Parking my refreshment trolley clear of passengers getting off and on at Three Bridges station, one knocks into me. Bleached denim jacket and jeans, hair spiked and cheekbones like blunt weapons beneath pock-scarred skin, he staggers a few steps down the aisle—beer can in hand—then spins around, locking me in his wanna-fight gaze. "Twat," he says.

I drop into a squat amongst shifting commuters' feet. Flatten three of the spinning pound coins I've been counting under my palm. Make a mental note to replace two from my eight pounds an hour wage. Body stooped once more into the line of fire, I stand to meet a voice pitched like an electric saw hitting a knot in a plank of wood: "You need some manners beating into you."

Since leaving Kosovo in 1999, I've done everything from washing cars to painting toilets, but pulling a laden refreshment trolley down the 18.46 pm London to Brighton is up there with the worst of them. A Russian girl I slept with once called drifting from one awful job to the next in a state of perpetual numbness, strength. Not laughing or crying for years. A body rigid with anger isn't strength. It's survival.

About halfway down the carriage, a head of brown spiky hair is just visible above a seat. I turn towards an old man, his hand half up like a schoolboy uncertain of the answer, and manoeuvre my trolley next to him and his white-haired wife. Black coffee for him. White for her.

"I've been on this train since Liverpool and I get on here with all you London twats… What's the matter, you don't like me cos I'm a Scouser?"

I've never heard of a Scouser before, but I've heard of Liverpool because my father was obsessed with The Beatles and listened to their catchy tunes on an old Sony

tape recorder that squeaked and buzzed and crackled. He even named our short haired dachshund after one of their songs: 'Penny Lane'.

The old man spreads a worn out wallet across his lap: "How much?"

"Four pounds twenty," I say.

He shakes his head. 'How can you charge two pounds twenty for this muck?'

"I do not set prices."

"And you've dribbled coffee all over the side of my cup," adds the wife.

Her tight-lipped husband presses cash into my hand and lowers his voice. "If you're going to come over here, have the decency to do your job properly."

"Screw the lot of you." The Scouser's words ricochet around the carriage like bullets, followed by a metallic crack. Something hits the back of my leg. The old woman rolls her eyes to a crushed beer can.

It's not unusual to get verbal abuse doing this job. Normally, it's water off a bird's back, but this Scouser—along with the old couple grumbling about coffee—is the end of the straw.

When I get to the Scouser, he's hunched over his mobile phone. I squeeze the beer can. It crackles and he looks up. The skin around his pale blue eyes is thin and wrinkled like a chamois my mother used to leave to dry on the washing line. The chamois belonged to my father.

"I think this is belonging to you," I say.

"Take that can back to your trolley…" says the Scouser and relaxes two meaty fists onto his lap with HATE tattooed across the knuckles of his right hand. Outside, through a rain-flecked window, black clouds hang above fields of bright yellow rapeseed,

reminding me of the home I left when I was 16 years old.

The Scouser raises his voice above wheels grinding against the track. "… else I'm gonna hit you so hard…"

The train slows as we enter a tunnel. His voice trails off as if muted by the sudden darkness. A few complaining voices about the faulty lights that flicker twice but don't come on, followed by childish giggles as we pick up speed in the dark.

"You there, Sis?" The glow from a small phone gives a green tinge to the side of the Scouser's face. "I'll catch you later… losing service in this bleeding tunnel. Love you."

With his hate tattooed fists and all that lip, as the English would say, I wouldn't think this man capable of love. But then I remember my father returning home after a night out with a cut under his eye and a bloody nose. Sometimes he'd pull me roughly to him and kiss me on the head; more often, though, he'd box my ears. It all depended on his sozzled mood.

The train speeds up through the tunnel. Bottles of wine rattle on my refreshment trolley, reminding me of a place and a time I've tried to forget.

*... Speeding along dusty back roads between fields of ready-to-harvest rapeseed in the back of my father's Volkswagen Polo. Bottles of cherry wine chime like little bells from the car boot. Another hot weekend spent crunching summer apples beneath our feet in my grandmother's garden. Gathering baby potatoes from the earth and placing them in a basket to take back to our flat in the city. In the front seat of the car, my mother points her Polaroid camera up at black clouds, then lowers it to the level of the yellow fields.*

*"Do you have to take pictures of everything?" yells my father.*

A pop followed by a child crying in the dark. A woman's voice: "We'll buy another balloon on Brighton Pier. Yes, we'll find you another pink one."

