

GLOW

Also by Ned Beaman

Boxer, Beetle
The Teleportation Accident

NED BEAUMAN
GLOW



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As to what hour it might have been I had no idea, except that it must have been some hour of the night. But it might have been three or four in the morning just as it might have been ten or eleven in the evening, depending no doubt on whether one wondered at the scarcity of passers-by or at the extraordinary radiance shed by the street-lamps and traffic-lights. For at one or other of these no one could fail to wonder, unless he was out of his mind.

'The Calmative' by Samuel Beckett

Only let the material interests once get a firm footing, and they are bound to impose the conditions on which alone they can continue to exist. That's how your money-making is justified here in the face of lawlessness and disorder. It is justified because the security which it demands must be shared with an oppressed people. A better justice will come afterwards.

Nostramo by Joseph Conrad





**LONDON, ENGLAND,
MAY 2010**



DAY 1

12.49 a.m.

When he first sees her, Raf is sitting on a washing machine about to swallow an eighth of a gram of what is apparently a mixture of speed, monosodium glutamate, and an experimental social anxiety disorder medication for dogs. That, anyway, is what it sounded like Isaac told him, but the music in the laundrette is pretty loud and he wonders if he might have misheard. The powder has been divided between two cigarette papers and then the cigarette papers have been folded up and twisted to make those tight sealed parcels that always remind him of pork wontons, and Isaac has already gulped down his wonton, but Raf still has his in his hand, because he can't stop staring at the girl by the door. She's half white and half something else, maybe half Thai; and she has one of those faces where the entire bone structure seems to ramify from the cheekbones in such a way that the result looks like a 3D computer graphic from the eighties because it's composed of such an economical number of sharp, flat planes, except that the angles are confused here by strands of long black hair escaping from where she's pinned the rest of it up at the back of her head; and she has a small mouth folded towards a natural semi-pout that must be a good shape for when she's pretending to disapprove of something while trying not to laugh; and she's wearing a black hoodie unzipped over a slouchy grey vest. There are about sixty people dancing in the corridor of space between Raf and this girl, like a rush-hour Tube carriage that's learned to vibrate to a determinate rhythm, and he considers pushing through them all to talk to her – 'Will you immediately become my wife?' – but then Isaac knocks him on the arm with a

plastic water bottle to hurry him up. Without breaking surveillance, he takes the bottle, puts the wonton in his mouth, washes it down with a gulp of water, and leans over to shout in Isaac's ear, 'What did you say was in this?'

'What?'

'What did you say was in this?'

'Speed, monosodium glutamate, and an experimental social anxiety disorder medication for dogs.'

'What's social anxiety disorder?'

'What?'

The sound system isn't even that loud but the room's so small that the treble pushes at the sides like a fat toddler stuffed into a car seat.

'What's social anxiety disorder?'

'I can't hear you. Come outside.'

Raf reluctantly follows Isaac out into the little paved yard behind the laundrette where a few people are chatting and smoking. Upside down in the corner is one of those white polypropylene slatted-back chairs that colonise faster than rats, lying there in the incredulous posture of an object that is almost impossible to knock over but has nonetheless found itself knocked over.

'What's social anxiety disorder?' Raf says again. From here he can't see the girl.

'Shyness, basically.' In recent years, Isaac explains, a lot of American vets have started to diagnose the condition in pet dogs, and as a result a range of competing psychiatric prescriptions have now been brought to market. As for the rest of the mixture, he has no explanation for the monosodium glutamate, unless that's just to bulk it out, although in that case it's difficult to say why, out of all the available inert white powders, the manufacturers have chosen to use monosodium glutamate in particular. (Raf almost wonders if it could be a joke about the wontons.) And it has some speed in it because everything has some speed in it.

'What's it going to do?' Raf says.

'It's like really bad ecstasy.'

For a long time Raf had thought of ecstasy as a substance so synthetic it was almost a pure abstraction, so it surprised him to learn from Isaac last month that the reason there's no good ecstasy in London at the moment is that two hundred and fifty drums of sassafras oil, which in the old days was thought to cure syphilis, were confiscated at a port in Thailand. To find out that ecstasy – like cocaine, like opium, like marijuana – comes from a plant that grew in the ground is to find out that angels have belly buttons. (Speed, by contrast, is made out of ephedrine, which can be extracted from certain shrubs but nowadays is almost always made out of laboratory chemicals instead, so like some theorem in vector algebra the drug owes nothing to the outside world, unless you followed the chain all the way back to the hydrocarbons they take out of crude oil.) Strange, too, to think of the million flirtations that won't be consummated, the million dawns that won't be watched, the million comedowns that won't be endured just because a guy in Laem Chabang neglected to pay a bribe or another guy refused to take one. No politician at a WTO conference ever had so much power. The drug trade, Isaac told him, is the first globalisation of the emotional life.

