

*All this is for you*

**and**

**Contemporary Uses of Omniscient Narration:**

**Theories and Case Studies**

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**Thesis submitted for the PhD in Creative and Life Writing**

## **Declaration of Authorship**

**I, Rachel White, declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own.**

**I have clearly stated where I have consulted the work of others.**

**Signed:**

**Date:**

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## Abstract

This thesis consists of two parts. Part One is the creative writing component, a 62,000 word novel, *All this is for you*, about Hemu Daswani, immigrant turned wealthy entrepreneur, and his daughter-in-law, Joanna, who between them debate the question, once a person has become rich, what else is there to strive for.

The second part is a 27,000 word critical commentary titled *Contemporary Uses of Omniscient Narration: Theories and Case Studies*. This commentary argues for the ongoing relevance of omniscient narration in contemporary realist fiction. I discuss the validity of fiction's author-God analogy and how it is both challenged and reinforced by theories of point of view, free indirect speech, and focalization. My close readings of works by Alice Munro, Elizabeth Strout, and Richard Yates examine the use of an omniscient narrator to engage readers in the multiple perspectives and complexities of close family relationships.

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**PART I: CREATIVE WRITING**

*All this is for you*

**A novel**

## Hemu

Hemu Daswani never thought he would outlive his wife. Most mornings, before he'd finished *The Times*, Laxmi Daswani was already out on her walk. She would put on her plain black MBTs, fasten a pedometer to the waistband of her trousers and plug a single headphone bud into her ear. She liked to listen to *aartis* while she walked, the spare bud tucked underneath the wide strap of her bra so that she could listen out for careless drivers and stay safe from robbers. The route she took went out along the Watford Road footpath and back through the Harrow-on-the-Hill Pitch and Putt, totalling three and a half miles, and on a good day, she did it in an hour and fifteen minutes. Hemu liked to see the glow about her when she got home, which took years off. Although he never told her that.

– Come with me, she always said to him. – A blast of fresh air will remove all your tension. And each time, he said he was too busy. She taped a magazine page to the fridge door: *Fifteen Benefits of Walking* and drew thick lines under *heart disease* and *diabetes*, which were first and second on the list and *stress*, which came lower down. In the margin she wrote:

*blood pressure*

*arthritis*

*balance.*

One night, when they were sitting up in bed, both reading from their iPads, she asked him if he knew what endorphins were. The bedroom light was turned off, and except for the blue-white glow of their screens, they were in darkness.

– Of course I bloody know, he said.

The article he was reading said that houses prices in Hounslow would rise by nineteen and a half per cent over the next five years. It was totally off the mark. Hemu had been buying property for more than thirty years and he counted on being three steps ahead of all of

these madhatter journalists. Anybody could've told this idiot that the problem with Hounslow was the constant forth and back over another runway at Heathrow.

– Then tell me, she said. – What's the purpose of an endorphin?

– I can't tell you the exact medical explanation. I know the general sense of the word.

– Endorphins are endogenous opioid inhibitory neuropeptides, she read out. – They are neurotransmitters that pass signals from one neuron to the next. The signals instruct the body to reduce stress and enhance pleasure. It says here that chillies, exercise and sex all release endorphins into the body.

– What you're supposed to do with the chillies? He said, and he laughed until a fit of coughing came on.

– This is what I'm telling you.

She rested her iPad on the duvet and looked at him over the top of her glasses.

– One of these days, you're going to drop dead.

\*

Hemu and Laxmi were married at the Bombay Radio Club on Arthur Bunder Road. The date was 22 September 1973, a Saturday. Hemu rode there on a white horse, rented for the day by his uncle. His younger brother holding the reins on one side and the young *ghodawala* holding them on the other. That morning, while he was taking his tea, Laxmi's cousin Meena came to collect him for the first of the ceremonies. This would be the foot-washing, which would take place at the apartment on Peddar Road where the bride's family lived. Earlier, he'd tried on the wedding *sherwani* his mother had chosen for him. The colour was cream with heavy gold embroidery covering the front panels. It fitted him well, except that across the shoulders it was tight and the collar had rubbed against his neck. Now, he was sitting on



the balcony, letting the sun warm his chest through the new white undershirt he was wearing. The sun was low and hazy, and his uncle kept saying that they were lucky because if there was to be rain, it would only come after the main ceremony.

Meena came onto the balcony and leant against the wall. She was dressed for the wedding in a mango-coloured sari with a blouse that showed her curves very nicely. She passed him a small red box.

– What's this?

– Open it.

Inside was a tie pin. It was a gold bar, with a large blue stone set close to the edge - the kind of jewellery he'd have picked for himself when he first got to London, thinking it made him look rich.

– Do you wear a tie to the office? she said.

– Of course.

She asked him for a cigarette and he offered her the packet.

– These are what you smoke in London?

They were Benson & Hedges Special Filters. In a gold box with the Royal Warrant stamped on the front.

– They're what I picked up at the airport.

He handed her his lighter, a plastic one with the phone number of his accountant stamped on it.

– Your husband allows you to smoke? he said.

– I allow myself.

Meena's marriage was a love marriage. Her husband, Rajeev, was a chemical engineer. Straight after Hemu's wedding, Meena and Rajeev were moving to America because Rajeev was starting his doctorate at a college there.

– It's California you're going to, no?

She nodded.

– I don't know it, he said. He stubbed out his cigarette and lit another – Are you nervous to go?

– Yes and no.

She put her arm across her body, just underneath her bust, to make a rest for her other arm, the one that was holding the cigarette. – I'm anxious and at the same time I want the day to come quickly.

He nodded.

– I don't like all the waiting around.

The balcony door opened and his uncle came out. His wedding outfit was a dark blue Nehru suit.

– Why you're still sitting here smoking? he said to Hemu. – Hurry up and put on your clothes.

He went back inside and Hemu took another long drag from his cigarette. Meena had turned away from him to lean on the balcony railing. The shape of her large round arse showed through her skirt and he watched it until he was ready to grind out his cigarette. Then, he stood up, put the red box into his trouser pocket and went to stand beside her.

– The tie pin was your choice? he said.

– You'll wear it?

He leaned forwards and kissed her. It was a rough kiss. His mouth was dry and so was hers. He reached up to her *choli* and squeezed her breast, but the rows of beads stitched onto the silk stopped him from getting the full feel of it. He squeezed again, harder, until she flinched.

At the Peddar Road apartment where the bride's family lived, her father was waiting for them in the doorway. He was holding a garland of orange and white marigolds, which he put over Hemu's head before they shook hands. The doorway and the passage of the hallway were hung with more marigold garlands and there was a clean woody a smell from the incense they were burning. It was a nice smell – the smell of a high-class place. Further inside, the girl's mother was waiting. Hemu slipped off his *chappals* and went forward, his head bent for the garland she was holding out for him. She was a small slim woman who looked like she wouldn't be crossed. He stood for a moment while she looked him up and down. There was nothing he could do. Then she nodded and he knelt down on the floor to touch her feet.

There was a chair waiting for him in the room they showed him to, covered with an embroidered sheet. A wide silver dish had been placed on the floor in front, with a length of wood laid across it. Hemu sat down, straightaway lifting his feet onto the wood. The girl was sitting on a sofa at the side of the room. She was looking down at the floor, and even though she must've known that he'd come into the room, she didn't look up. Her sari was red, with the same gold embroidery that covered the fronts of his *sherwani*. Meena sat down next to her and held her hand. He was tall. Something dry and doctorly about him, which made Hemu, sitting stiffly on the hard chair, feel like he was the lesser man. The father called to the servant to bring water. Then he put his hand onto Hemu's shoulder and squeezed slightly.

– The one piece of advice I can give you on a making successful marriage is the same advice my wife's father gave to me, he said. – Esteem and be esteemed.

It was the father who knelt first to take his turn at washing Hemu's feet, the cold water coming like a test, bidding Hemu to flinch. He refused, sitting completely still while the father brushed his fingers over the tops of his feet, pushing his fingers in between his toes, which was an embarrassment. Across the room, the girl started to cry, a gentle tinkling sound.

Meena was also crying. Now the kiss he'd given her felt like a mistake and he hoped she would not whisper to her cousin what he'd done. Somehow, by not responding, she'd got the better of him and then she'd outdone him a second time with the stiff beadwork that refused him his one last bachelor fling.

For a long time, Hemu and his wife argued about the foot-washing. He said that if her parents hadn't wanted to do it, then they shouldn't have offered. She said that anybody else would've known to put a stop to it the first time it was mentioned. It was only offered, she said, because his stupid uncle and aunty were expecting it. Her dad would've thought more highly of him if he'd refused to go along with it. Hemu said what difference did it make, that it was one small thing that was already in the past. The importance of it, his wife said, was that it told her every damn thing she needed to know about what a thick-headed husband he'd turn out to be.

He rode to the Radio Club on the white horse his uncle had rented for the day. His younger brother held onto the reins on one side, with the young *ghodawala* holding them on the other. Their two pairs of hands on either side of the reins was a relief because every couple of steps the horse stopped and tossed its head as if it might break into a gallop. They went slowly, weaving between the cars, motorbikes and trucks on Marine Drive and Hemu nodded at the men who called out advice or hooted as they passed. The wedding ceremony had seemed a formality. Weddings, he thought, were for the bride and not the groom. He wasn't expecting to be awed by it. But now he was feeling the significance of it; how he was holding himself out as a man who could provide for a wife. Now he would have to make good on that promise. He thought deliberately of the crates he had coming to London from Hong Kong. The new stock would earn him more than a thousand pounds. How many of the men who'd be watching him get married could make money like that in just a couple of weeks?

The wedding ceremony was taking place on the Radio Club's famous Pier. The Pier was a striking fifty-metre concrete construction reaching out into the Arabian Sea, with views of the Gateway of India and the Taj Hotel. This was Hemu's first view of it from inside the Club. It was an arresting sight, with the wedding *mandhap* set up at the far end of the Pier and the guests seated in rows of painted gold chairs that stretched all the way back to the lawn that separated the Pier from the Club's main building. He stood straight, as tall as he could make himself, and let them all look at him. He was a London businessman and there was no reason to think he wasn't the equal of this. And if, later on, his father-in-law suggested proposing him for membership, the joining fee of fifty thousand rupees wouldn't be a problem.

Even the *mandhap* was impressive, with its four corner poles wrapped heavily in red and yellow flower garlands. The canopy top was red, edged with long gold tassels, and the two chairs that had been positioned for him and his wife were large and brightly painted. The perimeter was marked with a line of shiny *diyas*, which stopped at the front to make a gateway for the two of them to step through. The whole thing shimmered in the heat given off by the fire. Whoever had done this had really gone to town, and another man might easily have been humbled by the grandness of it. He stepped inside and bowed his head to receive the garland that marked the start of the ceremony. While they made their vows, he stood shoulder to shoulder with his wife. Their heads were turned towards the priest who read out the Sanskrit words slowly in short phrases for them to repeat. When they were making their turns around the fire, he tried to catch her, but she kept her face turned away. When they retook their seats, he turned to look across the harbour at the pointed spires on the top of the Gateway of India and the bronzed dome of the Taj.

Forty years on, he could have entertained five hundred people in the Taj's ballroom. He could've served them oysters followed by black cod, with Asha Bhosle herself to sing for

them. But the proof of having made good was when you stopped going out of your way to show people what you had. So, when his wife said she wanted a dinner with dancing for their fortieth wedding anniversary, he said – Forget it. I'm done with all these bloody functions.

She wanted the party. He refused. Round they went with it. He wasn't willing to give an inch and neither was his wife. The Thursday before Easter, when Hemu came home from work, Laxmi called to him that she hadn't cooked. He was sitting on the stairs unlacing his shoes. Two large chocolate eggs side by side on the hall table reminded him that his grandsons would come at the weekend.

– Why you've bought such big eggs for the boys? he said.

– Because they're my grandsons and I like spoiling them.

He couldn't see her. Her voice was coming from the dining room.

– You should've bought smaller eggs and given the cash.

– Then you give them cash, she said. – I kept an appointment in town, so I ate there only. They gave cappuccino and beautiful sandwiches.

Hemu said he'd phone for takeaway.

– From where are you ordering?

– Royal China.

– Then I'll have something very little.

