

I AM THE MESSENGER

MARKUS ZUSAK

AUTHOR OF
THE
BOOK
THIEF

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

part one: The First Message

A ♦ the holdup

2 ♦ sex should be like maths: an introduction to my life

3 ♦ the ace of diamonds

4 ♦ the judge and the mirror

5 ♦ watching, waiting, raping

6 ♦ pieces

7 ♦ harrison avenue

8 ♦ being jimmy

9 ♦ the barefoot girl

10 ♦ the shoe box

J ♦ another stupid human

Q ♦ edgar street revisited

K ♦ murder at the cathedral

part two: The Stones of Home

A ♣ aftermath

2 ♣ the visit

3 ♣ the envelope

4 ♣ just ed

5 ♣ cabs, the hooker and alice

6 ♣ the stones

7 ♣ the priest

8 ♣ juveniles

9 ♣ the cops show up

10 ♣ the easy one and ice cream

J ♣ the colour of her lips

Q ♣ blood and roses

K ♣ the face of clubs

part three: Trying Times for Ed Kennedy

A ♠ the game

2 ♠ twenty dollars for the dog and the card

3 ♠ dig

4 ♠ the benefits of lying

5 ♠ the power and the glory

6 ♠ a moment of beauty

7 ♠ a moment of truth

8 ♠ clown street. chips. the doorman. and me

9 ♠ the woman

10 ♠ front-porch cyclone

J ♠ a phone call

Q ♠ the bell street theatre

K ♠ the last reel

part four: The Music of Hearts

A ♥ the music of hearts

2 ♥ the kiss, the grave, the fire

3 ♥ the casual suit

4 ♥ to feel the fear

5 ♥ ritchie's sin

6 ♥ god bless the man with the beard, the missing teeth
and the poverty.

7 ♥ the secret marv

8 ♥ each to each

9 ♥ the swings

10 ♥ audrey, part one: three nights to wait

J ♥ marv's afterthought

Q ♥ audrey, part two: three minutes to take

K ♥ the end

part five: The Joker

- J_* the laughter
- J_* the weeks
- J_* the end is not the end
- J_* the folder
- J_* the message

About the Author

Also by Markus Zusak

Copyright

About the Book

Ed Kennedy is an underage cab driver without much of a future.

He's pathetic at playing cards, hopelessly in love with his best friend, Audrey, and utterly devoted to his coffee-drinking dog, the Doorman. His life is one of peaceful routine and incompetence - until he inadvertently stops a bank robbery.

That's when the first ace arrives in the mail.

That's when Ed becomes the messenger.

Chosen to care, he makes his way through town helping and hurting (where necessary) until only one question remains: Who's behind Ed's mission?

I AM THE
MESSENGER

MARKUS ZUSAK

RHCP DIGITAL

For Scout

part one: The First Message



A

◆ the holdup

The gunman is useless.

I know it.

He knows it.

The whole bank knows it.

Even my best mate, Marvin, knows it, and he's more useless than the gunman.

The worst part about the whole thing is that Marv's car is standing outside in a fifteen-minute parking zone. We're all facedown on the floor, and the car's only got a few minutes left on it.

'I wish this bloke'd hurry up,' I mention.

'I know,' Marv whispers back. 'This is outrageous.' His voice rises from the depths of the floor. 'I'll be getting a fine because of this useless bastard. I can't afford another fine, Ed.'

'The car's not even worth it.'

'What?'

Marv looks over at me now. I can sense he's getting uptight. Offended. If there's one thing Marv doesn't tolerate, it's someone putting shit on his car. He repeats the question.

'What did you say, Ed?'

'I said,' I whisper, 'it isn't even worth the fine, Marv.'

'Look,' he says, 'I'll take a lot of things, Ed, but . . .'

I tune out of what he's saying because, quite frankly, once Marv gets going about his car, it's downright pain-in-the-arse material. He goes on and on, like a kid, and he's just turned twenty, for Jesus' sake.

