



# THE KNIGHTS TEMPLAR

Ethan  
O'Connor



So, ya don't fancy girls, at all, not even Dua Lipa?  
asked Aaron. Finn shook his head. *OK, but 'ave you  
ever smoked spice?*

---

AARON WAS COMFORTED BY THIS PART OF  
SALFORD, even more so now, in the hands of this  
girl. Bryony B Ward. The smoking area of the hos-  
pital was cordoned away, private. Beyond the med-  
ical estate, the fluid pattern of commutes, miles of  
skips and flyovers rose to the glare of Manchester.  
Along the motorway, visible to the patients in the  
upper wards: Allied Mills Ltd; their lorry drivers sig-  
nalling to colleagues shimmering in oil, the crude-  
ness catching in the breeze, inhaled in the same  
breath as grinding metal. The Army Reserve Cen-  
tre; soldiers, loud, drilling, a leap from the hospital  
car park. Salutes, cavalier, brigadier; Aaron thought  
of the word *pontoon*. It was midday. An older pa-  
tient was being wheeled into a taxi; *A big lad, 'im*,  
he said to Bryony, who groped him harder. The man  
wore a foot fracture brace, a tight Guinness T-shirt.  
By the revolving doors of the paediatric building,  
a young boy wearing an eyepatch held a nurse's

hand, waving enthusiastically at the swirling pi-  
geons. Aaron squinted to make out the yellow blob  
of SpongeBob printed on the boy's patch. The birds  
dove elaborately, as if aware of their audience, steal-  
ing crumbs from the industrial-sized bins, humming  
in the summer heat. Aaron's twenty-sixth birthday  
passed into the memory of the weeks before. His  
cousin had taken him to a casino by Salford Lads  
Club. Aaron told the other young lad in his bay, the  
one in the next bed over to be his 'lookout', (*Bless  
him, he looks half-dead*) the task becoming official  
after awarding him the military title. Aaron had been  
gone for over two hours. *It's no' ah bloody 'otel!* one  
of the nurses scolded, Aaron waltzing back in (*'Am  
allowed sum fresh fuckin' air!*), a hot dog from the  
casino buffet in his jacket pocket. About eighty-quid  
lighter. He ate it in the shower, to save one of the  
stricter nurses berating him for his excursion. With a  
few extra pumps from the gel dispenser he scoured  
his body, taking deeper strokes along his groin and  
pits. He was meeting Bryony later in the outpatient  
toilets, the ones on the ground floor. *Less weekend  
staff*, she pulled at his pants. She made big eyes at  
him. Was she alluding to her inexperience? *She's  
only about twe'ty-two, mind you*. He pelted up the

stairwell to C ward, his ward, toward the lunchtime medication rollout, surely Flynn (Finn?) would think this was meant to be?

---


Aaron was impatient, hitting the buzzer again for the nurses to let him in. *Alrigh', alrigh', Jesus Christ*, the one on reception huffed. Aaron's bay was for six low-maintenance men on the far side of the ward. There were also small, single-patient rooms dotting the corridor: their doors always open, hollowed-out men visible inside, being wiped-down, faecal, encouraging passersby to hold their breaths. *If we're low maintenance, then they're low dignity*, Finn once said. Aaron had laughed. That was his name, the sickly lad. *Finn*. He walked past the patient in the nearest private room, a security guard on his door, *A nice lad, a good lad, bit violent*, their conversation outside the loo one day about Donald Trump (*Ee's a funny bastard innee*) fresh in his memory. Aaron waved at him as the guard on his door played Candy Crush.

Aaron's bay was becoming visible. Finn, the lookout, was ahead, his name coming in and out of

focus. He had kept asking, recalling the image of a shark: animatronic, comedically chugging towards a crying victim. Finn was sat by the window (his shaven head, the bald patches), outlined by trees catching their breath in the sun. His parents had just left, a harmless-looking couple in their sixties. They were polite and grey, Irish accents, slightly hippie-ish. *Bit organic-looking*. Aaron had left his mum a voicemail that morning, telling her he was in hospital, telling her he was back up north. She wouldn't respond. His mum was a beast of her own; a blistering forging of a woman. *Some would call 'er a cow*. He could tell Finn about Bryony B Ward and how she wants a go and how she smokes menthols suggestively by the ambulances. Before he could open his mouth, a resident started shouting at a young nurse who was trying to take his blood. *Leave me alone, wench! Am fuckin' tie-yud!*

