

Dream Academy

The television studio designed as an auditorium went dark as I waited in the wings for my mark, hands shaking, my left leg twitching. Suddenly the giant screens burst into life, a swirling graphic of red and silver, which transformed into letters as the announcer's voice boomed out my name over the dramatic, pumped to the max, chorus from *O Fortuna*. The audience started cheering, screaming and clapping as the displays changed into an idealised, stylised, version of me, excessively made up, flattering lighting and expensive post editing effects. To be completely honest, I thought I looked great up there, like I belonged, like a goddamn star.

The screens changed as the pre-recorded segment began:

'This week we are going back with the contestants to their hometowns,' the narrator announced, 'first up is twenty-two year old, Benjamin Harrison from Kirkhead, in Rochdale.'

The image changed to one of screaming crowds as the camera whizzed past them, all of children and adults doing the 'X' symbol with their arms crossed across their chests, looking like the party members in *1984* screaming at the black and white image of Emmanuel Goldstein during the 'two minute hate'. I saw signs, held aloft with my name and face on them, crude hand drawn pieces, sometimes spelt correctly, with pictures of me cut from a magazine, stuck roughly to the signs at oblique angles. Then I saw me emerging from a silver stretch Humvee, looking ridiculous and cool in pop star clothes: hipster tight jeans; a natty graphite grey waistcoat over a striped collarless shirt, sleeves rolled up to the elbows; a tatty, blood red scarf that wouldn't look out of place in a group of female foreign exchange

students walking along Oxford Street in summer; and a sequined trilby on my head to top the look off. The screaming from the crowd intensified and they swarmed me, touching me, kissing me; a million arms around my shoulder and the flash of a million camera phones as the whole world tried to capture a picture of us together for their friends to 'like'. I saw a glimpse of myself standing in the midst of mayhem, my eyes wide, my face drained of colour underneath the fake tan, my shining, cosmetically whitened teeth bared in a snarl and the setting changed to me knocking on my own front door to 'surprise' my mum and Carl, my step-dad. They welcomed me with their arms wide open and hugged me like I had been lost at sea for years and led me and the camera crew into the front room, they described how they felt about me being on television and how they thought I would do in the contest:

'He'll win for sure,' Carl said, with exuberant passion, 'he's the complete package, the voice, the looks and the sex appeal for the girlies.'

The audience, back in the studio, screamed at this in approval, I felt my cheeks start to burn. Thankfully, it was dark in the wings so I didn't think anyone noticed.

The video on the screens changed to familiar, individual faces of people I knew: Mr Jackson, my drama teacher, his hair a lot greyer and thinner than it was when I at school six years ago, and Mrs Spencer, the headmaster with a wide smile on her face gushing my praises; Linda, my boss at the supermarket I worked, looking like her idol Bet Lynch from *Coronation Street*, faux fur and fake jewellery; Granny Pam from the café next door wearing a new, clean blue apron; Hannah, my co-worker and part-time girlfriend, who constantly nagged me to enter the competition after hearing me sing *Milk and Alcohol* by Dr Feelgood,

while mopping up a massive milk spillage, which always reminded me of the Great Boston Molasses Flood, after jugs of milk had been opened and poured down all the aisles of the supermarket by the local gang in retaliation to Linda blocking the youngest of the gang from buying cigarettes. I don't know why she thought a nine-year-old should be denied the right to smoke; and Kevin and Michael from school, still as tough looking as they did back then, now with tribal tattoos and too-tight shirts to display their muscles. Each person said something flattering about me, how they always knew I'd make it; how I was going to go all the way; make Kirkhead proud.

The studio screens started showing clips of my auditions and previous rounds building up, a crescendo of intensity, each clip shorter than the last, slightly louder and then a sudden stop, the music ceased, the screens turned black, the producer gave me a microphone, and the announcer's voice boomed 'Rochdale's finest, Benjamin Harrison.' The studio erupted in screams and light as I strode to the mark on the stage floor; I placed the microphone on the stand as the accompanying music started.

'In this dirty old part of the city,' I began with a strength in my voice that had been missing when I had sung in previous rounds, 'where the sun refused to shine, people tell me there ain't no use in tryin''. I closed my eyes and envisaged Hannah in my mind as I sang and my voice cracked when I reached the final chorus and I sang, feeling every word deep within, 'We gotta get out of this place, 'cause girl, there's a better life for me and you.'

The music faded and an ear-piercing howl of noise struck me as the audience started clapping and screaming. I opened my eyes to see the audience and judges standing in unison applauding me. After a lot of gesticulating from Simon it eventually died down and the judges made their comments: Simon said it gave him goosebumps, the crowd applauded; Sharon said it made her nipples go hard, the crowd bayed with laughter; Nicole said she was speechless and Louis said I had made the song my own, but I was expecting that as he'd said it to me for the past four weeks.

Simon then asked me what it was like to go back to my hometown, I hesitated as I thought of the people I'd seen, how amazed I was to see my step-dad Carl at home instead of at the pub or in the bookies, how much had the producers paid him to be there I wondered; how different my mum looked without her usual black eye; how surprised I was to see Mr Jackson singing my praises after the pervert had felt me up in detention every fucking week, with Mrs Spencer being all buddy-buddy and fucking smiles with him after she had repeatedly refused my complaints of abuse and put me in detention over and over again for lying; seeing Linda, my boss, who had done nothing but complain about me constantly throughout the six years I had worked in that shitty store, always on my back, getting me to work extra shifts threatening to fire me if I refused, there really aren't many jobs in Kirkhead for someone with no qualifications; Granny Pam who had got her grown-up son and his mates to beat the shit out of me when I told everyone I had seen her spit in the tea of a black customer and fucking Kevin and Michael who made my life hell at school after I had caught them making out together, slapping me around, telling everyone I was gay and that I had sucked off the school's caretaker for a quid, so everyone at school treated me like I had aids or something, and had the caretaker winking at me at every opportunity; how isolated, lonely and depressed this had made me feel and how I couldn't even lift myself up to work at my exams, to get the grades I knew I needed to leave that shitty little town and shitty life.

I thought about saying that all, getting it all out, a catharsis of emotion and hate, to the nation and the town that failed me, however I realised that was the Kirkhead in me, trying to keep me there, trying to keep me down, keep me following my step-dad's path of self-loathing and violence, I often wondered what my mum had seen in him to move us up to fucking Rochdale after my dad died, leaving our friends and life and opportunities in London far, far behind. It is like Kirkhead has a life-devouring soul, thriving in misery, revelling in hate, like Stephen King's Castle Rock. I then pictured Hannah and me hand-in-hand along the Thames at dusk, walking past the sellers with their Union Jack hats and tea towels; opening the door to my pop star mansion, all windows, pillars and driveway; standing in front of the crowds at the V Festival in Weston Park ready to deliver my headline set.

I straightened my shoulders, looked Simon dead in the eye and said 'I won't lie to you Simon, the welcome I received in Kirkhead blew me away, makes me so proud to come from there. I want to say thank you to all my friends, family and friends I haven't met yet for their kind words and support. Vote for me Rochdale!' I finished with a flourish and felt the Kirkhead presence around my soul release its grasp for the first time.