

DR. REAL © Simon Ings 2001 first  
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# Dr Real

LEFT Scalloped hems, embroidery and drawstrings. Zoe turns over a new leaf on colour with a cotton lawn skirt. Pretty pastel references partner an athletic tank with metallic trim. Inverted pleats make movement easy.

RIGHT Vita cuts a dash in supple leather adorned with Indian crewel work. Lips glisten under menthol and camphor. Scoop neck, loose lines, soft skin. This is the season to shine.

Nowhere is as exclusive as Burns Lake. Snug, inviting, huge log fires. Head for the teepee-covered bathhouse—Navajo blankets for cushions.

Maker's Mark bourbon in hand, unwind completely.

Last year, Dr Matthew Real took his family (Kay, his wife, and their daughters, Zoe and Vita) to Burns Lake. Their first night there, he photographed the girls. They had their arms round each other, and were sitting on a large red cushion in front of a real wood fire. Dr Real, seeing the moment for what it was—warm, endearing, fleeting—drew the camera up to his eye and feathered the shutter with his forefinger. For a brief, exhilarating second, the things Real saw through his viewfinder were just themselves. They were:

Daughters  
Cushions  
Curtains  
Samplers  
Lamps

But film—be it Ilford Multigrade IV FB, Kodak Advantix, or even Fuji FP100C—is no preserver of the real. Were Dr Real to show you his snap today—the finished thing, developed, framed—this is what you would find:

Red cut-out felt cushion, SKR900, Asplund  
Sublim 50504 trimmed with small faggoted silk fringe to order, Wendy  
Cushing.

O'Reda's Swedish linens  
Paper shade by Kaare Klint

Even the girls—especially the girls—have vanished beneath their own significance, thus:

Zoe: Branch out with a hint of sexiness!  
Vita: Copperwheat Blundell keeps me amused  
all day.  
Zoe: Sense the new ease in glamour!  
Vita: Strip away the cagoules and lovingly  
crafted couture-technique clothes shine  
through.

Yes, even in Burns Lake ('unspoilt... antique... deserted... shoe shoes... elk...') Dr Real had read, and booked a cabin then and there) everything meant something else. Even Burns Lake, for all that it had seemed virginal at first, was no better than the city they had left. The next day, cheated, angry, Dr Real drove his wife and daughters, whining, home.

So here they are now, home again, city-bound, hemmed in by things that can't just be themselves, but have to mean. 'Today things mean more than themselves,' Real lectures. (Zoe sniggers; Vita yawns.) 'Things signify more meanings yet, and more and more as everything concurs to mean all other things, till only six degrees need separate, then only five, then four, three, two—' (he's sweating), 'One—!'

Bed-time.

'Goodnight!'

'Goodnight.'

The hours pass. The girls, at best contingent, evaporate entirely in sleep, and are not spoken of again by Marcus Real and his wife.

Kay and Marcus sit and talk. Kay lays threadbare gambits out upon her tongue and Marcus ponders them, picks up, sets down, moves on—not so much a conversation, more a car-boot sale of words.

'Let's hit the hay.'

'Let's crash.'

'I'm bushed.'

'Dog tired.'

'Shut-eye.'

'Fuck first?'

'Fuckfest.'

Kiss. Kiss.

Dr Real and Kay, his wife, prepare themselves for bed.

The bedroom is sparse. If Dr Real had had his way, it would be empty—a pallet on a bare floor in a bare, whitewashed cell. Stripped of significance, it would be somewhere real, somewhere entire.

But Kay, for all she married Real, cannot resist a peek into the splayed-wide world of meaning. So the bedroom, much to Real's chagrin, contains a Veedon Fleece, an Alison Britton, some Penny Philip, all lit by a rare Thomas Boog.

Real allows his wife these small concessions, these little windows on the heaving maelstrom without. She has, after all, conceded to his plans for her; she has allowed herself to become more real than most—with all the sacrifices this has entailed.

