

INTO THE SKY - 4703 WORDS

In his peripheral vision he registers his phone, illuminated on the bedside table. Reaching over, he holds it close to his face to read in the dark. Kicking the covers off himself, he rubs his eyes, yawns, stretches. *Again*, he thinks. Shivering, he stands, starts to get dressed.

He dresses facing the door. He doesn't want to see the single bed, tissue thin mattress. Plywood bedside table, out of a kit. Slit of a window, looking over an alley where the waste from the hotel kitchens is left for collection each night. The smells of rotting food, cigarettes, cat piss and sweat mingle as they waft upward, will stink the room out if he so much as cracks the window. He's only had a few weeks of rooms like this, but already it's hard for him to remember different, imagine different.

Out of here in a few hours, he tells himself, buttoning up his suit jacket - doesn't help. Now is what matters. Now, sitting on the edge of the bed, freezing his ass off, trying to coax enough circulation into his fingers that he can tie his laces, get to work.

The lift is still broken. He stumbles on one of the concrete steps on the fire stairs, feels his back rick again.

"Think of the money," Poldek, the other Security guy, tells him any time he sees him start to get down on himself. "How do you think I do it?"

"I know," he says, making enough effort to keep his voice light, but only so Poldek will drop it. He wonders if Poldek really believes that's all it takes.

He has to put his right foot on the step in front of him, then drag the left up to

meet it. When he tries to walk normally, it feels like the vertebrae in his spine are pulling apart - needs his own bed. He leans heavily on the iron banister, his face and neck hot with sweat. The halogen lights nudge a headache to life at the back of his skull. His phone vibrates in his jacket pocket - another text. He doesn't stop to read it, afraid his back will seize up. He knows what it says, anyway. *WER RU?*

His brain almost can't compute it's only a month since he sat in the lobby of The Shelbourne, green tea, salmon sandwich slivers on gleaming silver platters, interviewed with Tommy for the job.

He hadn't worked in two months, since his contract with the gym hadn't been renewed. "Put it this way," he'd said, when Tommy asked why, "I think some of the clients would have felt more comfortable if my name had been Sean Connolly, not Solomon Chemedza."

The truth was he'd brought it on himself. Struggling up another flight, he remembers Lucy, stopping on the stationary bike, five minutes before her time. Not falling off, not fainting, just, stopping. Her legs were sore. "Exactly!" he'd told her. He'd heard himself, knew he was shouting, but knew he was right, too. "That's how you know it's working. Come on, back up there." But she wouldn't.

Or Luke, benched 300 pounds after only three gym sessions, nearly twice his own body weight. It wasn't easy, but it wasn't killing him, either. He'd 350 pounds in him, Solomon knew he had.

"That's enough for today," Luke said. "I'm afraid I'm gonna hurt myself."

"I won't let that happen," he'd said. "It's meant to be tough. Keep going."

"No," Luke said, standing up and facing him as if looking for a confrontation, but then turning away, grabbing his towel. "That's enough." He hadn't come back, either.

"They're good lads," Tommy assured him at the interview, an almost fatherly pride in his voice. He was barely five foot, to Solomon's six four; Solomon imagined putting him on his knee like a ventriloquist's dummy, bouncing him about. "They can get a bit, rambunctious, at times." Tommy hesitated, afraid Solomon might be struggling with *rambunctious*. "Mainly after they've had a few. Which is where you come in.....Solomon.

"Your job is to see the trouble, before it happens, get the guys out of there. Make sense?"

He'd nodded. Couldn't afford to talk himself out of this job, too.

"Forty-one is older than I normally take on for Security," Tommy said, "But I've a good feeling about you." He went to smooth down his immaculately Brylcreemed silver hair at the back, just managed to stop himself in time, afraid of ruining the effect. His suit was also meant for a man twenty years younger, yet he seemed about to drown in a puddle of his own self satisfaction, any minute. Solomon only knew the guy half an hour, but already he itched to slap him.

They stood to shake hands, the only part of the meeting he enjoyed, towering over Tommy and everyone else in the room.

"Just remember," Tommy told him, "Everyone's replaceable. Except me, of course."

He's perfected his hotel room door knock. Loud enough to be heard inside, but not waking the other three lads, asleep in the rooms alongside and facing.

He bows his head. Shoes need a polish when he gets back to the room. Can't have Tommy see them like that in the morning.

The corridor carpet's maroon, at least a decade old. The beige walls, dusty to his touch, badly need a fresh coat of paint, which round here, won't be happening unless the insurance pays off. The air's stale, recycled through the air conditioning, over and over. With each breath in he feels a little more nauseous.

