

CHAPTER 4

Or, Regular Exercise, 3 Times A Week

Hanging off the edge of the ledge and holding on only by her fingertips, she had never felt more alive.

Church pulled herself up, raising her body with her arms, getting leverage with elbows and pulling up until she got her knees on the foot-wide ledge hundreds of feet above the bustling road below. Once she had settled, she looked back down at the world below her: a bustling Thursday night, only a few weeks before Christmas, and accordingly the city centre was full of mothers and fathers running around in a self-inflicted consumer frenzy while trying, on some utterly superficial level, to maintain the original spirit of community and love that the season must have at some point signified. Brushing her dirty blonde hair out of her eyes and behind her ears, she watched on, smiling to herself. “Crutch”, she said quietly to herself, but above the warm blanket of noise and pollution which hung over the town, the word seemed to sing out like a tower bell.

Further upwards, Church found she could see forever around her. This region was particularly flat, and so the outlying estates and satellite-cities appeared like glimmering jewels set around the bright diamond of Central London. The view was breathtaking, and one that Church hadn’t seen for months. In self-imposed exile she had lived on and under the streets of most of the city for the past 2 years, looking for something or someone or somewhere – she didn’t really understand

herself, but she had never before felt such certainty; it was like standing on Everest and touching the moon, being able to feel every single grain of lunar dust but yet unable to express the sensation: words were unable to capture what it meant.

After a few months Church had completely stopped washing. She had heard the schoolyard myths that hair, if left untouched by shampoo for sufficiently long, would clean itself. The same was apparently true for the human body, or at least to a certain extent. While she did maintain a distinct odour, it was hers, personal and unique, and she had grown to love it. People spend thousands of pounds a year sterilising themselves, making themselves weak and vulnerable to the inevitable attack of microbes and bacteria by reducing the body's tolerance to external agents through a regime of obsessive scrubbing. Church, on the other hand, was fully immersed in the world – she drank it in, the smells, the tastes and all of the germs and filth that rode upon them, and she was ALIVE! Oh, if her mother could see her now! Church had no idea what her mother would think, if she were alive and with her at this moment. She hoped that her mother would be proud, and would understand, but her near-adult sense of the world quietly informed her that life is never quite that satisfactory. Her mother would never understand. At some base level Church had always understood this; the same base cunning had kept her alive for the past few years, and she was grateful to it for that, but she so often wished it would let her believe that Mother would understand.

She cried again.

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“CHARL! Don't eat that!”, Maria screamed! Church had already removed the sandwich from her mouth; she could sense her mother's reaction before even her mother had started to turn around, but Maria

was already beyond furious. “It’s got *mayonnaise* dear – you *know* you can’t eat *mayo!*”, Maria continued. “Really, it’s as if I’ve taught her nothing at all... Les! Hi!” Maria had already started to walk off. “Yes, mum. I didn’t realise...”, was what came out of Church’s mouth, but the words forming in her mind were more likely to be heard at an illegal West Hampstead cock-fight than in the Royal Variety Show rehearsal green room. This had occurred to Church herself – the thought of those ten or fifteen men standing in a circle, stripped to the waist probably, and reconnecting at a most fundamental level with the primal, with nature and with death itself... it inspired something dark and beautiful inside her, like a black rose pungent with the scent of over-ripe peaches.

Her mother was now talking to Les Dennis, and was in a world of her own. This always pleased Church; it was what made these events bearable, being the one time that Mother was so distracted she felt some sense of independence and autonomy. Moving around to the other side of the vast display of entrees and finger-foods arranged in a self-consciously erotic and pretentiously regal display on the central table, Church coily slipped a prawn concoction into her mouth and discretely chewed. It had been three days since her last significant meal, and even that had only amounted to beans on potato waffles and some bacon with all traces of animal fat removed. Breakfast normally consisted of ten grapes and a Yakult bio-yoghurt drink. Lunch was never more than two pieces of Ryvita with slices of non-dairy cheese so thin they looked like dirty cling-film. At the evening meal, Maria and James would indulge in the richest of foods – steak, fine wines and cheese, voluptuous desserts so sweet and creamy if they could look at themselves they would turn bulimic, but Church could only watch and smell. Instead, she was prepared a “macro-biotic blend of vegetables and essential vita-minerals, complex carbohydrates and anti-oxidising anti-aging hormone-synthetics”, or at least that was what the over-paid Swiss nutritionist had said before she... well. Before Then.