The train slows before a sudden jolt knocks me sideways into a seat. Rough denim chaffs. Cold metal against my cheek. Acrid stench of cigarettes and beer.

"Get off me, twat!" A rough palm into my face, and I roll from the seat and hit my head against an armrest. In the dark, I scuttle back down the aisle. A can cracks open as we leave the tunnel, and the carriage is suddenly flush with late evening sunshine.

Above me, a girl dangles a piece of pink rubber attached to a black line of cotton. "My balloon's burst-id," she says. I remember waves unfurling on Dover Beach the bright blue day I arrived on a ferry from France. That morning I was full of hope, but by the afternoon clouds had rolled over from France making the once calm, blue sea grey and prickly with waves.

"Oi, twat, get us one of them miniature bottles of whiskey when you've crawled back to your trolley," says the Scouser.

Confused in the dark, I must have crawled the wrong way down the carriage.

"The next station is Gatwick Airport." The pre-recorded female voice is familiar and soothing.

"Do that and I won't rip out your tongue for trying to give me a blowjob in the tunnel," continues the Scouser. He throws back his head and gulps thirstily from a can of beer. His Adam's apple pulses like a heart in his neck.

*My father's knocking back a large mug of cherry wine when a NATO shell hits the flats opposite. Salty butter running down my chin, I spit half-eaten potato onto my plate*

*and duck under the table.*

*"Yes! Yes!" my father yells above tense barking from our dog, Penny.*

*Beneath the kitchen table, I stare at my father's dirty feet: all toes flexed in wornout sandals, singing a favourite John Lennon song in heartfelt English. War is over. Merry Christmas.*

The Scouser is hunched over his phone slowly pressing the keys with one thick finger. He rubs his forehead with the back of his hand, revealing a raised area of healed skin—lighter than the rest—running between the bottom of his little finger and thumb.

As a child, I remember my father tracing his fingers across a similar scar, but a diagonal wound coarsely healed across his palm from the bottom of his index finger. Then he would tell me his tall story about running into John Lennon in a bar in 1979. He claimed they shared a bottle of whiskey and became blood brothers before Lennon caught his plane back to New York. My father always opened up the blade of his Swiss Army Knife at this moment and squeezed my palm to his scar. "Don't be a coward," he'd say.

Sometimes he'd squeeze me to his oil-stinking chest; once in a while he'd slap me playfully across the face and bob around me throwing punches, egging me on to fight back. When I refused he'd stagger back to his bottle cursing under his whiskey-soaked breath.

Most of the carriage empties out at Gatwick Airport, leaving the old couple and the Scouser. The couple stand up and retreat to the back of the carriage.

"Something I said?" The Scouser bares his teeth and snarls like a dog; then he turns to me. A change of tone as his voice vaults high: "You getting me that whiskey or what?"

I'm supposed to do one last sweep of carriages, but this Scouser has hooked me with his sharp tongue and a scar that pulls me back to a time before a missile sent me fatherless and motherless, here.

"Where did you get that hand from?" They've come out all wrong: these stupid English words. What I meant to say was: "Where did you get the wound on the palm of your hand?"

"These hands are for twatting twats like you," says the Scouser.

"The scar?"

He opens his fist, studies the palm, and runs a nail-bitten thumb along the wound. "That's a war wound from school."

*Sticking out of a mountain of concrete, wood and metal, my father's hand with his wedding band on one finger reflecting the last rays of the evening sun. I scramble out from under the table and stagger past the dust-covered body of Penny. My mother's body crumpled next to the upturned fridge and her smashed Polaroid camera. When I say "Nënë" my voice sounds far away. Ears ringing with a high never-ending note, I try to help her up, hoping she has some minor injury. Her body's limp. Heavy. Turning her, I find a piece of metal embedded in her right temple. Her eyes open. I make for my father's hand. Pull too hard on it so I stumble backwards across our destroyed kitchen, my father's severed arm held above me like a gruesome prize.*

The Scouser presses his thumb into the scar on his hand. "Batty Spencer—our headmaster—caned me once. Swearing in class or some bollocks like that. Twat tore clean through the skin." He circles a finger in the air like the English Queen from her carriage. "Any chance of that whiskey, mate?"

I slip a miniature bottle from the third drawer and pour it into a plastic cup. The Scouser has dropped his head back—eyes closed silently mouthing some song he's got in his head. When I put the whiskey under his nose, his head jerks forward, knocking the cup from my hand. Spilling it over his lap and mobile phone.