---

*WHERE WERE THE GUNSHOTS, THE FULL METAL JACKETS?* Finn thought, looking across the way, watching the soldiers out the window from his bed: a centipede formation. He couldn't see his





parent's car leave the grounds from here. He imagined them happy to escape. The view was clear today, beyond the junctions and prams and temperament of litter, there stood Manchester. He could feel the scrapes of pint glasses against wooden bar tops at the pub, the local one his friends would be at now (if it was a weekend, it was impossible to remember in here) with green and mustard tiles, sulphuric patrons, stickiness not easily rinsed away. His nose was masked with tape and tissue paper, catching any cerebrospinal fluid that was at risk of leaking on the underside, a complication of his neurosurgery from the weeks before. The soldiers carried on. Their shaven heads, mere blemishes from this distance, caught the light, mirroring his own.

Finn had seen the little boy in the eyepatch, his nurse, the girl smoking. She had bright red curls visible from their floor. He had seen her grab Aaron's dick over the wear of his jeans, the ones he never took off; how they drooped so his boxers were always on-show. They must have been his only pair? Finn was quite sure the girl was pregnant (which, mercifully, took away the risk Aaron would land her with a kid), but she was probably in for something serious; an assumption formed through her

attraction to a hyperactive guy with one outfit and major issues, despite his haphazard charm. She wore a hot pink hoodie and denim shorts; a bulging pantomime of youth, for she was definitely in her mid-thirties, conning nobody else but Aaron. *Is this a good idea? Why's she in here?* asked Finn, realising there was too much concern to be entertained by it all. Aaron shrugged, detached from needing to know. She had told him he could stay with her when he'd had his surgery. Finn didn't understand that information only dampens. Boys their age (for Aaron did think of them as boys, despite both being in their late-twenties) should be charging at life, leaving irrelevant questions to doctors. That not all answers made situations any more sensical. They can in fact only detract.

The blue of the Neurophysiology unit was faded, a last vestige of pre-millennium design, likely to remain for another quarter-century, passing into timelessness. Aaron looked towards Finn. His limbs roped down like drying roots to the scuffed laminate floor. He looked like a child who belonged climbing trees, alone; something light about him, pollinated, becoming an organ of the forest. He had arrived frail but with a clarity that couldn't be said for the







other lads. His eyes were dark, his head a mottled curve; bent brows, a large, bandaged nose. Aaron thought Finn a distant relative of that guy, the conqueror (*Genghis Khan?*) with all his descendants. He must be further up the tree than every other great-great-grand-what-have-you. He could see a concept of the things he didn't know how to name: a human genome, of babies birthed into rock pools that at some point intersected with others, giving off fumes (doesn't sperm share a relative scent to cadavers? *Doesn't jizz smell like dead bodies?*), forming a great elaborate bowl of tryphobic seedlings, dominant features edging their way into the next growth along.

Aaron would be at the lake now if not for his pending operation, for the tumour giving him seizures—*Dysembryoplastic Neuroepithelial tumour*, his consultant had said, at the start of the wait for surgery, nearly two years ago, giving a name to his condition. He and his cousin would take their beers and girls, peeling off their underwear on a golden embankment, clamouring along dried leaves and accumulating clay; the human features in the bark, solidifying into Finn's face. He pictured the girl from B Ward, her name forgotten again, revealing herself:

a citrus shimmer in the reeds, naked, painted in the reddish brown of the silt, almost ceramic. She had clumpy eyelashes and freckles and fragile lips in a deep, bluish bow. What was her real world persona? He liked to picture everyone not as rigid patients, gone astray, but as their formulaic selves. She could be a girl who expects presents from Selfridges, which gave him a slight twinge. Despite his dire finances, or lack of any real living situation, of which she knew, if all went well, he could fuck his way into her life, a small awareness that in hospital, people can play outside of the system of the realer, credit-card world. He smirked. *Rules are tomorrow's chip paper*. It was happening, in a certain future. They would be together within hours, most likely for an eternity. *You can stay with me*, she told him, hearing it replay, now the foundation of his cerebral makeup. Surely, inescapably, he is here; recovered and living with Bryony in some Ancoats high rise. The fantasy unfolds. In hospital it's all a certainty, all of it. Every thought about being discharged is a dream holiday, a; *what would you do if you won the lottery?* Real life gushes and throbs, and seems so compelling compared to stink of microwaved blocks they gnawed on through mealtimes. To have