After he'd ordered - gold and silver prawns for her, crispy beef for himself, Chinese greens and Singapore noodles, he went into the dining room and poured himself a whisky. His wife was sitting at the large table with papers spread out in front of her. There were lists she'd made and brochures from hotels giving details of their banqueting rooms. He took his glass and sat in one of the armchairs that faced out onto the garden.

– Outside looks nice, he said. – What's the name of the tree with the white and pink flowers?

- Since when have you been interested in the names of trees?
- I'm only saying we should sit in this room more often. The view is nice.
- If you really want to know, the ones with the pink flowers are magnolia and the one

with the white flowers is cherry.

There were three magnolia trees in a line along the back edge of the lawn, and it struck Hemu that their confetti of petals lying on the grass was as picture-perfect an image of good living as you could find, one which was matched completely by the heaviness of his whisky glass, Waterford crystal, resting nicely on his thigh.

- We could put a TV in here.

He pointed towards the wall where a large painting hung in a gold frame. The painting was of a string of horses being ridden through a sandstorm by turbaned riders.

- There would be good. We could easily move the painting to over the sideboard.

- I prefer it stays where it is.

She still had on her going out clothes, which were western: a plain grey jumper and silk scarf in purple and gold. She was also wearing lipstick and a gold bracelet. It was a style that suited her. Not flashy, but anyone could look at her and see immediately that she had money.

- Aren't you going to ask me where I've been?

- No, he said.

– I was at the Connaught. That was today only. I've also looked at the Intercontinental, Hilton, Marriott, Grosvenor House, Dorchester, and the Four Seasons.

He wasn't going to answer. His glass was empty. He got up and poured himself another drink. Walking past where she was sitting at the table he still didn't speak. She picked up one of the brochures and thumbed through it. When he'd sat back down, she looked at him over the top of her glasses.

– For the invitations, is it too much to write, ‘Mr and Mrs Hemu Daswani request the honour of the presence of...’?

– How many times have I to tell you, I’m not doing a big function, he said quietly. – I’m sick and tired of all these bloody functions.

– And I’m sick of hearing only what you think.

She took off her glasses and put them on the table.

– Are you saying that forty years of marriage isn’t something to celebrate?

– That’s not what I’m saying.

– So why do you want to spend it sitting at home as if it were any other day?

He finished his drink and got up to make another.

– For forty years what have I not given you? Whatever you want to buy, when was the last time you’ve asked yourself whether the money is there? What limits have I put on your spending? Which other wife can say that about the husband?

– This is something different.

Her voice was deep with emotion.

– This is showing everybody that our marriage has worked.

– Which people? And for what purpose do we need to show them? Everything we have is what we ourselves have made. I don’t need anyone else to tell me the value of it.

– If you can’t understand it, then who am I to explain it to you?

She stood up quickly and put on her jacket, picked up her glasses and her handbag and in a moment was gone from the room.

– Where are you going?

– None of your business, she called from the hallway



– What does it say about you? he shouted. – Only time something matters to you is if you're putting on a show for two hundred people as bloody stupid as you are.

– I'll continue making the arrangements and you come or don't come, she shouted back. – You do whatever you please.

The front door slammed and then she called through the glass.

– Your food is here. At least don't keep the driver waiting.

While he counted out cash on the doorstep, he could see her in her car. The engine wasn't running and she had music playing. He waited until the delivery man turned the corner, then he went over and tapped on the window. She brought it down without turning her head.

– You're eating yours out here or what?

– Tell me one thing, she said. – If you could go back forty years, would you still go through with it?

– Don't be stupid, he told her shaking his head.

He put his hand on the panel of the car door, close to her shoulder.

– As a family man I'm hundred per cent satisfied. Two hundred percent.

– Then why won't you do this one small thing I'm asking? I want people to see the different side to you.

He shook his head again. What else could he say?

– OK, fine. But it's for you I'm doing it, ok? I couldn't care less what any other bastard thinks of me.

She unlatched the car door and with his free hand he pulled it open.

– Twenty-first is the first day of the new moon, so we should definitely confirm for that day, she said. – Only the guest list is giving me a headache. They showed me the Mayfair Room and it was beautiful, but the capacity is too little.

– At least come inside, he said. – Before the food gets cold.

While they ate, his wife kept the Sindhi Association Directory weighted open with her water glass. She read out the names inside, asking him which people they definitely should invite and which were only maybes. Some of them were old names now, people they'd known a long time ago. Saturday-night parties he drove to with his wife holding onto whatever she was taking for the potluck, the car smelling of cooked rice mixed with her Opium perfume. On the back seat, Suresh and Sonali, bright-eyed in their party clothes, hair freshly washed and their pyjamas in a carrier bag because they'd always fall asleep on the late drive home.

It was his wife who'd been keen to join the Sindhi Association. Lifetime membership cost fifty pounds – although it was the done thing she said, to give at least double that. In those days, Mohan Gidwani and Ram Lalwani were President and Vice President of the Association. The two of them with full heads of white hair and thick glasses, both remembering the time before Partition. Printed on the first page of the Directory was the Association's aim – to promote the Sindhi language and culture and to bind the UK families of descendants of Hindu Sindhis who had lived in the province of Sindh. Hemu didn't know about all that. It sounded over the top when you thought about how many people they were, not even a thousand in London. Sindhi was Hemu's first language. It was still the language he and his wife used to speak to each other, except that they switched to Hindi when the subject was something they didn't want their children to overhear.

Hemu had grown up knowing that Sindhis were business traders. He knew that you could go to any city in the world and find a Sindhi with something he meant to sell you. But Mohan and Ram told him that there had been Hindu Sindhi traders in the Indus Valley for more than two thousand years. They were fishermen at first. But these Sindhis were also clever, and when they realised that they could make more money building boats than by

using them to fish, they taught themselves shipbuilding. In 320BC, when Alexander the Great set out to explore the Gulf of Persia - this because he'd finally understood that he didn't have the skill or the strength to conquer India - it was a Hindu Sindhi who sold him his fleet of ships. Later, the Sindhis built whole ports and they sold cloth and ceramics to the Romans.

– Even at that time, Ram liked to joke – Sindhis were doing import-export.

Hemu learned from Ram that General Sir Charles Napier, the Britisher who conquered Sindh, hadn't got the better of the Sindhis. After Sindh Province was annexed, Napier posted British Army soldiers the full length of India and they needed to be supplied with rations and ammunitions. How Ram told it, the General thought he was clever setting up those supply lines. But the Sindhis were cleverer. They negotiated for a monopoly for the army supplies. And for one hundred and fifty years, until Mahatma Ghandi threw all the Sindhis to the wolves for his own personal profit, the Hindu Sindhis controlled the entire economy of Sindh Province despite being only one quarter of the total population.

– You know what Napier wrote to his superiors the day of the victory? Mohan asked Hemu one night. – He wrote only *peccavi*. You know what that means? It's Latin for 'I have sinned'. The bastard thought he'd outsmarted us, but he never did. It was the Sindhis who outsmarthed him.

Hemu was born in Hyderabad in 1942 when Hyderabad was Sindh's second largest city and Sindh was still a province of British India. Not that he recalled the place, except that he remembered one afternoon when out of the blue, a squadron of planes came flying low over his house and dropped paper flags like kites. Mohan said the year must have been 1947 and the day must have been Pakistan's Independence Day. It made sense. In March of 1948, Hemu had gone with his parents on a steamer from Karachi to Bombay. This was the time that if you'd gone by train, you had a good chance of being killed. The same day they arrived in Bombay, his parents had to go and register as non-Muslim displaced persons from Pakistan

to qualify for the temporary lodgings that the Bombay Government were providing for refugees. The lodgings, in the countryside outside the city, had been built years before as a garrison for troops on their way to fight in Burma. Now the soldiers' billets had been converted to dormitories for refugee families.

Ram could remember the place. Outside, a single water tap served the whole camp and the latrine was also the home of a drift of pigs that came and went freely through the day. By the middle of the day the tap ran dry and women regularly came to blows over the last drops of water. Ram said that the Sindhis had it the worst of anyone who suffered Partition, only people didn't know about it because none of them ever never complained. They'd gone on, rolling up their sleeves and looking to make the most of whatever they had. Mohan and some of the older Association men said it was true. That's where the Sindhis were their own worst enemies, Ram said. They'd gone all over the world and made small fortunes, but the cost of their success was the loss of their language and their customs. Mohan said it had never been fully admitted the price the Sindhis paid for Partition - that they'd had their native soil taken from them and nothing given in return.

\*

The invitations Hemu's wife sent out ran to a hundred and fifty, which she said were not as many as she'd have liked, but the Mayfair Room was too good to let go. Even he would like it, she said, because it had the feel of an actual dining room in somebody's home, only it was much more luxurious. She showed him pictures of the antique mirrors and the 1920s chandeliers. To reach it, you went down a private staircase and through a marble hallway. The hotel would provide crystal vases standing on side tables all along the hallway and she wanted roses put in them. She said the scent would blow people away and the name, which

was Patience, couldn't have been more spot-on. Not that he was going to admit it to her, but he'd warmed to the idea of the party. His wife was right - forty years of marriage was a landmark, especially when he thought of how far they'd come and what means they had at their disposal now.

At the start of August, she had her measurements taken so that she could order her outfit from India. She told him that he should buy a new suit and he agreed. They went together to Selfridges and picked out an Italian tuxedo with satin lapels. He said the price was ridiculous, but only because if he hadn't said that, she'd have guessed that he was actually looking forward to the party. When he put the jacket on, he was pleased. The fit was nice across the shoulders and the length was right. The suit made him look like he'd definitely made it, which he definitely had.

## Joanna

Often Joanna thought about being grateful. She thought about what she had to be thankful for. Given half a chance, any number of people would swap places with her. Those times, when it settled on her that she should be counting her blessings and remembering how lucky she was, the thoughts came in her mother's voice. They also told her what a good husband Suresh was. Look at everything he did, how hard he worked and how stressful and exhausting it must be, a job like Suresh's. All those hours he worked and never a complaint. He didn't drink. He wasn't a womaniser. There wasn't a violent bone in his body. How many women could say that about their husbands? And look at the life he gave her. Everything she had. Whatever she wanted. He was a real prince. There's plenty of men who keep hold of the purse strings, her mother would say. There's plenty who put down all kinds of limits. Wanting receipts on so on. Wanting to know where you are and what you're doing. Your trouble is you don't know you're born.

Joanna's mother thought that whatever life gave you, you should take it and not make a fuss. Making a fuss meant that you might be getting ideas above your station. Quiet gratitude and not drawing attention to yourself - those were life's virtues. What's up with you? Put your face straight. Don't start thinking you're better than you are because all that happens is that you end up disappointed. It's a let-down when you find out that you're nothing special. Better to avoid all that. That way you won't miss what you've never had. Except that quite often Joanna was disappointed. Even though she shouldn't be, she was.

The eight o'clock pips came on the radio, which was next to the bed. Joanna was already awake. She was sitting up in bed with a notebook and pen. *It's my birthday*, she wrote. *Birthdays put me on edge. Not for the obvious reason. It's not about age. I'm not a person who's ageing too fast. Obviously, I'm worried I'm letting my life go by and letting too*

*much go. But that's not the same as worrying about getting old. Birthdays make me uncomfortable because they come with too much expectation. Mainly it's Suresh. Suresh likes the big gesture and I'm not saying he isn't well-intentioned, but it makes it all about him. I feel a tiny bit like he's pulling my strings and that I shouldn't be letting myself be steered. How can a single thing—even a big over the top single thing—carry all the meaning Suresh wants it to? You can't put a whole year into just one day. It feels artificial. It's like we're putting on a show for each other. He's the big and successful husband and I'm the little wife thrilled with all my new trinkets.*

She paused and looked through the open door onto the empty landing. From downstairs came the sounds of crockery being rattled out of cupboards. Somebody filled the kettle and clattered it down on the cooker. – Anyone know where Mum keeps the coffee pot? Suresh said.

– She leaves it in the sink. She washes it out when she wants to make more coffee.

That was Rohan, the younger of Joanna's two boys. He had a choirboy's voice. High and ringing. It was a voice that carried. She was always telling him to speak quietly.

– We should've picked up juice, Suresh said.

– We've got some. It's in the fridge, Adam, their eldest son said.

– Don't give her apple juice, said Rohan. – She always has grapefruit.

