



"Sorry" Doesn't Sweeten Her Tea

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HELEN OYEYEMI

"Sorry" Doesn't Sweeten Her Tea

*To you who eat a lot of rice because you are lonely
To you who sleep a lot because you are bored
To you who cry a lot because you are sad
I write this down.
Chew on your feelings that are cornered
Like you would chew on rice.
Anyway life is something that you need to digest.*

—Chun Yang Hee

"Be good to Boudicca and Boudicca will be good to you," Chedor-laomer said. Boudicca and I eyed each other through the blue-tinted glass of Ched's fish tank, and I said: "Tell me what she is again?"

To the naked eye Boudicca is a haze of noxious green that lurks among fronds of seaweed looking exactly like the aftermath of a chemical spill. But Ched's got this certificate that states Boudicca's species is *Betta splendens*, colloquially known as Siamese fighting fish because fish of this kind have a way of instigating all-out brawls with their tank mates. It's almost admirable. Boudicca doesn't care how big or pretty her fellow fish are; if they come to her manor she will obliterate them, whether that means waiting until the other fish is asleep before she launches her attack or, in the case of a fish that simply refused to engage with her, eating the eggs that the other fish had spawned and then dancing around in the water while the bereaved mother was slain by grief.

So now Boudicca lives alone, which is exactly what she wanted all along.

I get this vibe that Ched the eternal bachelor sees Boudicca as a fish version of himself, but he's never said that out loud, at least not to me. We don't have those kinds of talks. Even if Ched and Boudicca are on some level the same person, the fact remains that the man is able to feed himself and the fish needs someone to see to her nutrition a couple times a week.

Ched called me over to tell me he was going away for two years and he expected me to take care of Boudicca. Twice a week for two years! Plus, Ched's house is spooky. The House of Locks, it's called. That's the actual address—House of Locks, Ipswich, Suffolk. He travels a lot and I have his spare set of keys for use while on best-friend duty, watering his house plants when he used to have house plants, collecting post, etc., but when I'm in there, I don't linger. Nothing has actually happened to me in there. Not yet, anyway. But every time I go into that bloody house, there's the risk of coming out crazy. Because of the doors. They don't stay closed unless they're locked. Once you've done that, you hear sounds behind them: sounds that convince you you've locked someone in. But when you leave these doors unlocked, they swing halfway out of the doorframe so that you can't see all the way into the next room, and it's just as if somebody's standing behind the door and holding it like that on purpose. The windows behave similarly—they won't fully open unless you push them up slowly, with more firm intent than actual pressure. Only Ched really has the knack of it. Apparently, the house's first owner took a particular pleasure in fastening and releasing locks—the feel and the sound of the key turning until it finds the point at which the lock must yield. So for her the house was a lifetime's worth of erotic titillation.

It's a nice house for Ched too, in that it's big and he got it on the cheap, and anyway, he's not really comfortable in overly normal situations. As it is he hears voices. Nobody else hears these voices, but they're not just in Ched's head, you know? In this world there are voices without form; they sing and sing, as they have from the beginning and will continue until the end. Ched borrows their melodies: that's the music part of the songs he writes. For words, Ched uses rhymes from our village, the kind that nobody pays attention to anymore because they advocate living by a code that will surely make you one of life's losers. A lot of stuff about living honestly and trying your best. Even if you only have one tiny job to do, do it well, do it well, do it well...

These songs of Ched's turned out to be a hit with a lot of people outside our country. Ched got Internet famous and then magazine famous and all the other kinds of famous after that. It was fun to see. His mother still says to me: "But don't you think people overreact to our Chedorlaomer? These girls screaming and fainting just because he looked at them or whatever. He's just some boy from Bezin."

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That's the power of those true voices, man.

And now that you know that Ched and I are from a small village that might make you say, "Oh, OK, so that's why this guy believes in voices he's never heard." But trust, living in a small village in a country that's not even sure it's really a country you see a lot of shit that's stranger than a shaman (which is what Ched is, or was, before he started making money from the voices). Every day, there was news that made you say, "Oh really." Some new tax that only people with no money had to pay. Or yet another member of the county police force was found to have been an undercover gangster. If not that, then a gang member was found to have been an undercover police officer. An Ottoman-style restaurant opened in a town nearby; it served no food but had a mineral-water menu tens of pages long, and fashion models came to drink their way through it while we played football with their bodyguards. Oh, and speaking even more locally, there was this one boy at our school who had quite a common first name and decided to fight every other boy in our postal code area for the right to be the sole bearer of that name—can you imagine? I was one of the boys on his hit list, and I was already getting picked on because I didn't have a father. But what a ridiculous place we were born into, that fatherlessness was a reason people would flick a boy's forehead and say insulting things to him, then pile on four against one when he took offense...it's not our fault we're ridiculous people, Ched and me. How could we be anything else?

