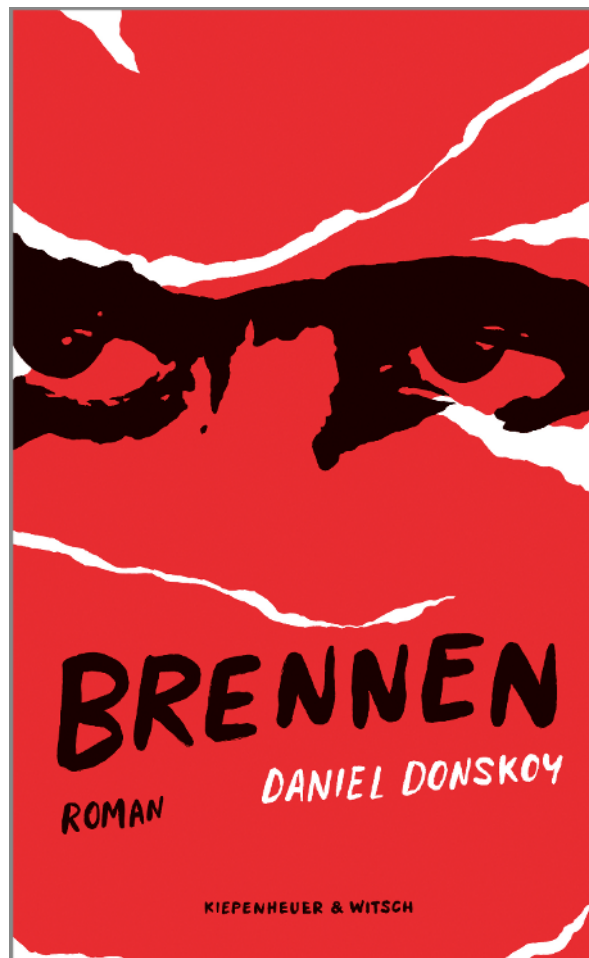


BURNING

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Dear Tyler,

first things first: Happy Birthday.

*Another year s passed by ... Somehow it all goes
faster and faster, don t you think?*

*Remember how our parents used to tell us
that one day time would start running
away from us? I think they were right,
those bastards – they were right about so much.*

*I m visiting them, actually. I m home – though
that s not what it feels like any more.*

*I m writing this while sitting in your favourite spot – on the little step
between the kitchen and the hall, from where you can watch
everything and everyone that moves through the house.*

*I haven t been here for a long time, Tyler – and to be honest,
I was afraid to come back.*

*Last night after dinner I sat alone on the patio –
caught somewhere between nostalgia and
self-pity, and for a moment it was almost as if
you were here too.*

And then, as if out of nowhere, I couldn t

*believe it: Dimitris Mitropanos starts singing. Yes,
the neighbours on our right are playing exactly the same CD
as they did back then. Those kitschy Greek hits that we
always wailed along to deliberately out of tune.*

*Before you ask: yes, of course my mum cooked way more
than anyone could ever finish. I swear
the portions are even bigger than they used to be.*

*It's Saturday, the sun's blazing hot, and earlier this morning
I plucked a few mangoes. The tree is huge now,
Tyler. Remember how we'd climb up it
to reach the first ones to turn ripe? And how we always
ended up with the green, rock-hard fruit instead?*

*You still ate them – with that triumphant grin of yours,
as if you'd hit the jackpot.*

*It probably won't surprise you to hear that those
annoying green parakeets are still here too.*

*Not only do they keep breeding like rabbits, but
the little buggers have got even more cheeky, pinching fruit
and crapping all over the place. Yesterday*

I watched one enjoying itself having a bath

in a basin of water.

A little green creature who knows nothing besides the present.

I tried to catch it but it was faster than me.

You d have got it with one quick move.

*The world has changed, Tyler, but here everything
seems to have weirdly remained the same. The house, the garden,
the neighbours – it s all still there. Sure, my parents have
got a bit older. And so have I.*

I m sorry to begin this letter with such banalities.

