

Ian Brotherhood

Lost in France

It was the first day there. First time in France.

The bus contracted by the employment agency had taken us to the digs after a rough ferry-crossing from Hull, and we were all still moaning about the shared rooms, the evidence of cockroaches and the lack of fridges, tellies or sound systems.

It might've helped if I'd known anyone, but we all seemed to be solo, stuck in our own sullen worry — the agency had said there would be three weeks at least, cropping turnip and beet. It was said to be hard graft, but decent cash if the targets were met, and the man said I looked strong and fit, I would do.

Sitting in the kitchen section of the portakabin which doubled as a lounge/recreation area for the twelve of us, it was inevitable that some argument would erupt — the pecking order hadn't been established, and several of the younger lads were sussing one another, trying to establish who would win out in any permutation of confrontations. It was still early on the Sunday, and we'd all been on the go for nearly thirty-five hours. Sleep had been sporadic and unsatisfying.

Jim, the oldest of us, had cracked his litre of whisky and was happy to share it for three Euros per head contribution to the next purchase. I passed. We were all struggling to convert the currency into Sterling, never mind Francs, but we knew he knew he was making a killing until we found the local stores and could buy for ourselves. The others had long since exhausted their cargoes on the bus-trip from Paris, and the more desperate were happy to part with the unfamiliar notes, staying seated and as close to the bottle as possible, watching as Jim poured the measures and paced himself carefully, making them wait.

It was Johnson who started it. He was on about some scrap he'd been involved in after an Old firm game, how he'd been cornered by a group of Rangers fans but managed to fight them off. Gerry laughed and downed the rest of his whisky, shaking his head and saying how full of shit the younger lad was, how unlikely it was that Johnson could fight off a drunk teletubby never mind a half-dozen stocious teddy-bears.

Johnson moved fast, the chair scraping across the linoleum as he rose to his feet and brought the glass down on the table's edge, making a noise but not cracking it. Gerry was slower off the mark, but soon had Johnson against the door, one hand at his throat, the other holding the glass-bearing hand hard against the wall.

You'll be going home sooner than you thought, Gerry said, and Jim had already moved across to intervene. I got up and as soon as Gerry had backed off enough for the door to be opened, I went outside.

It was warm, much warmer than the Scotland we had left the night before last. The clocks had only shifted forward one hour after the trip, but it felt as if time had been changed in some other way, that the sun was not where it should be, was somehow altering its behaviour. We had left Glasgow with sleet battering against the bus, the driver having to use the wipers at double-speed to clear it as we headed South, and he cursed every now and then as the wind buffeted the vehicle.

Now, the sky was bright and blue and there was no wind. We would be starting next morning, five a.m., but no way I was staying in that madhouse another second. There would be further fights, more tall tales and jeering, more Old Firm shite. Just the same as at home.

The portakabins were sited at the top end of a long, sloping earthy plot marked out with an ancient barbed-wire fence which ended at the riverbank. The river must have recently flooded, and all manner of plastic bags and bottles and sundry shit marked how high the water had risen. There was no wind, but a sour, milky smell, maybe

coming from the water.

Although the units looked fairly new and were clean and bright in the sun, they were atrocious inside — the smell of the previous occupants was still there, but the atmosphere itself was worse than the stale air, as if the accumulated grievances and hangovers of all those other temporary workers had somehow been absorbed, trapped by the walls and bedding. Four of us in the one room, one wash-hand basin, four tiny bedside cabinets and no lockers. I'd already shoved my bag under the bed, and it didn't take long to dig out my trainers. Abid, who had gone to school at the same time as my younger brother, was sound asleep on top of his bed, still had his boots on. He was muttering in his sleep, occasionally snorting, as if something was blocking his nose. He seemed alright. Maybe he would be a friend for the next month. If not, no danger. I was happy to keep myself to myself.

But right now, a walk. Anywhere. Clear the head, maybe see some birds or even a boar — we were close to the edge of the Fontainebleu forest, and it said in the brochures the agency gave us that the wild pigs were still hunted for sport by the wealthier locals.

