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The driver slows and pulls up, looking curious~~ly~~ at a pair of great steel gates between the two beige pillars. The rock is not really gold, but the setting sun's touch turns them a brilliant shade.

St Clements' entrance is similar to the one at Buckingham Palace, opulent and unnecessary. A reminder of what is keeping you ~~at~~~~in~~ the school. Money.

'This your school?' asks the driver as I fumble with my notes. My fingers are shaking. I stuff too much into the little dish, choosing a large tip over counting the notes under his narrowed stare. I think of the alarming rattle his taxi gave ~~at~~~~en~~ the last pothole, and stuff an extra note on the pile.

'Yes, it is. Thank you for the, uh, lift.' Do you thank taxi drivers for what they're paid to do? I said thank you to a bus driver once in front of Stuart and he couldn't understand why. ~~w.~~ Which says more about my friends than I like to think ~~of~~.

Opening the door, grit falls from my lap to join the other tiny stones crunching beneath my unsteady feet. I hear the driver's door open, perhaps to have a better look at the hazy building just visible at the bottom of a curving drive. Before St Clements' I had a fascination with large houses and who could possibly live in them. Now I'm one of them.

Instead, the driver pops the trunk and grabs my bags, hoisting them out and plonking them on the sandy stones~~s~~.

'You rich?' he asks, and I shake my head~~on~~ reflex~~ively~~.

‘Just lucky,’ I reply, taking the suitcase and sports bag.

‘You need help?’

I shake my head, again; ~~out of reflex~~ reflexively, again.

‘Alright. Be safe, lucky man.’ He tips his baseball cap at me. The extra notes are possibly responsible for this kindly behaviour. Or maybe he’s just nice. Not everyone is motivated by money. Some are just decent.

His taxi does a wild swing on the narrow road, almost ending up amongst the birch trees. Grit sprays up, and a cloud of dust hides me, glittering gold in the diminishing sun. I stand, hidden for a moment, and relax.

‘Fergus?’

Upon hearing the voice behind me, my heart ~~punctures~~ reshes in my chest. I wouldn’t be surprised to see it flopping between my feet in the dust.

I mustn’t turn around. Hope ~~fills me~~ that the dust will stay and hide me in its glittering depths fills me. But even I as think it, wish it, the air is clearing. The creak of a smaller side gate is accompanied ~~with~~ by feet on gravel. Dust betrays me and leaves me with watering eyes and a tickle in my throat.

‘Fergus.’ Not a question this time, but rather a statement. *He can see you, idiot.*

I can no longer play pretend. ‘Hey, Pete.’

A pair of dark hands are what I see first. Reaching for my suitcase before my greeting has fully formed. He has grown in the month I’ve been gone. He has flourished while ~~est~~ I have withered.