*But how do you start talking to someone when you ve
been silent for so long? To someone whom you owe
so many explanations – whom you d like to tell so much
that you simply don t know where to begin? Or whether
you have the right to begin at all?*

*It s been twelve years since the last time
we saw each other.*

*Perhaps that sounds melodramatic. And yet –
if I close my eyes and concentrate just for*

*a moment, you come into focus just as clearly
as if it was yesterday.
Every little facial expression.
Every freckle.
Every tiny hair of the fluff you called a moustache.
Your eyes – your big blue eyes.
How, twelve years ago, you looked at me and I knew
I'd hurt you. How you tried not to
let it show.
You still gave me a hug – with that warmth.
That intensity – I miss it so much.
Believe me: in all this time, hardly a day has passed
when I haven't thought of you.
Yesterday I walked past your house. I should have
rung the bell. But I couldn't. I couldn't couldn't bare the thought of
looking your mother in the eye.
Those big blue eyes – you got them from her.
I just stood there, staring at the front door and
thinking about you.*

This letter will probably surprise you. I myself can scarcely believe I'm writing it.

There's so much for me to tell you about because it's been so long since

I told you anything. Sometimes I feel like I'm

a mausoleum of emotions just waiting

to be ransacked.

Year after year. Thoughts you don't know about. Months,

weeks, hours we didn't share. I've asked myself

a thousand times what would've happened if I hadn't

decided to leave. Would we still be friends?

I won't ask you any more questions in this letter –

I promise. I don't have the right in any case.

Recently I started writing down everything that

happened. Simply because I was afraid that otherwise,

one day, I might forget. And because I know I wouldn't

manage to tell you everything if ever

we see each other again.

Afraid of the excitement, and because it's just too much.

I wouldn't know how to start.

And so I'm writing it down. So you can read it

some day, if you want to.

*So you know who I wanted to be, and more importantly
who I became.*

*Talking about yourself almost always feels like
speaking into a void, but that feeling could also have to do
with what I m doing these days:*

Tyler, I really did become an actor.

I can see you grinning, and I have to laugh myself. But

I m afraid it really is true. I play roles, stand

on stage, sometimes in front of the camera. I memorize

words written by other people. Then

I repeat them for hours on set. On stage it s

the same shit every evening. For weeks.

Sometimes for months on end. I m getting a little bit sick of it, I'm afraid.

Yes, I know – I should ve just learnt to do something respectable.

Get a proper job.. That s what my mother always says.

But what am I supposed to do? Found a start-up? Soon we ll all be

replaced by AI anyway.

*I've been so busy complaining I nearly forgot
to tell you that I live in London now – moved there
to learn how to be a different person, and
actually did become someone else.*

Hopefully someone you'd still recognise, though.

*When I arrived here, I had a single goal: to come back
stronger, wiser, and more successful and to tell you and
everyone else: I did it. I wanted to grow, Tyler,
to become as strong as you. To find a fuel that would
never run out. To free myself and feel pure. Sometimes,
better yet – to feel nothing at all any more. Because by now
even the certainty that nothing really matters can't
calm me any more.*

To live.

I just want to live.

But I think I no longer really know how that works.

*Do you remember how we always said that
we could do anything if we did it together?*

I've thought about that a lot as I walked

alone through the streets of London.

Maybe you'll find all this ridiculous, or maybe not.

*You probably won't read this letter, but I'm
sending it anyway.*

Because I miss you.

Because it still hurts.

And because I don't want to forget what was real.

Yallah bye,

D

With the grey sky

With the stranger's look that doesn't see you

With the longing to be someone else

LONDON, APRIL 2013

It's another of those terrible nights. I lie awake, eyes glued to the ceiling, counting the cracks in the plaster and listening to the rain hammering against my window, as if determined to stop me from dreaming. Every raindrop becomes a thought, every thought a wave roaring too loudly for me to sleep through. I toss and turn, entangled in my sad excuse for a blanket, imprisoned by the walls on either side of me. I feel kind of like ... Harry Potter. Except I'm not a kid, can't perform magic or speak parseltongue. The only thing Harry and I have in common is ... nothing. Dear brain, I really don't want to think about Harry Potter any more, so please

SHUT THE FUCK UP.

Breathe in on one ... breathe out on two ...

breath in on three ... breathe out on four.

The rain gets quieter ... aah.

But as soon as I fall half asleep a gust rattles the window, startling me. The rain is drumming away again – I'm awake. Trapped in the here and now. Where we're supposedly meant to be.

I turn over. Pull the blanket over my head. Then back again. Open the window. Too cold. Shut it. Drink some water from the bottle on the floor. It tastes like dust. I put the bottle back down. I lost the lid yesterday. It falls over. The water spills. I don't care. I don't care about anything. It could be four in the morning, or it could be half past five.

