



The Ruin of Europe

The border closed, he says. There are no gates or barriers or watch-towers or locks and bolts, just two lengths of chain and a small group of crumbling buildings in the middle of nowhere, and near to these a group of people surrounding a man sitting behind a wooden table and the dust swirling all around. The Customs Officer closes his ledger and affectionately strokes the grubby worn surface.

- The border closed, he repeats. You now wait. Tomorrow.

The blank look on his face confirms that his hand is unable to record any further details this day and the ink on the rubber stamp will not be refreshed until the morning. The bus will stay here overnight and the driver is already snoring in his cabin.

- His watch runs an hour faster, whispers the Dutchman.

There are still dozens of people still waiting to cross, standing in small groups, their belongings wrapped around their bodies, or with large packages at their feet, jostling for position in a queue that no longer has any purpose. The Customs Officer gestures over his shoulder at a large ramshackle building.

- But, good news to you, he says with a gentle smile, our hotel now open!

Set in the middle of a featureless plain, this elderly hotel marks an otherwise undistinguishable point between two borders. Some borders may coincide with geography, a river crossing or a mountain range, but who knows what mad cartographer chose this place between mountain and desert to draw a line? This arid plain, 6000 feet in altitude, is a gap of sorts, a deviation of an ancient trade route pockmarked with waterless water holes. To the North, the land rises up great frozen jagged peaks, to the West, a vast sprawl of salt desert, to the East a barren

land of stones and pebbles which dips towards several mountain ranges, to the South an area of mud flats and marshy lakes.

The wind and the sand, constant and unremitting, will surely erase all demarcation lines; these fine particles etching the face of all who pass through here for trade, for adventure, for need, for salvation, for pilgrimage and plunder.

In these remote lands, men with the head of a dog once roamed, or men without a head at all, alongside the Cyclops, one footed beings and fist sized men with large genitals and very long beards - or so European scholars once believed.

The lonely route here, from a forgotten town now half a day away, has been over dirt roads until at the border a stretch of fresh tarmac suddenly appears, just a few kilometres long. At the edges it is already diminishing, turning to sand. A single chain across the tarmac at each end, like a drooping tennis net, indicates the point of departure and entry. The hotel stands here beside some mud buildings and an open compound where passports and papers are stamped and passage negotiated.

- It's like the house in Psycho, says a young American woman.

- No, says her companion, the ruined mansion in Giant. You know, the James Dean one.

The building, wholly incongruous in this desolate setting, is raised up on concrete blocks, a brooding silhouette as the light seeps away from the desert. With a porch scoured grey by sandstorms, with its tower and sloping roof, arches and pointed windows, it seems a Victorian Gothic structure that would be best captured on black and white film and shrouded in the fog and wet of San Francisco bay. Only seven travellers choose to enter the hotel.

Of the Europeans on the bus, three West Germans stopped in the last village before the border, hired a guide who was a member of the local Revolutionary militia, then turned further south to follow in the foot steps and horse steps of a First World War military mission led by a Bavarian artillery officer. Across this snow-white desert those ambitious and bellicose men of long ago, from the Deutsches Kaiserreich, struggled with elements beyond their control, in the madness inducing heat of summer, their supply of chocolate and candles soon liquefying. They came to the East armed with gifts of gold fountain pens and watches, cameras, binoculars, ornately hand decorated rifles and pistols, a dozen electric alarm clocks and a cinema projector. They carried personal letters from the German Emperor and the Turkish Sultan urging a Holy War on the British Crown Colony of India and all their allies. Exhausted and delayed, their mission ultimately failed, their narrative sinking beneath the sands. Today, these modern explorers simply carry rucksacks, water purification tablets, American Express cheques and American dollar notes stuffed into socks, with no words of authority or plans of dominion.

Some of the other passengers ensured they were let off the bus early, striding off into the bare landscape, shrouded in burkhas and blankets. Without passports but with surefooted purpose, they cross at a point of their choosing in the manner

of their ancestors. Now, with the customs post closed, everyone else has dispersed, to bed down with their bundles in the dust under the mud walls, brewing chai and eating flatbread.

