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# SOLACE HOUSE

**Will Maclean**



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**I**

**THE RIDGE**

## 1

1. *A lost, lonely season unmoored. My mind erring –  
Returning to half-empty halls  
Of unending silence; enclosing, ensnaring –  
Now torrid remembrance enthrals.*
  
2. *All trauma's exiles, demented, therein  
All unto night's torments exposed.  
Delusions roam; eerie qualms underpin –  
Every spurious theory supposed.*

'SO, WHAT ARE YOU going to do all summer?' said Marcus idly, through half a sandwich. 'I mean, you can't very well stay here in this shithole, can you?'

'Of course not,' I said. 'But, you know. Having no plan is also, like, a *great* plan. World's my oyster. I can go anywhere, do anything.'

'Right.' Marcus seemed unconvinced by this; he made the word last two whole seconds. His mouth was still full. 'Well, I suppose that's technically correct.' Amethyst gazed airily through the window, at the uninspiring bulk of the opposite wing of The Ridge, identical twin of the one we were in, and blew smoke dismissively from her nostrils.

'I thought you were going to stay with relatives? Some aunt or something?'

Had I said this? It seemed likely I might have done, at some point, probably to change the subject. Either way, it wasn't true. 'I don't want to be a burden to anyone. Plus, this way I'm very much my own person. I can do what I like. Go where I like.'

Marcus looked puzzled, as if reviewing a bill filled with items he hadn't ordered. 'Wait. Are you saying you've made no plans *whatsoever*? For the *entire summer*?' And this statement was both horrible and unthinkable, and wholly and precisely correct, but I didn't want to discuss it. Any of it. Instead, I shrugged and smiled as if this complete lack of forward thinking were no big deal.

'Not yet. Like I say, it's very liberating, in one sense. I mean, ha, *terrifying* in another, but also, y'know, ultimately *very liberating*.'

Amethyst chewed her lip doubtfully. 'Really?'

'Definitely!' My voice brimmed with confidence. 'People say *if you want to make God laugh, make a plan*, but my dad always maintained if you *really* want to make the old fucker slap his thigh, make no plans at all. See where you end up!'

To underline my complete confidence in the age-old, tried-and-tested method of having absolutely no plan at all, I grinned, until my face hurt.

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Term had been over for half an hour. The Ridge, in that moment, still held a full complement of students, and so the usual noises still prevailed; slamming doors, scuffling feet, laughter and occasional shouting, music from radios and stack stereos, the drone of indie bands, the saccharine rush of dance music. Marcus and Amethyst were sitting in my room, as they were both already in the process of packing up their rooms. We were also listening to music; I had attempted to introduce them to Sonic Youth, but that had not gone well, so we were listening to a Jazz-Funk compilation and sharing the last third of a bottle of white wine.

I had met Marcus last September, before term started, when we'd both arrived early at The Ridge. There were only the two of us at first, and we got on well. But then, when everyone else arrived, and there had been drinks in the bar for the new residents, I saw for the first time how Marcus behaved in a social situation. Amidst a roomful of extremely

self-conscious and shy eighteen-year-olds, fresh out of small towns all over Britain, Marcus was bracingly different. He made everything into a big, boyish joke, called everyone *chum* and genuinely didn't care whether people liked him or not, which of course meant most people did. By the end of that first night, he was friends, it seemed, with everyone, and I made it my mission to let people believe that this loud, confident, easy-going young man was a close friend, that our friendship might go back years, rather than just two days. And most assumed precisely that, meaning I was spared a large portion of the burden of having to introduce myself to other people.

Amethyst had arrived a few days later, as close to the start of lectures as possible. Her scent arrived before she did – a thick, almost sickly perfume that pervaded the corridor, rolling out ahead of her like a red carpet; an astringent odour that insisted, almost angrily, that the wearer was an adult, a being of complexity and sophistication. This impression was only strengthened when I saw her. She did not resemble any nineteen-year-old I knew, certainly not any student. Her clothes seemed strangely middle-aged, as if her dress sense had skipped a couple of decades: roll-neck sweaters, thick cork heels, pleated trousers and large gold earrings that spoke of an exacting glamour painstakingly derived from the correct magazines. It turned out that she was not only on the wrong corridor that first day, she was also in the wrong hall – she was supposed to be at Hatfield, which was ten minutes away. I offered to walk over there with her and carry her bags, and from that moment – for better or worse – there was a connection between us. At the end of Freshers' Week, we had gone to some kind of mixer for Humanities students, and ended up drunkenly sleeping together, and although this situation had not recurred since then, I imagined – hoped – that it eventually would. Until then, we had simply remained as friends, but friends who – to me, at least – shared a history, and possibly a future.

