

Jonathan Kemp

London Triptych [an extract]*

The day before we met I saw a regular client, an Irishman, the owner of a record shop outside Dublin. Once a month he travelled over to buy stock, and usually gave me a call. He was younger than the majority of the men who hired me, not bad looking. One of the few I enjoyed. It was with mixed feelings I went to visit him in his hotel in Piccadilly. The last time I'd seen him he'd suggested paying for me to fly over to Dublin for a weekend, paying me not only for the flight but my time. Although I'd agreed, I knew that I would probably go even if he weren't paying, and that made me uncomfortable. I'd never considered that I might be lonely. Not that anything emotional was involved, at least not on my part. That never happened. But I knew that my curiosity alone would take me. Sometimes, my curiosity knows no bounds.

We went to his hotel. I knew it well. In the same hotel I would often meet another client, an older man, a married Scottish businessman who once showed me a snapshot from his wallet of the wife and kids, just after peeling off the rectal examination gloves he had worn while his fingers worked the lubricated edges of my anus. A polite man, who always

began the session taking Polaroids of my arse before asking, “May I insert a finger?” his voice tentative and uncertain.

The Irish record shop owner had no such kink, it was straight down to fucking, first me him, then him me. I wondered where my life was going, not knowing that, a week later, an answer would present itself in the shape of you.

(But what kind of answer was that?)

The first time we met was by daylight, though it always feels like night when I think of you. It was a freakishly sunny day in January when you appeared. 1996. I had been doing videos on a regular basis over the past couple of years for a man in Clapham, named Harry. He wanted me to ‘recruit some new models’. So he placed an ad in the gay press, using my phone number as the contact. My job was to screen out the uglies, to pan for gold. You came to me that way, my love, a glint in the silt. I’d get them to strip off and pose for a Polaroid. Of course, I had sex with most of the guys who came over. I’d say something like, “How would you feel about posing with a hard on?” And that was that.

I opened the door to let you in, and you were every bit as sexy as you had sounded on the phone. Tall and dark. Tight white t-shirt and turned-up Levis, black leather jacket. I couldn’t wait to see you naked. And when you took off your jacket I knew then, I think, that this was dangerous. I itched to taste your sweat. Such a pull, such a wrench, such a light-headed, dry-mouthed need to touch another. I thought that that had died in me, that thrill, that excitement. I made us some coffee, and talked about the modelling. You were new to the game, but showed no nerves when it came to shedding your clothes so I could take the obligatory snapshot for Harry. You were more beautiful unclothed than I’d imagined.

After I had taken the picture you sat down, still naked, on the floor by the window, where your clothes lay in a pile, and rummaged in your jacket for a cigarette, and said, after lighting it and exhaling the first lungful, “So, how did you get into this game?”

I was enjoying the excuse to look at you that talking allowed. You asked if I had any pictures from the porn modelling I had done, and when I said yes, you asked to see them. I went and fetched them from the bedroom, these pictures I had never shown anyone before. We’d been talking for about half an hour before you commented on how strange it felt, this situation of you being naked with me fully clothed. “I’ll take mine off too, if it’ll even things out,” I offered.

“I don’t know about evening things out, but I’d sure like that.”

I shed my clothes and you asked if I had any grass. I sat there naked at the kitchen table, rolling a joint. When I looked up you were smiling at me, a smile so bright it was as if you’d eaten stars.

“What?” I questioned, suddenly paranoid.

“Nothing,” you replied, and I mirrored your smile.

I thought I knew all there was to know about sex, but I’d never experienced before that dissolving of skin till nothing exists but a network of sensations that glow and sparkle, turning you inside out and back again, somersaulting rapids of touch and taste that you never want to end. Never knew this blending of selves, this fading into you. This cannibal, animal hunger and joy.

