Author Note

The Fortune Men is a work of fiction. Although it is inspired by a real event and real-life characters appear in places, all the characterizations and the narrative are entirely fictitious and are purely a product of the author's imagination.

Kow

One

Tiger Bay, February 1952

'The King is dead. Long live the Queen.' The announcer's voice crackles from the wireless and winds around the rapt patrons of Berlin's Milk Bar as sinuously as the fog curls around the mournful street lamps, their wan glow barely illuminating the cobblestones.

The noise settles as milkshakes and colas clink against Irish coffees, and chairs scrape against the black-and-white tiled floor.

Berlin hammers a spoon against the bar and calls out with his lion tamer's bark, 'Raise your glasses, ladies and gentlemen, and send off our old King to Davy Jones's Locker.'

'He'll meet many of our men down there,' replies Old Ismail, 'he better write his apologies on the way down.'

'I b-b-b-et he wr-wr-wr-ote them on his d-d-d-eathbed,' a punter cackles.

Through the rock 'n' roll and spitting espresso machine Berlin hears someone calling his name. '*Maxa tiri?*' he asks as Mahmood Mattan pushes through the crowd at the bar.

'I said, get me another coffee.'

Berlin catches his Trinidadian wife's waist and steers

her towards Mahmood. 'Lou, sort this troublemaker another coffee.'

Ranged along the bar are many of Tiger Bay's Somali sailors; they look somewhere between gangsters and dandies in their cravats, pocket chains and trilby hats. Only Mahmood wears a homburg pulled down low over his gaunt face and sad eyes. He is a quiet man, always appearing and disappearing silently, at the fringes of the sailors or the gamblers or the thieves. Men pull their possessions closer when he is around and keep their eyes on his long, elegant fingers, but Tahir Gass – who was only recently released from Whitchurch asylum – leans close to him, looking for friendship that Mahmood won't give. Tahir is on a road no one can or will walk down with him, his limbs spasming from invisible electric shocks, his face a cinema screen of wild expressions.

'Independence any day now.' Ismail gulps from his mug and smiles. 'India is gone, what can they say to the rest?'

Berlin makes his eyes bold. 'They say we got you by the balls, darkie! We own your land, your trains, your rivers, your schools, the coffee grains at the bottom of your cup. You see what they do to the Mau Mau and all the Kikuyu in Kenya? Lock them up, man and child.'

Mahmood takes his espresso from Lou and smirks at the exchange; he cares nothing for politics. While trying to straighten his cufflinks a drop of coffee runs over the rim and falls on to his brightly polished shoes. Grabbing a handkerchief from his trouser pocket, he wipes it off and buffs the stain away. The brogues are new and as black and sharp as Newfoundland coal, better shoes

than any other fella here has on his feet. Three £1 notes burn away in his pocket, ready for a poker game; saved through missed lunches and nights spent without the fire, mummified in his blankets. Leaning over the bar, he nudges Ismail. 'Billa Khan coming tonight?'

'Me come from the jungle? I wish I come from the jungle! I said to him, look around you, *this* is the jungle, you got bushes and trees everywhere, in my country nothing grows.' Ismail finishes his joke and then turns to Mahmood. 'How would I know? Ask one of your crooks.'

Kissing his teeth, Mahmood throws the espresso down his throat and grabs his fawn mackintosh before stalking through the crowd and out of the door.

The cold air hits his face like a spade, and despite urgently forcing the jacket around his body the bitter February night takes hold of him and makes his teeth chatter. A grey smudge hovers over everything he sees, the result of a hot chink of coal flying from a furnace and into his right eye. A pain so pure that it had hoisted him up and backwards on to the cooling clinkers behind his feet. The clatter of shovels and devil's picks as the other stokers came to his aid, their hands tearing his fingers from his face. His tears had distorted their familiar faces, their eyes the only bright spots in the gloomy engine room, the emergency alarm clattering as the chief engineer's boots marched down the steel staircase. Afterwards, two weeks in a hospital in Hamburg with a fat bandage wrapped around his head.

That smudge and a bad back are the only physical remnants of his sea life. He hasn't boarded a ship for

near to three years; just foundry work and poky little boilers in prisons and hospitals. The sea still calls, though, just as loudly as the gulls surfing the sky above him, but there is Laura and the boys to anchor him here. Boys who look Somali despite their mother's Welsh blood, who cling to his legs calling 'Daddy, Daddy, Daddy' and pull his head down, mussing up his pomaded hair for forceful kisses that leave his cheeks smelling of sherbet and milk.