– How do you know she doesn't want to try something different on her birthday, Rohan? You shouldn't make assumptions about people. Just because someone normally has grapefruit doesn't mean they aren't going to try something different.

– I think it does, Rohan said. – You don't know everything, Adam.

– Boys, Suresh said in a strained voice. – Let's focus. Have we got everything? What else do we need?

Joanna's sentences, written in large loopy letters, sloped down the page. That was bad, right? It meant you were a pessimist. If your writing was level, it meant that you were level too. Or if it did slant, better it went up the page. These were her first Morning Pages. Morning Pages were three pages that you wrote each morning before you did anything else. It was a private thing you did, just for yourself. And because there was no one else looking, all kinds of stuff could come out that you'd never admit to, not even to yourself. The trick was to write and not think. At the start you weren't meant to read what you put down. Probably, she thought now, because the first pages you wrote were no good. If you read them back straightaway, you'd be so crestfallen by what you'd put that you'd never carry on. The idea of it was that everyone had someone that made them feel ashamed. A kind of jinx that held you back and, once you got going with them, the Morning Pages got to be a way of chasing the jinx down. How many people thought straightaway, as she'd done, of their mother. Always it seemed mothers were the problem. What about her two boys? Would they be writing Pages one day about how she'd held them back?

She drew a thin line underneath the place where she'd stopped before. Then she wrote, *There are too many superlatives. I don't want everything to have to keep being amazing. Don't tell me to have an amazing birthday. I can't stand it. No wonder I can't catch my breath. If everything, all the time, has to be the best and the ultimate, all it means is that there's nowhere to go. It's claustrophobic. I haven't got enough space.* That felt good. It felt like a shift. Almost a physical sensation. It was like when she'd nursed her boys. When they fussed and cried, her milk started with a quick sting in her neck, just behind her collar bone, and it spread along her shoulder and down into her chest, sparking like a burn in a single long thread down her arm. It was the same feeling now, filling her pages with words that flowed like milk into her hand as if they'd been waiting there all along to be let go.



While she was still writing, heavy footsteps came on the stairs and Rohan ran into the room.

– She’s already awake, he called down the landing. Then to Joanna – Come downstairs. You’ve got loads of presents and we’ve made the breakfast. We’ve already been out. We got croissants and massive doughnuts.

He came over to the bed and stood next to her, leaning his legs against the bed and banging each knee in turn against the side of the mattress. – What’s that?

– It’s a kind of diary.

He shrugged and she put her arms around him, pulled him closer to her and kissed the side of his head. But he was distracted and he wriggled away.

–Come on, he said. – You’ve got to open your presents.

Downstairs, Suresh finished his croissant. He leant over to fill her coffee cup and kissed her. He’d bought her a laptop, which she hadn’t expected and she was pleased.

– Will you use it? He was saying now. – I can return it if you won’t.

– No. I will use it. I definitely will.

Really, she would. A laptop was purposeful. A space of her own, of sorts. As if Suresh had really known that’s how she would think of it. She pulled off the lid and lifted it out of the box so he could watch her set it up. The boys came and stood one behind each of her shoulders looking at the different images she could choose for her desktop. She ate a doughnut and drank her coffee.

– Alice in Wonderland, she said quietly.

Suresh frowned. – What?

– Nothing, she said. – I was thinking aloud.

– Once you’re up and running with that, there’ll be no stopping you.

He meant it. And it made her want all the sureness he had. The certainty there was about him that he knew what to do next. For Suresh, whatever he decided to do, the decision seemed to come fleshed out and with the assuredness that whatever happened, everything would work out the way he wanted. He seemed to take for granted that things had a way of falling into place for him. Of course, there was more to it than that. He was a lawyer. At work people came to him expecting him to know what to do and their expectations seemed to rub off on him. They made him more assured. He didn't have her habit of deciding that yes, she'd go back to college or something else, and then straightaway roll back, picking it apart so that it seemed like the wrong choice.

Adam leant against her chair, his chin resting on the top of her head. He said, – Can I have a laptop for my birthday?

– No, Suresh said, wiping doughnut sugar off his hands. – What's the plan for today?

– Whatever Mum wants, Rohan said.

He'd peeled away from the table to roll on the floor with the dogs, two snorting boxers. Now he spun away from them and came back. He perched on Joanna's knees and typed YouTube into the laptop.

– Can we go to the cinema? he said.

– Yes.

She pulled him onto her lap and squeezed his knees to tickle him. He laughed and wriggled closer and squeezed her knees so that she laughed and grabbed his hands, holding them tightly in hers.

– Can we get sweets? he said.

– Yes.

– And burgers?

– Yes.

– And chips?

– Yes.

– Cool.

He turned around and took hold of her cheeks, laughing as he squeezed them closed together to make her pout.

– Quack, quack, he said. – You're a duck.

– Are you having a nice birthday? Adam said.

– Yes. I am.

She was. She pulled him close and kissed him. She was the one they always came to. That was something Suresh had let go, casually it seemed to her, and without an idea of how much he was giving away. He couldn't have known, she was sure, because otherwise how could he have done it?

– I want you to have the nicest birthday ever, Rohan said.

Adam sat down on the chair next to hers. – If Gandalf and Dumbledore had a duel, who'd win? he said.

She thought for a moment, wanting to show him she understood it was a serious question he was asking.

– Probably Dumbledore.

– That's what I think.

He looked up at her. – What's your reason?

– Dumbledore would be quicker. More instinctive.

He frowned and then said, – I think that's right.

– I think Gandalf would win, Rohan said.

– No.

– Yes.

Rohan's hand felt for hers again and she took it. He said, – Gandalf can do magic just with his mind.

– So can Dumbledore. And Dumbledore's got the most powerful wand in the world, Adam said. – And he can read minds.

– But Gandalf comes back from the dead and Dumbledore doesn't.

– Only because he chooses not to. It's in book seven. If he wanted to, he could've come back.

– No.

– Yes.

Adam was conscientious and shy. He thought more than he said. People's attention went straight to Rohan, while Adam had to work for it, gaining it slowly. Her mother said she'd never had to worry about Rohan because if he fell out of the window he'd fall into a mountain of feathers. She also said he had the luck of the devil. And he did. Whatever he wanted, it seemed to come to him without him having to tax himself. That way he was like Suresh. Adam had to work at putting it all together. But it was more complicated. Adam had his own compact centre, solid and complete, and he was strong in a way that Rohan wasn't. As much as Rohan was better at getting people to like him, he needed their affection and their approval more. Rohan was the one who'd ask her, – How much do you love me? And are we best friends? Adam was more casual, seeming to take her love for granted, and that he'd always have it, no matter what.

\*

That evening Joanna and Suresh went by taxi to the Dorchester. Outside the large gold revolving doors, the top-hatted doorman bowed slightly as he waved them inside and smiled at her. She leaned into Suresh. – Let’s get drunk, she whispered.

He put his lips close to her ear and said, – Good idea.

The bar was a vast length of smoky mirrors with bottles in tiered rows and barmen dressed in striped shirts and red waistcoats working to the sounds of lazy jazz. Opposite was a line of booths where couples sat side by side, half concealed, absorbed in their own whispered conversations. Each booth was a curved velvet sofa coiled around a small circular table. The table-tops were lacquered gold and the sofas were high-backed making a string of snug compartments.

– I like these, Joanna said, as they shimmied behind the table – They’re for trysts.

– Illicit assignations, Suresh said.

– It makes me want to be decadent.

They ordered cocktails. A Dorchester Old Tom and a Champagne Shimmer.

– Last night I dreamt we lived on a boat, she said. It was an old-fashioned sailing boat, with huge sails. You were there pulling on the ropes. You were doing stuff with the sails. I don’t know what, but it was kind of sexy.

– It can’t have been me. I’d have been throwing up over the side.

– Not in the dream. You were kind of rugged. You didn’t have a shirt on.

– What did you have on? he said.

– I don’t know

– Shame.

While they were talking, Suresh’s phone beeped several times.

– My dad, he said. – I’ll talk to him tomorrow.

– Is he OK?

– He’s in full-on succession planning mode. He’s dangling my share over me. He wants me to prostrate myself to get it.

She’d been leaning against him and now she sat up straight.

– The thing about my parents and your parents is that none of them ever thought of doing anything that wasn’t work, she said. – They even treated being a parent it was work. Mine did that. Like it their job was to get me to college, get me a husband and a house.

Suresh nodded.

– When I got accepted to college and my dad kept the letter in his wallet. Everyone he met, he took it out and made them read it. He’d tell anyone he could, My son got the offer from Oxford. But if you ask him anything about what I did when I was there, or about the degree itself, he wouldn’t have a clue. He came once to drop me off when I started and once to the graduation. That was it.

– Mine were the opposite. They turned up all the time. I think my dad saw me being at college as a chance for him to be a student again. Any my mum liked it because she never got the chance to go.

She leant against him again, resting her shoulder against his arm while she took a sip of her drink and then a sip of his.

– I prefer mine, she said. – Yours is too sweet.

– He’s always been like this, my dad. Everything has to be about how much money he’s made. It’s like whatever you make, it only counts if you started off with nothing.

– I think he just doesn’t want to feel like you’ve outdone him. He wants to feel like he can still hold his own.

– I haven’t outdone him. Think about what he’s made out of literally nothing. It makes the hairs on your neck stand up. I couldn’t have done that and he knows it.

– How do you know you couldn't? she said.

– Nobody could have. It's not even possible these days to do what he did. That's why it's so frustrating that he can't let it go.

– Of course he's not going to let it go. Why would he?

– I'd never say it to him, but I envy him. He can always go back to how he did everything by himself. How he made something from nothing.

– The difference with you is, you're not putting all that on the boys. You don't have to pull rank like him. We can stand back with our kids and let them do whatever they want.

– You know, he said. – He did have someone helping him, an older man he knew. I think it was someone he worked for in Bombay who lent him the money for his ticket to London. If he hadn't had the loan, he wouldn't have been able to come.

The man at the table next to theirs caught Joanna's eye. An older man, dressed in a jacked and open collared shirt. He leaned across the table and spoke quietly to the woman sitting opposite, making her toss her hair and gather her handbag. The man stood up, followed by the woman, who towered over him now in crazily high heels. He gestured to her to go in front, then hitched up his trousers and followed behind her.

– We're the only genuine couple in here, Joanna whispered. – It's all businessmen and prostitutes.

– There are a few, Suresh said – But it isn't everybody. They're not.

He was pointing to a couple further away, a couple who looked like they were tourists. They looked out of place, both wearing sweatshirts and shopping bags stacked around the table.

– I've never seen actual transactions before, she said. – It's fascinating.

– It's what people do, he said. – You see it all the time.

Their drinks arrived with a ceremony of setting out the mats for their glasses, sliding aside the candle to make room for a small silver tray a tray of olives and nuts.

– Where do you see it? she said when the waiter had walked away.

– Hotels. It's everywhere.

– It's kind of a turn-on.

– Not for me, he said.

She was looking around at the tables, trying to judge the relationships on view, which ones were based on money changing hands.

– Have you ever been tempted?

– Don't be stupid.

– I wouldn't blame you if you had been.

– I haven't, he said. – I wouldn't be.

– I'm just saying, if it were the odd time, it wouldn't be the end of the world.

She took an olive and ate it slowly. – If it was all the time, that's different. If you did it all the time, you get too cynical.

– I think the turn on for men is the transactional part of it. The idea you can pay somebody and do whatever you want to them. It's titillating to buy somebody completely. Don't you think?

– No. I think the opposite.

– I don't believe you.

– Can we change the subject?

He was looking over at the bar. Tension all the way down his neck.

– Why?



She felt a disappointment that he wouldn't play along, that he'd got uncomfortable at the mention of it. And now, a kind of mischief had come over her. She wanted to needle him.

– And the flip side for women is that it's liberating to put yourself in the pay of someone else. It's meant to be that if you give yourself up completely to another person—a man, obviously—it's very freeing.

Suresh said he wouldn't know.

– Don't lie.

– I'm not.

– Well, you must be the only man on the planet who thinks like that.

She looked around the room. At the other table, where every other couple seemed to be bent together, flirting with each other in playful whispers.

– Why are you being so uptight?

A streak of a suspicion that he was lying. But she didn't think so. He was genuinely uptight. No, not uptight. He thought too much of himself. He wouldn't have stooped to handing over cash for something thought ought to have been offered to him.