'When is there going to be good ecstasy again?' Raf says.

'Maybe never,' says Isaac. 'We need to get hold of some glow.'

'What's that?'

'You know, that new stuff. Barky said it was the best thing he'd ever taken. Ever in his whole life.'

'Does he still have any?'

'I think so.'

'Is he coming here?'

Isaac shrugs. 'His phone's off.'

The reason the owners of this laundrette are allowing a small rave to take place here tonight is so they can sell drugs to the crowd, but all they have is cocaine, ketamine, and a new ecstasy understudy called ethylbuphedrone that you can buy legally over the internet from laboratories in China, none of which are of any interest to Raf.

Looking around, he feels, not for the first time, a mild bitterness that he wasn't born twenty years earlier, when a night out would have been all about snowy Dutch MDMA in a giant import warehouse near the M11, a drug culture so good that people wrote memoirs about it, instead of these self-administered double-blind trials in a twenty-square-metre urban utility. How was London reduced to this?

Quite soon, Isaac follows him back inside, and Raf sees that a boy and a girl have stripped down to their underwear and climbed inside one of the big spin-dryers to kiss, their skinny limbs struggling for purchase on the inside of the drum like test subjects in some astronomical study of the sexual possibilities of small cylindrical spaces. They, at least, have taken something good, or maybe not something good but at least something they've never taken before. The DJ is playing a track that Raf has heard on Myth FM a lot. He climbs up on top of the dryer, above the perspiration troposphere, to look around for the girl from before, but he can't see her anywhere so he just stays up there to dance.

2.12 a.m.

When Barky does arrive he still wears flecks of shaving foam on both ear lobes like little pearl studs, so maybe, like Raf, he got out of bed only a short while ago. In his wallet there are three more wontons wrapped up in a shred of orange supermarket bag, one dose of glow for each of them. About half an hour after Raf took that previous compound, he started to feel a change, but so weakly that he wasn't even sure, like when you go into a room and you think you can feel a cold draught but no windows are open and it might just be your imagination. Then it was gone again. So he's excited about trying Barky's novelty, and he's about to swallow some and get back up on the dryer when he feels a touch on his arm. He turns.

It's that same girl.

She leans to talk into his ear and he watches a soft shine skate across the film of sweat on her clavicle.

‘What is that?’ she says, which is a lot better than the expected ‘Why were you staring at me like a psycho before?’ She must have seen him take the wonton from Barky.

‘Glow,’ he says.

‘Is your friend selling it?’ She has an American accent.

‘No.’ But there’s no way Raf is going to leave it at that. He’s had girls flirt with him just for drugs before, of course, and maybe that’s what she’s doing, but in that case she doesn’t know the rules, because there’s no empty smile, no hand alighting provisionally on the small of his back. Plus, what if she is? He once slept with an Icelandic girl he met like that at a party. So he hopes he’s not being a total dupe when he says, ‘Do you want some?’

Now she does smile. ‘No, that’s OK.’

But he takes her hand and presses the wonton into it. ‘I’ve heard this stuff is amazing.’

‘What?’

Should he suggest they go outside so they can hear each other? No, not yet. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Cherish,’ she says, or that’s what it sounds like. Is that a name? ‘What’s yours?’

‘Raf.’

‘Do you have any water?’

‘Just a second.’ He turns to Isaac, but he doesn’t have the bottle any more, and Barky doesn’t have one either. Raf thought he saw a half-empty lemonade up on one of the washing machines, but he can’t see it now. And when he turns back, the girl has vanished again, like the ambiguous chill of the pedigree psychotropic. He asks Isaac and Barky where she went, but neither of them were watching. And Barky doesn’t have any more glow to spare.

5.37 a.m.