I knew the town of Grez was small, but it was still a surprise to be clear of it so suddenly. I guess maybe I was walking North, but that's no matter. I didn't know. If it wasn't North it felt like it should be. Just good to get out for a while, and no-one to bother me, no bullshit stories to listen to. Just walking in a place I didn't know, where no-one knew me, where, if I walked long enough, I would find something, see something new.

The road-signs were few and far-between, but there was a MacDonalds either 3 minutes or 3 miles further on down the road, and an Intermarche another three miles or minutes further again. This name was the one the agency kept repeating in their bump, because it was the closest supermarket where we could buy necessities. I couldn't remember if the place was open on Sundays, but figured that there would be no harm walking there anyway — at least if I found it I would know how to get there on foot and get a rough idea of how long the walk took. I didn't have a watch, but guessed that I'd left the site at 3.30 or so.

Minutes or miles? I knew the French used kilometers, so guessed that the m must stand for minutes. Maybe it wasn't a motorway, but the traffic was going fast enough anyway, and the signs were saying 70, 50, so I guess it was a dual carriageway. I made sure to walk against the oncoming traffic, but there was no footpath as such, and it was just as well it was a dry day — the turf was soft and Spring grass made it comfortable enough, but it was easy to imagine that a half-decent downpour would muddy it quickly. Minutes or miles? If minutes, then I would have to work out how far these cars could cover in three minutes. And that would just be to the MacDonalds. If the Intermarche was another three minutes, that meant at least six minutes. If the cars were going average 60, and that was kilometres, then they would be doing a kilometer a minute. 6 km? Maybe that was about four miles. Four miles.

Remembering Glasgow, I could see four miles as the distance I used to walk between the flat in Maryhill and the folks' old house in Govanhill. That was a decent stretch, but it used to take just over an hour. So maybe that was about 6km, four miles. Whatever, it didn't matter. I was out, and if I didn't reach the Intermarche, no problem. The agency had arranged that we would all be brought there by bus after completing the first day's shift. Still, it would be nice to get some tobacco and maybe even a half-bottle, just to show the others that while they'd stayed inside on such a beautiful day, bickering like wives about Old Firm shite and

paying old Jim a small fortune for niggardly nips of red-eye, I'd shown initiative enough to get off my arse. Not that they'd likely even notice — the younger ones would probably be happy to throw away more of their cash on booze. I started to work out how much I could make if I did what Jim had done, bought a litre and then divvied it out for a fixed price. It was fun doing it in Sterling, trying to imagine how much Jim really was making, but because I still didn't know the price of Scotch in the French places I couldn't entertain the project for long. Still, it was a thought that killed a half-mile or so.

Reached another rise, broached the hill — the stretch ahead was poker-straight and looked awful long, but it was still bright enough, still warm. I stopped, took the light jacket off, slung it over my shoulder and kept going.

Maybe an hour passed, and the same stretch was still as straight, but at least now there was a distant blinking of red and green, and it had to be an intersection with traffic lights. At least there would be a chance to change direction, get away from the road. I was aware of dryness in my throat and a vague feeling of hunger. Maybe time to turn about? I had to have been walking for two hours, maybe a bit more. Still, if I even got to the MacDonalds there would be a phone, taxi-numbers, maybe even a bus timetable. There would surely be a way to get back, and the idea of a nice big burger was now tempting, although I don't usually like that type of thing.

The trees were getting closer to the road, and here and there I would have to stop, judging the speed of oncoming traffic before juking out to pass a branch or cluster of budding twigs. Now and then a car would flash its lights at me, but whether the driver was being friendly or expressing anger I don't know. Perhaps they just weren't used to seeing anyone walking along this road. It struck me that since leaving the site I hadn't seen anyone. Not one other person. That's if you didn't count all the folk in their cars and people-carriers and the trucks and buses as well. No-one out in the open like me, no-one enjoying the sunshine and the warm air. Not alongside this road anyway.