The streets are quiet but the news of the King's death drifts from many of the low-slung wind-blown terraces he passes. Each wireless set relaying the broadcast discordantly, either a second ahead or delayed. Passing the shops on Bute Street, he finds a few lights still on: at Zussen's pawnbroker's where many of his clothes are on hock, at the Cypriot barbershop where he has his hair trimmed and at Volacki's where he used to buy seafaring kits but now just bags the occasional dress for Laura. The tall grand windows of Cory's Rest are steamed up, with figures laughing and dancing behind the leaded glass. He peeks his head through the door to check if some of his regulars are there, but the West Indian faces around the snooker table are unfamiliar. He had once belonged to this army of workers pulled in from all over the world, dredged in to replace the thousands of mariners lost in the war: dockers, tallymen, kickers, stevedores, winch men, hatch men, samplers, grain porters, timber porters, tackle men, yard masters, teamers, dock watchmen, needle men, ferrymen, shunters, pilots, tugboatmen, foyboatmen, freshwater men, blacksmiths, jetty clerks,

warehousemen, measurers, weighers, dredgermen, lumpers, launch men, lightermen, crane drivers, coal trimmers, and his own battalion, the stokers.

Mahmood turns away from the wreathed and porticoed splendour of Cory's Rest towards the docks, from where a red mist tints the raw, uncooked sky. He enjoys watching the nightly, industrial spectacle: the dirty seawater appearing to catch fire as vats of rippled, white-hot furnace slag from the East Moors Steelworks tip into the lapping evening tide. The railway on the foreshore bank clanking and screeching as carts shoot back and forth between the billowing steelwork chimneys and the angry, steaming sea. It's an eerie and bewitching sight that catches his breath every time; he half expects an island or volcano to spit out from that bubbling, hissing stretch of petrol-streaked water, but it always cools and returns to its morose, dark uniformity by morning.

The docks and Butetown cover only a square mile but for him and his neigbours it's a metropolis. Raised up from marshland the century before, a Scottish aristocrat built the docks and named the streets after his relatives. Mahmood had heard a rumour that the world's first million-pound cheque was signed at the Coal Exchange. Even now, in the morning, a different calibre of men come bowler-hatted to work at the Mercantile Marine Office or the Custom House. At both the Marine Office and Seaman's Union you know which door to use if you don't want trouble, and this goes for the labouring white men as well as black. Beyond the financial district, the neighbourhood is for everyone, all of them hemmed in

and pushed close by the railway tracks and canals cutting them off from the rest of Cardiff. A maze of short bridges, canal locks and tramlines confuse the new visitor; just before his time, Somali sailors would wear the address of their lodging house on a board around their neck so that passers-by could help navigate them. The canals are a playground to young children and once, when two went missing, Mahmood had spent a blue, insomniac night searching the muddy water for any sight of them. They had been found in the morning – one white, one black, both drowned. But his boys are still too young to go wandering, *alhamdulillah*. One day, when they are older, he will show them around this port town with its Norwegian Church and kosher abattoir, its cranes, booms and smoking chimneys, its timber ponds, creosote works and cattle yards, its three broad thoroughfares – Bute Street, James Street, Stuart Street – criss-crossed with ever-narrowing terraces. The flags and funnels of the world's shipping fleets crowding the pierheads and sprawling across the dock basins.

Mahmood silently plans the future but now, defeated by the icy chill sneaking itself through the gaps between his coat buttons, he decides against another night of poker and heads home to Adamsdown, where the real fire in his life burns.

Violet collapses heavily into the wooden chair and waits for Diana to set the table. 'Where's Gracie?'

'Just finishing up her extra schoolwork, she'll be down in a minute.'

'I think she's working too hard, Di, her little face looks haggard.'

'Don't be ridiculous. She is barely putting pen to paper, spent most of the evening going through my high heels and jazz records. I went up to chivvy her along and her face was smeared in Max Factor Sunset Shine. She thinks she's set for Hollywood, that one.'

'The cleaner said that when she was changing her bed sheets she found a photo of Ben in his flight suit under her pillow.'

'I know.' Her smile stiffens and she turns her back to Violet.

Violet squeezes Diana's forearm. 'Strength, Sister. *Koyekh*.'

'Come on down, Grace, we're waiting for you!' Diana shouts up the stairs, ripping her apron off and folding it over the back of her chair. The pounds she put on over the Christmas holiday still show on her muscular body and her green wiggle dress strains across the back. Her black hair folds into loose waves over her shoulders; she needs a haircut but Violet likes it like this, it gives her sister a Mediterranean look.

'You are a perpetual motion machine.'

'Not by choice, I tell you. Maggie got Daniel to drop off the chicken as I had so many customers earlier. Every last one of them wanted to put his money on a horse with some kind of association with the King: "His Majesty", "Balmoral", "Buckingham Palace". I don't know if it's their way of paying their respects or just superstition but I've never seen anything like it.'