I've lost any sense of time. Then at last, without even noticing it, I drift off. No dreams. Only silence. Darkness. Thank you.

When I wake up, the light is too bright. The rain has stopped, yet my forehead is clammy, as if I had sweated all through the night. I reach for my mobile. 8:17. Fuck. I jump up. Cold floor. Cold air. Dark thoughts. I get dressed at warp speed, throwing on the one sweatshirt that doesn't entirely smell of yesterday, and run out.

The sky is grey, the people are sullen. I don't see them properly, I only notice their movements, the way they walk too fast or too slow. Too fat or too thin, too attractive or too hard to look at – I can't stand any of them. My body's awake, my mind isn't. I'm moving on autopilot. Past the bakery, the florist's, and the corner shop. Past the pub and the Tube station that in the morning always reeks of chlorine. At the coffee shop I jerk to a halt and order with a couple of muttered syllables.

I actually like the area where I live. Just not today. Today I hate everything.

God you look like shit – that's what I say to myself as I stare at my reflection in the shop window – you're way too young to be this wrecked.

I look at my mobile. 8:34 – fuck. Go. Run.

Three minutes later I've reached my destination: The London Academy of Performing Arts.

Just step through those doors, and you hear a deep, gruff voice saying 'Generations of actors have walked these halls. Every room bears the patina of their knowledge, their craft, their talent and their passion.'

Some of them made it to Hollywood.

Others smoke crack for breakfast.

And once again a drop pulls me out of my sleep. Not rain this time, but a bead of condensed sweat that broke loose from the ceiling, falling three metres before landing on my forehead with a splash and jolting me out of a micro-nap.

I rub my tired eyes as my fellow students and I stand next to a circle of chairs. We spend nearly every day together. Twenty young people welded together by the same goal: to make art their life. And because that still doesn't sound pretentious enough: not just any art, but the art of stepping into another person's body, life, thoughts, and feelings. Some people call it acting. We, with studied humility, simply call it 'living.'

The ominous circle of chairs, which we're huddled around like animals round a puddle in the savannah, is situated in the depths of west London. In the middle of a massive ballet hall in a historic-looking brick building. The musty smell of the old walls blends perfectly with the odour of battered dance shoes and the salty tears of young talent. The harsh ceiling lights make every last stress-pimple on our faces glow - like mushrooms on rain-soaked moss. Endless monologues and vocal warm-ups echo from the corridors. Now and then some smash hit from

a musical breaks through: 'Willkommen, bienvenue, welcome! IM CABARET, AU CABARET, TO CABARET!'

Today's a special day, because today we begin working with no less a figure than Elouise Blunderstone. For the others in the room, that name is a LEGEND. Until a fortnight ago I'd never heard of her.

We're still gossiping about our weekends when the floorboards outside creak as if they're in pain. A lumbering shadow moves towards the door. And then we see her: Elouise Blunderstone heaves herself across the threshold, a bulky Brit whose neck has long since vanished, so seamlessly does her head join her shoulders. Small sparkling beads of sweat collect on her forehead and trickle down over the bulging veins at her temples.

With each step she takes we grow quieter, and by the time she plants herself in front of us, silence has fallen.

Some of us keep quite out of respect. I do it out of unadulterated fear.

Elouise Blunderstone looks as if she's crawled straight out of a Roald Dahl nightmare – though the wicked headmistress from *Matilda* would seem almost elfin compared to her. Her small eyes twinkle, and put you in mind of a piglet. 'So fresh, so full of joie de vivre,' she says, baring a row of tiny, dandelion-yellow teeth in a smile that freezes the blood in my veins.

Stories about Elouise have been circulating since the start of term. They say she has a way of prising the best out of everyone – using

'special' methods, often involving psychic and physical pain. And as she stands there before us, I can't help imagining her devouring the weakest students whole. Without chewing.

'Settle down!' she barks, and the group flinches all at once. We collapse on to the uncomfortable wooden chairs whose varnish was long ago eroded by the sweat from the arses of whole generations of actors. My chair creaks louder than the rest, and while I'm busy being amused by the sound, I suddenly feel Elouise's penetrating gaze on me. I try to parry with a confident-looking smile, but I have no chance. She just looks right through me.

'You're the European,' she says at last.

'Isn't that what we all are?' I reply, a little too loud.

'Continental European,' she corrects me. 'And I don't like it when people answer back.'