The traffic lights were clearer now, but still a long way to go. The road broadened and there was a slip-road coming on from the left, so, what with the drivers all being on the other side from at home, it was a bit confusing trying to get across, trying to time it so that the cars coming around the bend wouldn't be too close. A couple of times I started, then retreated. They were fast, and one car blared a horn, maybe he got as much of a fright as me. Then I got across and there was an overhead road held up by huge round concrete pillars. The lower reaches of these pillars were plastered with layers of posters, big brightly coloured images of Monsieur Le Pen with two raised fists, his expression gleeful, determined and excited, as if he'd just found out he had the winning Lotto ticket. I didn't know what the words meant, but there was a contact telephone number if you wanted to help him. The other posters were even bigger — there was one for the circus coming to a local town, and there was a lion roaring at a smiling woman as a man with a whip looked on. The other poster was the biggest and brightest of all, and there were maybe twelve of them lined perfectly along the arching wall behind the pillars. It was of a dark-skinned woman crouching, and she was wearing scarlet high-heels and had her hands covering her crotch. Her hair was dark and woolly about her face and her lips were painted the same colour as the shoes. She seemed to be blowing a kiss, or maybe just pouting, and there was no script or description of who she was or what she was up to, just a series of fluorescent yellow numbers with a double exclamation mark at the end.

The vehicles crossing the road above made a fast hard rattling sound, like a deep drum, and with the other cars passing below the bridge, the sound was suddenly painful and I was glad to get through it and back onto the grass verge.

The trees seemed taller and closer still, and now a wall, maybe ten feet tall and almost entirely covered with ivy, stretched as far as I could see before it merged with the overhanging branches. It was easier to walk now, a bit more space with all the trees being behind this great wall, and soon the wall curved gently inwards as the entrance to the estate came into view. The gate was iron, ancient, and massive, a good five feet higher again than the wall. Harmillon it said, Harm and illon in great curving letters of iron, painted black and set within the intricate upper frame. The road beyond the gate curved gently towards the front of a chateau, every shutter closed, the three floors supporting turrets which each had another two floors with solitary round windows. The road was strewn with fallen branches and old litter, and you could tell by just glancing at the chain about the gate's middle that it hadn't been used, not by drivers at any rate, for ages. And again, no sign of life at all. No cars in front of the huge building, no lights anywhere, in or outside, nothing. Maybe it was a holiday house for some Parisian playboy and he only used it in the Summer, else maybe there had been a family dispute over ownership and it was going to seed.

The wall curved out again and carried on. The lights were getting closer, and there was the big M for MacDonalds on the other side of the road past the intersection. The traffic was getting thicker too because of the lights, and as I caught up with the queue I could feel the passengers and drivers stealing a quick glance at me, perhaps wondering how I had got there, where I had come from. But surely they wouldn't bother. They didn't know I wasn't local. Not like everyone in the whole place could possibly know everyone else.

A set of hazards flashing as the road curved away to the left, then a man heading for the boot, a woman close behind him. She looked up and saw me, maybe fifty yards away from them, but she kept her arms crossed and hovered behind the man as he fished about for something in the boot.

Then another came into view, a smaller red car parked behind the white one. Another man had opened the driver's door and was sitting, staring at the road-edge. His hazards were on too.

Something had happened. I had a slight panic when the man turned suddenly from the boot. I was much nearer now and could make out his expression. He looked disgusted, ashen. Maybe she'd said something, or else the problem with the car was a serious one. It crossed my mind that he might ask me for assistance, thinking I perhaps knew something about carburetors or suchlike, which I do, but how the fuck would I explain that I didn't know what he was talking about? He turned away, a grimy black tool bag swinging from the end of his arm, and he was having a discussion with the seated man as I neared. The woman turned and looked me up and down quickly, assessing me, then smiled weakly as I grinned.

