

Big Cat: A collection of short stories
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I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own:

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Abstract

Big Cat: A collection of short stories comprises *Big Cat*, a collection of thirteen short stories, and a critical commentary entitled 'The challenges of realism in the work of Tobias Wolff, Alice Munro and John Cheever, and in my own practice'.

The critical commentary consists of close readings of three short stories, 'An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke' by Tobias Wolff, 'Silence' by Alice Munro and 'The Swimmer' by John Cheever, and a final chapter which analyses the stories of *Big Cat* and reflects on the creative process that produced them. The overall purpose is to illuminate and reflect on my own fiction, situating it in the context of literary realism. Referring to the critical work of Raymond Tallis and James Wood in particular, I argue that realism has been wrongly characterised as artistically irrelevant and outmoded and that, on the contrary, it represents the highest and most consistent challenge of fiction. I use the close readings of Wolff, Munro and Cheever to demonstrate this, and trace the development of my own work in relation to this same challenge.

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Part 1 - Stories

Berlin

Caroline, my wife, is feeling unwell. It seems that the city is not agreeing with her. We are sitting on a bench in the Lustgarten, looking across the road to the Palace of the Republic. I had hoped we would be able to go in but the building is closed, a rusting, derelict hulk deemed unsafe due to structural flaws, asbestos, or – it seems possible – more symbolic dangers.

The palace was the nerve centre of the German Democratic Republic, a paranoid state obsessed with the duplicity of its own people. It presents four walls of oily, bronzed glass intended, it seems, to conceal everything that went on inside it but which now conceal nothing, I imagine, except gutted offices, dim and draughty corridors. Instead, reflected in the glass is a corrupted, cubist vision of the city around it – shards of the cathedral's copper-green dome, Karl-Liebknecht-Strasse, the Spree River and roiling sky. Now some want it knocked down, while others would have it preserved as a reminder of the crimes committed inside.

I have been explaining this to my wife but now she is lying down on the grass with her eyes closed. Her face is flushed. She says she feels dizzy.

'It's so depressing here,' says Caroline, not opening her eyes. 'So grey, so much concrete, so many terrible things. I feel like I can't breathe.'

The city is much as I had imagined it: cold and grand, claustrophobic with history. The architecture is monumental, designed to intimidate. In the great plazas and

boulevards I find it hard not to think of grainy black-and-white film, thousands marching, crowds raked with searchlights. As we have criss-crossed the city under my direction, my wife has proved a reluctant tourist. She seems oppressed by everything – the run-down buildings near our hotel in the old East of the city, the incomprehensible graffiti that covers them, the surprising quietness of the streets. She complains frequently of tiredness. We have argued. She has decided that my interest in the city is unsavoury, voyeuristic.

‘A strange thing,’ I say, shutting the guidebook and sitting down next to her on the damp grass. ‘Something that strikes you when you read about it is that throughout the war, even very late on when many Germans must have known it was lost, life just seemed to go on as usual. People had dinner parties. They saw friends, went to parks, bars, the theatre. They even went on holiday. Everything was heading towards this disaster, this catastrophe really. Thousands were dying all over Europe but, amid the chaos, in some ways life just went on as usual.’

Caroline does not speak. She opens her eyes briefly to check my expression. Lately she has become suspicious of everything I say. She believes that everything is innuendo, an accusation or a trap.

It is spotting with rain. ‘Ready to go on?’ I say.

‘Please,’ she says. ‘I have to go back to the hotel.’

Two months ago I discovered that my wife was having an affair. She was so careless in her deceptions, so reckless in her choice of lover – a friend of ours – that I believe she wanted me to catch her, that she wished to punish me and make me suffer. There were plenty of clues, and anyway I was not so surprised.

I let the affair continue for several weeks – keeping track of her movements, imagining their meetings. In the end it played out like melodrama: the husband arriving home unexpectedly from work, the opening of the bedroom door, the wife and her lover momentarily oblivious to their discovery. Perhaps it sounds strange but this is what I had wanted to see – for her to know I had seen – so that there could be no excusing or reducing it, no pretending it was something other than this, no softening with words or regret.

I insisted on knowing everything: the wheres, hows and how oftens. I made her relive it in every detail. I put her through that; I felt I was entitled. This went on for days and eventually she told me all of it. When I revealed that I had known for some time, she raged at me, as if I were somehow responsible. There were scenes, dreadful scenes, in which everything seemed to be at an end, but in time we both relented. She was remorseful. I took some of the blame – I had been inattentive, absorbed in work.

It was then that I proposed the trip away. I remember it clearly. We were sitting in the kitchen. Soft autumn light fell in a band across the table between us. Outside in the garden the leaves on the trees were yellow gold and for a moment it seemed that it had all been nothing more than a bad dream. I had

bought a guidebook and Caroline sat, turning the pages. Of course she had visions of somewhere exotic – Brazil, Mexico, the Caribbean. That was what she was used to after all.

‘Germany?’ she said. ‘In November?’

I am reminded of this as we sit in the restaurant at the top of the Fernsehturm in Alexanderplatz, eating the tasteless and expensive food common to all such places. I have the lobster, Caroline the steak. We are sharing a bottle of white wine, although Caroline has barely touched her glass. Outside the clouds are turning pink in a wintry sky.

The Fernsehturm provides the best views of the city. Over Caroline’s shoulder are the Soviet housing blocks and great revolutionary boulevards of East Berlin. Behind me is the vast green space of the Tiergarten, once the private hunting ground of Prussian kings. I have pointed out the landmarks we have visited in the past three days and traced the line of the now-absent Wall through the city. Now she says that she is not hungry, that her steak is overcooked, and the sight of the city far below us is making her nauseous. At the next table a young couple whisper excitedly to one another, honeymooners perhaps. On the other side, two children are jabbing at each other with their cutlery while their parents pick at their food and ignore them. One of the children begins to cry and the manager comes over and speaks quietly to their father.

‘I was reading about the Stasi this afternoon,’ I say. ‘Apparently they used to keep samples of the body odour of anyone they thought was a criminal or a danger to the Republic. They arrested the person on some pretext and then swabbed their crotch with a cloth or broke into their apartment and stole some of their underwear. Then they kept the cloth or underwear in a glass jar. Specially trained dogs were used to recognise the presence of a particular person’s odour at an illegal meeting or whatever. Smell-differentiation dogs they called them. Unpleasant, but very effective.’

My wife does not seem to have been listening. She stands to go to the toilet and I see people at other tables turn to look at her. I am one of those men who want a woman in relation to how much other men want her. My wife is not beautiful. Her face is too angular, her expression too uncompromising for that. But she has a self-assurance, a physicality in her manner and her movements that causes men to imagine her in a particular way. I know this because I once imagined her in this way myself.

On our very first holiday together we walked through a market in Morocco. Caroline was inappropriately dressed, her arms and legs bare, and stallholders stared at her and muttered to each other. One man pushed past us and, it seemed to me, rubbed himself provocatively against Caroline’s body. I turned on him and began to shout and threaten him absurdly. Other people intervened and I was pulled away. Caroline brushed the incident off – ‘Men,’ she said – but I could not be calmed down and insisted we return to the hotel. There

she lay on the bed, baffled and amused, while I urgently and repeatedly made love to her.

‘I’ve been sick,’ says my wife when she returns to the table. She is pale, angry, a little unsteady on her feet. To her left, in the distance, are the glassy new towers of Potsdamer Platz, sign of Berlin’s modern rebirth.

When I wake up in the night my wife is sitting on the edge of the bed in the hotel room, crying. This is very unlike her. I have only seen her cry two or three times before; she did not even cry when I told her I knew about her affair. She does it awkwardly, wretchedly, her body bent over itself, as if she is in physical pain. I notice that one of her legs is shaking. White light coming through the blinds – streetlight or moonlight, I cannot tell – lies in bars across her body.

‘What’s the matter?’ I ask.

‘Nothing,’ she says. ‘A bad dream. Go back to sleep.’

A bad dream. Perhaps. But I look at her and I wonder if it is something else.

I have always been a jealous man. When my wife began her affair she believed she was hurting me. She did not realise that the deepest desire of the jealous man is to have his jealousy vindicated. She believed she was acting independently, in her own interests. Now she sees that she was manipulated – I

made her feel unwanted, I put temptation in her way – that I had already fantasised this role for her. She feels as if it were me who had been unfaithful, as if she were the one who had been betrayed.

Caroline's face is wet, her eyes red from crying, and as I look at her I see that thing that other men see in her. I reach out and put my hand on her shoulder. Her body tenses but she does not move away. I move my hand to her breast and begin to kiss her throat. Abruptly she stands and crosses the room to the toilet. I hear the click of the lock. The bars of light lie flat across the bed where she has been sitting.

I wanted my wife to have an affair so that I could resent her and punish her for it. I wanted to suffer and to make her suffer to prove that we were still in love. If it is a game then it is one I am winning.

On our last day in Berlin we get to the Jewish Museum around midday. I am keen to see all that we can before our flight leaves this evening and already we have visited two of the remaining sites on my list – Checkpoint Charlie and the Wall Museum. Caroline is tired and wants to stop for lunch.

'It's awful,' she says, looking up at the museum. 'So – I don't know – unnecessary.'

'Tell that to the Jews,' I say.

‘I mean the architecture,’ she says wearily. ‘I don’t feel so good. I don’t think I want to go in.’

After a while she gives in, unwilling to argue, but inside she trails behind and we become separated. The museum is a labyrinth of zigzagging corridors and odd-shaped rooms, walls leaning in or out at an angle and floors that slope abruptly up or down. Dim light comes through narrow windows slashed diagonally in the walls. I wander from room to room, pausing only briefly over the exhibits – on religious life, domestic tradition, the middle class – which are somehow not what I had expected, or hoped for. After half an hour or so I realise that I am coming to the same rooms over and over again. I sense that this is deliberate, that there is some conceptual scheme at work, but the meaning of it is obscure. I find it only frustrating, claustrophobic, and begin to look for a way out.

I arrive in a bare, high-ceilinged room without exhibits which I feel certain I have entered earlier from another direction. It is immediately clear that in the few moments before I walked in some sort of disturbance has occurred. Voices are raised above the usual hush of the museum. There is some kind of disruption in the usual movement of people, a small but perceptible sense of alarm. Then I see that everyone is looking in the same direction – towards a knot of crouching people, and a woman sitting on the floor among them.

At first I do not recognise my wife. Her skirt is rucked up above her knees and her hair has escaped from its clips and hangs in tangles around her face. One

of her legs is twisted under her and the other sticks out in front. Her face is red and a livid bruise is coming up around her eye, and for a moment I think she must have been attacked. Two of the museum staff are kneeling down next to her. One has his arm around her shoulders to support her and the other is holding a glass of water and fanning her face with a museum leaflet. The top two buttons of her shirt have been undone. Another man, a doctor perhaps, takes her pulse and speaks to her steadily. Altogether there is a strange intimacy to the scene. The contents of my wife's bag have spilled out onto the floor: her purse, sunglasses, phone, a packet of tissues and a small notebook. A lipstick has rolled into a far corner. Another member of staff walks around collecting them up and for some reason it is the sight of all these familiar things scattered across the room that is the most startling thing.

Other visitors to the museum, perhaps ten or fifteen of them, stand around, unwilling to move on. The atmosphere is strange, heightened, and I have the odd sensation that something profound has occurred, something that because of my late arrival I am barred from understanding. I cannot think how I should act or what I should be doing and for a moment I imagine myself to be just another passer-by, on my way through the museum, to whom the scene is a riddle, a mystery to be unravelled. What has happened to this woman? Where are her friends? She has a ring on her finger – where is her husband? I imagine myself as someone with a different afternoon ahead, a different life, to whom this will soon seem like only a minor incident in a busy day.

Someone has brought Caroline a chair and the museum staff are helping her onto it. All these people, all so solicitous - but then it is easy to take care of strangers. I am thinking this when suddenly my wife looks up and sees me. At first I do not speak or move. Then I hurry forward.

When we finally check in at the airport, hours later, there are no adjacent seats available on the plane. I watch from two rows back as the man next to Caroline offers her his window seat and then helps put her bag in the compartment above. She is a different woman from the one sprawled on the floor of the museum. She has changed her clothes, put her hair up and applied lipstick. Only the purpling bruise around her eye, incongruous with rest of her appearance, is a reminder of the events of the day.

Once we are in the air Caroline begins to talk to the man next to her. He is smartly dressed, professional-looking, Germanic. Anyone might think they were together. Caroline's manner is light, animated, as if a weight has been lifted from her. She points out of the window, perhaps showing him some of the things she has seen on our trip. Now that the city is receding below us, she finally seems able to appreciate it. Perhaps she is reimagining it in her mind already, a list of places visited and meals eaten, a holiday like any other.

The man laughs and I wonder what she has said that is funny. Perhaps she is explaining how she came to have the bruise around her eye. Maybe she

tells him the usual story: I walked into a door, I fell down the stairs. Or maybe she tells him how she fainted in the Jewish Museum, making it comic, absurd, full of melodramatic detail, a story at her own expense. I wonder if, in explanation, she tells him about our trip to the hospital, how the doctor turned to me – not to her, to me – and said, in perfect English, ‘Perhaps you did not realise? Congratulations, everyone is perfectly healthy.’ Perhaps the man next to her congratulates her too.

I look past the person sitting next to me and out of the window. I can see the Fernsehturm, the Reichstag and the green rectangle of the Tiergarten, and I trace the line of the Wall through the city. From the air Berlin seems innocuous, like any other city, a greying sprawl gradually giving way to fields. They say that former Stasi men still meet secretly in dingy bars to exchange information and plot surveillance. They use the old code words and signals and act as if the Wall had never come down. They cannot let go of their old habits and do not seem to notice that they are an irrelevance, that everyone else has moved on.

Half an hour into the flight Caroline stands to go the toilet, smiling and apologising. It seems to me that there is something different about her, something indefinable, a subtle confidence or a new awareness in the way she holds herself or the way she moves. I wonder if any of the other passengers who are watching her notice it, if they understand what it means, and, if they do, whether they could appreciate the terrible completeness of my victory. When Caroline passes me I reach out and touch her. Startled, she cries out. People turn

in their seats. She looks down and sees me. 'It's OK,' she says, 'it's my husband,'
and walks on down the aisle.

The Hunters

Nick and Maria watched the Hunters arrive in the village. They saw the car – a sleek black Audi with British plates – pull up in front of a house on the other side of the square, an old, beautiful building, carpeted with Virginia creeper in the middle of turning a violent red. Five of them got out: a good looking couple, forty-ish, from the driver and passenger seats, and from the back, twin boys, about five years old, and an overweight girl in her late teens or early twenties. Spotting Nick and Maria and their son Joseph high above on the balcony of their apartment, the woman called out a cheerful and ironic, ‘bonjour monsieur, bonjour madame, bonjour mon petit,’ and they began to unpack.

It was late September and the village was quiet, so over the next few days Nick and Maria watched the Hunters come and go. There were their voices - unmistakably upper middle class, probably north or west London – somehow self regarding and a little louder than necessary, so that their talk often carried across the square. There was their confident French and their over-familiarity with the shopkeepers. Every morning and evening the woman, as lean as an athlete, ran up the road and out of the village in a Lycra suit and mirrored sunglasses, a heart monitor strapped to one bicep, returning 45 minutes later. The man spent the afternoons slouched on their roof terrace, tapping at a laptop and drinking small beers, or dozing with a hat over his face. Two or three times a day the girl – evidently the children’s nanny - emerged from the house with the twins and went off in the direction of the playground or the swimming pool. The boys appeared to be identical and radiated a chubby, rosy-cheeked,

curly-haired glow of almost preternatural vigor and good health, something Nick had noticed was common to children of the very well off. For three days Nick and Maria watched them, discussed them and speculated about them, and agreed – they were awful.

Every morning a man selling fresh bread and eggs from the back of a van drove into the village. To Nick this seemed to embody something peculiarly French and rustic, and listening out for the toot of the horn as the van approached along the road was one of the things that most made him feel like he was on holiday. Four days after the Hunters' arrival, he found himself behind the woman in the queue as she bought croissants and baguettes. Nick's French was poor but from the little he understood and the tone it was clear they were having a dispute about money. Nick had noticed before that the man's maths was unreliable – he wrote every item down on a little pad and then laboriously added it up – but it was only a matter of a few cents and it seemed likely that these people could afford it.

After several minutes the man threw up his hands in irritation and handed the woman some change. 'Vous etes tres impoli, Monsieur,' she said, putting the money away. She turned and, seeing Nick, flashed a conspiratorial smile, which seemed to him to confess her duplicity, to say, 'Did you see how I got away with that?' Instead she said, 'You're the neighbours, aren't you? Why don't you come to supper this evening?'

Nick was caught off guard - the abruptness of the invitation, the sudden adaptation from the heat of the argument. It was like a seamless changing of gears, or watching a virtuoso dancer perform a complicated move with exquisite delicacy and technique, a kind of social agility that you could only be impressed by. Nick knew that when he got into an embarrassing confrontation like this – which was rare – it might take him an hour to calm down and at the end of the day it would still have the capacity to make him wince. Meanwhile, she was blocking the queue.

‘That’s very nice of you -’ Nick began.

‘Polly Hunter.’ She held out her hand and Nick took it. ‘We’ll put the kids to bed and then talk about adult things.’

Under her surprisingly intense gaze – her very green eyes – and with the rest of queue shuffling their feet behind him, Nick felt suddenly befuddled, unsure how to proceed, and so he said the easiest thing.

‘Great. We’ll bring wine.’

‘Your name?’

‘Nick.’

‘Toodahoo, then, Nick.’

Polly smiled and walked off across the square. Nick stepped forward to the van with the strong sense of having been outmaneuvered in several ways he

couldn't articulate. 'Bonjour Monsieur, ca va?' he asked in his halting French, hoping that a display of politeness – even obsequiousness - might disassociate him from Polly Hunter. 'Trois croissant, s'il vous plait.' The man pointed to the empty tray.

'Ah, desole, la dame a pris les derniers.'

When Nick, Maria and Joseph arrived at the Hunters' that evening, the nanny took the children upstairs to read them stories and then put them to bed. Before they had left their apartment Nick and Maria had had a rather tense conversation about how this would work.

'Joseph won't go to sleep in a house he's never been in before,' said Maria, 'with children he doesn't know.'

'But I said we would go.'

'Well, perhaps you shouldn't have.'

Ultimately, though, Maria had relented, and as it turned out, Joseph had gone off with the nanny and the Hunter twins without complaint.

Ewa is brilliant,' said Polly confidingly, as they stood in the Hunters kitchen. 'Barely a word of English, but she's a marvel with the children. Last year we went on holiday without her and I said, "Never again!" We're having fish,'

she said, indicating an enormous Salmon that was lying slit open from head to tail on the kitchen table. 'I always assume that everyone likes fish.'

The house – Nick could not deny it – was as desirable inside as it was out. There was no overall style that Nick could put his finger on, an eclectic mix of vintage and modern, rustic and urban, clearly expensive but without seeming showy. 'It's my brother's place,' said Polly, 'but he's in the middle of a wretched divorce and can't leave London, so here we are. I did the decor myself though. It used to be the *Maire's* house.' She raised her eyebrows and gave a sarcastic little pout. 'I'm told I have something of an eye. Ah, here's Simon.'

Simon was large. Tall, round faced and pot bellied – the product of too many long and expensive lunches, Nick thought – and with the same mop of curly blonde hair and glow of good health as his children. He was wearing shorts that revealed powerful, thickly calved legs.

'Simon Hunter,' he said. He shook hands with Nick and kissed Maria on both cheeks. 'Good to see you. Us lot have got to stick together. Apparently the place is overrun with the French.'

'Don't be boorish, Simon,' said Polly, 'and get them something to drink. Don't make them too strong. Other people aren't used to it. Now, what about that fish!'

The food was excellent and long after it was finished Simon was opening bottle after bottle of good red wine that he had bought from a local vineyard. Over the course of the evening Maria had paired off in conversation with Simon, and Nick with Polly, but this did not seem unnatural or awkward and Nick was aware of regular bursts of laughter from his wife.

Polly, unprompted, had been giving him her life story. She told Nick that after appearing in a play at university she had been persuaded she had potential as an actress, but after several years of auditions and a bit of modeling work she had given it up. 'My first humiliation,' she said, and laughed. Since then she had tried lots of things: a job in publishing, an interior design business, writing for magazines. 'I thought motherhood might be the thing, but it wasn't quite.' Now she was halfway through qualifying as a psychoanalyst.

Nick knew precisely the type, had been at art college with quite a few of them: well-off London girls who fancied themselves as creative spirits but had little talent and even less inclination to apply themselves. When they got out of college they floated through jobs in the arts or media where the basic requirement was to look and sound the part, or opened a shop in a fashionable part of London that sold overpriced and quirky designer goods and failed within a year or two. They had boyfriends who were aspiring actors, filmmakers or artists – though Nick was never one of them – but ended up marrying men their brothers had been to school with or who they had met on a family skiing trip when they were fourteen. Nick had run into one of them recently – a girl

everyone had been in love with at college – and she was selling homemade cupcakes out of the back of her Mercedes Jeep at a farmer’s market.

But despite the inclination not to take Polly seriously - even to dislike her – Nick was enjoying himself. He knew that food and drink had mellowed his natural antagonism but recently he had also been trying to be less judgmental, to give people the benefit of the doubt. In an argument Maria had asked him why he was so bitter and although he felt she had misunderstood him, he recognised a strain of it in his character and that it could be corrosive.

And, of course, Polly was attractive. These women almost always were, Nick reflected wryly. Perhaps it was as simple as good grooming, knowing how to make the best of yourself – as well as a lifetime of good diet, good dentistry and year round holidays spent swimming in warm, clear waters in beautiful places. She had a thin, sharp nose, slightly turned up at the end. This, along with the startling green eyes he had noticed at the bread van and which made relentless contact with his own, gave Polly an unusual quality of attention and Nick had the not unpleasant sensation of being revealed in front of her. Even though she was doing all the talking, she managed to convey the impression that it was something about Nick, some subtle quality of his, that was prompting her to be so candid about her life. On top of this was the undeniable pleasure of watching her small, braless breasts shift easily under her top as she moved.

They had been talking for several minutes about her psychoanalytic training – as part of this she was undergoing intensive analysis herself – when

Nick noticed that Polly had subtly altered the volume or direction of her voice to include Simon and Maria, whose own conversation appeared to have died out.

‘This is the hard stuff,’ she was saying ‘it’s not your modern, look-on-the-bright-side sticking plaster therapy. And inevitably you tell your analyst things that you wouldn’t tell anyone else. The relationship becomes very intimate, in a way. That can be very hard for a partner, particularly if they are not in analysis themselves.’

‘Not if they ignore it,’ said Simon. He stood up and began to open another bottle of wine. ‘What you have to understand about Polly is that she has had quite a few hobbies in her time.’

‘He’s in denial about it,’ said Polly smiling, ‘in my professional opinion. To be fair, it can reveal things about yourself or your life which are uncomfortable, or difficult to accept. Perhaps that’s why Simon’s afraid of it.’

‘You make it sound sort of... destructive,’ said Maria.

‘It’s not for everyone, it’s true, but for me it’s the most important thing I have done in my life.’ Her voice was suddenly very serious, although Nick wondered if she really believed what she said.

Simon began pouring the wine. ‘That,’ he said with emphasis, ‘tells you all you need to know. Lying on Dr Freud’s couch – sorry, Dr Jung I believe it is currently - and talking about herself all day is her greatest achievement.’ He

brought the bottle down heavily on the table, rattling the glasses, plates and cutlery.

‘That was dramatic, Si,’ said Polly.

There was a long, strained silence into which Nick – without realizing he was going to – began to speak.

‘I think I’m going to quit my job,’ he said. ‘I’m going to ditch the stupid job, get some studio space and paint again. Fuck it.’ At first he thought he was simply trying to provide a distraction, to rescue the evening from sudden wreckage – and it had worked, he had everyone’s attention – but then, from the sudden rush of exhilaration he felt as he spoke, he saw that he was serious. It was true that the design agency where he worked were offering voluntary redundancy with a good pay off, particularly for people who had been there as long as Nick. He had mentioned it in passing to Maria but had barely registered it as a possibility for himself – or so he had thought. Now it seemed to make perfect sense, the perfect opportunity to escape a job that mortified him every day of the year and rediscover a passion.

‘Perhaps I sound ridiculous,’ he said, ‘but why the hell not?’

‘Hear, hear!’ said Simon.

‘The money’ll last at least a year and by that time hopefully I’ll be selling things. I’ll get some freelance to top things up. I know people who are doing it. It’s not so hard. It’s a state of mind as much as anything.’

‘That’s it’, said Polly, ‘the hardest part is just making the decision to do it.’

For as long as he could remember Nick had deflected all questions and conversation about his job. ‘Same old, same old,’ he would say, ‘nothing to report’. But now here he was enthusing to strangers about himself and his plans and they were listening intently and urging him on. Maria had looked startled at first but now she too was listening carefully as he made his case.

When he was 24 and just out of art college Nick had taken part in a high profile show and was told by many people that he had an exciting future. But for the next couple of years there was little more and gradually the usual things happened – money pressures, fading belief, inertia – and he drifted from occasional work as a designer into a permanent job. Now he was nearly 40 and in the doldrums, feeling powerless and bored with everything. But this was another chance. Whatever it was – the restorative powers of a holiday, the sudden fissure opened up by the Hunter’s argument, the intoxication of an evening spent with people who did not know you, your faults or limitations – the more he spoke about it the more the risks and potential for failure began to recede and the sharper the whole idea came into focus.

They all drank more. Simon and Polly asked questions about Nick’s art and how he worked and even though he had barely painted for ten years, he answered them with a new and unfamiliar conviction. What had seemed like past failures became successes that he had not exploited as he might have.

‘You know a few gallery people, Simon – couldn’t you hook Nick up?’

‘Absolutely. You never know, I even like to buy occasionally.’

‘This is so exciting!’ said Polly. ‘I’m sure you can do it, Nick. And we will have been there at the very beginning!’

Nick was very drunk, he knew. A part of him was still aware that their encouragement and flattery was comical, absurd. They barely knew him, had no idea if he were a good artist or not. And of course, for them, such things were often easy – or at least they could afford to fail at them. It was easy to be seduced by people like this – this was exactly what they were good at, even trained for. But if some of their confidence or sense of entitlement had infected him then so what?

He turned to Polly. ‘Is all this just silly? Am I being a fool?’

‘No, no,’ she said. ‘You must! You must!’

Later, after Nick and Maria had carried Joseph home to bed, Nick suggested they stay up for another drink.

‘So what do you make of our new friends,’ he said.

‘Well, they certainly love the artist. She was flirting with you.’

‘I imagine she flirts with everyone. But what can I say? I’m magnetic.’

Nick and Maria had long, slow sex on the sofa, of a kind that had seemed to be a thing of the past, and the heightened sense of well-being from the evening continued to flow through them. Nick saw himself at work in a large white washed studio bathed in sunlight, at home amongst the chaos of paints, canvases, brushes, works in progress. And for one moment, as Maria climaxed on top of him, he was holding one of Polly Hunter's small, immaculate breasts in his hand and guiding her nipple into his mouth.

Over the following days Nick and Maria spent much of their time with the Hunters. They ate together, they drank together, they went to the markets. It was not hard to justify. The twins, Gus and Ronnie, had made a pet of Joseph and he followed them around like another smaller, less robust brother. It was far easier to submit to his clamour to see them than to insist on spending time as a family. Often, Ewa, the nanny would take the three of them out together and Nick and Maria were left to share a long lunch or afternoon drinks on Polly and Simon's roof terrace.

Gradually, they put together a picture of the Hunters' lives – the houses in West London and Suffolk, the friends who ran TV and PR companies (the sorts of places for which Nick had spent years churning out crappy corporate design materials), the IVF at a private clinic that had produced Gus and Ronnie at the third attempt. Simon had had a job in finance but was now doing 'some consultancy' which he said was 'half the work, but all of the money.'

When they were alone, Nick and Maria mocked the Hunters, the way they spoke, their lifestyle, the assumptions they made, and speculated on whether Simon was an arms dealer or Polly had an eating disorder.

‘They’re fascinating,’ said Nick, ‘like another species.’

‘What would our friends say?’ said Maria.

‘They must never know! Think of it as a holiday romance with someone totally inappropriate.’

Despite this, when they were all together, the hum of good feeling from the first dinner persisted, and Nick could not persuade himself to feel badly about enjoying the Hunters’ company. He found he was an unexpected hit with Simon and Polly. He noticed a subtle deference to his intellect, his views on art and politics treated as unconventional and eye-opening. His jokes, the dry style which Maria had called bitterness, seemed to delight them.

Then there was the painting. It came up every day. ‘Just making sure you haven’t gone cold on us, Nick,’ Simon would say. ‘Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,’ said Nick, ‘I have to do the work first.’ But he hadn’t gone cold on it. He had suspected that by the morning after the whole thing would seem like a drunk’s fantasy, an idea to be quickly put out of its misery, but this was not the case. There was a photo taken at the time of the big show Nick had been in nearly fifteen years ago, all the artists arranged in the main room of the gallery on the day of the launch party, and this image kept coming back to him. In the

years since Nick had often mocked himself in this photo – the long beard and wild hair, the workman’s overalls, the slight swagger about the way he was standing, the studied look of the young artist – but later that same evening a female journalist who was covering the exhibition had taken Nick out into the park behind the gallery and gone down on him.

In the early mornings, before it got too hot, Nick and Simon played tennis on a dilapidated court behind the village. Simon moved quickly and gracefully despite his size and it was easy to see that he was once a very good player. Nick had only played occasionally, and it was years ago. His serve was an embarrassment but he could hit the ball with a kind of awkward power.

‘Not bad, not bad,’ said Simon. ‘You should think about getting some lessons. Stick a couple of grand into your game and you’d give me a run for my money.’

‘You’d better believe it,’ said Nick, who had never played a sport well in his life.

They were taking a break between games to rest and gulp water. Simon bounced a ball under his racket.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘I haven’t always been the best husband.’

Nick looked up. ‘What do you mean?’ he said.

'You know – other women.'

'Oh,' said Nick, 'I see.'

'Before we were married it didn't seem like a big deal. And since then, and especially since the kids, it's kind of a necessity. A man has needs, after all.'

Simon laughed.

It was uncomfortable. Nick was unsure why he was being told this, or what reaction was expected of him. He picked at the strings on his tennis racquet, the way he had seen professional players do between points.

'I'm not sure what to say,' said Nick.

'Well, what about you and Maria? What's the story?'

Nick shrugged. 'No story.'

'You haven't been there?' said Simon

'Not really.'

'Not really?' Simon raised his eyebrows. 'That sounds interesting.'

'Nothing to feel guilty about.'

'That's the spirit – guilt is the enemy!' Simon threw the ball into the air, took a swing and hit it forcefully out of the court and into the trees. They watched it go.

‘I said nothing to feel guilty about,’ said Nick. ‘The odd flirtation. I think you’d find it disappointing.’

It had been a little more than that – and Nick had felt guilty about it. A woman at work, much younger than him. Nothing was ever said or done, and it was several years ago now, but for a while he thought he was in love with her and had fantasized about leaving Maria. The cliché of it appalled him but still for months it had controlled his thoughts.

‘Fine, fine,’ said Simon. ‘Perhaps I would.’ He drained the water bottle and stood up. ‘Think you can manage another set?’

At lunch Nick was distracted, irritable, his mood somehow poisoned by the conversation with Simon. He had said almost nothing but still he felt as if he had compromised himself. Before they arrived at the Hunters he had snapped at Maria over something trivial.

Polly had cooked – River Trout caught by someone Simon knew in the village – and, as they had come to expect, it was delicious. Gus and Ronnie and Joseph had already eaten and were at the pool with Ewa. ‘If there’s one thing I believe in,’ said Polly, ‘it’s the importance of a good lunch. You agree with me, Nick.’ She was wearing a bright yellow t-shirt and her hair, black and wet from swimming, was tied back in a loose ponytail.

‘I think that’s something we can all agree on,’ said Simon. Nick felt, or thought he felt, Simon trying to catch his eye, but with what significance he didn’t know. Once they had finished eating, Simon opened another bottle of the wine that he and Nick had chosen together at the market, and spread a map of the Languedoc on the table. The Hunters were leaving later in the week and friends had told them that they must visit the Cirque de Navacelles, a dramatic opening in the Vis gorges created by a loop in the river, about 30 miles away. A pyramid of rock jutted up from the middle of the valley floor and its base was a tiny medieval village.

‘Apparently, there’s an incredible little restaurant down there,’ said Simon. ‘Only has four tables but the food is spectacular.’

‘Lunch!’ said Polly.

‘Exactly. We’ll leave one car at the top of the gorge. And then someone will have to drive down while the rest of us walk. We can draw straws.’

‘Well, I hope no one expects me to act as chauffeur,’ said Nick, feeling that the wine had taken effect and his good mood of the past week had begun to return. He poured himself another glass. The afternoon was opening up pleasantly in front of him – more wine, a swim, perhaps a doze in the sun. Polly was looking at him, a half-mirthful expression playing around her mouth, apparently anticipating what he might say next. He could see the dark circles of her nipples under her t-shirt. ‘It doesn’t suit my temperament.’

'Oh, Jesus,' said Maria.

'Excuse me?'

'Just – it's getting a little wearying.'

Simon made a kind of irked or sympathetic face that appeared to make some insincere offer of male solidarity. Then, abruptly, he leaned back in his chair and turned his head away, in a movement that seemed to abdicate all involvement in the situation. Polly had disappeared inside.

'Right,' said Nick. 'I didn't realize.'

He had had no inkling of Maria's attitude – in fact he had been surprised and pleased at what he had taken to be her complicity in it all, their new plans, his revived mood. But now, when he thought about the past week, there was the dispiriting revelation that he could not trace any enthusiasm directly back to her. It had been a subject reserved for the company of the Hunters. And what about them? Had the Hunters begun to find him a little wearying?

Maria stood up, jarring her knees against the table. 'I'm going for a swim,' she said.

The Cirque de Navacelles was as dramatic as the Hunters' friends had promised. The wild scrubby land of the high plateau they had been driving over gave way suddenly to the vast sweep of the gorge. Far below was the massive lump of

rock, encircled by the dry bed of the river, and at one end the village of Navacelles itself. Simon had volunteered to drive down and meet them in the restaurant so Maria and Nick parked their car at the top and set off with Polly down the path. 'Look at that road,' Simon had said, pointing to the series of switchbacks that descended sharply into the valley, 'I think I'll enjoy it more on my own.' From the guidebooks the walk had looked strenuous and the children had been left with Ewa at the house.

The day was hot and bright and cloudless and the path cut along the side of the valley below an almost vertical cliff face before emerging into pine woods. After half an hour it dropped steeply through a patch of rowan trees and some steps brought them out at a river and an old mill buried in the cliffside. Nick identified this as the Source de la Foux, where the river emerged from underground and poured out into the valley. The scene was strikingly beautiful and they sat on a large flat rock overlooking the churning water and shared a bar of chocolate. From there the walk followed the path of the river, at times near the bank and then high above it. The three of them hardly spoke except to murmur at the views or to point out a way down the track. When they arrived at the restaurant, two hours later, Simon was at a table, drinking a beer.

It was still early and none of the three other tables were occupied. They ordered steaks which were served extremely rare and with what Simon called 'the perfect frites'. Aside from some banter between Polly and Simon and the waiter when the food came - which Nick did not understand - there was little

conversation over lunch. Nick tried several times to provoke a discussion, about the Millau Viaduct, which he said was not the modern marvel everyone said it was, and then about various French painters who he considered to be overrated. 'Of course,' he said, 'French culture – French culture and society is rotten in all sorts of important ways.' These were the sorts of views that, over the past week, the Hunters had seemed to enjoy and expect from him. Today, however, they only nodded noncommittally or smiled their assent and returned to the food.

Perhaps it was a natural and comfortable lull after the exertion of the walk or perhaps it was in deference to the drama and beauty of their surroundings, but to Nick the Hunters' silence felt calculated, oppressive. The previous day's sharp exchange with Maria seemed to echo loudly through the quiet of the restaurant. Back at their apartment Maria had refused to talk about it. She had gone to bed early and left Nick drinking and turning things over in his head. Now he felt the need to speak, to say something that would lance the tension, if that was what it was, and save the afternoon as he had saved their first dinner together – but he could not think what.

'Are you ok?' said Simon. 'You look a little off.' He was talking to Maria.

'Actually, not so good.'

Nick looked at her. She was pale and her hand was on her chest, as if to steady

herself. 'I feel a bit woozy. Just a little too much sun and wine, I think.'

'I'll take you back,' said Simon.

'We'll all come,' said Polly.

'Don't be silly, you and Nick stay. There's half a bottle of wine, dessert...'

Nick had already drunk several glasses and as the Hunters discussed what to do he looked on silently, feeling vaguely as if events had moved beyond his control and that they would arrive at the right plan regardless of his contribution. Sure enough, it was quickly agreed that Simon would drive Maria back to the village. Polly and Nick would finish lunch and then walk back up to Nick and Maria's car parked at the top.

'That ok with you, Nick?' said Simon.

'Sure,' said Nick, recovering himself. 'I'm up for it. I feel good.'

'See you back at basecamp, then.'

'Right you are,' said Nick, and gave him a salute.

Before leaving the restaurant, Polly and Nick each had a desert and then, at Polly's suggestion, a cognac. 'To fortify us,' she said, raising her glass. Once on the path they walked in near-silence which to Nick no longer hung heavily but instead seemed comfortable, even luxurious. His positive mood persisted for an hour or so but gradually his thoughts turned back to Maria.

Her undermining of him the day before seemed unforgivable. He wondered now if, over their fifteen years together, she had somehow diminished

his belief in himself, in small, gradual ways that he had failed to notice until now – but which had completely eroded his ambition. Perhaps, even worse, he had sought her out in the beginning, as someone who would recognize and nurture a weakness of nerve or spirit that had always been latent in him.

The sun was still surprisingly hot and the walk back up the gorge longer and more demanding than Nick had imagined. He had the beginnings, he recognised, of a brutal daytime hangover. When they got to the mill Nick lay down on the large flat rock overlooking the river whilst Polly went to look around the buildings. A fine spray from the churning water below cooled his face. He closed his eyes and the noise of the water filled his ears and his head.

‘Dreaming up a masterpiece?’

He had been asleep, perhaps only briefly, and Polly was sitting next to him on the rock. He pulled himself up. The sun was behind her and he had to squint to make out her face.

‘I suppose so, yes. Something like that.’

Polly spoke again but it was drowned out by the noise of the water.

‘Sorry?’ he said

She was looking at him, very intently it seemed to Nick – the sharp nose, the green eyes. It seemed as if they had been sitting there for a long time. Then Nick raised his hand and pressed it against Polly’s breast. It felt exactly as he had

thought it would. For several seconds nothing happened. She watched him steadily, her expression unchanging, the expression that seemed to say she knew and understood everything about him. Then she caught his wrist and placed his hand on the rock

‘I don’t think so, Nick.’

She smiled and stood up and he was reminded suddenly of their first meeting at the bread van, the same seamless and graceful movement from one moment to another, the virtuoso control over herself and the situation.

The sun was still in his eyes and Nick staggered slightly as he got to his feet. He had a blinding headache but was otherwise completely sober.

The Hunters were leaving.

Nick and Maria stood with Joseph outside the house as Simon and Polly loaded the last few things into the car. Polly had insisted the children hug each other but now the twins were in their seats, with Ewa between them, preoccupied with the DVD screens sunk into the seats in front of them.

‘So, guys,’ Simon said, ‘Suffolk – anytime. But sort out those tennis lessons first.’ He mimed a sort of spastic serve action and grinned at Nick. At breakfast they had scribbled down emails, phone numbers and addresses but

Nick knew – as the Hunters themselves surely did – that they would never go to Suffolk. Polly waved as she got into the passenger seat.

‘It’s been so lovely’, she said, ‘especially for the kids.’

The day before, when they got back to Nick’s car at the top of the gorge, Polly had offered to drive. ‘You look a bit worse for wear,’ she said. They drove across the plateau in silence and although he did not make an effort to speak himself, Nick felt that Polly was inflicting this on him deliberately. After half an hour she turned on the radio, to a station playing dire, upbeat French pop music.

When they drove back into the village, Simon and Maria were up on the Hunters’ terrace.

‘Don’t worry,’ Simon called out, ‘I’ve been taking care of your wife.’

‘I felt better as soon as we got back,’ shouted Maria. ‘Simon said I needed to drink more – and apparently he was right!’

Nick’s mouth was dry and he had begun to feel a little nauseous, so he had made excuses and gone back to the apartment to lie down.

The Hunters had pulled away now, but every few minutes the Audi’s large black shape would appear on one of the curves beyond the village before disappearing again into the trees. Joseph was crying and Maria stroked his head and whispered in his ear. But in his mind Nick was elsewhere. He was back at the

mill at the Source de la Foux, half way down the side of the gorge, the sound of the water pumping in his ears. His hand was against Polly's breast and he was waiting, waiting, to see what would happen next.

Mrs Echegary

If he could not make it, he always called. Often it was because of his work, sometimes because of his wife or children. 'You're not angry?' he'd ask. 'No,' she'd say, and she was not angry. She was very understanding, she knew the pressures and difficulties of their arrangement. 'Next time,' he'd say, 'I promise.' On these days she did not leave immediately. She listened to opera on the radio, watched television or read magazines. She did not like to think that she was simply waiting for Jorge.

They had been meeting at the Hotel Mirabelle – Jorge and Luisa – twice a week, Mondays and Fridays, for eight months. Today, as always, she got there a little early; there were things to do before Jorge arrived. At the reception desk the manager came out to greet her. The first time she had come in he had recognised her, said he was a big fan, and she had signed in not as herself but as Mrs Echegary. The manager had liked the joke and she had done the same thing each time since. Now he watched her hands while she wrote in the book and he smiled, a smile that said he knew how to be discreet, assured her, once again, that it was that kind of hotel. He was young, she thought, almost handsome. He passed her the room key and she winked at him, a showy wink she had been using for years.

Upstairs she made herself a drink, whisky with a little water, and undressed in front of the full-length mirror. She applied more mascara and lipstick quickly, expertly. She brushed her hair and then sprayed perfume around her shoulders and between her legs. She pulled at the skin of her neck and

watched it regain its shape. Luisa held her breasts in her hands, enjoying the new, still unexpected weight of them. For a second, in front of the mirror, she arched her spine and tilted her head back.

At the window she adjusted the blinds so that the sunlight lay in a rectangle on the bed. There was something about meeting in this shady room in the bright, dead hours of the afternoon, something deliciously illicit that she thought she must be addicted to. Satisfied, she lit one of her vanilla-flavoured cigarillos and got into bed.

This was how Jorge liked it to be when he arrived. This, he said, was the thought that made him drive a little too fast across the city to the Hotel Mirabelle.

The operation was Jorge's idea. It was their six-month anniversary and he said he wanted to buy her something special. The surgeon was a friend of his, his golf or tennis partner. Jorge made all the arrangements and went with her to the consultation at the clinic. There the two men and Luisa discussed the shape and size of the implants and Jorge paid in advance.

The day of the operation Jorge had been unable to be there because of his work. 'Felipe will look after you,' he told Luisa on the phone. The surgeon explained everything slowly and in detail, where the incisions would be made and how the implants would be inserted. He felt that she should understand

exactly what would be happening to her. She listened to the pleasant, almost hypnotic sound of his voice but not to what he was saying. He made her hold the implants in her hands – cool, formless – and she could not connect them with the operation she was about to have.

The surgeon put her at ease. He had something of Jorge's confident, relaxed manner. He said he and his wife had been watching her for years, that his daughter wanted to be an actress, but then didn't they all? He was concerned that she would end up disappointed. Luisa watched him spread the plastic surgical sheet over her and thought that it would not be so different from being touched by Jorge. 'Yes,' she said, 'it is a difficult business. I have been lucky.' She had been about to say something more but the anaesthetic had taken her under.

At their next meeting she was very sore – she had not expected to be so sore – but Jorge was very understanding. He said it made him happy just to look at her.

Luisa picked up the phone and called downstairs for a bottle of champagne, the Veuve Clicquot she and Jorge always drank. She sat at the dressing table in her negligee and began to paint her toenails a bright red.

Built into one corner of the room was a bar with a Formica counter. A mock chandelier hung from the centre of the ceiling. On two walls there were reproductions of Toulouse-Lautrec paintings. From the window there was a view

of the hotel car park. Over the last few months the room had become extraordinarily familiar but she rarely allowed herself to think of it, or of Jorge, when she was not here. It was a fragile pleasure, hoarded away at the back of her mind, where she could be sure it would not escape or be used up.

She did not recognise the maid who brought up the champagne and she stopped painting her nails to look. The girl was slim and dark and her hair was pinned flat on top of her head. She was wearing the hotel's black-and-white uniform and black lace-up shoes.

'Where would you like the champagne, Mrs Echegary?'

Luisa pointed towards the bar with the nail brush. 'What is your name?' she asked.

'Mariana.' The maid took the bottle and two glasses off the tray.

'Are you new, Mariana?'

'I've been here for nearly a year, Mrs Echegary.' Luisa beckoned her over to the dressing table.

'Tell me what you think of this colour. Is it too much?'

'It's very nice, Mrs Echegary.'

Luisa smiled. She wanted to say: You know Mrs Echegary is not my real name? You understand the joke? She said: 'But it doesn't really matter what we think, does it?'

The maid shook her head. She picked up the tray and turned towards the door.

'Wait,' said Luisa. She went to her bag and pulled out her purse. 'How old are you, Mariana?'

'Nineteen.'

Luisa pushed a note into her hand. 'Don't say anything. I'm feeling extravagant.'

Aventuras del Corazon. She wondered how many televisions in the hotel were showing the soap opera now, the first episode of the day, if perhaps the manager was watching it in his office. Mrs Echegary: a household name, a national institution according to some. Passionate and ruthless, famous for her diamonds, her perfect hair, her immaculate appearance maintained whatever the circumstances. She had survived the death of two husbands, the delinquency of her sons, cancer and several car crashes.

Luisa put down the remote control without turning the television on, walked to the window and parted the slats of the blind to look out over the hotel car park. She had a momentary vision of herself from the other side of the room - holding the tall glass, the light streaming across her face – as if caught in a photograph or a painting, and she felt a terrifying instant of paralysis. She stood a little straighter to break the thought, and took a sip of champagne.

The car park was quiet. The parking valet was sitting on the kerb, shining his sunglasses with a handkerchief. In the far corner her Alfa Romeo was half hidden by a Mercedes jeep. She had had the car imported from Italy ten years ago at a time when she had left Aventuras del Corazon and just received admiring reviews for a role in an American film. The magazines carried photographs of her driving it around the city or filling it with petrol at garages. The car was a little battered and rusting now but there was a powerful sentimentality that stopped her replacing it. Recently the door on the driver's side had broken and she had to get in through the passenger door, sliding awkwardly over the gearstick. It occurred to her again that she should get it fixed.

Three weeks ago Luisa saw Jorge in the Mall Mariscal Lopez. After the party where they had met and the consultation at the clinic it was only the third time she had seen him outside the room in the hotel. He was with two children, a boy and a girl, buying them drinks and hamburgers. They did not look like him, were pale where he was dark. They resembled their mother, Luisa presumed. Looking at them she had no idea how old they might be; Jorge had never said. It occurred to her that in some way she had doubted that they, or his wife, really existed, but were just figments of a game Jorge and Luisa played out in the Hotel Mirabelle.

The food the children had been waiting for was handed over the counter and the three of them turned and began to walk towards Luisa. Jorge appeared somehow different. Unshaven, casually dressed and loaded down with shopping bags, he seemed reduced, crumpled, physically shorter even. As they came closer she saw that he was wearing his wedding ring. Months before, as they were being introduced, she had searched his hand for the ring and not found it.

Jorge and his children were no more than ten feet away and she was preparing to speak to him, when she realised that he had not seen her. They walked past and his face registered nothing, except a certain weariness. She turned to watch them go and as they went he stooped down and said something to the children that made them giggle. A few moments later Luisa realised that a young woman was touching her sleeve and saying her name. She was asking for an autograph and Luisa was happy to be distracted by the ritual.

The next day was a Monday and in the afternoon Jorge and Luisa met in the room at the Hotel Mirabelle. She did not mention the mall. It was a month since Luisa's operation but she was still too uncomfortable to have sex. Jorge had seemed tense but they drank and later he knelt beside her on the bed and masturbated over her breasts.

The champagne was finished. She would order more for her and Jorge later. Instead she poured herself another whisky. The stripes of sunlight coming through the blinds were softer now and had climbed up against the wall.

Luisa turned on the television. The second of the consecutive episodes of Aventuras del Corazon had just begun. The programme seemed to be full of the new young stars whom she barely knew but whose faces were always in the newspapers, their frantic and scandalous personal lives reported in endless detail.

Luisa disliked it when she heard other actors say that they could not bear to see themselves on the screen; she believed it was a pose, an affectation. She enjoyed watching herself in this role, which, after so many years – and despite the dull and insubstantial storylines she felt Mrs Echegary had recently been given – fitted her like a second skin.

Two years after Luisa left the programme she had come back. In that time she made several films but the moment had quickly passed and the parts were no longer offered. Mrs Echegary, who had been killed by a jealous lover in front of an audience of millions – so adamant had Luisa been that she would not return – was resurrected, as feisty and indomitable as before.

Luisa lit another cigarillo and watched the smoke hang heavily above the bed. She picked up the phone and listened to the dreary, insistent hum of the

dial tone. When she finally looked back at the television the credits were scrolling up the screen.

‘I’d like another bottle of Veuve Clicquot.’

‘Of course, Mrs Echegary.’ Luisa put down the phone. She wondered if she had heard a different, perhaps a mocking emphasis in the manager’s voice.

In the bathroom she turned on the taps. Jorge would be surprised to find her in the bath, Luisa thought. Surprised and a little amused, the way he sometimes was.

Today was Friday and on Monday they had slept together for the first time since the operation six weeks ago. They had had sex twice and then lay in bed drinking and talking for the rest of the afternoon. Jorge told her that as a teenager he had fantasised about her, something he had never said before. Luisa told him about the house she planned to buy in the mountains which they would be able to use for their meetings. He told her how unhappy he was with his wife and they made love again.

The phone was ringing. If he could not make it, he always called. She did not hurry from the bathroom. She turned off the taps and as she passed the mirror she paused to move a strand of hair away from her face.

‘Yes?’

'Mrs Echegary?'

'Yes?'

'I'm afraid there is no more Veuve Clicquot. Only Moët. It is a little cheaper. Mrs Echegary?'

'Yes,' said Luisa, 'please send it up.'

She turned on the hot tap and let it run until the water was steaming. Then, without testing it, she stepped quickly in. For several seconds she felt nothing, there was no sensation. Then the pain came, biting exquisitely. But she did not get out. Instead she lowered herself into the water, feeling the skin tighten and become raw as it hit the water.

She gasped out loud and thought, I can tolerate this.

She counted slowly to twenty, looking at her hands, red under the water. Then she turned the cold tap on and let the bath fill.

The operation had been painful too. There were only scars now, deep red lines etched into the skin which would not disappear, but they were concealed on the undersides. She saw that it was nothing really. Many women she knew, especially in her profession, had something done every year. In a way it was surprising she had waited so long; she supposed she must have been a little proud. But Jorge had been so taken with the idea, and then later, so pleased with

the results. She could have paid for it herself but he would not have it and the money made no difference to him. 'Now I own part of you,' he had joked afterwards.