He goes on for another minute or so, until I have to cut him off.

'Marv,' I point out, 'the car's an embarrassment, OK? It doesn't even have a handbrake - it's sitting out there with two bricks behind the back wheels.' I'm trying to keep my voice as quiet as possible. 'Half the time you don't even bother locking it. You're probably hoping someone'll steal it so you can collect the insurance.'

'It isn't insured.'

'Exactly.'

'NRMA said it wasn't worth it.'

'It's understandable.'

That's when the gunman turns round and shouts, 'Who's talkin' back there?'

Marv doesn't care. He's worked up about the car.

'You don't complain when I give you a lift to work, Ed, you miserable upstart.'

'Upstart? What the hell's an upstart?'

'I said shut up back there!' the gunman shouts again.

'*Hurry up then!*' Marv roars back at him. He's in no mood now. No mood at all.

He's facedown on the floor of the bank.

The bank's being robbed.

It's abnormally hot for spring.

The air-conditioning's broken down.

His car's just been insulted.

Old Marv's at the end of his tether, or his wits' end. Whatever you want to call it - he's pissed off something terrible.

We remain flattened on the worn-out, dusty blue carpet of the bank, and Marv and I are looking at each other with eyes that argue. Our mate Ritchie's over at the Lego table, half under it, lying among all the pieces that scattered when the gunman came in yelling, screaming and shaking. Audrey's just behind me. Her foot's on my leg, making it go numb.

The gunman's gun is pointed at the nose of some poor girl behind the counter. Her name tag says MISHA. Poor Misha. She's shivering nearly as bad as the gunman as she waits for some zitty twenty-nine-year-old fella with a tie and sweat patches under his arms to fill the bag with money.

'I wish this bloke'd hurry up,' Marv speaks.

'I said that already,' I tell him.

'So what? I can't make a comment of my own?'

'Get your foot off me,' I tell Audrey.

'What?' she responds.

'I said get your foot off me - my leg's going numb.'

She moves it. Reluctantly.

'Thanks.'

The gunman turns round and shouts his question for the last time. 'Who's the bastard talking?'

The thing to note with Marv is that he's problematic at the best of times. Argumentative. Less than amiable. He's the type of friend you find yourself constantly arguing with - especially when it comes to his shitbox Falcon. He's also a completely immature arsehole when he's in the mood.

He calls out in a jocular manner, 'It's Ed Kennedy, sir. It's Ed who's talking!'

'Thanks a lot!' I say.

(My full name's Ed Kennedy. I'm nineteen. I'm an underage cab driver. I'm typical of many of the young men you see in this suburban outpost of the city - not a whole lot of prospects or possibility. That aside, I read more books than I should, and I'm decidedly crap at sex and doing my taxes. Nice to meet you.)

'Well, shut up, Ed!' the gunman screams. Marv smirks. 'Or I'll come over there and shoot the arse off you!'

It's like being in school again and your sadistic maths teacher's barking orders at you from the front of the room, even though he couldn't care less and he's waiting for the

bell so he can go home and drink beer and get fat in front of the telly.

I look at Marv. I want to kill him. 'You're twenty years old, for Christ's sake. Are you trying to get us killed?'

'Shut up, Ed!' The gunman's voice is louder this time.

I whisper even quieter. 'If I get shot, I'm blaming you. You know that, don't you?'

'I said shut *up*, Ed!'

'Everything's just a big joke, isn't it, Marv?'

'Right, that's it.' The gunman forgets about the woman behind the counter and marches over to us, fed up as all buggery. When he arrives we all look up at him.

Marv.

Audrey.

Me.

And all the other hopeless articles like us sprawled out on the floor.

The end of the gun touches the bridge of my nose. It makes it itchy. I don't scratch it.

The gunman looks back and forth between Marv and me. Through the stocking on his face I can see his ginger whiskers and acne scars. His eyes are small and he has big ears. He's most likely robbing the bank as payback on the world for winning the ugliness prize at his local fete three years running.