"Bonjour monsieur," she said wearily, and the standing man turned, something about the tone she'd used, and looked at me hard, as if daring me to offer to help. I nodded, made my smile fade, and was glad to have to trot across the intersection towards the MacDonalds as the lights turned and a double-lane of cars pulled away and sped up towards me.

I was at the door of the MacDonalds when I realized I didn't have any cash. I'd forgotten to take it from beneath the plastic-lined base of the hold-all. I had the wallet right enough, and it had my passport and driving license and pictures of

the weans and sundry other shite, but no cash. I'd changed two hundred sovs into Euros at the Post Office in Glasgow the day before we left, but gone to the bog on the ferry and slipped it into the bag. No way I could fall asleep with some of those bastards about. There hadn't been any reason or chance to spend since leaving Paris, so no need to dig it out. There was a hefty queue inside the place, mostly youngsters, and I could see the bright pictures above their heads at the counter — ice-creams, big dripping burgers, steaming coffee and tall cold cokes and fantas. I toyed with the idea of nipping in to use the bog, but I didn't need it and getting the smells of the coffee and the grub would just make it worse.

Headed back down towards the intersection. The couple had started arguing, and she seemed to be getting the better of it, laughing dramatically, throwing her head back as he cursed from under the bonnet. I walked further down the road, past the lights, then dived over and doubled-back towards the crossroads.

Must get back. Shouldn't have come this far. Must've been on the go well over two hours, maybe nearer three. Fuck walking back along that road, there wasn't much to see anyway. The sign says River Loing, and it's only then I realize this road off to the left as I approached the intersection becomes a bridge. And some size too, a great new suspension bridge with bright blue pillars maybe sixty, seventy feet tall and like a fan-shape of girders shining in the light, all connected to the ground with what looks like gigantic bolts. The River Loing. It goes past the site, it's at the foot of the garden. Surely it would be a faster route back.

I walk across the bridge, so high above the water, maybe a good fifty feet. Surprised how broad the river is at this point, cause surely it's upstream, it should be narrower, but whatever, it's broad and pretty straight, looks like it would be a safe route back, and a lot more to see down there what with the birds and fish and away from the noise of the traffic too.

But the sun's getting a bit low now, and by the time I get down the steep winding path that leads from the other side of the bridge to the riverside, the tall trees are already obscuring it. I'd better get a move on. There's a group of people with a dog way way further down the path, so I make them like a target and start hoofing it good-style. The path's hard and a wee bit pebbly here and there, it's got like two bare tracks, where maybe cars come down from time to time. There's ducks and the occasional splash as fish break the surface, but they move too fast to see them, there's just the splash then the circles getting bigger. The water's so still and it's green, dirty green, so even at the very edge you can't see anything in there, no stickies or plants or frog spawn or anything like that, and it looks really deep even at the banks. Same kind of trees as were lining the road, loads of them look totally dead, covered with dark ivy, like maybe some of them have been struck by lightning and just left, and it's really thick, dense, the trees packed together. Some of them are budding, but they're mostly bare, you can see quite far into the forest on both sides of the river, and loads of the older trees have decked it, some of them leaning against neighbours. It's nice and quiet right enough, but it's not exactly what you'd call a tourist attraction.

The river bends a bit, a new stretch comes into view, and there's like this enormous kind of a storage thing on the other side of the river, a series of four like silos, and the writing on it's something about agricole, so maybe it's grain or something, but it's a filthy looking thing, and the old paintwork's sort of grey compared with the first one which has just been painted. I breathe in deeply and catch a waft of the paint, and this thing must

be like two hundred feet away. You can see the pulley and there's two guys on it, they're not painting, maybe just preparing the surface, but seeing the size of these guys against the old surface of this grotty thing, and then realizing how small they look, how big this fucking thing really is, it makes me sort of dizzy and a bit sick. I never did like things that size, like the gas tanks up at Uncle Harry's, those fuckers used to frighten the life out of me, I'd be staring at the pavement for a good five minutes until they were well behind us.

