

# Number Games

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# Number Games

Owen Dwyer



To Rita

# Part 1





## Seattle, 2116

‘You take the word *quim*,’ she said, facing the glass wall and raising a fist, as though she was addressing a rally. ‘It was considered offensive by the men of past centuries. Too sharp, you see; too unambiguous. There is something impregnable in its single syllable. *Quim*. To have such a strong word connected with female genitalia was counterculture. To us, it’s simply part of the lexicon: little children use it every day, and no one turns their head.’

She paused to watch a swallow which was darting about in the empty sky, like the point of a tailor’s needle. When she refocused and turned to face me, her hump became silhouetted against the brilliant blue of outside. And though she looked strangely gnome-like, there was something dignified about her too, as she made her way to the table, where she placed, with deliberation, the knuckles of her right hand onto the polished rosewood. She tapped.

‘To us it is a better word than the old, awkward *vagina*, with its intimation of the act of invagination. The vagina was to facilitate, to allow the man to *invaginate* his penis as he would his sword – with the obvious implication of woman as facilitator to his potency. There were other ridiculous words that made you boys giggle – *fanny*, *beaver*, *pussy* come to mind – but the word *quim* was no laughing matter. It was the worst word you could use. Almost as bad as the notorious ‘c’ word, as it was called on the BBC, where it was banned. Which might make us wonder.’ She became thoughtful. ‘What the “BB” stood for.’

There was a glint of something in her good eye – might have been amusement. Hard to tell with these old Chinese, with their inelastic little faces, when they are joking. I wouldn’t have expected the leader of the American Triumvirate to be looking for laughs, at a time like this. Then again, as the leader of the

American Triumvirate, she would feel entitled to look for anything she damn well wanted.

‘If we want to understand a society,’ she continued, ‘we must look at its taboos. Does not the horror the Victorians showed towards challenges to their ideology tell how intellectually vulnerable they were? How could any society have been stupid enough to believe that there was a god, an old man with a white beard, who was intolerant in exactly the same sexist and racist way of their empire-building forefathers? *Nigger, fuzzy-wuzzy, quim, Chink*, all words designed to scandalise, and therefore put an end to discussions in which these subjects might arise. Or, at the very least, to denigrate the object, make it vulgar, risible even.’

She set off for the water-cooler and I was reminded of a hamster in slow motion: every boardroom had to have its water-hole, a place for the animals to drink while they considered each other. When eventually she reached the big blue bottle, she filled with deliberate fingers a small paper cone, from which she took slow sips as she considered me. For some reason, I felt a connection with this old woman, isolated together as we were on the two hundredth floor of the Ameri-Corpo headquarters, which was itself standing alone in its bed of rubble like a giant glass beehive. It was all that remained of their government. And here we were, stalemated in the queen’s chamber, with no way out for either of us. The armed guards outside would stop me, and I was stopping her. She started talking again.

‘These manipulations of language remove moral roadblocks, which might stand in the way of exploitation and profiteering. Everybody subscribes to the convenience of it, but lack of debate leads to chaos, finally. Look what happened to the Victorians: their ignorance culminated in the First World War, the greatest devastation the world had known, up to that point. It was their apocalypse. Their judgement day. The same happened to other unsustainable ideologies, like fascism, communism and democracy. The disintegration of the terminally named *United States*. Pogroms, holocausts and the slaughter of millions, culminating in the mess that was Israel. It was all witnessed and predicted by the sisterhood, but men wouldn’t, or couldn’t, listen. And why not?’

The heaviness of the question seemed to weigh on her, like a wet cape. Dropping her cup into a wastepaper basket, she turned back to the endless horizon on the far side of the laser-proof glass, to the ruins that stood like stumps of rotten teeth where a city had been. I tossed the sphere and caught it, felt its ominous



weight. I thought about throwing it at her head without arming it, like a baseball: she was so frail, the force would probably kill her. The swallow danced by, then danced away. She looked after it wistfully: swallows were going to survive. Bending one arm behind her back, she continued to gesture with her free hand, slow circular movements now, as though she was waving at an ecstatic crowd through the window of a state limo.

‘What matter?’ she said. ‘How can you learn from a history that has been rewritten? For so long we have refused to acknowledge the truth, and now, we, the isolated and deluded Triumvirate, pace the corridors of our powerbase like Hitler in his bunker or Nero with his fiddle. Now it is the turn of the women to fail. What next? Hand it all over to the children?’