Raf stumbles out of the laundrette to find himself engulfed in flowers. It's as if some phenomenological anode inside him has been swapped with its cathode, so that every sensation is replaced by another of exactly inverse quality and equal intensity: petals for skin, perfume for sweat, cold for heat, silence for noise, anthocyanins for disco lights. Only after a moment does he realise that on Saturdays there's a flower market on this road, so they're unloading the tulips and daffodils – and sure enough, just at that moment the silence is broken by the trundling of a steel trolley as it comes down a ramp behind him. He breathes in deeply and then walks on down the road to the bus stop where he can catch his night bus.

Isaac and Barky have already left the rave. For a while, they said they weren't feeling anything from the glow, and Barky also had a gram of ethylbuphedrone, so they all resorted to dabbing some on their gums, which always reminds Raf of rubbing salt and pepper into a flank steak. But then straight after that, too soon for it to be the ethylbuphedrone, the other two had run out into the yard and started vomiting ballistically over the concrete. Between spasms, Barky said the glow they'd taken must have been fake. It occurred to Raf that if he hadn't even heard of glow until tonight, and yet some opportunist was already selling a fake version, he must be badly behind the times. And then he realised with horror that somewhere the American girl was probably throwing up too because of drugs he'd pushed on her, and she only had about half Barky's body mass, so a poison could kick her twice as far. Even if he ever found Cherish again, she'd never want to speak to him.

Now, coming down from the ethylbuphedrone, Raf just feels bleached and fidgety, and he decides he probably didn't have a chance with her anyway. When the bus finally arrives, its windows are bright like a goods vehicle hauling not flowers to market but bulk photons. He gets on, nods to the driver, beeps his Oyster card, and climbs the spiral staircase up to the top deck. What he sees there

startles him so much that he forgets to hold on to the vertical hand-rail, so when the bus halts at a junction he nearly topples forward.

A fox sits there, about six rows back. Every hair in its orange coat burns with a separate flame, and the reflection of a street light outside the window is curled up inside each of its round black eyes like a pale girl in a spin-dryer. Raf has never noticed before that the white fur of a fox's snout and belly is sprinkled over its eyes, too, to make two oversized brows, and as it considers him this one wears an expression of detached scientific interest. The animal couldn't have got past the driver, he thinks, so it must have jumped on at the exit doors when someone got off. As the bus accelerates again, he sits down, and the fox turns from him to look out of the window. A scent reaches Raf's nose, muddy and petroleous, a savage hydrocarbon with no derivatives. No other passengers get on, and when the automatic loudspeaker announces in her broken diction that they've arrived at Camberwell Green, the fox jumps to the floor and trots downstairs to disembark.

6.20 a.m.

For the first six months that he lived in his current flat, Raf honestly believed that the corner shop at the end of his street was run by one Iranian guy who worked twenty-two or twenty-three hours a day. He's been in there at every time there is, and it's always the same face at the till just like it's always football playing on the TV fixed to the wall over the wine gums. Raf did introduce himself once, but the next time he went in the guy didn't even acknowledge their new familiarity. Then about a week later he glanced inside on his way past and he saw both owners arguing about something. Like a twist from a bad murder mystery, they were twin brothers. Today, Raf buys three bananas and a carton of orange juice, enjoying the careful, almost clerical way the guy at the counter wets the tip of his middle finger on a soggy foam pad like a prosthetic gland to help peel open the plastic bag; and then Raf walks down to his block of

flats, where an old stained mattress leans against the wall by the entrance, ready for rubbish collection the following week. The number of mattresses people leave out here every month seems wildly out of proportion to the human capacity of the building, like the waste product of some secret industrial process.

Even if it weren't for the drugs, he knows he wouldn't be able to sleep for another nine or ten hours, but he's so worn out that he gets into bed for a while anyway. The heavy black curtains are still closed from when he got up around eleven, so the room is in total darkness except for the red LED on his stereo, and around him are all the paraphernalia of his malady: eyemask, acoustic earmuffs, white noise machine, and about two dozen soiled earplugs scattered under the bed like the droppings of a hamster that eats only packaging foam.

The name of Raf's condition is non-24-hour sleep/wake syndrome. He was sixteen when he started to notice that his sleep patterns were even more fucked up than the average teenager's, but it took four different doctors before he got his diagnosis. In a healthy brain, your eyes tell your hypothalamus when it gets dark and when it gets light, your hypothalamus tells your pineal gland when to secrete melatonin, and the melatonin makes you fall asleep at about the same time every day. The normal human circadian rhythm is set at twenty-four hours to match one full rotation of the earth. But Raf's is set at about twenty-five hours. It's like his brain is wearing a novelty watch.