So I do the same, only this time I've got the group ahead to concentrate on, and I speed up a wee bit. The legs are feeling it, but it's good, like they're getting a good stretch, and no harm, tomorrow's likely to be a long day and this exercise won't do any harm, certainly a lot better than sitting in that poxy cabin throwing whisky down my neck.

One of the group turns, looks like a young lassie, maybe ten or that, she's playing with the dog. She sees me, has a wee look for a second, then jogs to catch up with the others. One of the guys pretends he's checking something about the dog and has a wee swatch as well. Fair enough — if I was out with my family and a guy comes up behind walking as fast as I am I'd have a wee look as well. The other two guys in the group sort of hang back a wee bit, there's a laugh, and they stick together, letting the two women and the lassie go ahead. One of them sparks a fag and the blue smoke goes straight up above him, making like a tail attached to his head.

But it's okay anyway. They stop to let the lassie throw sticks at a bottle that's bobbing about on the far side of the river, and the dog's totally dying to jump in, whining and all that, and this is a great laugh for all of them so they're smiling and quite cheery as I reach them.

"Bonjour Monsieur," they all say, it's like almost at exactly the same time, and I nod and say bonjour, bonjour, and the dog runs up and has a sniff, doesn't bark thank fuck, a right big thing, some kind of a Rottweiler and Alsatian mix I'd guess, a right scary looking creature but it's happy enough and the oldest guy, maybe the granda of the lass, he makes a right sharp whistle and the thing instantly spins away back to the lassie and they start laughing again, winding it up, all reaching for sticks to chuck.

Orange and pink streaks low behind the trees on the other side. The stretch is long, no bridges, and yet another factory or something coming up on the other side, and this one's rusty, bogging-looking, like a huge fucking liner that the sea's lifted right up and chucked miles inland. I keep the head down and the sweat's starting to make me a bit cold so I slip on the jacket. Quick glance up — there's no-one else further ahead.

No choice now.

So it's getting that way, I'm used up with asking for Christ and Jesus and Allah and anyone else that might have anything to do with it cause there's no fucking way I'm getting out of this. It's just going on and on and fucking on.

The moon's weak, a sad crescent, the stars are few and far between, there's been more bends, never sharp, but now I can't even guess where the sun went down. There's nothing but the blackness of the ground and the trees, and the only thing that tells me they're there is the slightly lesser blackness of the sky and its reflection on the surface of the river. If there was any fucking wind the river might move a bit and give me a better idea where the fuck it is, but there's no wind, so it's no help and I have to keep stopping to make sure I've still got earth to the right and left of me and amn't getting too close to the edge. If I get too close to the other edge, fair enough, I stumble and fuck these soft sannies and thank all the gods that the

ankle wasn't sprained, but there's no way I'm getting out of this now. And I've already begged Muhammad Ali and my granda and Mary Mother of God and anyone else who's rated by anyone that I'm sorry and I'll do better, and I'll go straight back home and be the man, the perfect man, but it gets worse, it just gets worse so that I can't even pray anymore. My fingers are holding the edge of the jacket sleeves, and even though I usually bite my nails I can feel the pressure of my fingertips in my palm. A fucker makes a noise to the right and I stop, fists raised. Maybe it's a bird, or a boar, or some other fucking thing.

Stop. Don't breathe.

It's hard to even guess how long I've been going now. There's a phone at the site, just up at the main road where I passed when I set out and I promised I'd call her at half-seven. Whatever fucking time it is now, it's not half-seven.

Hours have already passed since coming down from that bastard bridge, but I don't know any more. An hour, two hours, it makes no difference. It got dark about an hour after setting off down the path which started under the bridge, but since darkness fell I've lost track, it could be an hour, it could be three, honestly couldn't guess.