his own bed is erotic. To be in someone else's is to complete a pilgrimage. Every scrap of truth or suggestion or lie gathers into premonition. How the boys in school could envisage becoming a professional footballer. He had leant in, toward her neck, as they smoked together, into the cakiness of whatever she had sprayed herself with. He stiffened a little, understanding the plan behind intentions, of each move a person makes.


---


The nurses were calling out names, handing out medications, serving Aaron his pregabalin, ritalin, propranolol. Finn accepted his hydrocortisone, sertraline, morphine. They were both given their memory tests. *When were you born? Why are you here? Who is the Prime Minister?* Aaron spoke. *June. Brain tumour. Fishy Rishi.* Finn sighed. *August. Brain fluid leakage. Rishi Sunak.* Memories were at risk of becoming extinct in Neurophysiology. Seizures could be triggered through a treacherous manoeuvre mid-surgery, crucial millimetres from nerves; the wrong moment, a tumour with too-much brain matter attached to it. They had seen it happen. The other

men who are packed-up and ready to be discharged, suddenly losing all use of themselves, asking questions about the sky or where their dead mothers were. There were the ones wheeled who were unable to speak, who may never see again. The nurses all gathered together, sensically, regrouping. Every morning and afternoon, the same questions over and over.

Finn had been moved down from the High Dependency ward weeks ago; a pituitary tumour removal. Complications arose. *Possible cerebrospinal fluid leak but we'll keep you in for testing.* The headaches had been omniscient; a salty pour from the nostril, a stinging drip-back. His sleep, irregular. The only thing he could be sure of was the pain. To be here was to constantly ache, to be deprived of senses until it was time to be woken up in the night, after sleep had finally arrived, to have his blood pressure taken. On what planet was this restorative? It turned out, his body was no longer his own; just a machine in constant need of upkeep. He faded in and out of rest, sometimes needing a moment before recalling exactly where he was, why he was here.

Finn looked over toward Aaron, who carried his own illness in a lockbox so far down it was voided-out.







Aaron was someone who soberly flashed his belly during football victory dances (a merry band had sat to watch the derby a few days prior) revealing a hard, bloated stomach; an overturned china bowl. He flirted with the younger nurses, asking them to sneak him extra toast in the morning. The growth on the crown of his skull didn't deter him. The future was the future. He was the first guy Finn met upon being wheeled-in. Every other man in here was older, out of it, hidden. Aaron: perpetually snacking, buzzing around the ward, 7UP'd, on red-dye number 40. Finn imagined if he got close he would smell deodorised, burglary, a doglet, if any dog were as hairless as he. Maybe the breathiness, the pudginess? There was no doubt he was handsome. His shoulders and arms swelled, marblesque, reminding Finn of a close friend from school and many of those ago; blue eyes and black hair. A dimpled face. Here was Aaron, smooth, moon-like, dipped in wax, standing with his hands down his pants; an ode to the pregnant ginger girl, the Lonsdale band, holes in them visible, ready to tell Finn the plan. *I wanna get her somethin'. Should I buy 'er a bath bomb?* asked Aaron. Finn winced. Artificial, canned, sickly strawberry collapses into his mind; connotations of bacterial

vaginosis; an ancient pair of leggings. Finn recalled the small shop across the road that was within walking distance that those well enough were allowed to visit. *She wants dick, not a bath*, he replied. *Although she might need one.*