– Because I don't like being accused of sleeping with prostitutes. I don't know why you'd even bring it up.

– I'm just saying that if it's all around you, it wouldn't be unreasonable if you were tempted.

– I hate it when you start these conversations.

He'd dropped his voice almost to a growl.

– What conversations?

– The ones where I can't win. If I say yes, I've been tempted, then I'm an asshole. If I say no, I'm a liar. Either way, you've got me boxed in.

– I've got you boxed in?

– That’s what I said. There’s obviously some message you’re trying to get across, he said. – I’m obviously doing something wrong – that’s what I’m getting. I don’t like being accused of something I haven’t done.

She told him he was being pompous and he should stop.

– Fine, he said.

Then, he got up and said he was going to the bathroom. He was gone a long time. Their drinks came and she left hers on the table. But, when he sat down, he said he was sorry. He could be very disarming, looking at her straight on, as if he meant every word.

– What? he said, when she didn’t speak.

– I’m sick of you undermining me all the time.

– Don’t say that, he said. – Can’t we just go out for dinner without picking each other to pieces.

– All I’m doing is trying to have a conversation where we tell each other what we honestly think.

–I have told you what I honestly think.

He said that she’d ambushed him.

– How?

He shook his head.

– I don’t know how you want me to be. If I’m one thing, you want something else. I can’t keep up.

– You’ve got no idea what my life’s like, she said.

She didn’t rush. She didn’t raise her voice. Then she waited. With Suresh, the minute you raised your voice, he’d won. He’d act like you were the unreasonable one. He was looking back at her while he finished his drink. He was trying to make her be the one to speak next. He was trying to make her back down.

He said, – So tell me.

He used the same even tone that she'd used. It was a small victory. She'd made him ask her to say more. She took the stem of her glass and turned it around.

– I feel like I don't have any choices.

She waited again for him to speak, holding back all the things she was bursting to get out. It was obvious now. And the sound of it, spoken out loud, made it definite. She felt the hurt of it. Suresh frowned slightly, as if he couldn't see the sense of it.

– How? How do you not have any choices?

– What you do, your job, is the job you planned to do. You haven't had to change or weigh things up. You started out on one path and you've been able to stick to it. Nobody's ever questioned it. Or you. It's been a given that you'd do what you're doing now. And it's a given that you'll keep on doing whatever you want. That's the one central track for you. And it's turned into my central track. I feel like it's put me on a track too. Only I didn't choose the track. I just got pulled along with you.

– Are you saying I've held you back?

– I'm saying I feel held back.

– Why?

He shook his head.

– If there's something you want to do, you can do it. I'm not stopping you. You can do whatever you want.

– You say it like it's simple.

– It is simple.

– It's simple for you. You take for granted that whatever you want to do, you can stroll out of the house and do it. It's a luxury I don't have.

– And I do?

– Yes. You do. And the worst thing is that you’re so fucking sure of yourself that you can’t even see it. You can’t see what’s staring you right in the face.

He put both his hands on the table and leaned forwards so that his face was close to hers. – I’m not doing this, he said. – I’m not having it that you’ve got the bad deal and I’ve had everything my own way.

– But you have. How we live is what you wanted. It’s your big picture and I’ve had to fit in as best as I can.

– What’re you so desperate to do that I’ve stopped you doing? Tell me one thing I’ve done that’s meant you’ve not been able to do what you want.

– I don’t know. Stop badgering me.

– OK, Suresh said. – You’re frustrated and bored. I get it. You need to stretch your wings. It’s a good idea. Get a job. Go back to college. You can do whatever you want.

– No. I can’t just do whatever I want. Where do I even start?

– I know what’s at the bottom of this. It’s a wrench stepping back from the boys. You feel guilty.

It was true. The idea that she would have something to do every day that they weren’t at the centre of made her feel guilty. It felt like she’d be letting them down. A surprise that he could see it and that he’d said it so plainly. It was more perceptive than she’d come to expect of him. Now he’d put his hand on hers and tell her that all she needed was to push through. As if it were just one small change. As if it were just that. As if everything that had been important about her life for ten years could be set aside in a moment and it was only mind over matter.

– Don’t talk down what I do.

– I’m not.

– You think what you do is so much more important than what I do. Well, it’s not.

– I never said that.

– Not in so many words. But it's exactly what you said. You're making out everything's black and white. That's what you always do. It's not. What you do shapes what I do. So if I want to change things, I can't do it if you're going to carry on in exactly the same way.

It was true. The more she talked, the more she could see it, as if for her to take a step forward, Suresh would need to take a step back and make room for her to move into. Only he wouldn't. What he wanted was for her to go round him. She could do whatever she wanted as long as he could carry on doing what he wanted. She told him this, jabbing at the table with her finger. He shook his head.

– Number one: I never asked you to stop working. It was your choice. And nobody's stopping you changing your mind again. The boys aren't babies. They haven't been for years. Whatever's holding you back, it's not them and it's not me, it's you, holding yourself back. And number two: how am I doing whatever I want? I don't exactly have my days free and easy to do whatever I want.

She leant in towards him and whispered, – You're a complete asshole.

– Why? he said. – Because I'm telling you the truth?

– At least be honest. If you're saying I should resign and do something else, at least be straight about it. At least be prepared to admit all the things you'd have to give up. And not just you. The boys as well.

– This is exactly what I'm saying. You're putting it all on me. If something needs to change it's because it's me pulling the plug and you get off scot-free. You get to take the moral high ground because you've been so selfless all this time keeping us all afloat and now you're having to bend over backwards even further to placate me.

She picked up bag and got up. He came after her through the bar, into the hotel reception. Halfway to the front door she stopped and told him to stop following her. She went on, outside to the taxi rank, and he came too. Then, when she opened the cab door. – Don't get in with me, she said.

– This is stupid, he said. – Don't go.

He wasn't trying to get into the cab, but he wasn't going away. He was standing still, holding the door open. She told the driver their address. – Can we go quickly, she said.

Suresh had his wallet in his hands and he was pulling out notes. – At least take the fare.

She snatched the notes and threw them at him. Some of them fluttered down to the floor of the cab and some of them fell on the pavement where he was standing. Leaning forwards to pick up what had fallen inside the cab, she grabbed at them and threw them outside. Then, she pulled the door closed.

– Can you please take me home, she said to the driver.

## Hemu

The day his wife died, they'd argued in the morning. She'd taken chicken breasts out of the freezer and she wanted to know if he preferred butter chicken or Thai curry for dinner. He said it made no difference what she cooked and when he said that, she really lost her rag. If he wasn't willing to make the choice what he wanted to eat, she said, then she wasn't willing to cook it for him. It was too much headache deciding by herself what to cook. It didn't alarm him when the call came from Northwick Park Hospital, a nurse asking him to come because his wife had been taken ill. Once or twice each year her asthma flared up. Some days it was bad enough for her to need a couple of hours on the hospital nebuliser. Those times he drove her to A&E and when the doctor gave her the OK, she would call him and he would collect her. Driving home, they'd stop off at the Baskin Robbins on Kenton Road because she said a tub of pistachio-almond took the rawness off her throat better than anything they gave out on prescription. He always took a rum and raisin cone.

The young doctor who came to find him in the hospital reception took him a different way to the way he usually went. Instead of going towards the lift which would've taken him up to the ward, they turned left down a corridor and she showed him to a side room. In the room was a small sofa, which he sat down on and the doctor took the chair next to it.

– I'm afraid it's bad news, Mr Daswani, the doctor said. – Your wife has died.

Hemu shook his head. – My wife only has asthma. I've come to take her home.

The doctor told him that his wife had had a stroke. She looked young; younger than his daughter, with her hair coming loose messily from her ponytail.

– The damage to her brain was too much for her to survive, the doctor said.

– I don't understand. Couple of times a year she goes on the nebuliser. Usually, after two-three hours, the doctor allows her to come home.

– With a stroke, the young doctor said, – Oxygen can't reach the brain. And without oxygen, the brain shuts down, sometimes straightaway.

That was what had happened with his wife, she said. Something about blood clots that didn't make any sense. It was days like this one, when it was hot and windy, and dust blew in from the garden that made Laxmi short of breath. At night she couldn't sleep and, in the morning, she was cranky. That morning, he'd told her that if preparing the meals was getting too much, she should get a cook or at least order food in. She said that he was absolutely missing the point and she shoved the chicken back onto the freezer shelf.

His wife was on a hospital trolley, a white blanket covering her. Somebody had folded it neatly under her chin. He stood next to her head and looked down at her face. The features were hers, but the expression wasn't. His wife had left him and gone somewhere else and here was what she'd left behind – a person that wasn't her; a person who was only similar. It was the stillness that changed her. Always she was on the move, always on her way somewhere, always taking charge. He held her hand. It was soft and not cold. Her rings and bangles had been taken off and, without them, the hand looked frail. It was strange. Her hands, when they were holding a kitchen knife, even when they were knitting, were strong and steady. She had working hands. He bent down and kissed the back of the hand he was holding. Who could say where she had gone and where he was to go from here? She herself had said death was only the soul changing bodies, and that all we do in this life is give ourselves something to learn in the next. And who could say now that hers was not the most logical explanation? What other explanation was there, when it was impossible to say, even with her lying in front of him, that this morning she was here and now she was gone?

More than once she'd asked him what he wanted when his time came. It was a subject that irritated him and which she would not give up, even he when told her to. He told her



whatever reason we're put on this earth, it's not to plan our own funerals. Most often these thoughts came to her in the evenings, sitting up in bed or watching TV.

– It helps everybody if you plan ahead, she said one night when they were sitting with cups of tea. That day had been his grandson, Adam's, birthday. Adam's mother, Joanna had thrown a party for him with a hired magician and dressing up costumes.

– Why you're bringing this up now?

– People want the reassurance of knowing your wishes.

– When I go, I don't want all that fussing.

On the TV, Shahrukh Khan was teaching hockey to schoolgirls.

She said, – So we'll leave you to fend for yourself. Nobody will even come and bring you home.

– What will I care when I've gone?

– And when nobody comes for you, the first thing is they'll offer you to medical science. And if the scientists won't have you they'll give you a pauper's funeral.

She sighed loudly. Her way of telling him she was annoyed.

– At least you should decide for your ashes.

– You decide. You can do whatever you want with them.

– Mine I want scattered at sea. You can take a boat from Gateway of India and go out to Elephanta Island.

She paused and when he didn't answer she nudged him. – Are you listening?

– *Ha.*

– But stay far out from the jetty. I don't want to be floating about underneath where people are getting on and off the boats and throwing all their junk.

\*

When a Sindhi girl gets married, it's as if she's being born again, so the custom is for the groom to choose her a new name. He can choose whatever name he likes, according to the initial picked out by the astrologer, who will have calculated which letter is the most auspicious by plotting the bride and groom's exact times and places of birth alongside the exact time and place of the wedding ceremony.

The week before his wedding, Hemu's mother and his aunty took their list of times and places to Dr Pravin Balaji and he came back with the letter L. Hemu chose Laxmi because both women said what other name could bring as much good fortune to a marriage as the name of the goddess of wealth herself? He would've gone on calling her by her own name, which was Manju, but she insisted on Laxmi. She said that she liked the name. In fact, she preferred it. From when they arrived in London, the name she used for him was Raja. The first week in London, he closed the office for full two days. They drove to the supermarket in Pinner and she chose digestive biscuits and strawberry Angel Delight. He took her to Portobello Market to shop for the house. Whatever homewares they needed, he told her, she was absolutely in charge. Where he would've chosen everything plain, she picked out patterned sheets and plates with daisies twined around the rim. When they came home, she washed and pressed the sheets and stacked them in the airing cupboard. She rinsed the plates and the cutlery before she found places for them in the cupboards and drawers. It stayed warm through September and they made lots of shopping trips. The house started taking on something of her personality – what he could make out of it. She seemed young, with all her colours and flower patterns, but she had the house looking nice. At the weekends they went sight-seeing. Trafalgar Square, Big Ben, London Bridge. He bought her a camera and he took

the rolls of film to be developed in Boots. She caught the bus to South Harrow and bought herself an album.