An owl somewhere in the forest to my right lets out a "hoot". Hoot my arse. It's the devil, one of those fucking things you see on the side of churches and that, it's one of them and the fucker's alive, it's sitting in a tree somewhere watching me, waiting till I get underneath it, then the fucker's gonny drop onto me with claws and teeth, eating right through the top of my skull and I can feel it happening, like the way the chimps sometimes eat their weans, they just sit there, it was on the box, they just sit there like it's a worky having his piece, this big fuck-off guy chimp, pure bastard eating his own wean, or maybe one of his pal's weans, just eating right through the wee thing's skull like it's the crust of the piece, just a wee extra tug there and a bit comes away, Jesus the hair's still on it on one side, all bits of brain and blood on the other, it's likely still warm and he's eating it down like it's a fucking sweet, the bastard. Hoot. Aye, hoot hoot, I'm coming your way pal and you know it. You know I've no choice. Noises like that are meant for shitey movies, for old Hammers, not real, not like this, not real-life.

Footsteps, how near I don't know, a crunching of leaves and all the soft stuff you get in old forests, all the wee needles and wee bits of twig built up over the years and something moving across the stuff, definitely. It's there, maybe more than one, yeah, more than one, a crunching here, another noise further, but not much further, and still getting closer.

Whooooo...doowwho...doowwho...

Ya fucking, ya.

Words run out, there's no more talking inside. The prayers run out, vanish. No hope anymore. The arse loosens, and just as well I'm not needing or I'd drop the fucking lot right now. There's no more language in my head, no monologue, dialogue, nothing. Trees stretch up on either side, the river still, the sky a solid block of black heaviness. No escape. Keep going. But Grez is long passed and I know it. It's somewhere far behind me, up that way. It has to be. But no way of getting to it.

Straight on, always watching the dullness of the river so that I won't get too near to it but always liable to wander closer to it because of staring so much. There's no other source of light, it's the lightest form of darkness available. There's no choice.

Then a bridge.

Yes, a bridge. A light from somewhere is mak-

ing it glow in the distance. Speed up. The owl has stayed put, is still making a noise but not so often. Maybe the fucking chimpanzee gargoyle thing stayed put as well. The footsteps have stopped, but impossible to know if the things are still there, just having a rest, maybe just having a listen to check where I am and they can always catch up whenever it suits.

It doesn't seem to be the old bridge of Grez, but maybe, maybe it is. Have to get closer, so step up the pace again though the thighs complain and new muscles are forming between knee and ankle. Fucking murder.

It isn't the old bridge. It's the lock of a canal, and the House guarding the set-up is huge and spotlit and ever-so picturesque. Thin curtains across the ground-floor window, there's blue flickering, someone watching the box. And part of the picture is a large, old blonde Labrador sitting on the rear porch — he comes up the path, barking like fuck. I keep the same pace, but he roars all the more as I go beyond the scope of the automatic spotlight and the dog goes fucking berserk, chucking his body against the wooden fence, going pure raj and howling like a special howl he keeps for foreigners stinking of fear. I wait for the turning of a key, some French guy to dig me up, maybe not even ask any questions just take a shot at me, but there's only the dog having a canary. The darkness swamps about me again as the spotlight clicks off, and the Labrador stops.

Lost in France. Laugh aloud when it hits me, that I'm living the song-sheet of a classic Tyler smash, but even then, the barking dog is being missed, and I want him back as proof that this darkness and lifelessness can't go on forever.

Maybe it's time to consider bedding down. I'm fucked. The legs are pulsing, hot, that way when you know cramp will grab a hold right away if you point your toe or lift your heel like that, the small of the back is piping up too. A barge tethered to this side looms, makes shape, soft silhouette against the river but only if I look away from it — dry inside perhaps, and at least I've my wooly bunnet inside the jacket. It's plausible, for a moment.

But I have to be near Grez. Have to be. Maybe back the way across the other side, but surely it's close. The fucking town's called Grez-sur-Loing, the sign at the bridge said Loing. How many fucking Loings can there be?