'I saw one of them cash his advance note of pay with me and then go through to you. A fool and his money . . .'

'Oh, that's poor Tahir, he's not right in the head. One of the sailors told me that he was "misused", as they say, by Italian soldiers in Africa. He tells me he's the King of Somalia and killed thousands of men in the war.'

'Which horse did he put money on?'

'The Empress of India,' Diana says, splitting her red-lipped mouth with a loud laugh. 'I suppose he thinks that's his wife.'

'Goodness gracious. Let me go wash my hands quickly.' Violet smiles, looking over the spread on the table: roast chicken, pickled gherkins, boiled potatoes, carrots with red onion and beetroot, and a pile of poppyseed bialys. She returns from the sink and slips her stockinged feet out of her black orthopaedic tie-ups, stretching her serpentine spine, scoliosis having made a puzzle out of her ribcage and shoulder blades. She is paler than both Diana and Maggie, her face their father's down to the deep furrows on either side of her mouth, a nun-like purity to both her dress and to her pink-cheeked face. Her hair is still dark but the promise of a white widow's peak suggests itself above her sparse eyebrows. She gives the impression of someone who has always looked older than her real age and is now at the point of inhabiting a body tailored to her: the modest Cardiff shopkeeper.

'Turn on the wireless, Di, I want to hear the rest of the news. Imagine Princess Elizabeth – sorry, *Queen* Elizabeth – getting the liner back, knowing she has to

give up her calm little life with her husband and babies to take the throne.'

'No one is *making* her. She can stay in Kenya and declare the end of the monarchy for all I care.'

'You have no sense of duty. How could she do that when a whole country, a whole empire, is waiting for her?'

'You would say that, you daddy's girl. You make me laugh, Violet, Da leaves you this shop and you take it as seriously as if he had left you the entire world. I can imagine your face in the papers today, talking about your solemn pledge to rule 203 Bute Street to the best of your power, with the help of Almighty God.'

'This shop is my life, and if I had just sold it in '48 what good would that have done? A widow, a spinster and a little girl, jumping from home to home and job to job.'

'We could have gone to London or New York.'

'To start again? No, Diana, you're still young enough to get married and have more children. I couldn't.'

'Of course you could. Maybe not the kids, but you could certainly get married.'

'Should I go rooting through the rascals and charlatans who would only want me for my business?'

'Fine, fine. Your choice.' Diana raises her hands in surrender and then hollers at the top of her voice, 'Grace! Get down here this instant.'

'Coming!'

'Just come! Aunty Violet is tired, and the food is getting cold and slimy.'

Thuds pound down the winding staircase and then there she is – the centre of both of their worlds – four feet five of undiluted hope and promise.

She kisses Diana and Violet on their cheeks and then wriggles into her chair. Grace's soft round face is changing shape, Ben's square jaw pushing itself out and her nose taking on a fine Volacki curve. Ten summers, ten winters without him, thinks Diana, casting a glance over her daughter's freckled face.

'Did you get any of your exam practice done, petal?' Violet asks her, cutting into the chicken and putting three slices on to Grace's plate.

Grace takes a big bite from a bialys and smiles mischievously. 'Well, Aunty, I did start to, but then . . .'

'Hmm?' Diana rolls her eyes. 'My make-up bag proved more interesting?'

'You shouldn't have left it out, Mam, you know how easily distracted I am.'

'You're a cheeky one, Gracie,' laughs Violet.

The wireless announcer forms a fourth companion at the table; a rich male voice from London that sounds clothed in tails and a white bow tie and dress shoes from Bond Street. The tinkle of their knives and forks merges with sonorous choral music and the clang of bells ringing, from Big Ben to a medieval kirk at the furthest reaches of the Hebrides. The land beyond their dining room is in mourning, the stars frozen in their stations, the moon shrouded in black.

'Take these dishes to the kitchen, then get ready for bed, Grace.'

'Yes, Mammy.' Grace swigs the last of her raspberry cordial and then organizes as many plates as she can in her arms, as she has seen the waitresses in Betty's café do.

'One at a time, you can't carry all of those,' says Diana, relieving her of some of the pile and following her into the kitchen.

Violet is desperate to lie flat in her bed and fall asleep but she still has to write up the day's takings, secure the front door – upper and lower bolts, two deadlocks, Yale lock – and then the back door, before carrying the metal cash box up to her bedroom. The weight of it all pins her to the chair before she forces herself up and walks mechanically back into the adjoining shop.