That first year, October and November were wet. She said she didn't like the cold and she stayed in the house while he went to work. They argued often. Stupid arguments. She didn't like the dining table and chairs that arrived from the order he'd placed before the wedding. She didn't like the colour of the sofa he'd bought for the TV room. It was dark brown and the one she liked was a red leather one she'd seen in the window of Heal's one Saturday morning walking with him down Tottenham Court Road. That one was more up to the minute, she said. He said that her choices were fashions, which two years down the line she'd want to replace. She said where was the harm was in that? She made friends with a woman she met at the Sindhi *mandir*. The woman's name was Suddah Ramchandani. He'd come home from work and find them at the kitchen with mugs of coffee, film tracks playing on Laxmi's tape recorder and nothing started for dinner. He said that this was London not Bombay, that he wanted to eat dinner at seven not at bloody midnight. She cried and shouted at him from behind the bedroom door that she hated this stupid country. She said that if she'd been given the choice she'd never have come here.

– You did bloody choose, he said. – What are you saying? That I dragged you here by your hair?

Other times she cried if he moved close to her in bed. She cried when he told her he was going on a business trip. She accused him of going with other women while he was away and he said all that was stupid.

Once, when he came home from a buying trip, he found her dressed in one of his shirts, painting their bedroom blue. She said the name of the colour was New Orleans Blue. She'd done the kitchen bright yellow, in a shade called Citron. That night they ate bowls of cornflakes and milk. She said that the whole time he was away, she'd lived on cornflakes.

She'd been enjoying the painting so much that she didn't even think to cook. He said that if she lived only on breakfast cereal, she'd make herself ill and she told him it was the milk she liked. It was tastier, she said, than the milk at home and, besides all that, who said cornflakes could only be eaten for breakfast? He said what did it tell her that there was a picture of a cockerel crowing on the box and she said that any idiot knows a cockerel will crow at any time of the day.

In the spring, he decided that she should learn to drive. He found an English lady to teach her, an older no-nonsense woman. She surprised him by learning quickly. Less than three months after her first lesson, she passed her test. He bought her a red Vauxhall Viva for five hundred pounds and she took it out every day. At first, she went on errands to local shops and then she went further to explore the English shops in Watford and Pinner and the Indian ones on Ealing Road. One day she turned up at his office with *dahl* and rice still warm in the pot. He boiled the kettle for their tea and they sat side by side at his desk, eating from the same bowl.

\*

The afternoon his wife died, the first of her friends to come to the house was Suddah. She hugged Hemu firmly in the open front door and said, – The soul is not born and so it never dies.

Then she held out her car key to him.

– Can you bring the sheets from my car, she said. – I've kept them on the back seat.

In the two big Marks bags.

Hemu felt a tightness in his chest. He'd felt it first at the hospital. It came in waves. However much he tried to fill his lungs, the air wouldn't go in. The sheets were the large

white bed sheets they would spread over the floor of the room they'd use for prayers. Every morning and evening for the next twelve days, they would say prayers for his wife. All the world and his wife would come, all kinds of people that had known her. They would keep coming. Some would come in the morning and stay into the night. They would fill the house, take it over and leave nowhere for him to get away. It was the type of thing his wife always did, dropping all her plans and going morning and night for prayers when someone died. She threw herself into it. They'd expect him to show them how he was grieving. They'd want to see it—all of his sadness—so they could be sure it was there. They were stupid like that.

In the kitchen, Suddah was filling the kettle and while it boiled she took a cloth and began wiping the counter.

– What will you do? she said. – Will you go and live with Suresh or will Sonali move in here?

Her voice was as deep as a man's, and she spoke quickly, forcing the words out. The times over the years that his wife had taken him to task over one thing or another, he was convinced it was Suddah who put her up to it. It was the way she accused him point blank of whatever he was supposed to have done. The sentences she used sounded like Suddah had made them up for her to say back to him.

– I don't know, he said. – I don't want to go anywhere.

He couldn't catch his breath and he sat down.

– Actually, you're right, Suddah said. – Suresh's house is a very yo-yo house. If you went there, you wouldn't know if you were going or coming. But Sonali can also be very headstrong.

What was he supposed to say? How was she expecting him to respond? Suddah went to her bag for tissues and wiped her eyes.

– Give me one minute, she said. – I want a minute by myself to think of how she was in this kitchen. She was here more than she was anywhere else.

He listened to the hiss of the kettle and Suddah sobbing. Her breath caught at the back of her throat like she was gagging.

– Come, she said, when she finished drying her eyes. – First, we’ll have tea. And then we’ll get ready. We’ll do everything exactly how she would have done it herself.

While they were drinking their tea, the doorbell rang and Suddah got up. She came back into the kitchen with Aruna Patel and Maya Varma, two of the ladies from Laxmi’s kitty. Maya put her hand on his arm. – It was her time, she said. – Now we have to let her go as best we can.

Aruna said – She was a very inspirational person and now she’s making her peace with God.

Suddah poured the tea. She said to Hemu that there was no need for him to trouble himself. Everything that needed to be got ready, they would do it. Straightaway they were discussing how the dining room furniture would need to be re-arranged. They would need to push everything to the sides of the room to lay the sheets. Suddah said they’d need to get the absolute maximum floorspace because a lot of people would come. She said they should first decide where the coffee table would go. That’s where they would put Laxmi’s picture, so it needed to be placed where people would have sight of it from wherever they were sitting. Aruna said that the biggest space would be if they put the sofa and armchairs side by side in front of the long picture window. That way people could fill up the room from the window and they could keep a space near the door for latecomers. They took their tea and went into the dining room, but he could still hear every word they were saying.

– Where to put Laxmi’s Lord Krishna? Suddah said.

This was a knee-high gold figure of Krishna playing his flute.

– We'll put it on the table, Suddah said. – Next to where her picture will go.

– What about her Ganesh? Maya said. – We should also put the Ganesh on the table.

– Lord Krishna was her favourite, Suddah said. – We don't need Ganesh.

– She was also very fond of Lord Ganesh, said Maya. – Last year we went to Chiswick for the Ganesh Chaturthi. They did the full immersion. Everyone said it was beautiful.

Suddah said, – When her son was born, she wanted to name him Krishna, but her husband insisted on Suresh. He wouldn't even discuss it.

– I didn't know that, Aruna said.

– It's true. I was here when they came from registering the birth. She was in tears, poor thing.

Hemu got up from his chair and closed the kitchen door. He could've told them that his wife was tearful that day because the baby was restless and wouldn't feed. When they'd sent for the baby's horoscope, the astrologer sent back the letter S. His wife had liked Suresh from the start. Suresh Hemu Daswani, she said, sounded like the head of an international company, like a leader of men.

At four o'clock his son, Suresh, came. He came with Joanna, his wife, and their boys. The boys had come from their tennis lesson and now they sat with Hemu at the kitchen table, still in their white T-shirts and shorts. Joanna put her hand on Hemu's shoulder as she came past him, but didn't say anything, which was good. What was there to say? She sat down in a chair opposite Hemu's and held the mug of tea that Suddah put down in front of her.

Rohan said, – Mum took us for ice cream.

He had taken the chair next to Hemu's, and it wobbled as he swished his legs backwards and forwards under the table.

– I didn't want to tell them in the car, Joanna said.

– It was the right thing, Hemu said. – No reason they should be troubled any more than they have to be.

– Why did Ma die? Adam said.

Adam was the older boy. He came and stood next to Hemu's chair, put his arm around his shoulders and rested the side of his head against Hemu's. Hemu reached up to put his arm around the boy's waist and pulled him closer.

– She fell very ill very quickly, Joanna said. – It was too fast for the doctors to help her.

– Why couldn't they have been faster?

– They tried the best they could, Hemu said. – But there are limits even to what a doctor can do.

He moved his hand to rest on the back of Rohan's chair. – Which flavour ice cream did you take, *beta*?

– I had one scoop of chocolate and one scoop of bubble-gum.

– We have to feed the cows. Adam said, – Dad said it's for Ma.

It was true. He hadn't thought of it before. But it was what his wife would've done.

The Watford Mandir kept a sanctuary for cows. The *mandhir* itself, gifted to the Hare Krishnas by George Harrison, was a mock-Tudor mansion with gables on each side and large lawns. Around the lawns were wooded areas and gardens where people could go quietly for contemplation or to practise yoga. Inside, the house was a warren of small rooms. Solemn wood-panelled classrooms were among others which were brightly painted with scenes from the Gita. There were grazing fields for the cows at the Hillfield Lane end of the grounds and beyond the fields was the sanctuary where those who still gave milk were milked by hand because that was how Lord Krishna said it should be.



When they came home, the boys were more cheerful. They told him which cows they'd seen, which ones they were allowed to stroke and how they were going to go every day for the next twelve days.

– Tomorrow you can take them some food.

– No, we can't, Adam said. – It's not allowed. People were giving them the wrong things to eat and it made them sick. So now you can only leave money and the people buy special food.

He got out his wallet and he gave each of them two notes.

– Tomorrow you give ten pounds for the cows and you keep ten pounds for yourselves.

He put his hand on Rohan's shoulder. – Put it safely in your pocket and keep it there.

Rohan said, – Who's going to make your dinners now?

– I'll make them for myself, he said.

Rohan said that on the days he didn't have homework, he would come and help.

Then, he said, – Dada, do you know what cud is?

– No. I don't know.

– It's cows' throw-up. When the cows eat the grass, they throw it up and eat it again.

Don't you think that's gross?

– Little bit. But it's natural.

Adam said, – Dad says you don't like the people at the *mandhir*.

– He's telling the truth.

– Why?

– Because they ask people to give money for charity and then they keep it for themselves.

– How are they allowed? Rohan said.

– They're very crafty. They'll tell you it's wrong to have money and that you should give it to them so that they can give it to people who need it more than you. Then, they go and buy all fancy things with whatever people have given.

– So they should keep the money and not spend it? Rohan said.

– Nothing is wrong with spending money when you've earned it yourself, Hemu said.

– But it's wrong to go talking rubbish and holding out your hand for charity.

– What about the money for the cows? Rohan said.

– For the cows it's different. What you give for the cows, goes only to them.

– Did Ma like the people? Adam said.

– Ma was friendly with all kinds of people. That way she was very charitable.

It was true. He was glad to have said it. Suddah was listening.

When it was past eight, Hemu went to stand in the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room. He counted thirty-four people, mainly the women friends of his wife. Soon their husbands would come and they'd be twice the number, sitting on every chair and taking all the space on the floor. He'd have liked to take his car out, drive somewhere quiet and leave them to their prayers, but their cars were blocking his and more were parked across the driveway. He went back to his seat in the kitchen. He asked Joanna where the boys were and she said they were outside, playing football with Suresh.

– That's good, he said. – I don't want to involve them in all this.

– You should let them see, Suddah said from her place at the cooker. – It's life's natural journey. You shouldn't hide it from them.

She was adding water to a pan of *dahl*.

He said, – Do you think that's what my wife would want? To see them crying over her?

– She had talked about a wicker coffin, Suddah said. – She was quite particular, so you’d better get it right.

She replaced the lid on the pan and turned to face him.

– This is the last thing you’ll do for her. If you go against her wishes, she’ll never rest in peace.

She had on one of his wife’s aprons, a pinafore with red and black stripes. All afternoon she’d made trays of tea and coffee and offered them to the people who’d come to give their condolences. When the house phone rang, which was often, she picked it up and gave the story of Laxmi’s passing. She’d sent Joanna to the Waitrose at the bottom of the hill to buy more milk and sugar. Now she was rinsing mugs and putting them to dry on a tea towel spread across the draining board. The kitchen was hot and close, the air steeped in the smells of the food people had brought. There was *moong dahl* and *channah dahl*, pasta salad, aubergines that smelled sharply of *mehti*, many stacks of *rotis* wrapped in foil, and yoghurt curry because it was Laxmi’s favourite. There was a sense of purpose about Suddah that was irritating, almost as if she were taking pleasure from running the kitchen when all that was his wife’s job. She warmed food, dished it onto plates and sent it into the dining room for people to eat sitting cross-legged on the floor.

Hemu said, – How we’re supposed to get through all this bloody stuff?

– People will eat, Suddah said. – You should eat too.

He shook his head. There would be no pleasure in it with the house so full of people.

People were still arriving after it got dark and all the lights downstairs were switched on. By now, someone had plugged a phone into the sound dock and *aartis* were playing. A group of women had moved from the dining room onto the chairs in the TV room. Someone, he didn’t know who, had brought the photo albums down from his wife’s wardrobe and now

they were being passed around. When it was close to eleven, Hemu pulled Suresh aside and said he wanted them all to leave.