Her breasts floated just under the surface. She touched them and then held them with her hands, as if they were not part of her own body. She did not think they were absurd, as she had overheard one of the other actresses saying. She agreed with Jorge; they were beautiful. She took a deep breath and slid down into the bath, pulling her head underwater. She closed her eyes and felt warmed through.

There was someone standing in the bathroom doorway. For a moment she thought, Jorge. But it was not Jorge. Of course it was not. It was the maid, whose name she could not now remember.

'I'm very sorry, Mrs Echegary. I knocked for a long time.' She hesitated. 'Are you all right?'

She looked at the bottle she was holding, the champagne Luisa had ordered and forgotten about. 'I'll leave it on the bar.'

'Don't be silly,' said Luisa, sitting up in the bath. 'What is your name?' She was sober enough to notice that she was slurring her words.

'Mariana.'

‘Yes. Don’t be silly, Mariana. Open the bottle. I need you to fill up my glass.’

The maid hesitated and then popped the champagne cork and walked across the room.

‘If you don’t look at what you’re doing you’ll spill it,’ said Luisa, smiling.

‘Now pour yourself a glass. There’s another one in the other room.’

‘I can’t, Mrs Echegary. I’m working.’

‘Luisa. Please call me Luisa. This is working. I am a good customer. You can have a drink with me. Otherwise,’ she said lightly, ‘I will complain about you.’

The maid got the glass from the bedroom. She sat on the edge of a chair by the sink and held the champagne rigidly in front of her.

‘How old are you, Mariana?’

‘I’m nineteen.’

‘How old do you think I am?’

The maid looked past Luisa at the mottled glass of the bathroom window.

‘I don’t know, Mrs Echegary.’

Luisa waved her hand in the air. ‘It doesn’t matter. You have a very nice figure, Mariana.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Jorge would admire you. He would like your body. It is a pity they make you wear that uniform.’

The maid stood up.

‘I have to go. The manager –’

‘Let him wait,’ said Luisa, with a sharpness she had not intended.

She lay back in the bath, not speaking, and for several minutes she watched the champagne bubbles race up the side of the glass and pop at the surface. Then, still holding the glass in her left hand, she gripped the side of the bath with her right and began to pull herself to her feet. The water ran off her body in streams and again she felt the rawness of her skin. She felt terribly heavy but did not stop. She pushed away the hair that was plastered across her eyes and stood up as straight as she could manage. She held her arms out wide.

‘This is what Jorge likes,’ she said. ‘This is why he comes here.’

She felt dizzy. She staggered forward and the champagne slopped out of her glass into the water below. The maid stepped closer but Luisa held onto the window ledge and steadied herself. She turned to the maid.

‘We should have a toast. What should we have a toast to, Mariana?’

‘I don’t know, Mrs Echegary,’ said the maid, still poised halfway across the room. ‘To you?’

Luisa laughed. 'Yes, of course. To me.' She let go of the window ledge. She raised the glass in front of her and tilted it forward, knocking it against an imaginary other.

'To me, then,' she said.

Perhaps the light shed by the chandelier was less kind than the sunlight had been but, as she got dressed, it seemed to Luisa that in the months she had been coming here the room had become perceptibly shabbier. They had chosen the hotel because it was not ostentatious but now she noticed the thinness of the carpets and their old-fashioned floral pattern, the shiny vulgarity of the furnishings, the cheapness of the champagne flutes. There was a yellow-brown tobacco stain on the ceiling above the bed.

She took her time dressing, drying her hair and putting on make-up, and when she finally left the room she felt more hungover than drunk. In the lobby she paid the bill and cancelled the reservations for the following week. She asked the manager to light one of her cigarillos. Outside it was dark, not even dusky. The valet had disappeared so she walked across the car park to her car. She tried the driver's door before remembering it was broken. She went round to the passenger's side, climbed over the gearstick, and started the car.

The Starving Millions

'Nice car,' said Nick's brother Ed, as they put the bags in the boot at the airport. Nick looked up at him, wondering if Ed meant anything more than this and then deciding that he did not. He would have to try not to be so touchy. They had not seen each other for nearly two years and his brother was simply making an effort. After all, it was a nice car, a black four-wheel-drive Toyota, but hardly ostentatious. It was the first substantial thing Nick had bought when he and Beth had moved to the US eighteen months before and he could not pretend he did not enjoy sitting up high behind the wheel, driving the wide sunny streets on the way to work every day.

'Big,' said his brother.

'Well,' said Nick, starting the engine, 'we have the baby now. And anyway, everything's big out here, you'll see.' He pinched his belly and grinned at Rosie, Ed's wife, sitting in the back. 'Even me.'

'You look well,' she said.

'I'm a fat American, you mean.'

They had never been close but Nick was grateful that Ed and Rosie had made the effort to come to his wedding, especially as it had not been an easy journey. For the last year they had been working on some kind of hospital ship run by a Christian organisation that they were involved with. The ship went up and down the coast of Africa, giving out treatment and supplies in war-torn or impoverished countries. Nick was vague about the details. He knew that his

brother and Rosie had been given some basic medical training before they left England but privately he wondered what on earth use Ed – who had a degree in history – might be in this situation. Once every few months Nick would receive a card postmarked from Liberia, the Congo or Angola with a brief message saying ‘both well’, ‘Africa extraordinary’ or mentioning a particular country’s ‘terrible problems’. It was always the same card, a picture of The Angel of Hope, a decrepit-looking ship that Nick was certain he would not be tempted to put to sea in. Ed and Rosie had only finished on the boat the previous week and to get to the wedding in time they had flown from Ivory Coast to Paris and then to London, before catching the plane to Denver.

It was a source of wonder to Nick that he and Ed shared the same parents and had grown up in the same household with only three years between them. Although their parents had been regular churchgoers they had never tried to force their faith on their sons. With Nick it hadn’t stuck and by his teens he retained only the woolliest notion of a divine order. But while he experimented with drugs and girls and politics, his brother spent his university years attending the chaplaincy and organising events for the Christian Union. Nick had assumed this was just a phase, a hangover of adolescent self-consciousness or eccentricity that Ed would grow out of the same way he had grown out of sucking his thumb. It didn’t happen, and as time went on Nick began to regard his brother as something of an embarrassment, the sort of person that at university he would have ridiculed as painfully earnest and repressed. He told stories of his brother’s

piety – never swearing, giving away his Christmas presents to a charity shop, spending his summer holidays building an orphanage in Bangladesh – and as they lay on a beach in Thailand or thought about buying cocaine, it became customary among Nick’s friends to ask, ‘But what would St Edward say?’

As soon as they had finished university Ed and Rosie got married and began living and working in a homeless shelter in East London. This led, in time, to the boat. When Nick thought of Ed these days, he often had a vision of him as a dour Victorian missionary, buttoned up in a stiff jacket and collar, striding through slums in searing African heat, clutching his Bible. But Nick also knew that the mockery of his brother hid some other feeling, an unease he had felt in his company for as long as he could remember, the sense that despite everything – his professional success, his new baby, his upcoming wedding – he was fickle, trivial, somehow fundamentally lacking in seriousness. When he had told Ed over the phone that he and Beth had both been offered jobs in Denver, Beth’s home town, adding that the money was too good to refuse, he had been almost annoyed when his brother said that it sounded like a good opportunity and wished him luck.

When they got back from the airport Nick showed Ed and Rosie down into the basement of the house where there was a large bedroom, bathroom and second living room. The rooms had never been used by visitors before and as he opened doors and walked them through Nick wondered for a second why they had

bought such a large place. They had been able to afford it and at the time that had seemed like reason enough. But his brother and Rosie seemed happy with the arrangement. No doubt they were simply grateful for somewhere comfortable after all their flights and, prior to that, Africa. Thinking of this, Nick reminded himself to ask his brother more about their work and what conditions had been like on the boat. After dumping the bags they went upstairs to talk to Beth, who Ed and Rosie had only met twice before, and be introduced to Katie, Nick's daughter, who had been born since he had last seen his brother.

Ed and Rosie had brought Katie a present, an ugly little doll made out of two sticks bound together and covered in rough material. 'A girl in Sierra Leone gave it to Ed,' said Rosie. 'He helped treat her for an eye infection. It's not very exciting but we thought it was a nice thing to pass on.'

'It's very thoughtful,' said Beth. 'She has so much of this plastic rubbish already.'

Later, Nick drove them all over to Beth's parents for dinner. In the car Ed said, 'Nick, before we forget, what do we owe you for the flights?'

'Nothing at all.'

'Really,' said Ed, 'we'd rather pay for them.'

'Well, unlucky, because they're a present from me.'

'Nick,' said Ed.

‘Don’t make a big deal out of it, Ed. I already sold my soul so allow me to feel good about myself now and again.’ Ed did not reply and so, after a few moments, Nick said quickly, ‘Really, I wanted you guys here, don’t worry about it.’

Beth’s family had flown in from around the country and her mother had cooked an enormous joint of beef. Nick sat talking to Beth’s father, Bill, a retired lawyer who he got on with so well that Beth sometimes joked about which member of her family he was really interested in. Nick was at the other end of the table from his brother, but about half an hour into the meal he heard Ed say, apparently in response to something he had been asked, ‘. . . the real problem is the lack of basic medicines. Most of these things are completely treatable. But as it is you see small children with tumours like this.’ Nick looked over at him. Ed had put down his knife and fork and was holding up his hand, making a ring with his thumb and forefinger, almost as if he had the bloodied and malignant lump there in front of him. ‘They try and cut them out but they don’t have the equipment. The hygiene is so poor that more often than not they die anyway. And that’s only the beginning – glaucoma, dysentery, Aids of course . . .’

Ed had been engaged in conversation from across the table by Beth’s brother-in-law, Karl, a surveyor from Phoenix who bred bulldogs and who had taken Nick to his first baseball game. Nick looked around the table. Other conversation had died away and everyone was listening to Ed. Nick leaned forward, intrigued to see that his brother had become such an expert. He was

about to ask a question when Beth's mother cut in, smiling. 'Perhaps this is a discussion we could save for after dinner.'

'Anyway, I admire you,' said Karl, 'people like you. We don't all get our hands dirty.'

'We don't really see it that way,' said Ed.

'No, of course not. Just a turn of phrase. Are you going back?'

'No,' said Ed, 'not for now.'

'Job done?' Nick said, and then wished he had not. His brother gave no sign of having heard him.

'The project's in some financial difficulty,' Ed said. Karl nodded and, after a pause, changed the subject.

'So, what do you think about your kid brother getting married?'

'Oh no,' said Ed, 'I'm younger.'

'But you beat him to it?'

'Yes, one of the many things I've done to annoy him.'

Karl laughed and Beth's mother offered everyone more food. Talk turned to a ski condo in Vail that Nick, Karl and Bill were planning to go in on three ways. The idea was that it would be a place the whole family could use at the

weekends and for holidays. Karl said that apart from anything else, property up there was a gold mine and it would be a guaranteed investment for everyone.

Neither his brother nor Rosie had really touched their food and it occurred to Nick how much weight they had lost since he had last seen them. Rosie had been almost plump at their wedding. Ed, especially, looked gaunt, his eyes large and dark in his face and Nick thought he could be taken for someone ten years older. It all added to his natural air of severity and perhaps this is what it was, a gradual perfecting of an ascetic look he had been working on for years. Perhaps food and good health had become the latest form of self-denial. Or was it, Nick wondered, all out of some bizarre solidarity with the starving millions? Despite their deeply browned skin, he decided, they both looked faintly sick.

As he and Beth were getting ready for bed, Nick complained about his brother. 'He can't ever let it go. I sometimes think he just wants people to feel bad about themselves. It's a kind of meanness. Maybe he'd be happier if we all had tumours.'

'That's a little unfair,' said Beth. 'They've just arrived here from God knows what. It can't be easy to adapt. You should go easy on him.' This was what Nick had expected her to say and he liked it about her, her generosity, part of what he thought of as her Americanness, and it made him glad again that he was marrying her. It struck him particularly because Beth was not in any way like his

brother. She was down-to-earth, practical, at home with material and other pleasures, unburdened by things it made no sense to be burdened by. When Ed had written from Africa that he was leading daily prayers on the boat with his guitar they had both nearly wept with laughter at the thought of it. 'Just what they need,' Beth had said, 'the wretched of the earth healed through song.'

'I've been trying to go easy on him for years,' Nick said. 'And I always think it's going to be better when I see him, but it never is.'

Beth got into bed. 'Anyway, he's your brother, you're supposed to be embarrassed by him. If you're worried my family's not going to like him, don't. It doesn't matter.' She laughed. 'Perhaps what you're really worried about is that they'll like him more than they like you.'

Nick grinned. 'As if that were possible.'

'Still, it was sweet of them to get something for Katie.'

'Something is the word for it,' said Nick. 'I can't wait to see what they got us for a wedding present.'

When their parents were killed in a car crash five years before, Nick received a letter from his brother full of religious homilies about death and grief and reassuring him that they had gone to a better place. Ed said that God loved us

without reservation and that He had a plan for all of us. At the end he had signed off, 'Yours in Christ, Ed.'

It bothered Nick that Ed thought it necessary to put all this in a letter, rather than saying it over the phone or in person. At the time they were both living in London and seeing each other almost every day to deal with the aftermath of the accident. It struck Nick as fantastically conceited of his brother to believe that what he had to say on the subject was worthy of being written down. Ed, he felt, was trying out a pose, that he had been waiting all along for an event awful enough to match his piety. There seemed to be another implication to the letter too – now that life had revealed itself in all its profundity and suffering, he felt his brother to be saying, shouldn't Nick cast off the pretence of an unbeliever and accept what he in fact knew to be true?

He wanted to tell his brother that he found him ridiculous. For a few minutes after receiving the letter he considered sending Ed a postcard that just said 'Which better place?' or 'Better how?' but in the end he could not bring himself to do it. Instead, it was never mentioned by either of them – conspicuously so, it seemed to Nick – and, looking back, he sometimes felt that this was a victory for his brother.

But following their parents' death it was Ed who held things together. It was Ed who knew what needed doing and, he had to admit, what their parents would have wanted. Ed phoned or wrote to family and friends. He organised the funeral and gave a reading while Nick found he could only nod and mumble at

the aged aunts he remembered vaguely from his childhood. Afterwards, Nick made desultory efforts to take charge, feeling that as the eldest these things were somehow his responsibility, but he found much of it intolerable and in the end he consoled himself with the fact that his brother, who was working as a volunteer, had more time. In the following six months Ed arranged the clear-out and sale of their parents' house, and dealt with the execution of the will.

In the period that followed Nick felt as if a weight had been lifted from him, some kind of burden of expectation or judgement that he had not known had existed and which he did not think had much to do with the sort of people they had been. He felt an odd sense of freedom. About a year later he met Beth, an American working in his company, and soon afterwards they had begun to talk about leaving London.

Nick had hoped that his brother would not wish to come on the bachelor night two days before the wedding but when Ed made no sign of opting out Nick took him aside. 'This might not be your thing,' he said. 'I won't be offended if you want to pass on it.'

'Nice try,' said Ed. 'But I think can handle it.'

'Well, you have been warned.'

Karl had organised for a stretch limo to pick them all up from Nick's house, drive them around town long enough to drink a couple of bottles of

champagne and then drop them at a bar. Nick felt sorry for his brother. Ed was sitting at the far end of the car, squashed between Ray and Mike, two of Nick's workmates who had been invited along to make up the numbers. The rest of the party were in jeans and shirts, but Ed had worn a suit. It looked old and was rather too large for him and Nick wondered if it had belonged to their father. Nick heard Ray offer to take his brother out duck hunting before the end of his trip.

When the limousine pulled up outside the bar Karl asked for quiet. 'Men,' he said, adopting a sombre tone and looking from face to face, 'listen up. This is serious stuff. Two days from now one more of us gives up his freedom and is lost to the enemy. It is our duty – our privilege! – to make sure that he has one last bite of the apple. So that when he stands up there by the altar he's not thinking about that one last piece of pussy he should have had, that one lovely bit of quim he can't get out of his mind.'

'Like you, you mean,' said Ray.

'No comment,' said Karl, and then bared his teeth.

Nick grinned and rolled his eyes at his brother but Ed was staring up at the roof of the car, one hand tugging gently at the sleeve of his suit. His face was set with a serene expression – irritatingly serene, thought Nick.

In the bar they did shots of tequila. Karl bought round after round and after each slug everyone was encouraged to slam a fist on the bar and exclaim, 'I

said goddamn!’ After an hour or so they climbed back into the limousine and drove a hundred yards down the street to another bar where they did the same. Nick hardly spoke to his brother. Ed was standing on the edge of the group, sometimes talking to Ray, declining his shots but not, Nick thought, looking like he was having an altogether terrible time.

After one more bar Karl announced that it was time to commence the real business of the evening and the limousine dropped them in the parking lot of a strip club. Above the entrance a huge neon sign showed a cartoonishly shaped woman astride a cannon and below it the words ‘Shotgun Willies’. Karl paid for them all to get in, bought two bottles of champagne and a round of sambucas at the bar and then produced several small rolls of five-dollar bills fixed in rubber bands that he handed to each of them. Nick watched his brother raise his hands in refusal but Karl tucked the money into the pocket of Ed’s suit, as if he were a mafioso dispensing bribes. ‘My gift to you all,’ he said. ‘Please, it makes me happy.’

Girls in G-strings were dancing on small stages set around the club and Nick went and sat down at one of them. Ray sat down a couple of seats away from him, lit a cigar and laid one of the five-dollar bills that Karl had given them on the stage. The girl came over, put her hands on Ray’s shoulders, and began to grind over him in time to the thumping music, letting her hair fall in his face. When she had finished Ray took a long pull on the cigar and tucked the note into the band of her underwear.

Nick wasn't thinking about the girls. For some reason he had been reminded of something his brother had said to him several years ago, at the time of Ed's own wedding, about how he and Rosie planned to raise their children in the Third World. Nick had laughed and said 'Good luck to you', but occasionally since then, and more often since they had had Katie, the idiocy and self-righteousness of this remark would come into his head and fill him with a kind of fury. If he found the right moment and the right mood he would ask if this was still on the agenda.

Nick looked around. Karl was wandering from stage to stage. He would stop and stare for a minute at a girl and then walk on unsatisfied, the roll of notes gripped in his fist and held out slightly in front of him. Nick spotted Ed standing on his own at the bar, holding a drink. He looked so out of place, with his fixed expression and baggy suit, that Nick wouldn't have been entirely surprised if one of the bouncers had asked him to leave. He wondered why Ed had insisted on coming. As it was his presence threw the whole place into a seedy, pitiful light, the girls squirming joylessly in the overheated room, their plastered-on smiles and make-up. This was the effect his brother had on everything, Nick thought.

Ed came over to the stage where Nick was sitting. 'I'm sorry –' said Ed.

'Sorry?' Nick cut in. 'Don't be sorry. What's to be sorry for?' He grabbed his brother's arm and pulled him down into the chair next to him, more roughly than he had intended.

‘You know this is all bullshit.’ Nick gestured at the stage and the club beyond. ‘It’s just playing. I don’t even like champagne. All bullshit.’ He was still holding his brother’s arm. ‘While I’ve got you –’

‘I’m going,’ said Ed. He was holding out the roll of notes that Karl had given him. ‘Can you give this back?’ Nick took the roll from his brother and laid it on the stage in front of Ed. The girl spotted the money and began to walk over. Ed reached for the notes but Nick gripped his wrist. Now Nick was holding his brother by both arms.

‘Don’t,’ Nick said. ‘It’s not polite.’

The girl leaned forward and placed her hands on Ed’s shoulders. Nick let go of his brother, stood up and walked to the toilets. On the way back he went to the bar and by the time he returned Ed had gone.

A few minutes later Karl herded them back into the limousine and they drove to another club. It was late. The place was smaller and more brightly lit. There were no stages and the girls, who struck Nick as older and less attractive than before, walked around among the few customers who were still there. Nick was tired and starting to feel hungover. When Karl eventually reappeared from a side room, grinning and holding up his hands to show that he had been relieved of his cash, they left and drove home.

The wedding went off well. It was a beautiful day and everyone, it seemed to Nick, was in an excellent mood. A vintage Rolls-Royce drove them from the house to the church where they were married and a small choir sang songs that Nick and Beth had chosen. In the previous couple of days Katie had taken to Ed and he was given the job of looking after her during the ceremony. The reception was held in a marquee on the lawns at Beth's parents' house. There was a jazz band, and it was so warm that some of the guests swam in the pool before the meal.

For the first time since Ed had arrived, Nick did not feel anxious about his brother. Occasionally he glanced around and saw him, often in the thick of a group of people, Beth's elderly relatives or friends of her parents, people Nick himself barely knew or recognised. Ed played easily with the younger children too and it occurred to Nick that, against the odds, his brother was proving a credit to him. Several times Nick spotted him in earnest conversation with Karl.

After the meal, Bill got up and spoke. He welcomed Nick into the family and said he couldn't be happier in Beth's choice of husband. Then he introduced Ed, saying that although he was not a scheduled speaker, he had asked to say a few words. For a moment, as his brother stood up, Nick's heart sank.

'Since we arrived here,' said Ed, 'my brother and I haven't had much time to talk. And it's a long time since we've seen each other. So I wanted to take this opportunity to say how glad Rosie and I are to be here and that this is happening.'

We don't know Beth well but if she is prepared to put up with my brother then she must be something special. I am certain our parents would have approved.'

He paused and took a sip of water. 'Anyway, I know the real point of these speeches is to assassinate the character of the groom and as the person who has known him the longest I take that responsibility seriously.' Ed went on to tell a story Nick had all but forgotten of how, when they were children, Nick offered his brother ten pence if he would stand naked in a window at the top of their house for twenty seconds, while the other children in the neighbourhood played in the street below. Ed hammed the story up, making everyone laugh. Nick felt he had underestimated his brother – perhaps he had always been guilty of underestimating him. Ed explained how, as he stood in the window, Nick had adjusted his seven-year-old brother's arms and legs so that he was fully spreadeagled, and then counted to twenty so slowly that Ed had begun to cry.

It was odd to hear his brother tell this story so vividly. Nick had not been in the habit of thinking of his past and there now seemed so little to connect himself with the person Ed was describing. Beth loved to talk about her childhood, growing up in Colorado in the seventies, her large family and the summer holidays spent with her grandparents on the West Coast. Nick knew her stories back to front. Now that they were living in Denver it was as if her past had come to stand for them both and he sometimes felt a nostalgia for her memories that was entirely absent from his own.

‘So two things,’ said Ed as he came to the end of the story. ‘Firstly, I want to say to Beth that this was all a long time ago and I’m sure that she has nothing to worry about, and secondly to ask’ – here he turned to Nick – ‘can I have my money now?’

In the days after the wedding, Nick left Ed and Rosie to their own devices. He lent them his car and they drove over to Boulder and then down to Colorado Springs to visit someone they had worked with on The Angel of Hope. The day before their flight back to London Karl took them up into the Rockies. They wanted to see the mountains and Karl needed to take a final look at the condo he was buying with Nick and Bill in Vail and run over a few details with the real estate agent. They left early in the morning and Nick was in bed by the time they came in.

The following day Nick loaded Ed and Rosie’s bags into the car and they set off for the airport. Ed was in the passenger seat and Rosie sat in the back. Nick switched on the radio, flicked between stations and then turned it off. He could not think what to say to his brother. There seemed something final about the moment, as if an obligation had been fulfilled and now neither of them needed to have anything to do with the other. With their parents dead, they no longer even had family in common. They drove in silence until they reached the freeway.

‘So you haven’t said much about the mountains,’ said Nick. ‘How was it up there yesterday?’

‘It was beautiful,’ said Rosie. ‘So peaceful.’

‘Great time of year to be up there,’ said Nick. ‘Any time is a good time, in fact.’

They were silent again for several minutes. ‘Did you see the place?’ said Nick.

Ed made a sound, either a sigh or a drawing in of breath. Nick looked over at him. Ed put his finger on the button to open the window.

‘Yes, we saw it.’

‘And what did you think?’

‘I should tell you that Karl is making a donation to our appeal for the boat,’ said Ed.

Nick looked at the road ahead and then began to nod slowly.

‘I see.’ He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. ‘I see, I see. And I’m guessing that after this donation there isn’t enough left over for the condo.’

‘I believe so,’ said Ed. ‘Karl feels bad about it.’

‘Does he? Shouldn’t he feel good about it? Wouldn’t that be the point?’

Ed didn't reply.

'Do you feel good about it?' Nick said. Ed turned to look at his brother.

'God loves you, you know. You don't think so, but He does. He loves all of us, regardless.'

'Regardless of what?'

'Regardless of anything.'

'Well, thanks, I'll bear that in mind,' said Nick. 'But what I'm really interested in is what kind of money are we talking here?'

'It's not for me to say. Enough to help us carry on with our work.'

'Spreading His word?'

'Yes, that's part of it.'

'I'm a bit confused,' said Nick. 'So which is the most important part? Helping the needy or bringing them to God?'

'It's part of the same thing. Many do convert, if that's what you want to know. I'm sorry you resent me, Nick.'

'Oh Christ, don't be a jerk.' Nick slammed the palm of his hand on the top of the steering wheel and the car veered to the left. His mind was racing. He wasn't sure what was the most important thing to say.

'You're cynical, Ed. You think you're not but you are. You're really cynical. You don't know these people. They're nothing to do with you. You've no right.'

'I'm sorry you can't have your condominium.'

'It's not about the fucking condo.'

'Can you slow down please?' said Rosie. Nick looked at the dial and then braked. They were nearly at the airport.

'Sorry,' Nick said.

No one spoke. Then Ed said, 'Can I ask you something, Nick?'

'Sure, anything you like. Be my guest.'

'Do you miss our parents?'

Nick hesitated. If he was honest, he thought of them less and less, but he did not know how else you were supposed to be.

'Look, Ed. I'm healthy and my family are healthy. I live in a nice house. I just got married and I sleep well at night. Which part of it do you want me to feel guilty about?'

They were at the airport. Nick parked the car and they unloaded the bags.

'Well,' said Ed, 'come and visit.'

'Where?' said Nick.

Ed shrugged. 'We'll see.'

'Thanks, Nick,' said Rosie. 'It was a lovely wedding.'

When they had gone Nick drove the car round to where he could watch the planes taking off. As his brother had been speaking at the wedding, Nick had remembered a game they had invented together as children. They called it 'Having Trouble Breathing'. One of them would lie on a bed with a pillow on his face while the other sat on top of it. The challenge was to lie there as long as possible before crying out, 'Having Trouble Breathing.' Nick remembered the woozy feeling that would come over him and the thrill of not giving in too soon. On one occasion Nick had lain there not moving after Ed had got off, staying dead still while his brother began to scream and shake him.

Nick sat and watched the planes until he decided on one that might have been his brother's. He watched it climb into the sky and disappear. Then he started the car and drove home.

You Must Change Your Life

Laurie was standing at the kitchen window, looking into the garden – daydreaming, his wife would have said – when the first object flew over the back fence. Initially, he could not tell what it was. It appeared as a dark streak in front of his eyes. He was startled and slopped the tea he was drinking onto the tiled floor. The object landed in the middle of the lawn and he went out to have a look. It was a shoe – a brown leather brogue, the left one of the pair, perhaps a size eleven or twelve, expensive-looking but now battered. He knelt over the shoe, obscurely reluctant to touch it, as if it were some coiled animal that might react unpredictably. Then he picked it up and stood for a moment, wondering what he should do. He had a brief image of a tall, rumped man limping up to the front door to claim it, apologising for the trouble. Laurie carried the shoe round to the side of the house, placed it in a box in the garage and went back inside. By the time his wife and daughter arrived home, he had forgotten all about the incident. Even if he had not, he might not have thought it worth mentioning.

Then, two days later, there was something else. This time he did not see the object arrive. He had been out for a walk and when he came back, around lunchtime, it was there, lying in approximately the same place as the shoe – a child's teddy bear, a short trail of thread where one of its eyes had been.

Laurie looked towards the bottom of the garden, the direction from which the shoe had arrived and – he could only assume – the bear as well. Beyond the fence was a row of tall conifers and, just visible behind them, a large modern building, some kind of home or institution for the mentally ill. Laurie had

been past it many times. From the front it was an innocuous-looking place, all red brick and glass, with a car park off to one side, not unlike a school or a library. He did not know exactly who lived there or what their problems were, but he sometimes saw them – listless, agitated individuals – walking around the neighbourhood.

Laurie walked to the bottom of the garden, holding the bear under his arm.

‘Hello,’ he called out tentatively, alert to his own ridiculousness. No reply.

‘Hello,’ he said again.

That evening, as he was giving his daughter Jess her dinner, it occurred to him to tell her about the shoe and about the bear. Since he had given up his job he often felt he had too little to say to her about his day, that it was hard to account for himself. In its mystery and strangeness, this had the qualities of something that would intrigue her. He would describe himself creeping towards the fence and then calling out, embroidering the incident with little details that would make her laugh. But this would also mean sharing it with Marianne, his wife.

There were two ways the conversation might go. Marianne might see it as further evidence of how he spent his days: staring out of the window, preoccupying himself with things that were not important, waiting for something

to happen. She might even imply that it was a figment of his understimulated

imagination, that he had made more of it than it really was – and there was no denying the fact that he had been there at the window the precise moment the shoe had come over, almost as if he had conjured it up himself. Alternatively – and this was no more enticing – she might take it seriously. She would point out the danger to both her and Jess of objects being thrown into the garden without warning, and it would be hard to argue with this. She might insist that he go round to the home and investigate. Either way, it would rebound on him.

When Jess had just turned two, there had nearly been a terrible accident. Laurie was bathing her, as he did most nights, and left the room for what – he swore later – could only have been a few seconds. When he got back Jess's head was underwater and she was struggling. In the event she was shocked rather than hurt, but there was an awful row. 'You're a fool,' Marianne shouted at Laurie. 'Something distracted me,' he said later, when things had calmed down, though he could not say what.

It was also around this time that Laurie had suddenly decided to give up his job in a university. It was not the job itself – it could be boring or stressful at times but he did not especially dislike it. No, the idea had come to him, so it seemed, out of nowhere. One morning a woman on the street had handed him a gaudily printed leaflet emblazoned with the words You Must Change Your Life.

Later, he could not remember what was in the leaflet, or if he had even read it – some evangelical or cultish nonsense, no doubt – but over the next few days and

weeks the phrase kept coming back to him with the strength of an order, or a necessity.

He remembered the conversation with Marianne clearly. She had regarded him sceptically for several seconds, as if intent on discovering from his expression whether this was some kind of joke.

‘It’s hardly the time, Laurie. There’s the mortgage, childcare . . .’

She was right, of course, but Marianne was doing well in her work. As a lawyer she earned nearly twice what Laurie did. They would get by.

‘I know, I know,’ he said. ‘I just have the sense that this is something important I need to do.’

‘But what,’ said Marianne, ‘what do you need to do?’

He had a vague notion of the things he might do – anything was possible! – but this, to Laurie, seemed like missing the point. Much stronger than this, than any fixed idea of how he might spend his time, was the radical nature of the instruction, and it was only this that had caught in his mind – You Must Change Your Life – so bright and emphatic that it cast everything beyond it into shadow.

Over the next month many more objects came over the fence. There was no pattern – three things would arrive during one afternoon and then nothing for several days. There were bits of clothing – a woolly hat, a shirt, a scarf, the other

brogue – as well as a rucksack, a cushion, a cardboard box and an old paperback book. Throughout the day Laurie kept a wary eye on the garden, and each time he spotted something on the lawn, or, occasionally, caught in the branches of the conifers that hung over the fence, he went out and removed it to the box in the garage.

When he had given up work, Laurie had recognised the importance of keeping to a routine, of being purposeful – after all, it was not laziness that motivated his decision. To that end he got up early to spend time with Jess. At half past eight Marianne took her to nursery and then went on to her work. Once they had left the house Laurie read each section of the newspaper from front to back before going out for a walk. After lunch, he went out again, often for a swim. He carried around with him a notebook in which he wrote down things as they occurred to him, or drew quick and – he did not deceive himself – rather crude sketches. He drew diagrams too, complex networks of boxes and arrows that suggested how all these different thoughts and ideas might be linked together. He had it in mind that this would form the beginning of whatever it was he was going to do. It was vague, he knew, but Laurie was confident that from this structure, these good intentions, something meaningful would gradually emerge.

However, the appearance of these objects in the garden became a distraction. When he was reading or walking or writing in his book, he often found himself wondering whether anything new had arrived. He sometimes

stood at the kitchen window, in the pose he had been in when the shoe had appeared, anticipating what would come next.

Laurie asked himself what, if anything, it meant. One or two objects were not significant – a prank, someone’s passing whim, an accident even – but now he could not avoid the idea that there was some intention to it, a message, a statement, even a cry for help. He felt somehow that he was being appealed to, called upon to act. Each time something new arrived, he contemplated going round to the home, imagined himself climbing the steps to the front door and handing everything over to a member of staff, but each time he went out into the garden, picked up the object, placed it in the box in the garage and went back inside.

But the box was filling up. At some point Marianne would notice and he would have to explain what had been going on. It was awkward. It would be hard now to tell the truth and justify why he had not mentioned it before. At best, he would appear perverse, at a time when his judgement was already regarded as faulty. It had been strange and futile to conceal it in the first place and now, as a result of the subterfuge he was engaged in, the arrival of each new thing had become freighted with a budding anxiety. Still Laurie did not take the box back. He had begun, irrationally he knew, to feel that these objects were the manifestation of something indefinably volatile or malign beyond the fence.

Then, one Saturday morning when Marianne was out and he was in the garden with Jess, a black leather belt with a heavy buckle landed only a few feet from where she was playing, and Laurie knew he could not put it off any longer.

He had not imagined that he would meet the person responsible. On Monday morning, as he walked the ten minute route round to the home, he imagined that he would simply stand at the entrance and explain the situation to a member of staff, say that he did not care who had been throwing these things over the fence, only that it stopped, hand over the box and be on his way – and in this light he could not see why he had put off coming round for so long. But when Laurie stepped through the front door – it was heavy and as it opened he felt a rush of warm, slightly stale air on his face – and described it all to the young man who came out to meet him, the man nodded thoughtfully and waved him in.

He was left sitting in a reception area. There were flowers on the table and pictures on the wall, institutional like a doctor's waiting room, but somehow brighter and more cheerful than he had expected. Despite this, he felt a throb of the anxiety he had come to associate with the whole business.

'This is Jonathan,' said the man who had met him at the door. Another man had followed him into the room, but remained just inside the doorway, his face and body turned away.

'Hello, Jonathan,' said Laurie, 'I'm Laurie.'

Laurie did not recognise him. He was not one of the afflicted individuals he had seen walking around the neighbourhood, although he caught immediately the same odd air of listlessness and agitation. He was heavily built and tall, quite big enough to be the owner of the brogues, but uncomfortable in his bigness, a little stooped, unequal to his physical presence. He was wearing suit trousers that were too small for him, sandals and a T-shirt advertising Coors beer, a look that Laurie saw would, in other circumstances, have been rather comic.

Laurie put out his hand and then, when Jonathan did not move, let it drop to his side. There was a silence, and Laurie wondered whether, if he had still been working and not spending so much time in his own company, he would have known what to say or do. Perhaps he would have better handled a situation like this.

'Laurie has brought your things back. You've been throwing them into his garden.'

At this, Jonathan turned and took a step into the room. Laurie saw that he was much older than he had at first seemed. It was hard to know – his eyes and the pattern of lines on his face suggested some depth or intensity of experience rather than simply age. The way he had been standing had concealed the left side of his body but Laurie could now also see that his arm was heavily

bandaged, from the elbow to the wrist, and that he held it gingerly against his chest.

Laurie reached into the box and held up the shoes. 'Thanks for these but they're not my size.' He thought to put him at ease, to turn it all into an innocent joke between them – but Jonathan retreated to the doorway with a look of alarm.

Laurie had come in order to complain but now he felt the necessity of saying something hopeful or consoling, something to absolve Jonathan of any guilt or embarrassment he might feel, but he could not think what. He looked around the room. At the far end someone sat behind a glass screen, writing in a folder. He wanted to say, 'I'm sorry that you're here at all, I'm sorry for your problems, whatever they are,' but knew that this was useless as well as absurd. He wondered if he should ask about his arm but quickly dismissed it. He was at a loss.

There was a sudden crackle of sound and a voice came over a speaker system. It said something brief and unintelligible before there was another crackle of noise and then silence.

'My daughter,' said Laurie, wishing immediately that he had not mentioned Jess, 'my daughter plays in the garden. She might have been hurt.'

Silence again. 'You can keep the box,' he said helplessly.

‘Don’t worry,’ said the man who had let him in, ‘just leave everything here. We’ll have a word. It won’t happen again.’

Jonathan had already disappeared out of the door.

On the way home Laurie felt thoroughly unburdened, elated even. How had it gone? It was impossible to say, but at least it had been done, duty discharged. Once you faced these things, he reflected, they lost their power to affect you. He had no explanation for what had been happening but he decided now that there was no explanation – it meant nothing.

Over the next few days, no new items arrived and things had even come out, more or less, with Marianne, in a way that reflected positively on Laurie. Jess had said something to her about the belt that had been thrown into the garden. When Marianne brought it up with Laurie he explained that he had been round to the home and dealt with it.

‘Curious sort of place,’ he said. ‘You wonder what goes on there.’

Marianne raised her eyebrows. Laurie did not mention the other items and this did not seem like a significant deception.

However, a week later, as he was getting breakfast for Jess, he noticed something in the garden. It was the shoe – lying in approximately the same place

on the lawn as before. He wondered how long it had been there. The following day, as he was standing at the kitchen window, the bear came over the fence.

'It won't happen again,' the man had said. Laurie had been round to the home, he had been reasonable and yet now this. In the coming days and weeks, as the objects continued to arrive, he found himself going over the original encounter – brief and unremarkable as it had seemed to be – recalling each detail and everything that was said. It was an odd sensation but he was no longer sure if it was really as he had experienced it. There was something, something beyond the obvious, an undertow, that in his nervousness or complacency he had missed. He had misread the situation, its significance, and this was the result. The relief he had felt was entirely false.

Laurie thought often of Jonathan. He wondered what, at any given time, he was doing. He imagined him walking the corridors of the home or alone in his room, his bandaged arm held against his chest. He recalled details that he had not seemed to notice at the time – a mole on Jonathan's cheek, the porthole-like windows and thick, wired glass in all the doors. Several times when Laurie was out he spotted him, his distinctive size and way of carrying himself. On each occasion he had been about to go up to him, in the park or at a bus stop, when the person would turn and show themselves to be someone else, not even a likeness. At these times Laurie felt as if his life was perpetually shadowed by Jonathan's unknowable days.

It came to Laurie one afternoon as he sat in the park, with his notebook balanced on his knee and the hours stretching in front of him, that he was no closer now, months on, to knowing what he was doing. He had barely written in the book for several weeks, and when he had it was to briefly record where he had been and what he had done. It was clear nothing had announced itself and only a stubborn optimism had sustained the project this far. All he really had was a title – You Must Change Your Life – and even this lacked the clarity and force it had once seemed to have. The rest – the rest was just jottings, entirely trivial and self-indulgent. When he looked at his diagrams they were hard to make out, like scribbles in code or a different language altogether, with no clue as to what it was they were supposed to describe or illuminate. What on earth, he asked himself, had he imagined he was doing? He was only thankful that he had not confided it, to Marianne or anyone else.

Six weeks later, in July, Laurie returned to work. By luck his old job had come up again and they were happy to have him back. He could not deny that it was good to be working again. He took pleasure in the small things, the little routines. Very quickly, the previous eight months became hazy in his mind, as if it were in the distant past, or even a part of someone else's life that he had only been told about. Marianne began to refer it as 'Laurie's existential crisis' or 'Laurie's grey period', and her sarcasm also helped to put it at a comfortable remove. When he did think about it, it did not seem so dramatic or so strange a thing to have done,

just some kind of necessary readjustment, a chance to get things in perspective.

The objects continued to arrive from time to time but he was able to put it out of his mind. The sense of ticking dread that he had felt when he was at home had all but gone. The box was nearly full again. In time, he thought, he would return it to the home.

Every Saturday, Laurie took Jess swimming and it was on one of these trips, after he had been back working for several weeks, that he saw Jonathan again. They had changed into their things and Jess joined her class in the children's pool. Laurie climbed down into the main pool and began to swim lengths. These swims were one of the few links he felt between life now and during the 'grey period'. It was then that he had begun to swim regularly and it seemed to have perhaps been the only useful legacy of that time. It relaxed him. He liked to lose himself in the distortion of everything – the mottled light across the surface of the water, the shifting patterns of the pool markings below, the rush of noise each time his head came out of the water and sudden muting as it went in again. As he found his rhythm, the action and exertion of his body seemed to absorb everything into it, the yellowy glare of the lights, the chlorine smell, the white noise of shrieking and whistles being blown. If you got it right, Laurie thought, even in this unlikely place, you could manage a kind of meditateness, a temporary peace. Each time he approached the smaller pool he could spot Jess among the other children by raising his head higher out of the

water, the ribbon tying back her hair and the sky blue of her armbands. He had done six lengths and could do another twenty before her class had finished.

He was not sure at first that it was Jonathan. Laurie had mistaken him often enough before to doubt himself. He was part of a group that were standing in the shallow end, in a roped-off part of the pool. They made a strange sight, ten or so of them – dazed by their surroundings, apparently nervous of the water, their bodies pale and neglected. A woman in shorts and flip-flops stood above them on the edge of the pool, shouting to make herself heard over the din and demonstrating a stroke with her hands. Laurie checked for Jess, turned and pushed off for another length.

As he came back again he saw clearly that it was Jonathan. He had detached himself slightly from the group and was standing against the rope, blinking up at the lights. The water barely came up to his waist and he had wrapped his arms tightly around his body, to keep himself warm or perhaps in some other protective gesture. On one arm, the one that had been bandaged, there was a long scar, healed but still raw against his white skin. Unclothed, he seemed even larger and more out of place in his own body than when Laurie had seen him at the home. A sharp pang of pity went through him. As he swam towards the end and then turned and pushed off, Laurie was close enough to reach out and touch the scar.

Halfway through his length, it occurred to Laurie that he had not checked for Jess on his last approach. He had been preoccupied with Jonathan. As he

continued to make his way towards the far end of the pool the thought gathered urgency – he could not dismiss it. He had not checked for Jess – the endless reflex of checking, the unconscious habit of a thousand times a day had somehow let him down – and it would be nearly a minute before he would be back at the other end. By which time anything – he did not know what – might have happened to her.

The thought was absurd, he knew. Laurie concentrated on his stroke and his breathing, keeping them strong and even. He told himself that even if there were something wrong then a consistent stroke would bring him to her more quickly. He was nearly at the far end and he could get out and look or walk back to reassure himself. But this would be giving in to the anxiety – and it suddenly seemed to him that he must keep on swimming as he was, that this was imperative in what was to happen, that he must go on, as if he could control the situation by his attitude to it. He would swim strongly and evenly and calmly and when he reached the other end he would see Jess and all would be well.

It was no good. He turned underwater and pushed off the side. The opposite end of the pool was a blur in the far distance and approaching with dreamlike slowness. Laurie felt his heartbeat quicken, his breaths come shorter and shallower, and he knew he was moving more slowly, not faster, through the water. Each time he raised his head to take a breath the noise of the pool seemed to have risen in pitch and intensity. Where before the shrieking and abrupt whistles of the guards had been absorbed into his stroke, part of the

force that moved his body through the water, now there was something profoundly oppressive to them. The roar in his ears seemed like that of a gathering emergency, a calamity – or, alternatively, designed to drown out and distract from the disaster he felt certain was unfolding.

He was halfway back now, and he could see clearly the shallow end of the pool. Jonathan was not where he had been, against the ropes, as Laurie had already known he would not be. The group from the home were still there, looking vaguely up at their instructor, but he could not make out Jonathan among them. He scanned the sides of the pool but there was no sign. As he came up again for a breath, Laurie looked for Jess, although he knew there was no view of the children's pool from this distance. His arms were weary, leaden. He knew that he was not getting enough oxygen into his body. It seemed that he was barely moving forward, that his flailing stroke was futile against the weight and resistance of the water. As he looked ahead there was a horrible glare all around him, as if everything was emitting the same sharp white light.

Then he was there at the other end. Exhausted, Laurie dragged himself out of the water and on to the side. Immediately, he saw Jess, just ahead of him in the children's pool. Supported by one of the instructors, she was splashing her way from one end to the other. Her expression was fixed in a fury of concentration, her arms and legs pounding the water, and as she reached the end she grabbed for the side and shouted out in delight.

Laurie took two short steps and sat down against the wall. For several minutes he watched as Jess swam back and forth across the pool, somehow moved by the fact that she did not know he was there or watching. There was no sign of Jonathan. He had gone again. Then, when he had caught his breath, and the strength had returned to his legs and arms, Laurie stood up and called to her.

Perfect Yoga

It was my fault really, what happened with your mother. I was coming home from the office and I saw the poster taped to a lamppost on the high street. 'Tone your body and your mind! Tobias de Vere is one of the country's leading yoga practitioners. Every Monday at 6pm in the Methodist Hall.' There was a picture of him underneath, this Tobias, holding himself in the air with one hand, both legs knotted behind his head. I did something quite rash. I tore the poster off the lamppost. That's not like me, you'll know that when you're older. I don't suppose I'll ever do something that rash again.

Anyway, I folded the poster up carefully, put it in my briefcase and went on home. Your mother was breast feeding you. She wasn't in a good mood. She said, 'I've been cooped up in here all bloody day. I can't get him to hang on' – she meant you – 'and when he does hang on he won't let go until I'm sore.' We had some cheese on toast and a bit later on you went to sleep. I put on the tv quiz show, the one where your mother was always telling me to shut up answering the questions or go on it myself.

'What are you grinning about?' she said, not taking her eyes off the tv. I opened my briefcase and held up the poster of Tobias de Vere. She turned to look.

'What do you want me to do with that?' she said.

'You can meet some people' - I paused for just a second - 'do some exercise.' She shot me a cunning look then, checking to see if I was making

comments about her weight, the weight that she put on when you came along.

'I'll come home early and look after the baby,' I said.

'Oh, ta very much,' your mother said.

She turned the poster upside down and snorted. 'What's he doing with his legs? That's not natural.' She turned it back the right way.

'What do you think?' I said.

'Experience Tobias' innovative combination of physical and mental toning,' she read from the blurb at the bottom of the poster. 'Discover your centre and release your true potential. He sounds like a bloody magician.'

We went back to watching the television. I carried on calling out the answers - there was only one I got wrong and I'm certain it was a mistake on the part of the programme makers - but your mother didn't say anything. During the news you started crying and I said 'I'll go.' When I came back she was staring at the poster with a look on her face.

'It's not really me, is it?' she said.

I smiled and your mother smiled too. We both looked at the picture of Tobias de Vere.

'Ooh,' she said, 'do you think he'll be wearing those shorts?'

'He's barely wearing them now,' I said.

We hadn't had a laugh like that in ages.

Your mother was very nervous before she went out. I could tell because she changed her clothes three times, even though it was only tracksuit trousers and a t-shirt. She was ready half an hour before she had to be there.

We had a nice evening, you and I. We played with your teddy bears and then I gave you the milk that your mother pumped into a bottle before she went out. I told you a story about a magician called Tobias who put his legs behind his ears and flew through the air. You smiled and gurgled and sucked all the milk down.

After you went to sleep I watched a DIY show - I made a mental note of a couple of useful tips for wallpaper stripping - and by the time your mother came in I'd almost forgotten she'd gone out in the first place.

'Bloody hell,' she said. Her face was pink and her fringe was matted to her forehead.

'What was it like,' I said.

'Bloody hysterical,' she said. 'I couldn't stop farting. All that stretching just kept pushing the air out of me, like I was a great big balloon.'

'What about Tobias?' I said, making her a cup of tea.

‘He’s hysterical,’ your mother sniggered. ‘He’s about 20 years older than he is on the poster. He’s got a pot belly and he’s deaf in one ear so his voice sounds funny. He kept saying we should relax our anuses onto the floor.’

‘What about the shorts?’ I said. ‘Was he wearing the shorts?’

‘Was he ever,’ your mother said. ‘It didn’t leave much to the imagination.’

‘What did he make you do?’ I said.

Your mother put down her cup of tea. She dragged the glass coffee table to the other side of the room. ‘Lie down on the floor,’ she said.

I lay down between the sofa and the tv. ‘Roll your legs over your head. Put your hands under your hips. Then put your legs in the air and straighten them. That’s it,’ she said. I was upside down, looking towards the skirting board. It was in need of a lick of paint.

‘What’s the point of this?’ I said.

‘It’s called a shoulder stand. It’s good for your legs or your back or something. Tobias comes round and he moves and pushes you about. He’s very uninhibited. He touched my arse,’ she said, sniggering again.

‘I’ll bloody have him,’ I said, twisting to look at your mother’s upside down face.

I don't know why but all this made me feel rather randy for your mother and once I was the right way up again we ended up doing it right there on the carpet, between the sofa and the DIY programme that was still on and you sleeping like an angel in the next room. That was something we hadn't been doing much of since you came along, I don't mind admitting.

Afterwards it was odd to be in our own living room without any clothes on. My knees were chafed red from friction with the carpet. Your mother went to her bag and got out a pack of cigarettes.

'Where did you get them?' I said. She'd given up smoking when we found out that you were on the way.

'I bought them on the way home,' she said.

We were silent for a minute. I put my pants on. I said, 'Are you going to go again?'

'I don't know,' your mother said. She took a drag on the cigarette. There weren't any ashtrays so she tapped the ash into her empty tea cup. 'Tobias said I had perfect yoga.'

'Christ,' I said. 'What does that mean?'

Your mother let out a great cackle. 'How the bloody hell should I know?' she said.

Well, perfect yoga or not, your mother was certainly a more cheerful woman thanks to those classes, she'd been so miserable since you'd come along. She went once a week and every Monday night when she got back I'd have a cup of tea waiting and she'd tell a story about something Tobias de Vere had said or done. She did a funny impression of him and his funny deaf person's voice which even made you laugh in your own way. Our sex life improved too, temporarily I grant you, and maybe I have Tobias to thank for that. We got in the habit of doing it on the living room carpet on Monday nights like the first time. One Monday, a few weeks after the first class I took off my trousers, pulled my pants up as high as they would go, and stood in front of your mother.

'Guess who I am?' I said, copying the way she did his voice.

'Ooh, don't. That's gross,' she said, giggling.

But we did it anyway and a lot of times after that, with me saying things like 'let's see about giving you some inner length' or 'it's time for you to be centered' or 'relax your anus onto the floor.'

Tobias was like a fourth person in our house. We made jokes and talked about him all the time. We said it would be a miracle if the first word you ever spoke was Mum or Dad and not Tobias. 'What would Tobias think?' one of us would say every time we had to make a decision about something, like trimming the conifers at the bottom of the garden or retiling the bathroom. Your mother carried on smoking, which was the one thing I wasn't too happy about, what with

you around and everything, but given all the other improvements I didn't make a thing out of it.

One Monday night, a couple of months after she started the classes, we were sitting on the sofa without our clothes on. Your mother was having a cigarette and I was picking a scab on my knee.

'You know what?' I said.

'What?' she said.

'I'm dying to see this Tobias for myself.'

'What?' she said, blowing out smoke.

'I might come to the class next week.'

Now, I thought your mother would be happy that I was going to come along to Tobias de Vere's yoga class with her, but she wasn't, she wasn't happy at all. She said I was only coming because I couldn't bear for her to have something she enjoyed that I wasn't part of. And anyway what would we do with him, she said, meaning you. After a while she calmed down and said that she liked being able to tell me about the class and if I came along she wouldn't be able to do that would she? I said it wasn't just about Tobias, it would be nice to do something together, and anyway, since I'd finished decorating the bathroom, I could do with the exercise. She looked at me. 'Perhaps,' she said.