Looking at both Marcus and Amethyst now, in my room, I was suddenly acutely conscious that this was the last time I would see

either of them in their current form. They were going away, to have *experiences*. Amethyst had already talked at length about her summer, which she saw as nothing less than a dazzling opportunity for an almost-three-month holiday. She was going to spend the first couple of days in London, where she had a few parties to attend with her two best friends from school. Then, she and these friends were off to South East Asia, possibly ending their trip with a week in Australia. And why not? Her parents would write a cheque for a large amount of money they wouldn't even notice they'd spent. Why wouldn't her summer be anything other than a fantastic adventure?

Similarly, Marcus had plans. He was going back to London, too, where his family lived, and then he was off to stay with a cousin in Florida, where the plan was to teach American kids to take penalties at what he called *some godawful soccer camp* somewhere outside of Tampa. These specifics, however, were irrelevant; they were both going somewhere I couldn't imagine, somewhere where the beaches were white sand, the sky blue enough to make your eyes sting, somewhere where the sun shone, always. From my perspective, they might as well have been going to one of Saturn's moons, the far future, the deep past.

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'You must have some kind of plan, though?' said Marcus. Thus far, I had been careful to avoid the subject of summer, or, when pressed, to bat it away. And it *was* odd to have no plan; I could see that now. Most of the other students had vague plans – summer jobs organized by relatives, weekends at festivals, trips abroad. But even vague plans were better than no plans at all.

'Not sure yet,' I said breezily, trying to turn a negative into a positive. 'As I say, world's my oyster really.' I could have stopped there, but something – the painful sense that I was always, no matter how hard I tried, lagging behind them – made me carry on talking.

'I've been thinking about going up to, um, Scotland?' I heard myself say. 'To work on a fishing boat?'

It was strange to hear myself say this. I had not planned to say this.

'Wow,' said Marcus, unsure how seriously to take this. 'You've... got friends up there?'

'No,' I said, my mouth suddenly dry. 'But, you know. They're always looking for people!'

There was baffled silence. I realized they were both looking at me intently. The worst possible outcome: they were genuinely curious. Again, I felt compelled to talk. To keep digging.

'I mean, I was just gonna turn up? They always need people to work on the, um, the trawlers.'

No-one said anything. I experienced a brief, hot panic that *trawlers* might not be the correct word. Worse, when the silence continued, I heard my own voice say, as an unnecessary addendum to my previous unnecessary statements, 'I saw a programme about it on telly.' This last statement, at least, was true, and was the genesis of the whole strand of thought in my mind, but the words sounded desperate – pleading, almost. In the following seconds, I swore I could hear my own face redden, a fizzing sound like fat on a griddle.

Amethyst looked distressed, as if something in her body had started to ache. Marcus gazed intently out of the window. From somewhere, there was the drone of a lawnmower; the clean, eternally optimistic scent of freshly mowed grass spicing the air. They were already cleaning The Ridge up for summer.

'Don't you need a lot of experience to do something like that? It's very dangerous,' said Amethyst eventually. She sounded both puzzled and disappointed. She lit another menthol cigarette. I smoked infrequently, usually after meals and at the beginning and end of the day, but Amethyst smoked constantly. Whenever she came to my room, I had to air the place out afterwards. She never asked if she could smoke. She just did; flicking an efficient little flame from a slender lighter that I didn't doubt was real gold.

'Yeah, but... you can pick it up on the job.' I just wanted this conversation to be over now. I looked to Marcus for help, but he was still gazing out of the window.

'Also,' said Amethyst, putting her lighter back inside her handbag and zipping it up, 'don't you have to be really strong to work on a fishing boat?'

'Again,' I said, irrevocably entangled in the flypaper of this ludicrous fiction, 'I can shape up on the job.'