Kay enters from the bathroom. Her face is broad and red. Too full of blood, of juice and spit, to keep it all in check, her flesh exhibits tiny, endearing signs of rupture. Fine capillaries, exploding, have drawn a delicate tracery around her cheeks and chin. Her mouth is wide: a hungry, sexual organ. When she looks in the mirror she presses her lips together, embarrassed by her mouth's lewdness, and frowns. The frown in turn betrays her, lending fuck-me crow's feet to her eyes.

A sober woman, though not without passion, she finds her face, her whole blown body—heavy breasts, full labia, fondant, breachable arse—betrays her natural reserve. An elegant woman, she feels ensnared by her frump flesh.

Real knows of her dilemma—this tortuous and unnecessary self-loathing—only as a peculiar shyness about her bedroomy eyes; a coyness when she undresses for him; a tendency to hide her face as she attains orgasm. These sweet, incongruous little-girlisms charm him and he loves her, lustily.

He thinks she's beautiful. Once—when flesh was still itself, not just another language—many would have agreed with him. But women like Kay—big women, solid, sexy, pleasurable women—are poor messengers. They are too much themselves too carry meaning. Bad envelopes. Poor transmitters. Pidgin-English flesh.

'Now, Dr Real: he is something different again. Something special. Singular. A man of unique substance. More solid than his wife, who owes her incarnation to him.

'Help me with my apron, love.'

Real is the last physical representative of his species.

(Reluctantly, Kay plucks at the strings.)

Real is the last real anyone on earth. So he thinks. So he fears. And this despite his best endeavours, first with his wife (nearly there: an inspiration to him, and a sweet encouragement) then with his daughters (hopeless! A disaster). Finally, with his clientele (a ragged bunch: one day he comes home triumphant; the next—despair! collapse!).

'The strap here—I can't reach.'

Kay takes the polished leather tag between her firm, dextrous fingers. Pulls. The brass pin pings free. Kay lets go. The leather tag runs through the buckle. The heavy, padded apron slumps like a dead thing into Marcus Real's restraining hands. 'There now,' he sighs, released, relaxed. He catches Kay's eye, and sees the fear flicker there, the way it has always done, for just the briefest moment, before he lets the apron fall.

'My sweet,' he says to comfort her. 'My darling.'

Kay kisses him. He thrills to the feel of her big, bee-stung lips. He thinks she is beautiful and—once—who would have disagreed?

Kay moves to the foot of the bed, waiting, kneeling. And Marcus lets the apron fall.

What streams from his torso (chest moderately toned; belly somewhat potted by the years; the whole densely furred, a peppering of white amid the brown) is not light, nor anything that can be called a ray, though clearly there's something passing from his trunk to cover Kay.

It is not substantial, but neither is it merely a shimmer.

A fluctuation of the air when heated by a coil?—no, not quite right.

This then: from Real's trunk there comes a force, itself invisible, which particulates whatever it touches. Air, fabric, flesh, take on a certain graininess; they acquire substance; they gain mass.

Kay kneeling at the foot of the bed, receives her dose.

Look very, very closely and you will see how her flesh thickens and froths—flesh that might without her husband's gift have long since evaporated.

Look at her eyes, and you will see how her halogen-bright whites—the unreal eye-whites of girls in music videos, of Lara Croft, Tomb Raider, and of a billion AlphaCity avatars—are thickening. A small part of their gloss is lost, replaced by texture and capillary. No longer windows on the soul, they have become meaty jellies, resilient and packed with practical gristle.

Kay's hair is no wave, now—no glossy, fractally rendered plane—but a snap-ended jungle of dry, insectile strands, packed with sebaceous oils and taut with electricity.

And Kay's mouth is a sexual place.

And her hands, pressing her breasts together, make another.

This once made a woman what she was. This fat, this linkage, this tegument.

Once, this made a woman beautiful.

'I love you,' Marcus says, reaching out, pulling her close, feeling her vital heat.