‘We’ll get someone to look after him,’ I said, ‘don’t worry, I’ll sort it all out.’

The following Monday your mother pumped out some milk for the babysitter to give you later. It was the first time we’d ever left you alone with someone. When we got to the hall it was already quite full and we had to find a space at the back. There were about twenty people lying down with their arms straight by their sides, their palms facing upwards and their eyes closed. ‘This looks easy,’ I whispered to your mother, but she didn’t look at me or say anything. She unrolled her mat and lay down on the floor like everyone else. I looked around for a minute and saw a pile of mats in a corner. I rolled one out and lay down on it too.

We were like that for a few minutes. All I could hear was the clock ticking and I was beginning to think Tobias de Vere was on to a good thing, having people pay good money to come and do nothing at all, when a man with tattoos all over his body and long hair tied up in a funny kind of pony tail on the top of his head stood up at the front of the hall. He was very thin but very muscly, except for his belly which bulged out the way your mother’s did when she was about four months pregnant with you. His legs were like knotted pieces of rope and he looked anywhere between thirty and fifty years old. Who’s this joker I thought, and then I realised it was him, it was Tobias de Vere.

Tobias got us to stand in all kinds of different positions with names like the warrior, the tree and the pigeon, twisting our bodies and arms and legs

around and then not allowing us to move whilst he walked around checking on us. All the time he talked very slowly and in a strange way about things like consciousness and the breath and flows of energy. I kept having to look around at other people to see if I was putting my feet in the right place and leaning in the right direction. After a while he told us to lie down on our mats and relax.

‘Barbara,’ said Tobias , which is your mother’s name, ‘would you come and demonstrate the dog pose for us.’ She got up, went down to the front of the hall, and lay face down on Tobias ’s mat with her legs tucked under her belly and her arms out in front. Then, without Tobias having to say anything else she began to straighten her legs and push her bottom up into the air until her body was like a pointed arch over the floor. It was an impressive thing and quite strange to see your wife, I mean my wife, your mother, do something so well and easily and confidently that you never knew she could do. Everyone else in the room was watching her too. ‘That’s my wife,’ I kept saying over and over in my head. Tobias was standing to one side of her. ‘You see how the legs form a perfect right angle with the pelvis,’ he said, tracing his finger along the line of her hips and then down her thighs and her legs to her ankles. ‘The soles of the feet are planted firmly on the mat, grounding the whole body.’ Her tracksuit trousers had rucked up and you could see her bare calves, just the same shape as your dear little ones.

Tobias told us all to try the dog pose for ourselves. I lay face down on the floor with my legs under me and then copied what I’d seen your mother do. I

don't suppose I looked as good as her but I don't think it was bad either. After a couple of minutes my arms began to ache and I lay back down on the floor.

A second later Tobias was standing over me. 'Come on, fellah. Again. Let's see how open you can be.' I got back into the position and Tobias stood directly behind me, his legs either side of mine. He put his hands on the top of my thighs and pulled them up into the air. 'Come on,' he said, 'soften those muscles.' It was very tiring but I kept trying, for your mother, and because everyone else in the hall had finished and were watching. Everything ached. Looking back through my legs I could see a tattoo of a snake that wound round Tobias's ankle. Its wide open mouth was a couple of feet from my nose. It was rather a remarkable position to find yourself in and I was already looking forward to getting home and having a good laugh about it with your mother. I thought of you too and wondered what you would have made of it, all these strangers in the Methodist Hall watching whilst Tobias de Vere stood behind me and pulled my bottom up towards his groin. I thought, that's a funny story I'll tell you when you're older, quite a bit older.

'No,' I shouted. 'Stop that.'

The hall went very quiet. Tobias let go of my thighs and I fell to the floor.

'Ok, fellah' he said after a few seconds, 'best not to push it on your first time.'

When we got home the baby sitter told us you had slept through the whole evening and hadn't been any trouble at all. We sat on the sofa, neither of us knowing really what to say. Maybe we were both thinking about how usually on Monday nights after your mother got home from her class we did it right there on the carpet we were staring at now. Your mother lit a cigarette.

'Well, I'm glad I've seen him,' I said. 'He's quite something.'

Your mother didn't say anything. I looked up at the ceiling. The paint was flaking off in the corners.

'It's not really me, is it?' I said after a while.

Your mother took a drag on her cigarette. She smiled and I smiled too.

'Do you fancy a cup of tea?' I said.

So I decided that yoga and Tobias de Vere weren't for me and I think your mother was happy with that. Instead I got started on the living room which was long overdue for redecoration, choosing a jasmine finish instead of the magnolia I had applied 18 months earlier. It was slow progress. I could only paint and use the roller with my left hand because my right thumb had been broken when I fell over in Tobias's class. I had to wear a funny little cast that kept it sticking straight out so that the bone would mend. It was noticeable that we weren't doing it so much on the living room carpet after that. The scabs on my knees

healed right up. But these things come and go, it's the way of the world, you'll know that when you're older.

Your mother carried on going to the yoga classes. She even started doing it at home, her 'practice' she called it. Sometimes she did it in front of a grainy video made by Tobias at his retreat on a Spanish island. God knows what the neighbours would have said if they could have seen it, me half way up a step ladder painting the walls, her sitting with her legs crossed over each other and chanting in some strange language that for all I know had been invented by Tobias de Vere. You liked your mother's chanting, it made you laugh.

Your mother also pinned a map of India on the kitchen wall and spent a lot of time reading a large book with a bright red and gold cover. She said it was 'the yoga sutras.'

'Oh, the sutras,' I said, doing an impression of your mother doing an impression of Tobias .

She didn't laugh. She said, 'He is deaf you know.'

We didn't talk about Tobias so much anymore. When you first started crawling I said, 'give it a few months and we'll have him doing shoulder stands,' but your mother looked at me as if she didn't get the joke at all. On another occasion she was changing your nappy on the kitchen table whilst her cigarette was burning in an ashtray. I was rolling paint onto the ceiling but I got down

from the ladder and moved the cigarette to the window sill so that the smoke could go out the window. Your mother stopped changing you.

‘Are you my judge?’ she said.

‘I don’t know,’ I said.

‘Well then.’

I suppose I hadn’t read the right books to know how to have a conversation like that so I just climbed back up the step-ladder and carried on painting the ceiling.

One Monday night when your mother came back from her class I was crouching down on the floor and using a mini roller to paint the skirting board. She was acting rather strange and friendly and even complimented the job I was doing with the redecoration. She went in to see you and then asked if I wanted a cup of tea, even though it was me who usually made it. I looked at the clock and saw that she was back about 15 minutes later than usual. I’d been so involved with the painting – it’s very satisfying when its going on just right – that I hadn’t noticed. Your mother lit a cigarette to have with her tea and then she told me.

‘Tobias asked me to stay behind after class,’ she said, inhaling. ‘I felt like a naughty bloody schoolgirl.’

'And?' I said, putting the mini roller in down in the paint tray so that I could pick up the cup of tea with my good hand.

'It was flippin' weird,' she said. 'He asked me if I used to be dancer. He said it was my flexibility that made him wonder.' She started to laugh. 'I said I was. I don't know why, it just bloody came out. I said I used to be a ballet dancer. It was hilarious.'

When we had stopped laughing, your mother and me, we had a sip of tea and she carried on.

'He said he had a sense of me.'

'He had a what?' I said.

'It was weird. He said it was like a colour.'

'What bloody colour?' I said.

'He said there was something between us but he didn't know what it was.'

'I knew it,' I said. 'I knew it. He bloody fancies you. Tobias de Vere's a pervert.'

'He said it might be sexual.' Your mother was laughing so much she had to put down her cup of tea. She was shaking. 'Imagine what it'd be like doing it with him. He'd always be moving you around and adjusting you and talking the whole time.' We were laughing for quite a long time after that, I couldn't stop,

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and eventually you woke up and probably wondered what the big joke was. I hadn't realised how much I'd missed talking about Tobias de Vere the way we used to, your mother had been so stern and serious just lately. I don't mind saying I felt a little randy, and maybe your mother did too, but you were awake now, and anyway the floor was covered in sheets to stop paint getting on the carpet so I'm sorry to say it wasn't really practical.

The next Sunday it was your birthday, your very first, and I suggested we had a little party to celebrate. Your mother thought it was a nice idea and she made a sponge cake with one candle and your name written on it in icing. I folded up the sheets that were covering the carpet, tidied up the tins of paint and the brushes and put the step ladder outside. I hung some streamers and balloons from the ceiling. We put party hats on - I had made a little one for you - and sang songs. We all had a good time, especially you who were smiling and making noises all the way through, as if you knew exactly what the occasion was. I held you up to see if you could blow out the candle on the cake but in the end your mother did it for you.

Later on you got tired and fell asleep on the sofa. Your mother and I went into the garden and I even smoked one of her cigarettes. It felt like a nice thing to be doing, standing there with your mother and both of us having a cigarette, even though I only managed half of it because it was making me

nauseous. I looked around the garden and then up at the house and it seemed like a good time to say what had been on my mind.

‘Now the living room is nearly finished,’ I said, ‘I was thinking about the next thing.’ Your mother turned to look at me. She was still smoking her cigarette. ‘I was thinking we could extend the house out into the garden. Make some extra space, perhaps a whole new room. That way we’ll be ready when another little one comes along. Of course we’d have to re-lay the patio.’

It was hard to understand your mother’s reaction. I saw the end of her cigarette flare brightly as she inhaled and her face glowed orange in the light. Then she dropped it, ground it into the lawn and went back inside. She wouldn’t talk or even look at me for the rest of the evening. I suppose she was anxious about all the expense and disruption that an extension would involve, and I could see her point, it would be like the living room only ten times worse. ‘You’ll be able to do your yoga in there,’ I said, trying to make things better.

She went to bed early but I could tell she was still awake when I got in an hour or so later. ‘It was only an idea,’ I whispered. ‘We’ll manage with the space we’ve got.’ She got out of bed and I heard her going downstairs. It was clear this wasn’t going to be the night that we made your little brother or sister, which if I’m honest had probably been at the back of my mind when I had suggested your birthday party in the first place.

The next day, Monday, I was very distracted at work. I looked forward all day to getting home and straightening things out with your mother. But when I got there she went straight out in her yoga outfit, not saying a word to me. I made a bacon sandwich and chatted to you about my day. Later on it turned out your mother had forgotten to pump out any milk for you.

After dinner I laid the dust sheets out on the carpet and got the step ladder in from the garden. I finished the second coat on the ceiling, the skirting board and the doors and immediately I could see it was going to make all the difference to the finish. That was tiring so afterwards I made a cup of tea and went into the garden and smoked one of your mother's cigarettes. It made me feel sick but I smoked it anyway. I looked at my watch. Then I rang the speaking clock to check that it was telling the right time. I folded up the sheets and put them away. I put the step ladder and the paint cans in the garden shed. I smoked another one of your mother's cigarettes. Then you woke up and started crying because you were hungry.

The lights were blazing in the windows of the Methodist Hall. It was a scruffy building, the brickwork needed re-pointing and the window frames were rotted. It was hard work pushing your pram up the gravel driveway with only one good hand. You were still crying, you didn't know what was happening. We must have made quite an odd sight, you and I, but thankfully there was no one around to see.

I butted the door open with the wheels of your pram and there it was. I suppose I had already known, but I still couldn't believe it. It was so ridiculous it was funny. I might even have laughed. There it was, your mother lying on her yoga mat in the middle of the Methodist Hall kissing and grappling with Tobias bloody De Vere, one of his hands squeezing her bare breast and the other down the front of her tracksuit.

Well, they'd been caught red handed and there wasn't much they could say. Your mother looked very surprised to see you there. Tobias tried to act all friendly, as if it were perfectly normal to be kissing another man's wife, while wearing a pair of shorts that were so tight and small he might as well not have been wearing them at all. He walked forward with his hand out and said something but there was a kind of roaring noise in my ears that was drowning everything out. That's when I grabbed the half full pot of jasmine paint from the bottom of your pram, pulled the lid off and let Tobias have it. It wasn't a bad shot, considering the circumstances. He stood there covered from head to toe, the paint dripping from his ridiculous bloody pony tail. He was covered in the stuff. Apparently, straight after that I threw your empty bottle at your mother and called her something I shouldn't have, especially not in front of you. I don't remember that part but I don't see why your mother would lie about it.

That's about it really. Soon you'll wake up from your little afternoon sleep. I'll try and give you your milk but you won't like it because it doesn't taste the same as your mother's. You'll start to cry and you won't stop.

Perhaps when you're older you'll think your father was a damn fool not to see it coming all along, but I didn't. I am sorry you had to see it though, your mother messing around with Tobias de Vere. I don't think she's forgiven me for that but what could I do, I could hardly leave you at home. I just hope it doesn't scar you for life, the way people say these things do.

The minister of the Methodist Hall was very sympathetic. We agreed that I'd clean up the paint that had been spilt on the floor and he wouldn't press charges for criminal damage, given the exceptional circumstances. In the event I was even able to give him a few tips about the redecoration of the building that he said were very helpful. He asked how things were between me and your mother and I explained that she was staying with a friend whilst she thought about everything that had happened. According to the minister Tobias had stopped doing yoga at the hall. It had turned out that your mother wasn't the only one who he had asked to stay behind after class. The minister said, 'I know the type. They've been around as long as Creation and they'll get their comeuppance in the end.' He showed me to the door and we stood on the steps of the hall in the bright sunshine. 'No harm done,' he said. 'These things happen.' We shook hands and I agreed with him. I expect you will too, when you're older.

The Harrowing Inroads of Heathen Men

Towards the end of the short flight back from Malmo to London, when the seat belt sign had already been switched on, the pilot announced that there was a mechanical fault with the plane and passengers should prepare themselves for an emergency landing. His tone was calm, matter of fact, which Nancy did not think was at all a good sign.

Nancy had been in Malmo for three days at a meeting of academics who specialised in the oral sagas of pre-Christian Northern Europe. She herself had recently completed a PhD on Barbeld the Younger, one of the lesser known Danish bards, and had a vague hope that Malmo might lead to some useful connections, a chance to publish her thesis perhaps, or some more teaching work. But it had not worked out that way. She had given her paper early on the first morning to an audience of ten or twelve blank faced delegates. She had worked hard to prepare it, a perky, provocative, feminist take on her main area of work – Marfnkels Saga, Barbeld's epic retelling of the Viking invasion of England - but as she spoke it seemed only glib, facile and, she realised abruptly, came to precisely the wrong conclusion. There were no questions and the session ended early but during the coffee break that followed a very overweight woman in a neck brace approached Nancy and asked her where she had got her shoes. She introduced herself as Gloria van Kippen from Rotterdam and from then on she sought Nancy out every lunch time and between every session, but her persistent, garrulous presence only made Nancy feel more lonely.

Malmö itself, or what she saw of it, was also dismal: austere, grey, grimly industrial, savagely cold. Despite – or perhaps because of – its lack of obvious virtues, it seemed to be in the grip of an orgy of civic self promotion. Everywhere Nancy looked, every wall, every sign or poster or leaflet, the side of every bus, exhorted her to move to, study at, invest in or simply admire the redeveloped docks, the expanding university, the rebranded historic city centre. There was another thing she noticed too often for it to be a coincidence. The locals – the Malmöans - would not cross a road until the pedestrian crossing gave explicit permission. Crowds of them huddled on the pavement, not a car in sight in either direction, for minutes at a time, waiting for the green man. The more she saw it, the more it frustrated her - this apparent passivity, this obedience. Perhaps it was the mood she was in, but it almost made her want to shout out or even hit someone, to start a fight.

The only highlight of the trip was on the third afternoon when, her heart lightened by the thought that it was nearly over and keen to escape Gloria for a few hours, Nancy skipped the final plenary session and caught the bus from the university down to the waterfront where the guidebook advised her there was the city's oldest and best sauna. Nancy had never been in a sauna before and was surprised at how unselfconscious she felt to be naked and reclining in front of strangers. Sitting in the steam rooms, with a panoramic view of the Öresund Strait, she watched as one by one her fellow bathers stepped outside without their towels, walked the length of a narrow wooden jetty and then climbed down

a ladder into the almost black water. When, after an hour or so, she emerged onto the jetty herself the cold was breathtaking, but she did not mind it.

The sea was vast, rolling and moody and the sky overcast with grey clouds. Miles out, the bridge to Copenhagen faded into the murk and what might have felt oppressive instead seemed suddenly awesome, majestic. Her imagination leapt and she saw how it had all looked this way back to the time of the sagas and beyond, the same vision Barbeld himself might have seen. For a second, far out on the water, there were the shadowy outlines of long boats pushing through the gloom, setting out on raiding parties, or returning home after months at sea, the dull clank of oars, the disembodied voices of men. It was a moment she felt could legitimately be described as a minor epiphany, a crumb of the sublime. Encouraged, she walked to the end of the jetty and climbed down quickly into the water.

After the pilot's announcement, it all happened very quickly. Oxygen masks fell limply from the units above. The air stewards and stewardesses had disappeared and, of course, Nancy had not paid attention to the safety demonstration since the first time she had flown, on a school trip twenty-five years before. She strapped the mask over her face as best she could and then put on the lifejacket. Then she rolled herself forward into a kind of foetal crouch, the back of her head pressed against the seat in front, which she imagined might be the right thing to do. The plane had begun to descend sharply. No one was screaming and the

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cabin was eerily quiet except for a high keening sound, as if of a machine under great stress.

Nancy tried to think of her husband, her parents and friends but the images would not form. Instead, it was a picture of Ger Gersson, gigantic Icelander, keynote speaker at the conference and the nearest her field had to a celebrity academic, which floated into her mind. Striding about the conference platform delivering his speech, raised up there above the entirety of the delegates, amplified, with his wild beard and pure physical immensity, he had seemed like some hero or even god from the sagas themselves. Every few minutes, as he concluded a particular argument, he held out his hands, palms upward in supplication and asked, 'Is it enough?' Then he paused and stood smoothing out his beard with both hands, whilst his question hung in the air and the audience waited for him to go on. Sometimes he asked the question loudly, bellowed it out, sometimes goading, sometimes cajoling, and then again sometimes quietly, an almost erotically charged whisper. 'Is it enough?' The end of the speech was received ecstatically and as the other delegates fell into a kind of post coital daze, Nancy had wondered what to make of it. She could not now remember the substance of the speech – nor, she suspected, would the rest of the audience - but she had been left with the echo of its power, a kind of wake up call, a call to arms - and its mantra. 'Is it enough?' she wondered.

The feeling of someone else's fingers snaking into her right hand brought Nancy back to the present. They belonged to the man in the seat next to her but

when she turned her bent neck towards him he was looking straight ahead, his face taut and expressionless. She allowed the hand to grip her own. The angle of descent had become even more acute and the plane had begun to creak in an alarming way, as if one of the wings might be abruptly torn off or the whole cabin snapped in half. 'I touched my daughter,' the man said steadily, without turning his head, 'forgive me.' There was a shearing sound of metal against metal somewhere in the depths of the plane. 'Forgive me,' the man said again. 'I forgive you,' Nancy mumbled through her mask.

Then it was over. There was a screeching of tires, the smell of burning, two violent bumps which caused Nancy to bang her head hard on the seat in front twice, and the plane came to a shuddering halt. A weak cheer went up from the passengers, as if they felt this was expected of them. The man next to her had let go of her hand and was already hurrying down the aisle to the emergency exit.

They had landed on a small and neglected looking runway, the type of place used by secret services or drug runners, Nancy thought, somewhere off the map. There was grass growing up through cracks in the tarmac and over to one side were a few military style huts. Nancy had left the plane, like everyone else, via the inflatable slide, holding onto her skirt so that it did not ride up around her thighs, but now she found herself standing a little away from the rest of the group. The stewards and stewardesses had reappeared and were buzzing around, checking names off a list. Nancy could feel a small bump and a cut on

her forehead from where she had banged the seat in front and one ankle was a little twisted, but otherwise she seemed ok. She felt vaguely that she should report to the stewardesses, or some other officialdom, but she was in a hurry and this could be done later, over the phone. She began to walk away and when nobody called her back, she kept going. Just beyond the huts was a train station where she bought a ticket to London, arriving back in town soon after the time she had originally planned.

Nancy went straight to work. She had booked an early flight in order to be back for a 2 o'clock meeting of the Plagiarism Compliance Sub Committee, of which she was the Chair. Toby Zammit was in her office when she got there, as he always was. Zammit's status was unclear to Nancy. He had been a member of the department for as long as anyone could remember but a few years before he had left his radio mic on whilst taking a toilet break between delivering two lectures on Chaucer. Two hundred plus students had heard the sound of Zammit urinating, a little small talk with a colleague at the sinks and then an appreciation of a girl sitting in the front row of the lecture with some choice words from the Middle English vernacular. Since then Zammit had been considered a liability, was given spurious administrative tasks to do and was kept away from students. He had been moved from office to office according to the needs of other staff, with gradually reducing space and natural light, until he and Nancy, herself the most junior and most temporary member of the department, were installed

together. Zammit did not seem to particularly object to this state of affairs. He arrived punctually at nine every day, despite his lack of commitments, and spent his time chuckling over things he found on the internet and jamming up Nancy's email inbox with feeble jokes and videos of animals doing surprising things.

Nancy switched on her computer and began to check the news for reports of the plane's emergency landing. There was nothing so she tried various google searches but again, nothing. 'Too soon...' she muttered to herself.

'What's that?' Zammit said.

Nancy considered for a second whether she should describe what had happened, but she had a policy of not encouraging conversation with Zammit, and anyway, she was late for her meeting.

'Come and look at this,' Zammit said. 'It's hysterical.'

'I won't, thanks,' said Nancy, and went out.

At the end of her PhD Nancy had been appointed to the department on a one year, part-time contract and in an effort to become indispensable had loaded herself down with administrative responsibilities that none of the more established staff would go near. She had flogged herself nearly to death volunteering for every little thing, teaching extra classes when colleagues were away, organising open days for prospective students and, in what she felt was a rather black irony, running careers advice workshops for final year students about to go out into the world. Apparently, none of this had worked – her

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contract was due to expire in a month and so far there had been no talk of an extension. On top of this, the workload had meant she was unable to make any progress with her research and it seemed quite possible that she was even less employable than she had been a year before.

The Plagiarism Compliance Sub-Committee was one of these responsibilities. 'Plagiarism,' the head of department, Jed Wolff, told her after she was the only person to volunteer to head the committee, 'is a *cancer* within modern education and academia. The College is determined to get on top of it.' The mere mention of the subject, Nancy had noticed, made the entire department intensely nervous, for reasons she could only guess at, and prone to grandiose statements of this kind. Still, Nancy believed that it was a big, and growing problem, and that this would be a delicate role that required diplomacy and good judgement, virtues which, whatever her other qualities or flaws, she – at least at one time - possessed a good deal of. In addition, she was a conscientious person and still just about believed that this attitude would bring its rewards in the long term.

In addition to the formation of the committee, the university had spent several hundred thousand pounds on plagiarism detection software. This turned out to be so sensitive – or so riddled with bugs, no one seemed certain - that 95% of the material submitted came up as problematic. The work load of the committee exploded but after several gruellingly long meetings where Nancy led her colleagues in considering the merits of each case, it was discretely suggested

to her, again by Jed Wolff, that this was rather more cancer than the College could live with – or at least acknowledge. Instead, only the 5% that did not register at all on the system should be considered. Because of its extreme sensitivity, he said, ‘any work that doesn’t show up on the software is, *ipso facto*, deeply suspect. The student has clearly found a way of gaming the system.’ As there was no evidence or way of proving this to be true, these cases were then immediately dismissed.

‘Nancy!’ said Joy Hope, as Nancy entered the meeting room. Nancy and Joy co-organised a course on the Contemporary Literature of the Australian Diaspora. Joy had been married to two members of the department but was now, as she often told Nancy, ‘playing the field.’ She was Deputy Chair of the Plagiarism Compliance Sub Committee and – Nancy feared – saw herself as something of a mentor to her younger colleague.

‘It seems so long ago,’ Joy began to croon, in the manner of a middle aged jazz singer, ‘None of us were strong/ Nancy wore green stockings/ And she slept with everyone...’

‘Hi Joy,’ said Nancy.

‘How was Norway? Good?’

‘Sweden.’

‘Right, Sweden. How was Sweden?’

‘Well, Sweden was ok,’ Nancy began, ‘but on the flight back...’

‘I’ve always fancied Norway,’ said Joy wistfully. ‘A cruise around the fjords. Great word, fjord. I hear it’s spectacular. Maybe when I retire... If they ever let us fucking retire, right!’ Joy laughed brutally and did a little drum roll on the table with her forefingers.

The rest of the committee had come in. ‘Let’s get this shit underway,’ said Joy.

Nancy shuffled her papers and called the meeting to order. She noted several apologies from staff who could not attend, asked for comments on the minutes of the previous meeting - which she had taken - and then moved on to the agenda. She could hear herself speaking but quite quickly she was thinking of something else. This ability to think and act along parallel but unrelated lines was something she had acquired quite recently. It was impressive in its way, she thought, probably a useful professional or life skill, the sort of thing that Presidents, CEOs or other super high achievers might be gifted with. Perhaps - but to Nancy it also seemed suggestive of a kind of psychic fracturing or alienation. It was starting to happen in lectures and seminars. She was talking, answering questions, engaging with students but the entire time her mind was busy with something else, what she was having for dinner that night or whether she might be able to afford a foreign holiday later in the year. Students seemed to sense this and several times she had nearly lost control of the class.

Altogether, it seemed like a slippery slope, a bad road, one which would likely

lead to the chronic vagueness and distracted, eccentric behaviour she saw all around her.

On this occasion Nancy was thinking about how she came to be there at all, what vastly complicated and unpredictable alignment of opportunities, necessities, delusions, whims, recklessness, inertia, cowardice, good and bad luck - the whole human edifice, in fact - had resolved themselves into this Monday afternoon meeting of the Plagiarism Compliance Sub Committee. With respect to her PhD and current position, she had had no special interest in or knowledge of the sagas. She was finishing her masters at the College, itself undertaken because she had been drifting through menial office work for more than a decade and felt that she had to do something, when a secretive Greenland oil billionaire endowed the department with a number of doctoral scholarships as a tax write off, choosing a field which he had been advised was in no danger of attracting any wider attention. Nancy understood that a niche was crucial in academia and, as it turned out, Barbeld's sagas weren't bad – blood soaked and operatically over the top. But she had difficulty, particularly after more than four years, maintaining the belief that he or they were in any way important – and part of her job, the job she had given herself, it seemed, was to insist that they were.

'Nancy!'

It was Joy. She was snapping her fingers in Nancy's face. 'Earth to Nancy!

Anybody there?'

Nancy looked around the table at her colleagues. Everyone was watching her, apparently waiting for her to speak.

'Thought we'd lost you,' said Joy. 'FYI, your head is bleeding.'

Nancy put her hand to her forehead and felt the bump there. It did hurt a little, a dull but determined throb. When she took her finger away there was a small smear of blood on it.

'Well... I was... I was in a...'

The thread of the meeting suddenly, gratefully, came back to her.

'And that, I'm afraid, is beyond the jurisdiction of this committee and I will refer it back to College level.'

A murmur of approval went around the table and everyone began to gather up their papers.

'You're learning, sister!' said Joy in a stage whisper.

'See you tonight, right?' she went on as they left the room. 'I'll be debuting my new man. He has a prosthetic leg but don't draw any conclusions from that. He's the most sensitive lover I've ever had. I suppose it's the rest of the body compensating – you know, like a blind man with an exquisite sense of smell. I won't appal you with the details. Suffice to say, it's intense!'

Back in her office, Nancy again checked the web for news of her plane.

There was nothing. Did this sort of thing not constitute news these days, she

wondered. She was sure she saw similar incidents reported all the time – emergency landing, skill and heroism of the pilot, claims of terrorist involvement unsubstantiated etc etc. She looked up the number and phoned the airline. She described what had happened and explained that she had had to leave the scene before anyone took her name.

‘Nope,’ said the man on the other end of the line, ‘I don’t have anything for you on that... this was today you say?’ Nancy repeated all the details and then there was a long pause during which she did not know whether she was waiting for him to go on, or if he was waiting for her. ‘I don’t want anyone to think I am missing,’ she said finally. ‘I tell you what,’ the man said brightly, ‘I’ll make a note of your name and if anything comes up, I’ll pass it on to the right people. Does that sound good?’

After she had hung up, Nancy looked over at Zammit but he was absorbed in his computer screen and didn’t seem to have been listening. There was a mirror on the back of the door and before going out she inspected her face. The cut wasn’t much, barely more than a graze, but the lump underneath it had begun to bruise, and her head was definitely throbbing.

Three hours later, Nancy was in the car with her husband on the way to Joy’s party. She had been home, unpacked her bag from the trip and then fallen

asleep on the bed. When she woke up, she had a shower and got ready. Her head felt a little better.

Nancy picked her husband up from the station. He was smoking, a habit he had given up at least five years before. She caught a whiff of alcohol, too. There seemed to be some kind of atmosphere between them - Nancy tried to remember if there had been an argument before they left – and at first they drove in silence.

‘So...’ Nancy began. ‘My plane nearly crashed on the way home. Look, I got this.’ She pointed to her head. ‘But I’m ok.’

‘Nancy.’ Her husband had turned to her, a needy, tragic look on his face. ‘Nancy, this isn’t easy, but I’ve been wanting to talk to you.’ He lit another cigarette from the old one but carried on holding both, one in each hand. ‘I’m having a nervous breakdown. Well, maybe I’m not having one right now, but I’m pretty sure I’m about to have one. That’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot – is thinking you are having one the same as actually having one? How do you know when you are actually in it? There must be some kind of officially recognised scale for this sort of thing – where you get points for different symptoms...’ He stared out at the road ahead, apparently considering this further. Nancy looked at him in profile, the chinlessness she had never quite reconciled herself to. He turned back to her. ‘Regardless, I’m not in good shape, Nancy. Not good at all. I know you’ll be thinking this is all very sudden but it isn’t. It isn’t at all. I cry all the time, perhaps you’ve noticed? Just about

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anything sets me off. Someone'll say something and I'm gone. I'm terribly raw, I suppose. And – well, I've been thinking about it and what I think I need is to go away for a while, not for too long. I haven't thought about where, somewhere with mountains maybe, or perhaps rivers – just to get my head together. I've handed my notice in at work.' He paused. 'I'm not good but I'm coming to this as favour to you.'

'To what?'

'The party.'

'Oh.'

Nancy was not particularly looking forward to the party either, a departmental end of term do hosted by Joy at her flat in the East End. She was tired from the trip away and was teaching all the following day, but everyone would be there and it seemed good PR for her to go and be among her colleagues. Her husband seemed to have nothing more to say, and was back staring out of the window so Nancy switched on the radio. It was the news. The third item was about a plane that had gone down in Burkina Faso, killing everyone on board.

Joy met them at the door.

‘Nancy-Nancy Bo-Bancy Banana-Fana-Fo-Fancy Fee-Fi-Mo-Mancy Nancy! That’s it!’ She shook Nancy’s husband’s hand. ‘And John! John-John Bo-Bon...’ A young, very serious looking man standing next to Joy held up his hand, apparently to silence her. ‘Ah, well – you get the idea,’ said Joy. ‘Guys, this is Mario, my latest. He’s a veterinarian.’

Mario nodded and then turned and walked off through a doorway. Nancy watched him go. ‘You would never know,’ she said.

‘What’s that Nance?’

‘About the leg.’

‘Ah, no, a misunderstanding. That is not Ray. That is Mario. Ray, I’m afraid, is no more. I finished with him earlier this evening. He did not take it as well as I hoped. Voices were raised, items were smashed. It vindicated my decision though. He had become rather clingy. There was a lot of baggage, as it were, associated with the leg. He used to take it off before love making and lie it in a special case. He was very particular about that and too often it led to the moment being lost. I’ve had Mario lined up for a while though – a long term flirtation, though we have now, you might say, escalated things. Enough! There’s food and drink in the kitchen and the hard drugs will come out later! Now go, mingle! Mingle!’

Someone caught Nancy’s arm and steered her into the kitchen.

‘Nancy. What a relief. I thought you had abandoned me to these ghouls.’

It was Nate Snyder, Nancy’s only real friend and ally in the department. Nate, a New Yorker, had started on the same day as Nancy, but on a permanent, full-time, contract. They had gone to lunch together in the canteen then and almost every day since, sitting apart from the gaggle of their other colleagues across the room. Nate had applied for the job on a whim, describing himself in his application and interview as ‘a Balkan specialist’, because he thought it sounded ‘sufficiently vague and edgy.’ Very often their lunches involved Nate monologuing on the personal and professional shortcomings of their colleagues – rich territory, Nancy felt. But his real subject and obsession was his own inadequacies. Nate regarded his whole life as a series of amusing mistakes – his education, his marriage to an English woman, each of their five children – and the job was merely the latest of these. He regularly missed lectures, rarely attended meetings and frequently lost students’ work. He had a running joke about giving up academia to retrain as a dentist. His father had had a very successful practice in New York and if it hadn’t been for that then he would have gone to dental school himself. He felt that there was great beauty in teeth, that it was his natural calling. This was the great irony and tragedy of his life, he said.

Nancy had a different attitude to the job and sometimes she felt embarrassed by her conscientiousness, but she liked Nate because he seemed to like her and because his irreverence made her feel better about her own

situation. One day, he often told Nancy, they will have no choice but to fire me and then you can have my job.

‘Beer, wine or spirits,’ said Nate.

‘Just a glass of water for now, I think. My head,’ she realised as she said it, ‘is pounding .’

‘How was Schmalmo? Was it gruesome?’

‘Fairly,’ said Nancy, trying to find the usual wavelength on which she and Nate engaged. ‘Gersson made them all swoon, as usual. God, he’s such a fraud. But listen to this, on the way back the plane nearly went down. I got this.’ She touched the bruise with a finger and abruptly her entire head felt as if it had been tightened in a vice. Nancy winced.

‘Yeah, that looks nasty,’ said Nate. ‘Maybe you should get Joy’s vet to take a look at it. But look, Nancy, there’s something I need to talk about, and it has to be you. You’re the only one with the imagination to understand something like this.’ Nate had a very unfamiliar look on his face – he looked serious. ‘There’s this girl, right, she’s my kids’ babysitter actually, lives across the road. Fifteen years old. I tell you, this kid is incredible. I mean incredible. I know what you’re thinking. Already you’re thinking, what’s this dirty bastard of a cliché about to tell me, but it’s not like that. Or maybe you’re thinking, mother to my kids etc etc, but that’s not it either. She’s dreadful with the kids, as it happens. She can’t stand them, and they don’t like her either. Anyway, this is all

beside the point. The point is, she has this incredible way of thinking about things and when she talks she just nails it, every time, any subject. Stuff you always thought but never said. She's worth a thousand – a million! – of these jokers in intellect alone.' He took in the room full of their colleagues with a sweep of his arm. 'Anyway, we're making plans, exciting plans. She really thinks I should do the dentist thing, go back to school...'

Nancy said, 'I thought I was going to die.'

Nate was not listening. He was still talking and Nancy took a couple of steps away from him and out of the kitchen. There was a cool draft coming from somewhere and she followed it across the living room and out on to the balcony. A breath of fresh air seemed like a good idea.

Jed Wolff, Nancy's head of department, was out on the balcony, smoking a joint. Jed had thick, snowy white hair that came down to his shoulders and Nancy had often thought that there was something terribly immodest about a man wearing his hair so long at his age. Jed had not published so much as an article since the 1970s but this did not seem to have dented his self-regard. But he had – Nancy had to admit – the most beautifully rich brown eyes, and he turned these on Nancy and smiled. He offered her the joint but she waved it away with her hand.

'Probably wise,' Jed said. 'This stuff is not for the faint-hearted.'

Joy's flat was on the tenth floor and they stood side by side in silence for a little while, leaning on the balcony rail, watching the lights in the towers of The City – almost companionably, Nancy thought. The cool air was soothing on her head.

'Jed,' Nancy began, 'will I have a job next year?'

Jed looked at her and took a long pull on the joint. He held the smoke down for some time before allowing it to stream out of his mouth and nostrils. Nancy braced herself.

'You were in Malmo?' Jed said. 'Perhaps you are familiar with the Swedish concept of *lagom*? *Lagom* is central to the Swedish psyche, the national character, and it describes a striving towards consensus, equality and moderation in all things. The Swedes in general regard this as a positive thing – but then they are Swedish. For others it speaks of conformity, homogeneity, a heavy burden of civic and national responsibility. As you have been to Sweden you will perhaps have formed your own opinion.' Nancy did not know why she was being told this but she thought suddenly of the pedestrians on the kerbsides in Malmo, waiting dutifully for the lights to change, and how it had irritated her. 'For myself, I am not surprised they are all so depressed. It is the sort of place that makes you nostalgic for the British class system. I find it interesting that if you look at Sweden's current dominant cultural export, its popular thrillers and television dramas, there is a narrative requirement for the violent murder of a young woman, usually several women, preferably preceded by extended torture

and/or rape. Don't misunderstand me - I can't get enough of them. But what does this say about the culture, the society and the audience from which they originate?' Jed did not pause before answering his own question. 'It says that it is highly repressed. This, it seems, is the price you pay for the social democratic dream. This is my theory. I feel there may be an article, or perhaps even a slim volume, in it... Perhaps you would like to develop it yourself? I would be happy to talk more.'

'Jed,' Nancy managed to say, 'this isn't really my field.'

'Ah, well, we all have to be adaptable these days. Anyway, my apologies, I find I have forgotten your original question. I think I may be a little high.'

Nancy felt a rush of weightlessness, as if she was once more on board the plane, dropping through the air. Something moved inside her, detaching itself in some fundamental way. The pain in her head was sharper and more urgent than before. She turned away from Jed, held onto the door frame and lurched backed into the living room.

The party had filled up whilst she had been out on the balcony. Most of the department seemed to be there, even Toby Zammit, who she had never seen at a social event before, as well as others she did not recognise. The music was louder now and a group, led by Joy, were dancing under a disco ball hung from the ceiling. Nancy's husband was part of this group, strutting backwards and

forwards with his pointed forefingers striking the beat. Nate was leaning against a wall, tapping his foot and shouting into Mario the vet's ear.

Something had happened to Nancy's eyes. The room had a spongy look to it and, at the corners of her vision, fat little molecules of light were floating lazily in the air. With one hand steadying her against the wall, she made her way around the room to the stereo. It seemed to take her forever but when she got there she yanked at the power lead and the plug came out of the wall – it was surprisingly easy to do. She spoke into the sudden silence.

'Today...' Nancy began. Heads turned towards her in anticipation. 'This morning, I was on a plane...' She paused. The words had dried up in her mouth. The pain in her head had reached a new pitch. It was intolerable, irresistible. A particularly sharp jab, just behind the bump on her head, made her clutch her face. The pain then darted down the length of her body, like an electrical charge earthing itself.

'Got something to say?' someone – Nancy thought it was Toby Zammit – called out. There was some laughter and the conversations that had died when she had turned the music off began to bubble up again.

There was a bottle of wine standing on a shelf next to her, and Nancy reached out and gripped it by the neck. It was red, she noticed, unopened, and it felt good in her hand – substantial, potent. She swung her arm and smashed it against the wall. An arc of wine and broken glass travelled up the wall and across

the room, covering everything. It was wonderful, she thought, how far a single bottle would go.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘yes, I do,’ but it was not what she had planned.

‘In the Anglo Saxon Chronicle, the entry for AD 793 describes the Viking attack on the monastery of Lindisfarne: “This year came dreadful fore-warnings over the land of the Northumbrians, terrifying the people most woefully. These were immense sheets of light rushing through the air, and whirlwinds, and fiery dragons flying across the firmament. These tremendous tokens were soon followed by a great famine: and not long after, on the sixth day before the ides of January in the same year, the harrowing inroads of heathen men made lamentable havoc in the church of God in Holy-island, by rapine and slaughter. They miserably ravaged and pillaged everything; they trod the holy things under their polluted feet, they dug down the altars, and plundered all the treasures of the church. Some of the brethren they slew, some they carried off with them in chains, the greater number they stripped naked, insulted, and cast out of doors, and some they drowned in the sea.”’

Nancy felt the wine soaking into her clothes. She stood in a puddle of it. It was in her hair and ran down her face and into her mouth. She looked around the room and saw that she had everyone’s attention. She took a breath because this, it seemed, was the important bit.

'All of Christian England lamented what had happened at Lindisfarne and feared where and when the raiders would strike next. But there were those among them who suggested it was the act of a vengeful God. "Consider carefully brothers,' wrote Alcuin, adviser to the Emperor Charlemagne, "and examine diligently, lest perchance this un-accustomed and un-heard of evil was merited by some un-heard of evil practice...Consider the dress, the way of wearing the hair, the luxurious habits of the princes and people. The pride, the vanity, the greed.'

There were people moving towards her from all sides of the room, their faces grim and wary – her husband, Joy, Nate, Mario, Jed Wolff and Toby Zammit all among them.

'Either this is the beginning of greater tribulation, or else the sins of the inhabitants have called it upon them. Truly it has not happened by chance, but is a sign that it was well merited by someone...'

Nancy was still holding the broken bottle. It seemed likely that some of the red marks smeared across her arms and down her skirt were her own blood, but it didn't matter. Her headache had gone and her eyes were sharp. The edges of everything seemed very clear. She looked around the room. Her colleagues, friends and family were almost upon her. She took up a fighting position, slightly crouched, one foot behind the other, and brandished the bottle in front of her.

'Come on,' she said, in a hoarse whisper, and then again, much louder,
'come on you motherfuckers.'

JJ

I had two patients booked in for the afternoon. The first, Mary, I had been seeing once a fortnight for several months. She had made good progress and our sessions were relaxed and informal. A schizophrenic with a history of self-harm and suicide attempts, she had gradually reduced her medication and was now planning to move out of a hostel and into her own flat. We discussed the issues that were worrying her about living independently but overall she said she was feeling optimistic about the future. At the end of the session she asked me if I had a family. Because it seemed cruel to suddenly insist on the boundaries of our relationship – and because my happiness did not seem anything to be coy about – I told her that I was married and that my wife, June, was three months pregnant. I said that we were going for the first antenatal scan later that day. Mary told me that she hoped to have a family one day and I said there was no reason why it shouldn't happen. After she had gone I left the office and went outside for a cigarette. It was a bright, gusty spring afternoon and I watched the clouds colliding and morphing into new shapes. Back in the building I made coffee and sat down with the file of my second appointment of the day, a new patient.

I had just begun to read when there was a soft knock at the door. I looked up at the clock. It was five to the hour.

'Come in,' I called, a little flustered that I had not had time to go through the notes.

He was short, perhaps five foot six, and probably weighed not more than eight or nine stone. His small frame was swamped by an enormous tracksuit and

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brand- new, bright red trainers. He wore a baseball cap bearing the words 'Harvard University', which he took off to reveal a closely shaved head. I saw immediately that he was a wreck. His body was hunched over itself and visibly tense. His dark eyes were sunk deep in their sockets and his gaze was both anxious and strangely hypnotised, as if he were only dimly aware of what was going on around him.

I turned to the file. His name was Jetmir Jelenik – or JJ – a Kosovan refugee, and he had been in the UK for eighteen months. He had left Kosovo when his village was attacked by Serbian police. They had taken his mother, father and two brothers away. JJ was badly beaten but left behind. He had been unable to contact his family and now believed they were dead.

Since he had arrived in the country, JJ had complained of pains throughout his body. Scars from the beating were present on his arms, legs and back, but hospital tests had discovered no physiological problem. He had been prescribed painkillers, then a range of antidepressants, but none of these had afforded him much relief. A brain scan offered no neurological explanation and his GP had referred him to me, a clinical psychologist, for treatment.

I looked up at him. 'Well, JJ. I understand you've not been feeling well.'

He nodded.

'You have pains . . .'

'Yes,' he said, quickly, 'terrible pains. Please help me, doctor.'

‘I’m not a doctor,’ I said, ‘not exactly, but of course I will try to help you. Tell me about the pains.’

‘They come and go. One day I am OK and the next day my back hurts and I cannot get out of bed. Or I have a headache so bad it makes me sick.’

‘Are they just in these places – in your back and your head?’

‘No. They can be anywhere. In my hands or in my teeth. In my legs or my feet. Everywhere. What is wrong with me?’

‘I hope we can find out.’ I tried to smile reassuringly. ‘Can you tell me about what happened before you came to this country?’

He nodded vaguely, as if this was a disappointment, and began to repeat what I already knew. His English was excellent but I had the sense of a switch being flicked on. The fluid recall of details and flatness of his voice suggested a story told many times before and the effect was to render the terrible events prosaic. His use of banal emotional qualifiers – ‘I was scared’, ‘I was upset’ – only heightened this impression. It was unsurprising. He had no doubt spent much of the last eighteen months repeating his story to immigration officials, benefits agencies, doctors and social workers, many of whom were simply eager to pass him on to a bureaucracy other than their own. It had become a uniform he had to wear to identify himself and I suspected that the automatic litany he repeated

– his mother’s pleading with soldiers, his father’s weeping, his own savage

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beating with rifle butts – had entirely detached itself from the memory of the events themselves. As he spoke his hands pulled and twisted at his cap.

Then, abruptly, he changed the subject. ‘People do not believe me about the pains. They ask me questions because they think I am lying. They want to send me back to Kosovo.’

‘You don’t want to go back?’

‘On no,’ he said, alarmed. ‘I must not go back.’

‘Well, I believe you,’ I said. I had an urge to reach out and touch his arm, to comfort him. ‘I believe your pains are real.’

In the maternity clinic I held June’s hand and we watched the improbable image of our baby twitch and shift on the monitor. The nurse pointed to different parts of the screen and explained that all the internal organs were fully formed and that it was already growing fingernails, eyelashes and hair. She showed us the line of the spine, a hazy density of light that made me think of the Milky Way, and the pulsing blur that was its heartbeat. I watched June watching the screen. She struck me as something extraordinary, and very beautiful. We listened to the nurse and nodded and smiled at this whole new world opening up to us.

It was our first child. We had been trying since our wedding and had begun to worry that it might not happen. Many of our friends said they did not

want children. They made what seemed to me trite and self-indulgent remarks about bringing other human beings into 'a world like this', even though they had mostly had comfortable lives. Some changed their minds, of course, but we were never this way. The night we met, and before we had so much as kissed, we spoke of wanting to have a family – I suppose it was part of what attracted us to each other. It is hard to explain the desire for a child. No doubt it has much to do with one's own childhood – wanting to replicate or redeem – but, despite the work I do, it has always seemed too fundamental to make me want to examine it. I knew that since we discovered June was pregnant I had felt, in some indefinable way, that I was more a part of the world, somehow more substantial.

As we drove out of the hospital after the scan I noticed JJ waiting at the bus stop. He was a ridiculous sight in his vast and shiny tracksuit, trainers and baseball cap and I thought of pointing him out to June. Then I imagined him travelling back alone on the bus to a bare, comfortless room. I had treated people from the unit where he lived before and had an image of the shared strip-lit kitchens and vinyl floors, the inoffensive watercolours framed on the walls and the televisions blaring in every room.

I began the next session, a fortnight later, by asking JJ to describe his pains. He seemed not to understand.

'Is it like an ache? Or a sharp pain? A rawness?'

'Yes.'

I looked at him. 'All of those things?' He shrugged and looked away.

'JJ, what do you think is wrong with you?' He shrugged again.

'Are you angry?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know if you're angry?'

'Angry with who?'

'With the people who beat you and took your family? Perhaps you're even angry with them, with your family.'

He looked blankly at me and did not reply.

We met every two weeks and each time I tried in different ways to get him to talk. I felt simply that his pains were psychosomatic, a product of the trauma of his beating and separation from his family, that we would be able to unlock them by examining his experiences and his feelings. After two months we were still making no progress. He resisted every tack and it was clear he could not see the point in any of this. I was not a doctor who could carry out measurable tests or give him medicine. All I did was make him talk about things he did not wish to talk about. At times, through his indifference, he seemed to be regarding me

with a kind of curiosity, and I saw that with my questions and my meditation tapes I struck him only as obscure, an irrelevance.

‘Why do you come to see me?’ I asked him in one session when we had come to a halt.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I have to see a lot of people.’ Of course he had no choice – it was a condition of his accommodation.

There was no improvement in his physical state. In fact, JJ claimed his pains were getting worse, and more constant. To look at him, this certainly seemed to be the case. His posture had become even more hunched over, his skin sallow and tightly drawn around his face, and throughout our sessions his right foot would keep up a constant anxious jiggling against the floor.

My own feelings had become complicated. It was a mixture of profound pity – he was so young, his circumstances so awful – and growing impatience. I felt at times that he was being stubborn, pointlessly obstructive, or even, in his passivity, mocking my efforts to help him. I brooded on him outside work. I imagined him lying on his bed, staring at the wall or at the ceiling, counting the hours until it was time to eat again. Or aimlessly walking the run-down streets of the neighbourhood near the unit, his tracksuit hanging in folds around him. I thought of the smell of bleach and air freshener, visits to the residents’ office to collect medication or get access to money, the laboured jollity of the staff – the utter strangeness and foreignness of it all.

I saw that I was becoming too close to it. I should have made some excuse and referred him on, but this seemed like a failure – and a betrayal of JJ. Towards the end of our sixth session, during which he had sat almost doubled over in his chair, the banging of his foot against the floor signalling an even greater than usual agitation, he said desperately: 'Please help me. I am suffering. I don't want to be in pain any more.'

I nodded to acknowledge him and asked another question. He did not seem to hear me. The violent movement of his leg rattled the chair against the wall behind.

'Please stop that,' I said and grasped his chair with both hands.

He looked up, not shocked by my outburst, but a little bewildered, and I saw once again, very clearly, that he had no real idea who I was or what I wanted from him.

JJ did not turn up for our next session two weeks later. I sat waiting for half an hour before locking up my office and heading out to the car. The unit where he lived was only fifteen minutes from the hospital. It was a dispiriting part of town. A mix of vacant shopfronts and grubby newsagents lined the road and grim-faced estates stretched away on either side. Further on and set back from the main road, the place itself was sterile and well ordered, an anonymous huddle of buildings painted cream and set around a concrete courtyard.

At the office I explained who I was and asked if JJ was in his room. The woman on duty told me that he had been ill for several days. Someone had been supposed to call the hospital to let me know he would not be able to attend his appointment. I asked if I could see him and although it was perhaps unusual to have someone pursuing a patient to their bedside the woman did not query it. 'Hang on a minute,' she said. 'I'll take you up myself.'

Dangling a large set of keys from her hand, she led me across the courtyard and through a door. Inside the building the walls were painted a pale hospital green and bare except for fire extinguishers, smoke alarms and speakers and handsets for an intercom system. Every so often there was a noticeboard with posters advertising upcoming trips to the cinema, or to go ice skating or bowling. For a second I was struck by a bizarre image of JJ lying sprawled at the centre of an ice rink. We went along a series of corridors, through heavy fire doors and up several flights of stairs. 'It's a bit of a labyrinth, I'm afraid,' she said.

We passed a number of the residents in the corridors and to each of them my guide called out a cheerful hello, asked them how they were or reminded them to come to the office later on for one reason or another. Through one open door I saw a very overweight man in pyjamas standing by a cooker, frying something on the hob. JJ's room was at the far end of a corridor. The woman rapped on the door and called out his name. When there was no response she knocked again and then pushed the door open.