Ched was the absurd-looking boy who suddenly grew into his features and became really good-looking overnight. That didn't seem right, so he got picked on too. But Ched had been thinking, and the result of that was his going around offering assistance to the other boys who had the same name as me, arguing that if our little problem fought us individually, he would easily beat us, but if we stood up to him together, none of us would have to change our name. The others feared duplicity more than anything else (this was wise, since duplicity was all we knew) and decided it was better to take their chances as individuals: I believed Ched though. With the solemnity of a couple exchanging vows, we slipped knuckle-dusters onto each other's fingers, four for each hand. Then I walked over to the boy who didn't think he should have to share his name with anybody, and without saying a word to this boy, I smacked the pot of chocolate pudding he was eating right out of

his hand. He was so astounded he just stood there pointing at me as his friends came loping over like bloodthirsty gazelles. I didn't even check whether this Chedorlaomer boy really had my back, but I trusted that he did, and he really did. What a great day, a day that a modest plan worked. That guy changed his own name in the end. And it's been like that ever since with Ched and me. He was lucky enough to be a year older than me, and when he graduated from our school, it was like being the only sane person left in an asylum. There was more and more bullshit every day. But Ched waited for me at the school gates, and he had a lot of good pep talks.

That's why it's pretty odd that Chedorlaomer went back for mandatory military service. Only passport holders have to do that, and I thought he'd given up his passport, like I had.

"No, I never told you that," Ched said.

"But why would you keep it? Haven't you seen the stuff they write about you over there? You've sold out, you're scum, blah blah blah. So what, now you're trying to change people's minds? Why those minds in particular? I thought we—"

"Yeah, I know what you thought," Ched said. He laughed and ruffled my hair. All of his was gone; he'd just come back from the barber's. Baldness made him look younger than I'd ever seen him, and toothier too. Like a stray, but a dangerous stray; you could take him home if you wanted to, but he'd tear the walls down. "It's time for me to be part of something impersonal," he said. "Duty is as big as it gets. Do these people like me? Do I like them? Am I one of them? All irrelevant. I'll be directing all of each day's effort toward one priority: defend the perimeter."

Other things my best friend said to me: Two years was but a short span. And in the meantime, he hoped his house of locks would become a kind of sanctuary for me. It would've been a really nice speech if Boudicca hadn't been blinking balefully at me the whole time. *You there... forget to feed me once, just one time, and you're dead.* I mumbled that I had a lot on at work but I'd see what I could do.

I don't tell Ched how often the things he says come true. That's for his own good, of course, so that he stays humble. But here's an example: this past couple of weeks alone I've come to the House of Locks seven times. Four times to feed Boudicca and walk the length of her tank—

the first time, she raced me to the farthest corner, and all the other times, she's turned her back. The rest of my visits have been for sanctuary, I suppose. Just like Ched said. All I've seen or heard of him since his departure are blurry photographs of his arrival at barracks, these posted on various fan sites. He hasn't called or replied to emails, so I walk through the wing of the house that he favors, passing the windows with various views of his fountain. A girl of pewter stands knee deep in the water, her hands cupped, collecting streams and letting them pour away. Her eyes are blissfully closed. In the room I'm watching her from, the curtains hang so still that breathing isn't quite enough to make me believe there's air in here. The front door is the only one I lock behind me, so as I go through the house all the doors behind me are ajar. It's still hair-raising, but it's reassuring too. The house is wonderfully, blessedly empty—nobody else will appear in the gap between the doors—that gap is a safe passage across all those thresholds I crossed without thinking.

About work: I run a clinic for my Aunt Thomasina's company. A "Swiss Style Weight Loss Clinic," to quote the promotional materials. This basically means that people come here for three days of drug-induced and -maintained deep sleep, during which they're fed vitamins through a drip. This is a job I jumped at when it was my non-Ched-dependent ticket out of Bezin. It's not as peaceful as I expected; most of the sleeping done here is the troubled kind. A lot of sleep-talking and plaintive bleating. None of the sleepers are OK, not really. On the bright side the results are visually impressive: most clients drop a clothing size over those 72 hours. Aunt Thomasina experienced this herself before she ever tried it out on anybody else. Something awful happened to her when she was young—she's never even hinted at what that might be—and she took what she thought was a lethal dose of valerian and went to bed, only to wake up gorgeously slender three days later. *This will be popular*, she said to herself. And she was right. Most days the waiting room is full of clients happily shopping on their tablet devices; the whole new wardrobe they just ordered will be waiting for them at home after their beauty sleep. Of course, weight loss that drastic is unsustainable, which makes the clinic a great business model. We send our monthly customers Christmas and birthday cards; they're part of the family.

We have doctors who make sure that we're not admitting anyone likely to suffer serious complications from our treatment, so my job is mainly monitoring and addressing complaints and unrealistic expectations. I can fake sympathy for days: Aunt Thomasina says I am a psychopath and that it's a good thing I came under the right influences at a young age. I also do night shifts, since we can't lock anybody into their rooms and I'm good with sleepwalkers. Last week we had two. One guy rose up pulling tubes out of his skin because he's not used to sleeping indoors in summer. He grew up in an earthquake-prone region, and his family hit upon the strategy of sleeping in a nearby field so as to avoid having their house fall down on them. My shift partner got him back into bed with warm assurances of safety, but when it was my turn, I merely whispered: "You are interrupting the process, my friend. Do you want her to regret or not?" He sleep-ran back down the corridor and had to be restrained from re-attaching himself to the vitamin machine. That was what he'd written in his questionnaire beside "objective": TO BE SEXY SO THAT SHE REGRETS.