Most people who have non-24-hour sleep/wake syndrome have it because they're blind, so their hypothalamus never finds out where the sun is. But with Raf it must be something else, and no blood test or EEG has ever been able to determine exactly what. Serotonin is the precursor, the sassafras oil, of melatonin, so it could be that he has a mutation in the genes that make the enzymes convert one to the other, although that would imply that he has a lot of excess serotonin sloshing around in his brain, which is the same thing that happens when you take MDMA, and it's not as if

he feels euphoric all the time. It could also be that something's awry in his suprachiasmatic nucleus, an office of his hypothalamus the size of a grain of rice.

Whatever the cause, the effect is that each morning he slips one more hour out of sync with the rest of the world, as if he's taking a short westbound flight every day of his life without ever leaving London. At the beginning of his cycle, waking up at eight in the morning is easy; after four days, it's like waking up at 4 a.m.; after eight days, 8 a.m. is about when he needs to go to bed for the 'night'; after fifteen days, it's towards the end of his 'afternoon'; after twenty days, it's towards the end of his 'morning'; and after twenty-five days, he gets another normal day. His cycle isn't precisely twenty-five hours, he's not made of clockwork, but it happens to work out too close to make any difference. He would be more at home on Mars, where the length of a solar day is twenty-four hours and thirty-nine minutes, near enough to his own cycle that he could probably make up for the discrepancy with a lot of naps at the weekend under the dim glitter of Phobos. Last year, a woman at a letting agency, not quite following an explanation that he already regretted attempting, said to him, 'Wow, twenty-five hours – you must get so much done!'

And non-24-hour sleep/wake syndrome has no known cure. He's tried light boxes, hypnotherapy, and vitamin B12 injections, but nothing works. For a few months he took melatonin tablets, and that did help a little bit, but a doctor told him that the longer you kept taking melatonin, the more you'd have to take to get the same effect, just like MDMA, and that after a while the melatonin would start to shrink your pineal gland in the same way that testosterone supplements could shrink your balls. The pineal gland, he's read, was once a blush of photosensitive cells on the forehead of an eyeless fish, but since then evolution has yanked it inside the skull. He doesn't want to lose his antique monocle, his shuttered window.

Raf had once hoped to become the first person in his family to go to university, but in the end he left school before his A levels because

for about two weeks out of every four he couldn't stay awake in lessons. He's never had a real job. And he doesn't think he'll ever get married. Isaac says he should just trawl the sleep disorder support messageboards for a girlfriend who has the same syndrome. But the problem is that nobody else is likely to have his exact cycle. And, perversely, the closer his cycle was to that of a hypothetical lover, the more it would drive them apart. If hers was twenty-six hours against his twenty-five hours, they would synchronise every six hundred and fifty hours (by which time he would have lived through twenty-six subjective days and she would have lived through twenty-five). But if she had a cycle of about twenty-five hours and fifteen minutes against his cycle of about twenty-five hours, they would synchronise only every 2,525 hours (by which time he would have lived through a hundred and one subjective days and she would have lived through a hundred) which made his basic estrangement from the normal circadian rhythm look trifling in comparison.

In other words, their cycles would be mutually inverse for weeks at a time before they lumbered back together, as if each were going away on long business trips into the other's night. And their mutual synchrony would itself only synchronise with Greenwich Mean Time – making them indistinguishable from a normal couple for long enough to eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner together at the correct times – every 60,600 hours, or about every seven years, or about every two and a half blue moons. What if one of them had flu that week? Plus all this is to disregard the gravitational pull that each would exert on the other's cycle. Raf can make these calculations easily because back when he was trying to teach himself programming he adapted an open-source biorhythm generator into a new application to graph where he'll be in his cycle at any given time and date in the future. He'd planned to use it to schedule important appointments. But the life of a guy with non-24-hour sleep/wake syndrome is not exactly bursting with those.