Hearing footsteps inside the room, then whispers, barely audible, he straightens up, best he can, shoots his cuffs. He clenches his jaw to suppress a yawn, draws his features tight against the pain in his spine that won't subside.

The door opens. Gary's in white jockey shorts, Calvin Klein printed in black on the waistband. His peroxide blonde hair, after lying down, rolling around, then getting back up again, points up and out in random spikes. His bare chest and feet are paler than the underwear. Another five foot nothing, ten stone nothing. He could crack him in two if he wanted – if only.

Gary rubs his eyes, moaning for the benefit of whoever's inside. He rakes his fingers through his hair, making it more, not less, dishevelled. He jerks a thumb over his shoulder, then holds up his index finger – *One*. Solomon nods.

"Bed check!" he says, bustling past Gary and into the room.

"The FUCK!"

All he sees is the end of a blonde bob diving under the bedcovers, blur of alabaster skin.

"What's goin' on, man?" Gary says, trailing behind him. He sounds genuinely baffled. He's more of an actor than he'll ever be a singer; according to Poldek, the sound crew has to turn down Gary's mic every show, soon as the singing starts, Tommy's orders.

"Yeah, what's goin' on?" Gary's girl says, navy blue eyes challenging. She sits up awkwardly under the covers. "Who's this, Gary?" Already she sounds suspicious. "It's grand, babe, it's grand," Gary says, tugging at his shorts, rubbing his eyes some more. *Bit hammy*, Solomon thinks. "It's just our Security." Gary sits down next to her, but she pulls away when he tries to put his arm around her. "Hey. Everything's ok."

Solomon stands at the side of the bed, looking between the two of them. Gary looks back, smirking, but she stares straight ahead, like this way she can convince herself none of this is really happening.

"You know the rules, Gary," he says, folding his arms across his chest. Does this look imposing, in the mirror of the dressing table across the room that she's looking into? He doesn't feel imposing. He feels like he's auditioning and they're about to say we'll let you know. "No girls allowed in the hotel after the show. Tommy's going to freak."

"Who the fuck is Tommy?" she says, sitting a little more comfortably under the covers now, having made a kind of barricade against her nakedness out of the duvet and pillows.

"Our manager," Gary tells her. He pats her hand to reassure her, silently willing her to take the hint.

"Please, mate," Gary says, turning back to him. "You know this is the first time I've ever done anything like this. Gimme a break. Please."

It's the third time, in a week. And when the other lads do it, they're sheepish when he turns up to get the girl out, embarrassed. They apologise the next day for getting him up. They thank him, make him feel one of the lads, like they're all in it together.

Gary never lets him forget he's just the help.

Pretending to think it over, he looks round the room. The bed's no bigger than his own, but besides the dressing table, there's also a chair, floral wallpaper that looks less than five years old, and cream shag pile carpet made for walking barefoot on. Tommy insisting the lads are bankrupting him staying in places like this is just Tommy blather, but for a boyband touring their first album, it's perfectly acceptable. And warm.

"Alright," he says eventually. Trying to sound decisive, he's sure he only comes across more fake. "Listen." He hesitates, distracted by the sight of her clothes on the seat of the chair: pink boob tube and hot pants, black bra and knicker set, black stilettos, must be at least six inch heels - no coat. In December, when it's never got above three degrees in a fortnight. He feels himself becoming inexplicably angry, calms just as fast. She must have been half frozen, queuing to get in the venue earlier.

"Miss," he says. "If you get yourself together, now, I'll walk you out, get you a taxi. Maybe we'll get lucky, miss Tommy." He looks at Gary, a beat too long.

He's forgotten his next line.

"Is he doing his rounds again?" Gary prompts.

"Yeah," he says, relieved, but only for a second. Tommy's going to hear all about that in the morning. He wishes he could just walk out the room and never come back. "He says he can't sleep again."

"Shit," Gary says. "Just my luck."

Gary's still sitting with her on the bed, him over the covers. He doesn't try and put his arm round her again, but when he interlocks his fingers in hers, she lets him. Solomon senses that if he kissed her, she would kiss him back, too.

"I'm so sorry about all this, babe," Gary says to her. He stands up, decision made. "I really wish we were playing tomorrow night, as well."

She doesn't move.

"Gary," she says, eyes flaring, "*He*," looking at Solomon, "Works for *you*." Her voice and face are calm, her body poised. It's not her suspicion making Solomon's skin prickle any more; it's her authority. She may not understand exactly how, but she can sense that they're trying to play her, and she is not going to be played. "Just tell him to piss off."

