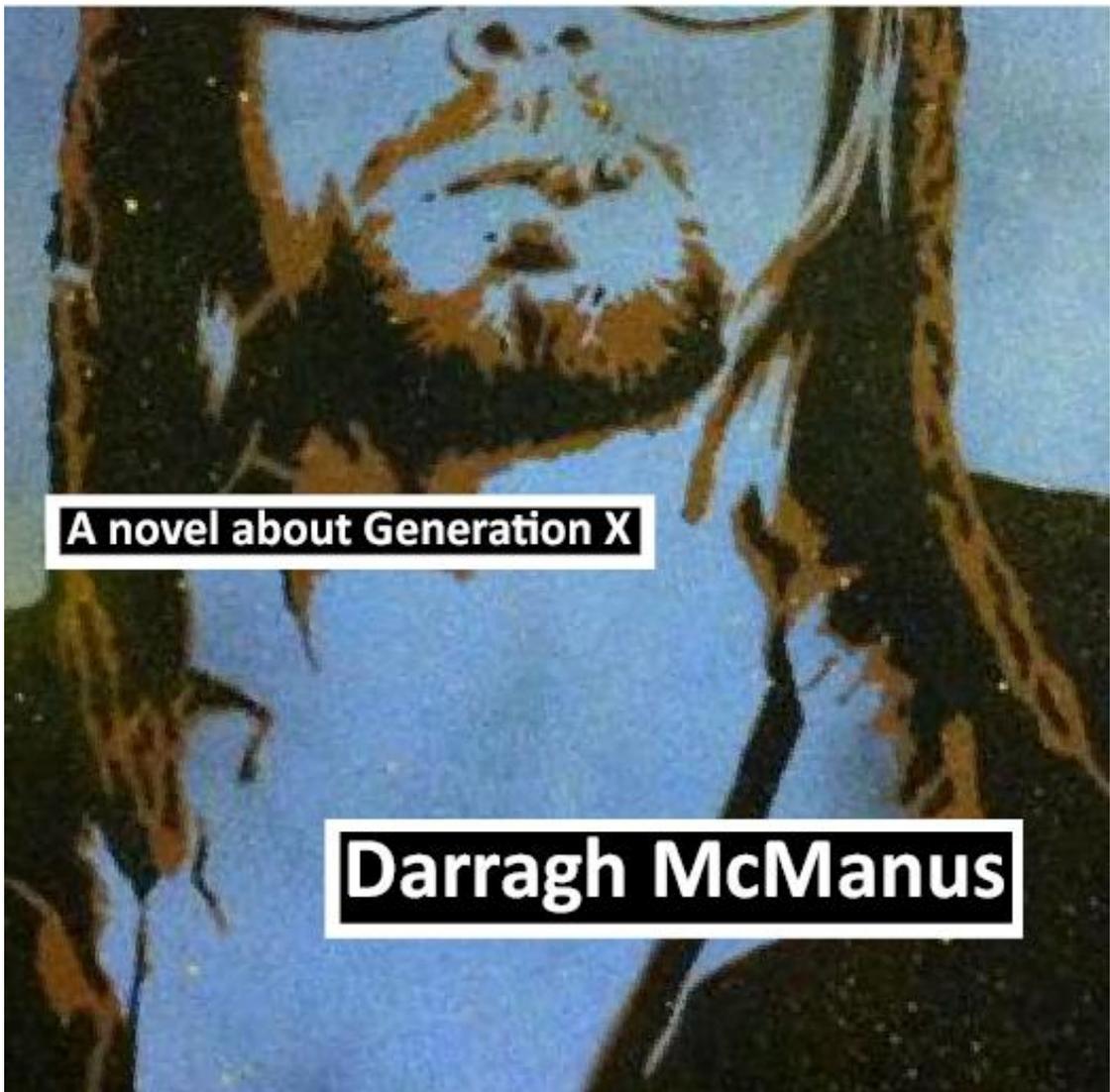




Pretend We're Dead



A novel about Generation X

Darragh McManus

darraghmcmanus@yahoo.com

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may

Robert Herrick, 'To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time'

(also Robin Williams, as Mr Keating, in 'Dead Poets Society')

Contents

I – June

Lookalikes

Bean and Nothingness

Signing on

I am not a number

The Vietnam movie party

II – July

Cowabunga, dude!

No jobs

Hairbrusher

Masters of the Gag-laxy

III – August

Drink and talk

Your Ghost

Be! Movie

Queuing for the phone

IV – September

Pretend we're dead

Perfect day

Prologue (modern life is rubbish)

A lot of things happened in 1996. Of course, end-of-the-decade, *fin de siècle* years invariably feel more eventful, more historic, at least as we remember them and subsequently organise and categorise those memories. But for a middle year in the final decade of the twentieth century, 1996 didn't do too badly.

The first Pokemon game was released, and a pop-culture phenomenon was let loose on the world. An IRA ceasefire ended with an enormous bomb in Canary Wharf. The super-intelligent, vaguely terrifying chess computer Deep Blue defeated world champion Garry Kasparov; a few months later, he avenged humanity. Alanis Morissette bestrode the charts and awards ceremonies like a whining, self-obsessed colossus. Dunblane massacre. Port Arthur Massacre. A ship sank on Lake Victoria and nearly a thousand people drowned. The First Chechen War ended but this was a false dawn; things would get much worse. The Unabomber was arrested at, where else, a cabin in Montana. The European Football Championships were played in England and won by Germany, accompanied by depressingly, hilariously xenophobic tabloid headlines: 'For you Fritz, ze Euro 96 Championship is over.' The worst trouble yet at the Orange Order march in Drumcree. Two notorious and iconic – if that word isn't inappropriate – killings in Ireland: Detective Garda Jerry McCabe and crusading journalist Veronica Guerin. Dolly the sheep became the first mammal cloned from an adult cell; everybody shuddered with some unconscious dread. The Olympics took place in Atlanta; Michelle Smith won three swimming golds amid unshakeable doping allegations that would basically end her career. François Mitterrand, Don Simpson, Gene Kelly, Marguerite Duras, Krzysztof Kieślowski, Timothy Leary, Ella Fitzgerald, Cubby Broccoli, Tupac Shakur – they all died. The first Irish-language television station was launched. Osama bin Laden declared jihad on America. Charles and Diana divorced. Bill Clinton was re-elected. Six-year-old JonBenét Ramsey was found murdered in her basement – the case remains unsolved. Fiona Apple, Hootie and the Blowfish, Manic Street Preachers. A lot of awful Britpop

and some half-decent Britpop. MMMBop, do the Macarena. The Spice Girls dashed through Wannabe and roared into megastardom; the hideous so-called 'Girl Power' movement was born. Independence Day and Twister made loads of money. The English Patient and Fargo won lots of awards. Michael Collins made some people happy and others crazy-angry. First performance of The Vagina Monologues. In books there was Primary Colours, The Beach, Bridget Jones' Diary. Fight Club and Infinite Jest. Ireland won the Eurovision Song Contest yet again, seventh in all, almost sick of it by now – we haven't come close to winning it since.

And of course, the Celtic Tiger. Ireland's economic miracle, which would all come crashing down around a dozen years later but was regarded almost as a wonder of the western world for a decade. After seventy years of stagnation, emigration and borderline poverty, Ireland was suddenly getting rather prosperous – or at least, showing signs that it soon would. The rising tide hadn't exactly lifted all boats, just yet, but the experts assured us that wealth was on the way.