– Get rid of them, Hemu said. – Say whatever you need to say.

So Suresh went over to the coffee table, where the golden Krishna now stood next to Laxmi's picture with its red and white garland. He held up his hands and people stopped their conversations. He was composed, Hemu thought. You could see his training. Suresh said how comforted they were to see so many people; that his mother would be gratified. Gratified. Hemu liked that word. It was a lawyer's word. Nobody could argue with it.

I hope you'll understand, Suresh said. – We need time by ourselves to take in what's happened. Tomorrow, we'll start the morning prayers at eleven, so please come and join us then. In the evening, we'll start at seven-thirty.

Nobody could've put it better. A few people got up straightaway and went over to Suresh, but most stayed where they were. Sheila Mahtani adjusted her scarf and whispered something to Aruna who was next to her on the sofa. Except for the *aarti* still playing shrilly, the room had gone quiet. Suddah had come to stand in the doorway with a tea towel in her hand. Suresh loosened his tie and smiled at the people who shook his hand, kissed his cheek and told him not to worry. Bina Gidwani said that if his mother could see him now, she'd be proud of him and he nodded.

When everybody had gone, Suddah said – You shouldn't have sent people away.

– In my own house I'll decide what happens, Hemu said.

– She wouldn't have wanted people turned out of her home like that. She herself would've sat up all night if that's what people were expecting. She was very well thought of and people want to give condolences in the proper way.

– I'm telling you, in my house I'll decide when the condolences are finished for the day.

She picked up a tea towel and folded it.

– You can let me know, she said. – What time you want me to come tomorrow.

She went out into the hall and Joanna followed her.

– Don't worry, he said to his grandsons. – She's only letting off steam.

## Joanna

The sound of the doorbell startled Joanna. She was expecting it to ring, but still. Standing at the kitchen table, she'd been looking over what she'd put out. An arrangement of biscuits on a dinner plate, and another with sliced melon and mango arranged in rows. In between the two plates was a bowl of strawberries and close by to where she stood a third plate with a rainbow circle of paper-wrapped teabags, cups and saucers at the side. One of the teas was called Womankind. Its silvery-pink wrapper said that inside there was *a delicate dance of organic cranberry, rose and sweet vanilla*. Also on the plate she'd placed vivid yellow Turmeric Gold next to Red Revitalise, *a burst of warming organic cinnamon, cardamom and ginger*. The effect, Joanna decided now, was a table laid for convalescents. A bland buffet suited to the tending of surgical wounds or broken hearts. The whispered fussiness reserved for new mothers. It was spread of food and drink for women needing careful handling to heal them of maladies that didn't have names. Wouldn't it have been better to put out biscuits and coffee and be done? Wasn't it work they'd be getting through here? A heaving out of all their disappointments and the secret hopes they'd nurtured quietly for years and then even more quietly let go. What they needed for this was bare fuel and none of the frilly trimmings.

They were starting a life-coaching course that was called This is Me. Joanna, three other women and a life coach whose name was Ian. It had been Ian ringing the doorbell and now she'd invited him inside and he was standing in the hall, flashing looks up the stairs as if something there would help him to work out what sort of a woman he'd taken on. There was a vase of freesias on the hall table, which she'd tidied earlier on by scooping up the pile of post, taking it upstairs and dropping it onto her bed. But the shoes underneath were too many to clear, so she'd left them where they were. Her two Kathleen Hyndman canvases facing each other, one on each wall, matching each other's bright colours and geometry. Would he

find them showy? Or too simple? He was a short man, mid-sixties, with a jowly face that put Joanna in mind of Frances Bacon. A picture she'd seen of Bacon looking straight at the camera, the collar of his leather overcoat turned up, combative almost in that black coat. Ian had the same expression, an unflinching way of looking at you as if whatever you said and whatever you did, he'd already seen it a thousand times before. He looked like you couldn't shock him. It made Joanna feel nervous. She offered him coffee and he said, yes. Cream if she had it, no sugar. He said he was on the Keto diet. There was an app, he said, that you could get on your phone and it counted up everything you ate and drank.

What she'd gathered from Ian's website was that he could get her up and running on a plan that would give her not only a direction, but a concrete destination. 'I can give you the life you've always wanted,' it said on his homepage. The idea seemed to be that he would ask you questions and help you find a sense of purpose. He'd got a page of testimonials from other women who said that thanks to him they'd started on new careers and now they saw themselves completely afresh. If he could do all that by talking to you for a few hours and getting you to talk back, what he might get her to say? A stab of recklessness coming through her nerves. What if he could get her to tell him all the things that would flit through her mind and that she pushed them away because they embarrassed her? Her most private thoughts, which she shied away from? There might be a defiance if she could do it, an unruliness if she dared to give in to it. He might be expecting them to tell each other all kinds of things, who could say what? Like a game of truth or dare. He might want them to do weird stuff. She'd read about nude therapy and sand-play therapy and re-birthing therapy. They might have to go past being embarrassed. In a group like this, you might have to go to pieces and everybody would see. All your shame and your confusion turned out on the table for everyone to inspect.

In the kitchen, while Ian lifted books out of his bag and put them on the table, Joanna spooned coffee into the pot, watching him. He'd brought *The Power of Now*, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, and *The Gifts of Imperfection*.

– Feel free to look, he said. – Whatever grabs you, just pick it up.

While the kettle was boiling she picked up *The Gifts Of Imperfection*. 'Let go of who you think you're supposed to be and embrace who you are' it said on the front. A white bird in the bottom corner. He was watching her now, as if it were a test she were taking. He was waiting to see what she would choose.

– That one's a classic, he said. – It's ten pointers towards believing that whatever you are, you're always good enough. It's a lot about letting things go.

He smiled at her. It was a broad smile he gave her that seemed well-practised. A part of his coaching routine to put her at ease. It felt to Joanna that he was trying hard to show her that he was ready receive whatever she could throw at him. Whatever questions or complaints she might have, he could answer them. She might get angry and take it out on him, but it was fine. He knew the reason why and however much she might lash out, he was going to give her back gentleness and understanding. It gave her an odd feeling. A man trying hard to hold back his masculinity and make himself like the woman he coached. He wanted to show her that he could put himself among women and be just like them. Except that she thought it must suit him too, to be in the middle of it. He was the gleaming peacock and the women he coached were meant to admire him. She nodded and put the book down.

– You're not convinced, he said.

He put his head on one side and looked at her.

– It sounds complicated when you start breaking it down. It's just another list of things you've got to get done.

– That's paring it down a bit too far, he said in an affronted tone.



– I just think you can't have it both ways. Either you're letting things go or you're giving yourself something to aim for. I don't see how you can say, from now on I'm going to not care and I'm also going to make a point of putting all these extra expectations on myself.

– Actually, I think you can. It's about finding a balance. Yes, you want to go forward, but you need to know where you're going. It's not about plucking things out of thin air.

He was still looking at her with his head cocked to the side. A peering look that she didn't like, as if she were a brittle thing on show, which if he'd picked up he'd have held delicately in case it fell apart in his hand.

– I don't do sleight of hand, he said.

The kettle was boiling and she turned away from him to lift it off the hob.

– My groups are very mindful. It's a very deliberate process of deconstructing all the barriers you've set up around yourself over years and years.

It was the idea that you could have everything worked out that bothered her. It was suffocating. It seemed that her life was a like the large immaculate rooms they have in galleries. In each room, the objects and images you find are affecting in their way. Carefully made arrangements of set pieces that you weren't allowed to touch and were designed to provoke an authentic response when you stood and looked at them. Objects and images that were meant to make you feel happy or angry or whatever else the person who made them had in mind. Everything pristine, the purest form of itself so that you felt it all keenly and you forgot that there were people in the background who'd made all this and were pulling your strings. It felt to Joanna as if she was wandering between the different rooms of her life and looking at the view. And everything was so well made that she could never find a cleft or a tear to work at and get to the untidy workings underneath. There was no deconstructing any of it. There was nowhere to even start.

They were underway. The five of them around the table. Outside the sun was shining. A draft of a breeze came through open window, slipping over Joanna's arms as she opened her notebook and wrote the date at the top of the first page. Imagine the other kind of September day—back to school days that were damp and flat and grey. You couldn't start something like this on a day like that. But mornings like this, her two boys back at school, the house was primed with her plans, the ones she made at this time every year, that she would do more and be better.

– I only have a couple of rules in my groups, Ian was saying. – That way I'm different to almost every other life coach. Actually, I don't want to call them 'rules'.

He pushed his hand through his hair, which was long and thinning. Then he picked up his pen and tapped it on his notebook. –They're a framework. Just that. We'll use them to make sure everything holds together, but we'll hardly feel them. We won't let them box us in.

Liz, who was in the chair opposite Joanna's, winked slyly at her. It was a wink that said, Fucking hell. Where did you find this guy? Joanna and Liz had known each other for a long time. They met when Joanna was doing her masters in art and politics, and Liz was doing hers in linguistics. Liz answered a notice Joanna had pinned up in the college canteen asking for people to volunteer to be interviewed for research she was doing for her dissertation. At the end of the interview, in which Joanna showed Liz pages of images and asked her to choose from lists of words describing them, they went on talking. They'd not stopped talking ever since. The other two women were Anita and Claire. Each of them had a son who was friends with Joanna's son, Adam. Claire was acting in an affected way, nodding seriously every time Ian spoke. This was because, the month before she'd done Ian's personal development weekend. Now, she was letting them know that she already got a head-start. But it was fine, she'd be patient while they caught on. Anita was writing down everything Ian said. She had a large notebook, a heavy-looking pen and several highlighters.

– The most important thing is accountability, Ian said. – Each of you is accountable to everyone else in the group and all of you need to make sure that people account to you. What we’re about here is setting goals. So, at the start of each meeting, it’s really important that you all say what you’ve done to get closer to your goal. If you haven’t done anything, you have to own up to it. Not because I want you to feel bad. It’s because once you’ve admitted to not taking the steps you meant to take, we can work out what’s holding you back. And we can get you back on track. That’s why we’re all here, yes?

They all nodded and Ian pushed his chair away from the table. He leant back in it and looked around the table at them, taking them in one by one. More of the deliberate kind of posturing he’d been doing before, when Joanna was making his coffee. Showing them that he was in charge. Probably he’d planned to do it, writing it into his notes as he prepared. Authoritative Body Language, he might’ve written down.

After accountability, there were two more rules. The Stop rule and the Gossip rule. The Stop rule was that you weren’t allowed to press anyone into talking about something they didn’t want to talk about. The Gossip rule was that if you had something to say, you were to say it to the person’s face and not behind her back.

– But doesn’t Stop cancel out Gossip? Claire said.

Joanna looked at Liz and Liz rolled her eyes. Joanna smiled. She pushed the plate of biscuits towards Liz and Liz took one.

– I can see what you mean, Ian said pulling his chair back to the table. – But, no, it’s not the same. Think of it like this; if we’re not having the conversation in the group we’re not having it at all. We’re not having it the next day in a coffee shop on Hampstead High Street or when you’re texting each other.

– I’m trying to get a sense of what the boundaries are.

She ate a strawberry, biting off the red body and then nibbling the white flesh around the stalk until it was bare. She dropped the stalk onto her plate and took another, which she held close to her mouth. – I think there are people here who haven't done any groups before.

– Can we not say gossip, Anita said. – It's got a misogynistic undertone.

– I don't think it's anything like that, Claire said, – I just think Ian wants us to be workman-like about this.

Ian said it was fine. – You're refining the boundaries, he said. – It's a good way to start.

But he was wrongfooted. He had the same look as before, when he'd tried to convince Joanna that whichever of his books she'd picked up, it had many of the answers she needed. It was a sullen look, scornful. A narrowing of his eyes, just for a moment.

– I'd rather we said rumour, Anita said.

While this was happening, Liz had been drawing a flower. It started in the bottom corner of her page and reached almost to the top. She'd given it pointed petals and a long stamen weighed down by bulging pollen buds. Ian looked at it and said that it was a very erotic image. She raised an eyebrow at him and drew another stamen.

– Don't ask me to draw anything, Claire said. – I can do a cotton wool sheep, but I can't do anything else.