Even at this late hour music pounds through the walls from the Maltese boarding house next door – rock 'n' roll with insinuating saxophones and thrusting drums – and Diana bangs her fist against the plaster to make them quiet. An explosion during her time with the WAAF in the war has deafened her a little in one ear but the Maltese play their music loud enough to wake the dead. With her daughter asleep in bed, Diana changes into her nightdress and slips under her quilted silk eiderdown. It was Violet's wedding present to her, and for some reason one particular corner still smells of Ben's cologne. The night always makes the presence of him blur his absence. She draws out his journal from under her pillow and holds the small blue pad carefully to stop loose pages falling out. The lamplight makes the pages look translucent, his fine, even handwriting floating in the air like a chain of dragonflies.

She blinks twice and brings the journal closer to make the words still. The entries have stopped reading like the words of a dead man and instead allow her to believe that he is still out there, in Egypt: sheltering from sandstorms, wandering through the souks of Suez and Bardia for souvenirs to bring home, before the night-time sorties in the Wellington with 'his boys' in 38 Squadron. She hadn't realized before the war what a beautiful writer he was. Even his empty days, spent reading whatever books he could get his hands on, were written in a way that made her feel the stifling languor of his tent. Now, the deserted Italian positions littered with abandoned trucks, motorcycles, jackboots and binoculars are as familiar to her as the steam-powered fairgrounds of her childhood. The mercury incandescence of the Mediterranean lit up by a full moon more worthy of a place in her memory than the turgid Irish Sea.

It takes Violet a moment to understand what the sound is. Her nightmare is still live, filling her mind with images of hands banging on the windows of a synagogue as the entire white structure sweeps up into flames, the night sky shimmering green and blue from the Northern Lights, the cries of men, women and children lifting up to it unheeded.

An alarm.

An alarm ringing.

Not for those dying inside the *shul*, but for her, in her own home. She sits bolt upright in bed and holds her head in her hands, her heart pounding louder than the

metallic rattle of the burglar alarm. Edging her feet into her slippers, she picks a silver candlestick up from the dressing table and switches on all the lights. Hearing footsteps on the landing, she holds on tight to the door-knob and feels almost ready to faint. It would be easier to just die here quietly, she thinks, than to face whatever is on the other side. Leaning her forehead against the door, she closes her eyes and slowly turns the knob.

'It's alright, Violet, the window's busted but there's no one down there.' Diana is standing at the top of the stairs, a torch in her overcoat pocket and a hammer in each hand. Seeing her sister's bloodless face, she stomps over and pulls her into her arms. 'Don't be getting into a state, Sis, everything's fine. Whoever it was chickened out.'

Shaking, Violet holds on to Diana and tries to gather her nerves together; it's not just the break-in, or the one before, or the one before that, but the letters that land on the doormat, counting the relatives murdered in Eastern Europe. Names that she barely remembers from her childhood, figures she can just about identify from black and white family portraits now come to her in her dreams, crowding her dining table and asking for more food, more water, a place to rest – please, please, please – pleading with her in Polish, *kuzyn, ocal mnie*, cousin, save me. Nowhere feels safe any more, it is as if the world is trying to sweep her away, her and everyone like her, creeping through locked doors and windows to steal the life from their lungs. Avram dead, Chaja Dead, Shmuel dead. In Lithuania, in Poland, in Germany. More and more names to add to the memorial plaque at the

Temple. The facts still seem unreal. How could they all go? The letters from Volackis in New York and London pile up but make less and less sense, rumours of who perished and where, when and how, a drip feed of death with a little happy news forced in at the end – a birth in Stepney, a graduation in Brooklyn.

'Which window is it?' she finally asks.

'The little one around the back. We'll call Daniel in the morning and get him to brick it up. I've put boxes up against it for now. Come on, get in with Gracie, and I'll keep an eye on things.'

Nodding obediently, Violet creeps into her niece's room and slides into bed beside her; gathering the child's sleeping body up in her arms, she feels even smaller and more vulnerable than her. There is an atlas on the floor beside the bed and Violet reaches for it, flicking through; the red of the British Empire tints the pages. She's had to learn so much more of the world recently, learnt the names of places that sound fantastical – Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Manchuria. The strong young men and women who had hidden in forests and survived Hitler are scattered, running, running, running from the catastrophe, going further and further east, as if looking to jump off the edge of the world. It's become the work of spinsters, who don't have the excuse of husbands or families, to round up these waifs and strays, these communal children who trust no one but take whatever is given. She sends money to these distant relatives and even to their destitute friends through banks in Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Istanbul, Shanghai, never knowing if it has got to them in time,

or if they will come to their senses and turn back to civilization, if it *is* still that. Violet drops the atlas back on the floor. The rhythm of Grace's inhalations and exhalations calm her but not to the point of sleep; her ears are fixed on the sound of Diana sweeping the glass away downstairs, her feet marching up and down the floorboards, fearless and strong, until finally she pounds up the stairs as the first birds call up the dawn.

