

## BURN

“What do you mean there’s a fucking curfew?” asked Isinglass. I say “asked,” but it was more like she shouted it at the top of her voice. Jo Isinglass is hardly the quietest of women on a good day – she can make your ears weep just by whispering – but when she’s angry, she’s loud. And on this occasion she was very loud.

There was no point trying to mollify her. Isinglass had been immune to mollification ever since her final marriage ended in the worst divorce since Henry VIII. All I could do was try not to flinch at every hurtling f-word.

“I was on my way to the suspect’s apartment,” I said again, “when a policeman stopped me in the street and told me to go home before the curfew started.”

Isinglass started swearing and this time she didn’t stop for a full two minutes. When she’d finished, she sat back, lit a cigarette and picked up the phone.

“Those things’ll kill you,” I said.

“Fuck off,” Isinglass replied, blowing a cloud of smoke into my eyes.

“Hello?” she barked into the phone. “Yeah, I want to see him. Now.”

I could hear a tinny voice protesting.

“Noon is fine,” said Isinglass and put the phone down.

“Put on a fucking tie, we’re going to see the chief,” she told me.

My name is Colin Ross. Most people pronounce “Colin” the American way, to rhyme with “rollin’” but my boss says it the English way, which rhymes with nothing on earth, because she’s English or because she’s lazy. I guess I shouldn’t complain: if she wasn’t so lazy and/ or English, she wouldn’t need an assistant to drive for her (“I’m not driving on the wrong fucking side of the road”), do her accounts (“Fuck the IRS”), and occasionally carry a gun (“Guns can fuck off”).

When I answered her ad, I assumed “Jo” was a man’s name so I was surprised when my prospective employer – J. INSINGLASS CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATIONS – turned out to be a middle-aged Englishwoman with a 40 a day habit and the vocabulary of a stevedore. So surprised, in fact, that I nearly turned around and walked out of her foggy office.

“Sit down, Colin,” she said, “I’m not going to fucking eat you.”

She smiled, and it was horrible.

“I’m going to do something much worse. I’m going to tell you the story of my life.”

I’ll keep it short, which is more than she did, but the essentials of Isinglass’ life were this: she grew up in London, went to cop school in somewhere that’s spelled “Birmingham” but pronounced “Barmy Num”, came to this city on a training assignment, fell in love with a local guy, discovered he was a bad local guy, and divorced him by pushing him under a truck. To be fair, he was trying to kill her at the time, but the witnesses were conflicted on who did what first, so she lost her job with the British police, and ended up staying here.

“There’s more to do,” said Isinglass. “You people are fucking nuts.”

The story of her life was a pointless train wreck, but there was something in Isinglass’ manner which made me feel that this would be an interesting job. Maybe it was the photo of the Mayor pinned to the wall with a cock and balls drawn on it, maybe it was the cat drinking water from a huge bar ashtray on the floor (“Yeah, I’m a cat lady, fuck off”) or maybe it was the yellowed newspaper clippings on the wall (“ARBOGAST BABY FOUND”,

“MAYOR CAUGHT WITH PANTS DOWN”, “PI ARRESTED FOR DRUNK DRIVING”) that intrigued me. Either way, I took the job, and I’ve been here three years.

And now it was noon and the Chief wouldn’t see her.

“I’ve got a fucking appointment,” Isinglass shouted at the sergeant outside the chief’s office. The sergeant shook her head.

“Saying ‘Noon is fine’ and slamming the phone down isn’t an appointment,” she replied.

Isinglass said nothing. For a moment I thought she must have suddenly died, but then I realised she was looking across the lobby, on the other side of which the Chief of Police was sneaking towards the exit.

“Fuck sake,” she said and then to me:

“Stop him.”

“Why don’t you – ” I began, then remembered that Isinglass didn’t do running.

I pelted across the lobby, which turned out to be a mistake. An alarm immediately began to sound.

“Stop,” said a dead voice.

I had forgotten about FAMS, dammit.

“Stop,” the dead voice said again. FAMS, Face And Movement Software, designed to target the combination of suspicious persons and suspicion actions, a combination also known as a young black man running.

“I have stopped,” I said, loudly and clearly.

“Stop,” said the dead voice.

Now I was worried.

Then there was a crunching sound, very like the sound a machine would make if a bad-tempered English woman had hit it with a fire extinguisher.

“Oops,” said isinglass.

“That’s police property,” said a voice. It was the Chief.

“You want to take it back to the shop,” Isinglass replied, “Because it doesn’t fucking work.”

“Isinglass,” said the Chief, wearily. Then he saw me.

“You OK, Colin?” he said.

“I am now,” I said, a little pointedly. The Chief had the good grace to look embarrassed.

“How’s your dad?”

I shrugged. Cops are always asking me how my dad is, on account of he was one.

“He’s fine,” I lied. “He says hi,” I lied again.

“Really?” said the chief. “Last time we spoke he told me I owed him a leg and he punched me. Fell over, too, but it was quite a punch.”

“She wants to see you,” I said.

The Chief sighed. It was a deep sigh.

“No coffee?” asked Arbogast as we sat down in the Chief’s office.

“You always have to push it,” the Chief said. Arbogast made a little “I guess so” face, then said:

“Why do you have a poster of the Mayor on your wall?”

The Chief winced. Clearly this was a sore point.

“Election coming up, he wants us all to show willing.”

Isinglass made an obscene gesture.

“OK,” she said, “Second question. What’s this curfew bullshit?”

The chief made a face.

“Not now,” he said. “I am up to my neck and I don’t need - ”

“Colin here was on a job for me and one of your wankers sent him home.”

If the chief was confused at the mangling of my name and the word ‘wanker’, he didn’t show it. He said:

“Curfew applies to everyone.”