'*Right.*' She smiled and raised her eyebrows. 'Well. It'll be interesting to see what you look like in September.' She stretched, arching her back like a cat. I knew from experience this meant that, truth or lie, whatever I was saying had ceased to interest her. She reached for the bottle of wine and splashed the last of it into her glass. The Jazz-Funk compilation was still playing at a low volume, the Brand New Heavies or Galliano or someone. I couldn't actually tell the tracks apart; I found this kind of music irritating. I suddenly realized I'd only bought this album because Amethyst had mentioned in passing that she liked it.

'When do you think you'll be back in the country?' I asked casually, trying to make it sound as if the answer was of very little concern to me.

'September.' Amethyst flicked her hair back. 'As close to term time as bloody possible!'

'Well, why don't we meet up?' This was a plan I had considered raising for a long time, and was now straining hard to pass off as something I'd only just thought of. In that respect, it was the precise inverse of the conversation I'd just endured, only just as awkward.

'When we get back?' said Marcus.

'Yeah,' I said, 'I mean, I *suppose*, the three of us, sure. But I was thinking more of just—'

'We could go out!' said Amethyst, smiling. 'A night on the town. We could all meet up in London and go out!'

'Well, I mean, we *could*—' I began.

'That's a great idea!' said Marcus. 'I know a few places around Green Park we can go to. We could start at my dad's club. I mean, everyone there's about a billion years old, but the drinks are cheap.'

'There's a new club I want to check out in Piccadilly,' said Amethyst. 'It was set up by two DJs from Chicago. Someone said they saw *Lenny Kravitz* in there!' This was clearly big news to Amethyst. She gave us a couple of seconds to absorb this world-changing information.

'Wow,' I said flatly.

'Yes,' said Amethyst, enchanted with her own idea of what our night out would be like. 'It'll be fun!'

'When will you be back?' I asked again, as casually as I could, directing the question at Amethyst. Despite my best efforts, the words were shot through with a thread of pure desperation.

Neither of them appeared to have heard me. And so, I decided to affect indifference, about this, about the whole crushing matter of them leaving, about my failure to engage with the immediate future and my need to lie about it, almost a reflex now; my need to lie about everything.

And the needlings of Marcus and the indifference of Amethyst were, ultimately, small and trifling cruelties compared to the deeds of The Annihilator, and the events of the Last Day.

## 2

3. *Under night's urging, that treacherous evening,  
Reason and base lies engineered:  
Mad and deluded, erring; perceiving  
In tedium, infinite fears.*
  
4. *Under lone exile, desire: even now,  
This house entices, surprises  
Until naught remains; I see easily how  
An unquiet night terrorizes.*

I SLEPT BADLY. My night was full of half-dreams, broken scenarios in which I was always close to humiliation, abandonment and utter defeat; I woke feeling as if I'd fallen down a flight of stairs. To cheer myself, I dragged a chair over to the window and sat watching, with a cup of instant coffee and a cigarette, as the rooms at The Ridge began to empty.

At first, I'll admit, it was funny to me, seeing everyone leave. From three floors up, I watched, delighted, as they packed up – along with their Anglepoise lamps and stereo systems – their lurid, noisy university personas. The people they had tried out being, wearing like costume, for the past year.

And so, there went Nick Tanner, captain of the university rugby team, climbing sombrely into the black Saab that belonged to his dad, who, it transpired, was some kind of clergyman. Nick's expression was a mask of shock; he looked for all the world like he'd been arrested. I half-expected his stern-faced father to push him down by the top of

his head into the back seat. And there went Fay, shy to the point of fainting when sober, but if given more than one drink would reliably make an exhibition of herself. Fay's mousy parents approached their daughter cautiously across the tarmac, as if she were being freed from a hostage situation, descending on her in a tearful embrace. And there went Nikki, or Nicola Molyneux as she'd now have to resume being, who had foamy-looking white dreadlocks and a nose stud and described herself as a New Age anarcho-collectivist, usually when nobody prompted her to do so. Her librarian-sensible and painfully embarrassed-looking mum came to collect her in a tiny blue Mini Cooper, which the pair of them packed up in a silence so strained I could feel the crackle of it from fifty yards away.