Daniel arrives while they are eating breakfast, the fear of the night veiled by the homely scents of coffee and toast. Violet blushes as he leans over to grab a crust from her plate, his deep, foreign-accented voice thrilling her and his bearlike body filling the dining room. She snatches a glance at his pale, wide-eyed face lost in the black fur of his beard and astrakhan hat, crumbs catching in his moustache. Musky cologne emanates from his damp sheepskin coat as he pulls it off and hangs it up in the hallway. He belongs to Maggie, their middle sister, but desire and envy have crept into Violet's heart. Her body is flush with yearnings stronger than she has ever felt before, and Daniel is the focus of them, his tall and broad frame like a sepulchre for her hope of some day bearing children. He is in her waking dreams: his lips, his hands, his pink nipples lewd and raspberry-like against his snowy skin. The fire in her womb suddenly flaring before the change moves the heat somewhere else. She looks forward to the end of it all – anything rather than this lovelorn, girlish infatuation with a man who sees her as a sister.

'Maggie is worried about you girls, she thinks the street is getting worse. I tell her it nothing, cost of the business, but she like a chicken this morning, pacing, pacing. She wants me to get you a gun!' Daniel pulls up a stepladder and eases the remaining glass out of the window frame. 'It must have been a little fella who think he can come through this window.'

With his back to Violet, she cannot help but look at his backside straining against his trousers. She looks quickly away when she sees Diana smiling at her.

'No need for that,' Diana replies. 'Me and Vi have agreed that we couldn't stab a burglar but we could certainly batter one. Vi came out of her room ready with a candlestick last night, I'm sure she would have made mincemeat out of him.'

Daniel's laugh booms out and then it's just the grind of mortar mixing, the scrape of metal on stone, and the *tap-tap* of bricks piling one on top of the other. The rectangle of light quickly extinguished and another barrier placed between the world and Violet.

After Daniel departs for the gentleman's outfitters he owns with his brothers on Church Street, Grace kisses them goodbye and strolls the few minutes to St Mary's primary school, which sits beside the church where most of the locals are baptized, married and laid to rest. Diana sets up her table as a turf commissioner in the small, damp outbuilding in the yard, the radio turned on to follow the day's major racing fixtures. Her nails, painted so thickly scarlet they look dipped in vinyl, are the only colour in the room. Her face will be slowly made-up

throughout the day, like a photograph developing in a darkroom, until at 5 p.m. she will look ready for a red carpet; the transformation from young widow to aged starlet complete. Violet, on the other hand, is habitually bare-faced and clean-nailed, she wears a simple navy calf-length dress and her father's silver war badge pinned to her brassiere for courage.

One display is still how their father left it; full of expensive compasses and ivory-inlaid hipflasks that are beyond the reach of their customers but still distinguish the shop from the others on the road. The rest of Volacki's is engorged with cheap and popular items: wellington boots hanging off hooks, black school plimsolls crammed into wooden cubbyholes, cotton dresses hanging ethereally from a rail near the stockroom, woollen blankets wrapped in tissue paper and stored on the upper shelves. This shop is a 'padded cell' in Diana's eyes, a place of madness whose method only Violet knows, the merchandise piling around her in small, unstable heaps. She sells knives, razors, rope, oilskin hats and coats, good strong work boots, sea bags, pipes, tobacco and snuff, but the real money is in cashing advance notes of pay for departing sailors. The heavy hand-cranked till collects more than a hundred pounds a day in its deep trays – and is only touched by Violet – never mind the safe or drawer where she keeps larger notes. The last customers arrive after the official closing hour, knocking discreetly yet impatiently on the glass panels to buy an urgent box of matches or cigarettes; everyone bending the law a little to make life easier.

Laba

Two

The plump, fat-marbled kosher mince begins to sizzle and brown in the pan and Mahmood shakes a teaspoon of chilli powder into the oil. He had bought kosher all the time in East London because he had a good butcher only a few doors down, and kosher is as good as *halal*, religiously speaking, but now, for some reason, it also tastes better to him. Holding the mysterious Hindi-labelled spices up to his nose, he picks out cumin, turmeric and ginger – good enough – and spills a teaspoon of it over the lamb. He'll eat some mince with a side of tinned sweetcorn for lunch and then mix the remainder with the last of the rice in the evening. This is as much good eating as he's capable of now, even though he had learnt how to steam, stew and roast while a ship's pantry boy, and to bake from the little kitchen job he'd had in the Somali boarding house he'd roomed in last year.