By the time you left, a couple of hours later, something had happened that had never happened before. I found myself thinking, I’d really like to see this man again. But before I’d time to ask for a phone number, you had said goodbye, kissed me, and gone, off into the drab evening, which began working its insipid way through the windows. You had been in the flat for hours. We chatted before, during and after sex, and it had all actually made sense, and

been funny, and felt good. I didn't want you to leave. And this was unheard of in my experience. With you it felt like meeting an old friend, someone I hadn't seen for years. Someone I was so glad to see because not only do we share a perfect familiarity already, but we have so much to tell each other, we could spend a lifetime recounting all those things we've done since we last met. And still it wouldn't be enough time. With you, my spirit danced. A face and a body I could never tire of looking at, and a soul it seemed I could never tire of exploring. We laughed like children and tore the world apart. Because of you, I am beautiful. Because of you, my body is a possibility. A gift. My flesh reconstituted in your hands, your mouth.

After your departure, my phone rang and I was called out to a regular client in Earls Court, who liked to be scrubbed all over his body with wire wool.

I didn't see you again for about a month. Harry booked me to do a group video, something I always enjoyed doing. I was horny and anxious for days leading up to it, wondering if you would be there, though I tried my best not to raise my hopes.

Harry led me into the lounge, where several boys were sitting around smoking and drinking, all naked. I was introduced to the other three boys in the room. I felt a jolt of disappointment that you weren't there and decided I didn't fancy any of the others much. In the centre of the room, on a white sheepskin rug, there was a smoked-glass-topped table, upon which stood a large brass ashtray and a marble cigarette holder. Along one wall, there was a unit holding an expensive hi-fi and several reproductions of Greco-Roman busts and bronzes of naked young men, individually lit from above. Harry began pouring me a drink. In one corner of the room, a large cheese plant stood in a copper pot. A labyrinthine hallway, its wall mirrored, led to the bedroom, which also contained one wall of mirrors. Classical music was always playing and this was also piped into the bedroom. Harry always had plenty of cigarettes and alcohol. Once I'd stripped off and plonked myself down he handed me a large

whiskey and I helped myself to one of the cigarettes from the ornate silver box on the glass coffee table.

He asked me some inane questions about my life, to which I responded with the minimum of detail and truth. While this was going on, the other three continued a conversation they'd evidently been having prior to my arrival. They were discussing a book one of them had read, some New Age nonsense. Harry refuted every single 'argument' the boys had been making in a loud and pompous, though highly logical, manner. Before he'd retired he'd been a physicist. Did you ever notice the way he slapped his lips together, only he doesn't actually have any lips, just these hard edges to his mouth, which when he smacks them together make a noise like a pop or a click? He disagreed with nearly everything the three boys said. They argued back. He interrupted by standing up excitedly and clapping his hands together and saying, "David, follow me." I put my drink down and he led me to the bedroom, where on the bed lay a naked man, spread-eagled on his back, his hands and feet bound to the bedposts, his eyes hidden beneath a black leather blindfold. It was you. Even with the blindfold on, I could see it was you.

"Suck him off," Harry said, fiddling with the video camera.

In the mirrored wall I watched myself crawl onto the bed and take your already hard dick in my mouth, recognising its taste and shape. I could see Harry behind me, switching on a spotlight that flashed back from the mirrored wall in front of me, blinding me momentarily. I closed my eyes and continued sucking. You started to groan.

"Okay, that's enough," Harry barked, and I reluctantly stopped. I looked at your face – what I could see of it beneath the blindfold. Your strong nose. Your Cupid's bow mouth. A rosebud pushed from between your lips and burst into vibrant colour. I imagined that you were falling in love with me, and pretended I could hear you gasp my name. I wanted to take

the blindfold off. I wanted to see your eyes. I wanted you to see me. I suddenly wished that we were alone.

“Send Darren in,” Harry said officiously.

I returned to the living room and told Darren to go to the bedroom. I lit a cigarette and refilled my glass, my erection wilting. The other boys had clearly been getting down to something while I’d been out of the room, as all three of them now had hard-ons. When Darren had gone, the other two asked me what went on in the bedroom. I told them. They started to kiss and I walked over and joined in, thinking to myself, at least they are not still discussing that stupid book.

One of the boys rummaged in his jacket and pulled a joint from one of the pockets. After a couple of drags he passed it around. The two boys kissed and played with each other while I stood there smoking. I crushed the finished joint into the ashtray and half-heartedly joined in.