'So which one of you's Ed?'

'Him,' I answer, pointing to Marv.

'Oh no you don't,' Marv counters, and I can tell by the look on his face that he isn't as afraid as he should be. He knows we'd both be dead by now if this gunman was the real thing. He looks up at the stocking-faced man and says, 'Hang on a sec . . .' He scratches his jawline. 'You look familiar.'

'OK,' I admit, '*I'm* Ed.' But the gunman's too busy listening to what Marv has to say for himself.

'Marv,' I whisper loudly, 'shut up.'

'Shut up, Marv,' says Audrey.

'Shut up, Marv!' calls Ritchie from across the room.

'Who the hell are *you*?' the gunman calls across to Ritchie. He turns to find out where the voice came from.

'I'm Ritchie.'

'Well, shut yourself up, Ritchie! Don't *you* start!'

'No worries,' returns the voice. 'Thanks a lot.' All my friends seem to be smart arses. Don't ask me why. Like many things, it is what it is.

In any case, the gunman starts to seethe. It seems to come pouring from his skin, right through the stocking on his face. 'I'm completely bloody sick of this,' he growls. His voice burns from his lips.

It doesn't shut Marv up, though.

'I think,' he continues, 'we might've gone to school together or something like that, you know?'

'You want to die,' the gunman says nervously, still seething, 'don't you?'

'Well, actually,' Marv explains, 'I just want you to pay the parking fine for my car. It's in a fifteen-minute zone outside. You're holding me up here.'

'Damn right I am!' He points the gun.

'There's no need to be *that* hostile.'

Oh God, I think. Marv's gone now. He's about to get shot in the throat.

The gunman looks out the glass doors of the bank, trying to figure out which car belongs to Marv. 'Which one is it?' he enquires - politely enough, I must say.

'The light blue Falcon there.'

'*That* piece of shit? I wouldn't piss on it, let alone pay a fine on it.'

'Now hang on a second.' Marv's getting all offended again. 'Since you're holding up the bank, the least you can do is pay my parking fine, don't you think?'

Meanwhile.

The money's ready at the counter and Misha, the poor behind-the-counter girl, calls out. The gunman turns and heads back for it.

'Hurry up, bitch,' he barks at her as she hands it over. I assume this is the mandatory tone for a holdup. He's seen the appropriate movies, all right. Soon he's on his way back to us, money in hand.

'You!' he screams at me. He's found new courage now that he's got the money. He's about to hit me with his gun when something catches his attention outside.

He looks closer.

Out the glass doors of the bank.

A slab of sweat falls from his throat.

He breathes hard.

His thoughts churn, and . . .

He goes off.

'No!'

The police are outside, but they have no idea what's happening in the bank. Word hasn't made it to the street yet. They're telling someone in a gold Torana to stop double-parking outside the bakery across the road. The car moves on and so do the cops, and the useless gunman is left holding the bag of money. His ride's gone.

An idea hits him.

He turns again.

Back to us.

'You,' he orders Marv. 'Give us your keys.'

'What?'

'You heard me.'

'It's an antique, that car!'

'It's a piece of shit, Marv,' I abuse him. 'Now give him the keys or I'll kill you myself!'

With a disgruntled look on his face, Marv reaches into his pocket and pulls out his car keys.

'Be gentle,' he begs.

'Blow me,' the gunman replies.

‘There’s no need for that!’ Ritchie yells from under the Lego table.

‘Shut up, you!’ the gunman yells back, and he’s off.

His only problem is the fact that Marv’s car has about a five-per-cent chance of starting first time round.

The gunman bursts through the doors of the bank and is on his way towards the road. He stumbles and drops the gun near the entrance but decides to keep going without it. All in a second, I can see the panic on his face as he decides whether to pick it up again or go on. There’s no time, so he leaves it and continues running.

As we all get to our knees to watch him, we see him approaching the car.