‘JJ,’ she said, ‘visitor for you.’ She turned to me and rolled her eyes, a gesture that might have seemed callous but instead relieved some of the tension I was feeling. ‘I’ll leave you to it, then.’

The room was much as I had pictured it. The curtains were drawn but in the dim light I could still see what was there: a narrow bed along one wall, an empty bookcase and a wardrobe. The room was a good size and the way that the furniture was crowded into one corner gave it an odd, temporary feel. It was modern and seemed clean, but the air was musty, a smell of unwashed bodies or stale water. It was also neat – there was none of the chaos or debris that I associated with a seventeen-year-old. The only sign of who occupied the room, or that it was occupied at all, was a glossy picture of a woman Sellotaped on the wall above the bed, apparently torn out of a magazine.

JJ was lying in bed under a blanket and one tracksuited arm hung limply down towards the floor. His cap was on the bedside table. He made an effort to push himself into a sitting position but quickly gave up and lay back down. He did not look at me.

‘They said they would telephone you,’ he said.

He thought I had come to reprimand him for missing his appointment.

‘It’s fine,’ I said. ‘You haven’t done anything wrong. I was just concerned.’

There were no chairs so I sat down on the edge of the bed. I looked around the room again. I looked back at JJ. His body was so slight that it barely

made any shape under the blanket. I recognised one of the meditation tapes I had given him sitting on the bedside table next to his cap. What was I doing here? Was I here because I was concerned about him? Because I felt guilty about the way I had behaved at our last session and wanted to make amends? Had I intended to conduct the session as planned, with JJ lying in the bed in front of me? I did not know.

‘How are you feeling?’ I said to fill the silence and cover my confusion.

‘How long have you been in bed?’

He did not reply to this either. His eyes were flicking around the room and I could see the blanket trembling with the motion of his leg. The atmosphere in the room seemed thick with despair.

I sat there for what must have been several minutes, then got up and left.

As I walked across to the car, the woman who had shown me to JJ’s room came out of the office, putting her coat on. Recognising me, she smiled mock sympathetically.

‘Productive?’

I rolled my eyes and she laughed.

‘Do you need a lift somewhere?’ I said.

I told her where I was going and she said I could drop her on the way.

Once we were in the car she held out her hand. ‘I’m Karen, by the way.’

We did not speak as I pulled out of the car park and onto the main road but as we waited at the first junction I asked her if she had time for a drink.

She looked at her watch. 'Sure. There's a place on the next corner.'

The pub was a dive, a rough all-day and all-night sort of place. It was only four in the afternoon but it was crammed with drinkers and the harsh lighting gave it a sickly, relentless feel. It was a long time since I had been anywhere like it and I felt self-conscious in my shirt and trousers. I went and sat at the only free table, next to a boarded-up window, while Karen went to the bar. When she came back I lit a cigarette and offered her one but she got out her own.

'So how long have you been working there?' I said.

'Long enough that I can't remember.' She dragged on her cigarette and then blew out the smoke.

'Do you like it?'

'I think I'm good at it. I suppose that sometimes feels like the same thing. It's hardly my dream. I don't plan on being there my whole life.'

'What is your dream?'

She laughed. 'I can hardly tell you that. I don't even know you.' She took another drag on her cigarette and then stubbed it out, half smoked. 'But seriously,' she said, 'it's OK. Pretty basic stuff really. Making sure they look after themselves a bit, that they get all the benefits they're entitled to, that they're

going to all their doctors' and social workers' appointments, that the only drugs they're taking are the ones prescribed to them.' She laughed again and lit another cigarette. 'We tend to treat them like children, really. Telling them off if they misbehave, giving them rewards if they don't. They are children in a way. They've been ill for so long, most of them, that they're used to being dependent. You get the odd success story, but mostly they just get passed around the system, getting slightly better, slightly worse, going in and out of hospital. Your man JJ – he's one of the better ones. I imagine he's only there because he's a refugee and someone thought they could use his medical condition to get a roof over his head.'

'He's not at all well,' I said.

'You should see some of the others.' She smiled and tapped her empty glass.

We had another drink and then I drove Karen back to the block of flats where she lived. 'Nice to meet you,' she said, as she opened the car door. There was a hesitation between us and she turned slightly back towards me. For a moment it seemed like it would not happen and then she leaned over and kissed me hotly on the mouth.

We saw each other about once a week, usually in the afternoons when Karen wasn't working and I had managed to rearrange my appointments. We would

meet at the pub, a friendlier and less intimidating place than it had at first seemed. Then, after a few drinks we drove back to hers. By about five o'clock it was over and I would leave to go home or back to the hospital.

I had the impression that Karen was used to having relationships like this, although this may just have been a fantasy of my own inexperience. She was practical and matter-of-fact about all of it: the arrangements to meet, the sex, the gaps when we did not see each other. I told her about June, although I could not bring myself to say that she was pregnant. She was good and easy company but gave very little away. She did not attribute feelings to it. She would not say 'I like you' or 'I've missed you' or 'I want to see you'. Any of this would have seemed inappropriate in what was going on between us. I did not think it concealed any great build-up of feelings for me, just that she had got into the habit of being guarded about herself. She had a young daughter, whose toys and clothes were strewn about her flat, and with a full-time job had no room in her life for difficult or chaotic emotion. She asked little about my life. This was not, I think, because she thought it was taboo, but because her own was real and absorbing enough.

For me it was all new and unexplored territory. I moved around in a kind of daze, learning the habits and rituals of a life that was fundamentally altered. Everything was terribly heightened, even the most trivial action or observation – the closing of the car door to go up to Karen's flat, the sight of the clouds moving across her window. And this was not just during the time spent with Karen. As I

sat waiting for a patient or smoked a cigarette in front of the building everything I looked at and felt was sharp and vivid; every moment seemed invested with a new weight.

Yet I adapted my life to it with a kind of ruthlessness and efficiency, as if I had all the time being carrying around this capacity inside me. Without a second thought I would rearrange my appointments so that I could make our meetings. At Karen's I showered with my own soap and then checked my clothes and the car for anything that might incriminate me. On one occasion I phoned June from Karen's flat to say that I had a departmental meeting and would be late home. I watched myself doing these things – kissing and talking and lying in bed with another woman – and was astonished at the ease with which they occurred.

It was remarkable how much this life, in all its strangeness and turmoil, resembled the one I had previously been leading. Everything was different and yet, aside from my weekly betrayal, nothing was. June and I saw friends and family and attended hospital appointments and antenatal classes. We made arrangements for the birth and met the midwife. I cleared out the spare room and began to turn it into a nursery. We shopped for things the books told us we would need. June's belly continued to swell.

But I could no longer see June and I clearly. I had lost all sense of the future, the vision which I realised I had been nursing since before we were

married: June and I and our child in our house, the baby learning to walk and speak. Now when I tried to look ahead, the future was blurred, indistinct. Only the present was astonishingly vivid. I could no longer imagine what it would feel like to be a parent, the husband to a mother. It sometimes came to me with a sense of dull surprise that I would soon be a father. When we discovered that we were having a boy, I had to fake a reaction.

At the same time, and despite all I did to conceal my affair, I was constantly seized by the urge to confess. As we sat at dinner, or drove, or walked in the park, I would be on the verge of it, picking out the words I would say, arranging and rearranging them. 'June,' it went, 'there's something I need to tell you. June, I don't know how to say this.' It was a heady, compulsive feeling, imagining these words coming out, but the clichés of such a confession made it seem unreal, false, and I could not go through with it.

It began to seem as if the possibility of confession, the exposure and what came after, was at the heart of what I was doing, the concealed motive. It was not lust or discontent that had led me to this – I felt neither of those things. No, it was not that.

I would lie awake in bed at night, my mind racing. One night June woke to find me watching her.

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'Go back to sleep.'

But the words were so loud it seemed astonishing that she could not hear them. 'June,' it rang in my head, 'there's something . . . June . . .' And the thought of it seemed like the most extraordinarily sweet relief.

Two weeks after I visited JJ in his room he arrived at my office for his usual appointment. Neither of us mentioned our previous encounter and after that our sessions followed the usual pattern. I asked him how he had been feeling and he described his pains. We discussed his family, their abduction and his own beating. We went over and over the same ground but I no longer had any faith in the idea that he would improve. I could only see him degenerating. I think that I expected him to die. We had been over his past so many times that it had begun to lose its distinctness. When I thought of what had happened to him and where he was from it appeared to me as a dim blur of uniforms, guns and violence, everything wreathed in hopelessness. Perhaps this was why it took me so long to notice that he was, as it turned out, recovering. He had to draw my attention to it himself.

'Next week I start a computer course,' he said at the beginning of one of our sessions, apparently out of the blue. 'Programming. I want to get a job.'

I was taken aback. I had never heard him speak of the future, let alone in a positive way. Then, in a sudden rush, I saw that all the signs had been there,

but that I had somehow made myself oblivious to them. Several times over the past few sessions he had mentioned another resident at the unit, someone with whom he seemed to have made friends. They had been going shopping and to the cinema together. I glanced at the file and saw that I had made notes of all this and yet had not registered the significance of it. Now that I observed him more carefully I saw that he looked different too. I had written in the file that he had bought new clothes – jeans and a jacket – but I had not noticed how much of a better fit they were, how much they changed the impression he made. I looked and saw that his foot tapped the floor with only a slow steady pulse.

‘Do you have any pains today?’ I said. ‘Only a little,’ he said, ‘here in my leg.’

‘What about yesterday?’

‘The same. A little in my leg. I am trying not to think about them.’

He did not arrive for his next appointment. I thought perhaps he had deteriorated again, that he was too ill to get himself to the hospital. I wondered if I had been mistaken about his improvement or overestimated it in my eagerness to see him better. It seemed very possible that I had gone from one extreme to another, from imagining him dying to being convinced that he was almost recovered. My own judgement seemed fractured, unreliable, and now a

whole variety of things flashed through my mind – that he had had some kind of accident, that he had been deported, even that he had killed himself.

This time when I arrived at the unit I did not go to reception. One of the doors off the courtyard stood ajar and I went through it into the building. The layout of the place was as confusing as before and this time I did not have a guide. The same arrangement of rooms and corridors was repeated from block to block and from floor to floor and there was little to distinguish one from another. Eventually I arrived on what I felt to be JJ's corridor. The overweight man in pyjamas that I had seen on my last visit was coming out of the bathroom, trailing a towel behind him.

I walked to the end of the corridor and knocked on the door. There was no reply so I knocked again and then opened it. The room was as I remembered it, the furniture all huddled in one corner, but there was no sign of anyone living there. The picture above the bed was gone. It smelled as if it had been freshly cleaned. The curtains were drawn but the window behind them was open and they flapped gently in the wind.

A feeling of acute desolation came over me and I sat down on the end of the bed, as I had done weeks before when I had first come looking for JJ. Then it occurred to me that I had come to the wrong room, perhaps on the wrong floor, and that it was an exact replica of the one directly above or below it. When I went downstairs and knocked on the door of the equivalent room, the young woman who opened it had no idea who JJ was. I tried to describe him but I could

see I was making her nervous. On the top floor I tried again but no one answered.

I began to go from door to door, asking the person who answered if they knew which room JJ was in. A few of them pointed vaguely along a corridor or to another part of the building. Others did not understand what I wanted or simply shut the door. It was Karen who eventually found me, sitting on the floor in one of the kitchens, disorientated and tearful. A few of the residents I had disturbed had gathered in the corridor to watch, and Karen led me quickly from the building. She told me that JJ had moved out two days before, into his own flat. A week earlier he had found out that his asylum application had been successful and that he would not be sent back to Kosovo.

Karen and I only met on two more occasions. We did not make a decision to stop seeing each other but it was clear that a line had been crossed. She had dealt with my visit to the unit discreetly and there had been no fallout for either of us, but we had both had a glimpse of the problems I might have caused. We only referred to it directly at our next meeting when she commented that I had been acting more like one of the residents than one of the professionals employed to help them. On that occasion we went back to her flat but it had an unmistakably valedictory feel and we did not linger in bed as had been our habit. The next time we met, a week later, Karen only stayed for a drink and then said she had things to do. I protested weakly but as soon as she left I realised I was relieved. Perhaps

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I had come to my senses, and the reflection of myself that I saw in her – of infidelity, and now of professional folly – was not something I could tolerate. To her, I suppose, I had ceased to be the casual affair without consequences. We did not see each other again.

June is due any day now. She is blooming, as they say. Everything is ready – the bag for the hospital is packed and waiting by the door. I have finished decorating the nursery. We have decided on a name. Our lives are lived in the grip of anticipation.

The future seems alive and something to look forward to. What happened with Karen no longer makes any sense in the context of our lives. At times the memory brings a sharp twinge, an almost physical pain, but it quickly passes. Sometimes, when we are out together and the whole city seems full of children and their parents, I like to think that June knows more than she lets on and has forgiven me anyway.

Last week we went to the hospital for a final check-up before the birth. I left June in the waiting room and went outside for a cigarette. It was bright and gusty, a day like the one six months earlier when I had my first session with JJ, although then it was spring and now it is autumn. At that moment I saw him, crossing the square fifty metres away from me. He was leaning into the wind, his cap pulled down over his face, one hand gripping his jacket tightly around him. I

had forgotten how slight he was and it seemed that at any time the wind might lift him off his feet and toss him up into the air. He was approaching the main hospital building and I wondered what appointment he could be attending. I called out to him but the sound of my voice was blown back towards me. I started to run but by the time I arrived in the foyer he had disappeared into the streams of people, and was gone.

The Subterraneans

Joel and I were born eleven months apart, him in September, me the following August, and we grew up on opposite sides of the same street in houses that were mirror images of each other. As kids, we were always working on something. When we were six or seven we gathered up crab apples that had fallen from the trees at the end of the road and went house to house selling them to indulgent adults. The following year we began to dig down from the ridge at the back of Joel's overgrown garden with a plan to create an underground bunker that children – but not adults – could pay to enter. The earth was hard and stony and after a couple of afternoons work the hole we had dug was no more than a couple of feet deep.

It would have been soon after this that we decided to run away to London. We would live in the woods there, surviving on nuts and berries and animals that we hunted. The day before our departure my father discovered the bag I had packed and I had to tell Joel I couldn't go. He said I wouldn't see him again and as I crossed the road to go back home I turned and he was at his bedroom window, staring grimly into the distance. The following morning he was outside waiting for me to walk to school and, like all the plans that ended, we did not mention it again.

It went on like this through our early teens. The ideas always came from Joel, whilst I acted as something like his committed assistant, his amanuensis, there to encourage and to take instruction. I do not remember resenting this. Perhaps it was the eleven months he had on me that made it seem like the

natural order or some tendency towards deference in my character (it is true that I have had similar friendships since). He was prone to violent nosebleeds and migraines which kept him off school for days on end, and during these times I was bereft, friendless and weepy. The only trouble between us was when one of his ideas came up against problems of execution, was thwarted by outside forces - such as my father's discovery of our plan to run away - or their imaginative velocity simply ran out. Then, he could be moody, indifferent to my being around. Once he twisted my arm painfully behind my back. On another occasion, I remember, I held a cushion against the wall so that Joel could practise his punching. After several punches I let go of the cushion and he bloodied his knuckles on the wall – but I don't remember him being angry about it.

Joel's mother was American and each year he returned from seeing family with exotic artefacts of the trip – a stone from the Grand Canyon, Mad Magazine, a wooden model of the Hoover Dam that we assembled together. One year he brought back a photograph of a street sign with my own name on it – proof, it seemed to me, of the vastness and variety of America. He usually returned, too, with a new obsession, made possible by his wealthy grandfather who had bought him a state of the art camera, telescope or radio controlled car. The rest of the summer would be spent scouting locations around the village for Joel's photographs, or standing on the roof of his garage late at night identifying constellations or searching for the moons of Jupiter.

In the summer of 1988 – we were both fourteen, the brief few weeks of each year for which we were the same age – Joel came back from another trip. This time he had been to San Francisco, discovered the beats, hippies and Jimi Hendrix. In Joel's bedroom we listened to *Are You Experienced?* and *Axis: Bold as Love* and watched videos of Monterey, Woodstock and the Isle of Wight festivals on his tiny black and white TV. There were other bands too - The Doors, Sly and the Family Stone, Cream (the heaviest band in the world, Joel told me) – but Jimi had no equal. Looking back, I think Joel saw some possible version of himself in Jimi. There was the Americanness, of course, but also his look, the exotic mix of black, white and Cherokee Indian. Joel was not as dark as that but he had a swarthy Jewishness, inky black hair and eyes that, in our village, where there was only ever one actual black kid, made him seem – and perhaps feel - different enough.

If I am honest - which I was not then – the music did not do that much for me. It was too raw, too chaotic. There were other things about Jimi, however, that I could not miss – the naked women of Electric Ladyland, the dazed and visionary world of marijuana and LSD, the wild vandalism of setting his guitar on fire. In September, around Joel's birthday, a white Fender Stratocaster was delivered, a present from his grandfather. He gave it a name – Marie – after a girl we both liked at school but were too shy to speak to. Joel went at it with his usual intensity, slinging the guitar behind his back when he had to eat or go to the toilet, only taking it off when he had to sleep or go to school. He was gifted,

everyone said, and his playing quickly surpassed everyone we knew, even friends of our brothers who were already in bands.

That Christmas my father bought an old drum kit from a junk shop which cleaned up pretty well, and we practised most days after school in a room at the back of Joel's house, Hendrix and Rolling Stones covers mostly. Joel's parents, when they were in, did not complain about the noise. I was happy to be out of my own house. My mother was ill, in ways I did not understand and we did not talk about, and home was heavy with it. My father was preoccupied, fretful, and my brother was away at university or out with his own friends. After a couple of months Joel and I started calling ourselves *The Subterraneans*, after one of the books he had brought back from America.

On our way home to practise, sometime the following June, Joel told me had recruited a kid called Charles into the band. I knew Charles. He lived in the village and went to our school, the year above us. Somehow Joel had found out that Charles had a bass guitar and that he could play.

Charles was the kind of kid at school that no one wanted to know. He always looked a mess and was in trouble for stupid, minor things. His hair was long and unwashed, his uniform was too big or too small and every week he had to sit at the side of the sports hall or the playing field because he had forgotten his PE kit - or didn't have one. The air of neglect hung thickly around him and of

course we were all sensitive to it. He was pretty hard to like in other ways, too. He was a know it all, who had seen or done everything. If someone said they had driven a car, Charles had driven a lorry. If someone had stayed up all night to do a school project, Charles had kept himself awake for a week just to see what happened. Everyone knew about his quick temper and he was regularly provoked into fights with kids who were bigger and more vicious than him.

We also knew about his family – or at least what was said about them. That his mother called herself a white witch and read tarot cards; that she had once stood outside their house, naked and shouting for people to come and look at her; that his older brother Claude had taken too many drugs, punched a policewoman on a train station and was now either in jail or *The Glades*, a mental hospital not far from our school. It was not possible for Charles to escape from under the burden of all this and even those of us who did not torment him knew that he was suitable for pity, at best, and certainly not friendship. Maybe we were a little bit afraid of him - of all this - too.

‘He has a bass,’ Joel said to me, ‘and an amp. And he has a four track so we can start putting together a demo.’ It was true that we needed a bassist to replicate the line up of *The Experience*. ‘And Ralph has contacts in the business – contacts are important.’ Ralph was Charles’ step-dad, or had been once, a musician who had toured and had records out in Germany and Japan, the nearest thing the village had to a celebrity and perhaps the only thing Charles earned a little credit for. ‘Well, ok,’ I said, ‘he can jam with us.’

Soon after that, a Sunday, Charles turned up at Joel's house to practise. His guitar, inherited from Ralph, was an extraordinary thing. Ralph had built it himself, from who knew what kinds of wood, and the body was immense, more or less square, and weighed too much for any of us to play standing up. It was painted in psychedelic green and blue swirls and, even when it wasn't being played, gave off an impressive, dirty hum of transistors and dodgy electronics. As it turned out, Charles couldn't really play, but he turned it up loud and attacked the strings with a kind of committed energy. He somehow looked the part too, in a vest top and with his long hair, which he wrapped carefully in a confederate flag bandanna before he played. He knew how to operate the four track and when the guitar gave him an electric shock and went dead, as it quite often did, he could take it apart and fix it, if only until the next time.

About three weeks after our first session with Charles, Ralph came round whilst we were practising. Charles had told us that Ralph wanted to see the set-up we were using. Joel's mother or father must have let him in because he arrived in the middle of a song and stood leaning against the wall, nodding his head slowly. Ralph was very tall and thinner than any adult I had ever seen. He wore tight black jeans on his spindly legs, pointy leather boots, a purple shirt and several thin, coloured scarves tied around his neck. His hair was long and patchy with henna dye. If you looked closely at his face you could see he was pretty old.

I forget what song we were playing but I remember that we played it as hard and fast as we could, and when we brought it to an end with an epic crescendo of feedback and cymbals, Ralph straightened up from the wall and clapped his hands a few times. 'Nice sound, guys,' he said, 'very nice sound.' We had been recording our sessions and Charles began to give Ralph a detailed explanation of how he had set-up the four track and the microphones. Ralph put on some headphones and listened to the recording, occasionally adjusting one of the dials. Then he moved a couple of the microphones on the drums to a different height and a different angle. All the time he carried on nodding slowly, as if in general approval of the arrangement. He picked up the bass, staggered slightly under its weight, and then played a fast and complicated series of notes up and down the fret board before nodding again and putting it down. 'Ok, guys,' he said, 'do your thing'. 'Foxy Lady,' called out Joel and we began to play. Ralph disappeared halfway through the song, but we carried on playing for a long time. We sounded good then, better than we had before and perhaps better than we would again. From time to time I looked up from my drums, at Joel and Charles bent over their guitars, and I could see they were feeling it too.

At our next session, a couple of days later, Charles told us in a casual way that Ralph had offered us a gig, as one of several acts supporting his new band, *The Jesus Cleaners*, at an Arts Centre in November. 'It's only a small show,' Charles said confidently, 'a couple of hundred people, but the vibe will be good.' Charles

had let it be known that he had been in a number of bands and played lots of gigs before but we had not questioned him about it. An hour or so into the practise, after his guitar had cut out for the third or fourth time, Charles said he didn't really feel like playing. 'Let's take a break,' he said. 'There's something I want to show you - if we're serious about this band.'

It was the beginning of the summer holidays and Joel's parents were at work. We sat in the kitchen whilst Charles cut the bottom off a plastic Coke bottle, made some holes in the cap and then wrapped it in tinfoil. He half filled a bucket with water and then took a piece of hash out of a little silver box he had in his pocket. He did all this slowly and precisely, with a kind of ritualistic purpose. He crumbled some of the hash onto the foil and pushed the bottle into the water. Slowly, holding a lighter to the hash, he drew the bottle up out of the water as it filled with pale brown smoke. Charles undid the cap, put his mouth around the bottle and pushed it back down into the water as he inhaled the smoke. Then he sat very still with his eyes closed for what seemed like thirty seconds or even a minute, before blowing out a great cloud from his mouth and his nose.

Charles began to prepare it again and signalled to Joel to take his turn. Joel took in a little smoke and then began to cough violently. Each time he seemed about to stop, the coughing began again. His face went very red. Charles got him a glass of water. 'Don't worry,' he said, 'classic first time reaction.' I took my turn. The smoke was surprisingly cool and smooth and I

inhaled the whole lot deeply and held it in for as long as I could, with my eyes closed, as Charles had done. When I had breathed it all out I banged the table. 'I said goddamn,' I said.

Charles and I had another go and then we began to laugh at Joel, who was lying on the kitchen floor, still coughing occasionally. I had never really heard Charles laugh before, and it was a high, slightly crazy sound. Then he put a video on in the living room, *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, which he said was Ralph's favourite film. Charles said Ralph even had a small part in it, though I didn't notice him, and I suppose now that this wasn't true. Whilst the film was on Charles went into Joel's back garden and through the window I could see him picking blackberries off the bushes. He must have found some apples, and other things too, in the kitchen, because a long time later he came back into the living room with three bowls of hot fruit crumble. Joel waved it away, saying he didn't feel hungry, and soon after that he fell asleep on the sofa. I had my own and Joel's bowl too, and it seemed like the best thing I had ever tasted.

The Subterraneans carried on practising two or three times a week, working on the songs we would play at the gig in November, but it was the holidays and once we got tired or bored we would go out. We often went to a treehouse in the woods that Charles and his brother Claude had built a couple of summers before. It was very hard to find and you could walk right under it without noticing unless you knew exactly the place. Charles and Claude had given each

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part of the woods its own name – Dark Vale, Arrow Glen, Crystal Falls, that sort of thing - and Joel and I began to use them too.

When we got to the right place, Charles scrambled up a tree and onto the platform hidden high up in the branches. He threw down a rope that was knotted every couple of feet to give a foothold. Once you got up there, the platform was surprisingly large, made of a couple of wooden crates that they had found down by the shipyard. An old rug was spread across it and a few cushions to make it comfortable. There was even a tarpaulin rigged in the branches above that could be pulled over in case of rain. The first time we went, Charles explained that the treehouse was not nailed or fixed to the trees in any way and that this was a very important principle. He pointed to a system of ropes and wedges which he said kept the platform aloft by tension alone and it was hard not to be impressed by this feat of engineering. We smoked joints up there and drank South American mate from a wooden gourd that a shaman had given Ralph and which he had told Charles was good for sexual potency. Joel liked the mate and although he did not cough so much when he smoked, he only took one or two tentative puffs on a joint before passing it on. 'I'm pretty high already,' he said. We lay on our backs looking up past the branches and leaves, not saying much, but listening to the wind, the birds and the voices of other people somewhere in the woods or even carrying from across the river.

At other times, we went to an old barge that was stranded on mud flats a little way down the river. Someone had thrown down pieces of wood in the mud

and we edged our way across them to get on board. The barge had been there for years and the cabin and some of the deck had rotted away, leaving just the shape of the hull that we could climb about in. Charles had found a collection of porn mags hidden under a plastic sheet at one end and we sat on what was left of the deck and flicked through them. He showed us a picture that he said was a close up of a clitoris and Joel went very pale and had to lie flat on the deck for quite a while. Another time Charles told us he had once been to a party with his brother and fucked an eighteen year old girl on a garage roof. 'She was on her period,' he said.

Every so often one of Joel's nosebleeds or migraines would mean that he didn't come out with Charles and I, or had to go home early. I didn't mind. When we weren't practising, Joel was sometimes sulky around Charles. Sometimes I think he pretended he wasn't well. So Charles and I spent time alone in the treehouse, in the woods and on the barge. I noticed that even then you couldn't really make friends with him, not in the usual way – he seemed somehow indifferent to it. He never asked me anything about myself, my family, or anyone I knew. He did not talk about other people, except sometimes about Ralph. He would not have noticed Joel's moods. I felt that the way he was with me must be the same as the way he was with everyone else, he did not know how to alter or adapt himself. Nevertheless, he wanted the company. He always insisted that I go with him or stay with him, but I felt that if we suddenly stopped

being friends, if that was what we were, it would make no difference to him at all.

Once, when we were up in the treehouse, and Charles was showing me how to chew tobacco, I asked him about his brother. 'Claude has a very brilliant mind,' he said. He spat an arc of saliva and tobacco juice over the edge of the platform. 'He built a radio transmitter from scratch and we broadcasted two plays that he had written. They were very experimental.' I nodded and then spat over the edge in the same way as Charles. 'Is he in *The Glades*?' I said, but Charles spat again at the same time and I wasn't sure if he had heard me.

The Glades was a Victorian mansion behind a high wall and wrought iron gates, I suppose our exact idea of what a mental hospital should look like. It was about a mile from our school, across a few fields and a small wood that was on our cross country running route. Sometimes kids would dare each other to run up to the gates and shout something through them. A couple of boys in my brother's year said they had broken into the hospital at night and seen one of the patients running down a corridor on all fours, like a dog. I didn't believe this. I had been there once, several years before, the first time my mother was ill. My brother and I waited in the car, just inside the gates, whilst my father went in to get her. We drove to a village a few miles away, the opposite direction from home, to have lunch. On the way there she thought her doctors were following us in a car behind and tried to grab the steering wheel, so we drove her back early and went home.

Near the end of the holidays the three of us – Joel, Charles and I - went down to the railway line and sat on a fence and watched the trains going past. We were all silent for a bit and then Charles said there was something he wanted to try. The previous summer he had been with his brother when Claude had dug a shallow hole between two of the sleepers and lain underneath the track whilst a train went over him. Charles took a small trowel out of the rucksack he often carried and began to move stones and dig out the earth. The ground was hard and he had to stop and retreat to the fence every ten minutes or so to let a train go by. It didn't seem like he wanted our help. It took a long time but eventually he had a hole wide and deep enough to crawl into. He let one more train pass and then quickly squeezed himself under and lay flat with his arms by his side. His face was hidden from us by the track. No trains came for a long time, or at least it seemed that way. Joel and I got down from the fence. It didn't feel right to sit there in full view, but we just stood around anyway. We waited and waited. Then Charles started to wriggle himself out of the hole. When he stood up he didn't look at us but picked up his rucksack and began to walk back up into the woods. We followed him, a little way behind, and when the train went past he didn't turn around but just kept on going.

When school began again in September, Joel and I saw a bit less of Charles. We were in different years and different classes but even when we saw him in the corridor or in the playground or on the bus home we barely acknowledged each

other, perhaps a glance or a nod. I think Joel and I were relieved and anyway, it seemed ok. It was as if Charles was two different people, inside and outside school, and we only knew one of them. Perhaps he had no expectations of us either.

We were still practising for the gig two or three times a week, and when Charles turned up at Joel's house it was the same as it had been all summer. The days were still long and warm and at the weekends, after our sessions, we went to the treehouse or down to the river. It was also around then that I went to Charles's house for the first and only time. Out of the blue he invited me and Joel around for dinner. 'It's ok if you can't,' he said quickly, and then, as if by way of explanation, 'Ralph will be there. He'll want to talk about the gig.'

The next day Joel had a nosebleed in a maths lesson. It poured out of him, all over the carpet and his clothes. I sat with him in the medical room while he waited for his dad to come and pick him up. He had balls of bloodied tissue in both his hands. 'I suppose you'll go anyway,' he said, and I said that I would.

Charles' house was down an unpaved road at the bottom of the village, near the river. I remember that in the front garden there were strange small trees with furry branches, soft like velvet. Charles let me in. It was a small place, maybe half the size of mine and Joel's houses, and the front door opened straight into the living room. It was crowded with stuff – paintings, books, rugs, furniture. One wall was lined from the floor to the ceiling with records. The room had a strong smell, but not a bad one.

'This is Sally,' Charles said. I had seen his mother before, lots of times, walking her two dogs around the village, but never so close. She was sitting on a sofa, with her legs folded underneath her, drinking a glass of wine. Behind her a piano was wedged between the sofa and the wall, so that it could not be played. There was a record on, nothing I recognised. Sally smiled at me.

'Joel's sick,' I said.

Charles nodded vaguely. 'Ralph will be here soon,' he said.

It was strange to see Charles in his own house, as if it were not quite true that he lived here. Perhaps he sensed something similar because he seemed agitated, uncomfortable. It seemed like neither of us knew what else to say, that we had pushed too hard at the limits of our intimacy. For a moment I thought he might send me away. 'I'm cooking,' he said, and went into the kitchen.

I sat down at the other end of the sofa. Sally's hair was such a pale yellow it was almost white, but not from age. She was tiny, like a girl, and very pretty. It was strange to think of an adult this way but then she did not look that much older than some of the girls at school. I needed something to look at so I picked up an ornament from the table next to me. It was a small porcelain elephant, white and decorated with blue flowers.

'My elephants,' said Sally.

I looked around the room. There were lots of them, each one a different size and design – on the bookshelves, the window ledge, along the top of the

piano. Above the piano there was a large Indian tapestry showing one laden with jewels. There was a wooden stool carved and painted like one, just by Sally's feet.

'They're lucky charms,' she said. 'You can touch them, but when you put them down you must make sure they're facing out of the window. Otherwise they are unhappy and the luck doesn't work.' She smiled to show she was not serious, or at least not entirely, but I put the elephant down carefully.

Whilst we were sitting there, Claude came in. He had been out of *The Glades* for a couple of weeks, I found out later. I was not sure that I had ever seen him before, but I guessed that he had not always looked this way. He was very fat, puffy faced, and his head was shaved. There was an inflamed looking rash across his nose and cheeks. He was wearing tracksuit trousers, a hooded top and trainers and he could have been anywhere between twenty and forty years old. It was true that he looked a little crazy.

Claude opened the door, lit a cigarette, and then stood there blowing smoke into the front garden.

Sally turned to me. 'How do you know Charles?'

'He's in the band, Sally,' Claude said abruptly, and not kindly. 'Keep up.' He took a long drag on his cigarette and I watched the end glow fiercely and burn down. 'Charles says you're a genius. Like Hendrix.'

'I'm the drummer,' I said.

‘Shit, that’s a fuck up. Sorry.’ He laughed briefly and then looked downcast.

Charles came in from the kitchen. ‘Food’s ready.’ He looked at Claude, at Sally, and then at me. ‘Where’s Ralph?’

There was barely room for the table Charles had set up in the kitchen. It was laid with place mats and wine glasses, though only Sally drank. Charles was a vegetarian – I already knew that – and he could really cook. There was a stew, with different types of beans, as well as grilled vegetables with cheese melted on them and rice, bread and salad, but a mood had come down on them, on us, and it only made it worse, the effort he had gone too. No one ate very much, even me – though I tried. Charles sat with his elbows on the table and stared down. Sally pushed her fork round her plate, drank her wine and smiled now and again at nothing in particular. After a few minutes, Claude got up from the table and stood smoking, this time at the back door. Ralph didn’t come, at least not whilst I was there.

‘Claude was in a band once, weren’t you Claude?’ Sally said suddenly, as if she had just that second remembered.

‘They were fucking brilliant,’ said Charles.

‘Forget about it, Sally,’ said Claude.

For a while no one spoke. There was only the sound of my own chewing, roaring in my ears. I looked around at them and I recognised a family walled off

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from the world, and even from each other, by its own difficulty and pain. The atmosphere – although perhaps it only seems this way now – was of almost intolerable melancholy, of people that did not expect anything good to happen to them.

Eventually Sally got up and went into the living room, and I heard the same record come back on. Claude finished his cigarette and threw it into the back garden. ‘Thanks, Charles,’ he said. ‘But I’m more of a smoker than an eater, as you know.’ He ran himself a glass of water, nodded at me, and left.

I stayed for a few minutes. Charles didn’t say anything, even when I thanked him and got up to leave.

A few days later Joel and I met Charles at the treehouse, at his request. He was already up there when we arrived.

‘*Psilocybe cubensis*,’ he said, pulling a very small mushroom from a small plastic bag, ‘the first crop of the year.’

He had talked all summer of the mushroom season, how, around the end of September, after rain, they appeared suddenly in short grass in certain places if you knew where to look. He had already told us the importance of picking the right kind, with the pointed little nipple on the top, the pale grey gills on the underside of the cap. There was another species that looked almost identical, he said, but if you ate it, it could kill you. We had asked to pick them with him when the time came but now it seemed he had gone alone.

In the past Charles had taken the mushrooms in many different ways – in an omelette, in soup, in cakes. The best way, he said, was to brew tea with them and then let it cool. The taste was horrific but it was worth it for the effect. But there was nothing to cook or make tea with in the treehouse so we began to pass the bag around, taking one each at a time. He had brought a bottle of coke which we sipped to wash them down.

Once the bag was empty, Charles made himself comfortable on a cushion and began to wait, and Joel and I did the same. We knew the sequence of events. After a few minutes you would get a stomach ache, sometimes you would start to burp, the taste of the mushrooms coming back up. You would want to lie down and whilst you were lying there the sickness would pass and something else would start to happen.

Charles began to talk. When he was born, he said, he had two thumbs on his left hand, a stumpy, half-formed one growing out of the knuckle of the other. His mother said it was a gift and she blamed herself for letting the doctors cut it off. 'I wish I had it now,' he said. This seemed like another of his stories but I sat up and he showed me the scar, a little raised area of whitened skin. It seemed like an astonishing thing.

I held up my hand. 'Listen,' I said, 'the trees are humming.' Charles and I listened for several moments and he nodded his head.

Joel had been lying silently on his back but now he started to push himself up. He began to examine his hands, unhappily, as if he saw something there that confused or troubled him.

'I don't feel well,' he said. 'I'm going to go down.'

'Going to go down,' Charles said.

'Going to go down,' I repeated.

Charles and I began to laugh.

Joel began, very tentatively, to lower himself down the rope. It did not seem at all safe but Charles and I could not stop laughing – it seemed to bubble out of me uncontrollably. Every time there was a lull one of us would repeat the words – going to go down – and we began again. It seemed to take forever for Joel to lower himself to the ground.

After a while we could no longer remember what it was we were laughing about and Charles and I both lay back on the cushions and stared up through the leaf canopy at the sky. I found that I could move the clouds above us into different shapes just by thinking it, merging and parting them, building empires and then tearing them down again. Every minute or two there was the sound of Joel retching somewhere below us but gradually this became fainter and fainter until it did not seem to have anything to do with me at all.

When Charles didn't turn up at Joel's house for practice two days later, we played without him – but we had become used to the three of us in the room, the sound of his bass throbbing away underneath us, and it felt listless, an effort. After a while we gave up and I went home early.

Charles wasn't at school the next day, either. A few days after that we heard that he wouldn't be coming back. Claude had taken an overdose of pills and had been taken to hospital. Charles had found him, apparently, and called the ambulance. A kid in my class had seen it outside the house. Now Charles had gone to live with his real father somewhere in the West Country, Somerset or maybe Devon. Sally couldn't cope, people said.

The Jesus Cleaners' gig went ahead without us but I heard the place was half empty. I think in some ways Joel and I were relieved at the way it worked out. I already knew that Joel's fascination with the guitar and the band had passed. Maybe there was some psychological explanation for it that was to do with Charles' disappearance and with Claude. Or that his intolerance of the dope, the mushrooms, the pornography, had undermined some idea he had had of himself. But I doubt any of this would be truthful. It was simpler than that, and Charles leaving was just a coincidence of timing and a useful excuse. Joel had given up on it, the way he had given up lots of things before. It didn't mean anything to him anymore.

The Subterraneans went quietly away. In fact, I never saw Joel touch his guitar after that and I know that he does not play now. For a while the gear

stayed set up in the back room but when we were in the house we didn't go in there. A few months later, when I was at Joel's, Ralph came round to pick up Charles' stuff. 'Hey guys,' he said, 'how's it going?' He quickly gathered up the microphones and the leads and packed the fourtrack into its box. I didn't have the courage to ask him about Charles and he didn't volunteer anything. When he came to leave he couldn't manage the bass as well so he said that he would come back for it. It was still standing in the corner of the room a year later, long after I had retrieved my drums and set them up at home.

I have lived somewhere else for a long time now, but my parents are still in the village and I go there when I can. Over the years I have heard bits and pieces about Charles – that he was still in the West Country, working as a mechanic, and then, later on, that he had got married and moved to Scotland. From this, I guessed he was doing ok, better than might have been expected anyway. Occasionally, when I am in the village, I see Sally walking her dogs in the park or Ralph at the bar of the pub. I nod at him and he nods back, but I am not convinced he remembers who I am. No one I have asked seems to know what happened to Claude.

I was back at my parents' house a few weeks ago. They are in their seventies now but in pretty good shape. I took their dog out into the woods. Without quite realising that I had walked that way, I came across the site of Charles and Claude's treehouse, a small opening in the undergrowth just off one

of the main paths. The area below it was a mess, strewn with charred logs, cigarette butts and empty cans where teenagers had sat around fires, but the structure above still looked to be in one piece. I tied up the dog and managed to haul myself up the fraying rope that hung from the platform. At the top, I looked again at the ropes and wedges that held the thing suspended, almost floating, between the trees, still worthy of admiration.

I lay down on the platform, looked up at the branches, the leaves, and the sky beyond them, and let myself drift for a little while, until the dog barked impatiently and woke me from my daydream.

The Good Guy

When he was twenty-eight and lonely, JP began a relationship with a woman over email. Her name was Molly. An old friend of his, Roland, had met her in a bar and at the end of the night he had given her JP's email address instead of his own. The following day Roland called to suggest that he play along but JP wanted no part in the prank (which was typical Roland). When an email came a few days later he put Molly straight immediately. She replied that she was very embarrassed and appreciated his honesty, and her tone was so pleasant and unassuming – not at all like the kind of woman he imagined being chatted up by his friends in a bar – that he wrote to her again. He told her that she wasn't to worry or feel like she had been made a fool of, because as far as he was concerned she hadn't. She replied again, saying how thoughtful he seemed, and kind. Soon they were emailing every day.

The relationship came at a good time for JP. He had finished his PhD the previous year – a 100,000-word study, 'Death and The Dead in the fiction of James Joyce', which made him feel ill every time he thought about it – and had just begun his first teaching job in a town where he knew no one and which was continually wet and tormented by a biting North Sea wind. JP felt like a fraud. Every day he stood terrified in front of his students who, with their confidence and frank sexuality, seemed to know more about life than he was ever likely to. When he discussed Leopold Bloom's masturbation he found himself blushing uncontrollably.

The university campus was a maze of buildings, squares and high walkways that seemed to have been cut out of one vast piece of concrete. According to the university's promotional material it was designed on the model of an Italian hill village. This, JP concluded, was either a cruel or absurd joke. A fashionable prejudice against windowsills at the time it was built meant that rain ran uninterrupted down the side of the buildings leaving great damp stains. The wind came off the sea, got up speed across the East Anglian plains and funnelled itself around the buildings. Making his way about campus, JP would sometimes find himself pushed off balance or spun round by an unexpected pocket of turbulence. And it was at these times, or as he made his way to or from a lecture along one of the stilted walkways, the rain seeming to drive into him from the side rather than above, that his whole future would stretch out in front of him like a bleak and featureless landscape . . .

This was not all. Three months after he started the new job, JP had the first of what he began privately to call his 'turns'. It happened as he was sitting in his office, waiting to go and deliver a lecture. He stood up to pull a book off the shelf and the floor seemed to roll under him, like the deck of a ship. He held onto the bookshelf with both hands to stop himself falling. There was a tightness across his chest, he could not catch his breath, and for several minutes he wondered if he was having a heart attack. But it soon passed and he was able to make it to the lecture on time.

Two weeks later he was watching a film in an almost empty cinema when he was gripped by a powerful claustrophobia. He rushed out into the street and sat on the freezing pavement, panting for air.

'Panic attack,' said the campus GP. 'You're part of a growing statistic.' JP did not know whether he was supposed to be reassured by this. 'I could tell you what's happening physiologically,' said the doctor, waving a hand dismissively, 'but personally I feel that this is an existential rather than a medical phenomenon. One for the philosophers, perhaps?' He smiled briefly at JP and then spun back to face his computer screen. 'Don't get me wrong. I'm glad you came in. I'll put you down for some counselling.'

'Am I dying?' JP had no idea where the question had come from.

The doctor did not look round. 'We're all *dying*,' he said.

And then, towards the end of the first winter, came the email from Molly. She was American, from Chicago, and had been on business in London when she met Roland. At thirty-five she was a few years older than JP and had, as she put it, 'nearly been married a couple of times'. She told him she had been named after Molly Bloom and this seemed to JP such a wondrous coincidence that he could not help but see it as some kind of omen. Very quickly he shared his anxieties about his work with her. 'I don't have anything useful to teach anyone,' he wrote. 'Sometimes when I'm standing there, I feel so insubstantial, as if you could reach out and put your hand right through me.' She replied that she didn't

know much about literature but that it seemed wonderful to take such a small thing and give it so much attention. 'If everyone did what I did' – something to do with investment funds that JP did not try too hard to understand – 'then the world wouldn't be much of a place.'

Although she had sent him a picture of herself (short dark hair, a small mouth, very pale blue eyes), when he thought of her he did not picture a person so much as a kind of light, a beacon in a dismal sea. The sense of quiet dread that had hung around him all year began to lift. His teaching improved; he felt perhaps there was something here after all and that he might have access to it. Leopold Bloom's masturbation no longer brought forth his blushes. The panic attacks were rarer and he learned to breathe his way through them.

Gradually the emails became more intimate. JP was honest, if not specific, about his lack of experience (a handful of one-night stands and a fraught and almost entirely chaste fling with a fellow Joyce scholar) but this did not seem to affect Molly's interest. And although JP had never been comfortable or confident with sexual matters, over email he did not feel the usual inhibitions. After some prompting from Molly he sent her a message describing what he thought it would be like to go to bed with her. In return she explained in detail some of the things she would do to him when they met. She had been reading Molly Bloom's soliloquy and quoted it at him: 'No I never in all my life felt anyone

had one the size of that to make you feel full up.’ None of this seemed tasteless or risky, only intensely erotic.

Then, abruptly, the emails stopped. At first JP could not understand it. He read and reread the last of her messages but there had been no warning, no disagreement or cooling in their tone. Molly had been talking about a trip to London she was going to have to take and at which they had planned to meet. At first he was genuinely concerned; he believed that something must have happened to her. But then the emails he sent began to be returned to him – the address she had been using had been closed down – and he quickly saw the way things were. He understood now that she had never intended that things would go further or that they would ever meet, that it had been some sort of game. What had been a source of private comfort, even joy, became a private misery and he was left feeling even lower than before.

At the end of the summer Roland called to say that he was getting married and to ask if JP would be his best man. It caught JP by surprise. He had heard Roland mention his girlfriend, Larissa, before but he had never met her and had not guessed it was serious. More than this though, he felt sure that Roland had other, better friends who could perform this duty. After all, they spoke on the phone from time to time but had not seen each other in more than a year. ‘Don’t worry about a stag do,’ Roland said, ‘just show up for the weekend.’

JP had sat next to Roland at his first lecture on his first day at university and they had become unlikely friends. JP was used to being ignored or patronised by a certain sort of person but here the differences between them – Roland's brashness and hedonism versus JP's nerviness and reserve – made them something of a double act. They found each other exotic, JP thought, and redeemed each other a little. Roland, for his part, regarded JP as a great wit and eccentric. 'You're funny,' he said, 'you have humour,' and he would introduce JP to his friends as 'the oddest guy I know'. Gradually JP played up to this role, becoming excessively dry, cautious, cynical. It became part of their routine that JP would make friends with girls that Roland wanted to sleep with, a kind of unthreatening bait. 'The Trojan Horse,' Roland called him, and though for a time he felt some reflected glory in Roland's conquests he later began to recognise it as a humiliation. As time went on he saw that he had made too much of a pet of himself and when, at the end of their degree, Roland went to work in the City and JP stayed on to do his Masters, he was not unhappy to be free of these expectations.

Since then the friendship had faded. But now, after the initial surprise, JP began to see things in a different light. Perhaps he had underestimated Roland, himself, what was between them. He began to look forward to the wedding and, months later, as he sat on the train to the West Country, his anxieties were balanced by a new hopefulness. It was spring and this feeling was echoed in the

greenness of the hedgerows rushing past the window. Things happen at weddings, he thought. Who knew what might happen?

At the station Roland hugged JP and then held him at arm's length, a hand on each of JP's shoulders. 'Hombre!' he said. 'Looking a little fragile, if you don't mind me saying. Modern life getting to you?'

'I'm dying,' said JP.

Roland slapped him on the back. 'Nice one. Well, don't do it before the end of the weekend. That would be muy inconveniente.' Roland did not look so good himself, JP thought. He appeared not to have slept. He smelled faintly sour. There were little white crusts of spittle at the corners of his mouth and the pores of his nose were swollen and raw.

Roland drove fast down the country lanes, his left hand hovering over the horn. 'You know, JP,' he said, 'I recommend marriage, I really do. I know, I know. You're thinking, "He's not even married yet and already he's the world expert." But seriously, it's going to make me a better person. I can feel it.'

'How?' said JP. Roland was staring ahead at the road, suddenly deep in thought. He wiped something from his lip and turned to JP.

'Anyway. Look at me, lecturing you. How are things in academia?' Roland pronounced the word slowly as if it were both grand and slightly foolish, like you might say 'diplodocus', JP thought. But he did not get the chance to reply. Roland leaned heavily on the horn and did not let go for what seemed to JP like a whole

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minute. 'I'm getting married tomorrow,' he shouted over the noise, apparently addressing no one in particular. 'Can you fucking believe it? I'm getting married tomorrow.'

Ten minutes later they arrived at the house where the wedding was to be held, a Victorian mansion that seemed to extend itself further and further in every direction as they approached along the winding drive. In one corner was a turret that looked like it had been added as an afterthought and did not quite match the style. Vast lawns ran down to a lake. In a meadow below the house a figure on a grey horse made its way over a series of jumps. Roland parked round the back of the building and led JP through the kitchens and up several flights of stairs. At the end of a long oak-panelled corridor lined with gloomy portraits were more stairs. They climbed to the top and Roland opened a door. 'Muchos apologies for the decor,' he said. 'I believe this is billed as the Raj Suite.'

JP could not help but be dismayed. The room was enormous. The high walls were hung with elaborate Indian tapestries in red and gold. At the far end, perhaps ten yards from where JP was standing, a low bed was stacked with cushions and bright silks. There were mahogany chairs, sofas, tables and a dresser. On the floor near the door lay a tiger-skin rug. Beyond it, in a corner, stood a child-sized statue of a native with a garishly painted-on grin, holding out a tray with a teapot. Three tall windows stared down on the gardens and, beyond them, a lake. Through another door two claw-footed baths sat side by

side in the bathroom. It would be impossible not to feel inadequate in a room like this, JP thought.

‘Think this is obscene, you should see ours,’ said Roland. ‘Africa!’ He sat down in one of the armchairs and pulled something out of his inside jacket pocket. For a moment JP thought Roland was about to offer him drugs. At a party a few years before he had given him some cocaine. Afterwards JP had spoken urgently about his PhD thesis to a girl he had not met before and then thrown up in an alleyway. The following morning he had woken up with a sense of self-loathing so sharp that it was like a physical pain.

Roland took out a bottle of pills and unscrewed the cap. He grinned at JP. ‘Not what you’re thinking. Only what the doctor gives me these days.’ He put two of the pills in his mouth and then went to the bathroom and turned on a tap.

He came back into the room. ‘Leave you to settle in, then. Work on your speech or something. Of course we’re expecting something special – everyone is.’ Roland hugged JP. ‘Thanks, hombre. Means a shitload.’

Once Roland had gone, JP took off his shoes and lay on the bed. He closed his eyes so that he would not have to look at the room and thought about the speech he would be making the next day. He had spent every evening for the last month working out what he was going to say. It was all typed neatly onto three-by-five cards which he had numbered and tucked in a zipped pocket inside his bag. But thinking of it now, he could not remember how it began or ended, or

anything in between. The words ran together in a blur. All he knew was that it was full of dreadful platitudes and even worse jokes. The thought of standing up in front of a room full of people made his heart race. 'Show love,' someone had told him, 'that's all you need to do.' Show love, he thought. Show love . . .

When he woke, JP felt groggy and disorientated. He had dreamed of standing at the front of a crowded room delivering his speech, naked from the waist down.

In the main hall, the party was in full swing. JP descended the wide, curving staircase slowly, looking out for anyone he knew. It was crammed with people, standing in groups, drinking and laughing. Waitresses in black trousers and white shirts circled the room with trays of champagne and there was an atmosphere of people having an extraordinarily good time. JP stood on his own at the bottom of the stairs, trying not to look conspicuous. He recognised no one. It was confusing – who were all these people, he wondered. He turned to look at the paintings on the wall. The one behind him showed twenty or thirty dogs – beagles, JP thought they were called – racing over a hedge in some kind of frenzied pursuit. The painting was so vast and so comprehensively detailed that every straining muscle of the dogs seemed to rise off the canvas.