“I’m a licensed PI and Colin works for me.”

“Not a cop, though.”

This was a harsh burn. Isinglass had liked being a cop. But there’s an old saying: you can’t push your husband under a Mack truck and stay in the force.

“Our client is an important person in this city,” she replied, and from the way she said it, I could tell even Isinglass wasn’t convinced.

“Really,” said the Chief. “Who are they?”

Isinglass shifted in her seat.

“I can’t tell you that,” she said. “Client confidentiality.”

The Chief shrugged.

“You wanted to see me?” he said. “You’ve seen me.”

And he waved his fingers at us dismissively.

We walked across City Hall Plaza. There was some kind of protest going on, although with the new ban on placards there was no way of knowing what the crowd were protesting about. Isinglass walked ahead of me because, as she said, I looked like a fucking student and I might get whacked any minute, so she was the first to find the parking ticket on the windshield.

“Protest about that!” she shouted as we got into the car.

The drive back was silent and neither of us spoke until we had reached the office.

“Fuck,” said Isinglass, by no means unpredictably.

“I don’t see the problem,” I said. “We just work around this.”

She looked at me.

“You’re a handsome lad, Colin,” she replied. “But you’re thick as mince. No offence.”

“Some taken,” I said.

“Our – *party*,” began isinglass, choosing her words with more care than her clothes, “is a night hawk. There’s no point following the fucker in the day because she’s going to be asleep. I mean,” she went on, warming to her theme, “we could visit all the nightclubs, bars and dives during the day but what would be the point of that? We’d just be walking round a lot of empty rooms that smell of stale beer, piss and peanuts. So, Colin,” she finished, “I don’t think we can work around this.”

I knew better than to point out that all the clubs and bars would be shut at night because of the curfew, but I did it anyway. Isinglass was surprisingly polite about it.

“It’s a curfew, not the end of the world, you clown,” she said. “Just because the streets are empty doesn’t mean people aren’t going out drinking and dancing.”

“But that’s illegal.”

“Oh fuck,” said Isinglass, “You’re right. I wish I’d thought of that.”

I pressed home what I thought was my advantage.

“Maybe we could go back to the Chief? Talk nicely to him this time and get a, I dunno, night pass.”

“Yeah, that’s on the fucking cards.”

She gave me a look that would have made Mister Rogers despondent. And then, to my horror, she smiled.

“Nah,” she said. “We’re just going to have to break the fucking law.”

Isinglass’ plan was, to say the least, basic.

“Got any black clothes?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said then, because I was pissed at her, “Do you?”

She looked down at what she was wearing. It was an odd selection involved a sort of blouse that might have been blue once, trousers that hadn’t been purple since Prince died, a cardigan buttoned up wrongly, and the kind of trenchcoat you find on a dead colour-blind informer.

“Yeah,” she said. “I used to be a fucking Goth.”

I was about to ask if this was true when she reached into her bag like it was a mantrap and carefully pulled out a large gun, which she handed to me handle first.

“Put some fucking bullets in this, would you?” she asked.

I say ‘asked’, it wasn’t a question.

Isinglass hadn’t told me much about the girl except that she had been missing from home for three weeks, belonged to a small group of activists called No Planet B, and came from money – “which is why I agreed to find the hippy twat.” The girl, whose name was Ailsa Nordhof, was also an active party animal, which according to Isinglass was no hindrance to her life as an activist.

“You know these wankers,” she said when we met in her office in our blackest clothes (I looked like a cool ninja, I felt, whereas Isinglass looked like a depressed beatnik), “Always out fucking spray painting on walls and doing stupid shit like that. Not what I call protest.”

I could sense that she didn’t entirely approve of Ailsa and her friends. I was right.

“Bunch of fucking rich kids,” she went on. “Partying all night on their dad’s money, fucked out of their minds on horse tranquillisers, and then when they’re bored of that, going off to save the planet by smashing some fucking windows or blowing up fucking blimps of the president. Saving the word one prank at a time, the fucking twats.”

“Ailsa Nordhof has done jail time,” I unwisely pointed out.

“I’ve done fucking jail time,” said Isinglass. “And I didn’t have a fucking rich daddy to bail me out either.”

This was true. Ailsa Nordhof’s daddy was a very rich daddy. He was Ryker Nordhof of Nordhof Pharmaceuticals and he’d made his money with ethically-sourced medical products: biodegradable products that reduced medical waste, recyclable bandages and – Nordhof Pharma’s best selling point – a range of medicines not tested on animals. This last infuriated Isinglass the most.

“If they’re not testing them on animals,” she said, “Then either they’re testing them on people or they’re not fucking testing them at all.”

“Would you rather they tested them on Shelley?” I asked, nodding at the large cat currently eating something wet and stinky from a large Pernod ashtray.

“They could test fucking nuclear weapons on that knob end for all I care,” she replied, fondly, and tickled its fat head. Whatever dregs of emotion remained in Isinglass’s soul had been directed at Shelley, whose response, like that of all cats, was to ignore Isinglass except when hungry, scratch her arms legs and crap under her desk. They were, when I thought about, a well-suited couple.

Isinglass looked up at the clock on the wall.

“Ten o’clock,” she said. “Let’s make like a shepherd and go and look for this twat.”

“That’s not how the - ” I began, but immediately gave up. Correcting Isinglass’s jokes never went well: besides, she was English and that might have been the joke for all I knew.

The first bar we went to was closed. The second was also closed and we had to hide in an alleyway from a patrol car. The third bar was open and very unfriendly; not that tis bothered Isinglass unduly.

“We’re closed,” said the goon on the door. He was wider than he was tall, and he was very tall.

“No you’re not,” Isinglass said. “There’s people in there, having drinks.”

The goon bent down a little and looked at her.