– Very often, with my clients, Ian said. – I ask people to draw something very off the cuff and straightaway we get to them managing to say something very deep, which if I'd asked them to put into a sentence, they'd have struggled.

Claire beamed across the table and said, – This is what's so amazing about Ian. He gets you to articulate things out about yourself that you never knew were there.

– What about you, Joanna? Ian said, turning away from Liz and Claire. – We haven't heard from you.

Joanna fiddled with her pen, flicking the cap on and off. Then she said, – I don't really have any expectations. I was just going to see what happens.

– Can I ask you something? Ian said, leaning in her direction. – What needs do you have that aren't being met?

It could've been a genuine question he was asking, but she wasn't sure. His way of speaking was like finger-pointing. It felt sharp, like he was accusing her of being careless and letting things slide. It felt like he wanted to make her feel uncomfortable, like she was a schoolgirl and he was the teacher who'd picked her out for special attention because of something he thought he'd seen in her and she was holding back. But then, she hadn't played along and he was annoyed. It was shameful to feel like that. She shrugged, felt her face flush hot. Stupid.

– I'm tempering chocolate at the Cordon Blue Cooking School. Claire said. – As soon as I can get signed up. In January I hope.

She made wide sweeps over the table-top as if she already had the tempering tool in her hand and the chocolate poured out on the table.

– Fantastic, said Ian and Claire blushed. – What I like about that answer is that you're right in there doing it.

They were filling in the gaps in a sentence printed onto sheets that Ian had passed around the table: *I am [doing what?], [where?] by [what date?]*. Ian said if they could write down the goal, he could give them the tools to make it happen.

– Make sure you put a realistic date, he said. – It's that dates that pins it all down. It's what you'll keep on coming back to.

Across the table from Joanna, Anita was writing quickly.

– Accountability, he said.

Joanna grinned at Liz.

– Locking down on a goal means making time to work on it, Ian went on. – We shoot ourselves in the foot before we’ve even started, saying that we’ll just do this one other thing and first thing tomorrow we’ll get back to the goal.

– That’s me, Liz said.

– Who can tell me why we put things off?

– Because we’d rather fail for lack of trying, Joanna said. – Because it’s better than putting ourselves out and failing anyway.

– You’ve hit the nail on the head, he said. – Now, tell us your goal.

– I’m not sure, Joanna said. – Can I wait?

Anita said, – I’m running past the Royal Albert Hall towards the finish line of the Royal Parks Half Marathon in October next year.

– Great. Everyone write this down: sit as little as possible. Don’t believe any idea that was not born in the open air and of free movement—in which the muscles don’t also revel. That’s Nietzsche. He was right. You have to move.

Joanna wrote down the quote. Then, she said, – OK. I’m here in my kitchen, a month from now, looking at the tattoo I’ve just got on my arm, she said.

Liz frowned. Then she grinned. – I love it. I’m coming with you when you get it done.

– Hang on, Anita said – Can she have getting a tattoo for her goal?

Ian shrugged and lifted his hands in a what-do-you-want-me-to say-gesture.

– Aren’t we supposed to doing something more long-term?

– I think it’s exciting, Claire said. – Do you know what you’re getting?

– Can we slow down a minute, Anita said. – Ian, I don't see how this is going to work. My goal needs ten months of training. Claire's going to have to go to class week in week out. And Joanna spends an afternoon getting a tattoo. How's it the same?

– Remember, Ian said. – We aren't here to judge each other's goals.

– I'm not judging. Even though I'd never get one. I don't see why we've all got to wear our hearts on our sleeves now. Literally.

– Careful, Anita, Ian said.

– My question is, if she goes and gets this tattoo next week, what's she supposed to do for the rest of the time? What's the point of picking a goal that you can do after one session?

– If she comes back next time with the tattoo, it's a goal ticked off and she can move onto the next one.

– Ian, I really think you're talking yourself out of work. You need to be stretching us. If what you're saying is immediate gratification counts as much as something more hard won, then how can you even sustain the idea of this course?

– Another quote: 'I'm not the richest, smartest or most talented person in the world, but I succeed because I keep going and going and going. Who said that?

– Obama, Claire said. – No. Madonna.

Ian shook his head.

– Tell us, Claire said coyly.

– Sylvester Stallone.

He nodded, like they should all have it clear now. Claire and Liz nodded back.

Claire said, – I've read that people with tattoos are more likely to take unnecessary risks. And also that women are much more likely to get them removed than men. I don't

know what that means. If you put the two things together. Anyway, Joanna, I think it's a lovely idea. I can't wait to see what you get.

Joanna got up to make more coffee.

– My turn, Liz said. She tossed her hair, pulling out the loose strands and dropping them onto the floor. – I'm eating breakfast on the terrace of a hotel in Italy with my soulmate.

–That's so nice, Claire said.

– I'm looking for a Richard Burton to my Elizabeth Taylor.

– I don't want to make an issue, Anita said. – But I'm really not getting this. I've put something I know's going to test me. I've deliberately thought of a difficult challenge but it's totally realistic. It's completely in my own hands if I do it or not. Other people are putting random things. Not you Claire. I can't see how this is supposed to work if the goals aren't more or less equivalent.

– Anita, Ian, said, – I completely honour what you're saying.

Anita put down her pen, sat back in her chair and folded her arms.

– We're all on our own expedition.

– Oh my God, Anita said. – It's fine. Forget I said anything.

– Anita, it's not going to work if any one of us is harbouring judgments about other people's goals.

– I want something big, Liz said. – Something intense.

Joanna leaned over her to fill her cup and she rubbed Joanna's arm.

– The only thing I'd say, Claire said. She was half smiling, half frowning at Liz –  
Are Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor a good model?

– They were terrible with each other, Anita said. – All they did was bring out the worst in each other.

Liz said that wasn't true. It wasn't even the half of it.



– Have you seen *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* That wasn't acting. That was how they were in real life.

– We should watch it, Claire said. – We could start a film club.

Ian said, – I think we're getting side-tracked.

Claire smiled and said she was sorry. All Claire wanted, Joanna thought, was cluck and bustle for Ian so that he'd tell her how well she was doing. Like eating a bag of sweets. That's all Claire was after.

– That's what I want, Liz said. – I want someone I can do anything with. I don't want to have to hold back.

Claire put on a quizzical expression.

– I don't think I could do that, she said. – It's the idea that anything could happen that puts me off.

If it's your soul mate, Anita said. – Shouldn't that person make you better?

– No. Why does everything have to be about being better?

– It's just what most people think. Aren't we supposed to be trying to feel better about ourselves?

Joanna and Liz had been over this lots of times. Joanna knew it by heart.

Liz said. – I don't want it all neat and tidy. I want somebody I can get into the worst fucking messes with.

Ian held up his hand.

– I'm going to stop you, he said. – This isn't a helpful road to go down.

– Why do you keep cutting people off? Anita said. – Why won't you want us to have a proper conversation?

– Because of what I've already said. We need to be careful we're not passing judgement on anyone.

– I don't feel judged Liz says, – I like this.

It was true. Liz loved conversations like this one. She had the idea that if you didn't feel things right to the core, you might as well not bother. Sometimes Joanna wanted that too.

– Fine. – I can see where this is going, but carry on. It's your group.

– For Christ's sake, Anita said. – Be quiet and let us talk.

Liz started to cry.

– Do you know what she said ten years after he died? She said, I keep expecting Richard Burton to walk through that door and tell me to go to hell. That's what I want. I want someone who gets under my skin that much.

Claire reached over to her and squeezed both of her hands.

– Don't be upset, she said.

– I want to be upset.

Ian cleared his throat.

– This is what I mean, he said. This is why I say let's be careful. We shouldn't let this get out of hand.

– Let's not be careful, Ian. Anita said, – We don't need you sanitising everything for us.

Anita leant across the table and takes Liz's other hand, the one Claire wasn't holding.

– Don't listen to him. We don't need men telling us what we can and can't say.

– I've got to tell you, Ian said. – I'm not happy with where this is going. I'm feeling quite ambushed.

– It's not about you, Anita snapped. She started to cry too. – My whole life, I've had men telling me what to do and what to think. It's enough. I want it to stop.

Claire got up from the table and lay down on the floor. She pulled her jumper over her face and shouted, her voice, a ragged stream of sobs coming from underneath the jumper, sounding like the howls foxes make when they cry at night.

What does it say about me, Joanna thinks, that everyone else can let go and I can't? Sitting here, at the table, she felt the distance between them and her. But she wouldn't go over. Something about all of them saying the same things, all together at the same time, that seemed to make them feel things more keenly and for her more diminished.

Liz and Anita had got up and were kneeling on either side of Claire, not howling now but sobbing, her face still hidden. They were each holding one of Claire's hands. At the table Joanna looked at Ian. A stunned look on his face. Maybe he was going to cry too.

– I'm not doing this, Ian says, – Everyone needs to come back to the table. We're not doing primal scream. This is about making a decision and sticking to it.

– No, you're not, Anita said. – You're not trying to help us. You're telling us what to do. And what you're saying is stupid.

Ian opened his bags and put his books inside. Stooped, with his hair falling forwards, over his eyes, he looked old.

– This was a bad idea, he said. – This is bloody crazy. This isn't what my job is. I'm not here to be the whipping boy.

– It kind of is your job, Joanna said.

– Don't you start, he said.

Anita said he'd brought it on himself.

– It's because you're hectoring us, Liz said. – And you don't listen.

– How am I hectoring you? I'm trying to do you a favour. Don't shoot the messenger, sweetheart.

Claire sat up. – She's right. You're not listening.

Liz said, – You're like all weak men.

– I'm not doing this.

– Because you're weak. You're going to walk away because you can't handle it.

– Don't go, she said. – All we're saying is that the one sentence thing doesn't really work. It's too black and white.

– It's all academic, he said. – You've already shot down my whole idea for the group.

– No, we haven't, Liz said – We're just saying you might not have got it all worked out yet. It's a work in progress.

Joanna stood up. – We should have a drink. I'm making martinis for everyone.

– I agree, Claire said. She sat up Her hair was messy at the back from where it had rubbed on the rug. She smoothed it down and asked Anita if it looked OK.

– Do you know what I like about martinis? Joanna said while they were drinking. – It's that you can't really taste the alcohol, but they're a really strong drink. You can feel the effect straightaway.

– Actually you're right, Anita said. – I hadn't thought of it before.

Joanna said she'd make another round. She picked up Ian's glass. He hadn't spoken for a long time. She touched his shoulder and asked him if he was OK.

– I'm fine, he said. – I'm just doing some coaching on myself. And I'll have another one too.

– OK, Claire said as she started on the second drink. – I feel better now. I think I can carry on.

– I think we should carry on, Joanna said.

Ian put his books back out onto the table and took the cap off his pen.

– Good, he said. – I’m glad. I think this has all been very positive. I think we’re getting somewhere and I’ve got a feeling this is going to be one of my most productive groups. It shouldn’t be easy, what we’re doing here. It should be really hard. It’s hard to say the things that matter. But I feel like today we’ve done some digging in.

## Hemu

The kitchen still felt like his wife's room. From where he was standing, frying the steak he'd bought for dinner, he might've turned his head to see her just there, watching him from the doorway. Her arms folded, frowning at him.

– What the hell are you doing? You're doing that all wrong.

But if she were here, he wouldn't be making dinner for himself. If she were here, she'd have cooked in the morning. His wife liked to get the cooking out of the way early. That way, she said, the rest of the day was her own. In the evenings he would let her know when he was leaving work and she would put the dinner on to warm so that when he got home, it would be ready to serve. Now he was here by himself. Only it was an effort to think of it that way. The feeling he had was that any time now he would hear her car pulling onto the drive, her keys in the door, and her voice shouting to him from the hallway that she'd been sitting in traffic on the North Circular for an hour and a half. Her wife's green tea in the packet on the counter, his box of Yorkshire teabags next to it. She preferred loose tea and he liked teabags. He liked her to leave his teabag in the cup so that he could remove it himself when the tea was strong enough. His wife would always take out the bag too soon. Always in too much of a hurry, he thought now, to get to whatever she had to do next. Her writing was on the calendar that hung on the wall and on the fridge her handwritten notes were held up with magnets. Also on the fridge door was the invitation card for their anniversary party. He pulled it off and the magnet, shaped like the Eiffel Tower, that had been holding it in place fell onto the floor and broke into two pieces.