That's not to say he's been single and friendless all this time. He's twenty-two, which is an age when a lot of people still play

polyrhythms with their bodies for days at a time; drugs help with that. His last girlfriend was a DJ, like Isaac, so she might play from midnight until four and go to bed at five, or she might go to bed at eight in the evening and go back out to play an afterparty at four in the morning, or she might stay up all weekend and then sleep all through Monday. To make two tempos match up a DJ normally just needs to twiddle a pitch control, but in real life they didn't synchronise very often; for her, though, that was true with everybody she met, so Raf was at no disadvantage. Sometimes they'd improvise a sort of laggard domesticity: when she got a minicab back to her flat at dawn he'd already be cooking a curry, and they'd eat it on her balcony as the sun came up, go for a walk through the dewy park nearby, come back to fuck and smoke weed and watch DVDs until lunchtime, fall asleep until it was dark again, and then meet some friends in the pub. She was gorgeous, with big green eyes like smashed jade, but what he loved most was her detachment from the world: she was vague, almost vaporous, bemused by everything but surprised by nothing. He'd never been so happy for so long.

Then, in March, she told him she'd decided to move to Berlin. Raf waited for her to reassure him that the flights were cheap enough that he could visit her every couple of weeks, which was about as often as they got to see each other properly anyway. But then he realised that no invitation was implied. That conversation was the most practical he'd ever seen her. Afterwards, he found out from Isaac that she was already seeing someone new, a Brazilian techno producer who was known for playing fourteen-hour DJ sets. Isaac hadn't intended to tell Raf about it, but he'd taken two good pills that night, and he can't keep secrets when he's high, which is why most of the time he does his conscientious best to avoid hearing secrets in the first place, like a spy revoking his own security clearance.

These six weeks since she left have been like the lowest point of the worst comedown from the filthiest Chinese amphetamines anyone has ever had, although at least for once in Raf's life it's as

if social expectations have shifted to synchronise with his own cycle: he's been dumped, so it's natural that he sometimes sleeps all day and drinks all night. Mostly, the change seems external, not internal. The shift is in the world around him. When you take good ecstasy, it feels as if the drug can pump from solid objects a joy that has always been hidden there inside them but will otherwise seep to their surface only very gradually. Now he feels the opposite: those same objects are desiccated, as if you could stand there with your tongue out for days and not a drop would fall. And it isn't getting any better.

Once, Isaac admitted he was scared that one night he might take so much MDMA that all the serotonin receptors in his head would burst like the turbines of a dam and after that last flood he'd never be able to take pleasure from anything again. That's how Raf is now. And while Isaac keeps saying he'll get over it, this despondency feels both permanent and territorial, as if joy might still exist somewhere but will never come back to these specific streets, this specific desert, even though she doesn't even live here any more.

Five days ago, climbing the staircase to his flat, a staircase he now loathes because of all the times he kissed her there, he wondered what it might be like to leave London himself, and just thinking about it gave him such a mighty feeling of relief he decided then and there that in a month he would leave London. He's given notice on his flat. This morning, Saturday, he has twenty-five days left, one cycle, before he says goodbye to the city where he's lived all his life. He hasn't told Isaac yet or even chosen where to go. Berlin sounds fun, and cheap, and it's the only place he's ever heard of where apparently it's considered normal to go dancing right after you get out of bed, but of course it's also the only place that's forbidden. There's a part of him that hopes something will happen to change his mind this month, but donating an emetic to a beautiful girl isn't it. Or maybe a fox on a bus is a start, but it's not nearly enough.

2.35 p.m.

Every day Raf has to carry a Staffordshire bull terrier down a ladder. At first she used to wriggle but now she sits so happily on his shoulders that sometimes it feels as if she's reluctant to get down off her bony palanquin. Rose is four years old, black all over except for a white cravat, and for the last thirteen months she's lived on the roof of an eighteen-storey council block, guarding a radio transmitter bolted to a wall. In a chemistry lesson at school Raf was once shown how to do chromatography, where you watch the different pigments in a smear of anthocyanin extract bleed different distances up a grid of filter paper, the same way they test for MDMA in the blood, and he sometimes thinks of a building like this as a giant chromatograph for the streets below, with nothing soluble enough to reach the very top but police sirens and motorcycle engines and on hot days a faint prickle of smog. The skyscrapers across the river are cramped together into one narrow band of the horizon's curve, a string of paper dolls, as marginal and unconvincing as one of those tourist board graphics where they cut and paste a dozen famous silhouettes into a greatest hits compilation.