“Fuck off,” he explained.

“All right then,” said Isinglass. “Come on, Colin.”

A minute later, she had kicked the lock off the back door and we were in.

“We’re going to get thrown out,” I said as I followed her to the back of the club.

“If we’re lucky,” Isinglass replied. “This place is full of fucking murderers.”

I looked around. The club was dark and the music was mind-numbing, but everyone in here was either on a WANTED poster or looked like they should be.

“Shit,” I said.

“Don’t swear,” said Isinglass. “And stop pissing your pants. Crooks are like wasps, if you don’t wave your fucking arms around, they’ll leave you alone.”

She pushed her way to the bar and I trailed along behind her.

“Two big whiskies,” she told the barman, “He’s paying.”

I turned around to give Isinglass her drink but she was gone. I found her a few seconds later sitting at a small table with a fat scarred man and some glamorously bored women.

“Who’s this?” said the scarred man. He looked like someone had tried to open his face with a can opener.

“Nobody,” said Isinglass, then: “Colin, this is Mister Sinha. He owns this place.”

“Hi,” I said, and did a little wave. Isinglass and Sinha exchanged a look.

“He’s cheap,” she said, then: “I see the curfew’s not done you any harm.”

“I’m paying a little more,” said Sinha, “But I’m getting more customers because nobody else is open.”

“I’m glad you’re doing well,” Isinglass said. “Maybe you could put less water in your whisky.”

“How can I help you, Isinglass?” asked Sinha.

“I’m looking for a woman,” she replied.

"You've come to the right place," Sinha said, "although I doubt you'd appeal to any of my girls."

"Ha the fuck ha. I meant this girl," said Isinglass, producing a printed photo of Alyssa Nordhof.

Sinha was about to look at the picture when there was a distant bang, like a door being shot off. I looked up to see five or six armed men run into the room and start hitting people.

"What the fuck?" Sinha said. He stood up and was about to pull something from his pocket when Isinglass put her hand on his arm.

"It's the police," she said.

Sinha sat down.

"Shit," he said.

Within minutes the club was empty and everyone including us was jammed into the back of several meat wagons.

"His dad's a cop," Isinglass said, indicating me as two uniforms pushed us into the van.

"That's not going to do him any good," said one of the uniforms.

"I know," said Isinglass as the door slammed, "I just like embarrassing him."

Forty-five minutes later, we were being processed with everyone else. An hour after that, we were sitting in a large communal cell with Sinha and what looked to be most of the scum of the earth.

"Nice," said Isinglass as a huge man with an entire catalogue of tattoos pissed into a bucket in the corner. The man stopped pissing and, still holding his penis, gave her the finger with his other hand.

"You want to go back, get your knob inked," Isinglass said to him. "I reckon you could get half a Minion on there, if you were lucky."

The man glowered at her, zipped up and walked away.

"Do you want to get killed?" I asked her.

Isinglass shrugged.

"Not arsed either way," she said. She banged Sinha on the arm.

"You want a word with whoever it is you're paying to stay open," she said. "I don't think you're getting your money's worth."

Sinha sneezed.

"What the fuck?" said Isinglass, wiping her sleeve with a very old handkerchief. Her arm was covered in a fine spray of mucus.

"Sorry," Sinha said.

"Bit chesty, are we? Or have we been on the gak?"

"I don't tolerate drugs in my club or in my body," said Sinha.

"I bet if you did, you'd fucking water them down," Isinglass replied. "Jesus, Sinha, your fucking snot is boiling."

She looked at him.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"I'm fine," said Sinha. "It's just a summer cold."

"A summer cold," Isinglass replied, "does not make your snot boil."

Sinha was about to reply when the cell door opened and a man in a suit stepped in, accompanied by two uniforms.

"Him?" said the suit, pointing at Sinha.

One of the uniforms nodded.

"Get him out, then," said the suit, and the uniforms hauled Sinha to his feet.

"Not what you know, is it?" Isinglass called after Sinha as he left. "Fucking typical."

After a while, people began to drift off, the ones who weren't still high on booze or drugs. I couldn't sleep, partly because I had never been in a cell surrounded by murderers before and partly because Isinglass's head was on my shoulder and she was snoring into my ear. I tried not to think of Sinha, who I imagined was snug in his bed by now, as I wiped Isinglass' drool from my shoulder with a tissue.

At four or so in the morning we were woken by a new influx of cellmates, who were young, loud and sober. They did a lot of bar-rattling and calling for lawyers, but subsided fairly quickly and just looked lost and scared.

"Fucking students," said Isinglass.

"Don't you care what's happening to this city?" asked one in what sounded even to me a slightly overdone way.

"Depends," said Isinglass, "Now shut up, I need my two hours kip before breakfast."

They released everyone from the club a couple of hours later.

"What about them?" I said, indicating the protesters still in the cage.

"They're up before the judge this morning," a cop said.

"On what charge?"

"Shut it, for fuck's sake," said Isinglass.

"I'm just - "

"Sorry," she told the cop. "He's a bit fucking simple."

We walked out into the morning sun and caught a cab.

"Well, that was a fucking jip," said Isinglass as we went into her building.

"I don't even know what means," I said. I was sore from sitting on a bench all night and my ear was still damp from Isinglass' snoring.

Isinglass opened the door to her office.

"Put the coffee on and stop sulking," she replied.

"Fuck sake," Isinglass said, hitting her computer.

"Can I help?" I said, moving her coffee to the left.

"You can try," she replied. "Look."

She typed in the name of the city and the word "curfew." Then she hit return.

"That's odd," I said. The screen just said, "No results."

"Yeah, and this is more odd."

Isinglass typed the word "curfew" on it own. Again she hit return and again the screen told her, "No results."

"Have you got a filter on?"

She gave me a look.