She was motionless for a while. I was on the point of thinking she might have died standing up, when she let go of a ponderous fart. While I searched for something to say to break the awkwardness, she turned and, as if seeing me for the first time, said: ‘It’s only America now, and I know you might think America a backward and insignificant place, but it is the wound through which the infection will spread. Conversely, treat America, and you cure the world.’

Her attention was caught by something in the rubble below. I stepped over and saw two security cars hovering over a cluster of dispersing people. Shots fired into their midst were followed a split-second afterwards by a muffled crack and violent sparks along the hull of one of the cars, which veered dramatically from the scene. Nothing else happened; no further fire was discharged; the people disappeared back into the rubble; and the cars, following a few cursory search patterns, zipped out of view. The side of her face, tinged blue by the refractor, gazed at the scene.

‘Something needs to be done before another collapse,’ she said. ‘Before another *revolution*. If the rebs gain control of Seattle, a chain reaction will engulf the world, and that will cause annihilation. It really would be . . . how did your friend put it . . . Armageddon. *She* can moralise about the ethics of what we are about to do, but ethics don’t matter any more, especially not here. Ethics are a luxury we can’t afford. What matters is the collective. What matters is that the greatest number survive. What matters is that *we* survive. No one cares how *you* part your hair.’

She waved a derisory finger in the direction of my hair. I thought this poor observation on her part: I never parted my hair. In this respect at least, I believed in chaos theory.

‘Or whether or not you are worth falling in love with. No one cares about or believes in gods unless they absolutely have to. How can they believe in the individual? As long as they are fed and have their creature comforts, the masses will be indifferent. Ideology exists for the oppressed, as a kind of rationale to justify begrudgery, or to give hope. But it makes people, especially men, zealously aspirational. The rebs want to take everything and give nothing. They do not understand balance. Our plan will restore balance to the books.’

Wandering away from the wall, she stopped to stare at one of the high-backed leather chairs that lined the table, as if considering the trouble it would take to sit in it. When she spoke, it wasn’t clear whether it was me or the chair she was addressing.

‘I know that you are not quite as stupid as either you or we have been making out. I know you have a better understanding of what is happening here, better even than your wholesome girlfriend. She thinks there is still some morality to be salvaged. You and I know different, don’t we?’

‘What if we do?’ I said carefully, not wanting to either aggravate or encourage her. I really just wanted to get away, to another life, where I could go shopping, wash the dishes, take out the garbage, whatever.

‘You must put the case to Euro-Corpo, substantiate the data. *Convince* them that we explored every other option and were left with no alternative. They will never believe that you are clever enough to lie to them.’

Suppressing an itch to take umbrage, I said: ‘Why should I?’  
‘Why *not*?’

‘But what difference will it make? You’ve already made up your mind.’

‘Oh, everything makes a difference,’ she said. ‘Small differences, big differences: they all add up. Right now, it is necessary to have as much in our plus column as possible, and the testimony of a boy-slapper, who is incapable of having an agenda, would definitely help. Besides, you would be making a contribution to history: not bad for an insignificant. What is there in the negative column, other than a trace of male pride?’

I could not think of anything, then and there, beyond my discomfort with her ruthless barbarism; it seemed bad manners to bring all that up again.

‘You know,’ she continued, ‘I will not allow anything to interfere with the plan.’

‘What about my friend?’

‘Friend, is she? Lover, perhaps? *Invaginatee?* She must stay here with us. If you have travelled so far to rescue her, then we already know that you are far more likely to protect her safety than she would yours. She has a nasty streak of the heroic, that one.’

I looked at the sphere and started fingering the coloured panels. I had heard enough.