It gets even darker. I can't remember ever feeling this afraid, and wouldn't want to even if I could. I can still see the trees, thick, some branchless, but only if I look away from them, leaving them to linger at the edge of vision, creeping slowly past as I move on. The river makes no sound, but fish are moving, perhaps birds swimming, and it's like I'm having to smell and hear the river to avoid getting too near it, maybe the coolness of the water can be registered by my face even though I'm not aware of it. Maybe. Something's keeping me on the path, and only the occasional tuft or sudden dip makes me stop, double-check the next foot or so with my trainer-toe. And away over there, in the woods, there is a light. A sudden voice, loud, male, far away, echoes from the direction of the light, and another male voice shouts a reply. The hunters? Maybe they go after the boar at night. They'll have dogs too, and maybe they'll get a scent of me. Thank fuck there's no wind to take my sweat and fear towards them. That movie. Jesus, that fucking movie starts to come into my head, and I try to stop the thought, cancel it before there is even the chance to recall the name of it, but it comes back, the Blair, the Blair Witch fucking, fuck it, that bit where the lassie opens up the wee blue tartan package, fuck it, fuck off. Grip

the edge of the sleeves harder, make two fists solid, stop dead, I know something's going to happen, right now, here it's —

Jesus fuck. The blast, leaves and twigs being pushed through, parting, the noise deafening, and some duck or other bird comes out and past me, wings clapping like gloved hands. The leaves and twigs rustle back into their original positions and the bird clatters against the surface of the river as it lands. The Witch Project, the bit where she's about to die and she must know it, the panic, battering down a flight of stairs with, fuck it, no, no, the bloody handprints of children, dozens, maybe hundreds of hand-prints, then, Jesus, no, fuck, there's that voice again, closer, and a laugh in it too, like there's a joke underway and a tiny light, red and orange flicks as tree trunks move to conceal it again. But it's there, in the woods, in there. She saw her pal standing in the corner facing the wall and that's when she must've known, cause that's the story they'd heard, that was the folk-lore, something behind her, something started as a joke kills her before getting the other one in the corner, standing like a wean in school waiting for a telling-off, only you don't get a telling-off this time, you get torn apart by something so scary you can't even imagine it, your guts would drop right away from you if you ever caught a glimpse of it, even a half-second's worth. My jacket torn into ragged-edged squares, and she'll be asked to try and identify me from the bits and pieces — a hand there, part of an ear there, a bit dried-out but all that's left. Try explaining that to the wee man, to baby Joy. Jesus. No. No. Jesus, please.

The fire is closer now, and there's a dog right enough, the bastard is letting rip. The voices are high, laughing, and there's a female involved as well. Not kids. A Sunday night in the woods, maybe a carry-out and a few joints, maybe a wee session on the floor of the forest among the moss and sticks. To join them would be safety, but how to explain, how to get near without the dog having me. Tread more softly, slowly, get past, get away, keep going. Don't stop.

Fuck me, no. The symbols made of wood hanging from the branches. That was the bit, that was the bit gave me the nightmares, but that was ages ago and I never got them again. Now it's back, black and white in the picture-house, now real and brighter than it was in the film, a million times more vivid when it's against the blackness in front of me. Someone made signs out of twigs and hung them from the branches, letting them know it was there, maybe trying to give them a chance or just saying, this is it pal, this is the way you're going, it's the way I want you to go and I'm waiting for you, waiting right here until you come into view. I must be remembering it for a reason, it must be a sign, a warning. It's actually happening. Stranger things happen, you couldn't write some of it, stranger than any fucking fiction. Maybe it's me this time, my turn to become an interesting gory story in the fucking paper, or maybe that last bit on the news. Maybe it'll be a scandal, maybe the agency will get exposed as the cheapskate fucker slave-traders they are, that'll justify it all, bring some good out it all.

Turn about, the moon has gone. There's a curved sliver of dirty-grey in the blackness where the crescent has been clouded over, and it's going down anyway, heading behind the trees on the other side. The stars have all gone. The Plough was ahead, looking wonky and not the same as it does at home, something not right there, even with the stars, but they've all gone now anyway. Another plane heading that same direction, must be a flight path for Paris and it's miles away, a passen-

ger jet maybe, dull distant throbbing but with it so dark the lights seem bright and clear, red winking before the clouds take it as well, everything being swallowed.

