

## VACANT GUN

You stand in front of the class knowing this thing you will do will happen soon. If you'd known it would come to this when you started teaching in 1998, you would have stopped while you still had the chance. But that was over twenty years ago and you are where you are. Now it feels like your destiny.

You're wearing a *Bioderm* bodysuit made from material that breathes like skin. Your body is slight – toned muscle sculpted round slim bone. On your face, a smile. A smile sewn on your face with ugly stitches made of string. You're smiling at the rows of obese men and women in front of you. There are twelve of them standing there in the studio like farm animals waiting out the rain in a field. You're small enough to roam around inside each one of them. You feel insignificant, a minority figure in an age where 67% of adults in the Republic of London are clinically obese. *GoogleSoft*<sup>™</sup> technology and the ruling Assembly's *Virtual Living* policy, has made the need to move beyond the confines of the home almost obsolete.

You look up at the squares of blue silence in the ceiling and, despite the subdued lighting and the *Nutri-air* climate control system, you'd rather be elsewhere. It's always been this way. The artificial light, the fabricated air, all that flesh – they make you feel like all the matter that exists in the world is crammed here in this studio with you. Despite today's 'hazardous' level pollution warning, you want to be outside on the London streets. Outside, alone, breathing in real skies, feeling the Thames lapping inside you.

You ask the men and women to go to the end of their mats for the roll-down. They obey, gathering up armfuls of themselves and hauling it across the floor. You can't see their bones move inside them as they do this and it disturbs you. You can't help despising them for it. These people are lost inside their own meat. But this thing you will do, will help them find themselves, you decide. This is why they've come to you. This is the reason you're here. Not to teach them Pilates, but to help them start themselves again.

You lead the class through the roll-down, walking fingers down spines you know must exist somewhere in the spongy folds of their backs. They are all bent over themselves now, pushing down on the sprung floor. You watch, appalled. How you hate the fat, the pictures you see in it – grimacing faces, ugly shapes, buried worms. But most of all you

hate the fat because it's alive. You look away, the taste of lard in your mouth, your tongue caked with it as you give the instruction to roll up. Eventually they're upright again, staring at you, their moon faces flushed from the inversion, and you ask yourself, how? How can the simplest of movements excite so much sweat from their glands? You put a hand to your nose, waiting for the *Nutri-air* climate control system to take the smell away.

A voice, firm, decisive. It's yours. You can hear yourself speaking to them. You're telling them you don't want to hurt them anymore than they've hurt you. And they have hurt you, over the years. They've hurt you by getting bigger and more immobile and less flexible, despite your best efforts. You've made a life's work of these weekly one-hour classes and yet, you realise now, it has all been for nothing. You've wasted your time. These people have done nothing but feed off you for years. You can feel them breathing you in every time you exhale. You press a hand to your face. It's like you're growing old in their skin. Their grey, lumpy, stretch-marked skin. An anger that's bigger than you, squeezes your temples, burns your throat and pushes at your eyes trying to get out. If these people had any respect for you, if they felt any loyalty to you at all, they'd do the decent thing and die.

Disgusted, you turn your back on them and confront the mirror. In your left hand, the vacant gun. On your face, a quiet smile. You love this gun. How beautiful it feels in your hand, like a cool glove. But this is no ordinary gun. It's not like any you can buy. No, you have designed this gun yourself. It's a gun designed by you to kill with precision. To kill beautifully. And now your hand will speak to these people. Your hand will tell these failed bodies what they need to hear. It will speak to them in bullets.

You pull out the gun in your empty hand and point it at yourself in the mirror. And it's in that moment, you know. For the first time in your life, you know exactly who you are. And you're not alone in this knowledge because the woman behind you in the first row, she knows who you are too. You can see it in her eyes. Brown eyes that suddenly can't meet yours. She looks at the floor. Pulls her shapeless black t-shirt down over the rolls of her stomach. Clutches the fleshy wings of her upper arms. Of all the people in the room, this one has fed off you the most. Questions, always asking questions. Always asking for help. Always wanting something from you. But you could never give her enough. Turning to face the class, you cast your eyes, slowly, deliberately, round the room. But really, you've already decided; she will be the first.

The men and women stare back at you like West End theatre-goers from the early nineties - demanding, expectant, waiting to be engaged. And you smile because you know you're about to give them the performance of a life-time. Adrenalin is coursing through your bloodstream like lust. Cut you now and you'd bleed anticipation, excitement. The adrenalin makes you shake, but it's a shaking that's somehow outside of you. When you raise your gun hand, it's surprisingly steady. You're aiming straight at her now, the woman you've decided will be first. She can feel the cold barrel scorching her forehead even from ten feet away. The fear in her eyes tells you this.

The woman dies as beautifully as you imagined she would. The bullets burn kiss-shaped holes in her forehead, chest, belly. In fact there's beauty, precision in the way they all die. You watch the bullets splintering hair follicles, splitting cells, as one by one, you shoot them down. And you enjoy it, seeing these people falling apart in front of you like this. You enjoy it because it feels like you've been part of this falling ever since you began teaching them all those years ago. This is how it was meant to be. Inevitable. So you keep on firing, on and on until every last one is lying on the floor. But still you don't stop because using this gun you've made yourself, it personalises the killing. Brings a kind of humanity to the violence. So you keep on firing at them, shooting their fat onto the walls until eventually it feels like you're firing at ghosts. And that's when you lower your hand, letting out the breath you've been holding since you brought the gun to life.

The studio is deathly quiet now, just the gun whispering. Kiss-shaped smoke rings float upwards in the beam from the glaucous spotlight above your head. But the gun no longer feels like it's in your hand. It's become something other, a thing in its own right. A thing that needs no-one but itself to exist, to fulfil its destiny. You hear a slow rapturous handclapping, but you're the only one in the room left alive, and, when you look at your hands, they're wiping themselves down the thighs of your *Bioderm* bodysuit.

"It's all your fault," you say, and as you look round the studio at the bodies lying on the floor, you realise this is something you've known about yourself your whole life. Just as you know you've spent your whole life preparing for this death. So you grab your things, stride across the studio and grapple with the airlock door. Eventually it unseals itself and breathes you out into the corridor. You walk away from the studio and head for the fire exit. Security cameras trace your every step as you leave the building. They know who

you are, your past, your medical history, where you've been, where you go, everything. But you're oblivious. You're looking at your hands. You're looking for the gun. Your beautiful gun.

"Did I just do that," you ask yourself, and you answer.