Tonight, the Customs Officer will also be the proprietor of the hotel and he will also be the cook. He quickly brings an enamel pot of very hot tea, some glasses and lumps of sugar. After outlining the options available to his distinguished guests – a loft room with bunk beds with excellent views of the mountains for a very extortionate price, or the scrubbed wooden floor of the dining room underneath a gently swaying chandelier for a reasonable extortionate price - the two Americans disappear upstairs, clearly excited by this themed experience. Three travellers choose the second option and agree to feast on scrambled eggs. The remaining two, industrialists and Marxists from Bologna, bed down on the porch of the hotel for a reduced extortionate price. Their plan is to turn North, in search of early Bolshevik sites, seeking out old Cossack and Tartar trails, beyond the region of the Dry Tree. They talk in whispers long into the night, poring over their arcane maps.

Here they are, between one place and another.

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If you ask a child to make a picture of their world, they will place their home at the centre, the houses and gardens of their friends nearby, then the school they attend, the playground, or their Grandparents house. Beyond that there will be some other familiar points, the least familiar spreading out around the edges. Ancient geographers did the same, placing themselves at the centre and at the edges marking where strange things lived. To discover the exact point of centre of the world, the Greeks believed that the God Zeus released two eagles from the outermost edges of the earth. They flew vigorously for days in a straight line, equal in strength and speed, without rest. Finally, they met in the air above Delphi and so the very heart of the world was determined.

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Picture the night sky here, with a clarity never seen before. Birds of prey soar high into the stratosphere. After dusk, it is totally dark in this part of the globe, but imagine the deeper outline of the mountains etched by starlight. Walking out a mere hundred yards beyond the wall of the compound, the few lamps of the hotel are tiny motes of yellow light. If they were to extinguish, you would surely lose your way. Listen to the quiet voices by your side. Concentrate.

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I was born to the grey rain spat streets of Govan. Raised with the colours of Glasgow Rangers football club, like my father before me and his father before him. My tribe. Taught to fear and hate the Fenian bastards at Parkhead. My bloody legacy - of brick and bar, bottle and knife, knuckle-duster and chain, razor and boot, fist and bone. You would die for your team. It was unspoken but true none the less.

Blood boils in the bitterness of a Northern winter. I used to believe there is no worse place to be than in freezing sleet on Gallowgate. I have been stabbed twice, suffered three broken ribs, two broken fingers, one broken jaw. I have lost two teeth and have battle scars on my face. These here. And here. Small change. My spartan trophies.

Our fame grew, as we travelled south of the border and kicked heads in Newcastle, Wolverhampton, Birmingham and, once, in Barcelona. At 17, after beating half the life out of an Aberdeen fan, I was sent to a correctional facility. No excuses or remorse. It was the way of things.

Later, for attacking an inmate who happened to be of the Papist persuasion, I was transferred to an English gaol on the fringe of London. I served my time. I kept myself to myself. The day of my release, I walked into another world. I saw the broadness of the Thames for the first time, people picnicking in the meadow grass, boys fishing, small pleasure boats lolling on the brown water. No-one seemed to have a care. Perhaps, I thought, it was because this town had a less than worthless football team, dwindling in the lower echelons of the league.

In gaol, I had lost touch with everyone. I had almost vanished. There was some grim satisfaction in this. But where to now? I wondered what it would be like to wade out into the water, to float downstream under the bridges of London, out into the estuary and finally the sea. How long would I float? How long before I sunk and how long before my body was washed up and identified? I doubted that anyone would care.

I found a job locally in a postal sorting office, and went to night school. I then trained as a telephone engineer. With money in my pocket, one day I took a train North to pay a visit to the old town. After six years, things were surely different. Night was falling on the charred sandstone of the city as I came out of the Central Station. I looked across the river. Fog was rising on the greasy water, the lights of the high rises were dim and blurry. I could smell the docks and hear the clank of heavy machinery. The cold cut through me.

I made my way to an old bar I knew. Fading photographs of John Greig and Colin Stein stared down at me while I drank, but none recognised my face. The team was doing well, but I had lost the common touch of everyday detail. I found I could contribute little to the smoky conversation but an occasional sullen grunt of agreement.