*Two years earlier*

I stoop out of a taxi and my eye catches the ankle of a woman. It's a swollen ankle, scuffed red where it's been forced into a high-heel shoe, for which it's too big. No Cinderella. Travelling northwards, I'm not disappointed to see that the ankle belongs to a fleshy leg, covered just below the knee with a shiny, shapeless material that passes as a dress. I can see, or at least imagine I see, the curve of a flabby thigh. I think of a squalid, squashed quim, stuffed into a pair of overstretched knickers, hidden from respectable society. Of course I'm drunk. Sober, I'm less venal – or at least better at pretending. Lasciviousness, Emily tells me, is what makes me easy to control. I know it, yet I can't stop being its slave. She's thick around the middle too, Swollen Ankles: stratified fat. Looks like the proud mother of a thousand carbo-rich craps. You can see the self-justification all over her face, like jam. Christ, I want her. She's swaying in the queue with a group of similar gargoyles, being lit with splashes of light from the perpendicular sign over an insulted Georgian door. *Dance Adonis*, it says, like an order. Alongside, there's the shape of a boy, could be two identical boys, flickering alternately from either side of a pole. One flashes turquoise, one pink. Both would look like outlines at a murder scene, were it not for the phalluses,

which rise and fall with the neon. Her eyes, moated by ponds of black eyeshadow, are glazed and wandering, attracted to the lights. She doesn't see me pick myself up, or notice me drain and fling away the bottle of alco-pep I've been arguing with the taxi-driver about. They're waiting to get into the nightclub – which, conveniently, is managed by a client of mine. She likes me, this client, likes the way I invest her money without asking where it came from.

There are always crowds at this hour on a Saturday night, outside the clubs on Leeson Street. Women mostly, and mostly married. They're there, ostensibly, to look at the pole-dancers. But looking is not enough for many. They want a taste of boy: a physical indulgence which drugs and arrogance tells them they're entitled to. Their husbands are at home minding kids, or zonked in front of soap operas, where they can exist in the ether of simulated emotion until their spouses decide to come home and tell them what's real again. They're not all like that. Emily is at home, her cool body enveloped between clean sheets, her sacrosanct, sweet-smelling quim, dry and oblivious in its sheath of silk. I'm imagining this; I've never seen it. I've never seen it through dates where we've talked about cinema, or through the painful evenings when I've sat prettily sipping beer with her friends. I've never seen it when she's powdered me with dry kisses in her car. Or while I've been hanging on her arm, at one of the upmarket dos where she's shown me off. I've never seen it, and I'm beginning to wonder if it exists.

I sidle to the head of the queue, towards a bouncer. 'Would Amy be there?' I ask. She should be shoving me back into the night, but there's something familiar about me. I've been there before. Muttering something into her headpiece, she tells me to stand back and wait, which I do, until Amy emerges presently from the heaving mess of noise to join us street-side. She does her big-guy act, of welcoming me and remonstrating with the bouncer for not knowing who I am, before ushering me down the stone steps to the basement. I turn to the gargoyles, diffidently.

'Join me?'

#

I get on well with women, mostly because I listen to them with fascination and let them feel in control. You need to know how to surf their moods and react appropriately, or else you'll end up being treated like a cheaper piece of meat than you actually are. I

need to work on my technique, because I don't come from money and I don't exactly stick out in a crowd. Amy, now she sticks out a mile, six foot tall and built like a brick shit-house – stuffed into a tuxedo, at least at the club. A thick plait of blond hair hangs right down her back, as far as her muscular buttocks. Her other most striking feature is that she likes young boys. I don't hold it against her. Who am I to judge anybody? She gives me a cheerful slap on the shoulder, plants a free bottle of wine on the counter, then dissolves back into the crowd. I watch her go with the sadness only a drunk can know. Swollen Ankles is speaking to me, and I'm not making her life any easier by being too pissed to talk. I start pursing my lips and nodding like I'm giving a shit about whatever she's saying. In the end, she reaches over and grabs one of my cheeks with a heavily ringed claw. Her mouth dips at the corners; it's full of large teeth, two of which don't quite make it behind the lips when they close. It's talking again.

'You're a cheeky little one, aren't you,' it says, as she leans forward to clutch my knee. I smile and shrug cheekily. She turns and growls at a stagerer-by who has raised an eyebrow in my direction, before reasserting proprietorship by hemming me between the vectors of her knees. Massaging my thigh, she continues. 'Out all alone at this late hour.'

