stomach. Instantly, I loved everything about you. Right there in the hospital waiting room. I loved your quiet voice, your polite dismissal of your own work, your understanding of difference. It fit perfectly with the Jeff Brennan I knew already online: always ready to draw attention to others but shunning the spotlight himself, even as his readership rocketed. While other famous bloggers put out books and DVDs and willingly became pundits for the very 'mainstream media' they'd built their fame from criticising, you always stayed true to your roots. You hid in the shadows, watching, thinking, and giving the world your daily perspective on events, just as you had done for almost seven years now. You posted no information about yourself, not even a photo. So reclusive were you that, in my darker moments, I'd wondered if you really existed. You seemed somehow too perfect. Perhaps the secrecy covered a lie, and

one day 'Jeff Brennan' would be unmasked as the creation of a corporate guerrilla-marketing department. I'd even searched through your old posts, looking for patterns: a subliminal shoe-buying message woven into the political analysis, or a particular brand of soda mentioned too often. But there was nothing. You were real.

'Do you want a coffee?' you asked.

'No, I'm good, thanks,' I said, smiling and playing with a few strands of hair. You were thoughtful, as well. Too good to be true.

'Marcus?'

'No thanks, mate.'

'Well, I think I'll get one.'

When you started to get up, I panicked suddenly at being left alone with Marcus and grabbed your arm. 'It's okay, I'll go.'

'You sure?'

I got up. 'Yeah, it's fine. You sit with your friend, and I'll get it. I could use a walk anyways. Milk and sugar?'

'No, just black. Espresso if they have it.'

'Sure thing. I'll be right back.'

As I walked off to look for the machine, I remember I glanced over my shoulder. To be honest, I hoped you'd be watching me, but you'd already turned to talk to Marcus. At that moment, I felt a sudden urge to go back. I felt sure that if I walked out, I would never see you again. After all, nobody really *wants* that coffee from a machine in a hospital. People only get it when they've been up all night worrying over a dying relative, and even then it's only to have something warm to hold onto. I was sure this was just a pretext to get rid of me. You hated me, just like all the nice guys hated me. When I returned, you'd be gone, and I'd be left standing in the waiting room, a clown with a cup of coffee.

I searched the long, blank white corridors for a coffee machine, but all the time I was thinking of you. I probably even passed a couple of those stupid machines and didn't even

notice. All I could think about was you. It's funny, I'd imagined meeting a thousand times, but never come up with this version of you. On your blog, your voice was older somehow, more serious. It sounded like someone who had seen the world from many different angles and understood them all. In person you were lighter, and so unsure of yourself. It wasn't what I'd expected, but I could get used to this new you. In fact, I felt all warm and fuzzy just thinking about getting used to you.

I found myself standing in front of a machine and pressing a button. Black liquid spurted angrily into a plastic cup. I felt weightless, like that moment when you drive too fast over a hump-backed bridge. Who knew love would feel that way? It was the weirdest thing, but standing in front of that coffee machine, for the first time in my life I knew exactly what I was feeling. I wouldn't have to fake it like I did with the other guys, to convince myself to feel something. This was real. You weren't as funny or as cute or as charming as the guys I normally dated, but what did that matter? The feeling in my stomach and my heart, that strange weightlessness, told me everything. As I tramped loudly down the corridor, I wished I'd brought a change of clothes. A sexy change of clothes, something to make me feel like I had a chance with you. But I hadn't. I was just a clown.

When I entered the waiting room, Marcus was sitting hunched over, one hand still propping up the other. Next to him was an empty plastic chair. In that moment, I got the opposite of that weightless feeling. Everything inside me seemed suddenly to be heavier than lead. My body wanted to sink down to the floor, curl into a ball and never move again. Marcus looked up, sending me a look of bemused innocence. Not my fault, the look said. Don't blame me. The idiot even tried to splay his hands in the kind of shrug he'd copied from the Italian soccer players on TV, but the pain was too much and he hunched over again to nurse his wrist.

For a few moments I stood in the waiting room, doing

nothing. I felt the eyes of every bored spectator fixed on me, waiting for the show to start. I wanted to make a dramatic gesture, to throw the cup of scalding coffee at Marcus, or in the miserable face of the receptionist. That would be something to see. I couldn't do it, though. My body refused to perform. I felt very tired and just wanted to go home. The spectators seemed to sense this and started to look away in disappointment. Nothing would happen. I was just a clown holding a cup of coffee. There was no punch-line.

# Chapter 3

**Marcus Higgins @marcushig** **3h**
Police brutality at Canary Wharf protest! In hospital w/ broken wrist. Spread teh word!

**Marcus Higgins @marcushig** **3h**
In hospital with broken wrist, BORED!

**Marcus Higgins @marcushig** **2h**
Still bored

**Marcus Higgins @marcushig** **1h**
Where are the doctors???

**Marcus Higgins @marcushig** **1h**
@JeffB u missed an opportunity there m8, she was GORGEOUS!!

**Marcus Higgins @marcushig** **50m**
@Martin2010 No, didnt get photos

**Marcus Higgins @marcushig** **47m**
@Martin2010 No vids either. No time b4 they attacked

**Marcus Higgins @marcushig** **45m**
@Martin2010 u don't believe me? Fine. Ohters will

**Marcus Higgins @marcushig** **25m**
RT Police brutality at Canary Wharf protest! In hospital w/ broken wrist. Spread teh word!

**Marcus Higgins @marcushig** **23m**
Back home from hospital. Why no response???????