Like all pirate stations, Myth FM have installed their aerial on a separate building from their studio, parasitic off the lift's AC supply like a tick deep in a scalp, because otherwise if an Ofcom van triangulated the signal they could wreck the whole operation with a single raid. The studio needs only an uninterrupted line of sight in order for the link box they've pried out of a satellite TV dish to beam the audio by infra-red up to the main rig. But this also means there's no one around to guard the transmitter, which is worth nearly a grand, and there are a lot of other pirate stations in south London who'd rather steal a working box than build their own. Theo, the genial forty-one-year-old proprietor of Myth FM, has paid off the caretaker to let him keep two heavy D-locks on the door out to the middle part of the roof, and in the past he's even experimented with razor wire and electrified scaffolding poles around the

rig, but the problem is that the sort of cunts who would know what to do with a stolen radio transmitter are, by definition, self-taught engineers with a lot of persistence, and they can get around anything you invent. So Theo adopted Rose. Maybe you could cut her down with knives if you were lucky, but only an idiot would start a fight with a full-grown Staffie on a roof with no parapet.

Theo's original plan was to leave the beast up on the roof, feed her twice a week, keep her hungry and resentful; but he loves dogs, and he just couldn't restrain himself, especially after Isaac told him he had a friend needing cash work. Rose now lives in a sort of shanty cabin nailed together out of tarpaulin, cardboard, insulating foam, and whatever else Raf could haul up the ladder to the roof, with a tub of rainwater next to a pile of old blankets that Rose can nudge together into a bed, and the lift machinery as her noisy neighbour. During the winter, Theo even put in a small electric heater on a timer switch, plugged into the same mains cable as the transmitter nearby, although he made Raf swear never to tell anyone. He sometimes jokes that he should move some students in there and charge two hundred quid a week.

Every day, Raf takes Rose downstairs in the densely annotated lift and gives her a long walk. He knows she must be lonely and bored up there, and he doesn't like it any more than Theo does, but she was hardly living in luxury with her previous owner: the scars on her snout and her milky left eye confirm what Theo has only hinted at in that respect. Also, as earnestly as Raf has tried to understand this animal, he's still never got the sense that she cares about being walked or fed on any sort of regular schedule, which is good for him, although he tries to make sure that most of the time he takes her to the park when there are at least a few other dogs around. Whatever the opposite of social anxiety disorder is, she has that.

Theo's always pleased to see Rose, so today Raf decides to take her over to the Myth studio itself, which is on the fifth floor of a shorter council block down the road with pairs of white concrete balconies running up the right-hand side like tick boxes on a

questionnaire and iron railings around the sides that mark off a buffer of grass between the building and the street. (Raf has never understood the point of those token lawns – no one ever sunbathes or plays frisbee on them, but the council still has to mow them all summer. They might as well just put down AstroTurf.) From out in the corridor, under the jittery halogen, Flat 23 looks normal, but in fact its front door is reinforced and soundproofed, and there's no point knocking: you have to dial a phone number. Today the door is unbolted by Dickson, a stocky guy with a shaved head and a wardrobe full of *Scarface* T-shirts who works for Theo. He looks down at the dog and shakes his head. 'You can't bring that in here.'

Dickson's never liked Rose, and as a result Raf's never liked Dickson, but this is unprecedented. 'What? She always comes in here.'

'No animals. New rule.'

'What does Theo say about that?'

'Theo's not here.'

'Where is he?'

'Away.'

'Away where?'

Dickson is shifty and hostile at the best of times, so it's hard to be sure when he's lying, especially when they both know that they shouldn't be chatting like this with the door open, but he does not convince Raf when he says, 'Kingston. Family wedding.' Raf doesn't remember Theo ever mentioning cousins back in Jamaica. Perhaps he's lying low for some reason.

'You have to pay me, at least. It's been a week.'

Dickson seems to be willing to break his 'new rule' if it will get rid of Raf faster. Inside the flat the stench of skunk is so solid you could boil it for stock. At the end of the hall is the door to what would once have been the lounge, with a marker-pen sign taped up that says 'Pay before you Play!!' DJs on Myth are charged twenty quid an hour for their slots, money they'll make back later in club bookings once their names get known. Isaac used to say the internet would make the pirates obsolete, but Raf never believed that, and there are

still at least seventy stations active in London, an invisible and interpenetrative confederacy. Until everyone has a broadband connection in their car, and next to their kitchen sink, and in the cheap hi-fi they just bought from the pawnbroker – which, admittedly, might be just a matter of time – the internet isn't going to kill pirate radio. The same goes for the digital switchover. What's more likely is that only the legal stations will make the transition, abandoning the dusty lecture halls and ballrooms of the FM dial to a squat party that can go on for ever.