Church moved around the table to see who else was here. It was quite early, and nobody turned up on time for the dress rehearsal but instead tended to stumble in mid-afternoon, just in time to secure their dressing rooms before the real event in the evening, so the spacious room felt much like an abandoned cathedral. Maria and Les Dennis talked near the grand frieze depicted the battle of Waterloo. Ronnie Corbet was talking to Lulu and Dave (“*from Chaz and Dave*”, Maria had spat out in a tone of voice she usually reserved for talk of Church’s dead biological father)... further around the room were an even dispersal of recently-created reality TV celebrities, and even Tony Blackburn had found someone (in this case fellow DJs “Doctor” Fox and “Kid” Jensen) to listen to book ideas, film ideas, band ideas and all the other useless drivel that people spouted to each other on occasions such as this.

It disgusted Church. Filling with ancient bile and rage well beyond her young years, her eyes were already glazing over with The Fury, a red/black mist of punitive justice and indiscriminate killing. She had always felt this, but as it grew with her she had learned to control it – it was natural, just another part of her life to be managed, scheduled, transported, rigged, and photographed. Except the photographs never seems to capture The Fury. Even the wanton destruction she had mentally wreaked upon the ‘journalist’ and entourage from Hello magazine had failed to be reproduced in the corresponding article and full-colour photo spread. Perhaps it was better than it was this way – her mother had been unbearable even before Church’s debut, and while she was no more bearable now at least she could be distracted more easily. Maria had moved on from Les Dennis to the aging Joanna Lumley, who at this relatively early hour (13:46 by Church’s watch) looked like her skin had just been washed and was drying back into shape directly on her bony skeleton.

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Almost at the summit of the building, Church looked around. This was the third time she had come here, the first being just after Then, and the second on what she guessed was the anniversary of that event. It was really more than a guess, that first year – she could feel it in her bones, and in the atmosphere around her. And now, on the second anniversary, she had returned again. Pushing a small ventilation hatch, still hanging by the broken hinges as it was when she had first arrived here, Church crawled through into the small space which had become like a shrine, a Mecca to which she would always be drawn.

A candle stood in the corner, long burnt out but still a signifier of Then, wax spread around it much like Joanna Lumley's skin those many years before. Church smiled at that thought. A picture, of a girl, had fallen down from where it had been stuck on one of the metal walls. Last but probably most significantly, a small off-white tube with notches and holes carved in it lay undisturbed, and the whole area was sprinkled with the months of dust that had settled since Church had last been here three hundred and sixty five days ago, exactly.

She felt comfort in this space.

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The rest of the dress rehearsal was uneventful, just like the previous years' with the notable exception that Lily Savage's rider had grown to frankly ridiculous proportions (a pink poodle capable of arithmetic with its own en-suite kennel; twenty packets of cheap tomato-flavoured corn snacks with all the "flavour bombs" removed and placed into the cupped hands of an Egyptian eunuch; two pieces of every variety of fruit, arranged 'biblically' on an miniature ark continually circling around Mount Ararat in its own 20ft wide marina; the heads of Cannon and Ball; and the installation of Savage's own modern art installation in the foyer, entitled "Glory Hole" – "*a mysterious and haunting physical*

trptych forcing people to reconsider the dark side of panto”, apparently). Church was ushered from room to room, scheduled and rescheduled, her hair crimped and cut and styled, fritzed and spritzed and spatzed, distressed, dressed, undressed, redressed...