Her breasts, mostly pertox by the look and shape, hold me in the gaze of their perfect nipples, while watery eyes continue to scan me, like I'm some prize she's unexpectedly won. I can't decide where to focus. I notice, clinically, that the focal-point of her ugliness is an upturned snout, and wonder if she should have spent the tit-job money on a nose. The good angel on my right shoulder asks me what the fuck I'm doing, asks what the fuck Emily would say if she could see me. But it is the thought of Emily finding out that charges the situation. If she were to see me now, doing what I'm doing (which, specifically, is reaching towards a pertox tit and feeling its rubbery surface with my fingertips), it would be the end of our sanitised existence. No more trendy restaurants or witty banter or powdery kisses.

Somewhere in my subconscious jungle, I want it all to end, while somewhere else I want it to begin. I want to be a happily married man, wiping his hands on his apron as he goes to greet his wife on her return from a hard day's work. At the same time, I want to have enough control over my life to *decide* whether or not I should work after I get married. To conform or not to conform, this is the question. I'm returned to the scene by the pressure of fingers on my crotch, and put my hand on Swollen Ankles' to

squeeze appreciatively. The ugly mouth attacks and grinds itself into mine. Shortly afterwards, we're hovering along in the back of a taxi, where she mauls me relentlessly on the trip to what turns out to be Kimmage. When we fall out of the car, she stabs the cred-pad and returns some abuse by way of a tip.

'Fuck you too,' she shouts as the driver takes off. 'And your fucking stainable seats.'

Turning to search for her prize, she sees me leaning against the wall of a laneway.

'We near your place?' I ask hopefully, but the time for talking is over – which is funny, because it never really began. Her lower lip stretches itself over most of her teeth.

We fuck, fight and fuck again. We make animal noises, to go with our animal behaviour. I become detached, letting her grind and grunt and work me over. Memories come to haunt me, of leather, and the pain of my hair being pulled backwards until the roots burn. I can taste stale smoke and cheap beer, mingling with the faint tang of diesel oil on the breath of a lost summer evening. The sensation of my balls being grabbed brings an involuntary yelp and returns me to the lane: her way of dealing with distraction, apparently. My body becomes a buffet on which she feasts. I wrestle on, gamefully. There isn't much we don't do, and if we've missed something it isn't worth writing about. When I eventually stagger out of the lane, holding up my trousers and ignoring her abuse, it's getting light. And now I'm really in trouble, because Emily will be picking me up in a matter of hours to go to some heavy-duty charity thing.

**Y**ou can see the dome of the Corpo Concert Hall from almost anywhere in the city: it's a great monument to our beloved system of corporatised matriarchy. What you're actually seeing is light. The dome itself is relatively minuscule, inside the gigantic glowing projection it shoots into the night sky when there's a major event. Every city has its Corpo Concert Hall, along with its Museum of Decadence and Forbidden City. The Forbidden Cities are where the Triumvirates live, in splendid isolation, and it's from here that their great philosophy flows to saturate our way of life – shape our thinking. This may be a bit overbearing at times, what with all the marketing, 3D documentaries and propagandised education system, but it's better than anything that went before: you've only got to go to the Museum of Decadence, to see the damage western democracy inflicted. And by 'western democracy', we mean 'men'. You're forced to go to the museum as a schoolchild, and no one's ever been to the Forbidden City. But everyone loves the Concert Hall. You can't help feeling privileged, when your car grips the park-wall and you're slid into the giant glass elevator, which floats you right into the ballroom.

We share the elevator, me and Emily, with some older, Asian couples, stiff with the starch of their clothes, and the uprightness of their position in society. These balls are an excuse for the well-connected to parade their affluence and generosity. But you can't help being enamoured by it all, and you ignore the hypocrisy. Tonight, it's all about raising money for the 'American Unfortunate', but it could be about anything. All anybody cares about, is looking like they care. I mould my face into an expression of concern, as the Mistress of Ceremonies describes the shitty situation at some orphanage in California. A 3D is switched on, and a trickle of fatherless children fizzle into being to walk among



us. Their gaunt faces look ahead or turn blankly in either direction, as they pull aside ragged clothes to show festering sores on bruised limbs. I'm standing inconsequentially on the outskirts of a group Emily is talking to, when my ear begins to wander.

'Poor bastards,' I hear some matriarch behind me say. 'Imagine having to live like that.'

'That's what happens when you don't get the numbers right,' answers another. Her tone is coldly philosophical. I turn, pretending to be looking for someone in the crowd, and see two middle-aged Chinese leaning into each other. If they think I might be listening, I don't matter enough to worry about.