Somewhere in the building there were piles of catheters waiting to be boiled; slicked in urethra. Finn cringed again as he had when the nurses pulled it out days after his tumour removal, a burning tire-mark left inside him. The quick foaming burn of plastic, nuclear; as nuclear as the day he had to stuff a glycerin suppository up himself, unblocking his morphine-wrecked bowels. *Wait half-an-hour.* The toilets all lead out onto the main corridor, or straight into the bay. There was no energy to be humiliated. We were all down the pit together. Finn chose to embrace it, the way some men get ferret-like thrills off public flatulence. They existed in here as souls to be tinkered with, kept away from the edge; bouncing off each other's bodily functions and rancid pheromones. He felt pity for the nurses, not for their daily tasks or chosen professions, but for the deprivation some patients relished in administering, as if living on a palatial estate; the custom of treating any healthcare professional as both





chambermaid and cattle vastly employed. Lunch-time: food left on trays. He wondered if his parents had made it home yet, back to Liverpool. There was a reef somewhere beyond his sight without disintegrating carrots and overcooked rump. *In here we're contextless.* We are whoever we say we are in our assigned beds, stranded on our own soiled beaches.


---

WALKING INTO THE TOILETS, TOWARD THE GIRL, Aaron thought of England; the flag and long nettled stems that crept from gutters, fingering the steam flailing from kitchen windows, of youth clubs in old chapels and scout huts where children could be safe. He thought of school and the smell of anthologies and he felt the cut of anxiety for not knowing what was happening, of copying coursework, the powdery clarity of other peoples crisps in detention, the arrival of takeaways at the weekend, the smell of fishing bait, the labour club where his grandad would make him imitate Johnny Cash for him and the rest of the witnesses to the factory bell, at the Labour Club. The stage was low; he stood there all of seven-years-old. His grandad let


him drink shandy. *But I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die, when I hear that whistle blowin', I hang my head and cry.* He refracts, leaving his spirit inside her. There is something that is lost, at the centre of a great pool, lay facing the just-visible sky through density and pornographic earthliness; a fragrant reminder of the body that was there may not be there again. They are surely not to last, but that is erotic in itself, isn't it, he thinks? To be privy to the grace of someone loving you in one moment and disinterested, cold the next; a body to belong to multiple other people in some den or club, anywhere he is not. The smell tells him he can't live forever. Public toilets; a rich ammonia in the basin. Here it is, the spirited smell of turpentine, of bodily want. But they will last, won't they?

---

A STRANGE HOLIDAY, AWAY FROM ALL OF THEIR LIVES. His identity in the real world had already become that of patient: Finn, the sickly friend, the guy who used to be attractive, the one who grew more disassociated with every passing day. *The risks of surgery are strokes, permanent brain*









damage, blindness, loss of life, his surgeon had told him as he signed the forms. His parents didn't know how to talk about it, and he didn't want to upset them by bringing it up. *Life can become stained very easily*, he knew now. Sickness is something people wish they could steer clear of and spritz over. His friends had tried to look after him but he had become attuned to their zone-outs. Empathy wasn't unlimited. He had managed the depression that never left, the anger that was easy to disguise, but losing his hair, seeing the fatigue in himself felt personal. *I have to stare it in the face now*. He wasn't built like Aaron, where everything was so immediate and set, as if carved into the walls of some forgotten monastery, living against moss: the future as sure as the past. He did know he had survived his operation, that he was weak, that his body was figuring out what its next reality is.

Outside of himself, Finn knows in here, everything is a variant of the real object; all becomes a simulation. Sustenance was empty, polyphonic. Friendships that seemed cosmic would sever upon discharge; everything a rough sketch of its prototype. Laying in bed for weeks was both stinking and sterile. Sheets, gowns and towels changed

both too often and not often enough, depending on how deteriorated he found himself. Everything; a small reset. If he survived the hospital, they would all become his own duties to perform again. He felt guilty: a little princeling. He wondered how many hot washes the laundry had seen, how many bodies had piled up, releasing foul odours? How many of those people were resting in peace; had been *celestially-discharged*, now in coffins, those whose identity was their illness?