Our other sleepwalker was just really, really hungry. You can't coax someone out of that. This client got up and searched for food with such determination that she had to have her drug dose significantly elevated. For a couple of hours, it seemed her hunger was stronger than the drugs. I sat out the third intervention and stayed in the monitor room watching the camera feed: it was fascinating to watch her returning to the surface of sleep, crying, "Chips... chips..." but eventually she went down hard and stayed under. Ultimately, she was happy with her results, but apart from the usual disorientation she also looked really thoughtful, as if asking herself: *Worth it?* She probably won't be back.

The sleepwalkers upset my shift partner Tyche. Her being upset helps her get through to them, I think. They can tell that she cares about them and isn't judging them like I am. Tyche is someone that I think Ched should meet. She's only a part-timer at the clinic; her business card states that the rest of the time she does PUPPETEERING-ODD JOBS-INVOCATIONS. Invocations. Something she learned while trying to do something else, she says. So she can relate to Aunt Thomasina's weight loss discovery.

Tyche's beauty is interestingly kinetic; it comes and goes and comes back again. Or maybe it's more that you observe it in the first second of seeing her and then she makes you shelve that exquisite first impres-

sion for a while so she can get on with things. Then, in some moment when she's not talking or when she suddenly turns her head, it hits you all over again. There's a four-star constellation on her wrist that isn't always there either. When it is, its appearance goes through various degrees of permanence, from drawn-on-with-kohl to full tattoo. I mentioned this to her, but she laughed it off: "But don't you stare at me too much? Everything OK with your boyfriend?" In my matchmaking capacity I've paid closer attention to her visuals than I would pay to anybody on my own behalf. On to inner qualities: She's powerful. Not just in doing whatever she does to make people listen to her instead of watch her, but...I think she heals herself. She wears a wedding ring, so I made reference to her partner, but she held her hand up and said: "Oh, this? I found it." Then she told me about it. A while ago she'd been in a relationship with someone who was adamant about keeping her a secret, to the extent that they didn't acknowledge each other if there was even one other person in sight. Her superpower was picking emotionally unavailable partners, and she doubted she'd get a better offer. She also assumed that the relationship would gradually get less secret. Nothing changed, and while she continued to profess her commitment to her secret boyfriend, her body disagreed and tried to get her out of it. She got sick. Her hair started falling out and her skin went scaly; she was cold all the time, and could only fall asleep by reciting words of summoning.

Nobody came, but one evening at the pub down the road from her house, she found a ring at the bottom of a pint of lager she was drinking. The ring was heavier than it looked, and she recognized it without remembering exactly where she'd seen it before. Since no one at the pub seemed to know anything about the ring, she took it to the police station, only to return there to collect it at the end of the month: there had been no inquiries related to the item, so it was hers. And when she wore it, she felt that a love existed, and for her...her, of all people. And it was on all the time. Of this love there would be no photographs, no handwritten declarations, no token at all save the ring. If this was the only way that what she'd called could come to her, then it sufficed; she was content. The hand that wore the ring grew smooth, and she recouped her losses.

"Didn't some nuns used to wear wedding rings?" I asked her.

She nodded and said that that was something she thought about a lot. I'd best introduce her to Ched before the nuns get her. Ched's voices

are bullies: they won't let him play unless it's for keeps. Tyche might have an answer for them.

But why am I treating Ched's celibacy as something to be fixed? Maybe because I am so much in his debt for so many things and I can't think of any other way to settle up; maybe I've become evangelical ever since I got a little family of my own. The scene at the homestead is different every day. My boyfriend has joint custody of his two daughters with his ex-wife, whose schedule is ever-changing, so the girls might be at home or they might not. Dayang is the elder at sixteen; Aisha's eighteen months behind her. Day is studious and earnest, a worrier like her father—she carries a full first aid kit around in her school bag and tells me off for calling her boyfriend by a different name every time I see him. In my defense, the boy genuinely looks different every time he comes over, but Day's concerned that he'll think she has other boyfriends. This would be catastrophic because Mr. Face-Shifting Boyfriend is The One. And how can she tell he's the one, I ask. Well, how did I know that her dad is my One, she asks. Some things are just completely obvious, GOSH.

Day is great, but Aisha is my darling and my meddlesome girl. She's the one who gets the question "But why are you like this?" at least once a day from her father. If she isn't growing something (she is the reason Noor finds toadstools in his shoes) or brewing something (she's the reason it's best not to leave any cup or drinking glass unattended when she's at home), she'll pass by singing and swishing her tail around (she put her sewing machine to work making a set of tails that she attaches to her dresses). A fox tail, a dragon's tail, a tiger's tail, a peacock's. On a special occasion she'll wear all of them at once. Last month, Matyas Füst released a new album and Aisha hosted a listening party for five bosom friends. The bosom friends wore all their tails too...

Those were the good old days, when Aisha's love for Matyas Füst was straightforward idol worship. Her wall was covered with posters of him; she sometimes got angry with him for being more attractive than she thought anyone was allowed to be and would punch a poster right in the face before whispering frantic apologies and covering it with kisses. She had Noor or me buy certain items because she'd read an interview in which he mentioned he loved this or that particular scent or color on a woman. All of Aisha's online IDs were some variation on her official motto: "Matyas Füst Is Love, Matyas Füst Is Life."