Raf is friendly with almost all the DJs at Myth, so he doesn't bother to ask permission before he tugs Rose down the corridor and pushes through the door into the cramped studio. The curtains are drawn, but you can see the bump in the fabric where the link box leans up against the window like a cat pressing its nose to the glass. On the wall is a whiteboard with the week's schedule; in the corner, for reasons Raf has never discovered, is a pub fruit machine; and at the far end of the room, where the turntables and tape decks and microphones and mixer and computer knot their roots under the desk, Raf expects to see Barky or Jonk or one of the other DJs who sometimes play Saturday afternoons – but instead, glaring back at him, there are two men he's never seen before. He's not quite sure what ethnicity they are, but they remind him of the girl from the laundrette: maybe they're Thai, if she was half Thai. In the studio there's always a radio tuned at low volume to Myth FM so the DJs can hear straight away if there's a problem with the signal, and what this pair is playing is some sort of synthesiser torch song with a shrill woman singing in a language Raf doesn't recognise. He doesn't know much about foreign pop music, so all he can say to himself is that it reminds him of something you might hear while eating noodles in a restaurant. This is not what Myth FM usually broadcasts. The song comes to a tearful end, and one of the men turns back to the microphone to talk in what sounds like the same language as the vocals. Raf steps back out of the studio and shuts the door.

'Who are those guys?' he says to Dickson.

‘They’re doing an afternoon community programme.’

‘Really? Which “community” is that?’

But Dickson hands him his wage for the week without a reply. Raf gets paid more than he probably deserves for walking Rose, but it’s still not enough to live on, so he also does some freelance graphics programming. He’s good with computers and he always had a knack for maths, so he was able to train himself out of textbooks, but he’s not by any means a born coder and with nothing much on his CV he can still only get boring, repetitive work. At the moment, he’s helping out a Polish company with lighting models for a program that an Australian property developer has commissioned to give online tours of unbuilt houses.

In the nineties, you didn’t have to worry so much about virtual light – it was always just flat and even, like in southern California – but now that it’s technologically possible to render it with a degree of realism, lighting is more important than almost anything else. Raf finds it amusing that a lot of the last generation of video-game programmers must have gone into the industry expecting that maybe they’d specialise in rifle ballistics or motorcycle handling and instead found themselves becoming as intimate with chiaroscuro as the most studious Florentine portraitist’s apprentice. And sometimes, up on the roof after a day at his computer, looking down at the Myth transmitter, he thinks how strange it is that light and radio are both electromagnetic waves, differing only in relative size – light is a chihuahua, maybe, and radio is a Great Dane (and infra-red is a Staffie like Rose) but somehow they’re all still the same species.

3.21 p.m.

In Isaac’s spare bedroom live three Japanese fashion students who answered an ad he put on a listings website. There’s only a double bed in there, and it doesn’t look as if there would be space for three girls, even these slender ones, but that’s not a problem because like the Iranian corner shop on Raf’s road they are a twenty-four-hour

‘Yeah. I got a call from Jonk about it.’

‘What did he say?’

‘You can’t believe anything that fucker tells you. Do you remember when he said he met that guy who could shoot electricity out of his fingers?’

‘Yeah, but what did he say?’

Late on Wednesday night, Isaac explains, Jonk apparently left Myth FM after his two-hour slot, wandered across the road to the playground, and sat down to smoke a spliff on one of those plastic sheep they have on wobbly springs for the kids. Through the trees, he could see Theo walking down the street, and he was about to shout a greeting when a van pulled up right beside Theo. It was just a grimy white builder’s van, ‘NO TOOLS LEFT IN THIS VEHICLE OVERNIGHT’, but the two men who jumped out of the back wore some kind of hi-tech goggles and were dressed all in black. Theo, taken aback, said something Jonk couldn’t hear, and then they pulled him inside the van and slammed the rear doors. The van drove off, and the strangest thing, Jonk claimed, was that somehow the engine didn’t make any noise at all: apart from the soft crepitation of tyres on the asphalt, it moved in total silence, headlights sweeping across the playground like the blank eyes of a wraith.