“Yeah, I’ve got my porn filter on and the one where you can’t look for fucking curfews.”

“I was just trying to help,” I said. “Let me some synonyms.”

“Let me try kicking you up the arse,” she replied. “I’ve done all that, on this and my phone too. There’s nothing.”

“You can’t block words like that.”

“You can do what you like if you know how,” she replied and picked up the phone.

“Who are you calling?”

Isinglass sighed. “We need to go and meet the press,” she said.

We sat outside the news editor’s office, watching through a glass wall as she took a long phone call. Cleo Hellier looked like a model and dressed like a homeless person, which was maybe how models dressed, I have no idea. It was probably a journalist thing, Cleo being the nearest to an investigative reporter the Herald had these days. Once the Herald had been a big loud paper, full of broadsides and campaigns: now it was a website full of clickbait and targeted ads. But it still employed people who could write and who could chase a story, which was why we were here.

Isinglass was irritated at having to wait, but somehow managed to turn her frown almost upside down when Cleo ended her call and waved to us that we could come in.

“Sorry about that,” she said as we sat down. “My mom. She’s not been well and - ” Isinglass interrupted her.

“Everywhere I go,” she said, “I keep running into this curfew. But when I look it up, nothing.”

“It’s good to see you too, Isinglass,” said Cleo, drily.

“Also,” Isinglass went on, “in your paper.”

Cleo frowned.

“We’ve run ads,” she said.

“Ads?”

Cleo prodded her tablet and pushed it at Isinglass.

“STAY HOME AT NIGHT. MAKE YOURSELF SAFE BY MAKING THE STREETS SAFE.”

“Kind of makes it sound like it’s our fault - ” I began. Isinglass hit me on the arm to shut me up.

“Ads aren’t journalism,” she said. “Where’s the fucking articles? Where’s the editorials?”

“It’s a public safety bulletin,” Cleo said.

“Which if you ignore you get arrested,” Isinglass replied.

“You got arrested, from what I hear, for being in an illegal drinking den,” Cleo replied.

“I don’t believe this,” said Isinglass, “Are you saying there isn’t a curfew?”

Cleo stood up and closed the door to her office.

“I’m not saying there isn’t a curfew,” she said. “But also I’m not saying there is.”

Isinglass made a face like someone had broken wind.

“Fuck me,” she said.

“Isinglass,” said Cleo. “You seem to have the idea that the Herald is some sort of crusader for justice. We’re not: we’re just trying to keep our heads above water. If the city government wants us to run public safety ads without commenting on them, we will.”

“All right,” said Isinglass. “I get it. You don’t do journalism because nowadays it’s all what this celebrity did next will make your fucking dick fall off. And you don’t fight City Hall any more because they’re the only ones paying the bills. There’s a curfew and you can’t criticise it. That’s all fine by me. But - ”

She leaned forward, right into Cleo’s face, which actually changed expression (alarm, worry).

“ – can you do one thing for me?” asked Isinglass.

“What?” said Cleo.

“Can you tell me,” said Isinglass, “*why* there’s a curfew?”

There was a moment of silence. Then there was another one.

Eventually, Cleo said:

“Get out.”

“I was just asking a - ”

“Get out or I’ll call the police.”

We got out.

“Fuck me, what was *that* all about?” said Isinglass. She sighed. “I knew her when she was a proper journalist. She even smoked. I mean, herbal, but it was still fags.”

“She was scared,” I said.

“Well, dur,” Isinglass replied. “Of course she was scared. Some fucker’s breathing down her neck and their breath’s hot and stinky. The question is, who?”

“And why,” I added.

Isinglass looked at me. It wasn’t an entirely contemptuous look.

“Yeah,” she said, “That too.”

We took the elevator down. In the lobby they were putting up a huge banner. It read:

STAY HOME AT NIGHT. MAKE YOURSELF SAFE BY MAKING THE STREETS SAFE.

“Now where did I see that before?” asked Isinglass.

I was about to tell her when she shook her head.

“Oh,” I said.

“Sometimes I fucking wonder if you went to college,” she said.

It was a nice day so we walked. As we got near the office, we heard a lot of honking going on from a big gridlock covering five or six blocks.

“Now what?” asked Isinglass, as though the gridlock had been put there just to annoy her.

Being curious types, we walked up the road to take a look. Marching band music wafted through the air as a large platform covered in flags and rosettes loomed into sight.

“It’s the mayor,” said Isinglass, and she was right. A tubby man with not enough hair was just getting out a limo and mounting the steps to the platform as fast as his stubby legs would let him.

“Where’s Jodie Foster when you need her?” said Isinglass.

“Actually, Jodie Foster wasn’t – ”

“I know. Fucking hell. ”

She turned her attention to the Mayor.

“Is this why there’s a curfew?” I asked. “So he can say the streets are safe?”

“Could be,” said Isinglass. “I mean, I wouldn’t put it past the hairless twit.”

At that moment, a siren blasted out from nowhere, and was immediately joined by another, and another, and another. Soon the air was filled with overlapping screams and wails.

“Jesus, how much fucking attention does he need?” Isinglass shouted.

“I don’t think it’s him,” I said, and pointed down the street, where the gridlock was somehow parting for a clutch of motorbikes. The bikes were escorting a small group of large vans, windowless and grey. We watched as the vans drove on past the gridlock and further into the city. Then there was silence again, except for the marching band music. The mayor stood at a podium, apparently waiting for something. Then the marching stopped abruptly in the middle of My Grandfather’s Clock and the PA system exploded into noise with some boomer rock record from the 70s.

“What a fucking racket,” said Isinglass as the elderly rebel rock anthem blasted out from the speakers with its vague lyrics about freedom and democracy. “Why do these wankers always pick these songs? I mean, it’s not like anyone who likes this sort of thing is going to vote for him is it?”