Kay suppresses a shudder.

Sometimes, in spite of everything, in spite of all Marcus has taught her, in spite of all these things...

Out of the corner of her eye, Kay glimpses the photograph Dr Real took at Burns lake: the girls look up at her from their frame on the bedside table.

'Shine through!' they shrill. The girls let go of each other, climb off the cushion and press their faces against their paper prison. (Daddy snapped their bodies, but their spirits remain unbroken.)

'Shine on, shine through!'

Through red-eye and thumbprint and cheap plastic frame:

'Shine on! Shine on! This is the season to shine!'

Kay groans. This flesh of hers, this gift of Real's, and thickened every night by his strange power—it feels like a prison!

Marcus Real's consulting rooms make no concessions. Bare of signs, of words in any form, and decked with furniture Marcus himself has sawn from MDF and panels of laminated chipboard scavenged from skips, the consulting room affects affectlessness. Unbranded, grey, it assembles itself out of the bruised, pre-dawn light like a cursory geometrical problem, plane against plane against plane. Chairs, table, screen.

The window is bricked in with blocks of load-bearing architectural glass. Light enters the room threaded and woven, disrupted and greenish. Whatever signals it might have carried from the outside world—messages in lights, van liveries, property sale notices, shop-front insignia and window stickers—are disrupted beyond recognition by the crude, rippling medium of the glass.

Homogenised, harmless, the light spills onto the black floor tiles and eddies like an oil-skein upon their polished surface.

Morning comes.

In quite another part of the city there is an apartment belonging to Dr Real's first clients of the day. There is a radio in the bathroom and a radio by the bed and a TV at the foot of the bed without video but with Ceefax and a TV in the living room without Ceefax but with cable and a video, disconnected at present, to make way for a second video, still in its box, by the front door, and a stereo system, in the living room, with two large speakers, and two wires which lead into the bedroom and terminate at two small speakers, one either side of the bed.

In the bathroom there are magazines—NME, Heat, Arena—and in the living room too—Dazed & Confused, Mixmag, Wire and Q. In the bedroom there are books: Ms Smilla's Feeling for Snow, Bridget Jones' Diary, Does My Bum Look Big In This?, Rachel's Holiday, My Legendary Girlfriend.

And, in the kitchen, things: Conran chopping board, Nick Munro pepper mill, Alessi lemon squeezer, Bodum cafetiere, Ikea table, Habitat chairs, Heals wine glasses, John Lewis cutlery, Poggenpohl cupboards, Smeg fridge, Zanussi oven, Hotpoint washing machine, Bosch dishwasher.

A pair of Calvin Klein knickers crosses from the bedroom to the bathroom.

A St Michael dressing gown leaves the bedroom for the kitchen.

The knickers fall at the feet of a Tosca and Willoughby toilet seat.

The dressing gown shuffles from one end of the kitchen counter to the other.

The knickers get up and go to the sink.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, two Twinings tea bags jump from their tin and drop neatly into two large Whittards cups.

White paste oozes over a Sensodyne toothbrush.

The dressing gown follows the cups from the kitchen back to the bedroom.

The toothbrush returns to its Muji beaker and the knickers leave the bathroom.

The dressing gown lands on the bed and a cup hovers before it, pregnantly.

The knickers fall at the foot of the bed.

The bed, a James Adam, flexes, and the dressing gown spills onto the floor.

The cups wobbles violently and returns to its mate on the bedside table.

The bed rocks, very slowly and for a very little time.

When it is still, there is a sound, A dull, somnolent drone, like two wasps, trapped in a jar.

Someone, or something, is trying to impinge upon the vivid realities of this branded space.

Back at Real's apartment, Zoe and Vita manifest themselves around the breakfast table. They long since lost interest in food. The cupboards are stacked full of cereal. There must be months' supplies of it by now, and a freezer-full of skimmed milk.