All the other girls had been mortified, scurried for the bathroom while he pretended to bollock whichever lad it was that particular night. They'd got dressed and out of there like the room was on fire, apologised to him as he put them in the taxi, any trouble they'd caused.

Gary sits down with her again, rubs her arm. "Babe," he says flatly.

Solomon wonders if he threw her clothes down on the bed, shouted at her to get dressed, would that do it, scare her enough to get going? It might make up for

before, at least, stop Gary saying anything to Tommy.

Or she might lock herself in the bathroom, call the Guards. Then the papers. "You're going to get me in trouble," Gary tells her. He sounds like he's warning a rebellious child.

"It's two in the MORNING!" she says. The increase in volume is so dramatic, it panics each of them. She means to say more but stops, as if she's crossed a line she either never intended to cross, or never knew was there. Gary starts frantically pressing his palms down in midair, pleading for her to be quiet.

Solomon plays her voice back in his head, scanning for any hint of drink, drugs – nothing.

"I'm not getting up out of here in the middle of the night," she says, looking at Solomon. Does she think he's really in charge? God help her. "I'll slip out first thing in the morning. Nobody'll even know I was here. I promise." She adjusts the covers round herself, looks down at the bed, as if readying herself for sleep, waits for Solomon to leave.

When he doesn't move she looks up again. "This is mad," she says.

"I know, babe," Gary says, "I know." He squeezes her hand. When she looks away, Gary nods, urging Solomon to step in. "But I have to follow the rules, too. Same as everyone else."

She jumps when Solomon claps his hands together, which in turn makes Gary jump. Solomon picks her stuff up off the chair, lays it on the bed in front of her.

"Time to go," Solomon says, staring her right in her eyes. "Now."

The night porter's in his sixties, salt and pepper stubble, shuffles instead of walks, eyes somehow both bloodshot and yellowed at the same time. He quickly unlocks the front door, recognising trouble when he sees it, but that's it for good news.

"An *hour*?" Solomon says. He stamps his feet on the pavement to keep warm, realising too late that it must look like he's throwing a tantrum. Just the idea rankles. He takes pains to be professional at all times, if nothing else. "For a taxi?"

She's standing on the curb behind him, back turned, arms wrapped round herself.

"This is Wexford, sir," the porter says. "Not Dublin." He stays on the hotel threshold, where some warmth from the interior just about reaches. Solomon wants to stand there too, wait for the taxi, but the way the guy said *sir*, Solomon imagines what he really wanted to say was *nigger*, tell him to fuck off, and his little slapper with him. So he nods. The porter closes the front door on them, locks up.

The bench outside the hotel's granite. She's spread her bag out to cover her lap and thighs, is sitting on her hands, trying to seal in her body heat. She can't stop shivering, face contorted against the cold.

"Here," he says. Scarcely believing himself, he unzips his parka as he limps round the bench to sit down, holds it out to her.

"I'm grand," she says, refusing to look at him.

"You're not grand." He holds the jacket right in her face, so whichever way she

looks she sees it. He keeps it there. "I've my fleece to keep me warm. Take it."

He waves the jacket at her. She's tiny, shorter than Gary, even. He feels like he's woken up in Lilliput.

Realising this is another battle she can't win, she stands, takes the parka, zips it up to the neck. It's like a duvet on her.

"Thanks," she says with bad grace, sits down on the far end of the bench.

"You're welcome," he says, equally bad, sitting in the middle.

The street is still, no sound other than their breathing and the haphazard movement of their limbs, trying to keep warm. In the dark it feels like there's no one else around for miles.

She holds out her hand to him.

"Siobhan," she says.

He looks, then shakes it.

"Solomon," he says.

He shivers, holds his jaws together to keep his teeth from chattering. Should have offered her the fleece, kept the jacket.

It's going on for three. He closes his eyes. The cold is making the pain at the base of his spine radiate upwards. He starts thinking about having to be up again in five hours, make sure the boys are packed and ready, on the coach for nine. If they're waiting as long for a taxi as promised he might as well stay up, only feel more tired later on if he does get his head down for a couple of hours.

"Solomon," she says.

"Yes?" He likes her voice, crisp in the what must now be touching zero air. She

doesn't do that devoicing thing, either, that he keeps reading about.

"Was any of that *not* bullshit?" she says. "Upstairs?"

He swallows, wincing at the dryness of his throat. How much truth is the right answer?

He looks into the sky, waits for his eyes to adjust, that instant when a million stars seem to become visible. He's doing this more and more lately, he finds, when he goes for a walk after the show especially, not tired enough yet to sleep.