“It sends out an inclusive message,” said a voice behind us. She turned to see the Chief of Police.

“Oh, here he is,” Isinglass said. “Doing a bit of policing for once, are you?”

“I heard you spent the night in gaol,” said the Chief. “You too,” he added, looking at me. “Your dad wouldn’t be pleased.”

“Don’t fucking tell him then,” said Isinglass. “Typical though, innit? I mean, we get locked up and that bald git is walking around, free as a twat.”

“I think it’s free as a - .”

“I *know*.”

Isinglass frowned at me then turned to the Chief.

“What the fuck is going on?” she asked. “I mean, I can understand the curfew, just, but how come nobody’s talking about it?”

The Chief was about to reply when sirens sounded again and a second stream of grey vans made its way past the platform.

“Excuse me,” said the Chief. “I have work to do.”

“I was talking to you!” shouted Isinglass as he walked off.

“That went well,” I said. Isinglass punched me on the arm.

“Don’t be fucking sarcastic,” she said.

Her phone rang. After a brief battle with her pockets, Isinglass answered it.

“Who?” she said.

After a minute, she put the phone away.

“That,” she announced, “was Mrs Sinha.”

“Mrs Sinha?” I said.

“The same.”

“What did she want?”

“She requests our presence at her husband’s funeral,” said Isinglass, and strode off towards the office.

“Funeral?” I replied, a few seconds later.

The chapel was large and white and stood in the grounds of an enormous crematorium. There was a large board outside it, one of the kind which has a different

inspirational message ever week. Today it read: STAY HOME AT NIGHT. MAKE YOURSELF SAFE BY MAKING THE STREETS SAFE.

“Original,” said Isinglass as we pulled in. She jumped out of the cab before it had stopped and ran towards the small crowd of people making their way into the building. I paid the driver and followed.

“Mrs Sinha?” said Isinglass to a middle-aged, fairly glamorous-looking woman in a black jacket and skirt.

“You must be Isinglass,” said Mrs Sinha. She looked at my boss’ chaotic clothes. “You could have dressed respectfully.”

“I only got your fu – your call half an hour ago,” said Isinglass, a little defensively. “Sorry,” she added, as Mrs Sinha’s full-beam stare continued, then:

“Why did you ask us here? I’m sure it’s not to lay a wreath.”

Mrs Sinha nodded.

“You were one of the last people to see him alive,” she said.

“But I thought he went home when he was released,” Isinglass said, frowning.

“No, he was taken straight to the hospital,” Mrs Sinha said. “They removed him from the cell because he had been taken ill.”

“He said he had a summer cold,” I said, remembering the sneeze.

“He was wrong,” Mrs Sinha said with barely repressed anger. “He was seriously ill, and he died a few hours later.”

“Fuck,” said Isinglass. “Sorry,” she added, “But Colin’s right. He was fine, pretty much, when they took him out. I don’t get it, to be honest.”

Some crematorium staff walked to a nearby hearse, opened the back and slid out a coffin.

“I can’t even bury him,” said Mrs Sinha.

“What?” said Isinglass.

A small group of men, presumably Sinha’s friends, shouldered the coffin and began to walk it towards the crematorium.

“He was very clear. The will said he wanted to be buried. But the hospital say he’s got to be cremated.”

One of the staff approached us.

“We’re ready for you now,” he said.

The service was short and emotional. Sinha had a lot of friends, not all of whom were murderers, and some heartfelt speeches were made. There was a selection of his favourite hymns, and a minister spoke who actually seemed to have known the deceased.

It was over soon enough, though, and I got up to leave. Isinglass grabbed my sleeve.

“What?”

“We’ve only got a minute.”

“Until what?”

Isinglass gave me a look.

“Until they burn him,” she said.

The coffin had been taken into a side room where it was waiting on a small table prior to being incinerated. I had assumed that this would happen during the service, but apparently there was always a slight risk that the casket might get stuck on the conveyor

belt, or the widow might suddenly remember that the deceased was still wearing his Rolex, or something like that.

Isinglass walked right to the coffin and, producing a chisel, began to prise the lid open.

“What are you doing?” I almost shouted.

“What does it fucking look like?”

“It looks,” I said, carefully, “like you’re prising open a coffin.”

“Yeah, I am. Give us a hand.”

“No!”

Isinglass stopped for a moment and said:

“When they were bringing him in, the box looked a bit light to me. There’s something up with it.”

“Up with it?”

“Just give me a fucking hand before someone comes.”

Between the two of us, we were able to remove the lid. Isinglass slid it to the floor.

“Fucking hell,” she said, “What the fuck is that?”

And she reached into the coffin and pulled out a foot.

“Is that it?” I asked.

“No, there’s another one in here. And the hands.”

“Someone cut the hands and feet off?”

“And threw away the body, yeah. Wait, they’ve not been cut off. There’s all black stuff on the - ”

There was a bang outside.

“Shit, get the lid back on.”

I struggled with the lid, then stared in disbelief as Isinglass stuck the foot under her coat.

“Evidence,” she said, “Which is otherwise going to get burned. Now quick, out the back way.”

Isinglass got down on her hands and knees, cleared the minifridge in the office of old milk cartons and beers cans, and put the foot – now at least wrapped in a plastic bag – at the back.

“I can’t get the fucker into the freezer compartment,” she said.

“At least we can still have ice with our cocktails,” I replied.

“Was that a joke, Colin? Very tasteful.”

“I’m not the one stealing feet from the dead.”

“One foot. Now shut up, I want to think.”

I was about to reply with something caustic when my phone buzzed. It was my dad, wanting to know where I was.

“Oh yeah,” said Isinglass. “Your dad called this morning. Said he wanted to have dinner with you.”