'But there should be political action,' says the first, a short woman in a high-collared velvet jacket. Jet black hair furls geometrically from her head in orbit circles. Her face is powdered white, with the cheekbones light purple: the stamp of the matriarch. 'From the very top. We need policies, not charity.'

'Oh, come on,' says the second. 'Please don't tell me that you think the Triumvirs have nothing better to do than deal with this rabble.'

'The question is,' says the first, 'what will happen if they don't?'

'No,' answers the second, 'I rather think it is what will happen if they *do*.'

I imagine a scenario where I'm confident and socially permitted enough to turn to them and say something like: "Scuse me, pardon the interjection and everything, but I couldn't help overhearing your little conversation there. Mind if I ask you a simple on the substantive? Why should you girls be doing all the pushing around? Eh? And who's to say these Americans wouldn't be able to look after themselves, given half a chance? Eh? Eh? Or that the rebellion that's destroyed their country, is not the product of the very politicians you say should rescue them? Surely even the most mesmerised disciple of the Triumvirate system must concede that the world is being run by a selfish elite who have a greater interest in their own power and wealth, than the good of humanity. Eh?'

But I could never say this, because I am a boy: I am conditioned not to have the confidence – and even if I did, society would puke on me for being an upstart.

'No,' the second is saying, 'I think we can safely assume that our noble Triumvirate are too savvy for interference.'

Tall and patrician, this one organises her body as carefully as her words, into interesting shapes. She, too, has *establishment*

written all over her, though her style is less formal. They both thumb a generous credit to the charity. The amount of each donation rises and explodes in 3D from the cred-pad before cascading about their contrived self-effacement. This is soon happening all over the ballroom, and the air fills with translucent numbers, dipping or rising, fading or emerging. It is an ecstatic numeration of goodwill, which is accompanied by a chorus of oohs and aahs, while the insensible, forgotten waifs limp colourlessly on.

When the business end of the evening finishes, the crowd, full of its own sense of generosity, settles into a guiltless guzzle of food and drink. The 3D is switched off, dispatching both the ghostly orphans and colourful clouds of numbers to memory. Emily, handing me a drink, smiles the brittle smile she's been spraying around all evening. 'Come on.'

'Fucius,' I say, following her to a balcony, where we look over a roof garden, lit romantically with hovering lanterns. 'I can't believe the number of rich bastards here. Did you see the amount of money floating around that room?'

'Is that all you saw?' she asks, like the whole American thing is my fault. I wonder what answer I should give. She doesn't look like she really wants one: her eyes, blue and cool, search the distance. I wonder why she has taken me to the relative privacy of the balcony, and whether she has something she wants to say. While I'm figuring all this, she moves away and disappears through a gaggle of husbands nattering their way to the men's room. I look at my glass, already empty, and follow. I'm insecure now, suspecting that she has only brought me along to remind her friends that she can actually get a date. It's then that I remember: this whole relationship thing has been manoeuvred by her mother Mianzi for reasons of her own. Mianzi, who also happens to be my boss at Ningbo Digits, thinks I'm a genius because I get results. Tells people about me at the golf club. Is particularly proud about the part where I am a boy, who comes from Carlow. It beefs up her liberal cred. And if this arranged relationship with Emily doesn't work out, it could screw up my career, as well as my head.

Maybe Emily is feeling the pressure of the 'arrangement' from her side, but whatever the reason, she seems to want me to hang around. At the foot of the stairs, she's waiting for me. She takes me by the wrist and continues showing me off to important people. And I begin to believe again, that there might be something going on after all. She avoids William Howe, darling of the tab-vids and slut son of a Corpo board member. This avoidance

is no surprise, as they have recently broken off an engagement. Across the room from Howe and his set, Mianzi and her husband Martin are at home in the sea of affluence, as they shuffle amiably through the crowd, towards a table they've reserved. Making our way steadily over, we join them. I've never met Martin, and am struck by his similarity to Emily. It's the seriousness: he has the demeanour of a serious man, with significant things on his mind. Heavily pouched eyes and immaculately groomed silver hair, together with an impeccable grey suit, put me in mind of an old-world politician, with the weight of a crisis on their shoulder. I'm expecting a serious conversation about the state of things in the Re-United States, or whatever, but he leans over and confides: 'See that woman there, with the feathers? Gay as a pantomime. Married with four children too. Very respectable.'