Mahmood still can't accept that he is just another uncared-for man eating from a plate on his lap in the solitude of a cold rented room. He had always helped Laura in the kitchen – what other husband would have? He'd had to, because she had no sense of what good food tasted like; he'd managed to get her to use herbs and spices, but still her carrots would be undercooked, her potatoes mushy, her meat dry and gasping. Now,

meals are just another thing he has to do by himself, for himself. Everything with just his own damned hand.

Mahmood has to remind himself that he doesn't *hate* Laura. That he is not *better off* without her. That those red thoughts that jut into his mind as he's walking down the street – telling him that her tits are too small, her arse too flat, her face too long – are not what he really believes.

Laura has fixed him in this longitude and latitude. He's only living in this house – with black men he has no common language, culture or religion with – so that he can stake her out, and keep things rolling between them until she comes to her senses. He watches the company she keeps and crosses the road to see his sons every few days. In many ways it's a come-up from that derelict Somali boarding house he was told to leave after the mosque business. He has a room to himself with a lock on it rather than that attic room sprawling with camp beds. He doesn't have to put up with the all-night coughing, or gossip, or damp laundry dripping from the lines suspended across the ceiling. All of the other seamen were lazy beggars, rolling around in bed waiting for someone else to get the stove hot in the mornings. Mahmood remembers the yellowed list of regulations pinned up above his head that Warsame had read to him before telling him to pack his bags.

1. The Seaman's Lodging House keeper shall not sell or be engaged in the sale of intoxicating liquor, or be engaged or interested in the business of a Clothier, Outfitter, or a Slop-dealer.

2. The Medical Officer of Health, officers of the Board of Trade, and Police have right of access and inspection to his premises at any time.
3. He must provide at least 30 cubic feet of air space for each person in his dormitories, and not accommodate at any time a larger number of lodgers than has been authorized by the Council.
4. He must follow out certain provisions regarding sanitation, water closets and washing facilities, and general hygiene. He must affix in a prominent place a copy of the City's Byelaws in this respect together with his scale of charges, and not make a higher charge than is provided by the scale.
5. He must not admit or fail to exclude from his premises any thief, reputed thief, prostitute, or reputed prostitute, or any other person of immoral or improper character.

Mahmood had laughed when Warsame got to that last rule. So he was no better than a prostitute? *Ajeeb.* He packed his trunk and vacated his 30 cubic feet of air space; moving into Doc's place that very same afternoon.

Red brick and leaded glass, the smell of bleach and defeat. The Employment Exchange has the atmosphere of a church; job notices flutter from the wall like paper prayers, and mean council workers dole out state relief with the aloofness of priests placing wafers into indigent mouths. Out-of-work miners, dockworkers, drivers,

handymen, barrel boys, plumbers and factory workers mill around, their eyes avoiding each other. The pine-wood floor is dented from the tramp of work boots near the counter and littered with cigarette butts and matches.

'Welder Needed'

'Ten Years' Experience Necessary'

'Under 21 Yrs?'

'Apprenticeships'

'Carpenters Needed'

'Gravedigging'

Mahmood shoves his hands into his sports jacket and paces from one notice to another, looking for boiler or foundry work. He has only shrapnel in his pocket, having lost the rest at poker. There is nothing worth trying for; none of the usual firms that can be relied upon to take coloured fellas are advertising. He looks again at the gravedigging notice. It's for Western Cemetery, the pay not half bad, but the thought of shovelling hard, damp earth and filling it with stiff corpses makes him shake his head and mutter, '*Astaghfirullah*.'

Pulling his homburg hat low over his eyebrows, he takes a yellow ticket stamped with a 9 and waits his turn for the counter beside one of the heavy coiled radiators. The heat from the cast iron blasts through his thin trousers and teases his skin, somewhere between pleasure and pain, and he rocks his body back and forth, letting the heat rise and dissipate. On the last tramper he had taken, the owners had installed new boilers and all the brass fittings had shone gold in the white light of the furnaces. He had stepped back to admire the

conflagration, before shovelling more coal in and turning the white light into an almost sentient, colourless gas that roved backwards and up the chimney like a *jinni* escaping a lamp. He had birthed that fire and nurtured it, from yellow to orange to white to blue and then that colour that had no name, just pure energy. He'd wondered what it would be like to step forward the few inches that separated him from it, whether, like in *cadaabka*, his skin would just fall from his flesh like a sheet. He had been formed by those fires, turned from a puny pantry boy into a knotted-muscled stoker who could stand at hell's gate for hours at a stretch, his face roasted and grimy with coal dust.

'Number nine come forward.'

Mahmood takes the chair in front of Counter 4 and places his hat on his knee, before handing over his grey identity card.

The woman in front of him is in a brown tweed suit and maroon lipstick, her hair done up with a net over the large bun. She looks at Mahmood over the rims of small wire-framed glasses. 'What can I do for you, Mr Mattan?' she says, examining the card.