“And you said you’d tell me but you forgot?”

“Got it in one. Go on, fuck off then.”

I fucked off.

My dad has certain routines. This was fine when he was a dad, because they were dad routines which, combined with his cop routines, brought stability and order to a life

made chaotic by the death of my mom. He managed to bring me up to be a responsible sane adult, partly on his own and partly with the help of aunts (some of the aunts were mine and some of the aunts were his) by imposing a rigid discipline on both our lives that he never let get too military. But now he was a retired cop, and his routines were those of a retired cop: dinner at four o'clock in the afternoon, in the same place he ate his breakfast and his lunch. I wouldn't have minded this if Nico's hadn't been the actually worst restaurant in the world.

How Dad came to be a regular at Nico's was a mystery to me. The only favour he could owe the guy, it seemed to me, would be to call the health inspectors and get the place closed down. The food wasn't terrible, not all of it, but what wasn't inedible was just depressing. The biscuits and gravy were tragic, the burgers were grey and sad, and even the eggs were not so much sunny side up as smile turned upside down.

"Why do you eat here?" I asked him once.

"Because it's got personality," he said.

I looked around. The walls were a kind of suicidal beige and the pictures on the wall were all of Nico with his favourite customers, most of whom looked like they were about to throw up.

"How come there's no picture of you and Nico on the wall?" I asked him another time.

"Because if he ever came at me with a camera," my dad said, "I'd shoot him in the balls."

Today Dad was sitting in his usual seat, his usual meal in front of him, and as usual, he raised his hand when I came in. Nico came over with a menu, but my dad shook his head.

"He'll have the same as me," he told Nico.

I sat down.

"How are you doing, Dad?"

"Never mind all that," he said. "I heard you spent the night in jail."

"Old cops never die, they just gossip," I replied.

"You can't be a lawyer with a prison record," he said.

"One, it was a night in jail and two, I'm not going to be a lawyer."

"You're just going to hang out with that woman, then? Maybe get lucky and inherit her business when she dies?"

My dad always called Isinglass "that woman."

"It's an interesting job," I said.

"Yeah?" said my dad. He pushed his eggs away, uneaten. They stared at me like baleful alien eyes.

"Not hungry?" I asked.

"I ate before I came out," he said. "Food here's terrible."

"Then why did you want to meet me for dinner?"

He looked around, as though for snipers.

"There's something going on," he said and sat back and folded his arms.

"OK," I said, and waited. After a few seconds I said:

"What?"

Dad drank some coffee, winced, and said:

"Just keep an eye out, will you?"

"For myself?"

He sighed.

"Some of the guys aren't happy," he said. "I mean, banging heads, throwing idiots in the can, that's fine. I'm no liberal. But -"

"Could you be more specific?" I asked. "Or at all specific?"

"Your mother was the lawyer," he replied. "Always out for the little guy. I used to say, what if the little guy was a serial killer? And she said, people have rights."

He fiddled with his napkin.

"We used to go round the houses on that one. Who has rights and who needs protecting. Never got an answer that satisfied either of us. And, you know, old guys get fixed in their habits."

I looked around, at the diner, at Dad's meal.

"Yeah," I said.

"But the older I get, the more I look at the world and I think she was right," he said. "People have rights."

"Dad, it's great you're turning into a lib in your old age, but what has this got to do with -?"

I stopped.

"The curfews," I said. "The election."

He said nothing for a while then:

"If you need anything, come to me. I may be retired but I can still pull in favours."

"OK," I said.

My dad seemed to relax. Then he smiled.

"Now how about some cherry pie?" he said.

I found Isinglass back at the office taking pictures of the foot with her phone.

"Take that off my desk."

"Why? Is it unlucky?"

"It's a decomposing body part."

"You're a decomposing body part," Isinglass replied, but she bagged it up again.

"Why are you taking pictures of it?"

"We're going on holiday together and it needs a passport."

"What?"

She looked up from emailing the photos to herself to give me a stern glance.

"Is it an American thing? Not getting jokes?"

"Sorry, I've just had dinner with my dad."

"At Nico's? No wonder he's still alive. If he can survive that shit, he must be immortal."

"He said if we needed anything we should get in touch."

"Like what? A pension? Magic?"

This last was to the computer, which had just binged. Isinglass clicked on the screen and images of the foot appeared. I winced as she zoomed in.

"What does that say to you?" she asked, hovering the cursor like a fly over the torn edge of a severed ankle.

"Necrosis?" I said. "It's a bit black."

"Necrosis my arse," she replied. "Some fucker's set it on fire."

Isinglass frowned.

"What kind of a wanker," she said, "burns feet?"

She picked up the bagged foot and was about to replace it in the freezer when I said: "What's that?"

We both looked down at the floor.

"Bit of paper," said Isinglass.

"It wasn't there just now," I replied.

"Must have fallen off the foot," Isinglass said.

I picked up. It was a sticker. Some letters were decipherable on it.

ORDHO

"Nordhof Pharmaceuticals," I said.

"Could be Nordhof," said Isinglass, "Could be anything." She hated to be one-upped.

"Like what?"

Isinglass sighed.

"All right, it's Nordhof," she said. "And?"

"Why would a foot have a Nordhof Pharmaceuticals sticker on it?"

"Maybe it was taking pills for a tummy ache."

I looked at her. She took the sticker.

"I can ask around and find out what this is," she said. "Fuck me, is it Nordhof Day or something?"

"Have you given up on Alyssa Nordhof?" I asked.

"No," Isinglass said, defensively. "I've just been a bit busy is all. Here – "

She handed me a notepad. It was stained with something that I hoped was whisky.

"This is all her activist wanker mates," she said. "I want you to WhatsUp them."

I didn't even bother to correct her.