‘Watch this.’ Marv begins to laugh. Audrey, Marv and I all watch, and Ritchie’s on his way over to us.

Outside, the gunman stops and tries to work out which key opens the car. That’s when we all crack up laughing at the incompetence of him.

He eventually gets in and tries to start the car countless times, but it never kicks over.

Then.

For some reason I’ll never understand.

I run out, picking up the gun along the way. When I cross the road, I lock eyes with the gunman. He attempts to get out of the car, but it’s too late now for that.

I’m standing at the Ford’s window.

I have the gun pointed at his eyes.

He stops.

We both do.

He tries to get out and run, and I swear I have no idea I’m firing the gun until I’ve stepped towards him and hear the glass shatter.

‘What are you doing?’ Marv cries out in pain from the other side of the street. His world is crumbling. ‘That’s my car you’re shooting!’

Sirens arrive.

The gunman falls to his knees.

He says, 'I'm such an *idiot*.'

I can only agree.

For a moment, I look down and pity him because I realize that I'm quite possibly looking at the most hapless man on earth. First of all, he robs a bank with unutterably stupid people like Marv and me inside it. Then his getaway car vanishes. Then, when he's onto a good thing because he knows how to get his hands on a different car, it's the most pathetic car in the Southern Hemisphere. In a way, I feel sorry for him. Imagine it - the humiliation.

As the cops put the handcuffs on him and lead him away, I say to Marv, 'Now do you see?' I continue on and become more forceful. Louder. 'Do you see? This only goes to show the patheticness' - I point to it - 'of this car.' I pause a moment to let him think it over. 'If it was even half decent, this bloke would've got away now, wouldn't he?'

Marv admits it. 'I guess.'

It's actually hard to tell if he would have preferred the gunman to get away simply to prove his car isn't so useless.

There's glass on the road and all over the seats of the car. I try to figure out which is more shattered - the window or Marv's face.

'Hey,' I say, 'sorry about the window, OK?'

'Forget it,' Marv answers.

The gun feels warm and sticky, like melting chocolate in my hand.

Some more cops arrive to ask questions.

We go down to the police station and they ask us about the robbery, what happened, and how I managed to get my hands on the gun.

'He just dropped it?'

'That's what I told you, didn't I?'

'Look, son,' the cop says. He looks up from his papers.

'There's no need to get shirty with me.' He's got a beer gut

and a greying moustache. Why do so many cops feel the need to own a moustache?

'Shirty?' I ask.

'Yes, shirty.'

Shirty.

I quite like that word.

'Sorry,' I tell him. 'He just dropped it on his way out, and I picked it up as I went to chase him. That's all. He was a complete shocker, all right?'

'Right.'

We're in there for quite a while. The only time the beer-gutted cop becomes unsettled is when Marv keeps asking for compensation on his car.

'The blue Falcon?' the cop asks.

'That's the one.'

'To be blunt, son - that car's an absolute outrage. It's disgraceful.'

'I told you,' I said.

'It doesn't even have a handbrake, for Christ's sake.'

'So?'

'So you're lucky we're not fining you for it - it's unroadworthy.'

'Thanks a lot.'

The cop smiles. 'My pleasure.'

'And let me give you some advice.'

We're almost out the door when we realize the cop still isn't finished. He calls us back, or at least he calls Marv.

'Yeah?' Marv replies.

'Why don't you get a new car, son?'

Marv looks seriously at the man. 'I have my reasons.'

'What - no money?'

'Oh, I've got money all right. I *do* work, you know.' He even manages to sound sanctimonious. 'I just have other priorities.' He smiles now, as only someone who's proud of

a car like that could possibly manage. 'That - and I love my car.'

'Fair enough,' the cop concludes. 'Goodbye.'

'What priorities have *you*, of all people, got?' I ask Marv on the other side of the door.

Marv looks straight ahead blankly.

'Just shut up, Ed,' he says. 'You might be a hero to most people today, but to me you're just the dirty prick who put a bullet in my window.'