When the weary looking middle-aged man stuck his head round the door to call her to the stage, she would have felt empathy for him had he not, like all the other backstage crew, been clearly harbouring rastapaedic impulses.

Her rehearsal performance was accomplished, as it always was. It often annoyed Church to see ‘celebrities’ twice her age behaving like children, constantly complaining that the room was too cold, the acoustics were causing “undesirable larynx feedback”, the stage was facing “too west” or some such other bullshit excuse for their blatant lack of talent. Most of the pearly hags, Church mused to herself, were only waiting to start the Pantomime season. Pantomime is like the theatrical field that entertainer horses are put to pasture in. Pantomime is where actors finally get to express their collective repressed homosexuality by dressing up as fat mares and campily prancing around, singing on stage with make-up that looks like it has been applied by an epileptic blind man. Church would take her life gladly, rather than even sit through another pantomime, and this feeling would have been obvious to the aging male cast of Coronation Street as she was ushered past them off the stage, had they not been too busy worrying about their corsets and garishly coloured wigs.

But she sang anyway, smiled to the gaggle of directors and producers and the swarm of assistant assistants that buzzed around them, and quickly marched off stage right while a hung-over Denise Van Outen struggled to read out her auto-cued spurts of pre-packaged inter-act cheery wit.

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In the little metal room, Church huddled to keep warm. Last year she had burnt the last of the heat from the candle that was spread across one corner of her space, and now could only rely on her own body heat. Midnight was approaching fast, but she still had some time to sit and think about the past. She thought about her friends; she hadn't really spoken to anyone for most of the two years since 'Then. At first Church had tried to speak to the others she had encountered in the other, shadow world she now inhabited. Once or twice she had found someone that could remember English well enough to string a sentence together between cancerous wretches and coughing up what usually looked like either sour and clotted milk, or a violently beautiful mix of mucus and blood. But she hadn't been able to really connect with anyone. The girlish part of her missed talking about boys, clothes and the various members of BoyZone, A1, Westlife and Lee from Steps. Living alone had, of course, hardened her, and while that small part of her longed to be young and innocent again, she knew she preferred her current situation, despite the lack of creature comforts

This year however, and in the past few months especially, she had started for the first time to think about the future.

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The rehearsals had finished, the auditorium cleared, and now Church peeked out from the wings of the stage as the audience began to fill their seats as the stage was redressed with the initial set for the second half. All over thirty, balding and fat (yes, even the women), they bought their souvenir programmes and wedged themselves into their pre-allocated seats, herded into place by smart young ushers. The ushers reminded her of Nazi concentration camp soldiers, herding what they

regarded as helpless sub-humans into their holding pens while the main event was being cleaned and prepared for yet another matinee.

The first half of the show had gone without significant hitch. Lily Savage, the host for this latter half of the evening, had thrown one of her typical pissy-fits when her favourite wig was pissed on by one of Debbie McGee-Daniels' chiwawas, leaving a rather fetching yellow streak which would have made Lily look like a Caribbean Elvira had the stink of urine not been noticed three minutes before post-interval curtain-up. This had amused Church intensely, but the power of Ms. Savage's fit had meant that she had been forced to rework her own hair while her allocated stylist physically ran to the nearest wig shop with the dimensions of a Liverpudlian man's ever-expanding cranium. And this angered Church even more.

Almost everyone was buzzing around, like irritating bugs in every sense: rapid movement; short attention spans; penchant for cakes and jam; the noises coming out of their mouths when not full of cake and jam... There was a constant murmur about the Royals in attendance; apparently His Royal Highness Prince Phillip Duke of Edinburgh And All That had been hitting the G & T's like nobody's business during the first half, and his behaviour towards the Royal Box attendants over the interval was causing a scandal. No doubt Buckingham Palace spin doctors would snuff out anything before the tabloids got their teeth into a story.