"And I'm doing this instead of you because?"

"Because you're young and you look fairly presentable," she said.

"Compliment," I said.

"Just don't fucking knob any of them," said Isinglass.

The first two names on the list hung up on me. The third went straight to voicemail, but the fourth said she'd meet me. Her name was Jolie and I told her I was Alyssa's cousin, and that I was in the city anyway and wanted to look her up – but I'd had no luck but her mom had given me some of her friends' numbers (I hoped Jolie wasn't the checking other people's stories type).

"What are you doing in the city?" Jolie asked.

"I'm a consultant for a small activist group back home," I lied, and that was enough for Jolie. She told me to meet her at a coffee place about three blocks from the office.

The coffee place was called Picnic At Hanging Rock and if it had been a person, it would have been crucified on social media for cultural appropriation. Every single surface was covered in Aboriginal drawings or paintings, there were didgeridoos hanging from the ceiling and the speakers were playing recordings of tribal rituals. It made me feel creepy and I wasn't even Australian.

"I like it here," I told Jolie.

"Yeah, it's authentic," she said. "When's the last time you saw Alyssa?"

"Christmas," I said. "I came to visit."

"And how were the Nordhofs?" asked Jolie, making a wry face.

I took the cue.

"You know when people say nuclear family?" I replied. "The Nordhofs were at Def Con One."

Jolie laughed. "Alyssa hates them," she said. "Daddy makes his money selling pills to suckers and he's a fucking neoliberal asshole. He says the only way to change the world is from within the system. Such BS."

I nodded in agreement. "So," I said casually, "When's the last time *you* saw Alyssa?" She frowned.

"That's the weird thing. Alyssa's been skipping meetings. She doesn't even come out clubbing any more. I mean, that's her life, right? Clubs and activism."

"Sounds like a good life," I said. "You worried about her?"

"A little," said Jolie.

But I could see from her face that it was more than a little.

I met Isinglass outside the office.

"Have you got my fucking keys?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Because they're in the lock."

"Oh yeah," Isinglass said, and opened the door. Then she stopped:

"Fucking hell!"

I ran in.

"What is it?"

Isinglass pointed at the floor where Shelly was crouched with something in her paws which she was attacking with relish.

"Did you," I said, "put the foot back in the freezer?"

Isinglass looked at me.

"Obviously fucking not," she said.

"Now what do we do with it?" I asked, after I'd finally managed to separate Shelley from her dinner. The cat had done a remarkable amount of damage to it in a fairly short time.

"Fuck knows," Isinglass said helpfully. "Just put it back in the freezer for now and I'll sort it out later. In the meantime," she said, as I bagged the remains of the foot, "I had a very productive morning with my friend Keith the lab tech."

I didn't ask who Keith was or how Isinglass came to be pally with a laboratory technician because I had a feeling that she might tell me and I had no idea how that story might pan out. Instead I just asked:

"What happened?"

"Well," said Isinglass. "I used to shag Keith, back in the day, even though he had a huge arse. So I figured he owes me one."

I made as non-committal a noise as possible.

"Anyway, I took him the sticker," Isinglass went on, "and he had a look at it. And he says yes, it's definitely a label from the Nordhof labs."

"We knew that," I said.

"Ah," said Isinglass. "But what we didn't know was what Big Arse Keith was able to tell me."

"Which is what?" I asked, quite patiently.

Isinglass gave me a look which was clearly meant to convey significance.

"It's from a small jar," she said.

"Oh."

"'Oh?' That's a fucking massive bit of information there," said Isinglass.

"A jar? It could be anything."

"No, it couldn't," said Isinglass, and now she looked triumphant. "Because while Nordhof use a wide variety of storage containers, from pill bottles to plastic boxes – I'm quoting Keith here - Nordhof use jars for one thing and one thing only."

"And what's that?" I asked.

"I've forgotten," she said.

"What?"

"I'm only joking. Nordhof use jars solely for medical solutions. I mean, literally, solutions. Soluble medicines, for injections and that sort of thing."

Isinglass paused.

"Sinha didn't die because he had a nasty cough," she said. "He died because somebody injected him with something."

"Someone at Nordhof?" I asked.

"Could be," she said. "Beats me why though."

"Maybe he knew something."

"Sinha?" She barked out a laugh. "He knew fuck all about anything outside clubs."

"Then why – " I began, but Isinglass wasn't listening anymore.

In the doorway, framed by the afternoon sun, was Cleo. She looked amazing and she looked terrified.

"What the fuck do you want?" asked Isinglass with easy charm.

Cleo came in and sat down.

"Did I say you could - "

"My mother," Cleo said. "They've taken her."

"What? Who has?"

"She only had a little cough."

"I am seriously keen for you to say something I can fucking understand," Isinglass said.

"It was a grey van," Cleo said. "I would have written down the licence plate but there wasn't one."

Isinglass got out a pad.

"A grey van took your mum?" she said, and looked at me.

"She was ill?" I asked.

"Just a cough," said Cleo. "Isinglass, I need your help."

"Oh, that is richly ironic," Isinglass replied. She sighed. "Still, I am a lovely person, so fair enough."

Cleo began to stammer out her thanks. Isinglass raised her hand.

"But first you have to help me."

Now Cleo sounded frightened as she said:

"I can't. They're clamping down. We're not even allowed to mention the - "

"The what?" asked Isinglass.

"The pandemic," said Cleo.

Five minutes later we had it all. There had been a spate of infections leading to flu symptoms that for some reason the city was keen to not talk about.

“We were told to promote the curfew,” said Cleo, “but not to ask why.”

“What’s a curfew got to do with it? Oh,” said Isinglass, answering herself. “Like a limited lockdown.”