'I'm sorry Miss Blunderstone.'

'Call me Elouise! Stand up. Introduce yourself,' she commands, sounding like an RAF general. 'Why are you here? What makes you special?' She pauses, eyes narrowing with disdain. 'And why in God's name do you think this is the right profession for you?'

The words come firing out of me: 'I'm here because I got a scholarship. Because I'm good at reading people. Because I want to be an actor. Because I wanted to go to the best drama school and learn from the best people.'

'Aha ... so you think you're special?'

'Isn't everyone? Each with their own universe, their own story?'

‘And why is this the right profession for you?’

‘Because I just know. Deep down, I know I’ll make it. That I’m cut out for this.’

Elouise Blunderstone stands right in front of me. Her eyes narrow to slits as she bursts out laughing. With her flushed cheeks and theatrically wobbling double chin, she reminds me of a gobbling turkey. The others laugh along with her.

‘Shh!’ Her hand shoots up in the air, and straight away there’s silence. She’s got the group totally under her control. She’s got us by the balls – her presence overwhelms me.

I sit back down. But Elouise has barely begun.

‘Aha, so you’ve got it all figured out, have you? The craft, the people – maybe even me?’

I’m about to reply, but she doesn’t give me the chance.

‘Here’s the point: you’re NOTHING special. Not even close. You’re a ... a ... tourist. A curious observer who thinks he understands what’s going on. Get back up! Come on. There, in the middle.’

Reluctantly I stand up. I don’t know quite what’s coming next, but I know it isn’t looking good for me.

‘I want to see how you suffer. How you burn inside. How your own truth crushes you. But don’t be surprised if I don’t feel anything. Because you’re exactly what you fear most: you’re ordinary. Mediocre! You sit there smiling, tossing out supposedly clever answers, but it’s all just a mask ... a mask it’s easy to see through.’ She begins slowly circling me. ‘You think you can toy with words, make them sound clever. But

this isn't a debating society, young man. What's in play here is your soul, not your intellect.'

I can feel my classmates' looks on me – visibly relieved that they're not in my shoes.

'I've seen plenty like you,' she continues. 'Boys and girls who thought they were special. Who thought they could impress me with their "original" ideas. 'She lets the last words dangle in the air, as if they were a joke. 'But you know what became of them? They left. Took off. Vanished because they were too proud to admit they knew nothing. You, my dear, are no actor. You're a ... a dilettante. 'She pauses for a moment, just long enough to be sure the humiliation has penetrated deeply enough.

My heart beats faster, my hands grow moister.

'Suffering isn't something you can just imagine. Pain ... isn't just an emotion you perform. It's all-encompassing. It's shattering. And you ...' She shakes her head, her eyes drill into mine. 'You probably simply haven't lived enough. Not yet.'

I swallow. 'You don't know what I've lived through.'

'Oh?' She arches one eyebrow. 'Then show it to me in the coming weeks. 'She takes a step back, as if she wanted to give me space, though I know it's just another power play. 'I've known you for ten minutes, and all I see is weakness. Here, in your little comfort zone, you feel safe. But in the real world, on stage and on set ...' She snaps her fingers. 'You'll be eaten alive. The world will swallow you whole, and you won't even notice how deep in the beast's throat you are until it's too late.'

She keeps talking, like a steam train that's raced out of control: 'You consider yourself untouchable. Invulnerable. Presumably you think I'm harsh? Cold? But what you don't understand is that that's exactly what you lack – the ability to strip yourself bare, to lay open your soul, regardless of how much it hurts, how unpleasant it seems. ' She lets the sentence hang in the room as if it was a verdict.

'Sit down.'

I let my body drop on to the chair while she slowly makes her way to her place. The tension in the room is so thick, the quiet so unpleasant. And Elouise is clearly relishing it.

'What did you see? 'she asks the class. Her look wanders around the room, but nobody dares speak up. 'No one? 'A thin smile flickers on her lips. 'What you saw was improvisation. A performance.'

The looks on my classmates 'faces say everything. They hang on Elouise's every word. One or two of them even bring their hand up to their mouth. Shock, awe.

'I played the role of the evil acting teacher, and you believed it. You felt it. But do you know what? I didn't. They were just words. Because it's never about you. It's always only about the audience. Understood?'

Everyone nods eagerly.

Applause, fawning.

I'm not sure what just happened, whether Elouise Blunderstone is a gifted actor or a master teacher, whether she's a good person or not. But I know one thing: she's got it in for me.

