

Commissioned Writing by Hugh Dichmont

It occurred to me it was a stupid idea when I thought of it. But my life is crap anyway, so I thought fuck it, what can I lose. My flat is dead shit, right. Really cheap, but the wallpaper's comin off an mould's growin in the corners, an in the kitchen there's these crystals like flaky head in patches, which I poke an leave holes in, an some comes off. The rent's dead cheap, almost nothing, which is what I can afford with no job. I don't even bring my mates round here. It's too shit. When telly's rubbish I just sit an think about havin a better pad, where I can take girls. One time, sittin there –an before you say it I already told you, I know it's stupid- but the mould an peelin wallpaper an cracks started lookin like a map to me, for some place I don't know where. I went up an down that big crack (no jokes) like it was a road, or something, just lookin. The smaller cracks were rivers, the crystals bits were snow on mountains. I was bored- so what? An I keep lookin at this wall, an for some reason I thought I should leave this shit-hole an go somewhere, anywhere. So I get this map of Britain I've got an I look at the names of cities. But I can't choose where I want to live that'll be better, so just for fun I get a pen an copy the line on the wall, the massive crack down the middle. I start at home an go up the map with the pen till I'm done, but not lookin down. An when I finish I look at the crack on the page, an my version's pretty good. Stoke-on-Trent is where it stops. So I know it's stupid, but I've already made my mind up: I'm goin to Stoke. Now I never knew my dad, but what I got of him is a photo. In it he's paintin, like a picture, an I reckon he was an artist. He's lookin at the camera, or mum takin it or whoever. Mum never answered any questions about him, an she never speaks about him, not even cross words. She just used to go quiet, so I learned to stop askin. But on the back of the photo it says "Tony, Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent, 1974". When I saw where the line ended on the map I thought it was funny, an straight off I thought of dad. I know it's crazy but I've always wondered what Stoke was like, an I had nothin keepin me here, not a job, not a girlfriend, an TV was shit. So I went.

1970s, the School of Art, Stoke-on-Trent. Tony, bearded, good-looking and in his forties, and Mark, early fifties, stout and balding, stand outside the building. Vikki, in her forties, pushing a plastic doll baby in a full-sized pram.

Tony takes a drag of a cigarette. He looks off into the distance. Mark stares at him.

M: What are you going to do Tony? You've screwed up mate.
T: It'll blow over, it always does.
M: You can't charm your way out of every mess you've got into.
T: I'll think of something. (Finishes his cigarette and puts it out)

Vikki wanders slowly into view, pushing her pram, talking quietly to herself.

M: Check this weirdo out.
T: What do you think I should do then?
M: Tell your wife, first of all. Tell her about this girl you've got up the duff, all the other students you've been messing around with too. Soon all the stories will come out by themselves, but it's better that she hears them from you.
T: I'm sick of this place, my life. I'm going to run away with Tina.
M: You're too old to run away, mate. And with a pregnant teenager?
T: Tina's not the pregnant one. I don't care about her. Tina is the tall blond one with green eyes. She's special. Different from the other girls.

M: And you should know... I bet you could identify half our student body by name through touch alone.

Vikki stops near them and takes the doll out of the pram. She hugs the doll and bounces it up and down, comforting it. Mark and Tony look, but keep talking.

M: What about the commitment you made with your wife, your plans?

T: You're right, I should think about Jayne. Maybe she'll understand, and we can be happy. Have a family.

M: And this pregnant girl? You can't just fob her off.

T: You're right, I should give her money or something, shouldn't I? I'm not into kids. Maybe I should get her to get it removed. You know, every fag break I look at all that carving on the Wedgwood, and it makes me depressed. It's beautiful, but all that hard work, and for what? They're just dead now.

Vikki drops the doll momentarily, but picks it up and continues to comfort it as before.

So I leave Stoke station an follow signs to the city centre. But I walk an walk, an there's just rows of houses. I ask a granny if I'm goin the wrong way but she says nah, that Stoke doesn't have a middle, an that the city's in pieces. I keep walkin an there's this paving slab on one street that says "step towards the future" on it, written in big. Now stop me if I'm talkin bollocks, but I reckon I'm steppin towards the past, but like my map, it's this big space with no names on it or signs, an I'm just walkin. What am I doin here? I ask myself. An I don't know. Sometimes I imagine what my dad was like, an I look at his photo. I can't see the picture he's paintin in the photo, but I imagine him sometimes to be brilliant, really good at makin it look realistic, makin it like it should be. An I think of my life if he was around, an I think it would have been good, to have him around. It might sound a bit gay, but you can fuck off if that's what you think, cos sometimes I wonder if he knew me at all, an if he ever held me, comforted me when I was just a baby. It makes me happy thinkin the gap between us is not so big anymore now I'm stood somewhere he was. I'm in a park, an I feel pretty stupid, I didn't bring any bread for the ducks. But they don't seem disappointed, they just go right past me anyway.