He used to be able to see himself with crows feet, an older counterpart, hunched, smaller, the way everyone shrinks. As a young man, he had envisioned his aged-body as a lacquered statue, a testament to long life. Formidable, if fragile, as if the years he had collected began to dress him in battle armour, engraved, etched with the silver deities of life's vignettes. Now he was a patient, eternal, would that become the dominant part of him, like those in the rest of the ward? *Pillow fluffers*, the nurses called them, in their sodden gowns, scratching at the crotch. Finn was adjusting to the new way ahead. A path, unearthed, previously disguised with thorns and laden with bracken had become exposed. He touched his bandaged nose, pictured the tumour






the surgeons removed, pulsating on a cold iron plate, wriggling and cancerous: a lunch for some war dog. To think of his new body moving through the world was spectral, faint; a forgotten aroma, before being acknowledged as a tangible human-form. Finn pictured armour engraved with tales of Pandemonium, ceremonial in requirement, useless in battle. *I am a zealot*, he thinks. *Somewhere, if not here.*


---

AARON HAD BEEN BACK A SHORT WHILE. The Donald Trump guy had his curtains closed. The security guard was gone, along with Candy Crush. He was thinking about what life he would be living in a few months' time, with Bryony. Finn was flicking through apps, noncommittal. A woman, fifty-something, long wiry hair, all neck and detergent stains, hammered in with a matronly stomp; swinging shot-put fists, house whiskies and open sores. *What ya doin in 'ere now then?* she growled, as if she was asking what all this paperwork was doing on her desk, many lives separated from her own. Finn muted, Aaron looked up toward his mother. *You got my*

*message then*, explaining his fits worsening, that he had been in A&E and waited eighteen hours for an MRI scan. She stared at him, blankly. Suspicion filled the air, as if the woman knew in her bones that her son had cooked this up to ruin her perfectly fine day. *Did you go out last night?* he asked, trying to move the conversation away from his health. *I 'ad a drink for ya' grandad*, she nodded solemnly, nobly. Christ-like. She had switched from Saxon raider to Saint Bernadette, gesturing at the feet of our lady without breath. Aaron looked over at Finn. *Do you want to see my kid? She lives with mum at the moment.* Finn nodded, attempting to keep composure. *"The moment" meaning six years*, she retorted. He had never mentioned a child. *Mum show Finn a photo of Chelsea*, said Aaron, ignoring the venom clouding the room. His mum handed Aaron an old phone with a photograph of a little girl in a school uniform and frilly socks. *Doesn't she look like me?* Aaron asked. Finn smiled. *She's so cute*, he said. *She's just you with plaits.* The woman turned around to Finn with her big, dead eyes, her breathing congested and foul. *She's a fuckin' littl' cunt*, she spat.

The silence was rank, infecting. Now, something lay ajar. There was a course ahead and behind







them, as there was for everyone, where children are delivered to their mothers regardless of qualification. Finn winced. *Here she is, the death of motherhood; Jo Malone, in her perfect shade of jaundice.* The constipated hotel foyer candle-ness of it all. So, history had usurped itself from the rotten Tupperware. Aaron's mum was here, calling her six-year-old granddaughter, his child, a cunt. *'Ere are sum clothes.* A t-shirt of a green frog Finn recognised from his teenage years, old memes, Pepe, was printed in medieval garb, a templar headdress, covered in the streaks of cigarette ash. Finn could feel Aaron's awareness of the room. He, the centre of a furnace. Finn looked at the t-shirt of the meme frog. *It's only future use is as a cum rag, at best.* She stayed a while, exchanging small happenings about some guy she was seeing, what Aaron's plans were for living after surgery (*there's no room at mine*, she said). The woman stood up to leave. *'Ave you go' any munney?*, she asked her son. Aaron shook his head. His present had come tearing in, humming. He was not ashamed. Why should he be? His mum continued to be his mum. An unidentifiable feeling rose in him; the act of seeing a recognisable profile turn forward. His daughter's face was round,

happy, the genetic reflection of his. His memory of her and the real her were hard to put together, a level of shame wrapping around him. *People will just do what they do. Why would they surprise you?* Something began scratching away. One he had felt many times before and tried to turn away from. He had landed his daughter there, living with that woman, the one who birthed him. He was incapable, as was the girl's mother. *The town bike.* There were too many answers already lying there: obvious, guilty, Vitruvian, half-dissected. Open heart and surgical. He closed the blue felt curtains around the side of his bed. Finn gave him a stunted smile which was only remotely returned. Finn's morphine was wearing off, he was drowsy with the hole in his head. He clicked the buzzer by the side of his bed, asking for more relief. A couple of nurses were chatting by the computers. *That ginger woman whose always faggin' it - The pregnant one, who was moved down from toxicology? - Yeah, that one - she's done a runner.*