Yes, a lot of things happened in '96. But for me and my friends, life wasn't quite that exciting. It never really is for dole-bums, students, part-time bartenders. We were young and vaguely disaffected, sort of bored, sort of restless. We were over-educated and under-employed. We were self-indulgent and naïve, suffused with a kind of benign narcissism. We were also, to be fair, mostly decent, smart and well-intentioned. Also sarcastic, amiable, funny, sceptical.

Like thousands of our peers, tens of thousands, we'd left college, possibly with a degree of varying worth, but definitely without much of a clue. We hung out, slept late, hand-rolled cigarettes, read difficult novels, watched bad movies on communal VCRs, talked a lot of bullshit, drank too much, worked in dead-end McJobs to pay the rent or because there was nothing better to do, no better way to pass the time between sleep and more sleep. We fantasised about becoming comedians, writers or alternative DJs, without ever doing too much to further that ambition, and wondered when this famous Celtic Tiger would reach us.

We were, I suppose, dreamers and cynics – and aren't those ultimately just facing sides of the same coin? The last generation of Irish

youth (until that point, at least) for whom decent employment was a hope, not an expectation. Post-modern, post-Catholic, Irish but with a global sensibility. Well-read, well-travelled, pop culture-addled and fond of philosophising.

Slackers, grungers, Generation Xers. There we were, in 1996, killing time and waiting for our lives to begin.

My name is Odhran Canty, and these are some of our stories.

I
June

Lookalikes

(Recommended listening for this chapter: *Zoo Station* by U2. Note to readers: press ‘play’ as you begin each chapter and let it fade to silence at the end of the song, as though you’re hearing it in a movie scene...)

Early summer, the first week of June or maybe the second. End-of-year exams are still taking place, so it’s definitely no later than that. I’m sitting on a very low wall, barely a wall, opposite the Boole Library in University College Cork. Smoking, chatting, spotting the talent, staring at the ground past my dark-blue canvas sneakers with the laces undone and snicked inside the mouth of each shoe. The library is massive, built in the 1980s. It looks exactly like something from then: looming and grey, stippled concrete, heavily tinted glass, an intimidating squareness. Something vaguely Fascistic about the design, if you’re given to conceptual hyperbole. It’s actually nice enough inside but the façade is unpleasant.

It’s a weekday, probably a Monday. The weather is sunny and warm, nudging towards hot. Later on that summer it’d sometimes get unusually humid, at least by Irish standards, but today is fresh and crisp. About as perfect as the summer climate can get in this country. Our characteristic soft light, that lovely muted, shimmering atmosphere which sometimes makes the real world feel like an Impressionist painting, has been clarified and amplified. Today is brighter and sharper than the norm. Everything looks in heightened focus, every detail super-real, like a picture that’s been doctored in Photoshop. Filter tool – sharpen – apply effect – save image. A day for sunglasses and cold cans of coke, maybe with little clumps of ice still clinging to the bottom of the can, hoisted from the freezer in the campus shop.

I’m sitting with two friends, Conor Maggs and Trotsky. We’re all in our early twenties: me twenty-three, just gone, the other pair maybe a year or eighteen months older. Maggs and myself are both smoking. Trotsky frowns at our smoking and theatrically crinkles his nose in disgust at the smoke as it wafts past his face, but makes no move to leave. We sit

in a row, me in the middle, six feet lined up as if they're in a closet, flat on the ground or tapping the concrete. We're playing the lookalikes game.

'Catherine Zeta Jones,' Maggs says.

I grunt in reply: 'Nah.' I see who he's talking about. She's pretty alright, dark-haired too, but not quite a Zeta Jones lookalike: this girl is skinnier than the actress, larger eyes. Her hair is more curly than wavy.

'Yes,' he says. 'She's the spit of her, boy.'

'No way. She doesn't look remotely like Catherine Zeta Jones.'

'She looks like her in that TV show. That one you used like.'

'*The Darling Buds of May*, is it? Is that what you're thinking of? I don't think I watched that even once.'

'You liardy bastard. You did so. Sunday nights.'

I shake my head, nope, don't think so. I'm prepared to keep doing this all day, mostly to annoy Maggs and also because it's something to do. Helps pass the time. These stupid, absurdly heated debates about pop culture ephemera: they can kill hours, whole days and nights.

Then Trotsky ruins it for me, whips the ground out from under my 'argument' of blanket denial. He says in his droning baritone, 'It's true, Odhran. Remember? When we shared the flat, the one on Highfield West? You wouldn't let me watch *The Week in Politics* on the other side.'

I laugh and throw my cigarette butt in front of me, squashing it with my toe. 'Jesus, Trotsky. Only you would prefer to look at Brian Farrell discussing politics than the lovely Catherine Zee frolicking around a meadow.'

'So you *did* watch it,' Maggs says. 'Winona Ryder.'

'No, I didn't say that, Conor. I said... ' I belatedly notice the Winona lookalike. Okay, not a bad spot. 'Oh, yeah, actually. She *does* look a bit like her. Same dark eyes.'

Maggs says, 'She's small like her, too. Winona Ryder's only about four-foot-eleven, did you know that?'

I laugh, a sceptical snort. 'You're full of shit. Four-foot-eleven!'

'I said *about* four-eleven.'

Trotsky cuts in, with the authoritative tones of a true film nerd: 'She's not. She's five-one. Courtney Love.'

‘Where...?’ I ask, then spot her. Yes, absolutely. She could almost pass for Courtney, in a dark nightclub, if you were tipsy. ‘Ooh, *yeeahhh*... Wow. She’s *really* like her.’ I turn to my left. ‘Have you any fags left, Maggs?’

I sometimes call Conor Maggs by his first name and sometimes the surname; our friend May has a younger brother with the same name, and it can get confusing if she’s around and the kid brother’s part of the conversation. Okay, so it’s easy to confuse us. Or maybe just me. We’re all UCC grads: Maggs last year in Civil Engineering, me in Arts 1994. Trotsky is the only who’s still a student. I think he got his BA in ’93; I don’t remember him being at any of my graduation parties in any case, although I presume I was blind drunk for most of them.

Maggs speaks with a strong west Cork accent, rough and broad but not unpleasant. Mine is milder: I’m from a small town in east Cork, heading for the Waterford border; there’s a diluting effect at work there. Trotsky is from north Tipperary somewhere, I’m never sure where – at different times he’s named Newport, Nenagh and Borrisokane as his home place, so who knows. I don’t think he’s ashamed of where he comes from so much as he thinks that they’re somehow ashamed of him. Anyway, he doesn’t speak with much of an accent. They don’t have a madly strong one in that part of the country to begin with, and six years living in Cork have altered his still further. But Maggs is pure west Cork: he sounds like an angry Kerryman with a throat infection and blocked-up bowels. He styles himself as a total hillbilly deluxe and proud of it, but it’s mostly a pose: his dad sells insurance and he came second in his degree year. He is an ape, though. No denying that.

Now he hands me a cigarette, lighting it and one for himself.

I nod towards the Courtney Love lookalike. ‘She’s got that messed-up, scarecrow-blond hair thing going on.’

Trotsky says, ‘And that smudgy drunken baby-doll makeup thing.’

‘But hopefully not that monomaniacal “I had my husband killed for fortune and glory” career thing.’

The two others laugh, Trotsky with an undertone of guilt.

Maggs says, still chuckling, ‘Now, now. Play nice.’

‘She’s actually really talented, Courtney Love. That’s the thing about it,’ Trotsky says.

I ignore this and say, ‘I think I’d like to suck that girl’s tongue for an hour or two. Fine-looking girl, you know?’