Shortly, we were all called into the bedroom, and I was glad that I wouldn’t have to wait while they all go in one by one until I could see you again.

When we got to the bedroom, the blindfold was off. Our eyes met and smiled. That same look of brand new recognition. The same face, the same response.

Harry said, “Jake, this is David.” We shook hands, and I was struck by the absurdity of the situation around the same time that you were. Our grins were equally broad.

Afterwards, you and I shared a cab with one of the other boys, and you got out first. I wanted to ask for your number, but not in front of him. I felt a sudden irrational hatred for this boy. I didn’t say a word to him during the rest of the journey, other than ‘See you’ when

he climbed out. I stayed on to Soho, seeking something other than rest. It's not difficult to find in this city. Not if you are restless enough.

The day after, I rang Harry to get your phone number, and when he started asking questions I wished I'd been bold enough to ask you myself the previous evening. I felt vulnerable, as if Harry knew how much I wanted the number, and I was annoyed that I had to rely on him to get it. He mentioned getting the two of us to do a video together, and I said that I'd like that and hung up. I rolled a joint and wondered how long I could reasonably leave it before ringing you. As I sat there, playing with the piece of paper bearing your number, I started to imagine you in my life, dreaming of the two of us beginning a career together, only doing films with each other, only doing escort work as a duo. I had turned into something I was not. It wasn't long then before I realised that I didn't want you to touch anyone else, and that this meant I was possessive, even though I remain unsure exactly what that means. Jealousy is not good in this game. Of course, it happens. I've seen rent boys tear each other's hair out over a man, thinking to myself, why bother? Sometimes it feels like I have spent my entire life thinking *why bother?*

Even though we had barely spent more than a few hours together in total, I had mapped out an entire life together with the colours and trajectory of a rainbow. The greatest thing about being a prostitute was the freedom. I couldn't imagine having to explain myself to anyone. Perhaps your being a whore too made me think it would somehow be easier, I don't know. I can't really remember how I justified calling you. But I remember that the second I decided to dial your number my telephone rang and I was required elsewhere. A distraction. Calling you would have to wait.

I arrived back at the flat around midnight, and as I approached the entrance to my block I heard a car horn bib behind me, and saw the momentary flash of headlights. I turned

around, and there you were, in a red Porsche, beaming your biggest smile. I walked over to the car and you wound the window down.

“Hey there, handsome.”

“Hi.”

“I’ve just watched a girl and her client fucking over there by your bins,” you said, laughing. “It was hot.”

“That goes on all the time,” I said.

“How you doin’?”

“Fine,” I replied. “You?”

“Yeah, great.” You banged the steering wheel. “Listen, I’ve got this beauty for the night – gotta deliver it in the morning. Fancy a spin?”

I walked around to the passenger door and as I did so you reached across and opened it. I climbed in. You leant over and kissed me.

As we left my road behind us you said, “Open your mouth,” and popped in a tab of acid. I immediately thought of Spike and our acid-fuelled joy rides to the Moors a hundred years ago. I was already stoned, and relaxed back into the smell of the leather and the thrill of being with you, embracing like a lover the night to come.

“I thought we’d go up to Highgate Cemetery,” you said. “Ever been?”

“Not at night,” I said.

“You’re in for a treat,” you said, grinning to yourself, your hand squeezing my knee on its way to the gear stick. Hole’s *Live Through This* was playing.

The cemetery was locked, of course, but after parking the car by the main gates and waiting for a clear road, you hoisted yourself up the wall and I followed. We dropped down into the shadows. The moonlight painted each leaf fluorescent till the trees glowed enough to light our way, and you led me through the labyrinth of trees and headstones to a sunken