I raise my eyebrows and assume a shocked face. Emily interrupts. 'Let's dance.'

This I welcome. With her stop-start interest all night, I've begun to feel like an engine that keeps turning over but fails to get going. A slim arm slides across my shoulder, as she draws me close and we shamble through a series of techno-funky tunes. There is an aura in her proximity, which goes beyond the touch of skin and smell of perfume. It beguiles me as it defines her. I want her to touch me suggestively, to whisper something inappropriate into my ear, but she behaves so well, I wonder if she's even interested. I catch us in a mirror, and am embarrassed by the contrast of her elegance to my smaller, slightly untidy form.

'You OK?' she asks eventually.

'Mmm,' I murmur approvingly. If she knows how happy being near her makes me, it might encourage her to grab my ass – do *something*.

'Having a good time?'

'Great, thanks,' I reply, with the enthusiasm of a Boy Scout.

'Good.'

'And you?' I ask earnestly, not wanting silence to resettle. 'Are you having a good time?'

'Sure. Why not?'

'You seem quiet.'

She sighs.

'Maybe I'm the quiet type.' And again, the brittle smile. Which brings the dread: she must at least suspect something about last night, about Fat Ankles and the laneway. I can sense contempt. Maybe it's my imagination, because she maintains an impregnable politeness as she leads me back to Mianzi's table,

where we resume our place and listen to the senior Corporatist holding court. Specifically, Mianzi is explaining to a group of listening heads how she and Martin have suffered at a recon-spa in Kilrush, where they spent last weekend working on their jowls. A good raconteur, she knows where to draw emphasis and create tension. Emily and I laugh along with the rest. It gives us a break from trying to talk to each other.

Howe and three of his set come over, gallant with alco-pep. Oblivious to the intrusion, they create an extraneous circle on the edge of our table, into which we are dragged. After some time – which Howe spends gushing at Emily – he replies to a polite interjection from me with a slashing movement of his head.

‘And who’s this?’

He looks smaller in real life, and his voice has a nasal twinge, which doesn’t come across on tele-vid. It makes me wonder how anyone takes him seriously.

‘I’m Li.’

He glares at me, while I withdraw my untouched hand. Having addressed the question to Emily, he seems to expect her to answer, by way of an apology. But Emily just shrugs. ‘Like he says, he’s Li. He’s a friend.’

Howe huffily switches his attention to *his* friends. They begin giggling through an animated conversation, with occasional looks deployed like missiles in Emily’s direction.

Eventually she asks: ‘And how have you been, William? I mean really.’

‘Fine,’ he half-gasps.

‘Hey Li? Can we talk to you over here for a minute?’ One of his cronies wants to know.

‘About what?’

‘Hey, it’s nothing to worry about. Seriously, we just wanted to ask you about something.’

They’re already standing up, gesturing me towards the bar.

‘Ask me about what?’

‘We just want to, you know, talk. Boys’ stuff. What are you so suspicious about?’

They are giggling again, incredulously, looking from each other to me, and finally to Howe, who has edged his chair closer to Emily’s. They’re smug, these boys. This environment fits them, like a soft leather glove. They’ll never question why they’re peripheral. Nobody questions anything about the world we all live in. Just as the dead generations of yesteryear would have accepted whatever shit they lived through, I suppose. I don’t know

why I question things; I just do. It's like I know something that I don't know – which means I must have forgotten it. Whatever it is, it's jumping around inside me, like a Mexican bean. A peppy-pill I have swallowed earlier, with one of the glasses of champagne Emily has been pouring into me, makes me brave.

'I'm not suspicious,' I say. 'It's just, I've never met you before, and I don't know what the *fuck* you would have to talk to me about. The only thing I know about you guys is that your leader here' – I gesture at Howe, who is observing with a sour mouth – 'is trying to mooch my date, and refuses to shake my hand. So, no. I won't join you at the bar, if it's all the same to you. Unless of course' – I turn to Emily, whose face remains as unreadable as it has been all night – 'you want me to.'

'I don't care one way or the other, but if you boys want to have a cat-fight, *I'm* going to the bar.'