By evening, my headache is so vicious it feels like my brain is about to leak out through my ears. My calves burn, my legs ache – as if Elouise herself had kicked me in the shins and then condemned me to that absurd tap dance class.

Tap dance. Why the hell do I need to learn how to bang my feet on the floor in rhythm? No matter how many hours I waste on it in this life, I'll never be a Fred Astaire.

Home at last. What a crummy day. Exhausted, I open the heavy red front door of 34 Eldersham Road. It groans softly as I push it open. The familiar musty stench of the old house rushes to greet me: a mixture of stale tea, resin, and the damp that seeps through every brick of this old Victorian building. The air is cool, almost stagnant. I step inside and the door closes behind me with a dull thud.

Every time I walk down this hall, I hope a house-elf by the name of Dobby will leap out and offer me a chocolate biscuit, but today as always Dobby is off duty. And so is everyone else.

No shoes in the hall! I've got the place to myself. What a relief. There's something magical about having the little red-brick house entirely to myself for the first time.

I walk down the dark, narrow hall. To my right, the door to the living-room. The walls are lined with yellowed prints of English landscapes, a piece of embroidery reading '*God save the tea kettle*', and a stuffed pheasant with only one wing, who looks like he was preserved in the middle of a nervous breakdown. The carpet, once bright, now

dark and rippled, crunches in places as if it's growing a crust. Walk on it barefoot? No way!

The floral pattern on the saggy settee is so faded you can only guess what the original colours were, its cover so ancient even the moths have long since given up eating it. In the corner, a fireplace that hasn't seen flame since the Blitz. The room has that typical English cosiness that always carries a whiff of the uncanny.

My landlord Leo lives right above this living-room. Leo is ... one of a kind. Seventy-five years old, stooped and brittle, strangely obsessed with putting every last thing in its proper place, he always reminds me of a character in a Tim Burton film. After his mother died last year, he came out – something he shared with me in great detail the day I moved in. But that was less shocking to me than the fact that until then he'd lived under this roof with his mother. Now that she's dead, he's only got one thing left to live for: his compulsion to keep things tidy. Every time I come home, something has been rearranged. Not just one chair repositioned slightly, no, the entire room reorganized. Even the things on my desk must be arranged according to Leo's standards. His neuroses drive me bonkers, but somehow I feel too sorry for him to complain.

On the second floor live Sophie and Amir. Sophie is studying pharmacology, but in looks and manner she could easily be taken for the serial killer in some Scandinavian crime series. She hardly ever speaks, and when she does it's in short, clipped sentences. Every interaction with her feels like you're being dissected, as she examines

you for any interesting defects. Her standard facial expression: a wall. No smile, no emotion – nothing but a strange disapproval, as if you just reversed your car over her dog without realizing it. I've got no idea what goes on inside her head, but some days I'm convinced she's secretly plotting mass murder. Who knows.

And then there's Amir. Amir Abu El Hassan, son of a Lebanese celebrity lawyer, raised between Beirut and Paris. Amir's the sort of person you simultaneously admire and can't stand. A psychology prodigy. Prays five times a day. Preferably – in our kitchen. Sophie hates it when he rolls out his prayer mat right next to the stove while she's trying to cook a vegan stew. I often stand in the doorway watching the two of them. I like Amir.

In another time the two of us would definitely have become friends.

I climb the narrow staircase, its steps held together by a few weary, rusted nails, up into the attic. Here's my room. It's small. Pathetically small – I can only stand upright in the middle of the room. The floorboards bulge, as if the house itself were frowning in thought, and the mint-green wallpaper peels in miserable flakes. But at least I can shut the door. Today Leo has once again been on one of his campaigns. My washing is laid out on my bed, all rolled up and sorted according to colour. The desk has been shoved against the sloping ceiling so I can't sit down without banging my head. My books and notes are neatly lined up on the shelf. Upside down and backwards alphabetically. I don't

have the strength to get annoyed. I take off my clothes and collapse on to the bed.

My alarm goes off. I feel like I've been hit by a bus. A double-decker. Ran me over, then went into reverse so it could again press me flat like biscuit dough.

My skull still throbs. Without thinking much about it and assuming nobody's at home, I shuffle naked out of my room and down in the direction of the kitchen to make myself a coffee.

The kitchen is quiet, empty – perfect. I reach for the coffee pot, yawning so loudly you could hear it many streets away, and slowly turn round to – find myself looking right at ... Amir.