'You want me to pay for it?'

Marv allows me another smile. 'No.'

To be quite honest, that's a relief. I'd rather die than put a solitary cent into that Falcon.

When we walk out of the police station, Audrey and Ritchie are waiting for us, but they're not alone. There are media people there as well, and a whole load of photos are taken.

'That's him!' someone calls, and before I can argue, the whole crowd is in my face, asking questions. I answer as fast as I can, explaining again what happened. The town I live in isn't small, and there are radio, TV and newspaper people, all of whom will be presenting stories and writing articles for the next day.

I imagine the headlines.

Something like TAXI DRIVER TURNS TO HERO would be nice, but they'll probably print something like LOCAL DEADBEAT MAKES GOOD. Marv will get a good laugh out of that one.

After maybe ten minutes of questions, the crowd disperses and we walk back to our parking spot. The Falcon's got a nice big ticket slapped on the windscreen, under the wiper.

'Bastards,' Audrey states as Marv rips it off and reads it. We were in the bank in the first place so Marv could deposit his pay-cheque. He can use it for the fine now.

We attempt to wipe the glass off the seats and get in.
Marv turns the key about eight times. It won't start.

'Brilliant,' he says.

'Typical,' replies Ritchie.

Audrey and I say nothing.

Audrey steers and the rest of us push. We take it back to
my place since it's closest to town.

A few days later I'll get the first message.

It changes everything.

2

◆ sex should be like maths: an introduction to my life

I'll tell you a bit about my life.

I play cards at least a few nights a week.

It's what we do.

We play a game called Annoyance, which isn't particularly hard and is the only game we all enjoy without arguing too much.

There's Marv, who never shuts up, sitting there trying to smoke cigars and simultaneously enjoy it.

There's Ritchie, who's always quiet, sporting his laughable tattoo on his right arm. He sips on his longneck beer from start to finish and touches the whiskers that seem glued in patches on his man-boyish face.

There's Audrey. Audrey always sits opposite me, no matter where we play. She has yellow hair, wiry legs, the most beautiful crooked smile in the world, and lovely hips, and she watches a lot of movies. She also works as a cab driver.

Then there's me.

Before I even mention me, I should tell you some other facts:

1. At nineteen, Bob Dylan was a seasoned performer in Greenwich Village, New York.
2. Salvador Dalí had already produced several outstanding artworks of paint and rebellion by the time he was nineteen.

3. Joan of Arc was the most wanted woman in the world at nineteen, having created a revolution.

Then there's Ed Kennedy, also nineteen. . . .

Just prior to the bank holdup, I'd been taking stock of my life.

Cab driver - and I'd lied about my age at that. (You need to be twenty.)

No real career.

No respect in the community.

Nothing.

I'd realized there were people everywhere achieving greatness while I was taking directions from balding businessmen called Derek and being wary of Friday-night drunks who might throw up in my cab or do a runner on me. It was actually Audrey's idea to give cab driving a shot. It didn't take much to convince me, mainly because I'd been in love with her for years. I never left this suburban town. I didn't go to university. I went to Audrey.

Constantly, I'm asking myself, *Well, Ed - what have you really achieved in your nineteen years?* The answer's simple.

Jack shit.

I mentioned it to a few different people, but all they did was tell me to pull my head in. Marv called me a first-class whinger. Audrey told me I was twenty years too early for a midlife crisis. Ritchie simply looked at me as if I was speaking in a foreign tongue. And when I mentioned it to my ma, she said, 'Ohhh, why don't you have a bloody cry, Ed.' You're going to love my ma. Trust me.