‘That’s gross.’

‘Is it? Why, is there something wrong with her tongue? Is it coated in toxic solvents or something?’ Speaking of which: that cigarette is foul. Sour, like it’s gone off although cigarettes don’t really go off, do they? I make a face and turn to Maggs again. ‘What sort of fags are these? They taste funny.’

He shrugs his wide, beefy shoulders, the fabric of his top stretching against the movement. ‘Um...Carrolls, I think. I d’unno, they were all in a box together.’

‘Have you heard her album *Live Through This*?’ Trotsky asks. He’s still riffing on Courtney Love and how talented she actually really is. ‘It’s remarkable. Punky-pop. A raw, powerful indictment of society’s treatment of women.’

I say, ‘Stop speaking through that rolled-up copy of *Rolling Stone* so you can get back to talking through your ass, will you, Trots?’ I can’t help it. Trotsky is just so easy to annoy. And I’m a complete baby; it amuses me to do it. Forgive me, Trotsky, ‘tis beyond my control.

He stands in a huff and fumes, ‘Fuck you, Odhran, okay? You’re so bloody childish.’

Trotsky looks funny when he’s angry; it doesn’t suit his face at all, that slightly cross-eyed frown. It doesn’t suit his whole look. He dresses precisely as his nickname would suggest: black cargo pants, black donkey jacket, black round-neck sweater, black Docs with – yes – black laces. A sliver-thin crescent moon of white tee-shirt shows for contrast. It’s ‘History student meets 1920s radical’, and the outfit never changes. But it fits Trotsky well enough: he’s tall and slim with dark hair, a heavy goatee, round rimless glasses, an ever-present five o’clock shadow and earnest expression. I wouldn’t be wholly surprised to see him in a photograph of the October Revolution, rifle resting by his leg, Stalin’s arm draped around Trotsky’s shoulder with that creepy over-familiarity of his, our boy trying

not to flinch in discomfort. His real name is Eamon and he's currently writing his Master's dissertation. You can guess why he's called Trotsky.

Maggs dresses in the most spectacularly naff way: rugby shirts, boring jeans, clunky white trainers that last looked cool when seen on the flying feet of Marty McFly in *Back to the Future*. He's got clipped blond-red hair and large, indelicate features; not exactly handsome but not quite ugly. Maggs is a big guy, two inches over six foot and built to match – he played for the college football team until something snapped in his right knee. Now he finds it hard to keep his weight down, but with that build, you can carry a lot of extra poundage and get away with it.

I'm dressed as I usually am: frayed denims shaped somewhere between a flare and a boot-cut, canvas sneakers, no socks, ironic tee-shirt – today's is a picture of Beavis and Butthead lying in bed together. Beavis is saying, 'Hey, Butthead: did we finally score?' My hair is ragged and just shy of shoulder-length, medium-brown, hanging round my face in unwashed strands or tucked behind one ear. I also have what I call, with ironic pretentiousness, an 'extended goatee': the classic 'square' shape accentuated with two thin strips of beard, reaching to the corner of my jawbone on either side. I saw it on a guy in a comic once, some poet-detective in a predictably rain-soaked urban dystopia. Having long hair completes a look, of course, but it's also virtually free to maintain: I snip the ends with a scissors once a month or whenever. The beard costs a bit, though. I paid my older sister's boyfriend fifteen pounds for a second-hand electric trimmer; I think he might have ripped me off.

And as always, I'm wearing love-beads. These I literally never take off, not in the shower, not in bed, nowhere and never. They're a good luck charm, I guess, or something like that. My mam gave them to me on my twenty-first birthday, in memory of a set of amber beads I used to wear as a baby. I was the only one of six children in my family who didn't have awful teething pain; some molecular property in the amber, absorbed through my skin and chemically reacting with my tiny body. I couldn't tell you if it was real science or pure juju, but those beads worked.

Trotsky sighs heavily and says, 'Don't even know why I'm wasting my time here with you. I've to give a tutorial in half-an-hour.'

‘Well, you don’t have far to walk,’ I say, ‘so calm it down for a few minutes.’

The History department building is on College Road, hardly five minutes’ stroll from here. I look at people drifting by, students in all their variety, wondering absently if any of them take Trotsky’s class, not really caring what the answer is. The year-round college uniform of big boots, big coats, big tees, big caps – just a *bigness* to everything, as though we all went in the wash instead of our clothes and came out two sizes smaller – that’s been replaced by more summery gear. Girls and boys in combat shorts, minis, strappy tops and sports jerseys, trainers and sandals, sunglasses, cotton hats, linen trousers, light shirts tied around their waists in fatalistic anticipation of the inevitable cooling of temperature. In Ireland, even in June, you never expect the weather to stay warm indefinitely.

Maggs suddenly gets excited and starts whooping like a gorilla: he’s actually making a simian pucker with his mouth, banging his bum up and down off the low wall. ‘Ooh, ooh! Whatcha call her!? Your one off *Last of the Mohicans*.’

‘Who? Madeleine Stowe?’ I’m mad about Madeleine Stowe. She is so lovely. Beyond elegant.

‘No, the other one,’ Maggs says. ‘The blondie one. She jumps off the cliff at the end.’

I inelegantly slap Trotsky’s legs and bark, ‘Mind out of the way.’

He moves aside and I spot the girl, stepping briskly towards the main library doors, clutching a folder of notes to her chest like an actress playing the role of a diligent student. I say, rather disappointed, ‘Yeah...yeah, I see her. Nah, she’s not really like her.’

Trotsky chimes in, ‘Her name’s Jodhi May. Interviewed in *Empire* a few months back.’

‘She is super fine,’ Maggs says.

I say, ‘She’s more than that, man. She is bee-yoo-dee-*full*.’ I love Jodhi May almost as much as I love Madeleine.

‘Who?’ Trotsky asks. ‘That girl going into the library or Jodhi May?’

‘Who the Jesus do you think?’ I say, exasperated. ‘Who. Fucking Jodhi, who else?’

Maggs stands and stretches his back – it can get uncomfortable sitting down that low, your muscles eventually protest. ‘That bit in the movie where she turns back to the camera...’ He clicks his tongue, sort of wistfully, then turns to our friend. ‘How come you’ve to give a tutorial, Trotsky? I thought all the students were finished up now?’

‘Master’s class. They don’t wrap up ‘till next week.’

‘Right.’

I say to Maggs, ‘Yeah, with a tear in her eye... Pretty fucking romantic, actually.’

‘It was. I thought it was.’

‘That’d be so cool. Wouldn’t it? To have a girl do something like that for you.’

Maggs says dreamily, ‘Some beoir jumping off a cliff for love... You couldn’t ask for more, really.’

‘Right, yeah.’ Trotsky harrumphs dismissively.

God’s sake, man, I think. You are way too young to be harrumphing. Trotsky is a gas character: perpetually uptight, serious, always worried about something. And super-intelligent, a borderline-genius IQ; too clever for his own good, probably. But he has a big, warm heart and never loses patience with Maggs and me, despite the fact that we constantly take the piss out of him. We’re both very fond of Trotsky.

Now he says gloomily, ‘Like any girl would do something like that for one of us.’

‘Gotta have the dream, man,’ Maggs drawls. ‘You gotta keep that dream.’

I stand, finally, and pat Trotsky on the shoulder, totally patronising. ‘Don’t worry, Trots. You’ll lose that pesky virginity one of these days, just you wait.’

He sighs even more heavily. ‘Yes. Very mature, Odhran.’