'I need national assistance, no job good for me.'

'What work can you do?' she asks, lengthening each word.

'Boiler work. Quarry.'

'Let me see if there is anything else that we are yet to pin up.'

She looks through the files on her side of the partition; her manner is good, better than some of the other

clerks, who seem to resent him, whether he is looking for work or drawing dole.

'There is one foundry job here but I don't think you will be suitable,' she says, leaving the rest unsaid.

He meets her gaze, swallows a bitter smile.

She stamps his card in the right places and counts out two pounds and six shillings.

'Have a pleasant day, Mr Mattan.'

'And you, madam.'

Mahmood rises and folds the £1 notes into his pocket book, before putting on his hat and leaving the melancholia of the Exchange for the thud and clamour of the racetrack.

The turf at Chepstow is turned up nicely; drizzle lifting the smell of soil, grass and horseshit into the air. Mahmood had had a tough morning at the greyhound track but is feeling better now that he is on to the horses. Hooves thundering, the ground shaking, his heart thudding, the other punters shouting or whispering, 'Come *on*, come *on!*' Gasps as a rider is thrown off and then, with no breath escaping his lungs, his horse breaks clear from the wave of undulating muscle and mane and is whipped, whipped, whipped, head daggered forward, across the finishing line. The confetti of betting stubs thrown to the wind is confirmation that he was one of the few sharp enough to take a risk on the stallion; over ten pounds in winnings on a horse with 20/1 odds. Mahmood had changed his bet at the last moment, after catching sight of the horse in the paddock; he was a fine-looking black thing, and Mahmood

could have sworn that he had nodded to him as he passed by on the groom's reins. A lucky name too, Abyssinia. Names beginning with an A are always good to him – and he has visited Abyssinia too, another sign. He should lean more on the As, he thinks. So far he has won on:

Achtung
Ambitious Daisy
Apache
Artist
Angel Song
Artois
Arkansas's Pride
Atlantic Revelry.

He should also hand over £5 quickly to Doc Madison for the lodging room in Davis Street, before it slips through his fingers and the codger gets on his back. The rest he will spend on the boys and Laura, treat them now that he has paid off the court fine. It had been a mistake, that last time – not just theft but sacrilege on the charge sheet – he had taken things too far, and it had turned them all against him. The shoes piled up outside the *zawiya* on Fridays seemed to be fair game – you could come with one pair and leave with another, with no real bother – but the *zakat* money was truly *haram*. He can't ask any of them for nothing now, apart from Berlin.

Passing the cinema, he looks up to see what pictures they have on: *Double Dynamite*. Still. And *Quo Vadis* and *The African Queen* as the new releases. He will watch *Quo Vadis*, but turns his nose up at *The African Queen*. He spends too

much of his money on the pictures; it's one of his chief vices but also his school. Where else could he learn so much about this place he's decided to call home? Its dreams, its history and its myths? In that dark, flea-ridden hall he's learnt how to romance girls, how to talk real English, and examined how his neighbours see themselves and how they see him. Films have made him realize it's hopeless to expect the Adamsdown biddies to change their ways; they'll only ever see him like one of those grimy coolies in loincloths, or jungle savages, shrieking before their quick, unmourned deaths – or at best, a tight-lipped houseboy proudly taking punishment in place of his white master. It makes him marvel that Laura was able to ignore all that shit and see him as a man like any other. Was it because her family, with its hunger, cussing and bitter wisdom, was not like the rich, chattering ones shown in the pictures? She is part of the servant class, he knows that now, who might just as easily stamp a black man into the dirt as offer him a hand up like a brother. Whatever it was, the navy money in his pocket had certainly helped.

Mahmood stumbles over a loose cobblestone and corrects his balance self-consciously, looking left and right. He is paranoid that his steps look strange, flat-footed; his shoes are a size too big, to allow room for the painful corns on his feet. You cannot look like prey here. You cannot show weakness or your days are numbered, like those of the Somali drunk the police beat to death last year. Mahmood had learnt to do the black man's walk early on in Cardiff: to walk with his shoulders high, his elbows pointed out, his feet sliding slowly over the ground, his

chin buried deep in his collar and his hat low over his face, to give nothing away apart from his masculinity, a human silhouette in motion. Even now, he flinches when passing gangs of Welshmen when they've been at the boozer on rugby days; everything might seem calm, normal, when suddenly a fist comes into his face as hard as concrete, the shock of it knocking all words out of his head. The laughter as they pass on, the attacker giddy and loud with self-congratulation, the shame hotter than a furnace. Other black sailors keep a knife or razor in a pocket, but for him the risks are too high. The police know him by name, they might search for a stolen watch and find the razor or knife – and then what? Two years for an offensive weapon. Instead, he has perfected not being seen. He knows people call him 'the Ghost' and it satisfies him; it helps with the work and reminds him of the characters in the American comic books he picks up for his eldest boy:

Absorbing Man
Black Bolt
Chronomancer.