JP crossed the hall and went into the kitchens. There was a crowd here too. Two men were sitting side by side at a steel counter, bare-chested, their shirts tied around their heads. Beside each of them was a large pile of bananas

which they were unpeeling and eating at great speed, their faces expressions of pure concentration. The crowd were urging them on with monkey noises and the shout 'Eat! Eat!'

JP walked back into the hall and immediately found himself part of a circle of people. They were all laughing wildly. Someone seized JP's arm. A remarkably beautiful woman started to speak. 'So, a black man, a Jew and a dog go into a bar.' Everyone laughed. 'Not really,' said the woman. 'A bear goes into a bar and says: "I'd like a pint of –"' She looked around at the faces watching her and then down at her feet. She sipped her drink slowly. "'– Beer please.'" Barman says: "Hey, why the big paws?"

They all whooped and clinked their glasses. 'Look here,' said the man holding JP's arm. He had very thick black-rimmed glasses. 'This is a very important discussion. We're doing a survey to see who has the best joke. When we've heard them all we'll vote. What's your joke?'

They all turned eagerly to JP. His mind was blank. There were jokes in his best man's speech but not that kind. Someone at work had told him a joke the previous week, but he had no memory of how it went or whether or not it had been funny. 'Well,' he began, and they all leaned towards him. At that moment a stream of people surged out of the kitchens and into the hall. The two shirtless men were at the front, their faces monk-like, determined. Behind them came the crowd that had been watching them eat bananas. The crowd had their fists in the air and were chanting 'Swim the lake! Swim the lake!' The cry quickly took hold

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and a conga line of people began marching across the hall and out of the doors into the gardens. 'Swim the lake!' they shouted. 'Swim the lake!'

The hall emptied. One man lay sleeping on a sofa. JP wondered whether he should look for Roland. He opened the door into a room off the hall. Inside a couple were grappling with each other against a wall. 'Fuck off,' said the woman. JP closed the door. He stood at a window for a few minutes, listening to the shouts coming from the gardens, and then climbed the stairs to his room.

JP woke up several hours later. A lamp was on and Roland was sitting in one of the armchairs, smoking a very large cigar. His face was half in shadow and for a few moments JP wondered if he had woken into another dream, one in which Roland was a gangster come to execute him.

'Hello, hombre. Did I wake you? Can't see the bride on her wedding night. You know the rules.'

There was a line of cocaine on the table in front of him. He nodded at it, almost sorrowfully, JP thought. 'Fancy a toot?'

JP shook his head.

'Didn't think so. Keep me company though?'

'Fine,' said JP and pushed himself up in bed.

Roland leaned over the table and snorted it up. He pinched his left nostril closed and sniffed sharply, then the right.

‘Tell me,’ he said, wiping the back of his hand across his face. ‘Do you ever wonder about things – you know, really wonder? Take Larissa. She’s a terrific girl, right, it’s just . . .’ Roland trailed off. ‘I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking, spare me the wedding-night nerves, eh, hombre?’

JP did not know what he was thinking. Roland sighed. ‘I guess I’m just a little tightly wound right now.’ He began to separate out another line. ‘I’ve been having this dream, right, and in this dream I’m trying to run away from someone. I can’t get away from them so I end up stab-bing them with a knife, and it goes on for ages, really bloody, until I’ve killed them. I’ve been having it for months, always the same, and I wake up really freaked. The other day I worked it out. The thing is, I think the person I’m killing is me. What do you make of that?’

Even in the dim light, JP felt the lurking absurdity of the room and its decoration. He pushed himself further up in bed. At the other end of the room he could just see the silhouette of the native.

‘I don’t know,’ said JP, ‘it sounds pretty disturbing.’ He paused. ‘I guess we all have our low moments,’ he began. ‘I was seeing this woman – well, not exactly seeing, but we had something going. You met her. Molly.’

JP explained what had happened. Roland was quiet but at the end he said, ‘But you don’t regret it, right? Better to have loved and lost and all that?’

'I don't know,' said JP, 'it hurt a lot.'

Roland snorted the line that had been sitting in front of him.

'JP, let me ask you something. Seriously, I want you to tell me, because I trust you. Am I a cunt? Larissa thinks so. She tells me all the time.'

'No,' said JP, 'I don't think so.'

'Thanks, hombre. I'm glad you said that because I really wanted you to come and do this for me. I don't want to go on about it but I've been having a lot of dreams lately and they seem – I don't know – significant. Anyway, I had a dream about the wedding and you were there, the best man. And when I woke up I knew it was completely right, that the wedding needed you, that you would know exactly what to say. Don't ask me why. I guess I just always thought of you as one of the good guys, that's all.' He dragged on the cigar and blew great thick smoke rings across the room.

'Anyway,' he said, 'thanks for the little heart-to-heart. It's been good. A load off.' He stubbed the cigar out in an ashtray, stood up and stretched. 'You know the hilarious thing? I didn't even mean to propose. Misunderstanding. Anyway, long story. The day begins. Guess I'll go and see what's happening downstairs.'

After he had gone, JP got out of bed and crossed to the bathroom. There he ran a searingly hot bath and then sat in it, watching the sky lighten outside until the water went cold.

Later, JP went out. He went down to the lake and then walked around it, watching water spurt from the fountain in the middle. On one side of the lake was a maze, a stone lion on either side of the entrance. He went in. He remembered being told as a child that if you hugged the left-hand wall wherever it went then you would always find your way to the centre. It seemed odd to JP that every maze would conform to this rule but he tried it and, after ten minutes, he arrived in the middle. There was a bench with initials and dates etched deeply into it, and a cherry tree just beginning to bud. He lay on the bench. He could see water from the fountain high in the air and imagined he could feel its spray on his face. Somewhere else in the maze there were voices. JP fell into a doze and when he woke two things had come clearly into his head. The first was that Roland had written the emails – there never had been a Molly. The second was the joke he had been told at work.

JP hardly noticed the wedding ceremony. He stood at the front of the main hall next to Roland. When Larissa came down the stairs in her dress, JP registered her vaguely as the girl he had thought to be Molly – the short dark hair, small mouth and pale blue eyes of the picture. Roland and Larissa read their vows, JP produced the ring from his pocket and they signed the marriage register. At the end of the ceremony the guests sang a song which they all seemed to know but which JP did not recognise.

Lunch was in the dining room. JP was on the top table with Roland and Larissa's family. Each person's place was marked with a little clue or riddle written on a piece of ornately designed card. JP's said 'The Trojan Horse'. Next to him was one of the men who had gone to swim the lake. He was Larissa's brother. Several people called out to him with monkey noises and mimed eating a banana, and he did the same back to them.

'Was it cold?' asked JP.

The brother looked blankly at him. 'The water. Was the lake cold?'

The brother shrugged and turned to speak to someone else.

JP picked at his food. The room was noisy and hot, and he felt extremely tired. A microphone was set up at one end of the room and after lunch the speeches began. Each time JP thought he was about to be announced, someone else stood up. An uncle of Roland's delivered a whole speech in rhyming couplets, a novelty that brought the house down. JP wondered if Roland had dreamed of every single one of these people speaking at his wedding. When the fourth person, Larissa's mother, stood up, JP went out to use the toilet. He stood leaning against the wall, taking deep breaths. Then he sat on the toilet and emptied his bowels. When he got back the room was quiet, and Larissa's mother was sitting down.

JP walked the length of the room to the microphone.

Everyone was staring at him. Roland was smiling but his face was stretched, tense. JP noticed the man from the night before with the black-rimmed spectacles, the couple grappling behind the door, the man sleeping on the sofa. He had the sudden, strong sensation that they knew all his secrets, everything there was to know about him – but this did not seem so bad. He felt light, powerful.

When he reached the microphone JP took out the speech cards from his jacket. His hands were sweaty and as he brought the cards up to his face he fumbled them and they fell to the floor. ‘Oh,’ said someone. JP was about to kneel down to gather them up when the thought hit him. He did not need them. He had a great deal to say – it would just be a question of knowing where to start. He cleared his throat.

Just then, JP felt his chest tighten. The floor rocked abruptly under him. He knew what was happening and he reached out to steady himself on a table. One of the guests laughed, then another; there was a smattering of applause. ‘Speech!’ shouted someone. ‘Speech!’ and a cry went up. ‘Speech! Speech!’

‘I’m not –’ began JP and then slid to the floor . . .

When his eyes opened, JP felt a new clarity. People were gathered round him on all sides. ‘Hombre!’ said Roland. Between the crush of bodies JP spotted an open window on the far side of the room and began to make his way towards it. He felt as if he were floating free of his body. ‘Show love,’ he cried out

ecstatically. 'Show love.' Roland was coming after him. He did not look well, JP thought, not at all well. 'Hombre!' called Roland but his voice already seemed very far away. JP went on towards the window and the open air beyond.

Reunion

The last time I saw my son was in Waterloo Station. It had been a year or so since our previous encounter, an occasion that, typically, had not gone well. This time he had sent a postcard, a crumpled picture of a tacky looking Spanish beach resort, postmarked in Bath, with a brief message saying he would be passing through London and asking if we could meet here and at this time. This was a standard quirk of his – not a phone call or an email, no address to reply to, and the presumption in it irritated me. I recognised all the things about him that drove me to distraction, the mixture of meekness and arrogance, the perversity, the request for money that seemed likely to follow. I thought about calling his mother for more information but this had never been worth the aggravation in the past and I decided to make the rendezvous.

Several weeks earlier I had seen a fireball. I learned to call it this later: a meteor but bigger, brighter, more spectacular than was usual. I wouldn't normally have been in a position to see it – this was something that struck me, and still strikes me, forcefully – but it was a Saturday. I had been sleeping badly and had stayed in bed late, listening to the sounds of my wife and daughters downstairs, and staring out of the window. Our bedroom looks out over woods and behind and above the gauze of bare branches the sky was the kind of crystalline, cloudless, very pale blue that you only seem to get towards the end of autumn. The fireball moved horizontally and very quickly across my field of vision, East to West, flaming blue and orange, very beautiful. It couldn't have lasted more than 2 or 3

seconds before burning out. By the time I was alert to it, it had gone.

Throughout the day I described it to people – my family, people at work – and although they expressed envy and surprise, it seemed hard to adequately impress anyone with the sight of it. A few news websites had stories about something that matched the description, but only in other parts of the country and earlier in the week. I read that it was a very rare thing to see in daylight and the chance that I might have been its only audience provoked an unfamiliar, almost mystical, feeling in me, the sense that this ‘vision’ (as my wife took to calling it) was a kind of gift.

I was thinking about the fireball, and perhaps staring up at the roof of the station, when my son tapped me on the shoulder.

‘Hi Dad.’

‘Hi Daniel,’ I said, and then, ‘I’m here’.

He seemed to miss or ignore the implication of this – that he could not have known for certain I would come.

‘You look well,’ I said. This wasn’t stretching things too much. He looked better. He had put on some weight and grown his hair out a little so that it began to curl, and the monkish look that I had almost got used to was tempered. Still, there were the dark circles around the eyes and adolescent complexion, the look of someone who didn’t eat or sleep well or enough. And although he was

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not smart, he was not ragged – a shirt, dark trousers without obvious holes, clean shaven - the closest I imagined he got to dressing for an occasion.

‘You too, Dad. This is Ruth.’

I had not noticed her. At least, in the general melee of the station I had not registered that she was with him, with us. She smiled slightly but did not look at me and her body language gave the impression that she would rather be elsewhere, though I could see she might always give this impression. She was not much – put bluntly – to get excited about. Fair, faintly reddish hair, pretty maybe, but buried in a heap of scarves, fleeces and other shapeless clothes, entirely sexless. I immediately caught from her the same serene suffering air that was familiar to me from my son. But she was new – I had not seen her before, had not seen anyone before. It could be good news, some kind of progress. I decided to treat it as if it was.

‘Hello Ruth,’ I said. ‘You guys ready for lunch?’

‘We don’t have time, Dad. We have to get the train at one. Let’s have a tea in the station.’

‘The restaurant’s only five minutes away and they’re quick. You’ll like it. You’ll make your train.’

Daniel looked up at the departure board and then at Ruth.

‘I’m not sure, Dad.’

It is fair to say that, by anyone's assessment, my son has had some difficulties. Restless and unsmiling as a child, he turned into a withdrawn, depressed teenager. When he was fourteen he tried to commit suicide twice, stopped going to school regularly and started seeing a therapist. He was put on various medications which seemed to do little except convince him of the singularity of his misery. Then, a little later, came dope and I don't know what other drugs. 'Self-medicating,' his mother said, no doubt self-medicating in much the same fashion herself.

She and I split up when Daniel was two, although it was a miracle we even made it that far. A year later she was living with a man named Mike Corelli who called himself a pagan and had a shop near Brighton selling Chinese herbs that he grew and harvested himself. Over the years I have had a few insights into the chaotic household they ran, the sorts of friends they had, the sporadic appearance of Mike's delinquent children from an earlier relationship. Throughout Daniel's childhood his mother had continued her own clichéd and gaudy drift into the alternative and the new age. Although distressed by his problems, she also seemed to see his unhappiness, his general at-oddsness-with-everything, as proof of some special depth of intelligence or sensitivity that should be honoured or indulged.

The restaurant, a noodle place I knew well, was basic and informal. It was lunchtime, busy, and it was good to be amongst the hum of other people. Daniel

and Ruth had a tatty rucksack each which Daniel stacked in a corner. The waitress brought us menus.

‘Where are you from, Ruth?’ I said, though I wondered immediately if this was just the wrong sort of question to ask.

She didn’t reply, but smiled again without looking at me and turned the menu over in her hands. It occurred to me that she was under some kind of instruction, self-imposed or otherwise, not to speak.

‘We can’t eat any of this, Dad.’

‘Ok,’ I said. ‘Sure. I’m going to get something. Just have a drink, then.’

I ordered soup and a beer and Daniel asked for water for the two of them. When the waitress brought a bottle he asked her for a jug filled from the tap instead. When she had returned with this Ruth looked around and then got up and went to the toilet.

‘How long have you two been...’ I trailed off, looking for the right word.

‘A while,’ Daniel said, ‘it’s serious.’

‘I can see that,’ I said.

An image of them together came into my mind, their pale bony bodies moving listlessly against each other. I put it out of my mind, guiltily.

Ruth came back to the table just as my food arrived. Daniel looked at the clock on the wall.

'Where are you headed?' I asked.

'We've been to see Mum. Now we're going back to The Farm.'

Looking back, the religious phase seems like an inevitability. The first I knew of it was when I saw his mother at the funeral of a mutual friend earlier in the year. I had expected to see Daniel too, but was told he was at The Farm. This turned out to be both the collective name for a small Christian-cultish group of modern life refuseniks and a rather grand description of an old barn and a few acres of land somewhere in Somerset. They grew fruit and vegetables in an effort to subsist but were, I suspect, kept afloat by the contributions of more worldly relatives. As soon as I heard about it I had a pretty clear image of what sort of place this would be – puritan, joyless, governed by bizarre strictures, a magnet for misfits, former addicts and exploiters. Even then, I could see that perhaps it wasn't entirely a bad thing for Daniel, he needed something. Presumably Ruth was part of the same set up.

'Dad, we have to go.'

I wished he would stop saying Dad like that, so deliberately.

'Daniel,' I said, 'it's half past. You have plenty of time.'

'We don't, Dad. We need to go.'

He was pulling agitatedly on a leather band around his wrist, some marker of The Farm perhaps. I noticed his hands, his long thin fingers, they were terribly like my own.

'I'm still eating.' I took a spoonful of soup to demonstrate my point.

'But we'll miss it.'

They started to put their coats on, as if on cue.

'So get a later one. I'll pay for it, if that's what it takes.'

'Someone's meeting us when we get there.'

'So call them.'

He shrugged his shoulders, helplessly.

'Of course,' I said. There was no number to call.

'Wait,' I said, putting my spoon down. 'There's something I want to tell you about. You'll be interested. It was a few weeks ago. I saw this amazing thing...'

I stopped. Daniel had held up his hand to silence me.

'Dad, I'm not going to see you again. That's why we're here.'

'You wanted to see me to say you weren't going to see me?' I laughed.

They both got up. Daniel held up Ruth's bag so she could slip her arms through the straps. Her sleeve caught in one of the buckles and it seemed to take forever to pull it free. Then Daniel put on his own bag and turned back to me.

'Goodbye,' he said.

I put some money, much too much, on the table, and got up.

'I'll come with you,' I said.

At Waterloo I stood and watched their rucksacks disappear into the crowd. Nearly a 100 million people passed through the station every year. I had read that somewhere. I bought a newspaper but then didn't look at it. I thought of the fireball again and what I had wanted to say to my son. It was impossible to describe what I had seen, but the glory of it was still fresh in my mind. I saw myself bathed in its blue-orange glow and thought that if there were such a thing as grace then this is what it felt like.

The Swimmer

Ever since my father's treatment – which, in many ways, had to be considered a success – it had been hard to know what to do with him. My brother and I went to pick him up from the farmhouse in Dorset where he had been staying for the week. When we pulled into the driveway we could see him sitting around a table in the garden with seven or eight others, all talking and smiling, their faces turned to receive the sun which was bright and high in the sky. He came over to the car, hugged us both fiercely – uncharacteristically so – and then led us over to the group. 'These are my boys,' he said to them, and then told us everyone's names. Someone brought us tea from inside the house and a balding man about my own age began to ask me a series of earnest questions, about my work, my family, my plans for the future. Next to me, my brother was receiving the same treatment from someone else. Meanwhile, my father seemed to have resumed telling a story, the details of which I could not catch but which was punctuated by comments and bursts of laughter from the rest of the group. Altogether, an air of brittle hilarity, or even joy, hung over the scene and in this – as in other ways – they struck me as resembling nothing so much as a group of hostages suddenly and unexpectedly given their freedom.

After ten minutes or so my father finished his story, stood up and began to embrace each person around the table. There were vows to email and phone and get together again soon, emotional goodbyes that seemed excessive for people who had known each other for not even a week. My brother and I found ourselves shaking hands with each member of the group in turn, accepting their

good wishes. Before we got in the car, my father made a great show of folding up his wheelchair and packing it in the boot.

In the car, my father talked – very rapidly, a stream of free association, flitting from one subject to another and then back again, the words sometimes getting tangled up or muddled, his mind apparently moving more quickly than he could articulate. He sat in the back, his face pressed against the window, pointing out everything that went past, a vintage car similar to one his brother had once owned, a pub that would have been nice for lunch except it was past lunchtime and anyway he wasn't hungry, repeatedly marvelling at the loveliness of the day and the countryside, the hills, the blossom on the trees, how all this made him think of a holiday he and my mother had taken nearby before my brother and I were born. Throughout this, one of his feet drummed rapidly on the floor of the car.

My brother asked him what they had done during the week, the nature of the treatment, but he waved his hand, as if to knock the question away.

'Amazing people, just amazing people', he said, although it was not clear if he was referring to those we had been introduced to in the garden – his fellow hostages - or others who had remained unseen. 'Don't worry, you'll hear all about it,' he said, although somehow we never did. At times he seemed

exhausted by his own efforts. He would try and stop himself, closing his eyes and taking deep breaths, one hand placed across his chest, as if swearing an

oath. At one point he took a small card from his wallet and began to mouth whatever was written on it, some kind of mantra perhaps, but then something else caught his attention beyond the car window and he was talking again.

After an hour we stopped at a service station just outside Dorchester. My brother went to fill up the car with petrol. I left my father in the cafe whilst I went to the toilet. I stared in the mirror for a minute, looking at a wrinkle line that was beginning to take hold around the side of my mouth. Then I opened my wallet, popped a pill out of its foil strip and swallowed it with a gulp of water from the tap. When I got back to the cafe my father was sitting at a table with three bottles of Diet Coke in front of him. I raised my eyebrows.

‘Max’ – I did not know a Max – ‘put me on to this stuff. Very more-ish. I got us one each.’

He looked down at a map on the table in front of him and then took a long sip of the Coke. ‘What do you think about a little diversion?’

It took another hour to get to Studland Bay and when we pulled up behind the dunes my father got out of the car and began to undress. ‘Oh Jesus,’ said my brother. For a moment it looked as if he was taking everything off but when he got down to his pants he threw the rest of the clothes in the car and set off towards the water. All the hair on his body was snowy white and I noticed the considerable weight he – always a lean man – had put on whilst he had been ill. My brother and I climbed to the top of the dunes and watched him wade

purposefully into the sea. It was beginning to get dusky and the beach was empty but I wondered what any onlooker might have made of this man, this scene. When the water was up to his waist he raised his arms above his head, dived in and swam. He was a strong, graceful swimmer, I had forgotten that. 'I don't know whether to laugh or cry,' said my brother. We had not known what we would find when we went to pick him up – we had hoped for something, certainly – but this, this was strange.

Over the next few weeks my father called me several times a day, often late at night or early in the morning – it was clear he wasn't sleeping very much. He was always excited, desperate to tell me about something he had read or seen on television, some new piece of information that had struck him forcefully, or report what he had been up to. He bought a mobile phone and discovered the internet and began to bombard me with text messages and emails with jokes or links to articles he thought I should read.

He started to build a treehouse in the back garden for my son and my brother's children, although this got him into a row with the neighbours because of its size and the way it hung over their own garden ('fuck 'em,' he said). He joined an amateur dramatics society, and wrote 'twenty or thirty' letters to the council and the local paper about a range of issues, none of which had yet been replied to or published. He took in a retired greyhound that he had seen pictured in a newsagent window.

A month after we picked him up from Dorset, perhaps with memories of that expedition still fresh in his mind, he called to suggest we take a trip to the First World War battlefields and cemeteries in Northern France. His own father had fought at the Somme and The Battle of Amiens and in the past, before he had been ill, we had sometimes talked of exactly this, a kind of pilgrimage. He had already spoken to my brother who had pleaded work and family commitments, no doubt truthfully.

‘Given your situation,’ he said to me, ‘I imagine you are more flexible.’

I asked what my stepmother thought about this.

‘Well, Diane has moved out – temporarily.’

Before I could gather a response he went on.

‘I said a few things that upset her. Look, it’s nothing to worry about. What about this trip? We’ll eat steak frites, drink pastis, that sort of thing.’

The fact was I could think of no compelling reason why I could not go. My situation, as my father called it, was that my four year old son lived with his mother and her new boyfriend at the other end of the country, and my work came in fits and starts. It felt melancholy to be so available but the alternative, not going, staying at home, was barely more appealing.

‘There isn’t anywhere else you’d rather go? It’s not all that uplifting a destination.’

‘But it is, it is,’ he said with emphasis, ‘that’s exactly what it is.’

My father insisted on taking the overnight ferry from Portsmouth to St Malo, although this was not in any way a direct route. He said there was a romance to getting a cabin and sleeping on a boat, the sense of travel as a true experience. From there we would drive to Paris, spend the night, and then move on to the battlefields and cemeteries.

By the time we boarded the ferry there was only time to have a quick meal, watch the lights of the shore recede from the deck and then find the way to our cabin. The room was small but my father was delighted with the way it all fitted together – the fold down beds, the TV recessed into the wall, the surprising amount of cupboard space – and he went around opening and closing doors, fastening and unfastening catches, investigating each feature. It was the first of several nights sharing a room with my father and I do not think we had ever done it before as adults. His personal, intimate habits - the way he took his socks off last when he undressed and then put them on first in the morning, the rather horrible way he spat after cleaning his teeth – made him seem alien, unknown to me. My own rituals, unexposed now for some time, suddenly seemed old-mannish, even shameful – the plastic guard I wore to stop my teeth grinding and which left a bloody taste in my mouth in the morning, the earplugs and sleeping mask. My father gave no sign of being similarly discomfited. He was still awake reading a newspaper when I turned out the light above my bed. When the ferry

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p.a. system woke me in the morning to announce that we had docked, he was standing between the beds performing Tai Chi exercises.

It was clear that, since Dorset, my father had calmed down considerably. Even in his more manic moods, the chatter was not so continuous, so rambling, although his preoccupations were still often surprising. These highs were also now interspersed with quieter more brooding periods, as if some of his intensity had turned inward. One of these moods seemed to descend on him as we drove out of St Malo, as it had the previous day on the way to Portsmouth. It was as if movement, the road, brought it on. He stared out of the window, sipping at another Diet Coke, perhaps lost in contemplation of the trip ahead and whatever it meant to him.

Ten kilometres or so beyond Rennes he turned away from the window and asked me what I wanted done with my body after my death. Whether this question had just occurred to him or was indicative of the general drift of his thoughts, I couldn't say. He did not wait for me to reply. 'The Tibetans have a tradition of sky burial,' he said. 'I've been researching it – online. Incredible resource...' For a moment he seemed to have lost his thread, and I pictured his mind floating off to the far reaches of cyberspace. 'The body is cut up and placed around the mountain top and vultures and other birds of prey eat the flesh.

They believe that the spirit leaves the body in death, so there's no need to preserve it. There are practical reasons too, but it's also an act of generosity,

giving yourself to other animals to sustain them. There are places you can do it here now - in Europe, I mean. There's something rather beautiful in the idea, don't you think?'

'I've always rather liked the idea of a Viking burial,' I said, 'sent off in a burning ship, sword laid at my side, et cetera et cetera.' I said this a little flippantly, but I was struck, quite abruptly, by an image of myself - stretched out in a long boat, eyes closed, a faint smile on my lips but apparently dead, the skin of my hands and feet beginning to blacken and catch fire.

'Do you actually care what happens to you?' my father said, rather irritably.

I looked at him. 'When I'm dead, I'm dead,' I said.

'You should have more respect for yourself,' he said, 'for your body.'

'But you said -' I began.

'I'll tell you a story,' he went on. 'Twenty years ago scientists carried out an experiment where they killed a dog - killed it humanely - drained its blood and replaced it with some kind of preserving solution. Three hours later they put the blood back in and brought the dog back to life. Only problem was - the animal was completely mad, psychotic. Every time they tried it, the same result. They had to put all the dogs down.'

I did not know what conclusions I was supposed to draw from this. When he did not continue I looked over at him.

'Hmmm...' he said vaguely, and then turned his attention back to the window.

We stopped for lunch in a village just beyond Laval. We sat outside in the pleasantly shady medieval square, with a bowl of moules et frites, and it was possible to feel like we were on holiday. My father seemed to have relaxed and was talking about his own father, stories I had heard many times before but was happy to hear again. Before the war my grandfather had worked on the trams in Blackpool and then for a chain of local cinemas. The cinemas all showed the same films but there was only ever one print so he cycled between them with the reels in the basket on the front of his bike, delivering and collecting them in a constant rotation to keep the films playing. When he went to enlist in 1914 he told them how old he was, sixteen, and the recruitment sergeant suggested he walk up and down the street and come in and tell them again. A picture of him taken before he went had always hung in my father's house, a formal shot, standing feet apart with some kind of cane braced between his hands, heartbreakingly young in his uniform. He had made a friend in France, Stan Cope, another sixteen year old, from South Wales, who was killed two months before the end of the war. We were going to visit Stan's grave in Amiens.

When we got back to the car my father asked to drive. He had not driven throughout his illness or since, as far as I knew.

'You forget, I was driving before you were even born.' He held out his hand for the keys.

At the slip road to the motorway, two hitchhikers were standing on the hard shoulder with their thumbs out.

'No one picks up hitchers anymore, Dad,' I said, but he was already slowing down.

My father interrogated them as he drove, switching his attention between the backseat and the road ahead in a way that did not strike me as entirely safe. They were Bernard and Patti, a young Dutch couple on their way to Paris to stay with friends. Bernard had a shaven head, a ring through his lip and orange and red flames tattooed the length of his forearms. She was very pale skinned, with short, bleached white hair and bright blue eyes. They were students in Amsterdam, both twenty-four years old, and had spent the summer travelling around France. Bernard was writing a thesis on prehistoric cave painting and they had been visiting important sites up and down the country. Bernard was forthcoming on all of this, eager to talk in his perfect, almost accentless English. Patti sat silently, smiling slightly and benignly, sometimes with her eyes closed.

'What's the story with those tattoos,' my father asked Bernard.

Bernard shrugged. 'No story. A friend of mine did them. I thought they'd look good. You like them.' It was a statement rather than a question.

'Not worried you might regret them when you're older,' my father said, 'my age perhaps? Or even my son's?' He indicated me with a thumb.

'I don't want to be the sort of person who has regrets.' He was a little annoyed by the question, or pretending to be.

'Good answer,' said my father thoughtfully, 'good answer.'

There was silence for several minutes and then my father said: 'There's nothing more beautiful than a pregnant woman, right Bernard!'

Bernard laughed. 'It's the truth!' he said.

I looked around at Patti. I had not noticed the way her dress tightened around the swell of her belly. She had her palms placed on either side of it, instinctively or absent-mindedly, the way pregnant women often do, as Helen, my ex, had done when she was pregnant with our son. Patti saw me looking at her, and her smile widened.

I closed my eyes and pretended to be asleep as the conversation went on between my father and Bernard. My father began to philosophise about the raising of children. He felt – I had never heard him express views on this or seen evidence of it before – that modern parenting was so neurotic and controlling that it had created a world for children that was utterly dry, sterile and

conformist. Children needed to experience fear, take risks, be free. 'I have seen it with my own grandchildren', he said. I flicked my eyes open at this but then closed them again without speaking. Bernard agreed with him. He talked about his and Patti's plans for their child, from the home birth to the long trips they would take whilst it was still small, the virtues of openness, innocence and courage that they wanted to instil. My father described an old tradition that had been revived in Russia of baptising young children by dipping them in holes cut through frozen rivers and lakes. 'Some say it erases sin,' my father said. 'The more prosaic view is that it's good for the immune system - and vitality in general. A little extreme, I'll admit.' I had read about this too – some children were said to have died this way. 'Perhaps a little,' Bernard said tolerantly. 'Right,' my father went on, 'but my point is...'

I pretended to be asleep, and then I was asleep.

When I woke up I could not tell how much time had passed. My father was still talking.

'It's life and death, you know, two sides of the same coin, the yin and the yang et cetera et cetera. In some ways, after all that, I don't give a fuck. But in other ways I do, I absolutely do. It gives you a different perspective, that's all.'

In the mirror I could see Bernard nodding soberly, apparently absorbing what my father had been saying. I wondered what I had missed, what essential conversation this might be the conclusion to. Regardless, my father seemed

satisfied that he had expressed himself as fully as was possible. We were approaching Paris and for the rest of the journey, until we dropped Bernard and Patti off at a station on the outskirts of the city, no one spoke. My father gave Bernard his email and phone number and insisted that they come and stay with him when the child was born. Bernard tried to give my father money for petrol but he refused. He hugged them both and I awkwardly did the same.

‘Nice kids,’ he said when we were back in the car. ‘Stunning girl.’

‘Yes,’ I said.

My father had booked us into a faded and pretentious tourist hotel in the Latin Quarter. There was a liveried porter on the door, embossed stationery and a small, grimy window in our room that looked out over the domes of the Pantheon, which no doubt accounted for the excessive cost. The room was poky and full of odd angles, evidently subdivided from a more generous space. Crammed into it was a double bed with an ornate headboard, instead of the two singles my father had reserved.

I ran a hot bath and lay in it, staring at the ceiling. Through the wall, I could hear my father on the phone, with long pauses whilst the person on the other end of the line spoke. I could not make out what he was saying but the tone became steadily more irritable and then there was a somehow deeper silence and I knew that my father had hung up. He began whistling, always one

of his habits. I lay there for another ten minutes whilst the water cooled and then got out.

Back in the bedroom, he was standing looking out of the window, still whistling.

'Diane says hello,' he said, without turning around.

'Everything ok?'

'Oh, fine, fine. It's cold there apparently, raining.'

'Right,' I said.

'You know the history of the place?' He meant the Pantheon. 'Louis XIV – or maybe it was Louis XV.... Anyway, he was dying of a mysterious fever and in his prayers he promised to build a church to Saint Genevieve if she cured him. The fever passed and this is what he built. Not the most beautiful building, but it has a certain grandeur I think. Later on, after the revolution, they turned it into a mausoleum – Victor Hugo, Voltaire, Rousseau, those guys.'

'I didn't know that,' I said.

He turned around and grinned.

'So now you do.'

He went into the bathroom to wash and I called my son to wish him goodnight. I tried to do this every night, even though Helen had let me know that

it was an inconvenience for her and perhaps not much fun for me or him either. Then I called my brother to let him know we were still in one piece. He laughed sympathetically and told me to keep him updated. 'Rather you than me,' he said.

'Cometh the hour, cometh the man,' I said.

The evening was still warm and we had dinner sitting outside at the restaurant next to the hotel. We had steak which came very bloody and my father ordered a fifty euro bottle of red wine, even though I said I wasn't drinking. His mood had turned fidgety, distracted, and he barely ate. A small, mangy dog sat pleadingly near our table and he cut off strips of his meat and threw it on the ground.

My father started to talk about Stan Cope. Two days after the end of the Battle of Amiens, in August 1918, the beginning of the end of the war, Stan collapsed with a brain aneurysm. I had never heard this before, or had forgotten it – I had assumed he had been killed in battle. 'He was sharing a cigarette with my dad and just keeled over. He might have had a knock on the head but it could have happened to him anyway, war or no war. Still, they buried him with the war dead - as they should.'

My grandfather was twenty when he got back from the war. He married soon after, had six children, of which my father was the youngest, and lived for

another 75 years. He spoke freely about his years in France, and did not seem traumatised by it, although he used to say that he had seen enough of the rest of the world for one lifetime and never went further than Manchester again.

‘Have you put on a few pounds?’ My father had changed the subject and was looking at me beadily, as if I was just coming into focus for him for the first time on our trip. ‘The Spanish have a phrase for it – Curva de la Felicidad, the Girth of Happiness. The weight a man puts on when he gets married and is comfortable in his life. It’s a lovely expression, especially in English. But I suppose that’s not really you is it...’ He broke off, but not, I think, out of a sense of tact.

For all his talk over the last weeks, my father had not spoken to me about his illness, treatment or recovery, if that was what it was. I sensed some kind of taboo around it – his or my own, I couldn’t say - as if to confront it directly might break whatever spell had been cast. The subject struck me as exhausting, irrelevant and dangerous all at the same time. Or perhaps not speaking of it – or perhaps of Helen – was part of a tacit understanding on both sides of what we could bear. But I felt moved to broach it now, when abruptly the waiter arrived to take our plates away.

My father ordered a Diet Coke and by the time the waiter left the moment seemed to have passed. I went inside to use the toilet. There was a queue and when I came out my father was not at our table. I thought perhaps he had gone up to our room in the hotel to get something. The waiter brought

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his Coke but he still did not appear. Someone across the square shouted and I looked across to the giant-columned portico of the Pantheon. The two columns furthest to the right were covered in scaffolding – presumably to allow cleaning or restoration work to the frieze that lay across the width of the portico – and three quarters of the way up, perhaps 100 feet off the ground and climbing, was my father.

It took me a few moments to absorb this and by the time I had stood up and run over, passersby were already beginning to gather at the foot of the building and watch. The base of the scaffolding was boarded up but on one side an access door was open. Either my father had spotted this from the restaurant or had just got lucky. Now he was scaling the ladders at speed and in very bad light. The crowd continued to gather. Someone called to him to come down. My father carried on, apparently oblivious, intent on whatever mission he had set himself. Something stopped me from calling out to him myself, shock perhaps, a kind of estrangement that meant I could not identify him as my father, myself as his son.

When he reached the top level, he walked to the left hand end of the scaffolding and climbed on to the narrow ledge underneath the frieze so that his back was pressed against the figures. He began to make his way slowly along the ledge. ‘Don’t do it,’ someone shouted in French. ‘Do it,’ shouted someone else, and laughed. My father stumbled slightly, steadied himself. He looked around and then down. He was a long way up, tiny against the looming mass of the

church, but I was sure he was smiling. He held out his phone and seemed to take a photo - of the view or of himself, I couldn't tell.

It seemed to take forever for him to get down – I counted 11 ladders. Halfway down the final one he missed his footing and fell the few feet to the ground. The police and an ambulance had arrived and the crowd were pushed back and told to move on. I identified myself and was let through. My father was shaking, elated. Two policemen were asking him questions and a paramedic was holding his arm.

'Cold up there,' he said to me.

'I can imagine,' I said, but that was all I could say. I felt my legs begin to buckle and I sat down on the ground next to him, utterly drained.

We got back to the hotel at three am and I took a pill to knock me out. At the police station my father had given a statement in which he offered no explanation for his stunt except that he was a little drunk and happy to be in Paris. He was given a warning and told that what he had done was very dangerous for him and for others, but when the formalities were over, the two officers shook hands with us and wished us a good trip. At the hospital an x-ray of my father's right arm showed a small fracture and a nurse put it up in a sling.

I slept lightly, despite the pill, and from time to time, through my grogginess, I was aware of my father sitting in the chair by the window or moving around the room. When I woke up, around ten, I was lying diagonally across the

bed and there was no sign of him, but I did not seem to have any worry left in me. I had a shower and went downstairs to have breakfast. He came in just as my food arrived, his arm strapped, his hair wild, and still wearing the clothes from the night before.

He sat down and poured himself some orange juice with his good arm.

'Beautiful day,' he said.

He hadn't been able to sleep so had sat up reading before going out to find an early coffee and watch the sun come up. When the Pantheon had opened at nine he had gone down into the crypt to look at the tombs. He showed me a small lead model of the church that he had bought himself from the gift shop and then handed over a t-shirt that had a picture of the Eiffel Tower and above it the words 'J'adore Paris.'

'A memento of our trip,' he said, almost sheepishly.

'You crazy bastard,' I said.

'Perhaps don't mention it to your stepmother.'

He finished his juice and stood up.

'We should get going. It's blue skies out there.'

It was around 3 hours driving to Amiens, where my Grandfather and Stan Cope had fought, and the cemetery where Stan was buried. After lunch we would go to the Somme Battlefields. We had a hotel booked in Arras for the night.

My father was quiet again. Once we had navigated our way out of Paris we didn't speak, but the silence felt companionable. About fifty kilometres from Amiens we crested a hill and suddenly we were amongst field after field of sunflowers. From there the land flattened out into the plains of the Somme valley and it was not hard to imagine vast armies inching backwards and forwards across the land. Soon we began to see the signs for the battlefields and cemeteries. We stopped at one of the roadside flower sellers and my father bought a bunch of red and yellow tulips.

St Pierre cemetery was a modest sized, unspectacular place, in a nondescript suburb of Amiens, backed on three sides by uniformly spaced yew trees. We walked through the iron entrance gates and past the stone of remembrance, engraved *Their Name Liveth for Evermore*. The sun was very bright and the clean white Portland stone of the headstones stood out like teeth against the immaculate green lawns. We found Stan's grave easily, half way along the final row. Below the cross, it read *Private S Cope, The Queens, 28th August 1918, Age 19.*

My father laid the tulips next to the headstone and began to pick fussily at the neatly mown grass around it, as if determined to find weeds. I wandered along the row – some of the dead were younger than Stan – and was startled by

the sound of my father's voice. At first I did not know who he was addressing, but then I recognised the poem. I did not know that my father read poetry, let alone knew any by heart. Perhaps he had studied it at school, as I had. Standing in front of Stan's grave, his eyes closed, his bad arm hanging across his chest, again he seemed unfamiliar to me and somehow, briefly – though I don't really like the word - heroic.

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle

Can patter out their hasty orisons.

No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;

Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, –

His voice began to crack but he kept going, with some effort. When he got to the end he sat down on the grass, buried his head in the crook of his fractured arm and began properly to cry. It began as a steady sob, moving on to a wail and then a kind of keening of pure, uninhibited sorrow. Whatever brittle barrier had penned this in over the last weeks had broken, it seemed to me, and out it came, torrentially, ecstatically.

I did not know whether to try and stop him or at least move him along, out of the cemetery and back to the car, somewhere more discrete, although we

seemed beyond that now. There were a few other people walking amongst the graves but no one was looking at us. Perhaps it was unremarkable in a place like this. I hesitated to intervene with him, such was the elemental force of his emotion. He did not seem to be trying to stop. Then I sat down too and put my arm around him, and he wept into my chest.

His face was red and swollen and his eyes bloodshot, but by the time we drove out of the car park my father had recovered his composure. We had planned to go on another hour or so and find somewhere for lunch, but as soon as we crossed a bridge over the Somme river – I had not realised that it was this that gave the area and the battle its name – he asked me to pull over.

On both sides the road was lined with fields of corn, six to eight feet high. My father got out of the car, and after walking up and down for a minute, disappeared into it. For perhaps two minutes I sat in the car, the engine still on. I took the strip of pills out of my wallet and registered dimly that there were not many left. I swallowed two with a gulp of the flat Diet Coke that my father had been drinking the day before. Then I pulled the car further off the road, got out and locked it. In among the corn there was the sound of water. The stalks were bent and trampled where my father had passed through. I went on for several minutes to where the field gave way to a small pebbly beach. The river was narrow here, perhaps fifteen metres wide, and ran quickly. There were willows

trailing their branches in the water on the opposite side. My father's clothes and the sling for his arm lay on the beach.

I shaded my arms against the sun and spotted him, out in the river, a little downstream. His arms were in the air and at first I thought he was struggling, but then I saw he was gesturing for me to come in. I began to undress, laying my clothes next to my father's. The skin of my ankles prickled as it touched the water and I thought for a second of children dipped in freezing lakes and rivers. I thought of the places we were yet to visit, the strange resonance of their names – Thiepval, Ypres, Passchendaele. I thought I felt the familiar, peaceful flood of the pills begin to wash over me, but it was too soon for that. I went on into the current.

Big Cat

One evening in the pub my friend Jonny told me about his encounter with the Big Cat. Every day he went running through Dulwich Woods – keeps my head together, he said – and on one of these runs, very early in the morning, sitting in full view on a fallen-down tree and watching him approach, was a black cat the size of a Labrador. He kept running and as he drew level the cat jumped off the fallen trunk and began to run too. For several seconds – during which, according to Jonny, they stared into each other’s eyes – they ran along the path together before the cat peeled off into the trees. It was a profound thing, he said, man and beast. I laughed at Jonny and he didn’t mind that – but he wasn’t joking. And anyway, with Jonny, somehow it didn’t seem so improbable. I could see the whole thing in my head.

Since we had moved further out of town – a bigger place, a garden, better schools, the usual things – I had heard stories of the Big Cat. Every so often a sighting was reported in the local paper, usually accompanied by a photo of the witness who had surprised it in his garden or seen it racing across Crystal Palace Park. Or someone would tell you that the uncle of someone her neighbours’ kids went to nursery with had been bitten trying to pull it off his dog. And it did strike me, although perhaps at the time everything struck me this way, that there was something peculiarly suburban about the phenomenon, the idea of some wild, untamed id stalking the quiet, repressed streets. Once, not long after we moved in, I walked past the mutilated body of a fox lying against a fence, partly buried under leaves but with its guts apparently half spilled out. It

was there again the next day and the day after and it seemed wrong that no one had cleared it away, though of course I did not do it myself. Each time, it gave me a shock to see it, but I did not think particularly of the Big Cat stories. Perhaps I had not heard them then. I had recently had what I suppose you would call a breakdown and with this had developed an entirely new sensitivity to anything that could be construed as an ill omen, and it was in this light that the sight of the fox affected me. A 'breakdown' was certainly how my wife recorded it in her diary of daily events – J: breakdown, she showed me – the same way she would a visit to the dentist or the delivery of a new washing machine. This did not really do justice to it but it was her way – and not a bad way – of nailing it down.

I bumped into Jonny on the train home soon after we moved, and this seemed a little fated. We had not seen each other for a long time, almost exactly ten years, but I knew his parents lived in the area. A great deal had happened since then but it was as if I had been on the look-out for him for the whole of that time. I often dreamt about him and had driven my wife crazy wondering aloud where Jonny – who she had never met – might be, how he was or what he was doing. The train had just left Victoria when I saw someone pull himself up on the handrail, so that he was hanging a foot or so above the floor, and somehow this movement, this casual flexing of himself, was utterly distinctive. Then he turned and I saw his face, which had not changed at all, except for a pointy little beard.

He was with his girlfriend and he told me later that she saw a look of pure panic cross his face when I came up to them, though I did not notice anything myself. We talked until we came to his station and I could not stop mentioning all the friends we had had in common and what they were doing – jobs, marriages, kids mostly, and one who had died, it was all news to him – but afterwards I wished I had not. Somehow it didn't seem fair. We swapped numbers and said we should get together soon.

Jonny and I were at university together but I had not known him so well then. Later on, in London, he was living with a friend of mine and I got him a job in the pub I was working in, *The Magpie*, a place where money was always missing from the till, we gave endless free drinks to our friends and there was usually someone doing cocaine in the toilets. We started playing in a band together. In the summer we hitchhiked to some festivals. On his initiative we had two big parties at the house I shared. At the second of these the house filled up with kids from the neighbourhood, there was a fight and the police had to be called. Near the pub was a boarded up church and one of Jonny's plans was to persuade the council to let him turn it into a café and music venue.

He was a little manic then, I could see that looking back – endless ideas, lots of girls, smoking loads of dope and then giving it up suddenly to drink heavily instead, always talking, talking – but at the time it seemed only like a fantastic appetite for everything and I wore his friendship like a badge of my own free-spiritedness and potential. Later, this vividness and vigour looked different to

me, like the preceding aura of his illness, the way migraine sufferers sometimes describe a strange and powerful clarity just before an attack. There were other clues, perhaps, in the past. At university he had once woken a friend of ours in the middle of the night, very upset, after climbing up the gutter and knocking at her window, but it had seemed like just a broken heart. There was another story from that period, which I remembered only much later, that he had to be talked round after locking himself in the toilet of his flat for hours, writing and drawing on the walls. We were naive, probably, but none of it seemed to add up to much at the time, just good stories that I had heard second or third hand - and anyway, I imagine you could make a pretty good case for anyone's instability if you tried hard enough. I still believe you never really see these things coming.

Jonny rang me in *The Magpie* one Saturday afternoon whilst I was working and asked if I could take his shift later in the day. I forget why he said he couldn't work or why I said I couldn't help out. When he arrived he seemed disoriented. He followed me around the bar whilst I was pouring drinks. In my mind I can see his eyes, the gaping, dilated pupils, but perhaps I have added this detail over time. I left, to go and do whatever it was I had to do, and only heard the rest later.

The pub used to get busier suddenly at that time of the day and soon Jonny became too distressed to work, standing at one end of the bar with his hands clenched together while people clamoured for drinks. One of the regulars, Junky David, a gentle old guy who came in every afternoon with his wife and

counted out enough change for two drinks each, saw Jonny was in trouble and took him into the garden. Jonny was crying and confused, rambling from one thing to another, nothing making sense, but after an hour he seemed to have calmed down a little and left on his bike, saying he was going home. It made an impression on David because for years afterwards, whenever I saw him, he always asked me if I had heard from Jonny or knew how he was doing. Jonny – he told me this himself much later – spent the next hours cycling back and forth across London, stopping to make alarming phone calls to his sister and an ex-girlfriend, convinced, in the usual psychotic way, that he was being pursued. Eventually, around 11pm, his sister met him at Waterloo station and took him to hospital. A day or two later his parents collected his things from his flat. Soon afterwards I moved house, stopped working at the pub and met my wife.

Two weeks after we bumped into each other on the train I rang Jonny and asked if he wanted to meet. A friend of mine's band were playing in a local pub and this seemed like a good excuse. If it was awkward or we had nothing to say to each other, the music would be a distraction. Until the moment he walked through the door, forty-five minutes late, it seemed obvious to me that he would not turn up. Later on he admitted that he had thought about it, that he had sat at his kitchen table watching the clock and trying to work out whether this was something he wanted or needed to do, but when he arrived there was no sign of it.

I had wondered what we would talk about, whether it would be better, or even possible, to steer around the missing ten years. I did not know then how ill he had been or for how long, only that he had had no contact with anyone we knew for the whole of that time. A few weeks after it had all happened another friend and I had driven to his parents' house. His mum answered the door but Jonny wouldn't see us. We sat drinking tea in the kitchen, knowing that he was in his room somewhere above us, unseen. His mum was polite but the strain in her face was unmissable and I had the overwhelming sense that we were intruding on a private family trauma. He was in a place and with people that we did not know at all and it was clear that he belonged to them now, not to us. My friend and I had imagined ourselves on some kind of mercy mission but this now seemed like a terrible vanity. There was little to say so we drank our tea quickly and left. After that, whenever I was away, I sent him a postcard, perhaps ten or fifteen in total. It seemed like a way of letting him know that he was not forgotten but after a while even this seemed only self-gratifying, almost aggressive.

Jonny had not been sure whether to meet me but now that he had there was only one thing to talk about. He drank quickly, two pints for every one of mine, a sign of nerves perhaps, or just my own restraint, and we ignored the music. When we said goodbye on the street several hours later (We missed you, man, I said, but it was a line I had rehearsed in my head, perhaps even for years, and now it seemed corny and inappropriate) I felt like I had stepped out of a

peculiarly intense and troubling film. It was a few days before I managed to report any of it back clearly to my wife, though perhaps this said more about my own susceptibilities at the time than anything else.

Jonny told me that for the first year he didn't come out of his room. He didn't speak to anyone except his family and the doctors, refusing all visitors and phone calls. His mum took him up his food and every two weeks a pack of Marlboro lights. He would smoke one of these a day, stubbing it out after a couple of drags. He could not watch TV, read the newspaper or listen to music or the radio, believing that everything was part of an elaborate conspiracy to cause him harm. His exacting paranoid logic did, however, allow him to read anything written before he was born – it was not possible for any of this to be directed at him – and so he found an unlikely solace in 19th Century novels. It amazed him now, he said, that he had the concentration for this, but in that year he read all of Tolstoy, Dickens and Zola, though he could not now remember a thing about any of them. The rest of the time he simply lay in a bed that was too small for him and stared at the teenage posters on the wall, wrestling with his mind and perhaps wondering – if he even had the capacity to wonder like that – how this dramatic regression had occurred.

Eventually the doctors found a drug combination which lifted him off the bottom and he began, very gradually, to resume something like an ordinary life.

One day he called his sister and mother when they were out in the car and

offered to make dinner. The first time he played his violin again he came out of his room and found his dad sitting on the stairs crying. He began to work again, in pubs and restaurants, and after five years at home he moved into a flat in Forest Hill. He made new friends quickly, as he had always done, started to play in bands again and acted in some plays. He was living a life, it occurred to me, that was almost a mirror image of the one he had disappeared from so abruptly, just with a different cast of characters. I can picture him then, revived, full of the old energy, racing around on his bike, a fixture at parties, appearing much the same to these new people as he had once appeared to us. But he knew he was fragile. Every so often someone from his old life would try and make contact and he would feel the danger in it, that the associations might easily bring him down. This was what had been going through his head when he sat at home wondering whether or not to come and meet me. It was strange, he said – even to him it sometimes seemed as if he had appeared out of nowhere, and when he was out or with friends and people talked about their lives and things they had done he was aware of a gap in his, that for most of his twenties he had seemed barely to exist.

Over the last year, when I had not been well myself, I had developed a preoccupation with other peoples' unhappiness or difficulty. Perhaps this is common to everyone who experiences something like this, I wouldn't be surprised. I spied it everywhere - in the lives of my friends, in stories of celebrity

divorces or overdoses, in the expressions of strangers in the street. It was as if I had gained a new and deeper awareness of human frailty. Until now, it seemed, I had managed to go through life ignorant of what most people suffered, the kinds of things they tolerated or were forced to reconcile themselves too. Often I felt that this new awareness had made me more human, powerfully empathetic – a compensatory gift for breaking down – and at other times I wondered if I had simply become morbid, voyeuristic, exquisitely sensitive to pain that wasn't even there. Jonny's suffering had been real enough, but perhaps he answered some need in me, and I wondered also if our being friends again could help him make sense of the different parts of his life. I imagined there might be something redemptive about it for both of us.