I follow, like a dog. We sit on barstools and pass occasional remarks to passing people we know. Though I try, once or twice, to start a conversation, she seems preoccupied. I give up, and begin counting the crystals in the chandelier, which, following another peppy and another glass of champagne, has become fascinating. I've switched my attention to her slender fingers playing with the stem of her glass, when a commotion breaks out at the other side of the room. An auction is taking place, for a person. That's the way it is: everything is a commodity, and everything is for sale, if someone is prepared to buy it. Tonight, the lot is Howe. He goes out on a date with you, sucks your tits, whatever, if you're the highest bidder. The matriarchs converge: they have the veneer of charity behind which to hide. Jumping onto the stage, he makes his way up and down the catwalk, lapping it up. A murmur of approval burbles into a cheer, when he points his ass at the audience and waves it expertly. The MC, who has changed into a sparkling silver jacket, slaps the ass as it passes.

'It's real, all right,' she announces. 'Now, do I hear ten thousand?'

What she hears are jeers and shouts of encouragement, for the removal of Howe's tight trousers. They've caught sight of a fluorescent G-string, and are like a pack of hounds on the scent.

I turn to Emily. 'Nice,' I say. 'Real classy.'

'Eleven thousand,' shouts the MC, impressed.

'At least he's giving it away for charity,' she says.

'Meaning?'

I thank Confucius for the narcotics surfing through my body: I'd never be able to brazen through what's coming otherwise.

‘That’s twelve thousand to the lady with the pearl necklace.’

‘Meaning whatever you want it to mean,’ she says, returning a nod to someone.

‘If you are insinuating something . . . .’

I find it hard to finish the sentence. Even if she does not know or suspect anything about the previous night, she would know that being ‘obliged to oblige’ is part of my deal with the Corpo. Mostly it’s at Mianzi’s suggestion, and mostly just dinner and a couple of hours of being awed by the Corpo’s power and influence. I have, on occasion, been tempted back to a hotel room, convincing myself that I find the woman attractive and would have shagged her anyway. It’s what’s expected at my level, from a man. That is, if he has any ambition.

‘That’s fifteen, yes, fifteen thousand to Mianzi. Going and gone!’

Martin’s been left alone at the deserted table. He’s staunch, like so many of his generation, but even he can’t take this. Rising slowly, he puts on a pair of grey gloves while Mianzi, in a throng of her peers, is gesturing obscenities, oblivious. As he is making his way to the exit, I elbow Emily.

‘Your father,’ I say, pointing to the old boy who has hesitated a moment with his hand on the handle.

‘Fuck,’ she says. But by the time she stands up, he’s already gone. ‘Fuck. You wait here.’ And she hurries after him.

I fall out of bed in my apartment and look at a Sunday-ful of sailors playing on Dublin Bay. They pimp up the flat blue, with colourful sails and water-suits, while the boys lay out picnics on the sea-shelf. The dread is back, and I am, familiarly, awash with disgrace. Stuck to the couch like a wet insect, I try to piece together the previous night. There's a recurring image of an ass-cleavage, smiling at me over the stretching elastic of off-white sweatpants. From a barstool in a city-centre flesh-farm, I think. I'm not even sure how I got there, though I do remember hurrying out the side door of the ballroom as soon as Emily left to find Martin.

I hear loud music and see loud lights. Must have been a club. A series of hot burbles floating from my stomach-pit tells me I've been pumping myself with cheap alco-pep. The ass-cleavage morphs into a woman. She develops a face and situates it in the middle of my horizon. Remembering makes my heart sink like a stone, but it's not like I have a choice. The face is heavily made up and enthusiastic. It advances. I see more detail: red blotches beneath the eyes, sloppy mascara. Then it attacks. I taste whiskey on a tongue and remember a stud, hard and round in the swirling slime. I'm on a floor early next morning when memory regains consistency. I creep from a bachelorette-squat Ass Cleavage shares with, I think, a sister. They've both had a go at me. For some reason there's a sense of freedom, infusing with the self-disgust, as I stumble along a pavement. As if I've escaped something.