He's materialized out of nowhere, suddenly sitting there on his little prayer mat in the corner of the kitchen, deeply absorbed in muttered devotion.

FUCK.

Should I back away, or play dead? Maybe, just maybe, Amir hasn't noticed me. Of course he has. How could he not have? I'm standing naked in the kitchen. Amir keeps chanting softly. 'Allahu Akbar! 'I'm thinking things couldn't get any more unpleasant when Amir abruptly opens his eyes. He looks at me and says, dry as bone: 'Don't make a big deal out of it. Nothing I haven't seen before.'

'What? 'My brain fails me. I grope for a joke. 'You mean because we're both circumcised, right? Circumcised – get it? ... Jews, Muslims – we're cousins, brothers.'

‘Yes ...,’ answers Amir drily, ‘that’s exactly what I meant.’

And with that he bends forward again and resumes praying without a sound.

*

I’m sitting in my tiny garret on my wobbly chair. It’s late April and the sun has finally decided to show up. I’ve positioned the chair so that the warm rays can hit me right on the face, though only if I lean so far back I risk dislocating my neck. Well worth it to feel the sun on my skin again. All the warnings about seasonal affective disorder in London have been totally outdone by the reality. Seven months of monotonous, demoralising grey on grey with an extra portion of grey, greyer still than unsweetened, overcooked, watery porridge. Day after day. Week after week.

And my days at drama school don’t particularly help. They just preserve my low-serotonin condition and the faint crunch of dopamine receptors dying off one by one. I spend most of my time pondering the horror of the impending lessons with Elouise Blunderstone. Mondays and Thursdays – like clockwork she slams me into the ground in front of the whole class, as if it was a ritual.

Last week, working on a play about American hostages in Iraq, we were supposed to choose colours to characterise our approach to acting our parts. As soon as I had uttered the last syllable of the

penultimate word of my monologue, Elouise asked me in her unmistakable steamroller of a voice:

‘So? What colour were you playing?’

‘Red.’

‘Red ...?’

‘Yes ... RED.’

A brief laugh and then: ‘Red like the blood that will run from my eyes if I see you acting so ineffectually one more time.’

I have to admit, she does have a good turn of phrase.

My mobile rings – I ignore it. Probably Leo again. He’s been asking for my rent for two months now, and I still can’t pay. London is expensive. And I am barely getting by on my grant. My daily breakfast consists of two slices of toast and two eggs. Then at lunchtime there’s a mixture of tinned chickpeas and tuna. And in the evening I sometimes get lucky and Sophie leaves one of her gloopy stews unattended and I can snatch a ladle-full.

‘The money’s coming soon, Leo, ’I mumble, as if saying it out loud could conjure up the cash. But I have to run – it’s Thursday and Elouise is already sharpening her teeth.

As I stretch my aching limbs on the cold ballet-hall floor, I overhear some particularly poisonous whispering behind me. A little circle of Elouise’s favourites: Peter McMarrow, an Irishman with a Superman-chin and luminous green eyes; Timmy Jacobs, the talentless scion of a rich father who’s on the board of the school; and Manuel – talented,

sure, but a total prick. Manuel loves correcting my pronunciation in his posh accent if I dare to get a word wrong.

Their conversation grows louder, livelier, and suddenly I hear Manuel's smug voice saying: 'Well, fine. I mean, we are talking about Simon. Simon Vale. 'Instinctively I mimic him. A mocking 'Siiiiimoone Vaaale 'slips out of me. The group shuts up immediately and looks at me, as if I'd picked up on a secret password.

Finally Manuel, with his always slightly dismissive look, answers: 'Yes, Simon Vale.'

'Never heard about the parties? 'sniggers Timmy idiotically.

'What parties? 'I ask with curiosity.

'Parties that are none of your business, 'Manuel snaps, cuffing Timmy hard on the back of the head, which makes his face contort into a grimace that reminds me of a farting hyena. Claire, one of my fellow students whom I also don't particularly like, steps closer and whispers conspiratorially: 'Vale pays the boys to work as waiters for him. Shirtless.'

'Shut your mouth, Claire. 'Manuel bristles.

'Pays them to be topless waiters? 'I can't refrain from laughing, but at the same time a strange mixture of curiosity and desperation makes itself felt inside me. 'And how much ... does he pay?'