A few weeks after the pub he came round for dinner. I wanted him to meet my wife and daughter, to see where I lived. My daughter made a friend of him immediately and they stayed upstairs reading until it was time to eat. When we did sit down, Jonny talked again. He lived with his sister now and managed a bar, paying off some debt he had got into after a business he had set up with a friend had failed. He felt good, he said. He had been off his medication for a long time and although the old paranoia would creep in occasionally he knew how to deal with it. He understood this side of himself and felt that he was far away from where he had once been. He told us this as we were eating, speaking mostly to my wife, and I felt a kind of proprietorial pleasure in watching the two

of them together. She asked him better questions than I had and I remembered what a good talker he was, how quickly he won people over.

Jonny told her things I had not known – about the pressure on him, the eldest of four children, to do well at school, to be a good musician; a difficult relationship with his dad who was unpredictable, sometimes aggressive. Later on he had been very unhappy at university, studying the wrong thing, taking too many drugs and confused about what he should be doing with all the time he had on his hands. He had thought constantly about leaving. I was struck by this. It was a lesson in how you could misread someone. I had not known him well then, but despite the odd story, he had seemed utterly natural, popular, at home in himself, not straining for effect like the rest of us. After university it was worse, he said. He had even less of a sense of what he should be doing. Perhaps it was not surprising that we did not see any of this in him: at the time he did not recognise it himself. It had taken years of counselling to help him unravel it, that showed him, after all, what a state he had been in. I suppose it was all just pressure building up, he said, pressure I didn't know was there.

After we finished eating we talked a little about people we both knew but whom he had not seen for ten years, and I had the sense – as I had when I first talked to him on the train – that this was strange and difficult, that I might be trampling on his carefully managed equilibrium. We had all, it turned out, been deeply implicated in his paranoia, a part of his neuroses, and he had reconstructed his life around our absence. When we talked about these friends

now he said it was like watching shapes – monsters, he might as well have said – forming out of the mist, people who had become indistinct over time, deliberately buried in the past.

My wife asked if he felt bitter about it all, what had happened to him, the things he had missed and the friends he had lost touch with. He said he considered himself fortunate - many people did not come back from something like this. It was part of his personality and experience, he could not separate it from who he was, and he had come to feel that in what had happened was inevitable, if not the exact timing or circumstances. This struck me as both new and true and I had a vision then of how all our lives might be, a bomb around the corner just waiting to go off, invisible and unavoidable. Perhaps something similar occurred to my wife, or perhaps she was loosened by wine and Jonny's candour, because she began then to give him a summary of my own troubles – the anxiety and panic attacks, the time off work, the not sleeping and then not being able to get out of bed. Jonny listened and nodded but showed no particular surprise or even curiosity. Maybe such stories had become prosaic to him, part of the usual order, or maybe he had already seen it in me. Anyway, I did not particularly enjoy it, hearing myself discussed in this way, so I made a joke and changed the subject. A week later Jonny texted me the number of his counsellor but otherwise didn't mention it again – whether out of discretion or a kind of indifference I don't know.

Jonny stayed late until I said that we had to be up early for work and school, but afterwards I lay awake in bed thinking about him. In my mind I had a sort of bohemian caricature of how he lived now – the friends living in squats, putting on exhibitions and gigs in disused buildings, going on marches and protests, working just enough to scrape a living, going away on a whim. There was a nostalgia in me for this. Still, I could see clearly that I could not live this way now, the sudden eruption and dying of enthusiasms, the insubstantiality of it all. I was conscious of the things I had, things that I felt had moored me through a difficult time, had stopped me floating off into some greater confusion and unhappiness.

I saw Jonny maybe five times after that. My wife was in favour of him and said, only half joking, that it would do me good to have a new friend - though of course he could not really be that. But it didn't work out that way.

I went to a party at his flat and my image of his friends wasn't far wrong. Everyone was younger, and smoking dope, Jonny included. He was wide-eyed, bouncing off the walls, and I guessed he was on something stronger too. The girlfriend I had met briefly on the train wasn't there, but there seemed to be someone else. I didn't know anyone and felt old and judgmental, so I made my excuses and left after an hour.

The other times we met in the pub. At first we went back over everything that had happened to him, until the subject was exhausted and there seemed like nothing more to say. Then he began to talk about the plans he had for the future – a band he was putting together, a couple of business ideas that did not strike me as realistic. He was good company, as he always had been, but I felt like an on-looker, shut out from his enthusiasms and vaguely depressed by their familiarity. He would want to stay drinking longer or would try to persuade me to go to a club where a friend of his was DJ-ing or he knew the band, and I felt like I was always disappointing him.

We met him on Peckham Rye one Saturday afternoon in the summer, my wife, my daughter and I. He had rung the night before to say that there was going to be a fair, with food and music and things for kids to do. We had a drink together and then Jonny offered to take my daughter to have her face painted by some friends of his whilst my wife and I sat in the sun for a while. They were gone for a long time and I began to walk around the stalls looking for them, getting myself into a state. When I got back to my wife, Jonny and my daughter were already there. My daughter's face was painted purple, yellow and green, a butterfly's wings, and she was eating an ice-cream. 'For fuck's sake, Jonny,' I said. 'Sorry, man,' he said, 'I didn't realise.'

The last time I spoke to him was when he came to the door late one evening. We were in bed and his knocking woke us all up. He was on his way out, he said, and thought he'd drop off a book we had talked about in the pub.

There was an awkward moment when he seemed to be waiting for me to invite him in. Afterwards, it seemed almost as if I had shut the door in his face. We spoke on the phone a couple of times after that but the plans to meet were vague and never happened. A month or two later I saw him when I was out in the car. I pulled up at traffic lights and he crossed the road in front of me, wheeling his bike. My hand was on the car horn but I didn't press it. Perhaps he saw me too.

Over the next year, I did not often think of Jonny. I was preoccupied with my own life again now – my wife was pregnant and I had started a new job. One Sunday afternoon late the following summer, soon after the baby was born, we were all out in the woods. It had been a wet day but now the sun was out and drops of water on the leaves were catching the light. The baby was asleep and my wife had walked on ahead whilst my daughter and I searched for blackberries in the bushes. I looked up and saw, for a second, something large, dark and muscular, flashing through the trees, heard the crackle of branches trampled or forced aside, a little way above us on the hill. Moments later it was gone - one of the neighbours' dogs, no doubt - and I turned, thinking I would tell my daughter Jonny's story about the Big Cat, but she had heard a bird call and had followed it along the path. By the time I caught up with her, I had thought better of it.

Part 2 - Critical Commentary: The challenges of realism in the work of Tobias Wolff, Alice Munro and John Cheever, and in my own practice

Introduction

The following critical essay consists of close readings of short stories by three different writers and a final chapter which applies a similar analysis to the stories submitted as the creative portion of this thesis. The overall purpose is to illuminate and reflect on my own fiction and artistic aims within the wider literary and critical context. To this end I have adopted a combination of approaches, a traditional critical analysis of the finished text (a critique of product), as well as a practitioner's perspective (a description and reflection on process). Overall, there is an emphasis on craft, to ask how certain effects are achieved and to what purpose. Therefore, whilst I have drawn on critical and theoretical sources, I have also relied on the insights of other creative writers in order to make my arguments.

Chapter 1 focuses on Tobias Wolff's 'An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke'.¹ It examines Wolff's use of detail, omission and point of view in the creation of fictional character, and argues that an apparent straightforwardness of form and style conceals a highly sophisticated management of tone, register and structure. Chapter 2 develops and extends these arguments with reference to Alice Munro's 'Silence', arguing that her work demonstrates a deep

¹ Tobias Wolff, 'An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke', *The Stories of Tobias Wolff*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), pp.32-46.

engagement with problems of representation and attempts radical solutions.²

Chapter 3 looks at John Cheever's landmark story 'The Swimmer', examining the technical virtuosity that allows the story's multiple readings and resonances, as well as the formal contrasts to Wolff and Munro.³ Chapter 4 brings these reflections and arguments together in an analysis of my own fiction, focusing in depth on several of the stories submitted here but also seeking patterns in the broader sweep of my work.

Wolff, Munro and Cheever have all been important to my creative development and the choice of these particular writers and stories is intended to reflect some of the influences and tensions in my own work. Over the past fifteen years I have worked almost exclusively on short fiction and these are writers whose reputations rest in large part on their stories. They are also writers who are regarded as exemplars of so-called literary realism, or, in Cheever's case, an exemplar of the departure from realism. It is within this context that, over the chapters that follow, I would like to discuss Wolff, Munro and Cheever and within which I would also like to contextualise my own work. It is therefore important to begin by making some preliminary remarks on how this term might be understood.

² Alice Munro, 'Silence', *Runaway* (London: Vintage, 2006), pp.126-158.

³ John Cheever, 'The Swimmer', *The Stories of John Cheever*, (London: Vintage Books, 1990), pp.603-612.

Contemporary literary realism – sometimes called lyrical realism - is usually understood to refer to the tradition that has its roots in the 19th Century fictional innovations of Flaubert and others. It implies the presence of some or all of the following elements: linear time, plausible motivation, attention to the details of everyday life, an apparent transparency of style, the centrality of character, as well as dramatic development and plot. The artistic value or otherwise of contemporary realism is hotly debated by critics and writers, with each side presenting itself as under siege. In an oft-cited 2008 essay, ‘Two Paths for the Novel’, Zadie Smith claimed ‘A breed of lyrical realism has had the freedom of the highway for some time now, with most other exits blocked’.⁴ In his 1988 work *In Defence of Realism*, Raymond Tallis, blaming what he saw as the marginalisation of realism on theory crazed critics in university departments, warned, ‘one should never underestimate the post-Saussureans’ capacity to survive’.⁵

To its detractors, realism is un-evolved and philosophically naive, merely ‘a system of conventional codes, a grammar so ubiquitous that we do not notice the way it structures bourgeois story-telling’.⁶ In ‘Two Paths for the Novel’ Smith described the tradition in which, by her own admission, she had published three

⁴ Zadie Smith, ‘Two Paths for the Novel’, *The New York Review of Books* (20th November 2008) <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2008/11/20/two-paths-for-the-novel/> [accessed 5th January 2016] (para. 2 of 59). Throughout this essay I have drawn on theory and criticism which relates the notion of realism to fiction in general. For a thorough examination of the particular relationship of the short story tradition – as distinct from the novel – to realism, see Charles E. May, *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice* (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁵ Raymond Tallis, *In Defence of Realism* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), p.25.

⁶ James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (London: Cape, 2008), p.171.

novels, as a 'literary form in long term crisis'.⁷ The problem, realism's critics argue, is that modern reality itself is 'unreal' and 'therefore unsuitable for realistic treatment' (Tallis, p.9). According to Bernard Bergonzi it is no longer possible to write as Tolstoy did:

[...] because we have no common sense of reality. We are saddled with all kinds of relativistic structures of consciousness. We do not believe on there being "one reality" out there as undoubtedly Tolstoy did.⁸

Furthermore, because of the essential incoherence and instability of modern reality any attempt to tell a coherent story is suspect, a kind of 'confidence trick'. Therefore, the serious writer should instead be devoted to 'meditating on the nature of narration' (Tallis, p. 21). Tallis also draws attention to a seemingly even more fundamental obstacle to any notion of realistic fiction, that the link between language and the things it claims to describe is broken or non-existent, that language is 'non-referential' (Tallis, p.171). According to Terence Hawkes, language is a closed system and 'does not construct its formations of words by reference to a pattern of "reality" but on the basis of its own self-sufficient laws'.⁹

⁷ Smith (para. 5 of 59).

⁸ Bernard Bergonzi quoted in Damien Grant, *Realism* (London: Methuen, 1970), p.4.

⁹ Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Methuen, 1977), pp.16-17.

For Smith, the fundamental problem is different, that ‘the founding, consoling myth of lyrical realism’ – and its fatal flaw – is its conventional idea of character, that ‘the self is a bottomless pool’. Describing Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* as an archetypal realist novel, which nevertheless wears its anxieties and contradictions on its sleeve, she writes:

It wants to offer us the authentic story of a self. But is this really what having a self feels like? And is this how memory works? Do our childhoods often return to us in the form of coherent, lyrical revelries? Is this how time feels? Do the things of the world really come to us like this, embroidered in the verbal fancy of times past? Is this really realism?¹⁰

It is certainly the case that many of the conventions of realism have come to dominate the artistic and commercial mainstream and that inevitably, as James Wood says, ‘when a style decomposes, flattens itself down into a genre, then indeed it does become a set of mannerisms and often pretty lifeless techniques’.¹¹ It is a mistake, however, to judge the value of the whole realist project on this basis, and to assume that its advocates have such a narrow conception of what constitutes ‘reality’.

¹⁰ Smith (para. 31 of 59).

¹¹ Wood, p.175.

As Tallis has pointed out, any effort to conclusively define realism is bedevilled by the problem of defining 'the real', arguing that 'It seems almost impossible to formulate a definition of realism that will steer clear of epistemological, social and political controversy about the nature of "reality" and "the real world"' (Tallis, p.189). Nevertheless, he attempts a positive definition. For Tallis a key and necessary feature of realism is a sense of imaginative plausibility, fiction that distinguishes itself by an attempt to 'represent reality' rather than 'fantasy or self-referential metafiction' (Tallis, p.4.). James Wood argues for something similar, what he calls 'mimetic persuasion': 'it is the artist's task to convince us that this could have happened. Internal consistency and plausibility then become more important than referential rectitude'.¹²

Tallis develops his argument by saying that realism is therefore not, as is commonly misunderstood by 'anti-realists', a set of methods popularised by Flaubert and other 19th Century realists, but instead a particular artistic aim of which *Madame Bovary*, *Middlemarch* and *Anna Karenina* are merely particular historical manifestations. Again, Wood seems to be arguing for something similar when he describes realism as not a genre but 'a central impulse in fiction making'.¹³ In this formulation the aim of realism, Tallis says, is 'understood as an attempt to do justice to, to express or to preserve, a piece of reality' (Tallis, p.3.).

¹² Wood, p.179.

¹³ Wood, p.169.

This is superficially appealing but, given the polemical nature of *In Defence of Realism* up to this point, it is, in fact, oddly feeble. Understood this way, realism becomes an ambition that few would want to argue with; which literary writer does not think of him or herself as writing about 'reality'? It attempts to disarm realism's critics by disavowing the tropes with which realism is most clearly identified, by taking no responsibility for them, the supposed formal conservatisms of character, storytelling and verisimilitude. The baby is thrown out with the bathwater.

If the term is to be meaningful, then – and for the purposes of this essay – it is necessary to draw the parameters a little tighter. To that end I would argue that realism represents a certain faith, firstly, in the ability of language to describe the world; that there is a relationship between the text and things outside the text, and that precision of language is therefore of crucial importance. To extend this, there is also a certain faith in the ability of fiction to depict character and individual consciousness in a meaningful way, that in fact this is at the heart of the fictional enterprise, that characters can be more than mere 'assemblages of words'.¹⁴ Thirdly, that realism represents a certain faith in the value and possibility of narrative and storytelling, that this is more than simply a 'confidence trick' which can only lead to the reinforcement of existing bourgeois power structures.

¹⁴ Wood, p.81.

However, this does not mean a sleepy, uncritical engagement with these articles of faith. In fact, realism is quite the opposite of its caricature as the dead hand of convention. The demands of showing fidelity to 'the real' are of the highest order and require a constant interrogation of methods and assumptions. The result is fiction that is often, 'as experimental as any of the more obtrusively experimental anti-realists' (Tallis, p.197). It is only in this way that art can become, as George Eliot wrote, 'the nearest thing to life'.¹⁵ It is the creative effort of Wolff, Munro and Cheever to meet this challenge – as well as my own effort - that is the subject of the chapters that follow.

¹⁵ George Eliot, *The Natural History of German Life* (London: Independent Publishing Platform, 2016), p.10.

Chapter 1: Tobias Wolff's 'An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke'

Tobias Wolff is the author of four collections of short stories, *Hunters in the Snow* (1982), *Back in the World* (1985), *The Night in Question* (1997) and, most recently, *Our Story Begins* (2008), as well as two memoirs, a novella and a novel. The stories are sparsely written, tightly constructed and controlled, richly textured examinations of character, human behaviour and moral ambiguity. A 1983 issue of *Granta* magazine that introduced Wolff to a British readership famously grouped him, Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, Jayne Anne Phillips and others together as so called 'Dirty Realists', writers of stripped down, unsentimental, declarative prose and stories that probed at 'the belly-side of contemporary life – a deserted husband, an unwed mother, a car thief, a pickpocket, a drug addict'.¹⁶

As Wolff himself has pointed out in a *Paris Review* interview, the Dirty Realist label never did justice to the particularity of the writers and none of them seemed to consider themselves part of any movement.¹⁷ John Barth subsequently satirised the critical and commercial tendency to apply critical labels wherever possible, calling Carver's oeuvre 'Post-Alcoholic Blue-Collar Minimalist Hyperrealism'.¹⁸ However, it does at least point towards the heart of

¹⁶ Bill Buford, *Granta 8: Dirty Realism* (London: Penguin, 1983), p.5.

¹⁷ Jack Livings, Tobias Wolff: The Art of Fiction No. 183', *The Paris Review*, <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5391/the-art-of-fiction-no-183-tobias-wolff>> [accessed 20th December 2016], (para. 31 of 130).

¹⁸ John Barth, 'A Few Words About Minimalism', *New York Times Book Review*, 28th December 1986, p.1. See also, Brian Jarvis, 'How Dirty is Jayne Anne Phillips', *The Yearbook of English* 270

Wolff's aesthetic project – realism, dirty or otherwise - one which seemed to arrive fully formed with *Hunters in the Snow* and has remained remarkably consistent since. Although his stories occasionally take on aspects of the surreal and the grotesque he has resisted the self-consciousness and meta-fictional experiments of many of his close American contemporaries.

In the introduction to *The Vintage Book of Contemporary Short Stories* Wolff states his unembarrassed preference for 'the short story's traditional interests in character and dramatic development and social context':

[...] stories about people who led lives neither admirable nor depraved, but so convincing in their portrayal that the reader has to acknowledge kinship [...] That sense of kinship is what makes stories important to us. The pleasure we take in cleverness and technical virtuosity soon exhausts itself in the absence of any recognisable human landscape. We need to feel ourselves acted upon by a story, outraged, exposed, in danger of heartbreak and change. Those are the stories that endure in our memories, to the point where they take on the nature of memory itself.¹⁹

Studies, Vol. 31 (2001), pp. 192-204, for further discussion of the term 'Dirty Realism' and its variants.

¹⁹ Tobias Wolff, *The Vintage Book of Contemporary Short Stories* (London: Vintage, 1994), p.5. 271

This is indeed a defence of the traditional virtues of the short story and of its purpose and value but Wolff makes himself sound more conventional than he is. It does not do justice to the 'cleverness and technical virtuosity' that is deployed in the service of realism, the sophistication of his ideas or his profound engagement with questions of form. The following close reading of 'An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke' aims to demonstrate this.

'An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke' appeared in Wolff's debut collection, *Hunters in the Snow*. Narrated in 3rd person, free indirect style, over 15 pages of clear, unadorned, prose, it tells the relatively un-dramatic story of a pompous, self-satisfied, university English professor who is obliged to attend a conference at a nearby town with a colleague, Riley, who he dislikes, perhaps envies and suspects of serial infidelity. Troubled by a suspicion of his own cautiousness and lack of vigour, and provoked by Riley, Brooke ends up spending the night with Ruth, a woman he meets at the conference. There is no violence, no one shouts at anyone else and no one dies. The climactic moment – Brooke's assumed sex with Ruth – happens off camera, as it were, implied but not described. There is a muted epiphany. Brooke resolves in future to be more humble, not to judge others but be instead judged himself, but ultimately, the narration implies, everything returns to how it was before, almost as if this 'episode' had never happened, at least as far as Brooke himself is concerned. With its straightforward structure, even tone, simple language, 3rd person – briefly

omniscient – narrator, and examination of human temptation and transgression under the watchful eyes of God, it has the feel of a parable, a moral lesson.

The foundation of Wolff's effects in the story is the use and accumulation of detail, the experience for the reader of closely observed life. The detail is spare, carefully chosen, and the effect is to evoke a 'recognizable, human landscape', mediated by the sensibility of Brooke, from whose perspective the majority of the story is seen. Riley, for instance, is immediately made vivid, a man with 'an unnecessarily large moustache' and 'so flashy that even his bright red hair seemed like an affectation'.²⁰ Ruth too is sharply sketched in, 'She was striking, not beautiful, really, but very blonde and heavily made-up', and the gap in her teeth makes Brooke think of Chaucer's Wife of Bath (Wolff, p.36). When Brooke accompanies Ruth to a poetry reading, the 3rd person narration drops away, leaving only Brooke's vivid contempt for Francis X Dillon:

Dillon arrived and without apology began to read. He was wearing a lumberjack shirt a loose pair of khaki pants tied at the waist with a length of rope. All of the poems were about trees. They seemed to be saying that people had a lot to learn from trees. Trees were natural and

²⁰ Tobias Wolff, 'An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke', *The Stories of Tobias Wolff*, (London: Bloomsbury 1997), p.32. All page references to the story will be given in the text from now on.

uninhibited and didn't find it necessary to build roads and factories all over the place. (Wolff, pp.39-40)

The level of detail in the story strikes a particular balance, enough to make the landscape of the story vivid, often telling, yet not dwelt on or over-elaborated. Imagery is sparse and so when it does appear it is striking - Riley and his red haired children sitting together in church, 'like a row of burning candles' (Wolff, p.32) – or even shocking – Ruth's baldness that makes Brooke think of 'pictures he had seen of Frenchwomen whose heads had been shaved because they'd slept with Germans' (Wolff, p.43).

Contrast this with a post-war American realist of a very different stripe, such as John Updike, whose prose lingers on and even fetishises details of material reality, as in this description of rain on a window:

Its panes were strewn with drops that as if by amoebic decision would abruptly merge and break and jerkily run downward, and the window screen, like a sampler half-stitched, or a crossword puzzle invisibly solved was inlaid erratically with minute, translucent tesserae of rain.²¹

²¹ John Updike, *Of the Farm*, (London: Random House, 2004), p.57.

Updike's professed aim was to recreate the material and sensual world in a form more vivid than our quotidian experience of it and through the descriptive power of his prose 'give the mundane its beautiful due'.²² Although arguably no less of a stylist, Wolff's more discrete and discriminating use of detail and description, his selectivity, is at the service of a wider concern with narrative voice and strategy, as we shall see.

On the whole the detail in the story can be said to be 'significant',²³ ruthlessly given and organised so as to point the reader towards particular conclusions – the brutal assessment of Dillon for example, and his apparently execrable poetry – regardless of how these conclusions might subsequently be complicated or undermined. However, there is also a different sort of detail, whose function is less straightforward. Also taking place in the hotel where Brooke has his panel discussion is a scoutmaster convention and these scoutmasters appear every so often in the background during Brooke's flirtation with Ruth, at first arm wrestling each other and then, later in a bar, singing scouting songs and turning somersaults on the floor.

This feels deeply Chekhovian - the apparent arbitrariness, the humour, the note of absurdity, the detail that refuses to explain itself, or in fact be anything other than itself. In Chekhov's 'The Lady with the Little Dog', another

²² John Updike, *The Early Stories: 1953–1975*, (London: Ballantine Books, 2004), p.7. Updike is often cited as one of the pre-eminent examples of contemporary realism's failure to evolve beyond the 19th Century model; see Charles B. Harris, 'Updike and Roth: The Limits of Representationalism', *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Summer, 1986), pp. 279-284.

²³ Wood, p.68.

story about an adulterous relationship, the lovers go to bed and afterwards thirty minutes go by whilst the man, Gurov, slowly eats a watermelon.²⁴ Wood calls this ‘studiedly irrelevant’ detail. There can be no such thing as merely irrelevant detail. Everything has been chosen by the author for a reason, even if it is ‘simply a kind of padding, to make verisimilitude nice and comfy’.²⁵ In the case of the scoutmasters it does this, certainly, but the odd juxtaposition of events – the mindless, juvenile, hi-jinks of these overgrown schoolboys off the leash, the implication of a wider world of absurdity – throws a subtly different light onto Brooke’s own behaviour.

Detail is limited and rationed in Wolff and it is also entirely omitted. If Updike’s version of realism at times seems to involve an almost exhaustive description of the world of his characters, Wolff is a very different sort of writer. The short story in particular could be said to be the art of what to tell and what to leave out and this subtle play of information and omission is certainly central to ‘An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke’. In his essay ‘Realism and Narrators in Tobias Wolff’s Short Stories’, Santiago Rodriguez Guerrero-Strachan notes:

²⁴ Anton Chekhov, ‘Lady with the Little Dog’, *Lady with the Little Dog and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1964), p.269.

²⁵ Wood, p.69.

[...] the reader must supplement what the narrator silences. His omissions indicate or hint at some aspects of the story that the reader must solve for himself. This lack of resolution obliges the reader to see the missing links and forces him to provide the story's endings.²⁶

A striking example of this technique is the treatment of Francis X Dillon's poetry. Explicitly and implicitly derided by Brooke at every turn – 'As he turned the pages Brooke formed the image of a guru in a darkened cell reading these same dreadful verses by no other light than that of his own mystical aura' – no single line of the poetry is reproduced in the text. When Brooke and Ruth go to Dillon's reading it is described in broad terms as being 'about trees', each poem taking a different tree, beginning the 'ascent at sea level with the coastal redwoods and they'd been climbing steadily ever since' (Wolff, pp.39-40). When Brooke and Ruth go to her house she recites a poem of her own, but we don't hear the poem itself: 'Brooke nodded to the beat, which was forced and obvious. He barely heard the words'. Then, at Brooke's request for more, Ruth agrees to read a poem of Dillon's. The title is given – 'Sunrise at Monterey', which certainly sounds Dillon-esque – but as soon as Ruth begins to read, Brooke drifts into a reverie in which none of the text of the poem is revealed, just a summary

²⁶ Santiago Rodriguez Guerrero-Strachan, 'Realism and Narrators in Tobias Wolff's Short Stories', *Short Story Theories*, Vol 35 (2012), p.274. Guerrero-Strachan ultimately claims Wolff (and Carver) as a minimalist, a problematic term, but which he sees as a form of 19th Century realism 'filtered by modern and postmodern aesthetics'.

of its trite and yet strangely affecting message, 'that the world was beautiful and we were beautiful, and that we could be more beautiful if we just let ourselves go – if we shouted when we wanted to shout, ran naked when we wanted to run naked, embraced when we wanted to embrace' (Wolff, pp.44-45). At each moment when a reader might expect to hear some of Dillon's poetry this is resolutely denied to them. This denial is all the more apparent when the banal, seemingly 'irrelevant' song of the scoutmasters is reproduced in full:

Our paddles clean and bright

Shining like sil-ver

Swift as the wild goose flies

Dip, dip and swing,

Dip, dip and swing. (Wolff, p.42)

One possibility is that this is simply a failure of Wolff's writerly nerve, that he doesn't trust his ability to adequately ventriloquise Dillon's verse, or perhaps that poetry like this is only ever generic and therefore nothing is to be gained by making it concrete. In fact, this omission, if we are to give Wolff proper credit, is a crucial part of the story's strategy and effect. Despite all the narrative

implication that Dillon's poetry is dismal, it is crucial that the reader is not able to make their mind up about this, separately or over and above Brooke's own mediated impression of it. Ruth loves Dillon's poetry, it made her 'want to live again' (Wolff, p.44) during her cancer treatment, and Wolff is refusing the reader the freedom to adopt the same condescending attitude to this supposedly inferior art, and by extension Ruth's own suffering and renewal, as Brooke does. The absence of the poetry allows this slipperiness and uncertainty to persist, to prevent the reader from occupying steady moral or aesthetic ground.

Wolff's intention and achievement in the story is not to patronise or ridicule any of his characters. Instead his purpose is to unsettle the reader's assumptions, to suggest we refrain from easy judgment. After all, it is Ruth's reading of 'Sunrise in Monterey' which stimulates Brooke's own near-ecstatic experience, the sudden belief that 'the world was beautiful and we were beautiful[...]'

This play of information and omission is also at work in the dramatisation of Brooke himself. The narrative tells us a certain amount about Brooke's interior world. For instance, when Riley asks him the worst thing he has ever done Brooke remembers a series of childhood misdemeanours and feels 'pain – a tightening at the neck that pulled his head down and made his shoulder hunch, and a tingling in his wrists' (Wolff, p.34). At other times it resists this level of

insight, skating over it or omitting apparently crucial emotional experience altogether, creating the space for the reader – as well as the ambiguity - that Guerrero-Strachan refers to. For instance, following a tense exchange with Riley over Brooke’s treatment of a colleague in their department, he goes outside:

A cold salty breeze was blowing in off the water. The streets were empty. Brooke walked around the hotel several times, nodding to the doorman as he passed the entrance. The street lights were on, and some mineral embedded in the concrete made it glitter in a false and irritating way.
(Wolff, p.38)

There is a powerful sense of turmoil here, but the specifics of his thinking are unavailable to us. He can’t resolve things in his own mind – thus the repetitive circuits of the hotel, the acknowledging of the doorman. The concrete glitters in ‘a false and irritating way’ but is the falsity and irritation a comment on himself or Riley or the conference itself, or perhaps none of these things? Here the narrative is better served by this restricted access to Brooke’s interiority. Again, one is reminded of Gurov eating his watermelon – there is so much to say following their liaison but Chekhov says none of it, and instead gives us this strange image. A sense of drama and tension is created between the story and

the reader because Chekhov is refusing to supply more detail, and instead, as Guerrero-Strachan suggests, we pour our own meanings into this gap.²⁷

In his essay 'What Chekhov Meant by Life', James Wood, prompted by a dull production of *A Doll's House*, recounts a conversation between Chekhov and Stanislavsky. Chekhov said: 'But listen, Ibsen is no playwright! ... Ibsen just doesn't know life. In life it simply isn't like that'. In Wood's view, which he takes to be Chekhov's too, 'Ibsen's people are too comprehensible. We comprehend them as we comprehend fictional entities. He is always tying the moral shoelaces of his characters, making everything neat, presentable, knowable. The secrets of his characters are knowable secrets'.²⁸ Wolff, like Chekhov, does not allow the reader the comfort of fully comprehending a character's mind or behaviour. They remain, at some level, mysterious to the reader, in the same way that they are in fact mysterious to themselves. As Brooke comes to the end of his walk around the hotel the narration does address his thoughts on Riley directly, but it is perfunctory and shows only the emphatic view that he has come up with to shut down his own uncertainties: 'He decided that he was right and Riley was wrong. But why did he feel so awful? It was ridiculous' (Wolff, p.38).

²⁷ Raymond Carver famously took this restricted interiority to an extreme in much of his early work, what Charles E. May in *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice* (London: Routledge, 2002), calls the attempt to 'embody inner reality by means of simple descriptions of outer reality' (p.94), although, as we now know, much of the impetus for this came from Carver's editor at the time, Gordon Lish.

²⁸ James Wood, 'What Chekhov Meant by Life', *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (London: Pimlico, 2000), p.74.

The depths and complexities are all hinted at, and the reader is allowed the space and luxury of drifting around in them.

The most obvious omission or lacuna in 'An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke', aside from Dillon's poetry, are the events that follow Ruth's reading of 'Sunrise near Monterey' to Brooke in her room. As in 'Lady with the Little Dog' the narrative skips discretely over the sexual event itself and picks up again the following morning when Riley arrives at Brooke's room and sees that his bed has not been slept in. Here again, omission is more potent than inclusion. The taboo act itself remains unavailable to the reader, the thing must not be contemplated. It lurks instead in the background, a set of tawdry clichés implied by Brooke's quasi-sexual experience of Dillon's poetry. In 'The Lady with the Little Dog', the languid eating of the watermelon perhaps serves a similar symbolic purpose.

The slippery relationship with Brooke's interiority is brought to a striking climax in the final paragraph of the story. The point of view peels away from him altogether and settles instead on his cuckolded wife, who has barely featured in the story. She smells unfamiliar perfume all over his clothes and, shattered, wonders what it could mean. Brooke is seen from the outside now, from her point of view, 'so much himself that night, so merry and warm, that she felt unworthy of him' (Wolff, p.46). He is finally, totally, unknowable to us.

In a 2008 review of *Our Story Begins*, Christopher Tayler refers to Wolff's gift of 'scrupulously concealing elaborate effects behind simple language [...] a subtly expansive command of register'.²⁹ This command of register, as well as the wider richness of texture, is intimately connected with the use of free indirect style, the point of view adopted in twenty-six out of thirty-eight of Wolff's collected stories.³⁰ 'An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke' is written entirely in free indirect style, where the narrative voice slips in and out of Brooke's consciousness, until the final moments of the story when, as I have already described, the point of view shifts startlingly.

Writing about Alice Munro, Ailsa Cox says, 'within every word, the speech of the characters mingles with an authorial voice. This is particularly evident in free indirect discourse, defined by Bakhtin as "inner speech transmitted... by the author."' ³¹ In 'An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke', the language, register and mode of expression of the narrative voice mimic and embody that of Brooke himself, capturing his way of thinking and incorporating the character's own turns of phrase. The story begins: 'Professor Brooke had no real quarrel with anyone in his department, but there was a Yeats scholar named Riley whom he could not bring himself to like' (Wolff, p.32). Immediately, the narrative voice is

²⁹ Christopher Tayler, 'Soldiering on', *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/aug/02/fiction> [accessed 14th January 2016] (para, 4 of 10).

³⁰ Martin Scofield, 'Winging it: Realism and Invention in the Stories of Tobias Wolff', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 31 (2001), p.98.

³¹ Ailsa Cox, *Alice Munro* (Devon: Northcote House, 2004), p. 43.

inflected with Brooke's own voice, not that of a disinterested or objective narrator - the passive aggressive emphasis of 'no real quarrel' and 'could not bring himself to like' already hinting at the character that will emerge.

A few paragraphs later: 'Professor Brooke had been invited to take part in a panel discussion on the afternoon of the second day, and though he did not enjoy literary carnivals he hoped that he might bring some sanity to the meeting' (Wolff, p.33). 'Literary carnivals' and 'bring some sanity to the meeting' – these are Brooke's phrases, this is the sound of him talking to himself, and the narrative voice is supple enough to let the reader know this is the case. When Riley gets back into the car after making a phone call wearing 'a theatrically tormented expression,' (Wolff, p.33) that 'theatrically' is Brooke's word, an expression of his contempt for Riley's general falsity and affectation.

At times we are straightforwardly in Brooke's mind, it is his own language completely, without this being explicitly flagged by up by qualifiers such as 'he thought', 'he wondered' etc. For instance, when he considers Riley's suspected infidelities, we could be in the first person point of view: 'Where did Riley find the time, considering his tireless production of superficial articles and books, for romancing girls who had not yet mastered the English sentence, who were still experimenting with hair styles and perfumes?' (Wolff, pp.32-33). The night before the conference, when Riley asks for a lift, the narrator reports, 'Riley was scheduled to read a paper but his car was on the blink' (Wolff, p.33). 'On the blink' is probably Riley's own phrase, but it is not specifically attributed to him

and could in fact be Brooke's when he tells his wife about the call or even just the narrator's – what we have is Riley mediated through Brooke mediated through the narrator, and it is not explicit whose language is whose. The different voices merge.

Flaubert wrote, famously, of narrative technique: 'An author in his work must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere'.³² Wolff is this kind of writer. The stories are highly constructed and yet evidence of this construction is not obvious and the authorial presence and voice are hard to locate precisely. In 'An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke', as elsewhere, he inhabits his characters' point of view completely and, with a small number of crucial exceptions, does not offer imagery or language or awareness that could not have come from Brooke himself. Yet the story is not written in the first person, we are not hearing from Brooke directly, and of course this is not an arbitrary technical decision on Wolff's part.

Free indirect style is used to create various textures in the story. Firstly, there is an immediate distance established in the reader's relationship with Brooke. He is not choosing to tell us this story and would no doubt not choose to tell it to anyone. There is even a strange formality in the relationship; in the title

³² Francis Steegmuller (ed. and translated), *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert: 1830-1857* (Harvard: HUP, 1980). The paradox of Flaubert's statement goes to the heart of the contradictions within notions of realism and Flaubert's own highly conflicted feelings about the category; see, for example, Marjorie Shaw, 'Further Notes on Flaubert's Realism', *Modern Language Review*, vol. 52, No. 2 (Apr., 1957), pp. 177-186.

of the story and the first line he is identified by his professional title, 'Professor Brooke', from then on as 'Brooke', and in fact we never discover his first name, even whilst we are given insight into the most intimate matters of his emotional life. Secondly, as already discussed, certain information and detail is omitted and the reader's access to these intimate matters remains partial and incomplete. Brooke remains, to a degree, an enigma.

Crucially, free indirect style allows ironic distance from a character. As I have said, the narrator of 'An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke' stays very close to Brooke himself - at times they are indistinguishable - but the distance is there and is exploited at different times to different degrees. We might detect it in the inclusion of those phrases 'literary carnivals' and 'bring some sanity to the meeting', the note of pomposity and self-importance. It becomes more apparent later on during Ruth's reading of Dillon's poem, when Brooke begins to enjoy it 'and even allowed himself to believe what it was saying' (Wolff, p.45). This is an insight that seems to come from beyond Brooke's own awareness of himself, from someone enjoying a broader perspective on his psychology and behaviour. In this passage the reader perhaps sees Brooke more starkly than before, the distance grows a little. Here he is sincere but also comic, ridiculous: 'if we shouted when we wanted to shout, ran naked when we wanted to run naked...' The narrator appears to be gently mocking him and the reader is made to feel complicit in this.

This distance grows again near the end of the story, prior to detaching itself altogether from Brooke's point of view. Once Brooke has decided that he will not tell his wife about Ruth, a kind of authorial voice makes itself known, summarising in a way that Brooke himself is explicitly not capable of: 'Without really being aware of it, Brooke saw the events of his life as forming chapters, and when he felt a chapter drawing to a close he liked to tie it up with an appropriate sentiment' (Wolff, p.46). Once again, the reader is placed in a different relation to Brooke. Free indirect style allows Wolff the flexibility and suppleness to bring off these shifts of scale, perspective and tone.

In the final paragraph of the story, the point of view severs its intimate connection with Brooke entirely and the narrative voice seems to reveal the full extent of its reach and authority. Any remaining sense of Flaubertian invisibility is shattered. It is now inside the mind of Brooke's wife but the point of view feels broader in time and space:

The doubt passed from her mind to her body; it became one of those flutters that stops you cold from time to time for a few years and then goes away. (Wolff, p.46)

The story turns on this semi-colon. In the first part of the sentence the narrative is referring to Brooke's wife. In the second part it has turned from the

specific to the general, 'one of those flutters that stops you...' Suddenly the reader is being addressed directly – 'you' - and asked to feel a commonality of experience or a 'kinship' with the character and the human circumstances described in the story as a whole.

'An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke' is explicitly interested in moral behaviour. Brooke doubts Riley's morals, Riley successfully provokes Brooke into violating his own, and as I have suggested the story has the overall flavour of a parable or moral fable. But the moral lesson, if there is one, is not straightforward. There is, instead, a subtle and continual manipulation of sympathy and moral weight.

Take, for example, the reader's ambivalent relationship with Brooke himself. Brooke judges others and the story seems to invite us to judge him. He believes that he 'tried to be good' (Wolff, p.34) and perhaps he does. He reminds Riley of the 'Nicest in the Class' (Wolff, p.34), though this is not meant kindly. Martin Scofield, in his essay 'Winging it: Realism and Invention in the Stories of Tobias Wolff', describes Brooke as 'sympathetic' although there is enough in Wolff's subtle portrait over the first few pages to make us think that it is more complicated than that.³³ He appears, at different times, smug, pompous, and judgmental, as well as professionally and sexually envious. After he agrees

³³ Martin Scofield, 'Winging it: Realism and Invention in the Stories of Tobias Wolff', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 31 (2001), p.97.

to drive Riley to the conference he complains, 'Dammit [...] I was looking forward to being alone' (Wolff, p.33). His anger and bitterness come as a surprise and one might wonder whether this is an insensitive thing to say to his wife.

However, this view of Brooke's essentially wishy-washy harmlessness is properly shaken when Riley challenges him to say the worst thing he has ever done:

One night when he was thirteen [...] he called the parents of a girl who had died of leukaemia and asked to speak to her. That same year he threw a cat off a bridge. Later, in high school, he unthinkingly used the word 'nigger' in front of a black classmate who considered Brooke his friend. (Wolff, p.34)

Brooke thinks Riley would be unimpressed by this list but he is probably underestimating himself. Far from seeming like the actions of a 'goody-goody' (Wolff, p.34) this suggests someone with a real talent for cruelty. As a result, the portrait of Brooke begins to shift to someone who routinely, thoughtlessly, sometimes unwittingly, causes harm to others – to Abbott, the young academic whose paper Brooke dismisses, to Ruth when he mocks the literary quotations stuck into the sandwiches, and finally to his wife when she discovers evidence of his infidelity.

In the final section of the story, when he returns from the conference Brooke seems conventionally remorseful, or 'heartsick' (Wolff, p.45) as the narrator puts it. He sees that he has done something that has changed him. Previously it had 'pleased him to be the man she thought him to be. Now he was different from what his wife thought' (Wolff, p.45). He seems to have learnt a moral lesson and thinks humbly, piously:

Never again, he decided, would he sit in the back of the church and watch Riley. From now on he would sit in the front of the church and let Riley, knowing what he knew, watch him. He would kneel before Riley as we must all, he thought, kneel before one another. (Wolff, p.46)

However, the sincerity of this declaration has already been undermined by the notion that he sees his life as series of chapters and as each one ends he 'liked to tie it up with an appropriate sentiment' (Wolff, p.46). The implication seems to be that the lesson is not a deep or enduring one.

If this is how he has always been, capable of compartmentalising his behaviour and then moving on, then this throws into doubt his belief that prior to this particular episode he was the man his wife thought him to be. After all, we have already heard about his youthful cruelties. Is the idea of himself as someone who 'tried to be good' a self-deception? This doubt is brought into

sharp focus in the final lines when, on the night of his return home, his wife describes him as 'so much himself, so merry and warm' (Wolff, p.46). This does not sound like the attitude of a penitent and the effect is almost shocking. Of course, it may be that he is simply overcompensating, covering up his guilt by a display of good humour. However, there are other possibilities: that he has already, in the space of one day, moved on, or even that it is the betrayal itself that has given him the vigour that he has sometimes feared he lacked. Wolff allows for all of these possibilities.

This pattern of ambiguity and complication is present also in the treatment of Dillon's poetry in the story. Dillon himself is set-up as a figure of ridicule. He is seen through Brooke's eyes but is a recognisable type – new-agey, pretentious, vacuous, perhaps a charlatan – and Brooke's scorn for him and his unseen poetry seems entirely appropriate. However, Brooke's assumptions, his sense of superiority, are shaken when Ruth tells him that when she had cancer it was 'Sunrise near Monterey' that had made her want to live again. Brooke notes that his 'pedantic' (Wolff, p.39), obscure books had never had this effect on anyone. He is embarrassed by them and hopes Ruth will not read them. Then she reads 'Sunrise near Monterey' aloud and he experiences a kind of epiphany, albeit one infused with sexual desire and alcohol. The story therefore seems to ask, quite sincerely, whose work has the greater value or power, Dillon's or Brooke's?

This brings us to what appears to be a deep paradox in the story and in Wolff's work more widely, that the highly constructed and controlled nature of his fiction does not result in prescriptive meaning and resonance and a sense of conclusiveness – rather, it is the opposite. Wolff himself has said 'the besetting vice of most writers is a programmatic intention, making a story like an algebraic equation with a solution at the end'³⁴ and this seems to echo Chekhov's criticism of Ibsen, that everything is 'neat, presentable, knowable'. Scofield writes that, in fact, 'the point of view of an authoritative author is not incompatible with the freedom of the reader'.³⁵ 'An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke' is exquisitely crafted and controlled but, as already discussed, that craft – the subtle and delicate use of point of view, irony, ambiguity – is aimed at a continual complication and deepening of the text. Brooke is never fully known, understood, celebrated or condemned. The meaning of the story is not solvable. It poses questions rather than providing answers. It is a moral tale which doesn't moralise.

When Wolff writes that a 'sense of kinship is what makes stories important to us' he is assuming a relationship between the text and the world, and the text and

³⁴ Livings (para. 53 of 130).

³⁵ Scofield, p.94.

the reader, that is meaningful and rewarding. Richard Ford suggests something similar in his essay 'Why We Like Chekhov':

[...] as readers we recognise that although we may not have been exactly here before, we still recognise a situation and a set of emotions which should surrender a lesson - reveal some keener sense of how we actually are as humans.³⁶

A devotee of 'anti-realism', to use Raymond Tallis' term, would find this highly problematic. Any sense of kinship felt by a reader towards a fictional character would surely be fraudulent, one of the confidence tricks of realism. Indeed, perhaps there appears to be a lack of sophistication, even naiveté, in this simply expressed desire for emotional connection between stories and readers. It is possible for an inattentive reader to make the same mistaken assumptions about Wolff's stories themselves, to miss the level of ambition and complexity in his fiction.

Christopher Tayler has said that Wolff's stories 'draw a good deal of their persuasiveness from distrust of the merely literary'.³⁷ This scepticism is on

³⁶ Richard Ford, 'Why We Like Chekhov', *The Essential Tales of Chekhov* (London: Granta, 1999), p.xvii. George Eliot is surely also getting at the same thing when she says in *The Natural History of German Life* that art is 'a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow man beyond the bounds of our personal lot'.

³⁷ Tayler, (para, 6 of 10).

explicit display in 'An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke': the absurdities of academic life which demands 'the tireless production of superficial articles and books', in which literary quotations are reduced to homilies written on flags sticking into plates of food, the pedantic and obscure nature of Brooke's own work, the awkwardness and falsity of the conference, his discomfort of talking to 'this person who had spent four years of his life reading *The Stones of Venice*' (Wolff, p.37). It is one of the satisfying and carefully worked ironies of the story that this satire is achieved in apparently simple, resolutely unliterary language. It is a further irony, however, that this language and the wider structure and voice is brought to such a level of craftsmanship, precision and control that it becomes literary in its own way, recalibrating the language of realism. The result is a sort of miracle of tone that allows, for example, Brooke's straightforwardly expressed feelings about his marriage, the 'sense of relief that after sixteen years they were still in love' to be charged with doubts and alternative meanings.

As Scofield says, 'experimentalism and realism are not mutually exclusive and the experiments of the "realist" writer are often more engaging than those of the self-consciously avant-garde'.³⁸ James Wood agrees that to think of realism as formally conservative is a mistake, arguing that 'All the greatest realists, from Austen to Alice Munro, are at the same time great formalists'.³⁹ Wolff exemplifies this, offering a story that is enigmatic and constantly

³⁸ Scofield, p.94.

³⁹ Wood, *How Fiction Works*, p186.

surprisingly, which implicitly asks deep questions about the value and purpose and truth of art, and that, long after it is read, 'continues in a shimmer of possibility'.⁴⁰ It asks us explicitly, boldly, to feel our 'kinship' with the characters of the story – 'one of those flutters that stops you cold from time to time for a few years and then goes away' – and feel renewed by this imaginative experience.

⁴⁰ Livings (para. 53 of 130).

Chapter 2: Alice Munro's 'Silence'

It used to be possible to underestimate Alice Munro: the relative narrowness of her (largely) rural Ontarian milieu, the lack of meta-fictional games or self-conscious literariness in her writing, an apparent formal conservatism. Now, after a writing career that spans over 50 years, continuous publication in *The New Yorker*,⁴¹ fourteen collections of short stories, the award of *The International Man Booker Prize* in 2009 and *The Nobel Prize* in 2013, she has been fully canonised. Not everyone is convinced; in a recent, dissenting, survey of her work in *The London Review of Books*,⁴² Christian Lorentzen characterised the stories as a succession of formal, emotional and thematic tics, a position he acknowledged as a kind of critical heresy. On the whole, however, as James Wood says, 'nobody bothers anymore to judge her goodness [...] her reputation is like a good address'.⁴³ She is simply 'our Chekhov'.⁴⁴ A satirical article in *the Toast* entitled 'How To Tell If You Are in an Alice Munro short story' ('You are having an affair with a married man. His sister knows, and hates you. She has volunteered to drive you back to town'; 'You have kept a secret from your

⁴¹ For a survey of this work, see Carol L. Beran, 'The Luxury of Excellence: Alice Munro in the New Yorker', *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 66 (1998), pp.204-30.

⁴² Christian Lorentzen, 'Poor Rose', *London Review of Books*, Vol 35 No.11 (6 June 2013), pp.11-12 (p.11).

⁴³ James Wood, 'Things happen all the time', *London Review of Books*, Vol 19 No.9 (8 May 1997), 31-32 (p.31).

⁴⁴ James Wood, 'Alice Munro, Our Chekhov', *The New Yorker* (10th October 2013) <<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/alice-munro-our-chekhov>> [accessed 29th July 2015] (para. 1 of 7).

daughter that explains her entire life. She dies'; 'You own one fancy dress, but you aren't wearing it today. You're wearing something sturdy and practical, because there's no use getting all dressed up just to go for a walk with a local widower'), part of a series that included 'How To Tell If You Are in a Shakespeare Play' and 'How To Tell If you are in an Opera', is a kind of tribute to how recognisable and influential her work and vision has become.⁴⁵

Yet Munro continues to be understood in a particular way, as a purveyor of more or less conventional – if high quality – realism. Without doubt, her stories are rooted in such 19th Century, pre-Modernistic fictional elements as character, plot and storytelling. The material world of social class, manners and domesticity are also to the fore. However, the experience of reading Munro cannot be characterised so easily and a close examination of her work reveals a level of sophistication, restlessness – even radicalism – in her stories of provincial life that is often overlooked. At the centre of her work is a continual tension between the desire to create fiction that has a profound fidelity to human experience and the paradoxical awareness of art's ability and tendency to misrepresent this experience. It is this that I want to explore by looking in detail at the story 'Silence' as well as her work more broadly.

⁴⁵ Eve Asher, 'How To Tell If You Are in an Alice Munro Story, *the Toast* (8th December 2014), <http://the-toast.net/2014/12/08/tell-alice-munro-story> [accessed 29th July 2015] (para. 1 of 1).

'Silence' appeared first in *The New Yorker* in June 2004⁴⁶ and subsequently in the collection *Runaway*.⁴⁷ The story opens with Juliet, a middle-aged, locally famous host of a television programme called 'Issues of the Day' on her way to meet her only child, Penelope, who she has not seen since Penelope's departure to a religious retreat six months before. When Juliet arrives, Penelope is not there and makes no further contact with her mother for the duration of the story, save for a series of birthday cards that arrive on her own, Penelope's, birthday. The narrative rewinds to describe the drowning of Juliet's husband Eric in a fishing accident when Penelope is thirteen and absent on a camping trip with a school friend, Penelope and Juliet's subsequent move to Vancouver and Juliet's developing career. In the years following Penelope's disappearance Juliet gives up her television job, immerses herself in classical Greek literature and has a number of unsatisfactory affairs. Then, by chance, towards the end of the story Juliet meets Heather, Penelope's old school friend. Coincidentally, a few weeks previously Heather has seen Penelope herself, and, unaware of the estrangement between mother and daughter, reveals to Juliet that Penelope is living further up the coast, a mother to five children. There is no final reconciliation or epiphany, just more silence, and Juliet's vague hope that she may one day in the future receive word from Penelope. In many ways, the story is quintessential Munro – in length (33 pages in *Runaway*), the wide range of

⁴⁶ Alice Munro, 'Silence', *The New Yorker* (14th June 2004), pp.157-190.