I live in a shack that I rent cheaply. Not long after moving in, I found out from the estate agent that my boss is the owner. My boss is the proud founder and director of the cab company I drive for: Vacant Taxis. It's a dubious company, to say the least. Audrey and I had no trouble convincing them that we were old enough and licensed

enough to drive for them. Mix a few numbers up on your birth certificate, show up with what appears to be the appropriate licence, and you're set. We were driving within a week because they were short-staffed. No reference checks. No fuss. It's surprising what you can achieve with trickery and deceit. As Raskolnikov once said: 'When reason fails, the devil helps!' If nothing else, I can lay claim to the title of Youngest Cab Driver in these parts - a taxi-driving prodigy. That's the kind of anti-achievement that gives structure to my life. Audrey's a few months older than me.

The shack I live in is pretty close to town, and since I'm not allowed to take the cab home, it's good walking distance to work. Unless Marv gives me a lift. The reason I don't have a car myself is that I drive people around all day or night. In my time off, the last thing I feel like doing is more driving.

The town we all live in is pretty run-of-the-mill. It's past the outskirts of the city and has good and bad parts. I'm sure it won't surprise you that I come from one of the bad parts. My whole family grew up at the far north of town, which is kind of like everyone's dirty secret. There are plenty of teenage pregnancies there, a plethora of shithead fathers who are unemployed, and mothers like mine who smoke, drink, and go out in public wearing Ugg boots. The home I grew up in was an absolute dump, but I stuck around until my brother, Tommy, finished school and got into university. At times I know I could have done the same, but I was too lazy at school. I was always reading books when I should have been doing maths and the rest of it. Maybe I could have got a trade, but they don't give apprenticeships out down here, especially to the likes of me. Due to my aforementioned laziness I was no good at school, except at English, because of the reading. Since my father drank all our money away, I just went straight into work when school was done. I started out in a forgettable

hamburger chain that I don't mention, due to shame. Next was sorting files in a dusty accountant's office that closed down within weeks of my arrival. And finally, the height, the pinnacle of my employment history so far.

Cab driving.

I have one housemate. He's called the Doorman, and he's seventeen years old. He sits at the flyscreen door, with sun painted onto his black fur. His old eyes glow. He smiles. He's called the Doorman because from a very early age he had a strong penchant for sitting by the front door. He did it back home, and he does it now at the shack. He likes to sit where it's nice and warm, and he doesn't let anyone in. This is because he finds it hard to move on account of the fact that he's so old. He's a cross between a Rottweiler and a German shepherd, and he stinks a kind of stink that's impossible to rid him of. In fact, I think that's why no one but my card-playing friends ever enters the shack. The initial stench of the dog slaps them in the face, and it's all over. No one's game enough to lengthen their stay and actually walk all the way in. I've even tried encouraging him to use some kind of deodorant. I've rubbed it under his arms in copious amounts. I've covered him all over with some of that Norsca spray, and all it did was make him smell worse. During that time, he smelled like a Scandinavian toilet.

He used to be my father's, but when the old man died about six months ago, my ma shifted him onto me. She got sick of him using the patch under her clothesline.

('Anywhere in the whole back yard he could use!' she'd say. 'But where does he do it?' She'd answer the question. 'Right under the bloody clothesline.')

So when I left, I took him with me.

To my shack.

To his door.

And he's happy.

And so am I.

He's happy when the sun throws warmth on him through the flyscreen door. He's happy to sleep there and move on a forward slant when I try to shut the wooden door at night. At times like that, I love the hell out of that dog. I love the hell out of him anyway. But Christ, he stinks.

I suppose he'll die soon. I'm expecting it, like you do for a dog that's seventeen. There's no way to know how I'll react. He'll have faced his own placid death and slipped without a sound inside himself. Mostly, I imagine I'll crouch there at the door, fall onto him, and cry hard into the stench of his fur. I'll wait for him to wake up, but he won't. I'll bury him. I'll carry him outside, feeling his warmth turn to cold as the horizon frays and falls down in my back yard. For now, though, he's OK. I can see him breathing. He just smells like he's dead.

I have a TV that needs time to warm up, a phone that almost never rings, and a fridge that buzzes like a radio.

There's a photo of my family on top of the TV from years ago.