He remembers the first time, his father showing him when he was a little boy, lifting him up effortlessly in his arms in Nyungwe Forest, between the bamboo trees.

"C'mon," she says, distracted as she speaks by the cloud her breath makes between them. "What's it matter now?"

He stamps his feet. It's a good point. And talking might distract him from freezing to death.

"Nobody stays the night," he says finally. "That's true."

She nods with a half smile, folds her arms, recrosses her legs.

"Some job you've got," she says.

"I'm saving." He doesn't know her so he can't tell if she's having a dig or not, but there's no reason for him to justify himself to some random girl he'll never see again.

"I want to go back to college," he says, practically in apology.

"To study what," she says. Each knowing it's just talk for the sake of talk, and that the other person knows they know.

"Law," he says.

She takes out her phone. It won't switch on. She throws it back in her bag, tries to spread the bag out more to cover herself, still shivering inside his coat. The sight turns something in him.

"Is there anyone waiting up for you," he says, speaking the words without thinking them first.

"No," she says, a beat too quickly. She turns towards him a little more. "I don't live at home," she says. "I'm sharing a flat with some girls from college."

He notes she didn't say friends. "What are you studying?" He feels the heat in his cheeks, embarrassment. He sounds so eager it strays into desperate, like he needs to know.

"Law," she says. They make eye contact, accidentally, it seems to him. She smiles, not parting her lips.

"Is it tough?" he says. Talking definitely makes him feel warmer, but he can't stop worrying about his back seizing up. He fidgets on the bench, but really he wants to stand up, stretch. He doesn't though, afraid of startling her again.

"Tough enough," she says, reaching into her bag to check her phone again, like a nervous tic. He sees she's no watch, probably just wants to know the time. He goes to say, but something still lingers from the hotel room. He says nothing.

"Can I ask you something," he says, after they've sat a few minutes without a word.

She takes her hands out of the pockets of his coat, which has never felt warmer to him than at this moment. Rubbing her hands together, she eyes him, puts her

hands back in the pockets. She looks at his face, but won't make eye contact.

"Go on," she says.

Before he can even get the first word out, he stumbles. "It's a bit awkward," he says, but really his bottle's going.

"Is there a part of this that *isn't* awkward?" she says, smiling.

"Well....." he says, "Do you actually.....*like*, their music?"

Her laugh's a jolt, sounds like it's coming from deep inside. It wakes him up, envelops him. For those few seconds, sitting in the sub-zero cold at twenty past three in the morning, he feels like at least he's done something right tonight.

"Brilliant," Siobhan says, wiping her eyes as the laughter starts to subside, settles down again. Now she can't stop smiling. "Like," she quotes. She rubs lip balm across her chapping lips, wags her finger at Solomon, as if he's trying to catch her out, but she's on to him. "Turn down the sound, look at the pictures, y'know what I mean?"

"They're good looking guys, alright," Solomon says. He takes off the black wool gloves his mother knitted him, opens and closes his fists. His fingers are numb. He puts the gloves back on, keeps making fists. "And Gary's your favourite," he says, low, more to himself than her.

"Yeah," Siobhan says. "His hair, his teeth. Those eyes....." She covers her face, shakes her head. "Do I sound like I'm fourteen?" she says, looking right at him, chin in her hands.

"No," Solomon says. He grins, not worried any more that she might make trouble for him. "Maybe nineteen." He billows a huge breath out in front of them, can't

help but laugh.

"Why?" he says, "How old are you?"

"Nineteen," Siobhan says.

"Seriously?" Solomon says, looking sideways at her.

"You'll never know," Siobhan says, laughing too.

She's quiet again, fiddles with the zip on his jacket. "How old are you?" she says.

"Forty-one," Solomon says.

"Old," she tells him.

"Thanks a million."

She lets go the zip, resettles her bag on her lap.

"You don't look a day over forty," she says.

Solomon makes a face. "That one's older than the two of us," he says.

It's getting colder. He bows his head, his chin almost touching his chest. He burrows his hands deep into the fleece, tries to think of something else to talk about. When they're silent the night feels like it's closing in on them, inch by inch.

He rotates his feet through ninety degrees, looks at his watch. "Half three," he tells her, "Taxi can't be much longer."

"Are you from Rwanda, originally?" Siobhan says.

He sits back like she's slapped him. "How you know that?" he says.

Involuntarily she goes to shrug, stops herself.

"I saw a film in school," Siobhan says. "In Transition Year. For Christian Doctrine."

"Oh." Nodding, he looks off down the street to their left, turning his back on her.