But Zoe hardly lifts the spoon these days—and Vita? Vita has another, semi-secret source of sustenance. The older of the two, she has discovered make-up. Shu Uemura. L'Occitane and Molton Brown. She feeds the way leaves feed, synthesizing all she needs from traces, mists and air: twelve dolly-mixture colours which bleed for a delectable, nude-looking finish; fibre from the limited-edition Chanel Petit Pinceau make-up brush; minerals from Fred Farrugia glitter.

Dr Real sighs: he has taken too little care of this.

'Eat something,' he says.

'Dad.'

'Eat something!'

‘I’m not hungry.’

‘Eat.’

‘Oh, dad.’

Resisting his rays, hiding from them, the girls have somehow finessed their way out of his grand scheme. A game at first, their hiding, Dr Real gave it little mind until, too late, they lost their visibility, turning from solid people into mere windows, exposing Real to meanings sweet and provocative by turns: ideas of daughters.

Zoe, the younger, dresses up. Looking at her, daddy sees: a scoop neck, touching a freckle above her small breast; a black silk glove caressing a bare shoulder; the sheen of flesh through a sequinned lace skirt; a band of belly framed above by a cashmere T shirt and below by a double-layer of silk organza.

Vita’s clothes, by contrast, are all cod-Glastonbury, and of little note. It’s her mouth, her eyes, her nails that beckon him. Looking at her, daddy sees: eyes hidden by a mask of wind-blown hair; a sheen on her cheek, gloss on her lips, Max Factor, Martine Sitbon, Iceberg, Celine...

‘Eat!’ he cries, casting aside their incestuous advances, Christ casting off temptation in a lewd, soft-focus wilderness. ‘Eat! Eat! Eat!’

He flings open his dressing gown. He struggles with his apron straps.

The breakfast table chinks and clatters, nervously. A spoon splash-lands in soggy flakes. A glass of mineral water trembles, spills, and leaves a water ring; it rises, unsteady, and falls. A chair rocks back.

Another strap! Oh so many straps! He must fight free! He must radiate! It’s not too late, he tells himself, it’s not, it’s not, they can be saved, they can be made manifest—if only he could get this apron off!

‘Oh, dad.’

‘Dad, really.’

‘Mum, dad’s taking his clothes off!’

‘Mum, dad’s silly!’

Once, they fled in childish, playtime terror from his rays-that-are-not-rays. Today they merely laugh at him. They have eluded him too long, too well, ever to have gained much mass, or acquired much solidity.

‘Mum, quick!’

They float up from the table. Daddy catches glimpses of them—tresses, ankles, necklines, cleavage, flowing curves of bedwear, shift and robe—they tease him, tease his laggard flesh and upright mind.

‘Quick!’ they cry, pretending shock, outrage, disgust.

Dad struggles. He sobs.

But mum does not rush in. Mum’s busy in the bathroom, throwing up.

Dad, hearing, shuts his eyes, shamed full.

‘It’s your fault, dad,’ says Zoe.

‘Why can’t you sleep in your apron, dad?’ Vita spits, accusing him.

‘You’re hurting her.’

‘You’re hurting mum!’

‘You’re burning her!’

He knows, he knows. Flesh does not admit of any soft misreading. Flesh is decay and pain and death as much as it is kiss and sport and spurt. The pleasures of the flesh have their attendant pains, and now it is time for Kay to pay for their night-time pleasures.

Her guts heave, filling her mouth with chunky bits. She spits—they splash the toilet bowl.

Zoe and Vita, repulsed, flee.  
Dad sighs, defeated, and picks his apron up.  
The room, shielded again, loses its grain.

Sometimes it's only by looking at the clock on the wall that Dr Real knows his clients have arrived. Some of the more desperate cases barely need to open the door—they simply ease their essences through the jamb.

'Alice? Andrew?'

\*Sigh\*

A chair scrapes.

'Yes, please do sit down.'

What once would have been a cough tremors Real's inner ear.