It's late by the time Mahmood reaches Berlin's; he had gone home to change, ignoring Doc's calls for rent, before darting out again in a three-piece suit and dark overcoat. Berlin brings out his self-doubt; he always looks so polished, like Cary Grant or some other star. Smoothing his moustache down, Mahmood pushes the heavy black door. Calypso music fills the room and somehow makes it feel busier. There are only a few customers on this Monday night: students in black

turtlenecks sitting on stools, a white couple dancing awkwardly beside the jukebox, their hips moving in an uncoordinated staccato. Berlin is standing fixed behind the bar, his arms stretched out either side of him, hands clenching the counter, his head bowed. Lost in this revelry, it takes him a moment to notice Mahmood settling into the bar stool in front of him; he finally lifts his head and his distant-seeming hazel eyes settle ambivalently on him. His face is reminiscent of a shark's – a hammerhead – with his flat skull and wide, dark lips. He is handsome but in a dangerous, bloodless way. He never loses himself or allows people to lose themselves in him. Mahmood knows that he abandoned a daughter in New York and a son in Borama; he speaks of them easily, but with no guilt or regret. He likes this lack of emotion from Berlin. It means you can tell him anything, and it is like speaking to a wall: no shock, no moralizing, no pity or disgust. Berlin has low expectations and a worldly acceptance of even the greatest tragedies. His own father had been murdered before his eyes in a raid on his clan by the dervishes, and watching that dagger run across his father's throat must have taught Berlin not to cling too hard to life.

'So the wind has blown you in again?' he asks in Somali.

'The wind has blown money into my pockets, *sahib*.' Mahmood drops a handful of coins on to the bar. 'Get me a pasty and a black coffee.'

'Good day at the races?'

'Not bad at all.'

'You missed some action tonight. The police found a couple of Chinese sailors running opium from a lodging

house on Angelina Street. Using it themselves, too, so they were walking on noodle legs to the police car, them and this little bebopper from the university. It gave the reefer boys a laugh to see the police busy with someone else.'

'The Chinamen are good at keeping their secrets. Someone must have told.'

'Like they said in the war, the walls have ears. Nothing is secret for long in this whore of a bay.'

Mahmood finishes with his pasty after just a couple of bites. It's greasy and stale, but luckily his stomach has become a small, easily satisfied thing. On the ships he could throw down whatever was put in front of him and go back for more, now he eats just enough to trick his mind into thinking he's had a meal.

'You think that new Somali from Gabiley is telling tales to the police? Something about him smells bad to me.'

'Who? Samatar? You got the wrong fella there. His knees start knocking if he even sees a police car. Wrong man to be an informer.'

'Grass,' Mahmood says, unconvinced, rolling the word in his mouth like a lost tooth. He hates grasses even more than coppers. You can be sitting down with a man, playing poker or warming your hands on a mug of tea, and the next thing you know everything you said is repeated back to you in the police station; no matter how much trash you were talking, or how tipsy you were, it goes down against you. You deny it and the police grab your neck and say they know it's so.

'I know an informer when I see one and he ain't it,' Berlin repeats. He is quieter when away from the others;

he doesn't need to get up on a stepladder and perform the role of bossman, the man who made it, the man who beat it all. It's getting late and he's burning down like an old wick; wiping the counter in slow, deliberate circles, rubbing his eyes. Despite the gleaming black hair and straight back, he is in his fifties and age is starting to catch up with him; he no longer attends the rent parties, and makes excuses to stay at home on weekends.

His gaze fixes somewhere over Mahmood's shoulder and his eyes track someone or something.

'What is it?' Mahmood asks, turning around.

'Just that Jamaican bastard, Cover. That carpenter who stabbed Hersi last year, just over there by the jukebox it was. If anyone is an informer it'll be him.'

Mahmood squints at the small figure walking along the opposite side of Sophia Street. Doesn't look like the kind of man who could give trouble; his arms swing as he walks and the pipe in his mouth sends neat puffs up into the cold air.

'What makes you say that?'

'He cut Hersi three times with a razor and then stuck him with a broken bottle.'

'Why?'

Berlin lifts his hands to the sky. 'He hates Somalis? Who knows? Hersi was nearly killed, he was in hospital drinking one blood transfusion after the next, but listen, the Jamaican go to court and get off scot-free, a pat on the back and home to bed. He's never coming back in here. Informer.' Berlin looks like he wants to spit the word.