I ignore him again and say, ‘At the top of the world with Jodhi May...sweet.’ I wince – there’s that awful taste in my mouth again. I say

to Maggs, in an accusatory tone, ‘No, there’s *definitely* something wrong with these fags.’

He frowns at me. ‘Whatcha want me to do, like? Lick ’em clean for you first?’

‘If you would? Yes. Please.’

Trotsky hoists onto his shoulder a leather satchel which looks so heavy it could cut clean through the flesh and bone underneath that black jacket. ‘Anyway. I’d better head.’

‘Yeah, good luck,’ Maggs says. ‘Might see you next week, will we? If not before, like.’

‘What’s next week?’

I say, ‘Ah, Sandra’s throwing a party at her house. Tuesday night. Is it Tuesday? Maggs?’

Maggs says, ‘Yeah, think so.’

Trotsky slaps his forehead – he actually does this, as though he’s a bad actor in a worse sitcom, though I’m pretty sure that’s not the intention – and goes, ‘Right, right. The thing, the end-of-exams thing. I knew that. Okay, so it’s next Tuesday?’

‘Her gaff, you know it up on Glasheen Road,’ I say. ‘*Off* Glasheen Road actually. That house with the thing on the front lawn. It’s just a few people around. Drinks, canapés, witty conversation courtesy of me, the inevitable end-of-night scrap courtesy of Maggs here...’

I jab a thumb in Maggs’ direction. He laughs and says, ‘I might, now that you’ve put it in my head.’

‘Anyway, it’s not just any old cruddy house party. It’s a *theme* party.’

‘What’s the theme again? Togas or something?’

‘Nah, boy. It’s a Vietnam movie party. You gotta come dressed as a vet, a hippie, VC, something like that.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Yes, seriously. ...Hang on, Conor, why are you asking me this? You were there when Sandra told us.’

Maggs says, slightly confused, ‘Right, yeah...I was, yeah... Sorry, Odhran. It’s the war, you know?’ He pretends to sob and puts a shake in his voice. ‘It’s the memories, man! I’m all fucked up from the ‘Nam!’

I can’t help laughing. It’s dumb but funny. ‘Idiot.’

Trotsky moves to leave. ‘*Riiight*... Anyway. I’ll see you then. Probably not before. I’m really busy all week, got this paper to hand in by the weekend, you know, my own work? For my dissertation, it’s like a précis sort of thing. “How you intend to progress...”’

He stops, sensing how disinterested everyone is in what he’s saying. We *want* to be enthusiastic about it, truly, but... A History dissertation. Exhale weary breath. Try to keep smiling. And Trotsky is poking around in some incredibly dull and arcane corner of the field; he’s told me loads of times what his thesis is about, but I always forget.

He says, ‘I’ll definitely go to that party, though. Be good to get a break from the old books.’ He pauses. ‘I, ah...I might have a little surprise up my sleeve.’

Maggs says, with a hint of intrigue in his tone, ‘Oh, yeah?’

Trotsky shrugs and smiles knowingly, then off he goes. I know all about this but keep schtum – don’t want to ruin the surprise. Maggs mutters into the gentle breeze, ‘Take it easy, Trots.’

I call after him: ‘And don’t forget to wear some flowers in your hair, daddio. Flowers, motherfucker! *Flowers!*’ There is silence for a long moment. Maggs is gazing into space with the vacant expression of a sedated rudimentary animal. Conor Maggs, the Totally Zen Cow. I say to him, ‘D’you think he’ll remember about the flowers? Maybe I should leave a note on his fridge door.’

We sit down again. More silence, more long moments. Not a whole lot to see, and hardy anything to say.

Finally Maggs breaks both silence and moment, and I’m grateful for it. ‘Have you a lot to do now?’

‘No, not much,’ I reply. ‘You? Actually I say “not much”, I really mean “absolutely zip zero nada fuck-all.”’

‘Nah. Nothin’ much either.’

Another long, *loooong* pause, our boredom and listlessness wrestling with time itself, forcing it to slow down or speed up, I'm never quite sure which of them I'm wishing for.

I say, 'I've got this thing at the dole office at the end of the week, though. So, you know. Something to look forward to there.'

'What day? 'Cause I might come down with you.'

'Didn't I just say at the end of the week? Friday, man, Friday.'

'So what is it anyway?'

I throw my hands into the air, a gesture of defeat. 'Blurgh. This fucking...*thing*, this meeting. With the welfare officer, you know?'

'Yeah? Go on.'

'I've to go down and talk about my "current situation", quote unquote. Efforts made to find employment, you know, courses I've applied for, all that shite.'

'Alright, well sure, I'll go with you. I've to sign on anyway, I can do it that day.'

'I thought you were bartending? The Poitín Stil, no? I'm sure that was your ugly mug was throwing out slops to me and Sandra there a few weeks back.'

'Yeah, well...under the table, you know? I can still collect.'

I lean backwards, resting my elbows on the dry soil behind the wall. I throw my head onto the ground and close my eyes against the sun, partly blocked by tree branches. Suddenly I feel exhausted, which is weird because I don't ever really do anything. I sit up again and join Maggs in staring dully at nothing.

'What a drag,' I say. 'Signing on. It's like some civil service vision of hell on... Hey – Andi McDowell.'

I've just seen her, out of the corner of my eye. Smaller than the Hollywood star, as in shorter, but the same handsome, square-jawed face. The game goes on, evidently, no matter how I feel.

Maggs squints around him, locks his vision on the girl. 'Where...? Mmm...nah. Not like her at all.'

He lights another cigarette for each of us. I take it, choosing to ignore the unpleasant taste of the last one. A crappy smoke is better than no smoke at all.

‘So what are you up to today?’ he asks again.

‘I’no. Nothing, really.’

‘Yeah, me neither.’

‘We go for a wander around town?’

‘Whaaah? Nah, I told you, boy, I’ve no fucking money.’

‘You don’t need money to *walk*. Conor, do you? Do you need money to walk?’

‘No, but, like...’

I lift my index finger to shush him. ‘Ap-ap-ap. Do you have to pay to walk around Cork of an afternoon, yes or no?’

‘No.’

‘“No” is fuckin’ right. Come on, baby – I’m taking you window-shopping.’

‘Sounds like a lot of fun. Not.’

‘You never hear of window-shopping therapy? No? It’s good for stress, like it reduces depression and stress and makes you feel all shiny and happy and...’

My voice trails off. Maggs is staring at me, unenthused.

‘Alright, alright,’ I say, patting his burly chest. ‘Anyways I have a Plan B.’

He raises an eyebrow in response. Very Roger Moore – and surprisingly camp for such a meat-and-two-veg kind of guy. I don’t tell him this. I just say, ‘Bean and Nothingness. If Jana’s working today, we might score some free coffee. Huh? How’s them onions for ya?’

Maggs shakes his head. ‘Odhran, I’d tell you if I had any fucking clue what that actually means. ’Mon so, we’ll go.’

We go.