⁴⁷ Alice Munro, *Runaway* (London: Vintage Books, 2004), pp.126-158. All further page references to the story refer to this version and will be given in the text.

time over which the substantial events of the narrative unfold (the greater part of Juliet's adult life), the movement between rural and urban Canada, the dramatisation of one woman's experience through a particular period of historical time (not specified but broadly speaking the 1960's onwards) and the competing obligations of work and family and personal fulfilment, all narrated in the precise, unadorned prose of her later style.

Sentence by sentence, Munro's prose is characteristic of conventional realism.⁴⁸ It appears plain, unremarkable, perhaps even a little colourless, almost wilfully so. It is built on precise external detail and brisk storytelling, the imparting of information, rather than lyricism, imagery or the establishment of a sense of sensual immediacy. The narrative voice is moderate, wry, unsentimental, never hyperbolic. This is a tendency that has become accentuated over the course of her career. Take, for example, the heightened, epiphanic prose of the penultimate, extended sentence of 'Walker Brothers Cowboy', the first story in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, Munro's debut collection published in 1968:

So my father drives and my brother watches the road for rabbits and I feel my father's life flowing back from our car in the last of the afternoon, darkening and turning strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment

⁴⁸ Wood, 'Alice Munro, Our Chekhov' (para. 5 of 7).

on it, making it kindly, ordinary and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine.⁴⁹

Contrast this to the non-committal, inconclusive, almost flat final paragraph of 'Silence', written nearly fifty years later:

She keeps on hoping for a word from Penelope, but not in any strenuous way. She hopes as people who know better hope for undeserved blessings, spontaneous remissions, things of that sort. (Munro, p.158)

There is an almost brutal austerity or asceticism to her prose in this and much of her later work, a lack of linguistic padding or comfort. Characters are rarely allowed prolonged bouts of interior monologue. Any sense of lyricism or poetry is muted almost to nothing, as in that final, strange, pay off, 'things of that sort'. Even the extraordinary scene in 'Silence' when Eric's body is burned on the beach is dealt with in less than a page and a half, with a matter-of-factness that seems to belong partly to Juliet and partly to the narrative voice itself:

⁴⁹ Alice Munro, 'Walker Brothers Cowboy', *Selected Stories*, (London: Vintage Books, 1996), p.15. 300

This was when the flames had reached the body, bringing the realization, coming rather late, that consumption of fat, of heart and kidneys and liver, might produce explosive sizzling noises disconcerting to hear.
(Munro, p.143)

As Jonathan Franzen observes in his perceptive introduction to the British edition of *Runaway*, as her narrative ambitions have grown and ‘come to resemble classical tragedies in prose form’, Munro has become ‘ever less interested in showing off’.⁵⁰ Her writerly confidence is such that she does not feel the need to depend on rhetoric or stylistic fireworks. Moreover, these extra details and flourishes take up too much space, slow the narrative down and get in the way of her larger intentions.

Noting that she has always been a ‘writer’s writer’, critic Ailsa Cox, says ‘what so impresses Munro’s peers is the lucidity of her style. Her carefully nuanced language combines literary sophistication with the vigour of everyday speech’.⁵¹ Like Tobias Wolff, Munro very often uses free indirect style, and the combination of ironic distance and psychological intimacy with her characters

⁵⁰ Jonathan Franzen, ‘Introduction: What Makes You So Sure You’re Not The Evil One Yourself’, introduction to *Runaway*, (London: Vintage Books, 2004), p.4.

⁵¹ Cox, p.7.

that this affords. The language becomes a supple vehicle for inhabiting and blending different voices.

'Silence' is narrated in free indirect style, with a constantly shifting sense of the sympathy and distance between Juliet and the 3rd person narrator. The spareness of the style is infused with a clear narrative or authorial tone which, whilst often intimate with Juliet's thoughts ('if she wanted to be totally honest, at this point she would say that one day without contact with her daughter is hard to bear, let alone six months'), is also capable of seeing her from a broader perspective ('She is what her mother would have called a striking-looking woman'). At times even a faint cattiness creeps in: 'This is the kind of exasperated mother-talk she find it easy to slip into (Juliet is an expert at reassuring responses)' (Munro, p.126-127).

Cox notes that 'the presence of the "speaking person" is deeply ingrained in Munro's style, which often recalls small town gossip'⁵² and this seems apt here, where Juliet has the sense of being not only judged by Joan when she visits the retreat and finds Penelope gone, but punished for her maternal and human failings by Penelope's continued absence. At Eric's funeral on the beach the narrative tone and perspective seems to remove itself a little further from Juliet, taking on an almost chorus-like omniscience, the sense of it as a public and communal occasion:

⁵² Cox, p.44.

The question arose of who would speak, and who would light the pyre.

They asked Juliet, would she do it? And Juliet – brittle and busy, handing out mugs of coffee – said that they had it wrong, as the widow she was supposed to throw herself into the flames. She actually laughed a little as she said this, and those who had asked her backed off, afraid that she was getting hysterical. (Munro, p.143)

Juliet herself is described from the outside – ‘brittle and busy’, ‘wide-eyed, rocking on her haunches’ (Munro, p.143) - and yet her perspective and language is still felt, for instance in the antipathy towards Ailo, a friend of Eric’s first wife who had told Juliet of Eric’s fling with another mutual friend, ‘her Scandinavian blood, her upright carriage and flowing white hair, seeming to fit her naturally for the role of Widow of the Sea’ (Munro, p.142). In the most striking passage, already quoted above, when the flames reach Eric’s body and the fear that the flesh might sizzle or explode, the matter-of-fact, direct voice seems to embody both a cool appraisal of the facts and Juliet’s own numb alienation from the whole occasion.

When critics, readers and other writers talk about Munro’s greatness - as, increasingly, they do – it is her depiction and exploration of character that they

usually draw attention to first. It is why comparisons with Chekhov are so frequently, and not unreasonably, invoked. As Franzen says, 'Her subject is people. People people people'. Her stories are not designed to convey information about, for instance 'Renaissance art or an in important chapter in our nation's history'⁵³ and nor are they structures designed to test abstract or philosophical ideas. Whilst her work is rich in identifiable themes, her characters are primarily vividly realised individuals, rather than ciphers for the currents of history or social change, or gender and sexual relations. Arguably, other facets of her writing – the self-effacing style, structure, plotting and drama, the overall aesthetic, in fact – are at the service of this primary preoccupation with individual psychology, behaviour and human experience.

This approach, which places Munro squarely in the realist tradition, is, according to Flannery O'Connor, the proper one. O'Connor, whose influence Munro has explicitly acknowledged,⁵⁴ described the relationship between character and story in her essay 'Writing Short Stories':

[...] in good stories, the characters are shown through the action and the action is controlled through the characters, and the result of this is meaning that derives from the whole presented experience. I myself

⁵³ Franzen, p.2.

⁵⁴ J.R. Struthers, 'The Real Material: An Interview with Alice Munro', in *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts*, ed. by Louis K MacKendrick (Ontario: ECW Press, 1983), pp. 5-36 (p.11).

prefer to say that a story is a dramatic event that involves a person because he is a person, and a particular person—that is, because he shares in the general human condition and in some specific human situation.⁵⁵

But what is a fictional character? As noted in the previous chapter, James Wood is dismissive of the tendency of some critics to see the notion of characters in fiction as meaningless, a literary convention, but he does draw attention to the difficulty of saying exactly what it means and answering the question of how they become vivid to the reader. On the one hand, Wood says, it is tempting to say that ‘character seems connected to consciousness, to the use of a mind’, but then notes a number of great literary characters – ‘Gatsby, Captain Ahab, Becky Sharpe, Widmerpool, Jean Brodie’⁵⁶ – to whose consciousness the reader is given little or no access. In Muriel Spark’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, the title character is only ever seen through the eyes of her students, never in her private life, and, in fact, the enigma of her interior life is absolutely central to the vividness of her portrayal and the novel’s overall effect. Tobias Wolff’s Professor Brooke offers an example of this too. The reader’s access to Brooke’s interior world, or consciousness, is partial, incomplete,

⁵⁵ Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), pp. 87-106.

⁵⁶ Wood, p.82.

sometimes at odds with his observed behaviour and then, finally, unavailable to us, and yet his experience animates the story. It is therefore a mistake to regard the depth or success of a fictional character as purely a consequence of an exhaustive delineation of their interior landscape, but rather as a complex play of interiority, observed behaviour, speech, event, narrative irony, gesture and action. In this sense the author's aim should be understood not as making a character known or understood but as making them *dramatic*. In fact, we might say that the realisation of a fictional character becomes a kind of drama between the author and the reader, a drama that mirrors the impossibility of any complete understanding of character in the wider world.

There are two principal characters in 'Silence': Juliet, from whose point of view the story is told, albeit in third person indirect, and her daughter Penelope, who is materially absent from the vast majority of the story but whose unknown motives and whereabouts propel the narrative. Juliet is introduced at the beginning of the story as a smartly dressed, successful professional, 'a striking looking woman', and a fond mother. She has a confident sense of her relationship with her daughter, 'she gives me delight', and also of Penelope's own character: 'She has grace and compassion and she is as wise as if she'd been on this earth for eighty years'. Despite the pain of a six month separation, 'all this time I've been in a sort of desert' (Munro, p.128), any sense that Juliet is uneasy about Penelope's trip to 'The Spiritual Balance Centre' and what it might mean for their own relationship is absent or at least unarticulated. The

inexplicable news that Penelope is not there and does not wish to be contacted, along with Joan's assessment that for all her intelligence, Juliet had failed to meet her daughter's emotional and 'spiritual' needs, therefore brutally disturbs Juliet's sense of herself and the stage is set for the unravelling of the rest of the story.

From this point on the reader's understanding of Juliet – and indeed Juliet's understanding of herself – is constantly enlarged and complicated. As patronising and vindictive as Joan is towards Juliet during their interview - an interview that, unusually, she is not in command of - past events that are then revealed in flashback seem to provide some basis for her appraisal of Juliet's maternal failings, all cold intelligence and no empathy: her final row with her husband Eric before his death had been prompted by Juliet's desire to have 'Penelope out of the way for the first couple of weeks of the summer holidays' (Munro, p.137) following the row over Eric's fling; the burning of Eric's body on the beach before Penelope is even aware of his death; the awkward way Juliet breaks the news to Penelope on her return, putting her arms around her 'rather formally' and then her manner 'sprightly beyond anything intended – her behaviour close to that of a *good sport*' (Munro, p. 145). There is the suggestion that whilst 'an expert at reassuring responses', Juliet is inadequate at a deeper level.

In this way, Penelope's later disappearance might be seen as a result of, and punishment for, her mother's own neglect – one kind of silence exchanged

for another. However, the story is too complex and subtle to let this straightforward reading of events fully take root. Despite Juliet's apparent mishandling of Eric's death, when grief fully strikes her, it is Penelope who is able to console her and make her feel forgiven: 'Juliet afterwards told a few people [...] that these seemed the most utterly absolving, the most tender words, that anybody had ever said to her'. Subsequently, Juliet tells Penelope about the row before Eric's death and the burning on the beach, and the forgiveness is made explicit: 'I forgive you. I guess I'm not a baby' (Munro, p.148). There does not appear to be a lack of intimacy or rancour between them. Furthermore, we are given no reason to think that Penelope is suffering during this period. This could be read as a significant omission – a reflection of Juliet's own self-absorption - but the only indicator as to Penelope's own state of mind implies the opposite, when Juliet overhears her dismissing Eric to a friend: 'Well, I hardly knew him really' (Munro, p.145).

Crucially, Penelope is never heard from following her disappearance, except for the blank birthday cards that Juliet receives for several years, and so her motivations and behaviour can only be speculated on, never verified or solved. The best information available to Juliet or the reader is filtered through the malign and probably unreliable Joan, trite homilies about loneliness and spiritual hunger. The fact that the details of Eric's death and its aftermath are in the story at all - the only flashback in the narrative – implies a significance to them, a context by which to understand Penelope's later actions, but Munro

resists presenting us with explicit links between the two events and, in fact, works to undermine them.

It is part of Munro's boldness as a writer that she refuses to offer any traditional closure to the story, in the form of a final meeting or reconciliation between mother and daughter, or perhaps some psychological explanation or detail that would seem to solve the riddle neatly. At the end of the story there is the possibility that contact will one day come, but also the implication - 'She hopes as people who know better hope' (Munro, p.158) - that to expect this is a mistake. The result of this openness, as Corinne Bigot argues, is that 'at the end of "Silence", questions and doubt linger, hypotheses alternate, and our reading shifts'.⁵⁷

Early on in the story, at the end of her interview with Joan, Juliet cannot bear being denied an explanation:

She had turned and cried out beseechingly, furiously.

"What did she tell you?" (Munro, p.135)

⁵⁷ Corinne Bigot, 'Alice Munro's "Silence": From the Politics of Silence to a Rhetoric of Silence', *Journal of the Short Story in English*, No. 55 (Autumn 2010), p.38.

By the end, years later, in a formulation that could be seen to accurately express Munro's own larger vision, Juliet has almost accepted the likelihood that she will never know why Penelope went away:

You know, we always have this idea that there is this reason or that reason and we keep trying to find out reasons. And I could tell you plenty about what I've done wrong. But I think the reason might be something not so easily dug out. (Munro, p.158)

Nevertheless, in the lines that follow, Juliet tries again to articulate it, to 'dig it out', attributing Penelope's disappearance to: 'Something like purity in her nature. Yes. Some fineness and strictness and purity, some rock hard honesty in her.' But honesty about what? And what sort of purity? It's just another guess, general and insufficient, and the passage ends in more doubt: 'Maybe she can't stand me. It's possible' (Munro, p.158).

What we have in 'Silence' - a quality to which much of Munro's work owes its power - is a demonstration of what Flannery O'Connor called 'the mystery of personality':

A story always involves in a dramatic way, the mystery of personality. I

lent some stories to a country lady who lives down the road from me, and when she returned them, she said, 'Well, them stories just gone and shown you how some folks would do,' and I thought to myself that that was right; when we write stories, you have to be content to start exactly there - showing what some specific folks *will* do, *will* do in spite of everything.⁵⁸

In 'Silence', this mystery occurs at a number of different levels. It is there explicitly at the centre of the story – the mystery of Penelope's disappearance, the question of what in her character and her experience has led her to this, the startling revelation towards the end, via Heather, that she is living not far away, a mother of five and perhaps now a 'prosperous practical matron' (Munro, p.156). The echo chamber of Penelope's absence also throws attention back towards Juliet herself – the famously incisive and empathetic interviewer who has misunderstood her daughter and moves through the rest of the story in a kind of bewildered fug of unsatisfying affairs and professional decline, a mystery, more or less, to herself.

Despite – we might say, because of - all her interest in character, in *Silence* and elsewhere Munro is constantly engaged in what Lawrence Matthews

⁵⁸ Flannery O'Connor, 'Writing Short Stories', *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), p.95.

calls the 'Art of Disarrangement',⁵⁹ never allowing the reader's assumptions to settle or to make a final judgment about the people in her stories. Penelope's overheard comment about her father, "'Well, I hardly knew him, really', is an example of this, the way it jars against both our expectations and the more obvious readings of the story, and is never really accounted for. Juliet undergoes her own 'disarrangement' when she finally receives concrete news of Penelope from Heather: 'Juliet had thought of Penelope being involved with transcendentalists. Of her having become a mystic, spending her life in contemplation' (Munro, p.155).

I have already noted the frequent comparisons made between Munro and Chekhov and we are returned again here to James Wood's analysis of how Ibsen falls short of Chekhov's standards – that his characters are 'too comprehensible', comprehensible as 'fictional entities', the secrets of his characters 'knowable secrets' when in fact they should aspire to 'bashful, milky complication'.

Wood has argued that this rejection of straightforward comprehensibility is what allows the creation of characters that 'act like free consciousnesses, and not as owned literary characters'.⁶⁰ But what does this notion of characters with 'free consciousnesses' mean when authorial control is unavoidable? Munro has

⁵⁹ Lawrence Matthews, 'Who Do You Think You Are?: Alice Munro's Art of Disarrangement', in *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts*, ed. by Louis K MacKendrick (Ontario: ECW Press, 1983), pp. 181-193 (p.181).

⁶⁰ Wood, 'What Chekhov Meant by Life', p.87.

long been preoccupied with the question of achieving a kind of artlessness in her writing, saying in interview in 1981 that 'fictionalising should be as unobtrusive as possible'⁶¹ and that a writer should not attempt to manipulate reality but instead let it 'dictate by itself what is going to happen in the writing'.⁶² This marries with what Lawrence Matthews calls a 'distrust of aesthetic pattern'⁶³ and 'a scepticism about, even hostility towards, the kind of "truth" which most literature claims to deliver'.⁶⁴

Munro explored this idea explicitly in her story 'Material', from the 1974 collection 'Something I've Been Meaning To Tell You', the disjuncture between life as it is lived and life as it is presented in art. The narrator has come across a story written by her ex-husband which fictionalises a period during their marriage. She is taken aback by it, its honesty and beauty, and yet she doubts it, too:

I had to admit. I was moved by Hugo's story; I was, I am, glad of it, and I am not moved by tricks. Or if I am, they have to be good tricks. Lovely tricks, honest tricks.⁶⁵

⁶¹ JR Struthers, 'The Real Material: An Interview with Alice Munro', in *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts*, ed. by Louis K MacKendrick (Ontario: ECW Press, 1983), pp. 5-36 (p.6).

⁶² Struthers, p.7.

⁶³ Matthews, p.184.

⁶⁴ Matthews, p.190.

⁶⁵ Alice Munro, 'Material', *Selected Stories*, (London: Vintage Books, 1996), pp.81-95 (p94).

She sits down to write him a letter to acknowledge the story and his achievement as a writer, but something different comes out: *'This is not enough, Hugo. You think it is, but it isn't. You are mistaken, Hugo'*.⁶⁶

Munro is concerned with trying to release her characters from the strictures of art and artistic pattern. Christopher R. Beha has described this continual concern in her work about the 'coercive power of fiction' and notes that she is herself 'among the least manipulative fiction writers imaginable':

As Hegel said of Shakespeare, she writes characters that are free artists of themselves, liable to shoot off in directions inconvenient to the author. This is what gives Munro's stories their odd shape – their feeling of too many things going on, and too many people – as well as their vitality.⁶⁷

We can certainly see this in 'Silence', Juliet's essentially un-dramatic drift through life following Penelope's disappearance, their continued estrangement at the end of the story, the lack of any final revelation as to the precise cause of the rift, a kind of anti-epiphany, the art of disarrangement that plays havoc with

⁶⁶ Alice Munro, 'Material', p.94.

⁶⁷ Christopher R. Beha, Alice Munro: reality hunger, *Prospect* (12th December 2012) <<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/arts-and-books/alice-munro-dear-life-christopher-beha>> [accessed 7th March 2016] (para. 19 of 20).

any attempt to discern some kind of programmatic intention to the story. This sense of looseness and freedom in 'Silence' and much of Munro's work is borne out in the ultimate fate of her characters, a refusal to make one stark aesthetic choice or another. As Lorrie Moore says of *Runaway* and *Dear Life*, the collection that followed it, 'there are no happy endings here but neither are these tales tragedies. They are constructions of calm perplexity, coolly observed human mysteries'.⁶⁸

Hallvard Dahlie writes that 'worlds are always qualitatively changed at the conclusions of Munro's stories, and though the causal changes have contributed to the unsettling of her protagonists, they characteristically point to an enlargement of possibilities rather than a restriction'.⁶⁹ 'Silence' arguably offers a more downbeat, more dispiriting conclusion than this but it is not without consolations ('Juliet has friends. Not so many now – but friends') or possibilities ('undeserved blessings, spontaneous remissions'). When it was put to Munro herself on a BBC Radio 4 programme that the loss of Juliet's daughter and her partner suggested she had 'turned against' her protagonist, she commented 'I don't feel I gave Juliet a particularly hard time, she goes on living. She succeeds [...]'⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Lorrie Moore, 'Leave Them and Love Them', *The Atlantic* (December 2004) <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/12/leave-them-and-love-them/303618/> [accessed 7th March 2016] (para. 2 of 9).

⁶⁹ Hallvard Dahlie, 'The Fiction of Alice Munro', *Ploughshares*, Vol 4. No.3. (1978), pp.56-71, p.67.

⁷⁰ Alice Munro, 'Open Book', *BBC Radio 4*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01jmkfq> [accessed 6th October 2015].

This remark indicates Munro's unwillingness to force a harsh or gratuitously grim fate on Juliet and the 'success' represented by simply carrying on. At the same time, it also acknowledges her ultimate responsibility for the characters and fictional vision she has created, the paradox of working hard to achieve the effect of artlessness and lack of manipulation. Despite her desire to make 'as strong an attempt, as honest an attempt, as one can make to get at what is really there' she is 'not so naïve as to suppose that even this, of course, is not trickery. One is always doing it'.⁷¹

However, the ambition remains, and as Lawrence Matthews writes:

The value of the art of disarrangement [...] lies in its continual commentary on its own tentativeness, in the face of life's complexity and mystery [...] it is not that the artist should abandon her attempt to render experience fully and accurately [...] The point is one should proceed warily, in humility, even, in a sense, quixotically.⁷²

One is reminded of 'Material' and Hugo's 'good tricks. Lovely tricks, honest tricks'.

⁷¹ Struthers, p.6.

⁷² Matthews, p.193.

There is a further paradox here, however. Munro's self-effacing prose style, her concern about 'the coercive power of fiction',⁷³ her distrust, as Ailsa Cox puts it, of the 'tendency in art to reduce lived experience to formal patterns',⁷⁴ the notion of her characters as 'free consciousnesses', the openness and ambiguity of her fiction, would seem to be at odds with her sheer narrative verve, the arguably old fashioned emphasis on what Franzen calls 'storytelling pleasure'.⁷⁵

Any reader of Munro knows just how much typically happens in one of her stories. Whole lives, or large parts of them, sometimes a number of lives, are ranged over. Large casts of characters experience betrayals, violence, murder, sudden illnesses and accidental deaths, abandonments and multiple infidelities. There are abrupt changes of direction or emphasis, and twists, a writerly relish in the sometimes almost gothic turns of her stories. In their broad sweep and cool observance of human travails, the eternal of love, sex and death, there is something of the saga or the oral tale about them.

This passage from 'Silence' gives some indication as to the complex landscape against which the stories often unfold:

⁷³ Beha (para. 18 of 20).

⁷⁴ Cox, p71.

⁷⁵ Franzen, p.3.

In the spring, through some trivial disclosure – and the frankness or possibly the malice of their longtime neighbour Ailo, who had a certain loyalty to Eric’s dead wife and some reservations about Juliet – Juliet had discovered that Eric had slept with Christa. Christa had been for a long time her close friend but before that, Eric’s girlfriend [...] (Munro, p.158)

Simply put, in Munro, a great deal is being manipulated or coerced in order to produce her fiction. Broadly speaking, modernism, in its rejection of god-like authorial manoeuvrings and any belief in large objective truths, tended to jettison the sophisticated, patterned plots and broad sweep of much 19th Century fiction, which was seen as inevitably fraudulent. Instead, truth was to be found in Woolf’s ‘moments of being’,⁷⁶ the individual moment realised in close-up sensual detail, and in the depiction not of external plot but of internal states of consciousness.⁷⁷ In many ways, the short story has been the primary inheritor of this tradition – the idea that reality is so fragmentary and without larger coherence or meaning that it can only be truthfully depicted in intense, individual moments – the ‘glimpse of life’ story, a sustained epiphanic moment, that has become the mainstream in contemporary and near contemporary short story writing.

⁷⁶ Virginia Woolf, ‘A Sketch of the Past’, in *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: Sussex University Press, 1976), p.70.

⁷⁷ Cox, p.35.

Not so with Munro. As has often been said,⁷⁸ her stories contain more – more plot, more life, more richness – than many novels. She focuses in on significant or pivotal moments of her characters' lives – take Juliet's meeting with Joan at 'The Spiritual Balance Centre', or the burning of Eric's body on the beach – and, at other times, moves with great rapidity over a sweep of time:

She took up jogging in Stanley Park. Now she seldom mentioned Penelope, even to Christa. She had a boyfriend – that was what you called them now – who had never heard anything about her daughter.

Christa grew thinner and moodier. Quite suddenly, one January, she died. (Munro, p.150)

And, on the following page:

She did not have room to have people to dinner anymore, and she had lost interest in recipes. She ate meals that were nourishing enough, but monotonous. Without exactly meaning to, she lost contact with most of her friends. (Munro, pp.150-151)

⁷⁸ James Wood, 'Alice Munro, Our Chekhov', *The New Yorker* (10th October 2013) <<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/alice-munro-our-chekhov>> [accessed 29th July 2015] (para. 3 of 7).

In fact, in defiance of the customary injunction to ‘dramatize, dramatize!’,⁷⁹ a remarkable amount of ‘Silence’ consists of summary. As Corinne Bigot has noted, during the central section of the story following the flashback that shows Eric’s death and the immediate aftermath, Juliet is rarely shown communicating with others. There are ‘very few dialogues and few sentences in direct speech’.⁸⁰ References to the amount of time that has passed become fewer and vaguer and all this seems to mirror the vagueness and lack of substance to Juliet’s life after Penelope. The story only seems to come fully back into focus – rooted in time and place - near the end, with the encounter with Heather outside a cinema in Vancouver, which of course brings direct news of Penelope.

In all these ways, Munro seems to be directing us – in ‘Silence’ and in much of her later work - towards taking the long and complex view, lives understood over a passage of time and variety of experience, rather than in the discrete moments. The questions or resonances that ‘Silence’ seems to set in train are: what events might lead to a traumatic rupture like Penelope’s disappearance and how might life go on afterwards?

⁷⁹ Henry James, ‘Preface to “The Altar of the Dead”’, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Scribners, 1934), p.265.

⁸⁰ Bigot, p.32.

To be able to ask these sorts of questions with any sincerity relies on the trustworthiness of the story, a faith in the patterning and organisation of the narrative, which would appear to be in conflict with Munro's apparent concern at the manipulations of fiction, her fear that 'the work with words may turn out to be a questionable trick, an evasion, an unavoidable lie'.⁸¹ This tension – between the appeal and problems of storytelling - is, in fact, embodied in many of her stories ('Material' is a good example), which, as Ailsa Cox says, contain 'the notion of conflicting, subjective experience [destabilizing] the possibility of any ultimate truths'.⁸² Therefore, the answers to those questions raised in 'Silence' would seem to be: we can't ever fully know why Penelope acts as she does but we can guess and, secondly, life goes on as best it can.

The commonplace notion that Munro's stories resemble novels is understandable. Their greater than average length, the expansiveness and narrative verve, the depth of characterisation and wide sweep of time in which they take place, all point to a novelistic sensibility. However, as Sarah Churchwell has written, looked at more closely this is 'too glib and conceals a more interesting fact'.⁸³ A quote from Munro herself, who, famously, has only

⁸¹ Alice Munro, 'The Colonel's Hash Resettled', in *How Stories Mean*, ed. John Metcalf and J.R. (Tim) Struthers (Ontario: Porcupine's Quill, 1973), p.189.

⁸² Cox, p.40.

⁸³ Sarah Churchwell, 'New Selected Stories by Alice Munro', *The Sunday Times* (18th September 2011).
<<http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/culture/books/fiction/article776268.ece>> [accessed 5th November 2015] (para. 5 of 11).

written one novel, *The Lives of Girls and Women*, which itself is really a collection of linked stories, is telling:

I don't know what it is about why I can't write a novel. God knows I still keep trying. But there always comes a point where something seems to be getting really flat. You don't feel the tension. I can go on writing it so many words a day, and I pretty much know where it has to go, but I don't feel this pulling on the rope to get to the other side that I have to feel.⁸⁴

There is a sense here that, at a profound and intuitive level, even as she continues to try and do it, Munro is again resisting the tendency towards formal conventions, what she calls 'the traditionally patterned novel',⁸⁵ because of her anxiety about misrepresenting lived experience. The hammering on of formal constraints and structure has the effect of flattening her creative interest: 'I don't feel this pulling on the rope'. Munro's artistic restlessness has therefore obliged her to resist the conventions of either the short story or the novel and arrive at something new.

This form, broadly speaking, involves a freedom from, or disregard of, conventional plot machinery, the unusual combination of intimate focus and the

⁸⁴ Struthers, p.15.

⁸⁵ Struthers, p.14.

long view, the tendency for the narrative to dive off into different directions and arrive, ultimately, at no kind of resolution. Lorrrie Moore describes the effect well:

Her narratives leap and U-turn through time, and the actual subject and emotion of a story may be deferred in such gymnastic travel, or may be multiple or latent. The particular and careful ways Munro's themes are laid into her narrative trajectories cause them to sneak up upon the reader. They surprise - like the rogue but graceful syntax of a fine but complex wine.⁸⁶

As I have suggested throughout, Munro can be thought of as a writer firmly in the realist tradition, her stories consistent with the definition offered in the previous chapter: linear time, plausible motivation, attention to the details of everyday life, the centrality of character, as well as dramatic development and plot. Her characters are alive in recognisable locations, specific historical moments and experience a recognisable social world. Whilst modernist short fiction was preoccupied with 'exploring internal states of consciousness',⁸⁷ Munro's stories are animated by the play between this interior and the hard

⁸⁶ Moore (para. 8 of 9).

⁸⁷ Cox, p.35.

social world in which her characters live. Her characters are defined by their circumstances and, very often, their resistance to these circumstances and definitions.

As Leo Robson rightly noted in a review of *Dear Life*, Munro is 'so often praised for her clear-water qualities, for offering a sense of unmediated access to life'.⁸⁸ This is a refrain that Munro herself returns to constantly when talking about her work, the importance of 'transparency',⁸⁹ work that attempts to get 'life' on the page as clearly, accurately and without distortion as possible. With this goes a resistance or even antipathy towards self-conscious literariness that is reminiscent of Tobias Wolff: 'I've never been an innovator or an experimental writer. I'm not very clever that way'.⁹⁰

She depicts herself, instead, at times, as an unsophisticated artist of pure instinct, free of any conscious artistic agenda:

I guess I mean that, for me, too much thinking about what I'm doing is altogether a waste of time. And not even a very great temptation, though I sit around, you'd maybe think I was thinking, but I'm just having

⁸⁸ Leo Robson, 'Dear Life by Alice Munro: A collection of highs and lows', *The New Statesman* (15th November 2012) <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/culture/2012/11/dear-life-alice-munro-collection-highs-and-lows> (accessed 12th April 2016) {para. 3 of 9}.

⁸⁹ Struthers, p.7.

⁹⁰ Struthers, p.9.

a big, gloomy, empty-minded period trying to get my story straight. I'm not *thinking* about writing.⁹¹

Munro may profess herself to be uninterested in 'cleverness' or 'thinking' about writing in the abstract, and yet we have already seen the complexity and awareness with which she approaches her material and her art. If she does appear to have an 'unmediated access to life' then this access is hard won. She is, in fact, someone who, increasingly, has pushed the formal limits. As far back as *The Lives of Girls and Women*, these concerns are on her radar. Del, an aspiring novelist, laments:

No list could hold what I wanted, for what I wanted was every last thing. Every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack delusion, held still and held together – radiant, everlasting.⁹²

These formal and representational anxieties have recurred, developed and deepened to the point where, as Christopher Beha has said, 'It is an odd mark of Munro's mastery that she is often seen as the standard-bearer of an

⁹¹ Struthers, p.36.

⁹² Alice Munro, *The Lives of Girls and Women* (London: Vintage, 2001), p.253.

imperilled brand of subtle realism while her stories have proven increasingly sceptical of realism's power to contain the mess of life'.⁹³ These anxieties have evolved not into a self-conscious, metafictional, postmodern aesthetic which abandons any attempt to 'render experience fully and accurately' but instead proceeds 'warily, in humility'⁹⁴ with an ever more complicated and richer vision of character and storytelling. We see this in 'Silence', the richness and openness of its vision, the multiplicity of readings it provides, the radical refusal to explain or justify or solve the riddle of Penelope's disappearance – the simple but radical act, as Flannery O'Connor had it, of 'showing what some specific folks will do [...] in spite of everything'.

⁹³ Beha, (para. 18 of 20).

⁹⁴ Matthews, p.193.

Chapter 3: John Cheever's 'The Swimmer'

John Cheever never aspired to be a short story writer, but despite his novelistic ambitions it took him until he was forty-five, in 1957, to publish his first, *The Wapshot Chronicle*. Although it won *The National Book Award for Fiction* in 1958, it had been a huge struggle to write and Cheever, as well as many critics, was never convinced of its artistic success, or that of the novels that followed, *The Wapshot Scandal* and *Bullet Park*, all of which have struggled to stay in print since. In contrast, when *The Stories of John Cheever* appeared in 1978, containing sixty-one of the stories he had published since the war, many of them in *The New Yorker*, it not only won *The Pulitzer Prize*, *The National Book Critics Circle Award* and *The National Book Award* but – unusually for a book of short stories - became a bestseller.⁹⁵ It was at this point that Cheever seemed to enter the American canon, as Malcolm Bradbury was quoted on the back of the 1990 Vintage edition of the stories 'somewhere between F Scott Fitzgerald and John Updike'.⁹⁶ Whilst Cheever's status has never reached that of Fitzgerald or Updike – a fact of which he was acutely aware and resentful in his lifetime⁹⁷ – *The Stories of John Cheever* has continued to sell a respectable 5000 copies a year.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Charles McGrath, 'The First Suburbanite', *The New York Times Magazine* (27th February 2009) <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/01/magazine/01cheever-t.html? r=0>> [accessed 11th December 2015] (para. 2 of 37).

⁹⁶ John Cheever, *The Stories of John Cheever*, (London: Vintage Books, 1990).

⁹⁷ Blake Bailey, *Cheever: A Life* (London: Picador, 2009), p.362.

⁹⁸ McGrath, (para. 2 of 37).

Publication of Cheever's Journals in 1991, containing revelations about his private life, and more recently Blake Bailey's biography, brought renewed interest in his life and work.

Of all the stories that built and burnished Cheever's reputation, 'The Swimmer' is justly the most famous. Published first in *The New Yorker* in 1964 and then in the collection *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow* later the same year, it is the story of Neddy Merrill who, one hungover Sunday afternoon in summer, decides on a whim to swim the eight miles home via the swimming pools of his affluent neighbours to where 'his four beautiful daughters would have had their lunch and might be playing tennis'.⁹⁹ At first Neddy is invigorated by this idea, taken by the notion of himself as 'a pilgrim, an explorer, a man with a destiny' (Cheever, p.604), and is welcomed and celebrated by the friends he meets, but soon the mood turns darker. A storm gathers, he finds a neighbour's house deserted and their pool dry, and crossing the freeway in just his swimming trunks he is jeered at and a beer can is thrown at him. It becomes clear that some personal disaster has befallen him – 'We've been *terribly* sorry to hear about all your misfortunes, Neddy' (Cheever, p.609), one neighbour tells him – but of which he himself seems not to be aware. At the same time the contours of the material world begin to slip, the summer's day has come to an abrupt end and everywhere are signs of autumn and winter. Treated with contempt by a couple

⁹⁹ John Cheever, 'The Swimmer', *The Stories of John Cheever*, (London: Vintage Books, 1990), p.603. All page references to the story will be given in the text from now on.

he considers his social inferiors and then again by his former mistress, Neddy finally arrives at his own home, all hope and vigour drained from him, to find it empty and gone to ruin.

Adapted into a successful film starring Burt Lancaster in 1968, *The Swimmer* became one of the best known stories of its era¹⁰⁰ and a staple of university and school curriculums.¹⁰¹ Michael Chabon has written about coming across the story for the first time in an anthology entitled *100 Stories Ruined by English Teachers* and it is not hard to see how the rich and foregrounded use of symbolism and allusion as well as the central mystery and ambiguities of the story lend themselves to many levels of critical dissection.¹⁰² Much of this critique, however, has obsessed on finding some singular and essential meaning to the story and also to hold it up as an exemplar of the abandonment of realism. Through a close reading of the story I aim to show that the multiple meanings and resonances – and the sustaining of these - are an integral part of its achievement and that far from representing an abandonment of realism ‘The Swimmer’ should be read as an exploration of its potential.

¹⁰⁰ Blake Bailey, *Cheever: A Life*, p.318.

¹⁰¹ Anne Enright, ‘Fiction Podcast: “The Swimmer”’, *The New Yorker*, <<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/fiction-podcast-the-swimmer>> [accessed 5th January 2016].

¹⁰² Michael Chabon, ‘Personal Best: The Swimmer’, *Salon.com* (30th September 1996) <<http://www.salon.com/1996/09/30/cheever/>> [accessed 21st January 2016] (para. 1 of 3).

In his essay, 'John Cheever's Flowering Forth: The Breakthroughs of 1947', James O'Hara traces Cheever's evolution from what he calls 'a committed realist' to a writer whose formal and genre experiments would eventually produce such masterpieces as 'The Swimmer'.¹⁰³ Between 1930 and the end of the Second World War, perhaps guided by the perceived tastes of his *New Yorker* editors and readership, where much of his work was published, Cheever produced largely naturalistic stories of the depression era and military life that eschewed fantasy and comedy and were instead characterised by a kind of 'Hemingway-esque understatement' (O'Hara p.51). It was after the war, O'Hara argues, that an emboldened Cheever started to 'move beyond objective realism into forms of fiction that that would allow him to "instruct" his readers in the meaning of "reality"' (O'Hara, p.52).

In making this case O'Hara draws attention to three stories Cheever published in *The New Yorker* in 1947: 'Roseheath', 'Torch Song' and 'The Enormous Radio'. Of these 'The Enormous Radio' is the best known and, like 'The Swimmer', regularly anthologised and given as a set text. The Westcotts, a young middle class couple living in an apartment building in New York City, buy a new radio which has the unlikely ability to tune into the private conversations of their neighbours. Eventually, the radio is 'fixed' but it is too late for the Westcotts whose new insight into the pain, hypocrisy and squalor of other

¹⁰³ James O'Hara, 'John Cheever's Flowering Forth: The Breakthroughs of 1947', *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 17, No.4 (Autumn 1987), 50-59. Further references to this essay will be given in the text from now on. O'Hara develops this argument at much greater length in his book *John Cheever: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: Twayne, 1989).

people's lives has revealed a similar rottenness in their own. The conceit at the centre of the story is a little gimmicky, but it is executed with skill and style and allows Cheever to exercise a greater imaginative range in the building of a more explicit moral vision than he had previously allowed himself.

William Maxwell, Cheever's editor at *The New Yorker*, recognised the change in direction that 'The Enormous Radio' represented and claimed to have opposed it, despite ultimately publishing the story (O'Hara, p.51). The reaction of other critics was also sceptical but Cheever was not put off and as O'Hara says the story 'set the pattern for most of the realistic fantasies that would follow... with its unlikely combination of ultrarealistic and bizarre effects' (O'Hara, p.52). The story ends with no explanation as to how or why the radio does what it does, for this is not the point. As O'Hara says 'any attempt to "solve" the story is simply inappropriate', concerned as it is with 'narrative possibilities' rather than 'neat solutions' (O'Hara, p.57-58). All this can equally be said of 'The Swimmer', written nearly twenty years later, arguably the finest realisation of the 'possibilities' Cheever had begun to explore nearly twenty years before.

Writing in *The London Review of Books*, Colm Toibin says of 'The Swimmer' that 'There is a realism in the way the details and the character are evoked which forces the reader to believe that this is actually happening – that Neddy is really

swimming home, pool by pool [...].¹⁰⁴ Tobin is right that this unlikely seeming mission – one that Cheever himself, a fanatical swimmer, had in fact tried – is made to feel conventionally plausible by the attention to detail and the locating of Neddy's character in a recognisable suburban milieu, in the garden of his neighbours one hungover afternoon. This sense of verisimilitude is nurtured throughout the story. Each house and encounter is made vivid with detail, from the Westerhazys' pool 'fed by an artesian well with a high iron content', to the 'flowering apple trees' at the Grahams' and the deserted scene at the Levys': 'Glasses and bottles and dishes of nuts were on a table at the deep end, where there was a bathhouse or gazebo, hung with Japanese lanterns' (Cheever, p.603-605). The terrain of the story is the precisely evoked, nuanced and oppressive manners of Neddy's own social world – or at least the social world he has once been a confident part of:

The Biswangers invited him and Lucinda for dinner four times a year, six weeks in advance. They were always rebuffed and yet they continued to send out their invitations, unwilling to comprehend the rigid and undemocratic realities of their society. They were the sort of people who discussed the price of things at cocktails, exchanged market tips during

¹⁰⁴ Colm Toibin, 'My God, the suburbs!', *London Review of Books* (5th November 2009) <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n21/colm-toibin/my-god-the-suburbs> [accessed 9th November 2015] (para. 1 of 38).

dinner, and after dinner told dirty stories to mixed company. (Cheever p.610)

In a *Paris Review* Interview, asked about ‘verisimilitude’ and ‘reality’ in fiction, Cheever says something akin to Toibin’s observation about ‘The Swimmer’: ‘Verisimilitude is, by my lights a technique one exploits in order to assure the reader of the truthfulness of what he’s being told.’ However, he goes on to say: ‘If he [the reader] truly believes he is standing on a rug, you can pull it out from under him’.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, as Neddy’s position in this moneyed suburban idyll begins to seem in doubt – harried out of the water at the public pool, commiserated over his misfortunes by Mrs Halloran, rejected by the Biswangers and his former mistress – so too does the material reality of the world around him begin to fracture.

As Thomas Kennedy observes in his essay ‘Negative Capability and John Cheever’s “The Swimmer”’ around about the moment it suddenly grows dark and begins to storm ‘something is happening to the realism of the story, to the chronology of the narrative’.¹⁰⁶ Noticing that the wind has stripped a maple tree of its leaves, Neddy thinks that ‘Since it was midsummer the tree must be

¹⁰⁵ Annette Grant, ‘John Cheever, The Art of Fiction No.62’, *The Paris Review* (Autumn 1976, No.67) <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3667/the-art-of-fiction-no-62-john-cheever>> [accessed 11th December 2015] (para. 12 of 113).

¹⁰⁶ Thomas E. Kennedy, ‘Negative Capability and John Cheever’s “The Swimmer”’, *The South Carolina Review*, http://www.clemson.edu/cedp/press/scr/articles/scr_48-1_kennedy.pdf [accessed 11th December 2015] (p.12).

blighted, and yet he felt a peculiar sadness at this sign of autumn' (Cheever, p.606). Four pages later the change has quickened, 'Leaves were falling down around him and he smelled wood smoke on the wind. Who would be burning wood at this time of year?' Soon after this, approaching the Biswanger's pool, 'it seemed to be getting dark and these were the longest days of the year [...] The twilight, reflected on the pool, had a wintry gleam'. By the time he gets to the pool of Shirley Adams, his former mistress, the evidence is incontrovertible: 'Looking overhead he saw that the stars had come out, but why should he seem to see Andromeda, Cepheus, and Cassiopeia? What had become of the constellations of midsummer?' (Cheever, p.609-611).

The slippage here, the collapsing together of several seasons into a single afternoon, is not jarring. Partly this is because a certain heightened mood and tone is established from the opening of the story, the hot, hungover afternoon by the Westerhazy's pool, the continued drinking at each stop on Neddy's journey. Neddy's resolution to swim home seems at the limit of plausibility or at least rational good sense, and yet when he tells his wife, Lucinda, neither she nor anyone else seems to query it. Initially invigorated by his mission, as the story unfolds, Neddy too becomes less sure of himself. At first, as the storm breaks and he shelters in the Levys' gazebo, the note of uncertainty is very faint: 'rain lashed the Japanese lanterns that Mrs Levy had bought in Kyoto the year before last, or was it the year before that?' As he passes through the Lindleys' riding ring and finds it overgrown, 'He seemed to remember having heard something

about the Lindleys and their horses but the memory was unclear'. Then, finding the Welchers' pool drained and the house up for sale, even though he believed he had only a week before turned down an invitation from them, he wonders, in perhaps the most explicit statement of the story's central conceit, 'Was his memory failing or was he now so disciplined in the repression of unpleasant facts that he had damaged his sense of the truth?' (Cheever, pp.606-607).

At this point the narrative deftly switches perspective and the reader is asked to reconsider him as the 'fool' or madman he quite possibly is: 'Had you gone for Sunday afternoon ride that day you might have seen him, close to naked, standing on the shoulders of Route 424, waiting for the chance to cross' (Cheever, p.607). Two pages previously he is still sufficiently aware of social decorum to 'not want to be seen on the road in his bathing trunks' (Cheever, p.605) but this capacity for embarrassment has apparently passed. Entering the Hallorans', he takes off the trunks as well. Now it seems it might not only be the seasons that have collapsed together but that the years too have become blurred. At the Sachs' he is surprised to be told it is three years since his friend Eric has had an operation and stopped drinking. The affair with Shirley Adams ended 'last week, last month, last year' (Cheever, p.611). When Neddy finally arrives home, the handles to his own garage are covered in rust.

By this point in the story, everything has become blurred, provisional and inevitably questions are raised in the reader's mind: are the seasons really changing as Neddy perceives them to be or is he hallucinating? Is he mad? Can

we trust what the narrator tells us? However, the breakdown in strict verisimilitude, so foregrounded in the story, should not be taken – as has often been the case in critical discussion of the story – as a more general loss of faith with realism itself or as a puzzle that asks us to decide what is actually ‘real’ in the narrative. The sense of verisimilitude is instead subjected to huge pressure in order to widen the notion of realism, to allow Cheever to tackle the more fundamental task, as O’Hara has it, of ‘instructing’ his readers in ‘the meaning of reality’. In doing so, what Chabon describes as the story of ‘one bewildered man, approaching the end of his life, journeying homeward, in a pair of bathing trunks, across the countryside where he lost everything that ever meant something to him’,¹⁰⁷ becomes something even more far-reaching, multifarious and resonant, an exploration of ‘narrative possibilities’. It is worth examining how this is achieved.

Conceived originally by Cheever as a version of the myth of Narcissus, ‘The Swimmer’ is thick with mythic references and symbolism, both subtle and overt. From the moment he settles on the idea to swim home, Neddy himself identifies as a ‘legendary figure’, ‘a pilgrim, an explorer, a man with a destiny’ (Cheever, p.604). Blythe and Sweet, among others, have shown how the story fits the model of Homer’s *Odyssey*, the hero’s journey transposed onto a relentlessly described suburban landscape and one of its quintessential symbols, the private

¹⁰⁷ Chabon, (para. 3 of 3).

swimming pool.¹⁰⁸ The tension implicit in this is constantly exploited in the movement of the narrative voice between comedy and tragedy, the sublime and the prosaic. When Neddy slides down his bannister earlier the same day he had 'given the bronze backside of Aphrodite on the hall table a smack'. As he sits by the Westerhazy's pool he sees a massive cloud 'so like a city from a distance – from the bow of an approaching ship – that it might have had a name. Lisbon. Hackensack'. Neddy himself 'might have been compared to a summer's day, particularly the last hours of one' (Cheever, p.603). Throughout, Neddy's 'vague and modest idea' of himself as a 'legendary figure' is subjected to heavy irony.

As the story progresses, the symbolic register becomes more pronounced. When the storm gathers it marks a clear turn in the mood, the beginning of doubt in Neddy's mind, and he is struck by a sudden image of a railway station that is stark in its contrast to the prosperous, sunlit gardens of the story so far:

He thought of the provincial station at that hour, where a waiter, his tuxedo concealed by a raincoat, a dwarf with some flowers wrapped in newspaper, and a woman who had been crying would be waiting for the local. (Cheever, p.606)

¹⁰⁸ Hal Blythe & Charlie Sweet, 'Classical Allusions in John Cheever's "The Swimmer"', *NMAL: Notes on Modern American Literature*, Vol. 8, No.1 (Spring 1984). Blythe and Sweet have written extensively on symbolism and myth in *The Swimmer*.

From its opening lines, generalising about the mood of a whole community, 'The Swimmer' indicates that this might not simply be the story of Neddy but carry a broader resonance: 'It was one of those midsummer Sundays when everyone sits around saying, "I *drank* too much last night"'. It is not just the parishioners leaving church but the priest 'struggling with his cassock in the vestiarium', not just the golfers and the tennis players but the leader of the Audubon group 'suffering from a terrible hangover' (Cheever, p.603). At the end of the first paragraph the story moves from the general to the specific. Foregrounded as it is at the beginning of the story, it seems reasonable to ask whether this hangover might represent more than just a hangover, and this single suburban community some larger community of souls.

Cheever himself insisted that:

Any questions about the story seem to me to imply that the story has failed – it should be taken at face value. The fact that the constellations change, that the foliage changes, that all time is completely dislocated or altered in the story, ought to be taken at face value. You can cut down through about seven layers of the story, if you feel like it. I think it's an

idle occupation – and if it can't be taken at its surface value, that is, if it doesn't have a response in the reader, then of course it has failed.¹⁰⁹

In a sense, of course, Cheever is right. The story has to – and does – work at its 'surface value', and this is part of its wide appeal, that it does not require a deep knowledge of myth or particular sensitivity to symbols to provoke a 'response in the reader'. To argue, however, that the story has failed if these questions are asked seems disingenuous. The story explicitly invites symbolic and metaphorical readings, the idea that we might draw a wider meaning from Neddy's own personal travails.

It is worth noting that whilst Cheever was publically dismissive of the 'idle occupation'¹¹⁰ of academic interpretation, he did in fact crave and was flattered by critical attention, as Blake Bailey has described.¹¹¹ Cheever himself noted the story's popularity in the Soviet Union where he claimed it was taken as a critique of American society and 'an example of the artificiality of a personality based entirely on consumer consumption'.¹¹² This is certainly a popular and persuasive reading of the story. The unnamed, quintessentially upper middle class suburban American community (often assumed to be Westchester County, New

¹⁰⁹ Donaldson, Scott, ed., *Conversations with John Cheever*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1987), p.63.

¹¹⁰ Donaldson, p.63.

¹¹¹ Bailey, p.307.

¹¹² Donaldson, p.65.

York, where Cheever lived himself, although this is never stated) is surgically dissected and mercilessly satirised. Scratch beneath the surface of the 'Prosperous men and women gathered by the sapphire-colored waters while caterer's men in white coats passed them cold gin' (Cheever, p.605) and what is revealed is hypocrisy, moral vacuity and spiritual and social ruin. On the only occasion in which he ventures out of the private realm of his neighbours' homes, into the trauma and humiliation of the public pool – lacking, as he does, the necessary identification disk – Neddy fears he may 'contaminate himself – damage his own prosperousness and charm – by swimming in this murk [...] a stagnant bend in the Lucinda River' (Cheever, p.608).