I make myself a cup of coffee and use it to wash down a peppy. Back on the couch, in the interlude between swallow and kick, I get the familiar, creepy feeling that I'm being judged: that everything I do, say or think is being scrutinised, that I will later be held to account. I get this all the time, when I'm feeling low:

it's called paranoia. But right now it's real, and it scares the shit out of me. I try to blank my mind, to deny the force its fuel, but continue to recollect. I don't want to. I want to forget last night even happened, but my mind is on a roll, seems to be enjoying getting me into trouble. I see myself hurrying through a strange hinterland, after I've escaped from the squat until I find a vac-stop, where I stand and shiver. Eventually one arrives, and I hunch in an empty carriage, like a refugee. When the vac stops at Parkgate, I see through the kitchen window of a redbrick, a woman nursing a child. The white flap of a Corpo-uniform hangs down to release her breast, and a single strand of hair has fallen over her face. Though she glances at her watch, she is mostly intent on the baby. As the vac moves away, a husband comes into the frame and takes the child. The scene reminds me of something, some kind of Madonna-and-child thing, but I can't think straight. So I let my mind meld into the blur of the grey city and the hum of the vac.

The scars from Fat Ankles are still in the circuit mirror. I wonder if Ass Cleavage or her sister noticed, and if so, whether it tainted their enjoyment of my flesh. My skin erupts when I shower, so I step quickly through the drier and apply more ointment. I'm like a fisherwoman mending nets, or a farmer sharpening a plough. We all have to take care of our equipment. I smear antibiotic skin-repairer onto my wincing penis, and gut-lurch when I remember where it's been. Standing by the sitting-room window, with my kimono hanging open, I swirl the dregs of a fourth cup of coffee and look at the sailors. They weave slow patterns on the expanse of the sea, random, free. They can turn any way they like.

#

I'm watching Arsenal, mid-afternoon, foundering against Chelsea in the China Cup, when my irritation is interrupted by Emily's pristine little image fizzing from my sphere-phone, which I've forgotten to switch off.

'What *happened* to you last night?' It wants to know. The oily machinery of duplicity clicks into place.

'I, uh, thought you wanted to be with Martin,' I say, a big look of understanding on my face.

'I told you to wait. I was only gone ten minutes.'

'Well, I didn't think you really wanted me to.'

'And where did we get that idea from? Did I say I *didn't* want you to wait? Did I? Did I?'



I put on a bit of a pout, try to look like I'm about to cry.

'No,' I say. The little head shakes, as irritation dissolves into exasperation.

'Would you like to tell me what exactly is going on here?'

'I thought you, like, wanted to be with Howe or whatever,' I say, letting her think she's unravelling me.

'And what made you think that? I was bloody worried about you. I told Mianzi I'd take care of you. Had to take a real earful this morning.'

Sitting into a miniature armchair, she produces a tiny cup from the invisible margins, which she brings onto her lap. I hope the miniature me she is looking at is holding its composure, or at least losing the right amount of it.

'Well, how was I supposed to know what you wanted?' I say. 'You, like, hardly spoke to me all night, and when you did, it was to make remarks.'

'Remarks?'

'Yeah. About my character. And stuff.'

Even to me, the speaker of these words, they are nauseating. I feel like throwing up, a whole bucketful of the crap I go on with.

'Well, aren't we Mis-ter Sensitive? All I've been hearing about you is how you're holding your own in a woman's world, and how capable you are.'

When I don't reply, she softens. 'Look, I'm sorry, OK? I didn't mean to be ignoring you all night, but you were a bit spliffed, and there are rules about taking advantage. But I would have seen you home safely. Were you OK getting home, by the way?'

'You're checking up on me now?'

'Don't be paranoid.'

'And how was Martin?' I switch.

'Upset, as you'd expect.'

'I ended up running out of that place,' I agree, sensing an escape over common ground. 'It was just so awful, so . . . *vulgar*. Place erupted into a cattle market. So degrading. I don't know how that tart Howe can live with himself.'

'And all conveniently "for charity".'

'Yeah, well anyway, I probably overreacted. Sorry.'

'I'm sorry too, baby. Why don't we meet later for a drink and talk about it?'

A meeting could be perfect. I could tell her everything. About the things I do and the reasons I do them. I could tell her about paranoia: what it's like to live with. I could tell her I want to reform, beg her to take me under her angel wing and make me

a better person. Truth is a strange commodity, in a world held together by truism. But I could bet on Emily's morality: the odds would be in my favour with a moral person. This could be it. This could be my chance to free myself from the lattice of secret longings and fears that have been tying me up.

'I can't,' I say. 'Have to go see my parents.'