Ched had met Füst a few times and said he wouldn't want any daughter of his going anywhere near "that dickhead," but the first time he said that, I took it with more than a pinch of salt. For starters Aisha's polite refusal to have a crush on her friendly neighborhood pop star was something of an ego bruiser. There were a few other small but influential factors: Füst's being ten years younger than Ched, and its being well known that Füst composes, arranges, and writes the lyrics for all his (mostly successful) songs himself...no voices. It just wasn't really possible for Ched to like him. Füst was forever being photographed wearing dark gray turtlenecks, was engaged to be married to a soloist at the Bolshoi Ballet, didn't seem to go to nightclubs, and reportedly enjoyed arthouse films, the occasional dinner party, and the company of his cat, Kleinzach. A clean-shaven man with a vocal tone reminiscent of postcoital whispers, that was Matyas Füst. The way he sings "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" is no joke.

Ched had been away for about a month when I got home to find "love to hatred turn'd."

Noor was making dinner, checking his recipe board after each step, even though he knew it just as well as if he'd written it himself. The not-so-hidden charms of a man who takes his time over every detail... especially once you distract him for just long enough to turn all his attention onto you. It didn't occur to me to ask about the kids until halfway through our very late dinner. Bad stepfather.

"Er...have the kids already eaten?"

Noor shook his head. "They promised they'd have something later."

"Hmmm. Why?"

"Not sure. Heartbreak, I think."

"Ah, so the face shifter isn't The One after all?"

"No, it's not Day—well, it is Day, but only because she can't let Aisha go through it all on her own."

The sisters were huddled together on Aisha's bed with a laptop between them. They closed the laptop when I came into the room, leaving me to look around at the bare walls and wonder what had happened. Both girls were red-eyed and strenuously denied being upset. When I left the room, I clearly heard Day say: "You've got to stop watching it," and Aisha answered: "I know, but I can't." Then she said, "Maybe it isn't true, Day? It probably isn't true." and Day said, "Oh, Aisha."

Minutes later Noor and I watched the video ourselves downstairs. It was called “A Question about Matyas Füst.” Noor found it hard to watch in one go; he kept pausing it. This cowardly pacing would normally have been grounds for a dispute; I agreed with him just that once, though. The video opened with a woman sitting on the floor in her underwear, showing us marks all over her body. A lot of the marks were needle track marks, but they were outnumbered by marks I hadn’t wanted Day and Aisha to ever become acquainted with: bruises left by fists and boots. I dreaded the end of the camera’s journey up to the woman’s face and didn’t know what to think when I saw that it was untouched, even a subdued kind of pretty. No makeup, clean, mousy-looking hair, age absolutely anywhere between twenty-five and forty-five. I’d seen girls who resembled her waitressing in seedy bars across the continent, removing customers’ hands from their backsides without turning to see who the hand belonged to, their gestures as automatic and unemotional as swatting midges.

She pulled a T-shirt on and looked at the camera for a little while before she started talking. You could tell from her eyes that she was out of her head on something and probably couldn’t have told you her own name if you’d asked her. Her English was far below fluency, but since she was in her happy place, she didn’t bother struggling with pronunciation, just said what she had to say and left us to figure it out. She wanted us to know that “the entertainer” Matyas Füst had picked her up on a street corner a few hours after he’d played a sold-out concert in Greenwich. She’d spent the rest of the night with him, and he hadn’t proved very entertaining at all. *Tell us a bit more about yourself*, the person holding the camera said—a woman, I think, trying to sound gentle, but her voice was thick with anger. The woman on camera obediently stated that she was often on street corners trying to get money, and that she didn’t often get lucky: the men she signaled to could usually tell just by looking at the backs of her hands that she’d gone too far into whatever she was doing. But Matyas Füst didn’t care about that: he’d had a fight with his controlling bitch of a girlfriend, and it had taken all he had not to hit the girlfriend. Taking your fists to a prima ballerina with an adoring host of family and friends would be a very messy and expensive blunder. So he went looking for someone nobody

cared about. *And he found...me...* the woman on-screen said, and giggled. Noor pressed pause again and left the room, went upstairs, and knocked on Aisha's bedroom door. "Come and eat," he said, and Aisha and Day said they'd come in a minute.

Hours later they still hadn't come downstairs. We'd watched the rest of the clip by then. The whole thing was only three minutes and thirty seconds long, but we kept trying to watch it through Aisha and Day's eyes, this woman telling us that after they'd had sex, Füst had insulted her, so she slapped him, and once he'd received the slap, he'd smiled (her fingers plucked at the corners of her mouth until we could see just how he'd smiled), told her she'd "started it," and proceeded to beat her until she couldn't stand up. She'd hit back, she said, even from her place at his feet she'd hit back, but every time he hit harder. Then he stood over her in all his wealth and fame and arrogance and shrugged when she said she wasn't going to keep quiet about this. Matyas Füst had shrugged and asked her if she thought anybody was going to give a shit that someone like her had got hurt. A nameless junkie with seriously crazy English. *Look at you*, he said. *And look at me*. He threw a handful of money at her and told her it was better for her to keep her mouth shut and spend that, or save it for a rainy day. Then he went back to his girlfriend. They must have made up, because she'd seen photos of them having a romantic dinner in a restaurant, and hints had been dropped about their wedding plans. *Every day I look him up on Google*. The woman on camera seemed proud of her diligence. Then she asked us her question about Matyas Füst: *Did anybody care that he'd hurt her, someone like her?* She was just wondering. She laughed and gave us a perky little wave at the end. *Thank you. Nice day to you*.