Since I hardly ever watch the TV, I watch the photo once in a while. A pretty good show, really, although it gets dustier every day. It's a mother, a father, two sisters, me, and a younger brother. Half of us smile on the photo. Half don't. I like it.

In terms of my family, my ma's one of those tough women you couldn't kill with an axe. She's also developed a bit of a swearing habit, which I'll tell you more about later.

Like I said, my father died about six months ago. He was a lonely, kind, quiet, hard-drinking deadbeat. I could say that living with my ma wasn't easy and it drove him to drink, but there are no excuses. You can make them, but you don't believe them. He was a furniture deliverer. When he died they found him sitting on an old lounge chair still inside the truck. He was just sitting there, dead and

relaxed. There was still so much to unpack, they said. They thought he was sitting in there lazing around. His liver gave out.

My brother, Tommy, has done most things right. He's a year younger than me and goes to university in the city.

My sisters are Leigh and Katherine.

When Katherine got pregnant at seventeen, I cried. I was twelve then. She moved out of home soon after. She wasn't booted out or anything like that. She left and got married. It was a big event at the time.

A year later, when Leigh left, there were no problems. She wasn't pregnant.

I'm the only one left in town these days. The others all left for the city and live there. Tommy's done especially well. He's on his way to becoming a lawyer. Good luck to him. I mean it.

Next to that picture on the TV, there's also a photo of Audrey, Marv, Ritchie and me. We set the timer on Audrey's camera last Christmas, and there we are. Marv with cigar. Ritchie half smiling. Audrey laughing. And me holding my cards, still looking at the most shit hand in Christmas history.

I cook.

I eat.

I wash but I rarely iron.

I live in the past and believe that Cindy Crawford is by far the best supermodel.

That's my life.

I have dark hair, half-tanned skin, coffee-brown eyes. My muscles are hugely normal. I should stand straighter, but I don't. I stand with my hands in my pockets. My boots are falling apart, but I still wear them because I love and cherish them.

Quite often, I pull my boots on and go out. Sometimes I go to the river that runs through town, or I go for a walk to the cemetery to see my father. The Doorman comes with me, of course, if he's awake.

What I like best is walking with my hands in my pockets, having the Doorman next to me, and imagining that Audrey's on my other side.

I always picture us from behind.

There's glow turning to darkness.

There's Audrey.

There's the Doorman.

There's me.

And I'm holding Audrey's fingers in mine.

I haven't written a song of Dylan proportions yet, or started painting my first attempt at surrealism, and I doubt I could start a revolution if I tried - because apart from everything else, I'm a bit of an unfit bastard, though I'm lanky and lean. Just weak, too.

Mainly, I think the best times I have are playing cards or when I've dropped someone off and I'm heading back to town, maybe from the city or even further north. The window's down, the wind runs its fingers through my hair, and I smile at the horizon.

Then I pull into town and the Vacant Taxis lot.

Sometimes I hate the sound of a car door slamming.

Like I've said, I love Audrey something terrible.

Audrey, who's had plenty of sex with plenty of people but never with me. She's always said she likes me too much to do it with me, and, personally, I've never tried to get her naked and new and all shivery in front of me. I'm too afraid. I've told you already that I'm quite pathetic when it comes to sex. I've had a girlfriend or two, and they didn't exactly rave about me in the sexual-encounter department. One of them told me I was the clumsiest guy she'd ever met. The other one always laughed when I tried something on her. It

didn't really work wonders on me, and she quit me soon after.

Personally, I think sex should be like maths.

At school.

No one really cares if they're crap at maths. They even proclaim it. They'll say to anyone, 'Yeah, I don't mind science and English, but I'm absolutely *shithouse* at maths.' And other people will laugh and say, 'Yeah, me, too. I wouldn't have a clue about all that logarithm shit.'

You should be able to say that about sex, too.