circular arena of private mausoleums. Graves yawned. The darkness was thick with the sounds of the night: with owls and silence, the occasional fox crying like some abandoned baby. You pulled me to you, pulling my face close to yours till our mouths met in a kiss that made lights appear in my head. It was a cold night, but when your hands reached under my clothes to touch the small of my back they were warm and massive, and I responded by holding your head in my hands and eating your kisses like a starving man might wolf down his first food for weeks. And the sky was made of amethyst, and all the stars were just like little fish. Not feeling the cold, we unfastened our trousers and pushed them to our ankles, grabbing and tasting each other's flesh. This cannibalism made time itself more edible a concept. Nipple, belly, cock, scrotum, armpit, arsehole. I wanted to eat you as badly as you wanted to eat me. Waves broke against me in sudden splashes. Sea-spray flecked my hair. Salt stung my skin. Your warm hands passed through me and your mouth tasted good. Your hair smelt atomic. A bright forest of tall white candles grew up around us, lighting up the sky. *Go on, take everything, take everything, I want you to.* When you pulled away, silver webs appeared between us, which dissolved almost as soon as they were spun. It was suddenly as bright as day and a shoal of stars swam off into this vast sea of light, leaving trails of bubbles that rose and burst. My hands passed right through you. We walked through each other's body like walking through corridors, opening doors that lead to other corridors and other doors. Your moans transformed into a flotilla of butterflies, and as they flew away they spelled out the word 'danger' with their dark bodies. I am here without knowing how. Suddenly, terrifyingly, present. Here, now, lost and hot, my heart in my head, and my cock warm and wet in your mouth. I held your head in my hands, your black curls thick between my fingers, and as I slid down your throat towards my orgasm I remembered who I was, who you were, and I didn't know whether to feel safety or fear.

In bed, afterwards, we stayed up until sunrise, describing to each other the visions we could see.

After the cemetery, nothing. You left in the morning without offering any hope that we might meet again. There followed what seemed like weeks of deserted time, stretched out between the last sight of you and the next sight of you, dune upon dune of pointless space, waiting to be crawled across in the vain hope that your face might rise like an oasis as I scaled the summit. I busied myself though nothing could bring me joy.

I cannot recall now how long until the next encounter – perhaps no more than a week. You pulled up outside on a motorbike, making enough noise to raise the dead. It was late at night. I was stoned and bored, waiting for the phone to ring, for the distraction of a client. I leant out of the window to see you looking up at me, visor up, holding out a spare helmet. I grabbed a jacket and ran down the three flights of stairs so fast I felt dizzy and breathless by the time I reached you. There are no words for what followed. I don't know if you felt anything like what I felt that night, with my arms around your waist, my hands nestled in your denimed crotch, my legs sealed against yours, the heat between us bonding our surfaces like adhesive, like two pieces of a whole being mended. The aroma of your leather jacket. The click of our helmets like a clumsy attempt at a kiss. The night air tearing through us as we sped across the flyover and out of the city, leaving the earth behind us as we traced a flight path beyond the speed of light, slowing down time till we could taste each nanosecond as it passed through our lips. When we stopped and climbed off and removed our helmets, somewhere west of the city, I felt such a spin of adrenalin that when you grabbed my face and kissed the mouth off me, I lost myself in that dissolving of reality that makes you believe that life after all might be worth something, if only it could last. We made love on Barnes Common and smoked a joint, talking about things I can no longer recall, things that made sense of the madness of our lives, if only temporarily. Things that pulled me further in.

“So I guess we’re fuck buddies, now, huh?” you said with that ironic tone of yours that only now I realise contained a distance I myself was trying to bridge. At the time I thought you craved a cleaving of the gap between us as much as I did.

“I never had a fuck buddy before,” I said, mirroring your tone, ever reluctant to let the real emotion show lest it not be reciprocated. “What are the rules?”

“There are no rules,” you said, “rules are for people who have no imagination, who fear freedom.” I remained silent. “You and me, we’re free as birds.”

“Free to do what?” I asked.

“Whatever you want.”

On the way back, more than once I was assailed by a strong urge to loosen my grip on you and let the wind rip me from the bike and send me out into space, to a place from which I could never return. Somehow I knew that whatever it was that existed between us it could not be preserved, or could only be preserved if we were to collide with a tree or a truck and be crushed into an instant that could keep this love locked up tight forever, never to go stale. You dropped me off outside my flat and roared off into the night.