Aisha came downstairs cradling her laptop in her arms. Day followed, hands helplessly rising and falling. "It's not just the clip, it's the *comments*," she said, when she saw us.

Ah, yes, the comments.

Noor couldn't make himself look, so Aisha and I read some of them aloud. There was a lot of *LOL cool allegations junkie, maybe it was all a dream?* and *LMAO people will say anything to ruin a good man's reputation stay strong Matyas!*

If only that was the worst of it. Aisha's haggard face as she read: *Oh boohoo. What's this one complaining about? He paid her, didn't he? She*

hit him, didn't she? Admitted all this herself. Does she think you can hit someone and just walk away? I read: She should count herself lucky: men probably treat broken-down old whores worse than that in her country. And she got to bang Matyas! Matyas Füst can beat me up any time baby LOL.

Then the apologists came out to play: *Even if this is true is it the full story? We know that Matyas wouldn't just lash out like that so we need to be asking what she did...*

Day showed us a screenshot she'd saved. She'd posted a comment of her own: *Guys, are you being serious? I'm appalled and really scared by this and all the reactions I'm seeing...this isn't the world I want to live in.* She'd received so many replies telling her to kill herself that she'd decided to delete her account.

"I still don't think it's true," Aisha said. "He couldn't have done something like this." When Noor put on his solicitor voice to point out that the video had been up for half a day, had a view count of half a million, and would have had Matyas Füst's team of lawyers swinging left and right if the content hadn't had any basis in fact, Aisha said through gritted teeth: "But he hasn't said anything at all."

"He'll probably make a statement in the morning," Noor said. We were failing as the men in Day and Aisha's life. We weren't doing what we were supposed to do. This came through very clearly in the way that Day and Aisha were looking at us, or more not looking at us, really.

The morning brought no statement from Füst, and Noor sounded relieved (and ashamed of his relief) when he said: "Looks like she hasn't got any proof and he's going to ignore or deny it." In the afternoon there were reports of an eyewitness to the beating coming forward, and about an hour after that Füst's legal team announced that he'd voluntarily made himself available to the police for questioning.

At the clinic, my concentration was poor and I mixed up check-out forms so that departing clients got to read details of each other's low self-esteem and experience the outrage of not being unique. Tyche Shaw and I were on the same shift again and got authorization to offer free secondary sleep sessions all around so we wouldn't be sued. But like Aisha, Tyche was addicted to the YouTube clip. She spent her break time watching it over and over on her phone and ran the battery right down.

"I found that one tough to watch," I told her.

"Really?" She said. "But it's just someone talking about this time she got beaten up. No bullets or gore or bombs or anything. This is nothing compared with other things you can see on this site."

"I don't know what to say. I can't explain it."

"Well, I hope she sees the view count and accepts that as an answer to her question about whether people care. These numbers are up there with the numbers for footage of the world's most brilliant strikers scoring the decade's most brilliant goals. So it's not that we're indifferent... We care... just in a really really really fucked up way..."

Matyas Füst's fiancé released a statement as we were leaving work: She was shocked and upset to hear of "the events described in the video" and would be paying the victim a visit to see if there was anything she could do for her. She had never seen a violent side to Matyas' character, but it was now clear that he'd been struggling with some issues, and they'd be spending some time apart while he completed a course of anger management therapy.

"No jail time for Füst...just a fine and some therapy," Tyche predicted, even as she admired the photo of the prima ballerina, who was elfin and ethereal and all the rest of it.

"Yeah, well, I beg to differ," I said.

Tyche stuck her hand out. "Bet you a hundred pounds."

"I suppose this is all just a joke to you, but I know a girl who's pretty badly shaken up by all this."

Tyche sighed. "She was a fan?"

"She's still trying to be one, I think. Clinging to every possible delusion."

Tyche's sigh deepened. "Let me know if there's anything I can do for her."

"OK, thanks..." I had it in my mind to ask Tyche what she thought she might be able to do for a girl she'd never met—in a spirit of curiosity, not hostility—but had to hurry over to the House of Locks. Terry, the man who maintained Boudicca's fish tank, was waiting for me to let him in. After Terry left, I stayed a few more hours, reading Matyas Füst updates aloud to Boudicca, who looked suitably incredulous. YouTube woman was glad she'd had the chance to meet the woman she'd found herself taken a beating for and wouldn't be pressing charges. She'd hit Füst first—that was an excessive response to some words he'd said, and

his response in turn had been excessive; all she asked was acknowledgment of that. A sincere apology. So Matyas Füst was preparing a sincere apology.

Has she read any of the comments? That's what I wondered. Did the woman from the YouTube video understand that the public wasn't on her side? She made her requests with such placid mirth, as if talking into a seashell or a shattered telephone, as if Matyas Füst fans weren't actively looking for her, probably in order to finish her off. Even those who'd begun to condemn Füst believed his apologies should be directed elsewhere ("It's his fiancé I feel sorry for in all this...") Those who claimed they *wanted* to feel concern for YouTube woman didn't like that she'd filmed her allegations while high. And yet she might not have been able to talk about it sober.