“The mayor is terrified that business will suffer,” Cleo said. “And with an election coming up - ”

“So he’s what? Rounding up anyone who feels a bit peaky until the election’s over?”

I looked at Isinglass.

“I don’t think Sinha’s coming back,” I pointed out.

“What?” asked Cleo. “What does he mean?”

“Nothing,” Isinglass replied, giving me serious stink eye. “Listen,” she told Cleo, “We can help you but I’m gonna need something back.”

“What?” Cleo asked fearfully.

Isinglass told her.

We stood outside the gates of Nordhof Pharma. The building was large and white and so was the security guard who approached us.

“This is private property,” he said.

“We’re here to see your boss,” Isinglass replied. “Got an appointment and everything.”

Nordhof’s office was large and white and he sat in a white swivel chair behind a white desk.

“Got a good deal on white paint, did we?” Isinglass asked him.

“I was about to call you,” said Nordhof. “You seem to have made very little progress.”

“We’re getting there,” said Isinglass. “There’s been a few issues. Like the curfew, and the election. And - ”

She leaned into his face.

“ – the pandemic,” she finished.

Nordhof’s face was a smooth blank.

“What pandemic?” he asked.

“Don’t come it with me,” said Isinglass.

Now Nordhof looked really blank.

“She means don’t act innocent,” I translated.

“There is no pandemic,” Nordhof said.

“Really?” asked Isinglass. “Then why are you testing vaccines out on sick people?”

Nordhof froze.

“No denial, I see,” Isinglass said.

She looked around the white room for a moment.

“See, I kept thinking,” she said. “I get why you’d be testing a vaccine, but not why you’d be sticking your needles in people without proper tests. I mean, you’re a big corporate feller, all right, but you’ve got a good track record. You don’t even like testing on animals, let alone people’s grannies.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Nordhof.

Isinglass showed him the vaccine sticker, which for added effect she had glued to an old pill jar.

“If I got this analysed by a rival chemist,” she said, “I bet they’d say it was a vaccine.”

“Where did you get that?”  
“Never mind,” said Isinglass. “Cos I’ve got a question for you.”  
She looked at Nordhof, who was sweating now.  
“Where’s your daughter?”

The next morning at ten we were in the foyer of City Hall.  
“You can’t come in here,” said the receptionist. “There’s a press conference on.”  
“That’s all right,” Isinglass replied, showing her the press passes she’d finagled from Cleo. “We’re the press.”

We rode up in the elevator.  
“This isn’t going to work,” I said.  
“Thanks,” said Isinglass. “Did you bring the gubbins?”  
I looked at her.  
“The stuff I asked for,” she said.

The elevator door opened and we walked out into a room full of press. At one end the mayor was just getting out from behind his favourite podium.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” a spokesperson said, “The mayor will now take questions from the press.”

Isinglass’ hand shot up. A moment later, a lackey had passed her a handheld microphone.

“Jo Isinglass, Puzzle Monthly,” she said.  
“What are you doing here?” said the mayor.  
“Just wanted to ask a couple of questions,” said Isinglass.  
“Well you can’t,” the mayor said, petulantly.

“Can we have that back please?” said the lackey, trying to get the mic back. Isinglass waved it above his head.

“Sorry pal,” she said. “And don’t turn it off, either.”  
“Who is she?” I heard the spokesperson ask.

“Me?” said Isinglass. “I’m your worst nightmare, darling. Miss Marple with a badge. A press pass, anyway. Do you know what this is, Mister Mayor?” she asked, punching me. I took the gubbins out: a syringe and a small glass bottle.

“This,” she told the room, “is the antidote to the virus that’s currently knocking off one per cent of the city’s population.”

“There’s no virus!” shouted the Mayor.

“There is, and it’s why we have the curfew,” said Isinglass. “Which is not very effective, obviously, but the mayor here doesn’t want businesses to have to close. So very soon that one per cent will be five per cent, then ten percent, then twenty, then - ”

There was some commotion in the room.

“I was about to make an announcement!” said the Mayor. “There is a virus, yes - ”  
More commotion.

“ - but we will soon have a vaccine!”

Isinglass shook her head.

“Maybe,” she said. “I know Nordhof and everyone has been working on one, but it doesn’t work, does it?”

“Tests are inconclusive,” the mayor began.

“No they’re not,” said Isinglass. “Cleo?”

As she spoke, Cleo stepped forward and clicked on a remote. The screen behind the mayor showed an image: the charred remnants of Sinha.

"Sorry about the bite marks, that cat's a bastard," said Isinglass. "This photo is evidence of the, um, side-effects of the vaccine. It makes people burst into flames and burn up."

"If this is the case," asked Cleo, in a by-no-means rehearsed tone, "then surely Nordhof would have stopped the program?"

"They would have, but the mayor needs results before the election, so he can put a lid on the virus before it's even known about," said Isinglass. "So the mayor put pressure on Ryker Nordhof."

"This is all lies!" shouted the mayor.

Isinglass strode up to the mayor.

"Then why is Alyssa Nordhof being held in a house registered in your name?" she asked. "Is it because she's a hostage?"

There was plenty of consternation to be getting on with now. The mayor lunged forward.

"Lies!" he shouted. "All lies! Give me that!"

He grabbed the syringe from Isinglass. Then stopped as its sharp end slid into his wrist.

"Oh fuck," said Isinglass.

"Everyone back!" I shouted.

Five seconds later, the Mayor burst into flames like a Roman candle. Fifteen seconds later, he was just two feet and two hands in a pile of ash.

Isinglass looked at me.

"Looks like the election's cancelled," she said.

She was right. The election was cancelled and, a short time later, Nordhof's daughter was released, and Cleo's mother returned home. Nordhof Pharma continues to work on a vaccine and with luck, there'll be one soon.

Meanwhile, the cases pile up.