We met again the next night. It was raining lightly. I walked past Price Check, crossed the road, past the Scala, towards the Bell, the place where it all began. I passed a man and a woman standing in front of a shop window, a huge reflective surface, in the crude glare of the streetlights. The drizzle shone like glass on the young man’s bare, hairless torso. She turned his gaze towards his image. His blue jeans were unbuttoned, the root of his cock visible in the gape. “Look at you,” she said. “Just look at you. You’re fuckin’ beautiful.” And he looked at himself. And smiled. A stupid, drunken, narcissistic smile.

I walked into the bar. Already stoned. Looked around but you weren't there. I bought a pint and found a seat. You arrived, and I never thought this was possible, this tug-tug-tugging of the heart. A face I didn't want to take my eyes from. That face can never, will never, leave me. A face to light up my own. My piece of treasure. A nail to pierce the hands and feet. *Always be with me*, I thought to myself. Always be with me and always look this glad to see me.

I felt scared for the first time in years. I tasted danger when I looked at your face. I smelt the unknown. I wonder now how much of it showed? Wonder when it got too hot, when you felt the intensity become unbearable for the first time? When did it all become too much and you decided to chicken out? I certainly imagined at the time that I always kept it well hidden, how good it was to see you. Thought I was playing it cool – at least to begin with. I was used, of course, to performing in the opposite manner, feigning a pleasure I didn't feel. Perhaps we always give the game away, despite ourselves, to spite ourselves. You bought a drink and sat down next to me, kissing me on the lips. You had just done a client and were glowing with after-sex. I wanted you. Still want you. Will always want you, perhaps. I felt a stab of jealousy. The air I breathed got thinner. It was a feeling that remained for the longest time indescribable. I dismissed it.

“How was your day?” you asked, and I told you, though I cannot recall what I said. Very little of that time remains with me that didn't contain you. My life had long ceased to be memorable. I would never have admitted it at the time, but I was bored. My days had become an utterly pointless quest for cash and cock. The brief thrill of the cruise. Even sex rarely moved me anymore, unless it involved you. The anticipation was more enjoyable than the actual thing. How many times during that period did I conjure your face to make myself cum?

After a couple of pints, we returned to my flat, and I lit a candle before climbing into the bed beside you. Several minutes into the sex, the room became suddenly illuminated with a dancing orange light – the candle had set fire to some newspapers in my room. You leapt up and used your t-shirt to beat out the flames, rendering it scorched and un-wearable. You managed to stop the fire, but the wall was black and the room full of acrid smoke. I opened the window coughing. We pulled on our pants and left the flat, going upstairs onto the roof to get some fresh air. The familiar smog of London greeted us affectionately. Some of the residents from the other flats had planted little container gardens up there but no one in our section had bothered. Ours was the slum end. There was one pot that served as the last resting place for a dried up stump of a plant. There was a red British Rail bench. On one side of us the lights from the trains were moving in and out of King’s Cross station; on the other, the staccato architecture of St. Pancras silhouetted against a burgundy sky. I tried not to think about what might have happened if we had not spotted the fire in time. I didn’t want to think about that. I wanted to return to the moment, so I started to kiss you. We fucked standing up, both facing out onto the open city, your cock connecting us, our bodies welded with sweat, alone, together, facing what lay before us, like the figurehead of a ship about to sink.

The next night we met in the West End. Meal at Pollos, drinks at The Edge, a cab back to your flat in Limehouse, during which you pointed out your favourite buildings, or recounted stories about the history of the area. I think if I had to pick the first moment when I expressed to myself how much I had fallen in love, it would be then, when you talked excitedly about what you knew.

Your flat was enormous, with a balcony overlooking the river. I remember wondering to myself what you must think of my pokey, untidy flat. The bathroom was painted black with hundreds of silver stars covering the walls and ceiling. You showed me a table you made while studying furniture design when you were younger, a huge, kidney-shaped hunk

of wood, and some strange but beautiful vases you had made recently. Your accent betrayed the fact that you grew up partly in America when you said *vayse* instead of *varze*.

I said that I thought they were beautiful, though I wasn't really sure I meant it.

"Would you like one?"

I didn't say anything.

"Here, have one, I want you to have one," and you held out a green vase. "Matches your eyes," you said with a smile. Why do I feel so unlike myself when I am near you?