Noor texted that he was considering taking Aisha's laptop away until the Füst case died down. She seemed to have spent the entire evening engaged in a long and rambling argument with her friends via six-way video call. She attacked Füst's reputation, defended it, then attacked again, berated the friends who'd gone off him for their faithlessness, cursed the infinite stupidity of his unchanged fans, and threatened to put on a Füst mask and beat them up to see how they liked it. She'd skipped dinner again and was running a temperature. When was I coming home?

Two firsts: Being reluctant to leave Ched's house and being reluctant to enter my own. I said I'd been at the gym. Ched does have a home gymnasium; he works out a lot, his body being his backup plan in case he gets ugly again. But I don't know why I lied.

Aisha will get over this. But what of her tails and her plant-growing projects and the remarkably potent gin she was perfecting? "That gin was going to make us richer than an entire network of 1920s bootleggers," I said, to see if that wouldn't rouse her. She likes money. Now it seems she liked it because she could exchange it for Matyas Füst-related items. What worries Noor is that three of Aisha's graven images fell off their pedestals at once: him, me, and Matyas Füst. The girls seemed to pity our weakness. Noor's brusque talk of judicial process and media treatment. My awkward, awkward silence. Is it really bad that the girls have found us out, though? I never projected strength. Not on purpose anyway.

“What are you really worrying about, Noor?”

He shuffled papers into his briefcase, rearranged his pens, straightened his tie. “It just...I think I’ve lost them. Just like that, overnight. Their mother says they’re fine with her...”

I loosened the knot of his tie a little, just a little. It still looked neat, so he couldn’t complain.

“Nah. I don’t even know them as well as you do and I can tell they’re just thinking.” A casual overview of all their main emotional attachments reveals that Noor and his ex have been better parents than they realize; while Day and Aisha appreciate strength, lack of it isn’t a deal breaker in the matter of whether they respect a person or not.

All was quiet on the Matyas Füst front for a few months; I kept an eye on that situation (among others) and read that the reporters who managed to get a sound bite out of Füst all got the same one. He was completing his anger management therapy and was still preparing his apology. This sound bite was paired with another obtained from the YouTube woman: *Looking forward to it*.

It was around that time Ched and I started talking again—not often, but enough. I’d be entering or leaving the House of Locks, the phone would ring and it would be Ched. He described his current existence as a cycle of drills and chores, and was so tired he’d fall asleep mid-sentence. It was good to speak to him, not just because it was him but because he didn’t know the first thing about the incident that had rocked my household. When I gave him a brief outline he said: “Oh, you know the apology Füst’s preparing is going to be a song, right? And that song is going to become an anthem of repentance. It’s probably going to be called ‘Dress Made of Needles.’”

“Nice—I’ll go down to the betting shop tomorrow.”

There was something else I wanted to talk about while I had him on the line. When I answered his phone calls, he needed half a second to adjust his greeting, and it sounded as if he was disappointed that I was the one who’d answered. Well, disappointed is too strong a word. It was more as if I wasn’t his first preference. Which was fine, except that I’m the only other person who has keys to his house. His mum’s been trying to get a set for years without success.

“So what’s going on? You met someone?”

"Not sure," he said. "I...think so."

"And this person has keys?"

After a lot more questioning, he eventually confessed that he hadn't given a set of keys to anybody else and had never actually met this woman in person, but was fairly sure that she had keys because she sometimes answered the phone when he called. When he said that I adjusted my position so that I was able to watch all the open doors and I said: "That's wonderful, Ched. I'm really happy for you."

"Don't overreact," he said. "She's a nice voice at the moment, nothing more. Like one of the ones that sing. Except that she just talks."

"Did you ask her how she got in?"

"Of course."

"Well, what did she say?"

"She encouraged me to think of a better question."

I glared at Boudicca; no wonder she'd been filling out lately. "Maybe she feeds your fish too."

"Haha, maybe. But while we're talking about this, could you do me a favor? I don't think she wants to be seen, so if you let yourself in and happen to notice that she's around, just leave immediately, OK?"

"OK, Ched. No problem."

Just another day in the lives of two boys from Bezin. Still, I checked every room in Ched's wing of the house before I left. His alarm system's in working order and none of his valuables have moved. For now.

Ched's phone girlfriend earned me the first direct smile I'd got from Aisha in weeks. "You stupid boys," she said, lovingly. A string of text messages appeared on her phone and her smile vanished as if it had never been.

"Brace yourself," Noor shouted from the next room. "It's Matyas Füst's apology."

Day wasn't ready to leave her bubble bath—"Oh, no, no apology for me, thank you," so Aisha grabbed a couple of foam stress balls, jumped onto Noor's lap and said, "Go." We watched and listened to Matyas Füst singing a song about a girl who walked the earth in a dress made of needles that she couldn't remove without maiming herself. People with good intentions kept trying to pull the needles out and give her something soft and warm to wear instead, but the needles pricked their

fingers so much that they gave up. Then the girl met a bad man who drove the needles in deeper. Not with a hammer, but with his hands, for the thrill of joining his own torture to hers. Luckily, luckily the bad man managed to bleed out before he could kill her—it turned out his bones were magnetic(?). I might have misunderstood that part of the song, but whatever it was about his bones, they drew the needles from her and into him, he died in the utmost agony, the end. I kept waiting for Füst to wink, but he didn't.