'That depends, 'Claire answers, shrugging her shoulders. 'How much effort you put in. 'Then she pushes her tongue against the inside of her cheek in an unmistakable way and winks at me. That doesn't

sound good, but given my financial situation, it's nevertheless enticing. And what does Claire know anyway.

Elouise – The Executioner – Blunderstone enters, and I brace myself for the scaffold. Another demoralising hour of 'YOU'LL NEVER MAKE IT IF YOU KEEP THIS UP 'and I'm in the corridor again, shoving chickpeas in my mouth and replaying Manuel's words in my mind. Parties that are none of my business? What a tosser. That's what he thinks.

A few days go by, and I make it my mission to find out more about these so-called 'Vale parties. 'No one will tell me anything, but every time I hear the name Simon Vale in the corridors and rehearsal rooms, I prick up my ears. I piece together scraps of information. It's not long before I've found out that he's apparently a well-known producer who throws lavishly decadent parties – supposedly at his estate outside the city. And of course 'Simon Vale 'is just an alias. So how do I get in?

*

'You really need a job, bruv. 'Manuel breezes past me sporting his cocky smile as I'm scraping the last of the tuna out of my tin after one more demeaning tap class. 'That stuff stinks up the whole place, loser! 'he yells at me from the end of the hall.

That same evening I drag myself, exhausted, lost in thought, and as broke as I've ever been, towards Eldersham Road. I look in the shop

windows and watch them come to life: all these treats, none of which I can afford, sprawling about packed close on top of each other, grinning salaciously at me. Golden brown pasties, the first water melons of the year, shining strawberries and juicy legs of lamb. They're dancing for me. Showing a bit of skin to lure me – but with no money, no happy end. I have to look away. I walk past the pub and wish I could afford a nice cold pint of lager. I stop and rummage in my pocket. 50 pence, but that won't get me far. Just as I've resigned myself to heading home, through the pub's window I see Timmy Jacobs. He's on his own. Even from outside I get the impression he's already drunk himself into quite a state. He's gesticulating wildly and laughing even more stupidly than usual. This is my chance. Not just for a beer, but for the intel I've been craving about Simon Fucking Vale.

Inside, a mediocre musician is butchering an Ed Sheeran song. Timmy is raucously slurring along.

Minutes later I'm next to him at the bar. The barman says Timmy's already on his fifth pint. I watch him giggle into his glass like a toddler.

'Another?' I ask with over-the-top enthusiasm, gesturing to the bartender.

'Sure, one more!' slurs Timmy, his cheeks flushed, his eyes glassy.

'You know what, Timmy,' I begin in an offhand way as I'm pushing another pint over towards him, 'I heard there's a Vale party coming up.' Timmy blinks at me, his brain seems to be clattering like an

old computer that's overheating. 'Yeah, man, 'he says, grinning like a fool. 'I always get invited.'

My plan is simple. As simple as Timmy: make sure he keeps drinking, get him drunk enough, borrow his mobile, gain access to the information.

Half an hour later and Timmy's at that point. He's leaning forwards, his face only inches above the table, and slurring something incomprehensible in the direction of his glass. Now or never.

'Timmy, can I quickly borrow your mobile, my battery's dead.'

He mumbles something that sounds like 'Yeah, sure 'while already half-asleep in his beer. But where is it? I slowly and carefully pat him down. Right front pocket. Finally. A few swipes and I'm in his texts. There it is – the message from 'S. V. 'I copy the number straight into my phone, slide his back into his far too tight jeans, where I find a twenty, hail a cab, load Timmy onto the back seat, slip the note to the driver and feel just like Sherlock Holmes.

No, like James Bond.

Back home, adrenaline buzzing, I text 'S. V.': 'Hey, I'm a ripped mate of Timmy Jacobs. He said you're looking for guys for an event. ' My thumb hovers over the 'Send 'button and then with a nervous jolt I press it. 'Ripped mate – 'I read my own message with a considerable amount of embarrassment. My heart pounds. Now it's a matter of waiting.

The seconds feel like hours until finally a reply shows up:
'PHOTO topless! 'My stomach knots. A photo?

I scroll frantically through my gallery, hunting for a picture with even the faintest hint of good abs. Bingo. Not perfect, but it'll do. I hit send. Another eternity – then ping. 'Next Saturday. 6pm. And hit the gym first.'

It really did work.

Soon I'll be able to pay my rent again.

[END OF SAMPLE]