Pointing to a small mirror on the table, upon which lay two fat lines of cocaine, you said, "Help yourself," and I did. You came over and made short shrift of the other line, before dabbing your finger in the remaining dust and rubbing it against my gums, then kissing me. You lay back on the sofa and whispered, "Come here," pulling me to you. I lay on top of you and we kissed for a long time, grinding our erections together through our jeans. You slid your right hand inside the back of my jeans. You said, "Let's sit on the balcony – it's beautiful out there at this time of night."

So we stood up and you walked over to the open-plan kitchen and grabbed a bottle of red wine from the rack, scooping up two inverted wine glasses from the draining board. I remember wondering who else had been around here drinking wine with you, and how recently. You nodded down at the table as you passed it, saying "Grab that box," and continued on towards the glass doors leading outside. I picked it up and followed you out onto the balcony. The sky was a dark, dark blue. Starless and moonless. Across the water, a galaxy of orange-lit windows, blinking lights, strings of streetlamps and the brazen beams of cars. This city is constructed of points of light, like a madrigal.

You opened the box and removed Rizlas and a pebble of hash. There are lots of ways to roll a joint. In my life, I have probably witnessed them all. But no one has ever rolled a joint like you did. It was an art to rival origami, the way you ripped and licked your way through six small Rizlas. You handed it to me, and I set a flame to its magnificence.

You stood up quickly and said, "Let's have some music. What do you fancy?"

"You," I said, feeling like a prick immediately the word was out.

"Got any Radiohead?" I asked, to cover the word that hung there in the silence between us.

You disappeared indoors, returning as the first notes of *The Bends* crashed in. I handed you the joint. You were carrying a CD case and I watched as you carefully cracked open the two parts of clear plastic to expose the hollow of its spine. There, like vertebrae, lay a row of white pills.

"I posted them over last time I was in LA. You get the best ecstasy there." You necked one and held another out for me to take. I closed my mouth around your fingertip and swallowed the pill. Across the river, two spotlights appeared in the black sky, their beams cutting across the darkness, and dancing, now close, now far apart, their diagonals dissecting my vision. The music intensified the sight.

Everything started to fragment.

You told me it was your mother's flat. She's English, your dead father Venezuelan. You didn't have a flat in London. "I don't like to feel tied down to one city," you said, mysteriously. You told me that your mother, a professor of art history, was away, lecturing in the States. You told me that your younger brother died of AIDS four years earlier, just months after your father died of a heart attack. You recounted these details without any

visible or audible emotion. I have no Great Tragedy to recount in return, only the uneventful blandness of my childhood. The fact that I haven't seen my family in ten years doesn't strike me as a Great Tragedy. I told you one or two stories about myself. You told me about the three months you spend each year in Venezuela, staying in your dead grandmother's house, taking the purest cocaine and sleeping your way through the local boys. You told me about hanging out at a bus depot there, where they have showers for the drivers to freshen up before going home after a shift, recounting how you befriended the son of the depot manager, and how one day when the manager was absent and the son was in charge, you talked him into locking the door while the two of you and a few of the drivers stripped off and had sex in the showers. I wondered whether to believe a word of it, and concluded that it didn't really matter.

"It's like Joe Orton said," you smirked, "you'll only regret not having fun with your genitals."

I looked at the sky. I could hear and smell the pelt of the Thames passing by us not too far below, like a beast pacing the forest floor.

"You know, you're not at all like the other British men I've met."

"Really? In what way?" I asked.

You laughed. "Well, the way you have sex, for a start. You really go for it. I like that."

"Is that unusual?" I asked, wondering what kind of person wouldn't really go for it with you.

"You're very passionate. I like that. I don't find that very often in Brits." Although what you said made me feel good, I didn't know what to say in response, so for something to

do I lit a cigarette. Just at that moment you held out the joint and I swapped it for the cigarette.

“Shouldn’t I have said that?” you asked, a slight note of worry in your voice.

“No, it’s cool.”

“You’re a rare breed.”

You reached for the ornate wooden box.

“You have the most amazing aura.”