The amusement began to pall, however, when people who were more than simply the background scenery of my life at The Ridge also started to disappear. Phil – probably my best friend here after Marcus – an amiable ginger-haired young man who never swore, always shared cigarettes and played fragmentary Metallica songs on his acoustic guitar, was the first on my corridor to go, knocking on my door to wish me a good summer. I watched sadly as his bemused dad – looking uncannily like an older version of Phil – arrived as though through a time warp to rescue his younger self. Angela, who lived directly across from me, was next to vanish, meaning the corridor would never again vibrate to the shockwaves of her constant manufactured dramas, ranging from the terror of upcoming exams to breaking up with her on-off boyfriend, a singularly dull Classics student called Andrew.

It was easy, during term time, to sneer, yet now, it was plain to see that all of this was colour, was context, was life. It was infinitely precious, all of it: youth and folly and energy, the envy of the whole dead world, now itself dying, ossifying into the stale shorthand of nostalgia, a simplification of itself from which it would never recover. This rich combination of things – people, time, place, circumstance – would never repeat, never happen again, and its priceless complexities would

be smoothed away by time, its heady and unique flavour condensed by memory into a series of images bland as flashcards; a dance, a laugh, a kiss, a song, stripped of all vitality.

And every hour, the corridor I lived on, and the hall of residence that surrounded it, grew quieter; the building around me seemingly growing larger and more imposing as its population dwindled. *It's like they're all dying*, I thought, as I shut the window. Succumbing, each one, to a disease that would take them, and leave me, cursed and alone, with the one person whose company I wasn't sure I could endure.

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After lunch, Marcus and Amethyst left together in Marcus's car. This made sense, as they both lived in West London; Marcus in Ealing, Amethyst in Notting Hill. Neither of them had very much stuff, so their belongings all fitted into Marcus's battered blue Volvo. I persuaded him to take a couple of boxes of my things too, partly because it reduced my luggage here solely to things I could carry, which I felt might be handy, and partly because I wanted a hook, some sort of obligation, in Marcus's life. Even someone as allergic to short-term planning as I knew that beyond the immediate problem of summer lay the larger problem of next year's living arrangements, and I half-hoped that Marcus and I might get a house together, maybe with Phil. Leaving Marcus in possession of my music system was therefore a tactical move. It meant that when he came back, one of the first people he would have to see would be me.

I helped them load the car. Every cardboard box I carried was a step closer to being alone, and having to face whatever happened next, so of course I dawdled. When the car was finally packed, I realized I was staring at Amethyst, as if I were a faithful dog, she my indifferent owner.

'I suppose this is it,' I said, more sadly than I intended. In response, she smiled a restrained, political smile.

'See you, Alex.'

‘Take care out there,’ I said. ‘Let me know when there’s an address I can write to you.’

She looked excessively grave and serious. ‘*I shall.*’ I got the impression that Marcus was grinning, but when I looked, he turned away.

‘Goodbye then,’ I said. What did I want to happen? In that moment, I wanted her to embrace me, to kiss me, to make it clear that she would miss me. I wanted to matter to her. In the end, of course, she simply gave me a perfunctory hug and a kiss on the cheek, before detaching herself from me with the air of someone having fulfilled some grim but necessary duty. And, ultimately, wasn’t it better this way? This way, I could maintain the agonizing fiction that we were drifting towards being a couple, that the endless summer apart was just one more bump in a road that led to a beautiful inevitability. I could survive on that delusion all summer. Before I could say anything further, Marcus’s hand clapped firmly onto me, gripping me so tightly I thought his fingers and thumb might meet somewhere in the meat of my shoulder.

‘See you on the other side of summer!’ he said, playfully mock-punching me. And then, he turned away, opened the driver side door of the Volvo and swung himself inside.

As he did so, he muttered, almost imperceptibly, from the corner of his mouth, ‘*Good luck on the trawler.*’

For a split second I perceived his grinning face as something diseased – a ripe spot about to burst. I looked away, just as a smirking Amethyst, already in the passenger seat, put an elbow playfully in Marcus’s ribs. Then, Marcus parped his horn twice as the car accelerated up the driveway, and Amethyst’s pale, delicate arm appeared from the passenger window and gave a regal wave.

And they were gone.

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I went back up to my room, intending to look out of the window, down onto my fellow students, for a while, but the fun had soured. Plus, I was just watching strangers now, people I didn’t know, and