Church couldn't even find a quiet corner to subdue The Rage building inside her. Normally she insisted that no one was to enter her dressing room for the fifteen minutes preceding her stage appearance. She would then be led to the stage, with her eyes closed, would sing her songs eyes still closed, or focused into the distance and at nothing, and then Big Smile, curtsy, and quickly off stage right and led back to the dressing room. Nobody had really questioned why she insisted on this. Perhaps in comparison to the ridiculous demands of the other artistes it

seemed like the most normal behaviour imaginable. Probably. Regardless, it was utterly essential to her, and without it she had no idea what would happen.

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There seemed little point in staying long in the cold room this year.

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It was her turn now, time to earn her keep, even if it was just stale bread and water. She was led onto the stage and up the little set of stairs that she was to descend during the second verse of her aria, by some patronising fop who was telling her she look “fabulous” and that she should “break a leg”. Church could hear Lily Savage reading her lines beyond the closed curtain, and the muffled, prompted and strictly-for-television guffaws and belly-laughs of the cattle in the stalls and circles. And then the intonation in Savage’s voice changed, and she knew that her time was now. A few short breaths; she had done this so many times it was like second nature, and she didn’t ever get nervous; a few short breaths, and while the audience applauds, the curtain goes up.

And then silence, or not quite. The applause had *changed*, somehow, it was dying out but not in the normal, polite way it typically does when a performer has indicated they are about to being. With her eyes still closed she could hear people moving in their seats, and then she heard something different. Phillip was shouting something. It was hard to make out because there was some kind of scuffle going on the Royal Box, but with one huge burst of Regal strength His Royal Highness Prince Phillip Duke Of Edinburgh And King Of Gin pulled himself from under the Royal servants and up beyond the lip of the Box, and shouted: “GET YOUR TTTS OUT FOR THE LADS!”

Without thinking, Church opened her eyes, and saw the audience.

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With the picture of a girl she used to know stuffed in her pocket, she climbed out of her room for the last time. Looking around at the amazing view, she once again got the euphoric feeling which testified to her that she was the most brilliant and vibrant being alive. She stepped towards the edge of the tower, and looked down. Below her she could see cars moving like ants searching for food, and the people just like dots, static on a giant television. She looked back up again, and above her head: the stars. A few clouds dressed the dark pool of the heavens; a rich blue at the edges made by the ambient light pollution of London's streetlights, house and cars; but at this height the effect was quite beautiful. The oranges and yellows of the City blended through a dirty white-grey and into a warm and then deep blue, and then above her pure black, only interrupted by the tiny specks of furiously combusting gas at the farthest reaches of space. And at the centre of it all, she was here, here she was.

There was hardly any wind, so she felt quite safe standing only inches from the edge. There was no safety barrier – probably because the engineers who had built this 1980's altar of the new age of commerce hadn't imagined that anyone would ever be up here. But still, she felt *good*.

It was time, that much was clear. Like the year before, and the year before that, she took some short breaths, and closed her eyes. But this year, she spread her arms wide and above her head, and Church opened her hand, the photograph dancing away from her into the sky. She took a deep breath, and then she opened her eyes. And then she opened her mouth.

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The sight of the people made her want to wretch so hard she physically buckled. Even overwhelmed with this feeling of sickness, she could feel her mother's eyes staring at her from the side of the stage, the look of an aging woman seeing her future fortunes slipping away because of one stupid little girl. Her stomach hurt, but now her head and eyes were starting to buzz as well. Looking back over at her mother, a sense of calmness returned. Control. Power. She could hardly see anything by now, her vision filled with red/black mist and her brain shouting amidst the swell of voices and sounds and noises building up within her. The last time she ever saw her mother, now, she smiled. And then she turned to face the audience, and took a deep breath. And then she opened her mouth.

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And so, on top of the British Telecom Tower, Church let open her world-famous lungs and started to scream.