---

THERE WERE FLAMES COMING FROM THE NURSE'S STATION. Finn shuffled, craning his neck from the







bed, around Aaron's curtained partition, to witness a small candle lit. A nurse lowered the lights, the entire ward a shade darker than before. He asked the nurse what was happening. *A patient is having their last rights read*, she said. Who would it be for? Who was dying? The candle gives off small wisps of black smoke, smelling of paraffin and formaldehyde. Finn's eyes flickered to his grandmother at the Carmelite Church, in Dublin, genuflecting by the remains of St. Valentine; Father Cormac's thurible, expelling incense as it swung; liturgical. She had taken him there as a child before his mum and dad moved over here. The past could have happened, could be happening, to someone else. The past felt like objects: clear, transferable pouches that could be shared between individuals rather than something that had just happened to he, himself, a few days or hours ago, when memories belonged to someone antiquated; something to be written as a record of an event, rather than attached to any real truth. Weren't we supposed to exercise a level of distrust with history books? Everything that was to come was sure. The hospital bed, the gown, it all fits. How many had played host to this bed? How many of them were, weeks later, to be memories to their

loved ones,—the idea of being a reverie to others and not a self with a body made him shudder—to be remembered through flowers given in condolence? He thought of his grandmother who could not stand the sight or smell of flowers, reminding her of her premature parent's death; a Shankill kitchen made to host mourners eyeing up valuables, full of white roses and lilies as if the room were built on the grave. *Memories were at risk of becoming extinct in Neurophysiology*. The ward was less specific, more of a plane that glowed, imbued with switches and heart rates. Finn realised the patient in the private room closest to the entrance, who sometimes wore a Reform UK cap, the one with the security guard, had candlelight gesturing against the blinds of his window.

---

WHY SHOULD ANYTHING AFFECT HIM? Aaron opened his curtains. Why should he be the one to wallow? He looked over to Finn who was trying to read but seemed to be looking past the pages. A book on poetry, something historical with tales of immortality, probably gay, Aaron guessed. Finn





asked him how he was. *Me? I'm good yeah.* He sat down, in the chair by Finn's window. They were silent for a while, both watching the last of the crucible red leave the sky, replacing itself with oceanic depth. Aaron watched Finn drift off from the corner of his eyes. His skin was paler than it had been before. *Did my parents come and see me today?* asked Finn, innocently. Aaron was jealous of how blissful he sounded, if confused. Aaron remembers one of their first conversations; when he sat himself down at Finn's window. Finn had mentioned an ex-boyfriend. Something about Dua Lipa. Aaron starts to feel small, thinking of the boy in the eyepatch, waving excitedly at the birds, too young to understand how different his life would be. He could feel himself drawing to a close, stood staring down onto an archaic, uncovered cemetery. He, communing with; these relics of bodily fragments that held their last worldly possessions, parents buried with jewelry, last trinkets of any value they had been able to scrape together. Further into the soil, soldiers buried in uniform from deaths dealt in youth or as old men with memories wiped-clean, the deepest ravines of soil reserved for the rusted chainmail of knights, given a respect in death he was unsure he was able to

attain in any version of his life. He was not like Finn, who despite it all still wore a shroud of respectability. *Someone who'd have a proper funeral, have people actually turn up for him and not the free bar.*

---

Outside was evening; sound distilled into many fragmented echoes. The nurses' station was still flickering as Aaron walked off the ward, leaving their forgotten grotto, the faint smell of paraffin passing over each of them. There was a clarity present, now, between the quiet of the hallway and the mark of his mum left on the chair. Aaron was heading to the shop before it closed, to get Finn something for when he wakes up. He knows it's already shut, walking past it, off the hospital grounds and down towards the dimly-lit underpass toward the motorway, toward Manchester. Rot had long passed over the graveyard in his mind, skeletal rats, the land replaced by the inhalation of wind and cold souls. *This could still be the future*, he thinks. They're all still down there, forgotten, marauding, waiting for someone to speak, to pray, to their remains. *Finn, wha' will ar' tombs look like?*