GRUNGE MUSIC - SOUNDTRACK TO THE MOVIE RUNNING INSIDE MY MIND

Grunge - and the attendant attitude, lifestyle and philosophy - was incredibly important to slackers. Dissonance and melody, minor chords and melancholy, off-beats and chugging riffs, rain and feedback and collective burnout...it was basically the soundtrack to Generation X. Almost as important was cataloguing and rating things, so this is my stab at the ultimate grunge collection. A mix of stone-cold classics that couldn't be omitted, lesser-known songs by major bands, obscure and/or seminal works...what I feel best captures the sound and era. This double album - had to be a double - follows the time-honoured running order. Certain rules must be obeyed. So, kick off with several belting rockers (including what's generally considered the original of the species, Mudhoney's Touch Me I'm Sick), slow down for a song or two, another loud one to remind the listener how much grunge kicked ass, round off Side one with a few ballads. Roughly similar line-up on Side two, before finishing the compilation with, first, the iconic Where Did You Sleep Last Night? - both a commemoration of grunge's most infamous tragedy and a hint of where the movement might have gone - and Release, a slow-burning, nine-minute epic from the biggest band of their time, Pearl Jam. There are probably artists and songs I'm missing. You're probably tearing your goatee out in annoyance that such-and-such didn't make the cut, and how the hell are there two tracks from those clowns...? What can I say - it's a personal collection. The grunge that most inspired me, spoke to me, or moved me to mosh like a motherfucker. Popular music was never this good, before or since...

"COME AS YOU ARE": THE CLASSIC GRUNGE COMPILATION

SIDE ONE

MUDHONEY: TOUCH ME I'M SICK

MOTHER LOVE BONE: THIS IS SHANGRI-LA

PEARL JAM: JEREMY

TEMPLE OF THE DOG: PUSHING FORWARD BACK

TAD: GREASE BOX

SCREAMING TREES: FOR CELEBRATIONS PAST

STONE TEMPLE PILOTS: PRETTY PENNY

NIRVANA: IN BLOOM

ALICE IN CHAINS: RIGHT TURN

SOUNDGARDEN: BLACK HOLE SUN

SIDE TWO

HOLE: VIOLET

THE GITS: SECOND SKIN

BABES IN TOYLAND: HE'S MY THING

L7: PRETEND WE'RE DEAD

CHRIS CORNELL: SEASONS

FOO FIGHTERS: I'LL STICK AROUND

MARK LANEGAN: DOWN IN THE DARK

ALICE IN CHAINS: IT AIN'T LIKE THAT

NIRVANA: WHERE DID YOU SLEEP LAST NIGHT?

PEARL JAM: RELEASE

Bean and Nothingness

(Recommended listening: *Novocaine for the Soul* by Eels)

‘Bean and Nothingness – the philosophical café.’ What a great name for a coffee shop, or else it’s laughably conceited; I tend to swing between these two poles. The owner is Belgian, I think someone said, from the French-speaking side, possibly a drop-out from academia. Possibly just wants everyone to *think* he’s a drop-out from academia, like it gives him an air of tainted glamour, coats his being in a patina of intellectual rebellion. Presumably he specialised in Sartre and/or Existentialism if he really was a philosopher, hence the name. Sandra made a joke to him once: ‘Oh, you should expand the business and call your next place A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology. You know, something snappy like that.’ He didn’t take the joke well. Existentialists never can see the funny side of things.

The place is located on a small side street off Oliver Plunkett Street. Conor Maggs and me take a scenic route downhill from UCC into town: College Road to O’Donovan Road, Connaught Avenue to Gillabbey Street, past the Gothic majesty of Saint Fin Barre’s Cathedral and forward to Bishop Street and then the quays. We cross the Lee at Parliament Bridge and stroll on towards Oliver Plunkett. It’s a beautiful day and a really pleasurable walk. It’s nice, sort of swimming through a state of agreeable aimlessness.

I wouldn’t quite say I reach that Buddhist thing of perfect emptiness, but I’m able, at least, to enjoy ‘being in the moment.’ On the odd occasion, I can do this. Mostly, life on the dole is mildly stressful and monumentally boring, suffused with a vague but almost tangible sense of panic. You become obsessed with time in one sense, even as time ceases to have any real meaning.

I’m wasting time. I’m wasting my life. I’ve wasted months, full years of it. I have to use my time better. I have to start doing this immediately, or as soon as possible, or definitely at the beginning of next week. Nine am, Monday morning, I will spring out of bed and stop wasting time. Definitely. I mean it this time.

Gah. It's exhausting. So, when I *am* inside that pleasurable moment, I make sure to appreciate it. I look around me and study the people and enjoy the feeling of hard concrete pavements under my feet. Actually being able to walk is more than a pleasure – it's some fundamental need being met. The evolutionary heritage, I suppose; our tip of the hat to whichever primitive hominid first stepped out on two legs. So I feel each crack and take note of it and appreciate that I too am here, alive, to do this. The feeling won't last long so I try to hold onto it, store it away, make the memory of it permanent in my mind. You never know when you might need to draw on a happy memory for solace or even just company.

Now we're on Winthrop Street, approaching Bean and Nothingness. The giant plate-glass window out front is decorated with some very cool sketches of comic-book heroes, Japanese *kanji* characters, quasi-revolutionary slogans and iconic catchphrases, rendered in vividly coloured poster paint. And I swear, I can virtually *hear* Sebastian, mouthing off and droning on, through the glass. Like most people, I'm wont to give everyone the benefit of the doubt more often than not, but Sebastian is an utter prick. Just look at him, sitting on a revolving stool at the chrome-plated counter, his hands waving as he pontificates to poor Jana behind the counter. That large, handsome head nodding metronomically in agreement with his own arguments.

He's very good-looking, and man, doesn't he know it. A tall, lean body topped with a tall quiff. Nerdy 1950s-style glasses sitting on his strong, pretty nose. A few years older than me, he looks like James Dean crossed with Johnny Depp. Naturally, every guy who knows him hates Sebastian just for that alone, ha. But it's not just envy: he's one of the most smug, self-important, narcissistic clowns I've come across in my two-and-a-bit decades on the planet. He thinks he's a superstar DJ in the making but generally just lounges around all day in his apartment, top floor of a newish complex off South Main Street, smoking dope and looking cool. And he's a callous asshole when he wants to be, which is most of the time.

But, for all this, he's a friend of sorts. Alright, make that an acquaintance.

Maggs tosses the end of his cigarette onto the pavement and we go in. He mumbles something about needing to ‘drain the lizard’ and shuffles off to the bathroom. (In here, the doors aren’t labelled, that would be too lame and *bourgeois*; instead, you’re meant to guess which is the men’s and which the ladies’ toilets from the impressionistic drawings of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir on the stripped wooden doors). I stand just inside the café front door and sort of space out for a little while. I like listening to the burble of conversation in public places, the wash of bullshit and warmth and friendly debate flowing through my ears and over my skin like heavy saltwater. It’s nice to step back from it, to swap engagement for observation.

I really *can* hear Sebastian now, at the far side of the room, his tight vowels and pompous delivery cutting through my mental calm like a car siren. He’s saying, ‘...can see it down through history, in every single totalitarian regime. Secular or religious.’

Then Jana replies in her impeccable English which still carries the tiniest trace of an accent from her early years in Sweden. ‘They were all sexually dysfunctional?’

Jana is blonde and absolutely gorgeous, almost a pastiche of the beautiful Scandinavian. She’s also a lovely, unaffected person, really smart. She works in Bean and Nothingness while she tries to figure out what use a Master’s in Social Science can be put to, if indeed there is any. And she’s totally wasted on a tool like Sebastian, but there you go: as Bill Hicks sings, chicks dig jerks. For God knows what reason, they do.

Now he says impatiently, ‘Absolutely. That’s how you control the masses, y’see? Calm the libido to make people more compliant.’

Oh, enough, *enough*. With a bit of effort I manage to tune out from Sebastian and concentrate on what other customers are saying. The interior of Bean and Nothingness is pretty typical of these painfully trendy coffeehouses, though it’s one of the first I can remember seeing in Ireland: low couches, distressed floors, defiantly unattractive artwork hung crooked on the walls. Studiously cool people smoking, scribbling in notepads, sipping hot drinks from absurdly huge mugs.