'Please, help yourself to water.'

Two glasses rise from the tray on Dr Real's desk, otherwise bare.

'Perhaps the room confuses you,' Real begins. 'Please do not be alarmed. In its bareness lies its healing power. Its freedom from reference, from spill. That way, you see, it has no provenance, no meaning beyond itself. It can be entire. Whole.

As—'

What he says next, he says with a sort of hollow bafflement, that he alone should have been saved.

'—As I am whole.'

A stirring—not hunger, nor curiosity, weaker than these, but an appetite all the same—troubles the air.

'Of course,' says Dr Real. 'Of course we can begin.'

But still he hesitates.

'Flesh—' he says (remembering his wife's burnt guts, her raw grimace, the drizzled toilet bowl) '—does not fulfil desire. Desire must battle flesh. Be prepared for discomfort, please, or remain enervate.'

A glass clashes upon the tray—enough of this occult prevarication!

'Quite so, quite so.' Like a virgin bride, upbraided by a too-eager husband into some show of unfeigned willingness, Dr Real blushes, and his fingers feather at his tie. He retreats behind the screen, draws it on its casters into a protective horseshoe, and proceeds to undress.

His clients, rooted by surprise, make manifest, as much as they can. An iris dilates. Hands touch and fingers knit and squeeze. A nyloned calf tucks itself against a leg of one of Real's crude chairs. A scent of aftershave...

The casters squeal as Dr Real reveals himself to them.

He is naked and with crossed arms—a feminine pose—he holds his heavy, padded apron to his chest.

The edge of the apron casts a diagonal shadow over his pubis and his genitals. His legs are matted with black hairs, his feet have athletic arches; taken together with the sprightly wings of hair over each ear, these things lend him a faun-like air: a Bacchus, a Puck, a Caliban.

A chair scrapes. Glances are exchanged. Startled, Dr Real's clients shiver into gelatinous existence.

Now— Before they challenge him. Before they call for money back, or threaten him with the authorities, all 'What's all this then?' and 'Well I never!' Before the sight of him seems threatening, or laughable. Now—

He drops his apron.

Rays that are not rays irradiate the room.

Tiny pin-prick nubs of flesh regurgitate themselves into the air. They float, a fizzy, frothy mass, quite indistinct at first. Then, dividing into two swarms, they begin to take on the characteristic shapes of people. A man, and a woman.

Marcus Real, surveying the handiwork of his rays-that-are-not-rays, is moved to see that the couple might have been himself and his wife, say, twenty years ago—only the man is taller and better built and the woman, though fair enough and curved, is no match for his darling Kay.

The couple blink at him, newborn, trusting, one hundred per cent pure puppy-fat. Adam and Eve in a grey box-room Eden, shielded by thick, irregular windows from the naughty world of signs.

Clothed, entire, they stand and stare with wonder at Dr Real, their paunched and pated God.

Marcus Real awakes at six o'clock the next morning with a premonition: something is terribly wrong.

Where is Kay? Where is his love? Where that hot and welcome pressure at his back? Where is that hand upon his hip, whose night-time twist and flop (like a dog turning in its basket) wakes and engorges him, for sport, or crafty, cuddly wanks?

(I'll spray your back.'

'Mmm.'

'Kay.'

'Love you. Let me sleep.'

'There! There! Oh...'

He runs his hand through the sweet mess, tucking it between her buttocks. ('I love you, Kay.')

Where is all this? Where is she? Her absence is a cold husk. He shudders and turns over in the bed, banishing the cold golem beside him. 'Where've you gone?' he calls—a comic petulance.

'Love?' he calls

'Darling?' His tone is urgent, now, under the sitcom lilt. 'Darling, where are you now?'

A tap runs in the bathroom.

Oh.

A heaviness descends. He fears he knows what this is. ('Dad, you're hurting her!') She is that age now, Kay, his love, when flesh begins to turn. When fertility wizens and hot hormonal sweats presage death. Not death for years and years, mind you, but death, nonetheless. The menopause—the first flash of the scythe.