I crept back to the station and took the next train back across the border. I maintained a low profile, but even here I was no longer safe. Hooliganism was becoming the currency of the day, a national pastime. I knew its deadly attraction and how it would reach out to me. For the first time in my life, I was afraid. I decided to leave, for another land, maybe Australia.

I hoarded my wages, then headed to the East across Europe, doing odd jobs in quiet little towns – carpentry, sweeping, washer up – to see something different, to become someone else, to discard the weight of history and religion.

There's a sense of heaviness here, hanging in the air, in the dust. I can sense it. It's somewhere out in the darkness, under the rocks and stones, that tribal instinct, that need to destroy the people over the next hill. I can tell you, man, it's a crazy world and that's the truth.

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The cold is drawing in, like a sharp blade cutting across the skin. Swirls of sand are lifted by the wind and settle once more. Parched tongues hold the memory of moisture. The fire eats up the desiccated wood with a sharp crackle. Where are the lush gardens and fertile valleys that amazed travellers, the perfumed fruits and pomegranate orchards?

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Like a moth to the flame, I am drawn eastwards, to cross these stinging sands, through desiccated cities, their kingdoms long turned to dust and dream. I have a book of maps in my mind, interpretations of those routes drawn by the great Court Cosmographer and mathematician Gerard Mercator of Rupelmonde. Like him, I have often doubted the truth of all philosophers.

In Rotterdam, I grew up a stone's throw from the old docks and so there were always ships in my childhood, looming above me, arriving, disgorging their goods, exchanging one cargo for another, setting sail for another port, their engines humming far out across the grey sea. The waters of the Rhine and the Meuse mingled here, flowing from deep within the continent. It was expected I would find work here, as an engineer or steel man as had generations before, but I fled to Amsterdam to find something different. I didn't know what.

This was the time of change. John and Yoko staged their bed-in for peace at the Hilton and we all sang along with them. *You say you want a revolution, we all want to change the world.* I didn't play electric guitar but my sister insisted I learn to cook, an essential contribution to the collective. Space cakes, coconut rice and anything with lentils.

You know, there is a Dutch saying: ‘Behave normally, that’s strange enough.’ We lived in a commune, another narrow and horizontal world, where everything was shared and one relationship flowed indistinguishably into another. Eventually, as the squatter community grew around us, there was trouble with the police. We fought them with paint cans and powder bombs, we held parties in the rubble-strewn streets and set up Defence Committees, sowing and harvesting seeds of dissent. Our staid past was behind us and we were creating the world anew. Even Mao Zedong was now dead, though he lived on in day-glo posters on our walls.

So, all you might have heard about us is these stories about drugs and free love and radical politics, but we are really a deeply conservative people. A few kilometres outside the city centre, you will find life has gone unchanged for a 100 years, still quietly in deference to a Golden Age long gone, surrounded by bulb fields and pastel colours, living on land reclaimed from the sea.

One day I looked in the mirror and felt uncomfortable. I wondered what person was emerging and what were the forces shaping his destiny? I wondered why the fervent pursuit of an ideal seemed to ultimately corrupt the believer? I asked myself: why should our passions destroy us? Another old saying is, ‘Where the land is flat, the spirit has no urge to fly.’ It was unfortunately true. I found doing the same thing, in a parody of a mechanical routine, a ceaseless tape loop of days repeated. I longed for a world on the other side of the barricade of which I knew nothing, a land of poetry or madness or both. Like Bilbo Baggins in *The Lord of the Rings*, a book beloved by my comrades, I wanted to travel the road that goes ever on and on.

Seeking this path, I left Amsterdam, perhaps for good, and travelled far beyond the Cape Good Hope, seeking to understand our vilified heritage, where mercenary and merciless traders once coveted spices, where the warships and troops of the United East Indies Company ruthlessly enforced their trade monopoly.