A scrawny, intense socialist type sits just inside the door, at a reddish table made from one giant slab of wood, opposite a mawkish-looking lank-haired girl. He jabs a self-rolled cigarette at her as he babbles away, fervent and self-righteous, a little wild-eyed: ‘...charging for water. That’s when the machine will go too *far*, man, by charging the workers for *drinking water*. The masses will rise *up* then. ‘Cause you can only push people so far.’

She nods earnestly. ‘Uh-huh. Uh-huh. I see what you’re saying.’

‘No, I’m *definitely* moving to Canada,’ he says, disgusted at something. ‘After I save up some money. This whole place is fucked anyway, whether the water is free or not. The forces of the state are just too... But there’s places in Canada you can hide, you know? From this New World fucking *Order*, man. It’s a big country. I mean Canada, it’s *big*.’

The girl with lank hair is still nodding. ‘Canada, uh-huh. I understand where you’re coming from...’

By the wall, facing each other over a tiny round table, two geeky-looking guys: one fat, one thin, almost as if this is the set-up for an unfunny TV comedy sketch. They seem like they might be science students. The fat guy smokes and eats a pastry at the same time.

He talks around both food and cigarette to say, ‘...beauty of the Windows operating system. You know me, I’m no fan of Bill Gates, in fact I hate Bill Gates, but I have to admit that Windows was pure genius. It was just this incredible visual leap, wasn’t it? You see where I’m...?’

He waves a hand at his friend, the guy’s cue to respond. The skinny fella seems a mite startled. He says, ‘Oh, yeah, yeah. Jesus, yeah. Like, on a technical level it’s pretty crap, but what you say about the visual thing.’

‘I mean, having to go to Finder and search for your document on a Mac. It wrecks my head, all the documents hidden behind each other like that. But with Windows, it’s like, hit the little bars at the bottom and bing!, bing!, bing!, up they pop.’

‘It revolutionised the whole way people think about their computer. Sort of made possible the entire notion of a home computer, didn’t it?’

The fat one actually splutters, crumbs of pale, dry confectionary leaving his mouth and spraying the table. ‘Sort of? What sort of? There’s no sort of. It totally did that. Gates is a fucking genius.’

His friend draws a cigarette from a packet which he’s keeping inside his pocket. Maybe he’s afraid of getting robbed. He says unhappily, ‘Oh, definitely. Couldn’t agree more. ...Be good if they didn’t crash so often, though.’

In the middle of the room, nearer to the counter, four feet from it or perhaps three, there are two girls, youngish, probably still in their teens, Art or Design undergrads if I had to guess, chatting about someone they know. They almost sound as if they’re performing a duet, with those airy, pleasingly sing-song accents.

One of them swishes her cigarette out of the way and leans in, eyes open wide, fired-up and conspiratorial. She hisses, ‘...came home, she found the flat stripped bare of all his stuff, his clothes and books and everything. *All* of it. Gone.’

Her friend, a mousy, pretty little thing, looks genuinely shocked. ‘That’s... God above.’ She shakes her head in some level of disbelief. ‘She must be just...’

‘That’s not even the worst of it. You know what the melodramatic prick had done?’

The second girl shakes her head again. No, don’t know.

‘He’d put that song, *The Next Life*, on repeat play in the stereo. You know it? The Suede song?’ The storyteller hums a little of the tune. I know it instantly: a really nice piano intro, awfully sad but staying just the right side of whatever imaginary line separates bittersweet from morbidly depressing.

Now her friend recognises it, too. She mutters, ‘Yeah, yeah... Lovely tune, actually.’

‘So the clown had this playing over and over when she stepped in the door. “See you, in the next life...where we’ll fly away for good...” He couldn’t just dump her and that’d be that. Had to make this big deep drama out of it. Wouldn’t that just make you wanna *puke*?’

The mousy-pretty girl shakes her head yet one more time. She thinks about the whole situation for a few seconds. Her final judgement is succinct and inarguable: ‘Asshole.’

I’m jolted out of my dreamy eavesdropping by Maggs punching me on the shoulder. ‘Odhran, the fuckin’ coffees aren’t going to order themselves, boy. C’mon, there’s Jana, you were right. C’mon we’ll go over say hello.’

I scowl at him. ‘I hope you’ve learned to wash your hands after using the potty by this stage.’

He ignores my jibe because he’s just noticed Sebastian. ‘Ah *shit*, there’s your man as well. Jana’s boyfriend. I don’t like that fella at all.’

He starts moving towards Sebastian and the others anyway. I follow, replying *sotto voce*, ‘Yeah, me neither. But...no pain, no gain. Just ignore him, man, he’s a tool.’

We can hear the pair of them as we get closer. Jana sounds amused, saying, ‘So what are you saying, Sebastian? That people should make love as a means of rebellion? Maybe you and I should start right away? Catch the authorities napping.’

Sebastian frowns. God, he’s so humourless about himself. ‘Don’t tease me, Jana. I know you’re just kidding but don’t tease me. Please.’

‘Aw, I’m not teasing. I’m agreeing with you.’

A customer ambles over, calling Jana’s attention. She moves away and Sebastian continues talking, more-or-less to himself. ‘Fascists and communists, the puritans, the Inquisition, British Empire – they all squash the libido. Because if you’re not doin’ it, you might as well be out there fighting for God and country, right?’

A different guy comes to the counter, a kind of chubby version of Woody Allen from around the time of *Annie Hall*, a frayed-edge copy of *Sight and Sound* magazine under his arm. They’re ranking the best foreign language films made since the end of World War II.

Woody shrugs and nods as though in agreement with Sebastian, who notices and addresses him: ‘Or, okay, take this thing in religion of venerating women. The Mother of God. The Holy Virgin. Muslim women told to cover their faces, that it’s out of respect for them. Ha! As if.’

Woody studies him closely, a little wary now.

Sebastian goes on, 'Women shouldn't be treated like they're some sort of perfect, pure being. Women are *dirty*, man, same as us. The way it should be. We're all animals.'

The man nods, debating internally about moving away. I'm at the counter myself now, standing behind Sebastian's stool. He hasn't seen me. I lean across, between Woody and Sebastian, drape my arm over his shoulder and smile dumbly. 'Well, I know *I'm* filthy, for starters. How are you, Sebastian? Still stickin' it to the man, huh? I love that, how you're such a rebel.'

He glowers at me and doesn't try to hide it. Weirdly, Sebastian has always seemed kind of fond of me, even though it's probably obvious that I don't like him very much. He often calls to my flat with a bag of cans, or pesters me to check out some stupid club he's thinking about approaching for a gig. That's proof of his self-obsession right there, I guess – he assumes that everyone else adores him as much as he does. He likes me, for whatever reason.

But he doesn't tolerate being made fun of by me any more than anyone else. He sighs, 'Fuck off, Odhran, would you?' and looks away, a thick contrail of smoke snaking from his lips. He seems to be ignoring Maggs, unless he hasn't seen him. But Maggs is a large guy, tends to stand out in a place.

Jana has come back. Now she says to the increasingly bewildered-looking customer, 'What can I get you, sir?'

He frowns and purses his lips. 'Hm...mm-hm. You know what? Nothing. I'm actually fine. Thanks anyway.'

He leaves, not happy but not particularly pissed-off about it. A sort of grumpy stoicism instead.