From the green packet, you plucked out six skins in quick succession.

“Sorry?” I immediately remembered the night at Harry’s, and that dreadful new age book those boys were discussing. Had you been involved in their conversation before spreading-eagle on the bed? Had you begun it? Read it? *Believed* it?

“Your aura. It’s the most amazing colour. I’ve never seen another like it.”

You started to lick a Rizla’s edge and begin to construct that strange configuration of papers.

“And what colour is it?” (*What colour is it?*)

In the distance, the Thames was striped in gold like a tiger. A black and gold tiger.

“It’s kinda orange. Like a flame. Really hot,” you said, with a grin on your face fresh enough to eat.

I could hear the river tiger breathing in low slow rasps. I didn’t know what to say so I didn’t say anything.

“David isn’t my real name,” I said, after a long silence, apropos of nothing and sounding far more mysterious than I had intended. Just at that moment, you shouted “OH *SHIT!*” and drowned out my statement. I looked at you.

“I just dropped the dope, man.”

“You didn’t!”

“I did. It fell right down between the fuckin’ boards!”

We both looked down at the balcony floor. It was constructed of widely spaced wide wooden beams between which the resin had just dropped, down onto the beach below. The tide was out, luckily, the Thames revealing its bed, like a whore disrobing. A carpet of shingle stretched out beneath us, millions of dark brown lumps of rock worn smooth by the river's suck. Each and every one of them looked just like a lump of hash.

I said, “Whoops.”

“Whoops?” you yelled, “no, ‘whoops’ is for when you’ve accidentally electrocuted your grandmother. ‘Whoops’ is for when you realise you’ve just outed your boyfriend to his parents, or when you catch your foreskin in your zipper. The only possible response to this situation is...” And you emitted the most bloodcurdling scream that had us in fits of giggles, which you cut short by saying, “It’s not funny, man, that was a big fuckin’ lump.”

“Oh, well.” I took a sip of red wine in commiseration. I was already rolling from the E.

From the living room drifted the sound of Thom Yorke tearing his heart out.

“I’m gonna fuckin’ find it!” you said, standing up and disappearing inside.

“OK,” I said, joining in the lunacy and following. We went down a flight of stairs into the bedroom, a large room with two massive vertical wooden beams. You disappeared into a cupboard and reappeared with a rope, which you tied around one of the beams like you’re Errol Flynn, testing your handiwork before trailing the rope towards the open window. I watched you thread it through and down to the beach below. “A flashlight,” you said, running past me and out of the room.

You returned holding out a bunch of five white candles like a ghost’s hand. “Couldn’t find a flashlight. Here.” You handed me one.

You went first, disappearing through the window, and I heard the wet crunch of you landing on shingle. I followed, smelling the damp brine, crystalline, in the warm air. Clumps of green mush and debris were scattered about, tin cans, plastic bottles, crisp packets, a bicycle wheel, looking strangely beautiful in the faint candlelight. On our hands and knees, faces pressed close to the circle of orange light as it makes its way across that impossibly homogenous landscape, we began our search for the lump of hash. There was no sound except the rustle of the tiger’s fur.

It was hard not to laugh, so we did. The tiger laughed too. Quietly.

A long and profound silence descended, until...

“This is like looking for a needle in a fuckin’ hay-” I said, the sentence broken off by the absolute beauty of the brown nugget I had just panned.

“I’ve fuckin’ *found it!*” I yelled, holding it up inside the candle’s halo, feeling it give as I squeezed it gently, gently squeezed it. Yes. I tested it on my teeth like a jeweller. Yes. You ran over and kissed me, leaving diamonds in my mouth. Mmm. We rooted the candles

amongst the stones and you began to skin up our prize, saying, “What did I say? You’re fuckin’ amazing.” The river purred at our feet.

I looked at you and heard an echo: *you’re fuckin’ amazing*. And the river purred at our feet.

*Novel published September 16 2010 (Myriad Editions)

Citation: Kemp, J. 2010. ‘London Triptych’. *Polari Journal*, 1 (April 2010), www.polarijournal.com/resources/Kemp-London.pdf (accessed <insert date>).