Once there, amidst these islands, where corn steamed over a pot of boiling water and hot and spicy unfamiliar food tantalised my tongue, the crush of the unfamiliar excited me. It was a revelation to me. Amid the bustle and perspiration of the night markets, I was mesmerised – there is no other word for it. I took great pleasure in simply wandering with no particular purpose, in the vastness of the largest archipelago in the world, where no dialect was recognisable, amid the dark, husky aromas of incense burners. I gorged on fish and peanuts roasted over a fire as acetylene lamps smouldered green in the dusk. And I believe I found love on these wild shores.

We met by chance one afternoon, with the sea on one side and volcanic heights on the other. She had the eyes of cat and skin burnished bronze. We wandered through groves of coconut, then down to the ocean through the rhododendron, casuarina and eucalyptus. That night, we lay entwined for hours, our bodies damp,

sweat pooling in the crevasses of our bodies and folds of skin. We hardly spoke a word – it seemed unnecessary, our only language was touch, the most gentle and intimate caress, our lips burning.

It was a magical night. How else to name it? When I woke, she was gone from my arms. Did I imagine this chance encounter? I looked for her in a dizzy haste along the beach and in the villages, but I could find no trace of her, not that day, nor the next, or on any subsequent day. She had vanished and I am still searching for her.

I fell ill and spent six months recuperating back in the Netherlands, but I felt no joy in that place. It felt claustrophobic. I had changed. Utterly. There, where the level earth sits precariously on the water, I felt insecure, an empty vessel. I longed for the islands, I longed for the apparition of this local woman of whom I know nothing. Did shame cause her to flee? Was this a moment of no significance or of the most fundamental import? Compelled to return to the sleepy fishing villages and deserted beaches, I wonder what I might in time become - a guide, a charlatan, a wise man, an exploiter, or all these things in some measure? What measure of freedom do we really have to determine our future? Do we throw ourselves to the mercy of the gods of chance?

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The wind howls down mountain passes and rocky defiles. They say it is a bringer of misfortune, that it masks the passage of thieves and scoundrels and brigands. Wayfarers gather around the cooking fires and exchange contraband and favours. Amidst sandy wastes that might mark the edges of the world, one of their number speaks up and recalls the Dari poet Abu Shukur of Balkh.

*A tree with a bitter seed
Fed with butter and sugar
Will still bear a bitter fruit.
From it, you will taste no sweetness.*

They nod at these words, in unspoken agreement, and wrap their robes tighter about them. They long to draw fresh water from the well and rest their bones beneath the fragrance of the cedar trees.

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I never thought much about my identity, who I am or what I should be. Whether this is confidence or ignorance, I do not yet know. I was born in a time when the

government tested their new Hydrogen Bombs in the Pacific and schools still stocked geography books with vast areas of the world coloured pink to indicate British rule. The books smelled very old. Each year we celebrated Commonwealth Day by putting up paper flags all around the classroom representing all those countries and possessions. Our form teacher, from Galway, gave a daily reading from a book called 'Lands Far and Near' to remind us of our destiny and responsibility. It all seemed so distant. Then, when I was eight, half of my junior school class emigrated to South Africa. I never saw nor heard from any of them again.

Growing up, the idea of imperial adventure seemed to involve crawling through the African jungle with spears through both your legs, half blind with trachoma, mad with malarial fever. "The tropics are fine," declaimed the geography teacher, "as long as you don't have to work." He would scurry up and down the aisles between our wooden desks, arms spread wide, making peculiar humming noises to imitate various planes of the Royal Air Force, in which he served and of which he endlessly reminisced. Failure to correctly identify the type of aircraft resulted in extra homework or detention.

There was a reproduction of a large Victorian painting in our school corridor, which we were encouraged to pay homage to. It depicted the final moments of the gallant escape of William Brydon, an Irish surgeon serving with the British army in Afghanistan. The evacuation of Kabul in the depths of winter turned into a massacre. The troops and their followers, fleeing through the Khyber Pass, were cut to pieces as they retreated, leaving the subject of the painting the sole survivor. In exhaustion and desperation, he rides across the ochre plain on his stumbling pony. As his pursuers finally fall behind, he reaches the outskirts of the garrison at Jalalabad to tell his terrible tale and for this moment to be later recorded on canvas by a painter on the other side of the globe.