The background of Cheever's personal life gives other resonances to 'The Swimmer' and its themes. Some critics have noted the centrality of drinking to the narrative and argued that the story as a whole is a parable of the ruinous effect of alcoholism, something with which Cheever was well-acquainted.¹¹³ In this version the increasing disorientation of the narrative is a consequence of a descent into alcoholic insanity and alcoholic black outs the cause of his loss of memory. Alcoholism had reduced Cheever's brother Fred more or less to poverty and in a passage strongly evocative of Neddy Merrill, Blake Bailey writes that 'Fred's hopefulness in the face of total disaster – for both himself and his

¹¹³ Scott Donaldson, *John Cheever: A Biography*, (New York: Random House, 1988), p.211.
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family – struck his brother as an object lesson in the ruinous consequence of self-deceit, a fate he rightly feared for himself'.¹¹⁴

In various interviews Cheever observed that successful fiction is not 'crypto-autobiography',¹¹⁵ but a 'mysterious union of fact and imagination' in which 'the writer is able to present the reader with a memory he has already possessed but has not comprehended'.¹¹⁶ So whilst it is wise to exercise caution when drawing on a writer's biography to analyse the work, the revelation of Cheever's fraught bisexuality in his journals and his daughter Susan's memoir, *Home Before Dark*, following his death, provides another compelling route into the enigma of the story.

For Colm Toibin 'The Swimmer' is easily read as a metaphor for Cheever's sexual double-life, a subject he could not – or felt he could not – address directly in his fiction, at least until his penultimate 1978 novel, *Falconer*. The journals detail a relentless struggle between Cheever's homosexual urges and flings and the threat of public shame and domestic ruin that accompanied them. As Toibin says, thought of like this, 'The Swimmer' becomes 'a version of the writer's dream' – to dive into the sensuality and freedom of the pool – 'and then his nightmare'.¹¹⁷ In this version, suburban respectability and security is a brittle delusion that might collapse at any time.

¹¹⁴ Bailey, p.316.

¹¹⁵ Donaldson, p.29.

¹¹⁶ Donaldson, pp.155-156.

¹¹⁷ Toibin, (para. 4 of 38).

Toibin says that, reading 'The Swimmer', we believe that 'this is actually happening – that Neddy is swimming home, pool by pool' but goes on to say that there is also 'something else going on which makes us wonder if the story is a metaphor for something, or a parable'.¹¹⁸ Doubtless, it is; be it a metaphor for the hollowness of the bourgeois lifestyle, American society in general, or the human condition itself. Doubtless too that it drew from the explosive combination of sexual shame, class snobbery and alcoholism in Cheever's personal life. All these readings are persuasive – some invited explicitly by Cheever, some not – and all add to the experience of reading the story but to claim that any are conclusive is a mistake. The achievement of the story, the key to its enduring appeal, is its ability to remain slippery and ambiguous, to sustain all these possibilities at the same time.

The efforts of critics and fellow writers to categorise Cheever have tended towards a similar formulation and a constant attempt to police an apparent border between realism and its apparent opposites. For Philip Roth, Cheever was 'an enchanted realist'.¹¹⁹ For Charles McGrath, he was 'a writer pressing against the very limits of realism itself'.¹²⁰ John Updike, Cheever's friend and sometime literary rival – at least in Cheever's own mind – wrote that 'realism

¹¹⁸ Toibin, (para. 1 of 38).

¹¹⁹ Steven Beattie, '31 Days of Stories 2015, Day 25: "The Swimmer" by John Cheever', <http://www.stevenwbeattie.com/?p=5233> [accessed 9th December 2015] (para. 1 of 10).

¹²⁰ McGrath, (para. 11 of 37).

could not contain him'.¹²¹ Cheever himself, a widely read autodidact who did not finish high school, was typically evasive about this kind of labelling, claiming 'I don't have any critical vocabulary and very little critical acumen'.¹²² Asked in *The Paris Review* if he saw himself as part of any particular literary tradition he claimed 'I can't think of any American writers who could be classified as part of a tradition'.¹²³

It is certainly true that in 'The Swimmer' and elsewhere Cheever departs more substantially from verisimilitude than, say, Munro or Wolff or other so-called realist writers. However, as I have argued, this is better understood as a demonstration of realism's suppleness and flexibility in pursuing its goal of fidelity to human experience, rather than a rejection of it. It is worth recalling Cheever's take on verisimilitude, 'a technique one exploits in order to assure the reader of the truthfulness of what he's being told'. This aligns directly with Raymond Tallis' view of realism as a particular aim which manifests itself in different techniques and methods. In 'The Swimmer' Cheever is acutely aware of these techniques, but like all great formalists, engages with them creatively, pulls the rug from under our feet, in 'an attempt to do justice to, to express or to preserve, a piece of reality'.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Bailey, p.355.

¹²² Grant, 'John Cheever, The Art of Fiction No.62', *The Paris Review* (Autumn 1976, No.67) <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3667/the-art-of-fiction-no-62-john-cheever> [accessed 11th December 2015] (para. 20 of 113).

¹²³ Grant, (para. 65 of 113).

¹²⁴ Tallis, p.3.

There are, however, crucial differences between writers like Munro and Wolff, who we might think of as part of the Chekhovian tradition and a writer like Cheever, in their engagement with the challenges of realism. As we have seen, Munro's writerly impulse is to make 'as strong an attempt, as honest an attempt, as one can make to get at what is really there'.¹²⁵ She recognises the inevitability of trickery ('One is always doing it') but her relationship with this telling of fictional 'lies' is an agonised one. Cheever has far fewer qualms, and more confidence in his own artistic authority and vision, describing fiction as 'the telling of lies [...] a sort of sleight of hand that displays our deepest feelings about life'.¹²⁶ There is little sense of Munro's 'distrust of aesthetic pattern' and 'a scepticism about, even hostility towards, the kind of "truth" which most literature claims to deliver'.

In Munro and Wolff the vivid portrayal of an individual character is paramount, their specificity and particularity, rather than what they might embody more generally. This portrayal requires a certain level of ambiguity, psychological depth and plausibility. Neddy Merrill is different. He is evoked largely in the present moment of the story, the intense sensual experience of his long afternoon swim. His motivations are immediate and spontaneous and don't depend on a backstory to explain them. Fit, affluent, vigorous, a man of a certain age in a certain sort of neighbourhood, sitting at the edge of the Westerhazy's

¹²⁵ Struthers, p.6.

¹²⁶ Grant, (para. 8 of 113).

pool - even this name is a none too subtle clue as to the story's metaphorical ambitions – he thinks of his 'four beautiful daughters', the generically perfect, almost fairytale-like, family waiting for him at home. Gradually fragments of backstory do pierce Neddy's reverie, as we have seen – 'We've been *terribly* sorry to hear about all your misfortunes, Neddy' – but they remain vague, elusive, non-specific. 'Why we heard that you'd sold the house and that your poor children [...]' (Cheever, p.609) Mrs Halloran trails off. Neddy is revealed, in the end, primarily as a cipher, a vehicle for themes and ideas and drama that are more important and more substantive than his own individual psychological and experiential reality.

I have already noted James Wood's argument that characters should never be 'too comprehensible', and should instead aspire to a 'bashful, milky complication', as elusive as Wolff's Professor Brooke or Munro's Juliet. This is what allows the creation of characters that 'act like free consciousnesses, and not as owned literary character'; it is Flannery O'Connor's 'mystery of personality'. Neddy offers a different model of character in fiction. There is certainly mystery and ambiguity around him, both in terms of what has happened to him prior to the events of the story and in the sense of what is happening to him during the story. However, the second of these is really a formal mystery – is this some kind of dream or reality? – and the first is a mystery that is essentially unravelled for us rather than sustained or deepened.

Interviewed about 'The Swimmer' by *The New Yorker*, Anne Enright says that 'I wouldn't ever see a morality in Cheever'¹²⁷ but it is hard not to read the story as at least partly a parable of hubris. The reader's attitude to Neddy is not really an ambiguous or subtle one. There is great pleasure to be had in the sensual details of Neddy's experience, a kind of virtue in his ambition to 'enlarge and celebrate' (Cheever, p.604) the beauty of the day, the whole story a kind of 'beautiful falling',¹²⁸ as Enright has it. However, by the end of the story he is conclusively revealed as a vain, snobbish, drunk, womanising failure, ultimately without even the redeeming attribute of youth and vigour, and he meets his fate accordingly. It is hardly the territory that Wolff outlines of 'stories about people who led lives neither admirable or depraved'.

Responding to the idea that characters might take on a life of their own, a concept comparable to the notion of them ceasing to be 'owned literary characters' or becoming 'free consciousnesses', liable, like Munro's, to 'shoot off in directions inconvenient to the author', Cheever was nonplussed:

The legend that characters run away from their authors [...] implies that the writer is a fool with no knowledge or mastery of his craft. This is

¹²⁷ Anne Enright, 'Fiction Podcast: "The Swimmer"', *The New Yorker*, <<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/fiction-podcast-the-swimmer>> [accessed 5th January 2016].

¹²⁸ Enright, *The New Yorker*.

absurd [...] the idea of authors running around helplessly behind their inventions is contemptible.¹²⁹

At the end of 'An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke' and 'Silence' the reader is left with something inconclusive, ambiguous, open, as Harvard Dahle writes of Alice Munro, 'an enlargement of possibilities rather than a restriction'. Cheever, however, has something more prescriptive in mind. 'The Swimmer' builds towards a final epiphany by which time Neddy has been revealed in all his moral squalor and pitifulness – as well, arguably, as that of the world he inhabits – and he is damned for it. Neddy's ultimate fate is not left open, as Juliet and Brooke's are, but resolved.

Writing of 'The Enormous Radio', 'Torch Song' and 'Roseheath', O'Hara says 'it is obvious it is in each of them that behind the prism of observation there is an informed intelligence sorting out events, a critical eye analysing and connecting details, a moral architect building sophisticated themes into the story's architecture'.¹³⁰ The same can be said of 'The Swimmer' – and indeed much of Cheever's work from 1943 onwards – the sense of a highly moral vision that wished to 'instruct' readers in a pessimistic and fatalistic view of human affairs.

¹²⁹ Grant, (para. 19 of 113).

¹³⁰ O'Hara, p.57.

Beyond this desire to 'instruct' the reader, a didacticism to his sensibility, there are perhaps other, more pragmatic reasons why Cheever's work found its fullest and most successful expression away from the straitened naturalism of his early work. The first is his stylistic and imaginative exuberance, an author who ended the domestic travails of 'The Country Husband', with a florid allusion to the world of Hannibal and his army: 'it is a night where kings in golden suits ride elephants over the mountains'.¹³¹ As Blake Bailey writes, he had a powerful and inventive imagination that was 'forever going off on tangents, compulsively transforming the world into something more resonant, funny and meaningful'.¹³²

The second is to do with the complex relationship between Cheever's creativity and his private life. I have already noted how 'The Swimmer' may be read as a metaphor for the homosexual double life that Cheever was pursuing, as well as the shame and fear of exposure. Arguably, not only did this 'secret life give him creative energy',¹³³ as Toibin puts it, but because a large part of his own life could not be alluded to explicitly, he was obliged to find other modes, metaphorical ones, in which to dramatize his preoccupations. Cheever could not quite be a realist in the mode of Updike, his near contemporary, 'a meticulous painter of middle class life',¹³⁴ because he could not document with forensic detail the things that, as the journals show, were at the very heart of his own life.

¹³¹ John Cheever, 'The Country Husband', *The Stories of John Cheever*, (London: Vintage Books, 1990), p.446.

¹³² Bailey, p.315.

¹³³ Toibin, (para. 2 of 38).

¹³⁴ McGrath, (para. 15 of 37).

Toibin makes a compelling argument that the relative artistic and commercial failure of Cheever's early novels was for exactly this reason, that 'there were vast areas of himself that he could not use as a basis for a character dramatized over time' and the result was the broad comedy and bloodlessness of the Wapshot novels.¹³⁵ Cheever himself seems to have suspected something similar, writing in his journal as he struggled to complete *The Wapshot Scandal*: 'I cannot resolve the book because I have been irresolute about my own affairs'.¹³⁶ It was only when he finally addressed homosexuality directly, in his short penultimate novel *Falconer*, that, as Susan Cheever has said, 'Each chapter and scene seemed to stream from his imagination already written', and he produced what critics and Cheever himself regarded as his masterpiece.¹³⁷

Cheever admitted that 'The Swimmer' was 'terribly difficult' to write, taking two months rather than the usual three days it took him to produce a story.¹³⁸ Originally conceived as a novel, it was eventually cut down from 150 pages of notes and the result is a remarkably compact, vivid and sustained piece of writing, a more or less perfect example of the short story form. Much of its success is down to the perfect tension in which it holds its different registers –

¹³⁵ Toibin, (para. 14 of 38).

¹³⁶ Cheever, John, *The Journals* (London: Vintage, 2009), p.103.

¹³⁷ Susan Cheever, *Home Before Dark* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1999), p.244. For further discussion of the relationship of Cheever's art to his personal life see, Malcolm Cowley, 'John Cheever: The Novelist's Life as Drama', *Sewanee Review*, 91 (Winter 1983), pp.1-16.

¹³⁸ Grant, (para. 98 of 113).

the suburban and the mythic, the comic and the tragic, the real and the fantastic. He was by no means a conventional realist, if such a thing exists. He was a realist in the best and widest sense of the term, formally engaged and continually straining to meet its challenge. His achievement, in 'The Swimmer' and elsewhere, was to combine the merciless dissection of a particular social milieu with an attention to the wider human condition. The result, as Updike wrote, was to turn suburbia into an archetypal place, 'a terrain we can recognize within ourselves, wherever we are or have been. Only he saw in its cocktail parties and swimming pools the shimmer of dissolving dreams'.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ John Updike, 'Comment', *The New Yorker*, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1982/07/12/comment-6018> [accessed 20th January 2016] (para. 3 of 5).

Chapter 4: *Big Cat*

In a 2012 essay responding to a charge from James Wood that she and too many other contemporary writers were engaged in producing what he called 'hysterical realism', Zadie Smith made the point that 'writers do not write what they want, they write what they can'.¹⁴⁰ In her essay 'Writing Short Stories', Flannery O'Connor said 'I write to find out what I know'.¹⁴¹ Both of these statements, made fifty years apart, point to the essential mysteriousness of the creative process and an apparent lack of conscious control over what is written. This resonates with my own experience of writing fiction and has implications for the way in which one can talk about one's own creative work.

In discussing *Big Cat: A collection of short stories*, the creative work submitted for this thesis, it would be disingenuous to claim that it was produced via the deliberate and successful implementation of a set of artistic techniques, values and intellectual ideas. Rather, it is the result of a complex mix of planning, intuition, frustration and accident, as well as conscious and unconscious influence. It is not possible to conclusively unravel this complexity (or perhaps even desirable; the superstitious belief that to try and do so runs the risk of

¹⁴⁰ Zadie Smith, 'This is how it feels to me', *The Guardian* (13th October 2001) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/oct/13/fiction.afghanistan> [accessed 1st February 2016] (para. 4 of 17).

¹⁴¹ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), p. 89.

undermining the process altogether). However, with this caveat in mind, much insight may still be gained via a description and examination of the creative process.

In the previous three chapters I have offered analysis of the work of Tobias Wolff, Alice Munro and John Cheever. This chapter will bring together this critical approach, a scholarly examination of my own finished work that references and develops the arguments in these earlier chapters, with a necessarily tentative, provisional and personal account of the creative process.¹⁴² The central theme is the preoccupation and negotiation with realism as I have discussed it in the previous three chapters, the notion that the continual struggle to create something that corresponds and resonates with the experience of life as it is lived is 'the central impulse in fiction making'.¹⁴³ I will examine the progress of my artistic development in relation to this impulse, from my earliest work through to the stories included in this submission, looking at how I have sought to meet the challenges of realism myself, the tensions within my work, and reflecting also on the role of autobiographical material. I will argue that the consequence of this is not the lazy, habitual invoking of dead conventions, an ossified and sclerotic version of 19th Century literary realism, but something vital,

¹⁴² Ailsa Cox has written well about these contrasting approaches and the attempt to integrate them, particularly as it relates to the short story form. See Ailsa Cox, 'Editorial', *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice*, Volume 1, Number 1 (2011), p.3.

¹⁴³ Wood, *How Fiction Works*, p.81.

authentically contemporary and relevant, the high-minded but fundamental belief that, as Cheever put it:

Fiction *is* experimentation; when it ceases to be that, it ceases to be fiction. One never puts down a sentence without the feeling that it has never been put down before in such a way and that perhaps even the substance of the sentence has never been felt. Every sentence is an innovation.¹⁴⁴

For the final thesis of my Masters in Creative and Life Writing, awarded in 2002, I submitted four short stories, three of which were set in carefully detailed but deliberately unnamed, non-specific locations, at non-specific points in history.¹⁴⁵ In 'Border', the unnamed woman narrator is waiting to cross the border from her impoverished and dangerous home country to one where she believes a better life is waiting. In 'The Ice Palace', a man sitting at the bedside of his dying mother reflects on the extraordinary circumstances of his conception in a

¹⁴⁴ Annette Grant, 'John Cheever, The Art of Fiction No.62', *The Paris Review* (Autumn 1976, No.67) <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3667/the-art-of-fiction-no-62-john-cheever> [accessed 11th December 2015] (para. 12 of 113).

¹⁴⁵ Tom Lee, *Border and other stories* (unpublished master's thesis, University of London, Goldsmiths College, 2002). Further references to this thesis will be given in the text,

boomtown that has since fallen into ruin. In 'Island 21', a young conscript finds himself alone guarding an apparently unimportant territory:

The conscript sits in his uniform and scrolls through the dial on his shortwave radio. He would like to hear news about the progress of the military campaign or the election that was imminent when he left the mainland. Occasionally he hears words in the language and accent that is familiar to him. He cranes his head towards the speaker, the muscles of his face tensed, but the voices are quickly blotted out by a rising distortion. (Lee, p.51)

Heavily influenced by Jim Crace's book of linked stories *Continent*¹⁴⁶ and Peter Carey's first collection *The Fat Man in History*,¹⁴⁷ the stories have a heightened narrative voice that tends towards that of the fable or allegory and appears to situate them not in specific real world locales, but, as I stated in the commentary included in the thesis, 'one imaginative globalised territory' (Lee, p.62).

In the commentary I explained this choice as a reaction against a particular sort of fiction that seemed to fetishise the contemporary, arguing that,

¹⁴⁶ Jim Crace, *Continent* (London: Picador, 2008).

¹⁴⁷ Peter Carey, *The Fat Man in History* (London: Faber, 2002).

'The danger for writers who seek self-consciously to capture the zeitgeist is that they get bogged down in the ephemeral'. I quoted Jonathan Franzen who wrote that 'by insisting on drawing on an up-to-the-minute vocabulary of icons and attitudes, instead of challenging and questioning the culture we live in, these writers, and others like them, risk only imitating and reinforcing it' (Lee, p.60) and invoked the example of the short-lived, misguided and now long-forgotten anthology of stories and literary movement *All Hail the New Puritans*.¹⁴⁸ Whilst this explanation still feels true to a degree, I now take a slightly different view. I alluded to this in the following description of writing 'Border':

In this story I was able to write about the desperation of a sexually abused migrant, something I would not have felt comfortable doing had I set the story in a specific context. Freed from the notion of responsibility towards a particular group of people, or the feeling of being presumptuous in writing about an experience so alien to my own, or the accurate evocation of a particular locale, my imagination was given free rein to tell the story I wanted to tell. (Lee, p.61)

Viewed in this way, the form these early stories took was more a result of necessity than of choice, the notion that writers 'do not write what they want,

¹⁴⁸ Nicholas Blincoe & Matt Thorne (eds.), *All Hail the New Puritans* (London: 4th Estate, 2001). 355

they write what they can'. Freed from the duties and limits of a strict verisimilitude of time and space, I was liberated both imaginatively and linguistically. At this stage in my writing life I did not yet have the confidence – or the human or professional experience – to take on these burdens and responsibilities. It is worth noting that the result of this was to produce work that, at least in the obvious sense, did not reflect my own experience at all, the opposite to the cliché of a writer's early work depending disproportionately on autobiographical elements.

Ultimately, however, I felt that this approach became a creative dead end, a burden and a limitation in itself. Essentially, I had been writing a form of what Angela Carter defines as 'tales' as opposed to short stories, a rich and distinct tradition with its roots in folk and fairytale and the oral tradition. The 'tale', Carter writes, 'does not log everyday experience as the short story does',¹⁴⁹ and I had begun to feel that by not engaging with 'everyday experience' I was losing too much: the specifics and variety of language, place, character and incident in the contemporary, material world. The 'tales' were driven partly by a particular political and philosophical agenda and allowed me to engage directly in big human themes – Greed, Hubris, Folly - but operating within the broad emotional strokes of allegory and fable allowed little room for the ambiguity, complexity and contradictions of experience. Under the influence of writers like

¹⁴⁹ Angela Carter, 'Afterword to Fireworks: Nine Stories in Various Disguises', in *Short Fiction & Critical Contexts*, ed. Eric Henderson and Geoff Hancock (Oxford: OUP, 2010), p.426.

Wolff and Munro, and that of critics like Wood, I began to locate the energy of my stories in the details of an individual life, in the specifics of voice and character, rather than simply using them as ciphers for large, abstract ideas.

'The Starving Millions', included in this thesis, begins:

'Nice car,' said Nick's brother Ed, as they put the bags in the boot at the airport. Nick looked up at him, wondering if Ed meant anything more than this and then deciding that he did not. He would have to try not to be so touchy. They had not seen each for nearly two years and his brother was simply making an effort. After all, it was a nice car, a black four-wheel-drive Toyota, but hardly ostentatious. It was the first substantial thing Nick had bought when he and Beth had moved to the US eighteen months before and he could not pretend he did not enjoy sitting up high behind the wheel, driving the wide sunny streets on the way to work every day.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Tom Lee, 'The Starving Millions', *Big Cat: a collection of short stories*, p.60. All page references are to the version which forms the first part of this doctoral thesis and will be given in the text from now on.

The language and style of this first paragraph is characteristic of the rest of the story and a number of the other stories included in this submission. It is dry, unadorned, unselfconscious, a natural development of the aspiration set out in my MA commentary to write with an 'economical rather than verbose prose style, one that tries to avoid the flashiness and throwaway humour of much contemporary writing, and a way of telling stories where drama is valued over cleverness, where as much is withheld as revealed'.¹⁵¹ Whilst my view, as expressed then, is both rather general and seems now to overstate the point, it does highlight an instinctive antipathy towards writers who seem to me to share to a greater or lesser extent the values that Raymond Tallis ascribes to so-called 'anti-realists', that narrative is a confidence trick, characters in fiction a bourgeois construct and language as a closed system which operates without meaningful reference to the world beyond it.¹⁵²

In contrast my own fiction is built on a belief – or faith as I have described it previously – that whilst Wood's statement that 'a word has a necessary and transparent link to its referent'¹⁵³ is problematic and almost wilfully naïve, language certainly does embody a system of shared meanings and have a link to the world it seeks to describe. It is, in fact, in this very lack of transparency, this complexity and slipperiness, that the power of literary language resides. On this

¹⁵¹ Lee, *Border and other stories*, p.63

¹⁵² For a detailed argument in favour of the 'anti-realist' position, see Robert Scholes, *The Fabulators* (New York, 1967), in which he suggests that those who still work in the realist or naturalist traditions are 'like headless chickens unaware of the decapitating axe' (p.6).

¹⁵³ Wood, *How Fiction Works*, p. 171.

basis, the precision of the language used is paramount, Flaubert's 'le mot juste', or as Carver puts it:

For the details to be concrete and convey meaning, the language must be accurate and precisely given. The words can be so precise they may even sound flat, but they can still carry; if used right, they can hit all the notes.¹⁵⁴

It is interesting to pursue this notion of hitting 'all the notes'. In a lecture given to students on Columbia university's writing programme Zadie Smith suggested that there are two types of writers: 'The Macro Planner' and 'The Micro Manager'. Describing herself as a Micro Manager, Smith says 'I start at the first sentence of a novel and finish at the last' and that she hasn't 'the slightest idea what the ending is until I get to it'. She goes on:

Because Micro Managers have no grand plan, their novels exist only in their present moment, in a sensibility, in the novel's tonal frequency line

¹⁵⁴ Raymond Carver, 'On Writing', in *Short Fiction & Critical Contexts*, ed. Eric Henderson and Geoff Hancock (Oxford: OUP, 2010), p.433. Carver, the writer most closely associated with the term 'Dirty Realism', is perhaps the one featured in *Granta 8* whose work in fact has the most complicated and ambivalent relationship with realism; see Charles E. May, "'Do You See What I'm Saying?": The Inadequacy of Explanation and the Uses of Story in the Short Fiction of Raymond Carver', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 31, North American Short Stories and Short Fictions (2001), pp. 39-49.

by line. When I begin a novel, there is *nothing of that novel* outside of the sentences I am setting down. I feel I have to be very careful: I can change the whole nature of the thing by changing a few words.¹⁵⁵

Smith is discussing the process of writing a novel but this description of how a creative work begins and the absolute centrality of finding the right ‘tonal frequency’ in order for it to proceed is entirely familiar to me as a writer of short stories. Establishing the ‘tonal frequency’ – what we might also call ‘voice’ – in the first paragraph of ‘The Starving Millions’ was crucial in allowing me to imagine and write the rest of the story.

The set-up is relatively simple: two brothers who have not seen each other for two years, apparently with some tension or sourness between them. The ‘tonal frequency’ however is in the particular choice of language that the narrative uses to frame their relationship, Nick’s feelings about his brother and about himself, and the free indirect style that takes Nick’s point of view but is not identical to his own voice. In the second and third line there is Nick’s instruction to himself not to be so sensitive to his brother’s behaviour – ‘He would have to try not to be so touchy’ - the knowledge that his mere presence inflames him. There is the attempt to see the best in Ed: ‘He was simply making an effort’.

¹⁵⁵ Zadie Smith, ‘That Crafty Feeling’, http://www-personal.umich.edu/~shanesg/EOTW/Supplementary_Readings/Zadie_Smith_Suite/ZADIE_CRAFTY_FEELING.pdf [accessed 1st February 2016] (para. 8 of 35).

Then, finally, the assertion that he did not need to feel bad about owning a large car – or anything else – and that he enjoyed driving it. The way this is expressed is arguably the key tonal moment at the beginning of the story, the anxiety implicit in the double negative of ‘could not pretend he did not enjoy’, reminiscent of the passive aggression in Wolff’s Professor Brooke who ‘had no real quarrel with anyone in his department, but there was a Yeats scholar named Riley whom he could not bring himself to like’. Nick is on the defensive, already justifying himself, aware of some possible larger guilt. These apparently small details of phrasing and language, of finding a voice and tone, especially at the embryonic stage of a piece of work, are key to how it will be written and indeed whether it will be written at all.

Fundamental to this tone, and to the overall effect of ‘The Starving Millions’, is the use of free indirect style, as it is in Munro’s ‘Silence’ and Wolff’s ‘An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke’. The story is narrated in the third person, from Nick’s point of view in a voice and register that is close to Nick’s own, inflected with his language, mode of thought and prejudices, and very often identical, as in the self-justifying, ‘could not pretend he did not enjoy’ or the comment that it was a ‘source of wonder’ (Lee, p. 61) to Nick that he and Ed shared the same parents. At other moments, however, the gap between the two voices is apparent. When the narrative states of the work Ed’s hospital ship carried out in Africa, ‘Nick was vague about the details’ (Lee, p. 60), this is not Nick’s voice exactly, but something more complicated and textured and through

which I hoped to allow room for a view of Nick as too casually dismissive of his brother's work. Throughout the story this insertion of a subtle and ironic distance between the narration and Nick, a play of voices and registers, is designed to complicate the reader's experience of the text and to allow for a continual manipulation of sympathy and moral weight, similar to that managed by Wolff in 'An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke'.

In the writing and re-writing of 'The Starving Millions', I was very aware of the absoluteness of the oppositions I was setting up: the wealthy, materialistic, atheist brother who has moved to The United States versus the ascetic, devout brother working on a missionary ship in Africa. Questions of morality and ethics are very much to the fore, and indeed give the story much of its energy, but I endeavoured to blur and complicate the absolutes both in the spirit of creating dramatic resonance and depth and because I aspired, like Chekhov, to a type of fiction that, is 'a bashful, milky complication, not a solving of things'.¹⁵⁶ At first, and superficially, the moral and ethical scales seem to weigh against Nick, for all the obvious reasons: his apparent materialism, unapologetic aspiration for the good life for himself and his family, disparagement of his brother's good works. However, Ed's piety and evangelism are alienating too, his presumption following the death of their parents - 'Nick received a letter from his brother full of religious homilies about death and grief and reassuring him that they had gone to a better place' – the sense that, at least from Nick's point of view, this is all

¹⁵⁶ James Wood, 'What Chekhov Meant by Life', p.75.

part of 'a pose', that Ed 'had been waiting all along for an event awful enough to match his piety' (Lee, p. 68). As it turns out, everyone likes Ed, he is a hit with Nick's new family and his daughter in particular, he is a good enough sport to go along to the stag do and not make a scene (in the end it is Nick who makes a scene), and makes a witty – although possibly loaded – speech at the wedding. Then, when Karl's donation to the fund for Ed's hospital ship, is revealed, an inevitability that Nick seems to foresee, assumptions about Ed's motives and character are again thrown into doubt: 'You're cynical, Ed. You think you're not but you are' (Lee, p. 78). To what degree did Ed solicit the money from Karl? Is this all about self-interest? Is it an act of spite against his brother? Nick's memory of the childhood game 'Having Trouble Breathing' at the end of the story suggests the brothers locked in a suffocating, passive aggressive cycle of harm.

My intention was not for one brother to appear more sympathetic to a reader than the other nor to make a wider moral argument. Instead, any attempt by the reader to come to a stable judgment about the characters or a moral intention to the story as a whole is deliberately thwarted. I was also aware of, and worked hard to complicate and undermine, a stereotype of The United States and Americans as entirely in thrall to money, especially as I had used a version of the U.S. to stand as symbolic of a particular relationship to materialism and greed in 'Border' and 'The Ice Palace'. The story is set in an affluent American suburb but Nick's wife, Beth, is much more sympathetic to Ed

than Nick himself and Nick sees this favourably: 'he liked it about her, her generosity, part of what he thought of as her Americanness' (Lee, p. 66). Similarly, the rest of Nick's family do not share his antipathy towards Ed, even when he talks about tumours over the dinner table. Ultimately, Karl donates the money to the hospital ship.

Nick and Ed's behaviour offer contradictory and ambiguous evidence of their character and motives and as I have already suggested I worked to further complicate this through the texture of the narrative voice. Everything that is known and seen about Ed is mediated through Nick's view of him and everything known and seen about Nick is mediated through the third person narrative voice. The story is not an objective series of events and characters but refracted through multiple levels, each of which creates new elements of distance, doubt and ambiguity. All this points away from the notion that characters can be fully known or comprehended and instead towards an ideal of them as endlessly complex and enigmatic. Similarly, the story ends with Nick and Ed back, more or less, where they started – in fact where they were as children - another layer added to the resentment between them, continuing to inflict damage on each other, nothing resolved.

Other stories submitted here, most notably 'The Harrowing Inroads of Heathen Men' and 'The Good Guy', represent a slightly different sensibility and aesthetic in my work and echo more loudly the heightened tone and drama of early stories

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such as 'Greenfly' and 'San Francisco'. Narrated in the third person, from the point of view of underachieving and melancholic academic Nancy, 'The Harrowing Inroads of Heathen Men' begins by establishing a conventional verisimilitude, a depressing trip to a conference in Sweden:

Malmö itself, or what she saw of it, was also dismal: austere, grey, grimly industrial, savagely cold. Despite – or perhaps because of – its lack of obvious virtues, it seemed to be in the grip of an orgy of civic self-promotion. Everywhere Nancy looked, every wall, every sign or poster or leaflet, the side of every bus, exhorted her to move to, study at, invest in or simply admire the redeveloped docks, the expanding university, the rebranded historic city centre. (Lee, p. 121)

On the last afternoon Nancy skips the final conference session to go to a sauna and, standing naked on a jetty looking out to sea, experiences a 'minor epiphany' (Lee, p. 122). The narrative voice is ironic, blackly comic, reflecting Nancy's own sense of wry despair. Then comes a near plane crash, during which Nancy assumes she is going to die. Although the plane manages an emergency landing on 'a small and neglected looking runway, the type of place used by secret services or drug runners, Nancy thought, somewhere off the map' (Lee, p.

124), the story appears to have itself entered more ambiguous territory with parallels to Cheever's 'The Swimmer'.¹⁵⁷

Improbably, Nancy is allowed to wander away from the plane and makes her way back to work in London. Here she is surprised to find no mention of the incident on the news. Gradually, these faint notes of strangeness become louder and more insistent. She has a headache that won't go away. Every time she tries to tell someone about the plane they talk over her. Hours later it has still not been reported in the news, although she hears on the radio about another crash, in Burkina Faso, and everyone – her colleagues Joy and Nate, and her husband – make startling confessions. When her head of department fails to answer her question about the future of her job at Joy's party, Nancy's headache erupts into a kind of delirium. She smashes a wine bottle on the wall and makes an impassioned speech to the rest of the guests about the Viking attack on Lindisfarne:

It seemed likely that some of the red marks smeared across her arms and down her skirt were her own blood, but it didn't matter. Her headache had gone and her eyes were sharp. The edges of everything seemed very clear. She looked around the room. Her colleagues, friends and family

¹⁵⁷ Part of the inspiration for 'The Harrowing Inroads of Heathen Men' was in fact another Cheever story, 'The Country Husband', in which the protagonist is also on a plane that nearly crashes and is subsequently unable to communicate this trauma to anyone.

were almost upon her. She took up a fighting position, slightly crouched, one foot behind the other, and brandished the bottle in front of her. (Lee, p. 143)

As in 'The Swimmer', the carefully established verisimilitude of 'The Harrowing Inroads of Heathen Men' gradually fractures as the story builds to a dramatic crescendo. As Cheever said: 'If he [the reader] truly believes he is standing on a rug, you can pull it out from under him'. At the climax of the story, quoted above, it is reasonable to wonder how a reader should view Nancy's actions. Is her long speech plausible? Does she really smash the bottle and shout 'come on you motherfuckers' (Lee, p. 143) to her colleagues? One might decide that this is a hallucination, a symptom of the headache that has been plaguing Nancy since the plane crash. Alternatively, it is arguable that the rupture with ordinary plausibility occurred much earlier in the story. Why can Nancy find no record of the plane's emergency landing? Did the plane go down after all? Is it the same reason that nobody seems to be listening to her? Is she, as some have suggested of Neddy in 'The Swimmer', already dead?

These are all possibilities and, as in 'The Swimmer', this ambiguity does not need to be resolved. 'The Swimmer' and 'The Harrowing Inroads of Heathen Men' bear comparison in other ways. In Nancy and Neddy they feature protagonists who are the subject of an intense build up of psychological pressure – for Nancy, the anxiety about the future of her job and her choice of vocation,

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as well as the mental and physical trauma of the plane flight; for Neddy, the repressed knowledge of his personal ruin. An obvious reading of both stories is that this build up of pressure and the consequent psychological unravelling of the characters reflects or is even the cause of this breakdown in the stories' strict verisimilitude.

This turning away from verisimilitude and instead towards a foregrounding of what we might think of as a subjective or interior realism, represents somewhat different aesthetic priorities. We move towards an idea of fiction as Cheever's deliberate 'telling of lies', a 'sleight of hand that displays our deepest feelings about life'. It allows a certain freedom, a freedom that in 'The Swimmer' Cheever used to load the story up with metaphorical and symbolic weight. Although 'The Harrowing Inroads of Heathen Men' does not attempt to carry these same burdens there is nevertheless a running theme of the corrupting power of a pervasively misogynistic culture. Gone is the deliberate complexity and ambiguity of 'The Starving Millions', replaced by a starkly moral vision, one where hubris, complacency and, above all, misogyny, are deserving of karmic retribution:

Either this is the beginning of greater tribulation, or else the sins of the inhabitants have called it upon them. Truly it has not happened by chance, but is a sign that it was well merited by someone... (Lee, p.143)

By the time the stories included in this submission began to be written, I had rejected the ambition outlined in my MA thesis commentary to avoid writing about a recognisable geographical and historical milieu. 'The Starving Millions', 'The Hunters', 'Berlin', 'Reunion'¹⁵⁸ and others rely on a strict verisimilitude of time and place, a focus on individual psychology and experience, and a textured narrative voice often facilitated by the use of free indirect narration. Others – 'The Harrowing Inroads of Heathen Men' and 'The Good Guy' – rely too on this framework of verisimilitude but then expose it to an extreme kind of pressure that results in a stretching or distortion of the frame.

However, I was still conscious of a tendency in my work towards easy oppositions, of a dramatic momentum and inevitability, a certain neatness and programmatic intention. Carver wrote: 'I like it when there is some feeling of threat or sense of menace in short stories. I think a little menace is fine to have in a story. For one thing, it's good for the circulation'.¹⁵⁹ Like Carver, I had become used to employing this sense of threat or menace, claustrophobia, a heightened tone, a sense of contrived drama, even melodrama. It seemed to be necessary to get my writerly circulation going but the result, increasingly, began

¹⁵⁸ My story 'Reunion' is a further homage to Cheever and his story of the same name.

¹⁵⁹ Carver, p.433.

to feel like short stories that had the gestures and tics and shape of other short stories, even of my own short stories repeating themselves.

This is a version of the anxiety that Munro has talked about, her concern at the 'coercive power of fiction' and the 'tendency in art to reduce lived experience to formal patterns'. Against this, Munro sets the continual desire to make 'as strong an attempt, as honest an attempt, as one can make to get at what is really there'. Munro's stories, specifically the later work of *Open Secrets*, *The Love of a Good Woman*, *Hateship*, *Friendship*, *Courtship*, *Loveship*, *Marriage* and *Runaway*, in their lack of fictional tricks, easy symmetries or familiar symbolism, and their curious shapes, spaciousness, and apparent lack of artifice, seemed to offer a challenge to me in my own work.

'Big Cat', the title story of this submission, is told in the first person and aspires to a kind of informal, colloquial style of narration rather than the tight, heightened, somewhat dry and ironic style of much of my other work. The locations and encounters have a deliberately prosaic, everyday quality to them, too:

I bumped into Jonny on the train home soon after we moved, and this seemed a little fated. We had not seen each other for a long time, almost exactly ten years, but I knew his parents lived in the area. A great deal had happened since then but it was as if I had been on the look-out for

him for the whole of that time. I often dreamt about him and had driven my wife crazy wondering aloud where Jonny – who she had never met – might be, how he was or what he was doing. (Lee, p.243)

The set-up of the story is not neat, or obviously dramatic: a narrator who has ‘recently had what I suppose you would call a breakdown’ (Lee, p.243) telling the story of re-encountering a friend who he has not seen since the friend’s own more extreme form of breakdown ten years previously. This felt like an artistic risk, to construct a story around two depressed, or formerly depressed people, who offer little obvious contrast to each other. In addition, the story does not develop in a conventionally dramatic way. The narrator and Jonny continue to meet, but each time there are diminishing returns and gradually the relationship fades away again. There is no climactic event or dramatic rupture.

This presented creative challenges. Following the surprise encounter on the train, their arranged meeting in the pub and the background to their friendship and Jonny’s life in the intervening years, all of which takes us to the halfway point of the story, there was a question as to how to move the narrative on. There was a strong temptation to build to a dramatic climax – why else have a story at all? – for the friendship to become unhealthy and cause problems for one or both of them, for there to be some kind of emotional showdown. This was the easy option, a writing reflex developed over previous stories, to bring everything to an anxious, dramatic boil. However, this was a different sort of

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story, with a different tone established from the beginning – more melancholic and reflective - and one that required a more challenging effort to, as it were, meet the challenges of realism.

There is an echo of the kind of dramatic climax that I have produced before (the final scene of 'You Must Change Your Life' involves a parent's perceived threat to their child from another adult) in the meeting with Jonny at the fair on Peckham Rye. However, it is not the denouement of the story; it is dealt with in a single paragraph, told in summary rather than sustained dramatic moment, and the story moves on. Rather than brush over the absence of further dramatic action, the narrative foregrounds this and attempts to make a virtue of it: 'I saw Jonny maybe five times after that' (Lee, p.253). The friendship then ebbs away in a series of summarized encounters - 'I went to a party at his flat'; 'The other times we met in the pub'; 'The last time I spoke to him' (Lee, pp.253-254) - where the narrator is uneasy, almost bored and there is little action of obvious significance, where in fact his sense that there is no long term future in the friendship is really the point. This sense of drift towards an unspectacular or muted ending recalls Munro's 'Silence', a kind of refusal to allow the 'coercive power of fiction' or the 'formal patterns' of art to inflict a more conventionally satisfying or grandstanding conclusion. There is no epiphany or great, unresolved tension. Instead, the notes that are struck are light, only a little suggestive, conflicting: that Jonny might be stuck in a destructive cycle with his own life and health – 'He was good company, as he always had been, but I felt

like an on-looker, shut out from his enthusiasms and vaguely depressed by their familiarity'; that the narrator's own seeming return to equilibrium may have come at the loss of his own 'deeper awareness of human frailty' - 'Over the next year, I did not often think of Jonny. I was preoccupied with my own life again now' (Lee, p.255).

Of all the stories included here, 'Big Cat' draws most straightforwardly on autobiographical material. I experienced a breakdown similar to the one described by the narrator in the story when my daughter was young and we had just moved to a different part of London. Soon afterwards I bumped into a friend I had not seen for ten years following his own, more serious, mental health problems. Therefore, although much of the detail is fictional, there was also a model of lived events against which to measure my own attempt to bring something authentically alive. In 'Big Cat' – as well as 'The Swimmer', submitted here (note, my own story of that title, not Cheever's) which drew heavily on my father's experience of illness and recovery – I felt able to write with a new emotional directness, an appeal to human experience that had previously been filtered into comedy, melodrama and the surreal:

Until now, it seemed, I had managed to go through life ignorant of what most people suffered, the kinds of things they tolerated or were forced to reconcile themselves to. Often I felt that this new awareness had made me more human, powerfully empathetic – a compensatory gift for

breaking down – and at other times I wondered if I had simply become morbid, voyeuristic, exquisitely sensitive to pain that wasn't even there. (Lee, p.250)

It is worth noting, however, that it would not have been possible to write the story if it had not been for the one fully fictionalised aspect of it: the 'Big Cat' of the title. This element presented itself to me, as often in writing fiction, in what felt like entirely serendipitous fashion – a short article in a local paper - and the two lines that open the story were the first I wrote and remain unchanged in the final version:

One evening in the pub my friend Jonny told me about his encounter with the Big Cat. Every day he went running through Dulwich Woods – keeps my head together, he said – and on one of these runs, very early in the morning, sitting in full view on a fallen-down tree and watching him approach, was a black cat the size of a Labrador. (Lee, p.242)

I felt that this opening had a note of strangeness and ambiguity that demanded further development. The uncanny element of the cat allowed an indirect way into the story of these otherwise down to earth, domestic and personal issues, as well as offering a potentially symbolic and metaphorical

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dimension. The contrast between these two elements felt potent. Altogether, I realized that this constituted the 'tonal frequency' that Zadie Smith writes as being necessary to write a piece of fiction. Implicit in these first lines – and although the cat itself appears only in this first paragraph and the final one – was the rest of the story.

It is useful to note the development in my artistic aims and techniques over the period in which the stories in this submission were written, and prior to this, by examining how a significant theme is revisited time and again in my work. In the most recent stories, 'Big Cat', 'The Swimmer' and 'The Subterraneans', the question of mental illness and breakdown is dealt with explicitly. The narrator of 'Big Cat' refers to his own breakdown as well as his friend Jonny's 'illness' (Lee, p.251), his being 'psychotic' and the 'drug combination' (Lee, p.248) he had been put on to bring him out of it. In 'The Swimmer' the narrator's father's illness is never identified but resembles some kind of depressive episode which, following treatment at a retreat in Dorset, is replaced by a mania. The narrator himself takes an unidentified medication at moments of anxiety in the story. In 'The Subterraneans' the young narrator's mother is 'ill in ways I did not understand' (Lee, p.170) and the brother of another character has recently been released from a psychiatric hospital and takes an overdose towards the end of the story.

In 'The Harrowing Inroads of Heathen Men' and 'The Good Guy' the theme is present, although the shades of anxiety, depression and breakdown are

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elements in a blackly comic drama rather than the explicit subject of the stories. In 'The Harrowing Inroads of Heathen Men' Nancy's husband makes a surprise admission:

I'm having a nervous breakdown. Well, maybe I'm not having one right now, but I'm pretty sure I'm about to have one. That's something I've been thinking about a lot – is thinking you are having one the same as actually having one. How do you know when you are actually in it? There must be some kind of officially recognised scale for this sort of thing – where you get points for different symptoms... (Lee, p.133)

In 'The Good Guy', the main character, JP, is diagnosed as suffering from panic attacks, the most spectacular of which takes the form of an out of body experience at the climax of the story. Earlier, JP's friend, Roland, produces a bottle of pills and tells Roland, 'Not what you're thinking. Only what the doctor gives me these days' (Lee, p.199).

The earliest of the stories included here, as well as many of those in my MA dissertation and published collection *Greenfly*,¹⁶⁰ deal with the same material, although more obliquely. In 'You Must Change Your Life' the main character, Laurie, who has given up his job abruptly and for reasons he cannot

¹⁶⁰ Tom Lee, *Greenfly* (London: Harvill Secker, 2009).

clearly articulate, becomes obsessed with a mentally disabled man who lives in an institution behind Laurie's house. In the title story of the collection the narrator, Janey, off work for unspecified but apparently stress-related reasons, believes her flat is infested with greenfly but it remains unclear if this is a figment of her nervous imagination. In 'Island 21' the young conscript marooned on a non-descript island begins to lose his identity altogether. Following my own breakdown, I published a piece of memoir in *The Dublin Review* in which I reflected on the collection I had just published:

And when I went to events and read the stories themselves out loud – grim, claustrophobic, paranoid stories – I suddenly saw what I had somehow missed before, that here was an intimate record of my own increasingly fraught mental state. They ended, almost every one of them, on a cliffhanger of unresolved anxiety, their characters apparently on the brink of psychic collapses. I had anticipated myself.¹⁶¹

It is tempting, of course, to review everything through the prism of a traumatic experience and this quote perhaps overstates the case, but themes of anxiety, mental disquiet and depression have undoubtedly animated my work,

¹⁶¹ Tom Lee, 'The invader and the antidote', *The Dublin Review*, 62 (Spring 2016), pp. 26-45 (p.40).

from the earliest stories in which it manifested in claustrophobia, paranoia, melodrama and characters under extremes of pressure, to the most recent where the less dramatic, more prosaic realities of mental illness are explicitly explored. It is interesting to note how this move towards a more Chekhovian strain of realism (the realism of Munro and Wolff), married with the more overt use of autobiographical material, represents a contrast, broadly speaking, to the direction that Cheever's work took. In order to realise his potential as a writer, and to dramatise the issues most central to his own life, he was driven away from the naturalism of his early stories and into the heightened mythmaking of work such as 'The Swimmer'.¹⁶²

There is a different skill and challenge in rendering the subject matter of anxiety, depression and mental illness more directly in fiction, as well as a concentration on the ambiguity and complexity and shape of individual human experience, and I believe it represents an increasing sophistication in my work. However, it would be wrong to characterise this as a smooth, continuous and conscious move in one particular aesthetic direction, away from the heightened melodrama of earlier work. Rather, it is a haphazard, often unconscious trend, full of digressions, that involves the continual negotiation of what seem to be two different impulses in my fiction (for example, my most recent work, not included here, is a novella, *The Alarming Palsy of Joseph Orr*,¹⁶³ which depends

¹⁶² James O'Hara, p.52.

¹⁶³ Tom Lee, *The Alarming Palsy of Joseph Orr* (unpublished manuscript, 2016).

on the relentless build of psychological tension on a man suffering from an abrupt disfigurement of his face). I chose 'Big Cat' as the title for the collection for this reason, because I felt it to be the most fully achieved example of my fictional aspirations at this point, and because the cat itself captured this tension in my work between the heightened and the prosaic, the uncanny and the domestic. In this way it echoes the title of my published collection, *Greenfly*, where the existence or otherwise of the eponymous insects infecting Janey's flat is never resolved.

Progressing and developing as a writer requires restlessness, a sense of dissatisfaction with what you have done and the need to do it differently and better. I have endeavoured to show here how this progression and change is not a steady or wholly conscious process but is unified by a continual impulse to get 'life on the page, life brought to different life by the highest artistry'.¹⁶⁴

The stories submitted in this thesis represent a continual negotiation with notions of realism in fiction and by this I mean realism in its most vital, flexible and innovative sense. There is a tendency among some writers and critics to assume that work that does not explicitly call attention to its fictiveness or signpost its self-awareness is by definition conservative and unsophisticated but I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this commentary that this is far

¹⁶⁴ Wood, *How Fiction Works*, p.186.

from the being the case. Therefore, whilst my own stories do not bear the more obvious marks of experimentation or of the avant-garde in fiction, and continue to show faith in the traditional elements of character and narrative, I do not believe this represents any deficit in artistic ambition.

Very often the antagonism between advocates of different forms of fiction, specifically those who argue that realism is pre-eminent rather than just another genre and those who see it as irrelevant, seems to suggest that this is a binary – work is one thing or the other – and that the relationship between them is entirely adversarial. The binary does not work. Good fiction is much too sophisticated, slippery and original to fit neatly into two or even very many categories. Perhaps the relationship is adversarial but this may also be creatively fertile, as critics on both sides of the argument have acknowledged.

On the one side, in the final chapter of *In Defence of Realism*, Raymond Tallis reflects on his polemic and decides that his counter attacks on ‘anti-realism’ may at times have been ‘hysterical and unfair’ and furthermore that he ‘may have underestimated the value of the hostility directed towards realistic fiction’. Although no substitute for realism, he argues, ‘anti-realism’ and the debate around it help to keep realism ‘on its toes by continually questioning the received version of the nature of reality and mocking the fictional conventions by which reality is captured for the printed page’.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ Tallis, p.214.

On the other side, in a 2015 interview in which she was asked to reflect on 'Two Paths for the Novel', Zadie Smith is similarly emollient, suggesting that:

[...] the fashionable argument against 'realism' has become a bit simple-minded. The now familiar idea that 'realism' is just another literary genre' or that realistic writing is always and everywhere unexamined and unconsidered – a form of philosophical naivety – is in itself, in my opinion, somewhat overstated.¹⁶⁶

Smith too acknowledges the creative potential of this antagonism, pointing out that it is at the intersection of the different traditions that we often find 'extraordinary writers claimed by both sides: Melville, Conrad, Beckett, Joyce, Nabokov'.¹⁶⁷ We might easily say the same of fiction being produced now, fascinating, innovative work such as Ben Lerner's *10:04*, Rachel Cusk's *Outline* and Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation*. There is great vitality too in the contemporary exploding of distinctions between fiction and life writing, the

¹⁶⁶ Jennifer Hodgson, 'Interview with Zadie Smith', *The White Review*, 15 (December 2015) <<http://www.thewhitereview.org/interviews/interview-with-zadie-smith>> [accessed 1st September 2015] (para. 5 of 9).

¹⁶⁷ Smith, 'Two Paths for the Novel', (para. 31 of 59). It is interesting to compare the critical view of modern literary realism with that of realism in other art forms. In *Realism in 20th Century Painting* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), Brendan Prendeville notes a similar tendency to view realist painting as un-evolved and artistically irrelevant when in fact it has renewed itself through engagement with modernism and new visual technologies.

autobiographical novels of Karl Ove Knausgard, Sheila Heti and Elena Ferrante.

All these writers and their work continue to be an example to me in my own attempt to meet the challenges of realism.

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