Jana shakes her head and tuts jokingly. She says to Sebastian, 'I'm going to have to ask the management to bar you, sweetheart. You're intimidating the customers with these crazy theories of yours.'

'Hang on. No, fuck that. What is crazy about what I'm saying? Hold on, Jana. Just admit it. Admit that what I'm saying is true.'

She leans across and gives him a big sloppy kiss. ‘It’s true, it’s true. I love you and everything you say is true.’ Jana smiles tenderly and caresses Sebastian’s face. Then she pulls back and looks at me. ‘Hi, Odhran, how are you? Hallo, Conor. Come on up, don’t be hiding in the background there.’

Maggs waves lazily and lumbers forward. I pull my arm from around Sebastian’s shoulder and tip my finger to my forehead in greeting, saying, ‘Hey, Jana. How’s it going?’

‘It’s going okay, yeah. You boys want a coffee? On the house, there’s nobody looking.’

She starts fixing the drinks before we’ve even had time to reply. Free coffee, straight away – I raise my eyebrows and smile at Maggs triumphantly. I say to Jana, ‘Mm. Please, that’d be cool. Thanks a mill. Americano for me.’ Then to Conor, ‘What you want, big man? Lemonade? You’ll have a lemonade? Hot milk, maybe?’

‘Cappuccino,’ Maggs says. ‘Thanks, Jana. Appreciate it.’

The pair of us plonk down onto counter-side stools, me next to Sebastian. He says softly and sarcastically, ‘You don’t *drink* cappuccino after lunch. It’s a breakfast drink. In Italy nobody has cappuccino after, like, eleven in the morning.’

Now Maggs ignores him back. I smile again and say, *faux*-innocently, ‘Did you say something, Sebastian? I thought I heard some weird kind of annoying kind of squealing noise coming from over there.’

He smiles, a little pissed-off but hiding it well. ‘Not a thing, Odhran.’

‘What are you having, anyway? The big expert on Italian coffee.’

‘Macchiato. A double. Two shots of espresso with a little twist of steamed milk.’

Maggs mutters, ‘Fuckin’ steamer is right.’

Sebastian sighs elegantly and doesn’t dignify this with a response. He is just too fucking cool.

‘Well, how’re the men? Jesus. *All* the men. Ye’re all in here.’

The three of us turn in unison at Sandra’s voice. She’s on the short side with a nice figure, bottle blonde, stylish in a neat, pressed, Benetton-

girl sort of way: lots of snug-fitting rugby shirts with upturned collars and well-cut jeans that invariably look like they've just been purchased. Sandra is almost exactly the same age as me – we started college together, back at the turn of the decade – but she's only just finished her degree after a six-year detour. She spent twelve months on Erasmus in Holland somewhere and another year in California, her course in abeyance. She also failed second year because of a personal crisis: not hers, something to do with her parents' health. The college were shitty about it and insisted she repeat the whole year.

Sandra's from Limerick, county not city but near enough. She's very sure of herself, deeply pragmatic and impatient with bullshit. For these and other reasons, a lot of people don't seem to like her. It's the Irish way, maybe: we don't want people to come straight out and say what they mean. Hiberno-English takes a meandering route towards meaning; it detours and doubles back on itself, it's allusive and oblique a lot of the time. The meaning is in there, somewhere, and we enjoy having to work it out for ourselves. Sandra isn't like that – she's direct, blunt almost to the point of rudeness.

I like her, though. She calls me on my self-indulgence and propensity for melodrama, all that adolescent angst I haven't quite managed to fully shake off yet.

She lands a stack of books – mostly hardbacks with UCC library tags on their spines – down on the counter between Maggs and me. I say, 'Alright, girl. How are you?'

'Grand, I suppose, yeah. You? Hiya, Conor. Sebastian.'

Maggs nods hello. Sebastian says disinterestedly, 'Hey, uh, Sandra.'

Now Jana comes back our coffees. She smoothly places them before us, the china saucers making a gentle, sonorous *clink* against the chrome worktop. She smiles broadly at Sandra.

'Hello! Hi. It's lovely to see you. You're okay?'

Sandra nods, drawls 'Uh-*huuh*' and slides onto the last stool. Maggs unconsciously shifts his bulk so as to give her more room, even though there's plenty of space. I'll say that much for the Belgian

Existentialist Coffeehouse Owner: he doesn't believe in squashing in the punters. He leaves you some room to think.

Jana must have read Sandra's mind, because without asking, she cracks open a bottle of Dr Pepper and fires it into a tall, lily-shaped glass. The dark-brown liquid explodes on contact with two inches of crushed ice, foaming and fizzing to an astonishing volume. Sandra waits for the drink to settle before taking a few big swallows.

She licks her lips and lets out a sigh of pleasurable satisfaction. 'That hit the spot. *Oh*, yes.'

I shake my head and say, 'Dunno how you can drink that stuff. 'Slike medicine, I swear to God.'

'D'nno myself. Got a taste for it in the States.' Sandra shrugs. 'I like it.'

Jana smiles mischievously and sort of glides down towards Sebastian, who's stubbing out a cigarette and lighting another. She says, 'Sebastian, tell Sandra your theory.'

He looks bored. 'Nah. Couldn't be arsed. No offence, Sandra.'

She doesn't seem to be listening anyway. Jana presses him: 'No, go on. It's good, it's interesting. Don't be shy, baby.'

'Yeah, let's hear it, man,' I say. 'You can tell all of us.'

He sighs. Jana announces to the group, 'Sebastian believes that sleaze is preferable to puritanism. He says he'd sooner sell blow-up dolls and hot pink vibrators than run for election. What do you think of that?'

The pedant in him is unable to resist correcting her, even though what Jana's said is probably more-or-less the gist of it. Sebastian sighs again, deeper this time, not bothering to try and hide it. He says, 'No. What I *actually* said? Politicians are afraid of sexuality. People in power, rulers, leaders, kings, whoever. They hate and fear sexuality. Especially women's. And every dictator knows that you have to stamp down on it. Hard.' He gives the counter a little thump for emphasis.

'Right,' I say. 'What do you believe, Sandra? You go along with all this?'

‘Odhran, I believe that I am absolutely knackered after my last exam and I need about a bucket of caffeine to keep me on my feet. What do *you* believe?’

‘In the power of love, of course. What else is there?’

Maggs chuckles and elbows me. It hurts a little bit – he doesn’t know his own strength. I say to Sandra, ‘Oh, yeah. You’re finishing around now. That’s today? Good stuff. Sorry, I’m...what did you have again?’

‘Modern Australian History.’

Jana places one hand on Sebastian’s. Is he actually sulking? She says, ‘Yeah? And how was that?’

‘It was...fine, I guess? Ah, fuck it,’ Sandra says. ‘I don’t even wanna think about it. I’m shit sick of college and studying and the whole bloody thing at this stage.’ She pauses, as if debating in her head whether to go on. ‘Know how long ago I started my degree? Let me remind you, this is a primary degree, not a doctorate or something. Actually Odhran, you’d know this.’

I draw an imaginary zipper across my mouth, *omerta*. The other three shrug and shake their heads.

Sandra says, ‘Six years ago. *Six years* for a three year course in History. 1990 I did my Leaving Cert. Christ, that is a depressing thought.’ She leans back in her chair, rolls her neck, tiny bones cracking in there, squeezes her eyes and groans. ‘Anyway. Heh. Don’t mind me. Just a bit daunted at the thought of actually having to go out into the adult world now for about...what, forty years or so? After that I’m sure it’s beer and skittles all the way.’

‘I won’t lie to you, Sandra – it is a horrendous place. Truly,’ Jana says playfully.