"My favorite thing about this song is the way it starts out all about her and ends up all about him," Noor said, as we refreshed the page and fat red love hearts accumulated in the comments beneath the video.

*Matyas understands
This is exactly how I'm feeling today
Thank you Matyas
Think we can all agree he shouldn't have done it in the first place but
now he's done the decent thing
We forgive u*

All I could say was "Amazing."
How did it go from "Füst should apologize to the woman he beat up" to "Füst should apologize to his fiancé" to "Füst should apologize to us"?
Aisha spoke through the stress ball she'd stuffed into her mouth, removed it, and started again: "Maybe this is a piece of conceptual art? Like something out of one of Matyas' favorite films. Couldn't YouTube woman be an artist who's worked out a concept that uses the media to show us something about fame and its...its magic touch. So what if that touch is a punch? She's famous now. Maybe she's trying to get us thinking about the different ways people get famous. By excelling at something, or by suffering publicly. Maybe what that eyewitness saw was a performance? What if she already had an agreement with Matyas that he would beat her up for the concept? Doesn't it seem like there's no way to avoid getting punched by someone or other? Doesn't matter who you are, it's just a fact of life. So isn't it a little better if you get to choose who punches you? You know, I think if I could pick, I would have chosen him too."

She was doing well until Noor, who'd stopped me from countering every single one of her speculations, said: "Ah, darling. Would you?"

Then she buried her head in her dad's jumper and howled. We couldn't tell if it was heartbreak, rage, mirth, or simply the difficulty she was having unimagining Mr. Matyas Füst.

The rehabilitation of Matyas Füst was in full swing. His compulsory course of therapy was over, but he was continuing of his own accord. His fiancé quietly moved back into his house, and he was doing a fuck-load of charity work. The charity work was the last straw for me. Before I explain the part I may or not have played in another man's complete mental and physical breakdown, I just have to quickly praise myself here. Yes, I have to be the one to do it; nobody else even understood how patient I was being with Aisha's mourning process in the midst of every other event worthy of grief going on in the world. Aisha herself was in a hurry to attain indifference to "the Füst matter" but you can't rush these things. The cackling with which Aisha greeted YouTube woman's simple and dignified acceptance of Matyas Füst's apology, that cackling was not ideal. Words were better, a little less opaque, so I was patient with her outbursts. More patient than Jesus himself!

The first I knew of my contribution to the charity of Matyas Füst's choice was an email that arrived while I was pursuing quotes from satisfied customers. The email thanked me for my £10000 auction bid—the winning bid!—and expressed hope that my daughter Aisha would enjoy the private concert that Matyas Füst would accordingly be putting on for her. Ten thousand of my strong and painstakingly saved pounds, Matyas Füst, that was all I was able to compute. Oh, and I saw red arrows between the two. Ten thousand pounds to Matyas Füst. I had some sort of interlude after that, running between my keyboard and the nearest wall flapping my hands and choking. Tyche came into my office, glanced at my computer screen, threw a glass of water in my face and left. That got me to sit back down, at least. Five minutes later, Aisha Skyped me from her school computer lab. I accepted the call, put my face right up to the camera, and bellowed her name until she resorted to typing:

OMG PLS CALM DOWN
YOU'VE GOT TO CALM
I'M CASHING THE VOUCHER
I SAID I'M CASHING THE VOUCHER!
"What voucher?" I asked the camera.

Aisha held up a finger, rummaged in her schoolbag, and held up a voucher I'd given her her last birthday, the last of a booklet of six. There in my own handwriting were the words: *This voucher entitles you to one completely fair and wrath-free hearing.*

"Ahhhhh," I said, banging my chest, trying to open up some space in there. "OK, OK, I'm ready."

"I used your emergency debit card," Aisha said. "You know Dad always wants to know why I'm like this, and all I can say is I'm sorry I am. But I think—no, I'm sure, I'm sure, that if I just look him in the eye... I know it's a lot of money. I didn't really think the bid would go through. I didn't know you had that much on there! But please understand. I will pay you back. I'm going to get a job, and I'm going to make some stuff and sell a lot of it."

"It's OK," I said. "It's OK." My heartbeat was returning to normal. Aisha had been operating on the principle that I wouldn't want to be that guy who embarrasses himself by withdrawing a ten thousand pound donation he made to an enormously deserving cause. But I am that guy, so it's fine for me to do that.

Noor's ex-wife came over for coffee and spoke of seeking psychiatric assistance for Aisha, particularly in the light of Day's discovery that Aisha had made a purchase from her laptop: a liter of almost pure sulfuric acid—96 percent. The three of us sat silently with our coffee cups, picturing Aisha and Füst alone in some garland-bedecked bower, Füst singing his heart out, maybe even singing his latest hit "Dress Made of Needles"... then as the last notes of the song died out, Aisha uncapped the bottle of acid hidden beneath her dress and let fly. For about a week, Noor couldn't look at Aisha without shouting "What are you?"

All we'd hear from Aisha was the bitter laugh, and I tried to soothe her by saying "He's been forgiven, Aish. Everyone else has forgiven him," but I stopped that because there was a look that replaced her laughter, and that look haunted me.