You should be able to proudly say, 'Yeah, I wouldn't have a clue about all that orgasm shit, ay. I'm OK at everything else, but when it comes to that part I wouldn't have a clue.'

No one says that, though.

You can't.

Especially men.

We men think we *have* to be good at it, so I'm here to tell you I'm not. I should also explain that I honestly think my kissing leaves a lot to be desired as well. One of those girlfriends tried to teach me once, but I think she gave up in the end. My tongue work is particularly bad, I feel, but what can I do?

It's only sex.

That's what I tell myself, anyway.

I lie a lot.

Getting back to Audrey, though, I should really feel complimented that she won't even touch me because she likes me more than anyone else. It makes perfect sense, really, doesn't it?

If she ever gets down or depressed, I can make out the figure of her shadow through the front window of the shack. She comes in and we drink cheap beer or wine or watch a movie or all three. Something old and long like *Ben-Hur* that stretches into the night. She'll be next to me on the couch in her flannel shirt and jeans that have been

cut into shorts, and eventually, when she's asleep, I'll bring a blanket out and cover her up.

I kiss her cheek.

I stroke her hair.

I think of how she lives alone, just like me, and how she never had any real family, and how she only has sex with people. She never lets any love get in the way. I think she had a family once, but it was one of those beat-the-crap-out-of-each-other situations. There's no shortage of them around here. I think she loved them, and all they ever did was hurt her.

That's why she refuses to love.

Anybody.

I guess she feels better off that way, and who can blame her?

When she sleeps on my couch, I think about all that. Every time. I cover her up, then go to bed and dream.

With my eyes open.

3

◆ the ace of diamonds

There have been a few articles about the bank robbery in the local papers. They talk about how I wrestled the gun from the thief after chasing him down. Quite typical, really. I knew they'd make more out of it.

I go through some of them at my kitchen table, and the Doorman just looks at me like always. He couldn't give a shit if I'm a hero. As long as he gets his dinner on time, he doesn't have a care in the world.

My ma comes over, and I give her a beer. She's proud, she tells me. According to her, all her kids have done quite well except me, but now she at least has a glimmer of pride in me to glimmer in her eye, if only for a day or two.

'That was my son,' I can imagine her explaining to people she meets on the street. 'I told you he'd amount to something *one* day.'

Marv comes over, of course, and Ritchie.

Even Audrey pays me a visit with a newspaper tucked under her arm.

In each article, I'm known as twenty-year-old cab driver Ed Kennedy, as I lied to every single reporter about my age. When you lie once, you have to make it uniform. We all know that.

My bewildered face is plastered all over the front pages, and even a guy from a radio show shows up and tapes a conversation with me in my lounge room. I have coffee with him, but we have to drink it without milk. He'd stopped me on my way out to get some.

It's a Tuesday evening when I get home from work and pull the mail out of the letter box. As well as my electricity and gas bills and some junk mail, there's a small envelope. I throw it down on the table with everything else and forget about it. My name's written in scrawl, and I wonder what it could possibly be. Even when I'm making my steak-and-salad sandwich, I tell myself to go into the lounge room soon to open it. Constantly, I forget.

It's fairly late when I finally get around to it.

I feel it.

Feel something.

There's something flowing between my fingers as I hold the envelope in my hands and begin tearing it open. The night's a cool one, typical of spring.

I shiver.

I see my reflection in the TV screen and in the photo of my family.

The Doorman snores.

The breeze outside steps closer.

The fridge buzzes.

For a moment, it feels like everything stops to watch as I reach in and pull out an old playing card.

It's the Ace of Diamonds.

In the echoes of light in my lounge room, I let my fingers hold the card gently, as if it might break or crease in my hands. Three addresses are written on it in the same writing as on the envelope. I read them slowly, watchfully. There's an eeriness slipping over my hands. It makes its way inside me and travels, quietly gnawing at my thoughts. I read:

45 Edgar Street, midnight

13 Harrison Avenue, 6 p.m.

6 Macedoni Street, 5:30 a.m.