They both laugh. I take a long draught of my Americano: bitter and strong, just the way I like it. Maggs tentatively licks some of the foam off his cappuccino. He examines it on the end of his tongue, cross-eyed, a simpleton expression on his face.

I tap him on the nose with his spoon. ‘Use this, you Neanderthal.’

He takes the spoon and begins digging into his drink with gusto. Then Sandra brightens up a little, rummaging in her bag as she remembers something. ‘So, hey. You guys are coming to my party next week, right? Don’t let me down, now.’

Jana says, ‘My favourite tee-shirt is steeping in tie-dye even as we speak.’

‘We’ll be there,’ I say, jerking my thumb back and forth between Maggs and me. ‘He’s coming as a lava lamp.’

Maggs grunts, ‘Huh?’

‘*Lava*, dumbkopf. Lah-ha-ha-vaaah.’

‘Whu?’

‘Forget it. Jeez. It’s like actually *talking* to a fucking lava lamp.’

Then Sebastian goes, ‘Sorry – what’s this? What party, Jana?’

‘I told you about this, like, days ago,’ she says.

Sandra pulls a flier out of her bag and we pass it along the counter to Sebastian. Poorly printed, really smudgy, the ink practically falling off the edge of the page. Mostly text, spotted with Sixties-type images: flowers, the CND symbol, Che Guevara as famously shot by Alberto Korda, Andy Warhol’s Mao II, those shapeless, cartoonish blobs that seemed to be all over the place back then.

‘It’s the summer of *luuuuve*, beb-bay,’ Sandra says. ‘Courtesy of me and my flatmate. A few decades late, maybe, but sure, that’s Irish timekeeping for you. Tuesday of next week.’

Sebastian reads aloud from the flier: “‘To all you groovers, earth mothers, communistas and children of the revolution. Dust down the kaftan, put some beads around your neck and get on down to Sandra and Maura’s Vietnam Movie theme party – where the sixties will live again. Come as a hippie, a grunt, a Vietcong or Richard Nixon, or admission will be refused...’” He drops the flier and looks up. ‘Hang on, this is what? A Vietnam War party?’

Sandra shakes her head, blonde hair wisping around a heart-shaped face. ‘Nuh-uh. A Vietnam *movie* party. Slight difference. See, none of us are old enough to remember the war itself – but we’ve all seen tons of

films about it. *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Jacob's Ladder*... You get the idea.'

Jana smiles and says, 'Will someone actually be dressing up as Richard Nixon?'

'Yeah, I think Eamon might be, believe it or not.' Sandra laughs.

Jana scrunches up her face, trying to picture 'Eamon.'

I say, 'You know him. He hangs around with us. We call him Trotsky? Sort of a not-bad-looking anal retentive.'

'Ah, yes. Eamon.'

'Yeah, you remember him now! With that description, who wouldn't. Actually we could call him Eamon Retentive.' Nobody else finds my joke funny. Philistines.

'He's a real history buff,' Sandra says. 'Has loads of Nixon's speeches memorised. Didn't you say that, Odhran?'

I nod sagely. 'This be true a'ight.'

Sebastian snorts contemptuously as he clocks Trotsky in his memory. 'Oh, him. A right fucking tool.' He slides the leaflet along the counter. Maggs and me help it on its way back to Sandra. We're like the Pony Express here.

'Sebastian, don't be like that,' Jana says. 'Eamon seems a nice fellow.'

Sandra says, 'Yeah, Eamon's okay. The poker up his ass has the proverbial poker up its ass, but he's sound. Genuine kinda guy.'

Sebastian stands, stretching his back out before reaching down for a dark-grey hemp satchel. 'Whatever. Don't let me get in the way of the Trotsky Appreciation Society, girlies.' He steps away from the stool and says to Sandra, 'Anyway, listen – can't make that thing next week. All apologies.'

Sandra shrugs, monumentally indifferent either way. 'Hey, if you can't make it, you can't.'

'No, hold on, Sandra,' Jana says. 'Sebastian, what does this mean, you can't go to the party? What's on then that's so important?'

He grimaces and glowers at the floor like a scolded child. ‘Jana, leave me alone, will you? I told you I had that thing next Tuesday. Meeting the guy at the club?’

She glares at him, annoyed. Sebastian laughs – I can’t tell if it’s embarrassment or amusement. Probably a bit of both. He says, ‘What? Why are you...? I *told* you. He might have a gig for me, okay?’ He looks at Sandra again. ‘DJing. The new place on the Mardyke. Cubik’s Rube, you know it? The owner’s looking for a resident DJ for midweek. So...’

He holds his hands up apologetically. Sandra waves hers dismissively. ‘Don’t worry about it. I told you, it’s fine. Jana, it’s fine, really.’

Jana mutters, ‘Yeah, sure. It’s fine...’ She says to Sebastian, ‘I’ll talk to you later, then.’

He slings his bag over his neck and goes to leave. ‘Can’t wait.’

Then he’s gone, the grandstanding pillock. Sandra stares into her coffee, a little embarrassed. I stare into Sandra’s coffee too. Maggs stares into space. Jana bites her lip for a moment, more than a little embarrassed, then smiles at Sandra.

‘Anyway. Tell me all the fabulous ideas you have for bringing the sixties back to life.’

‘Yeah, tell, tell,’ I say, easing a cigarette from the packet that Sandra’s just popped up on the counter. ‘I can’t *wait* for this fucking party, to be honest. Is it true that free-love orgies are not only approved, but actually mandatory?’

A LIST OF BOOKS EVERY SLACKER HAD TO HAVE READ - OR AT LEAST COULD
PLAUSIBLY BLUFF ABOUT HAVING READ

The Outsider by Albert Camus

Because it's about a disaffected, misanthropic young man with delusions of grandeur bordering on a God Complex - just like me!

Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys

Took an existing classic (*Jane Eyre*) and worked something new out of one of the characters. Post-modernist chicanery at its finest.

Ulysses by James Joyce

Obviously nobody read much of it - I did it for my degree and barely managed two chapters. But it's a masterwork of inspired gobbledegook.

The Naked Lunch by William Burroughs

Nauseating, bewildering, painful, pointless and virtually unreadable. And those were the good qualities.

On the Road by Jack Kerouac

Not nearly as nauseating, sometimes bewildering, stratospherically pointless, readable enough if you were in the mood.

The Drowned World by JG Ballard

A journey through a strange, dreamlike other universe, as Kerans rapturously dives into the 'archaeopsychic past' of the human animal.

The Diceman by Luke Rinehart

Creepy, weird, inventive and very funny, the light and the dark in one unholy mix.

Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov

La-la-la-la-Loh-lee-taah, the tip of the tongue and that trip of three steps...

American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis

Chancer or virtuoso, neither or both? All of the above. A book it's possible to love and hate simultaneously.

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance by Robert Pirsig

It seems deep when you're reading it but you later realise that it's sort of a case of hidden shallows. But a nice book, for all that.

The Catcher in the Rye by JD Salinger

'Cause only phonies haven't read this.

Watchmen by Alan Moore

Brilliant, cynical, hugely ambitious reimagining of the cult of comic-book superheroes.

The World According to Garp by John Irving

You literally couldn't have paid me to read this stuff, and I was poorer than the proverbial church-mouse, but... People seem to like it.

Siddharta by Herman Hesse

See *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, with added mysticism.

Generation X by Douglas Coupland

It's sweet, cool and thoughtful in equal measure - like we considered ourselves to be. And it's got dinky little pictures along the side!