Poor Kay!

He goes to her, uxorious and kind and meaning well, the carpet tickling his toes.

'Go away,' she says.

'Darling?'

'Not now.'

Bleary-minded, not hearing her, expecting and so half-hearing a different answer, Real opens the door.

Kay is standing before the mirror, Vita's make-ups ranged around her, peering into the glass, mascara raised.

'My love!'

'Leave me alone.' Kay's voice trembles. Her hand trembles as she lifts the tar-black brush up to her tender eye.

'No!'

'Oh...' Kay drops the brush and snatches up a tissue, dabbing away the error. 'Just—just—'

'My sweet?'

'FUCK OFF!'

The air trembles. Real trembles. Kay gasps; she turns as if she might snatch back this enormity, this unmeant, cruel thing—too late.

And after the tremor, clarity: Dr Real and his wife stand eye to eye under the harsh electric light.

Kay's face is all caved in, the red-raw flesh slumping, rumpling, slipping from the skull.

'My love!' he sighs.

'Look what you've done!' She dashes water in her face, scoops cream and jabs it into her skin, bunching it up between her bony fingers in flaccid folds.

'My love!'

She throws water over her face once more, rinsing off the cream and with it all else she has applied: foundation, blusher, toner, concealer, lipstick, eyecream, eyeshadow, definer, eyebrow pencil, kohl, mascara, all, revealing—

Burnt flesh, weeping, spiderwebbed by fine and broken blood-vessels.

The face he loves cracks open like a husk. Dried saliva tacks and pools at the edges of the purple gap. Sour teeth, lopsided, furred and creamed, gleam yellow in the electric light. The tongue, grey as an afterbirth and as misshapen, stirs and flaps. Kay speaks:

'There's nothing left of me! Look! Look!'

'My love...'

'It's all used up. You've had it all!'

'Not me, my love. I gave you all. But time—'

'I've got to get it back!'

'No, no...'

She turns to him, sensing some terrible betrayal. 'You like me like this?'

'No, but—'

'So you'd rather throw me off now! Suck your fill then spit the shell—'

'No! No!' He puts his hands to his ears, to block her words, to keep his teeming head intact.

'Wear your apron, damn you!' Kay screams. 'Keep that heat away from me, it burns me up!'

'But it's life, it's flesh, it's real—'

'I'VE HAD ENOUGH!'

He watches her sway, watches as the blood trickles from her nostril into her mouth, watches as she takes hold of her hair and pulls, and the hair comes away and for the first time he sees that it is grey.

Too quick, he thinks. Too soon for this. This, he realises, with a sick lurch, is not Time's doing at all. This is not old age, not the tender, slow over-ripeness he expected.

This is some man-made decay, some surreal culinary rot, fresh mushrooms sweating to a nothing in the pan.

‘My God!’ he cries, ‘What have I done?’

‘Dad! Dad! You’re killing her!’ they tease. Through the thin wall separating the bathroom from the girls’ bedroom, he hears them, tittering.

‘Bad dad!’

They know their daddy’s dangerous. Year after year, they have watched as he substantiated his wife, their mum. Year in, year out, they have watched as Kay learned what it was to be real—to sweat, to labour, to strain and falter, to scream with a pleasure indistinguishable from pain.

‘Then show you mother love!’ their daddy screams, beside himself. ‘If you know so much, tell me how to make amends; don’t just sit there sniggering!’

He storms out the bathroom, down the hall, and bursts in on them, the door flung wide, and his rays-that-are-not-rays flood a room papered with rock posters, boy-band centrefolds, Athena prints, calendars from the Francis Kyle gallery, free postcards advertising films, signed autographs of soap stars and footballers, and tour posters listing the dates of performances by stand-up comedians.

‘Dad!’

‘Dad!’

‘No!’