"Sorry," I say, but as I reach for the empty cup on his lap, something hard hits my face. I stagger backwards into my trolley. Slide down the side of the cold compartment. Where'd that come from? He was quick, just like my father, who was lightening fast with punches even after drink distorted his words and turned his legs to spaghetti.

*Stumbling around the smoke-filled street outside our flat, I meet Mrs Miljko—an elderly Serbian neighbour. She demands I drop my father's arm. When I pull it to my chest, she smacks me so hard across the face I fly back into an upturned shopping trolley. Tears stream down her dust-covered cheeks as she rushes towards me, apologising. But a policeman is first. He prises my father's arm from me. Tries to snap one finger to get the gold wedding ring off. When that fails, he takes out a knife and slices clean through the ring finger.*

The Scouser stands over me, cleaning his phone with the filthy corner of his denim jacket. "Thought you'd murdered my phone." When he reaches his hand towards me, I remain slumped against the trolley. The metal-bullet taste of blood on my lips. My eyes roll to him and I remember the policeman tossing my father's finger into the shattered remains of our flat.

When the Scouser presses his callused hand into mine, I hold on. He lets go, so I reach for those huge fingers again as a child would reach for a familiar book before bed. Compelled to touch those paper pages before sleep. That was one thing my father liked to

do when I was young: read me a story. It was always the same one, an adventure story for boys. Even when I was older, after one of his verbal or physical attacks, he'd stumble into my room looking for that book. When he found it he'd sometimes read it, but more often than not he'd fall asleep with it open on his lap.

The train trundles over a section of cross track, picking up speed. Wine bottles on the trolley chime like little bells. I catch his hand. *How can I let go my father's hand?*

I remember one of my father's wild punches caught me on the chin. From where I'd rolled—cowering under a bookshelf of books my mother had instructed me to read if I wanted to escape a dead-end life—I squeezed my hand into a fist. My father was always threatening my mother when his food was late or his beer wasn't cold enough, and that night he'd struck her too. I'd had enough, so I stood up—both fists clenched—and crept towards his bare, sinewy shoulders. Ready to hit back. If Penny Lane hadn't growled he wouldn't have turned to find me creeping towards him. I would have acted. Wouldn't I? Instead, I offered to fetch him a beer from the fridge.

I catch the Scouser's hand, and hook into soft flesh around the thumb with nails I've left to grow too long. He leans forward reaching for the back of a seat to steady him and catch his balance, but he misses and crashes backwards knocking the trolley back down the aisle. The old man and his wife stand up at the far end of the carriage like a couple of spectators at a fight.

I bounce in front of the Scouser's slumped body like a boxer before a bout. I've a lean, bony body like my mother and my knuckles bleach the skin of my tensed fist. When the Scouser bares his nicotine-stained teeth, a tongue flicks out then disappears like a frog picking a fly out of the air.

"Gonna respect you more if you stamp on my head and kick me in the bollocks," he says.

I remember my father turned away, hunched over a shot and beer glass. The volume turned up high on his cassette recorder. John Lennon pleading for help or peace or love. Later, I'd hear him sniveling behind the sound of a boiling kettle broken-hearted, perhaps, because I wasn't as hard as him, or as brittle. Because my father was a weak man who didn't know how to love or make peace or even ask for help.

"What you waiting for?" The Scouser sucks in cracked lips and drops his chin onto his chest, resigned to me not throwing back a punch or kick—not doing what he and probably his father before him would have done.

"Twat." All the Scouser's power-tool has screech gone—muted by beer and whiskey. Punching is an action, I think to myself. So is walking away.

When the train pulls into Brighton station, I do not stop on the platform with my trolley of so-called refreshments; or pop over the pub for an English pint before catching a train back to London. I let the sea breeze guide me toward the gaudy lights of Brighton Pier.

I take my shoes off—damp pebbles kneed the stinking, cracked soles of my feet. Drizzle soaks the warm air; a couple kisses under a lamppost on the promenade; the distant sound of Friday night revelers: cheers and breaking glasses.

I toss one pebble into the choppy water, and then another—a little further this time, skimming across the prickly waves beyond a point where it might stop and sink. My father taught me to skim stones on a small lake next to my grandmother's house, but lost interest when I skimmed a stone further than him. The next stone is slate smooth. A

perfect fit between finger and thumb. This one will make it to France.