It was Ched's opinion that it might have been all right if the apology had been something that Aisha could consider real, but now this thing wouldn't end unless she was able to take or witness vengeance upon Matyas Füst. Tyche agreed, but with a slight modification: Aisha would be able to move on if Matyas Füst was able to deliver a sincere

apology for what he'd done. "At least...that's how it would be for me," Tyche added, twirling her wedding ring around her finger. "I mean, the galling thing about 'Dress Made of Needles' is that as a piece of music it's fine, but as an apology it takes the piss. But you know what, at least we got a meaningful song out of it, at least he wrote this good song because of her..."

The constellation on Tyche's wrist was definitely a tattoo that day and her breeziness was macabre. I thought for a long time, or what felt like a long time anyway, before I asked her if there was anything she could do for Aisha.

"Let me talk to her," Tyche said.

I wasn't allowed to listen to their conversation, but I know that it concerned the invocation of a goddess, and Tyche was very well prepared for it, arrived at our house wearing an elegant black suit and carrying a portfolio full of images and diagrams that she and Aisha pored over at length.

"Just FYI, we decided on Hecate," Tyche said on her way out.

"Yeah? Who's she?"

"Oh, nobody you need to worry about..."

"Come on, let me have the basics."

"Well...she keeps an eye on big journeys from the interior to the exterior, or vice versa. She's there for the step that takes you from one state to another. She's someone you see at crossroads, for instance. Well, you sort of see her but don't register what you've seen until it's too late to go back. She holds three keys...some say they're keys to the underworld, others that they're access to the past, present, and future. And—ah, you're zoning out on me..."

Tyche struck and held a warlike pose in the doorway.

"Picture the image of me fixed in this doorway, and also in every other doorway you pass, sometimes three dimensional and sometimes vaporous, whatever I feel like being at the moment you try to get past me," she said. "Imagine not being able to stop me from coming in, imagine not being able to cast me out because I own all thresholds. As an additional bonus, imagine me with three faces. That's who we're sending to have a little chat with Matyas Füst."

"Oh! Why didn't you just lead with that instead of the benevolent stuff? But listen, hang on, Tyche, is that not a bit much—"

She was already gone.

Summer has come back around, and with only a week until Ched returns from military service, I write this from a bench beside Ched's water fountain at the House of Locks. The woman with the voice he likes came in while I was feeding Boudicca, so I left.

Anyway, events of recent months, presented without comment, for who am I to comment after all?

- The day after Tyche and Aisha had their meeting, a black bordered notice appeared in one of the national newspapers:

R.I.P. Matyas Füst,

Happy Birthday Matyas Füst

And good luck. Your rebirth will be a difficult one.

Naturally, a lot of questions were asked, since Matyas Füst was alive and, at that time, well. It proved impossible to discover who was responsible for the notice.

- The day after the notice appeared, Matyas Füst phoned into a 5 p.m. radio show that was popular with commuters all over the country and announced that he'd like to apologize for his apology, which had come more from his head than his heart. He also asked that his fans cease their verbal abuse of the victim of his attack, since she had "been through a lot" and hadn't asked for a penny in compensation beyond their original transaction. The hosts of the radio show had to ask him to repeat his declarations of remorse several times because his weeping made them unintelligible.
- About a week after that, Füst interrupted his performance on the live taping of a variety show to state that he was being "hounded" and that he feared for his life, that "they" pricked him with needles and slammed his hands in doors. When members of the audience pointed out that he was uninjured, he appeared confused and said that it had only happened "inside where no one could see." Before the broadcast was halted, he also managed to say that he believed that in attacking the woman he'd met on the street he'd been following a bad example set by his father, who had frequently beaten his mother in front of him. His parents issued a joint denial that basically boiled down to We have no idea why he's saying these things but it's making

us sad. Füst's fiancé moved out of his house again with talk of plans to "focus on her career"...that was funny, and rather sweet...if there was ever anybody focused on her career it was this prima ballerina, but her statement suggested she thought it didn't show. As for her ex-fiancé, a few close members of his family moved into his home, "to look after him." The close family members were unable to prevent him from phoning into radio shows and appearing on breakfast TV to apologize for his previous apologies and make further apologies. He ended his most recent TV appearance with the reflection that quality was probably better than quantity and that he'd take his time to find a genuine expression of his thoughts. He'd been told that the key to a real apology was the identification of one's real mistake. He hoped to be able to do that soon.

- Healthcare professionals were reported to have joined the close family members surrounding Füst at his home, but he escaped them all and was reported missing for six months.
- Füst was found to have been sleeping rough all winter—a very hard winter, so much surprise was expressed that he'd lived through it. He gave one interview, to a reputable chronicle of paranormal phenomena. I think he intended for the interview to dispel the rumors of his insanity, but it had the opposite effect. Especially when he spoke about "them." "They" demanded that he apologize and then called his apologies glib. He said that "they" were three women and yet "they" were one, and that one of them took his pain away so that the others could return it to him, and so it went on. He said he should have died during the winter, but it pleased "them" to keep him alive in order for him to learn what he could say or do to keep them off. If there was anybody who knew how to convince this woman that he was sorry, Matyas Füst begged to know that secret at any price.
- Aisha may have abandoned tails for good, but all-heal plants are flowering in her window box, she's working on reducing the aphrodisiac effect of an otherwise very convenient headache cure, and she's looking forward to Matyas Füst's forthcoming book, *An Outcast's Apology*. She reckons Füst is getting closer to identifying his mistake, and says he should keep trying.