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"I AM THE FURY!" she screamed, standing at the top of the stair riser on the stage. "I AM PURE, AND I AM RAGE!" It was like the moment just after a nuclear detonation, where the flash of light has just burnt your retinas, and you are simply existing, numb, in the moment between that and the unstoppable shockwave which will casually disintegrate your flimsy body. A high-pitched keening had filled the air even as Church had started to open her mouth, and the people sitting at the front in the stalls were the first to go; their eyes and ears began to bleed, the membranes of the more frail attendees ripping open and releasing a torrent of life-fluid all over themselves, their chairs, belongings and companions. A young couple near the front row were

vomiting on each other with a shocked look of terror in their eyes, but were muted by the relentless flow of gastric juices re-entering the outside world through mouth, nose and tear glands. Many of the audience members in the front row had lost the parts of their skin left exposed by gaps in clothing – all their faces were stripped, and the muscle burnt; women's cleavages were similarly torn apart and proceeding to blister.

Within hundredths of a second the Queen's head had exploded all over Prince Phillip, who was clawing his eyes out with his femininely long nails whilst his ears were leaking blood and the milky fluid which cushions your brain inside the skull. The blast pattern Elizabeth had left against the far side of the Royal Box was rather like a Jackson Pollock painting. Charles, who had already been driven to the brink of madness over previous months, threw himself out of the Box and into the steadily-deepening pool of viscera which was building up in the Stalls, leaving a comet-tail of partially digested caviar streaming from his left trouser leg as his bowels simultaneously released. Both the servants (who had seconds before been restraining Phillip) and Camilla had simply ceased breathing and now lay limp on the floor, completely hairless and every bone in their bodies appearing to have lost substantive consistency. Charles hit the floor with a splash and a crunch and didn't move again.

The lucky people occupying the Dress Circle had, quite rightly, the best view and experience that was available. Those at the front were witness to the initial onslaught below, but also had the time to become aware of the intense heat in the air before they were driven completely mad. It was like a furious vibration of space around them, and the resulting friction ripped each and every one of them cleanly apart. Those further back might have even had time to taste the odour of their less wealthy cousins below before being sonically eviscerated, cleaved open by the young girl's undeniable pain.

Several seconds having passed, Church's harmonic harbinger had settled into pure tones, and visibly cut through the remaining audience members like the sharpest invisible knife. Programme sellers buckled as their legs and torso where mutually disconnected and slid off of each other, shredded paper flying into the air as each shockwave pulsed and blasted the entire auditorium. She could see in her peripheral vision that many of the cameramen and stage-hands had fallen out of their posts and were either suspended in their safety harnesses and pissing blood down their freshly-rented tuxedos, or lay crumpled on the ground tens of feet below where they were positioned for the show, bones sticking through the skin when their landing had been cushioned by the various pieces of equipment they were supposed to be operating.

The performers who had been standing in the wings of the stage had perhaps borne the most suffering of all those present – rather than a clean and painless cessation of existence, they were subjected to the slow enduring torture of fallout: not cleanly sliced but instead torn; membranes ripped and liquid seeping outside and in where it doesn't belong; skin and brain screaming a chorus of white-hot pain, before the heat dies like a match in space and the body falls like heavy electricity onto the wooden polished floor now slick with blood. Kenny Everett would have wanted to die this way: Les Dennis, Rue Paul, The Chuckle Brothers and Lulu, plus their respective gaggles of fops and flunkies, just had. Maria's shocked face was now spread over several square metres of black curtain, although you could still make out the major features of her expression (mouth agape, wide eyes). But essentially, she was simply gone.

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Charlotte didn't know what happened after that. She didn't know how she got here from the theatre, or how long ago it had been. Minutes? Hours? Days? She looked around, and found herself standing in a crowded tube train. Instinctively she closed her eyes, but something

inside her had changed. She found her self able to think quite clearly; there was no buzz, no noise like wild static in her head. She tentatively opened her eyes, one at a time.

Sitting across from her was a strange old man with several faded plastic bags full of god-knows-what. He was looking right back at her. She smiled.