‘Get away!’

‘Cover yourself!’

‘Mum!’

‘Mum, are you all right?’

‘Mum, what’s he done to you?’

Roaring with rage, Dr Real storms into the room.

Bed sheets fling and toss themselves. Nightdresses tangle. Pillows puff.

‘Come here!’

‘Dad!’

‘No!’

‘Come here, I said!’

Their screaming turns to scornful laughter as Zoe and Vita begin to sense their independence. Not even Real’s powers can manifest them now. They are invisible to him.

‘Come here!’ Real cries.

They are free.

He chases the chaos of linen and nightwear across the room and over to the window. He reaches out to them, blindly, beseeching. All thought of chastisement gone, he yearns to touch them, hold them, stop their cruel pubescent jibes with tender glances, fatherly warmth—

‘Ugh.’

‘Fuck off, dad.’

The window shatters. Glass explodes, shattering to dust and falling soft as snow upon the street below, and Zoe and Vita, transported now entirely to the realm of spirit, flee into a night alive with sign and symbol, idol and icon, billboard, muzak, and the air is heady with designer scent.

The worded world floods the room, the lights of hoardings and shop signs and the brightly illuminated windows of electrical shops and designer sandwich bars and theme pubs and the spill from stadium video displays settling like a hectic growth upon the postered walls.

Real pauses, takes stock, and retreats.

On the other side of the city, Doctor Real's patients are fucking each other harder and harder and harder. He catches her legs up over his shoulders and violates her. She ties his hands to the bed and slaps his face, over and over. He breaks free and forces his semen into her mouth. She takes him into the bathroom and lies him in the bath and relieves herself over him. Afterwards, she will lead him back to bed and as they cross the living room their feet will settle on sharp shards of plastic and glass—snapped CDs, shattered vacuum tubes and twisted video cartridges, and when they wake up in the morning the foot of the bed will be smeared with blood, and they will see it and laugh, to be so sweetly imprisoned at last. Happily, they will suck the splinters from each other's feet.

Come the morning, Dr Real leaves the house as usual; but he does not have the heart, now, to open his clinic.

The weight of the apron drags at him as he walks, and he thinks, I will never be able to take my apron off now, not ever again in the presence of another, and when Kay comes to bed I will only ask her to strap it tighter, tighter, tighter, and her breasts will never again touch my belly, and neither will her tongue. So protected, she will slowly fade, and I will watch her eye-whites turn bright and flat again, like the eyes of Lara Croft, and her skin will plasticate, and her gestures will take on lives of their own, and her step will lighten, lighten, lighten, and from inside my apron I will watch these things, and fight for breath against the straps, and slowly, by degrees, let lead and flock weigh down my heart to stopping. Weight for me, weightlessness for her and all the world, as it was meant to be. I am a throwback, out-evolved, I cannot turn back time. I am, after all, only a man.

Marcus Real returns home to break the news: he has decided to retire. He calls for Kay, but there is no reply.

From the girls' room comes a rustling.

Steeling himself, Real tries the door. It opens. He peeks in. No Kay—but the wind through the shattered window has peeled the posters from the walls. Crumpled by cross-currents of media-toasted air, they flap and flock like pigeons round the room. Real opens the door wider to watch, a draught picks up, and the posters wheel and launch themselves out of the open window, into the neon dusk.

The room's a poor grey shell now. Marcus sighs. Another door to close, he thinks, never to open any more.

He enters his bedroom and finds Kay lying there, her head turned to face the bedside table.

'Kay?'

She will not speak to him.

'Where are the children?' he says.

She will not turn to him. 'This is your fault,' she says.

The fire blazes up in the lodge in Burns Lake, and the cushions by Asplund glow mellow in the flames' light, but Zoe and Vita are gone, and when, an hour or two ago,

Kay picked up the photograph to dust, all she saw was an empty room, a grate full of spent ashes, and a pile of last season's clothes, flung carelessly to the ground.