"The genocide," he says. As if it could ever be anything else.

They watch each other's breath, spiralling in the air in front of them. He waits for the inevitable.

"Did you lose anybody," Siobhan says. Her voice is soft, barely a whisper.

Fighting off sleep, too, from the sound of it.

He folds his arms. "You didn't watch the film properly," he says.

"What you mean?" Siobhan says.

He turns so he's facing her. He angles his head up, to catch the light from the street lamp opposite.

"See?" he says. He speaks into the yellow/white light, head still angled up, eyes closed. "Hutu. Not Tutsi."

She folds her arms, rubs her hands against her elbows.

"Is that why you left," she says.

He nods, sits up straight, opens his eyes, goes to speak again, stops, knowing the words will catch in his throat, if they come at all.

"How old were you when you left?" Siobhan says, either missing the signals or choosing to ignore them, "Nineteen?"

"You can subtract," Solomon says. "Very impressive."

She ducks her head away, unzips her imitation Vuitton, checks her phone again.

"I'm sorry, Siobhan," Solomon says, but it's not enough. He wants to reach out, touch her arm, make her understand he really means it. But he's still too afraid of frightening her. It's the longest conversation he's had in months and he won't be

the one who ends it. "I haven't talked about it in a long time," he says. He scratches a patch of stubble on his cheek. "I never seem to say the right thing when I do."

She looks back at him, doesn't look away. He feels like she's touching him, with her eyes.

"It was my tribe, responsible," he says, deciding. He looks straight ahead, at the shuttered up chipper and Spar across the street, the rubbish bin between them stuffed to overflowing. "Not my family, my tribe." He realises as he says this, the first time he's spoken the thought, that not only does he not know if this is true, but that he will never know. "My mother said, 'We have done this to them. If we stay, they will do the same to us. Sooner or later.' My father didn't want to go, had been offered an important job in the new government, but my mother insisted, so we left." He looks for, finds, her eyes. "And I was twenty. You were close."

Without any memory of moving they're sitting closer, almost touching.

"Have you ever gone back?" Siobhan says.

He shakes his head. He feels like he can say anything and she'll listen. His father had told him it felt like that when he first got sick, people visiting him in ICU. "My mother says if we ever went back, even for a holiday, we would never leave." He has to fight to not close his eyes, knowing if he does, even for a second, he'll see their old house, his friends, the patch of waste ground where they used to play football. His father, playfully tapping him on the shoulder, when he tried to keep playing with his ball under the dinner table.

He claps his hands inside his gloves, rubs them together, but it's so cold now even that's not working any more. Siobhan takes her shoes off, rubs her bare feet, red and swollen. He watches as she struggles to get her feet back inside the heels. Should he help? Or could that be taken wrong, as well?

She looks over at the chipper and Spar too. "I'm sorry," Siobhan says. "I can't even imagine what that must feel like."

He presses his lips together in acknowledgement, but she doesn't see. No point saying any more, either. It won't change anything. He'll still be here.

"Is he nice?" Siobhan says.

He feels his entire body clench, reflexively, until he realises she means Gary.

"Was he nice to you," he says.

She closes her eyes, as if trying to summon the memory, quickly opens them again.

"He was.....alright," she says.

"There you are then," he says. For her sake, not Gary's. It's as diplomatic as he's been in a long time. If he could have managed that much before, he'd still be at the gym. And warm.

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The taxi pulls up in front of them at twenty past four. Siobhan winces as she stands, her shoes pinching one more time. She takes off his parka, folds it in half, lengthwise, hands it back to him.

"Thank you, Solomon," she says.

"You're welcome, Siobhan," he answers. "Nice talking to you."

"And you." He sees her consider shaking hands, waits for her. She decides against, smiles, nods, gets in the taxi.

After Siobhan tells the driver where she's going, Solomon asks him how much the fare will be. When he says a tenner, Solomon holds out a twenty Euro note to him.

"Do me a favour," he asks the driver, "When she gets out, wait a second, make sure she gets in her front door."

"No problem," the driver says, taking the money, but his tone of voice meant to convey that he would have waited, anyway.

Solomon looks in the backseat. The heating's up full and Siobhan's already stretched out, shoes off, eyes closed. She'll be asleep before they round the next corner. He turns away. "Cheers, mate," he says to the driver, taps the roof of the car with the narrow end of his fist.

He steps back on the curb as the taxi drives on. Zipping up his parka, he decides he might as well stay up now. Before he goes back to the hotel, pisses off the night porter a second time, he looks into the sky again, waits for his eyes to adjust.