The left foot goes down, I'm toppling, reach for the ground, hope to grab it, reaching right, have to stay on the path, but I'm on my arse at the edge, the steep dry earth bank crumbles under my fingers. It's okay. Soft landing, but trying to get back up, the legs are refusing to work, the cramp is going to start. Sudden heat on the left forearm where the jacket rode up, must have been some kind of nettle, the itchiness is sudden and sore, feels like a hundred ants all biting at the same time. There must be dock-leaves here same as at home, but fumbling about for one I'd likely find more nettles instead. The cramp is coming. Squat, back up straight, do it again. Pull the calve up behind the arse, one at a time, stretch it all. Have to keep going.

One step at a time. Something clicking in the bones where hip and thigh are connected, no pain but something not right. The breathing is getting faster but I'm hardly moving. The air tastes warm, smells of water and leaves. My eyes are closed, then they're open, then closed again. Fingertips to the eyelids to check they're working properly. Breathing so fast, lungs aren't working, breathing with throat only, even then the mouth is opening, taking more, like a pump has been stuck through the sternum, but it's not catching, not working. Stop, reach for the ground again, the twin tracks in the grass, the earth dry, grass cool. Let the head go down a little, just for a minute, maybe taking the weight off the head will help the breathing, use less energy. Pebble digging into that knee, move a bit, no don't, the cramp's ready to spark. Keep the eyes closed, darkness is okay then, it's the way it should be.

Pinkness, light, growing stronger, taking a shape. The feel of warm velvet under the fingertips, the scent of skin, baby Joy is there, it's that picture, the one of her in her bright pink sleep-suit, the one with yellow bears, and that big white fleecy bodywarmer thing Mum got her. She's laughing about something, whatever it is that babies find funny, now the picture frozen and that same expression, sideways and from slightly below, so she's looking down at me holding the camera, she doesn't know what I'm doing but she smiles at whatever and no teeth there, she grimaces and rubs the gums together, blue eyes shining like she's determined, she'll do whatever it is she wants to do. And this face is laughing at me, laughing at the daft things Daddies do, how they don't make sense to a baby, any baby.

The laugh drags the remaining breath from me, but I want to laugh so much that the air rushes in, the lungs fill with cool air, the throat opens, and I laugh and cry at the same time, keeping the head down but not caring any more where the fuckers are, whether they're listening or not. My fingers feel her face, so small and warm and soft, thumb brushing over her nose, making her serious, making her pause before she laughs again with that growl, that noise from deep in her tiny chest, from the heart of her.

The face fades, the memory of her smell is forgotten. I get up and walk.

Abid is up when I finally get in. He slept most of the day. I've been away eight hours. Must've done twenty miles easy. Thank fuck that road turned up when it did. It took me over the river, then another river, and it must be that the river split. I was walking along a canal. It must've been dark when the split came. I was about six kilometers past Grez, hoofed it back along the road. There was a

phone box in a village and I tried calling home, reversing the charges, but it took ages to explain to the lassie what I wanted to do and when she did eventually make the connection the line was engaged. She would've been worried, maybe calling her Mum or my Mum.

But maybe it was all for the best. Turns out there was a barney right enough, but it wasn't Johnson and Gerry, it was old Jim and an English guy called Tommy who took exception to the price he was charging for a shot. Turns out Jim had another litre bottle planked and hadn't even let on. Tommy cracked when Jim produced it and asked for another five euros apiece, set about him with a tumbler. The cops aren't long away, Tommy's nicked, Jim's at the hospital. He's definitely lost an eye, and had some kind of a stroke as well, maybe a heart-attack.

I crash on the bed. It smells of feet and bad breath, but so fuck, it's only the one night and I could sleep for Scotland — and anyway, whatever time it is tomorrow, wherever it is, I'll be on that first bus to Paris, and they know what they can do with their bastard turnips.