Even then, the celebration of this man and his trusty mount in the direst of circumstances seemed out of date. It was a dead world of weird and unbalanced behaviour, of hardship and failure rather than adventure. As a kid, I was becoming more interested in the Beatles than the British Empire. That's who I identified with, that was history to me, though I had never been to Liverpool.

I was inclined to be a bit of a book-worm at school, burying my head in literature but an academic weakling. I left at 16 to work in a pea factory but punk rock saved me, sending a burning arrow of anarchy into my heart. From the outer spaces of Cannock into the vortex of inner Birmingham, into the arms of the pouting barmaids who worked at Barbarellas or The Crown. I listened to a thousand inconclusive conversations about the nature of art and existentialism – anyone could be an artist and might be a better artist for being illiterate, slightly insane, unskilled or drunk. I could find Joe Strummer standing in the rain by the

Rag Market explaining why the band were stopped from playing by the City Council, then find the police turning up to arrest people for unlawful gathering and obstruction. With all my mates in bands and my driving licence a precious commodity, I drove a battered Ford transit van through Northern towns by night. The clutch was shot to hell, but the van made it from Leeds to Hull to Bradford to Huddersfield and finally the fabled Liverpool. Then back to Manchester, a city so grey, worn and desolate, yet so glorious.

I remember Ian Curtis standing there, the rain drizzling down, loitering outside the Manchester Apollo, wearing a tatty parka with 'MODS' dabbed on it in white paint. Iggy Pop's name in neon lights above the doors, the letters sparkling in the damp air and we're all in awe and no-one has any tickets or any money to speak of. We blag our way inside, as Iggy sings about a passenger and he throws his body about the confines of the red light soaked stage. Like a beast of mythology, his eyes are huge, ravaged and strange.

Later, The Prefects, a one chord combo, make a right old racket in a run down cellar. Sweat and sometimes snot runs down the walls. It was not glamorous, it was gritty and laughable and heartfelt. Maybe Ian understood the message hidden behind the glare of the lights, maybe not. Maybe he mouthed the words of the passenger song to himself in his bedroom, dreaming the short-lived dream as the Ford Transit climbed onto the moors along the A27 and our faces dimly glowed looking back over the city and the sodium lit cloud cover above.

I buy a camera and start to document everything. A Japanese model. It proves to be a very reliable companion. The faces change. For a year, nothing much seems to happen. Clothes fall apart and are reconstructed. We look thin and emaciated. Horizons that opened up now shrink back again. People speak of their plan to move to Berlin but the furthest East they go is the Lincolnshire coast to find work as a bar manageress at the Butlins holiday camp. Ambulance workers, health service staff, rubbish collectors and grave diggers go on strike. The only good news is that Birmingham City beat Manchester United 5-1.

I get a job with the council, and work in a basement above the nuclear fallout shelter, printing photographs of cracked paving stones and sites of accidents for insurance claims. I regress further and listen endlessly to The Byrds singing, '*Take me for a trip/Upon your magic swirling ship...*' The scene already feels old, wasted and discordant, everyone turning to drugs to escape their daily grind. The Fall are singing about repetition, repetition, repetition and I can't get the song out of my head. I read once that Judy Garland told an audience before her death that she had performed 'Over The Rainbow' 12,380 times. As a sixteen year old, she was popping amphetamines and barbiturates, drugs to wake up with and keep going, then a shot of morphine to get through the evening gig, and finally sleeping pills to go to bed with. Thankfully, we're not in Kansas anymore. We're waiting on this

peculiar border, weary strangers, wishing on a star, waiting for some kind of illumination or redemption.

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Inevitably, again the forlorn wind rises and seeps into the hotel like a whisper. The chandelier sways gently back and forth. Electricity crackles and the few lights dim and flicker. Flurries of dust settle on sleeping bags, on scoured wooden counters and between the cracks in the floorboards. The sound of breathing is the only other sound. Dreams caught on the tail of the wind blow out across the blackened and inhospitable landscape, carried so far away they are no longer remembered by the dreamer. Each dream thus has its own momentum, each dreamer seeking their own fulfillment, their consciousness dispersing into the night, lost under the cold radiance of uncountable constellations.