*Mr. & Mrs. Hemu Daswani*  
*are honoured to request the presence of*  
*in celebration of their ruby anniversary.*

He tore the card in half, struggling with the thickness of it, and dropped it into the bin. Still he had the feeling of her watching him. A more severe frown now. Idiot, she might've called him, whispering it under her breath.

– What?

– Feel better now?

– Be quiet and leave me alone.

He went back to the pan and pressed his finger into the meat. It needed another half a minute, a few seconds more maybe. That was a tip he'd found on [bbcgoodfood.com](http://bbcgoodfood.com). To see how the meat was cooked, you prodded it with your finger to see how soft or hard it was. The trick to it was that you could test the cooking against your own hand. You pressed different fingers onto your thumb and then with one of the fingers on your other hand, you could feel the fleshy pad at the base of your thumb. With your thumb against your index finger the pad was very soft and the feeling was the same as a steak cooked very rare. With the middle finger it was tougher and with the ring finger it was tougher still, which was the same as a steak cooked well-done. He tried it and it worked. His wife never cooked steak at home. In restaurants both of them asked for it well-done because his wife said that was how it tasted best.

– Actually, it's you who's been getting it wrong, he was saying to her in his head. –  
With good quality steak like this, what you're paying for is the flavour and the texture. Too much over-cooking will take away all the taste.

– My preference is for well-done. I don't like it when blood runs out on the plate.

– Blood only runs on the plate if the meat hasn't been rested. If you rest it properly, the meat will reabsorb its own juices. It gives a better taste and there's no blood.

He'd like to see her face, watching him cook like this. A good quality rump and a bag of salad. He'd started buying wine to drink with dinner. His wife had been teetotal. She said that alcohol gave her heartburn. The wine helped him to wind down. It was milder than whiskey and he liked the restful feeling it gave him. Not drowsiness. He wouldn't call it that. It was more that it took away the sharpness of the day. He could go back over everything and nothing stood out that couldn't be fixed.

At the end of the table where he sat with his plate and his wineglass, were four shoe boxes, all filled with letters. The letters were his wife's. They'd been sent to her by a dentist called Harkashan Khubchandani, who lived in San Diego, California. Without him knowing, this Harkashan had been writing to his wife, one letter every month, for more than forty years.

The letters came to light the day Suddah spent the afternoon upstairs, clearing his wife's clothes from the wardrobe. She turned up with four empty suitcases, telling Hemu as she carried them inside that she was going to send Laxmi's clothes directly to a shelter in Bombay where women could go whose husbands mistreated them.

– Whatever you do, don't leave the house while I'm going through it all, Suddah said from halfway up the stairs.

She was carrying two suitcases and Hemu was behind her with the others.



– I don't want the responsibility of making the decisions of what you want for keepsakes.

– I don't want to keep anything.

She got to the top of the stairs and put down the cases.

– Few things you have to keep, she said to him.

He didn't answer. He went into the living room put on CNN.

Partway through World Business Today, Suddah came downstairs with Laxmi's wedding sari.

– She had kept this, she said. – You should keep it in case one day you have a granddaughter.

–I don't want it.

The sari was wrapped in tissue paper, but the bright red fabric showed through.

– I told you, I don't want to keep anything.

– But this can't be given away.

– What good is there in keeping it? he said.

– Because she had kept it, Suddah said. – It was important enough to her to do that.

She came further into the room and stood between him and the TV.

– All this, I'm trying to help you.

He turned up the volume on the TV and Suddah sat down on the end of the sofa, the sari laid across her lap.

– Grieving is a journey that you'll find easier if you share with others.

– When did I ask for your advice?

She smoothed the tissue paper packet and said, – There's something else. She'd kept boxes of letters.

– And?

– I think you should look at them.

\*

May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013

*Dearest Manju*

*The photos you sent from Adam's birthday were beautiful. He's looking so much like his father looked at the same age. I've looked at them all many times and I'm still thinking of him with the cricket bat you gifted him. It looked like it was his pride and joy. You're very blessed with both your grandsons, as am I with my grandchildren. I'll send you their pictures next time. I haven't had the time to get them ready to send with this letter. Samara is turning eight next month and Nikhil is talking about doing maths at university. Arjun is a puzzle, but he is a very talented musician. I'm glad to have another musician in the family.*

*I'm writing this later than I should because the last days have been hectic – busy in mostly a good way. Pooja was here for the weekend with Samara and Arjun. Patrick and Nikhil had gone for a camping trip with the scout group. Arjun is still refusing to join, which I think is causing tension between Pooja and Patrick. It's not for me to get involved telling them what I think, but I'm inclined more to Patrick's point of view than to my own daughter's. Pooja indulges the children, especially Arjun, I suppose because he's the youngest. In her eyes Arjun can do no wrong. There was a silly argument the second evening about what we were having for dinner. Pooja said to let him be and she allowed him to order pizza instead of eating what we had*

*all cooked together. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her this is the exact reason his father wants him to go scouting. But, instead, I thought of what you always say, that whenever you think of giving somebody a piece of advice, it's better to give them a hand to hold and an ear to listen. So, I let it go about the pizza. I think Pooja noticed and I think she was appreciative. It was a small grievance and, in the end, it was a pleasure having them.*

*Manju, something important I've been thinking about recently. Even after so many years, from time to time I wonder, what if? Should I have done more to persuade you not to go off to London? No doubt at all that each of us feels the wiser with the benefit of so many years behind us. I don't doubt that your husband has been a good and solid family man. There's no reason to think you've been anything but happy. Look at how you've lived. I'm thankful for all these years that we've remained friends. Only tell me, do you ever stop and think what could have been if we'd done things differently? Could I have persuaded you to come to California with me? I'm not so rich as your husband. With me you would have been a dentist's wife. Perhaps you would not have liked it, having to keep an eye on the housekeeping money too. Perhaps you would have found the life here too quiet, me too whimsical and too old-fashioned. You've been wise to always take me half and half – always reminding me to keep my feet on the ground, always able to give me a piece of good advice whatever the occasion – and here I am a sentimental old man – and I know you will put me right, but I can't help myself asking, do you think we could have made each other happy?*

Hemu drank some wine and then sliced into his steak trying to recall a time he'd heard his wife giving advice about not giving advice. Whatever the phrase was, about

listening and holding hands, he'd never heard it. The first thing he did after the first letters he'd read was to type Harkashan's name into Google. He got LinkedIn profiles and links to singaporecricket.org and outlookindia.com that repeated down the screen and among them, a third of the way down the first results page, a link to Harkashan's practice. Three times he'd been through the Sindhi Association Directory looking for Khubchandanis. There were none.

That morning, he'd left the house early for his swim. Wednesday and Friday mornings he swam fifty lengths of the pool at the Fitness First. There were four of them who went each week: Hemu, Charlie Patel, Mansoor Agarwal and Anil Sharma. The others preferred speed walking on the treadmill. After their exercise, they all met in the steam room. They called it the Breakfast Club.

– What's the most you'd pay for a TV?

That was Anil, whose way of speaking was the most Anglicised. He spoke like a toff. In the steam, Hemu could see the others outlined like large grey stones. You could never catch the expression on anyone's face, you had to go only by the voice. It was a nice feeling he got from talking and being hidden in the steam—nobody looking at him to see if he was looking well. He was finding that losing a wife made people nosy. They were looking at him more than they'd done before to know something about what to expect when their turn came to have their wife go.

– How big?

– Doesn't matter the size. I'm asking what's the most you'd pay for a TV regardless of size.

– I would always go for a Sony.

That was Mansoor. Mansoor had made his money importing fruit and vegetables. One afternoon each week he spent working the till at one or other of his shops. He said that when you take your hands off a business, it's an advertisement to the staff to rob you blind.

- Would you pay more than five thousand? Anil said.
- For the TV only or is it the full home cinema package?
- TV only.
- My son has bought one for seven thousand, Hemu said.

The enjoyment of these conversations was firstly that they were slow. Because of the heat, nobody could be bothered to argue like they might've done if they were eating dinner somewhere. And secondly, if you felt like listening and not speaking, it was fine. You could sit and follow the talking and nobody would say that you're quiet today and ask you why you're not joining the conversation.

– If he has the cash in hand, then why not?

– At his age, Hemu said, – which of us wouldn't have chosen to reduce the mortgage instead.

– Our time was different, Charlie said. – Which of us had the luxury of a father to go to if we ran short?

Charlie's name was Chirag, but he'd called himself after Prince Charles.

– First TV I ever had cost me one pound a week. It was a Radio Rentals model.

The conversation turned into an exchange of observations about how the times have changed and what was different for them compared to their children. They'd had the same conversation many times before. But one or other always had something new to say about something that one of their children had bought. Hemu was sure it was the same for the others—the enjoyment of rebuking his son and at the same time making it his own badge of honour to have raised a son who now had the wherewithal to blow up his cash.

For a few minutes none of them spoke. The only noise was the clunking sound of the machine gearing itself up to send out another gust of steam. Perhaps the others were thinking, like he was, about how much there was that the children they'd raised here would never

understand. In his case, there were things he'd made a point of not telling them. Why burden them with the past? But as well as they'd done themselves, it was difficult to watch how they lived and see how much they took for granted.

Then, Charlie asked if they knew that Raj Sadana was being investigated for tax fraud.

– It looks like he might actually go to prison, Charlie said.

Hemu said, – Everybody bends the rules, but Raj takes it too far.

He was shaking his head, even though the others wouldn't be able to see.

– What you can get away with these days is less and less, Mansoor said. – It's not worth it. Only an idiot would risk being on the wrong side of the law.

– My son won't even give cash to the window cleaner. Hemu said. – Everything goes through his bank account. Not a single pound in cash.

Suresh had that luxury. For him the same luxury had been much longer in coming. For a long time, the scrimping and the money he took under the counter had been out of necessity.

Afterwards, on the side of the pool, Hemu let the others go ahead and he told Anil about the boxes of letter.

– My question is, he said. – What was this Harkashan to my wife?

– What was written in them?

– Mostly it was only news. But in one of them he was writing about what might have been. At some point he must've entertained a marriage proposal.

– This is going back how many years?

– I don't know. A long-time ago they must've been close.

– Don't take it to heart, Anil said. He wiped his face with his towel. – She kept in touch with an old flame and she didn't tell you because she knew you'd put a stop to it.

– Why go to the trouble of keeping a secret if there was nothing to hide?

– All women like to have their secrets. They like the feeling of getting away with something that their husbands won't allow.

– I never stopped her going out with friends. Only I didn't want to go. It didn't mean I didn't allow her.

He watched another man swimming a fast front crawl. This other swimmer, a man who must've been forty years his junior, took only one breath halfway along the length of the pool.

– That's how you're seeing it now, Anil said. – Think about before. If she'd said when you were newlyweds that she was keeping in touch with a man she knew before, what would you have done?

– Then I'd have put a stop to it. Even you would have, if it was your wife. But later on, I would have let it go.

– Exactly. She didn't tell you at the start. And then it went on, past when she could say something. So, she decided to keep it quiet.

It made sense what Anil was saying, but in his gut he wasn't convinced.

– If it were my wife, Anil said. – I wouldn't give it a second thought. It doesn't change a thing.

All the time now, people were telling him what it meant to grieve. And what he should be doing to feel like he was moving on. Moving on from what, he thought each time somebody said it to him—as if because this one thing had happened—that because his wife was no more, then that in itself meant that everything had changed. They described it to him, this moving on, like it was a simple process. The way they talked, it was the same as buying a house—as if one step automatically led to the next. Even the GP had called him and asked him to make an appointment.

– I don't need to come in, he told her.

She said that with older people, when they lose a spouse, the surgery liked them to come in for an assessment.

– We need make be sure that any care needs you have are being met.

When she said that, he ended the call. There was no point in trying to explain to her that whatever he needed, he could pay for himself. Later in the week, a leaflet came in the post. *If you have been given this leaflet, it said, you have experienced the death of a close relative. It can be devastating when somebody close to you dies. You might feel a number of emotions all at the same time.* He tore it in half and threw it in the bin.

Once, he'd bought a terrace of six old houses near Potter's Bar. The plan was to refit them all to be very modern and then to rent them to young couples. But when the Buildings Inspector came from the council, he shone his torch behind one of the old plasterboard panels and said he could see wattle and daub. After that, it was a choice between the Conservation Officer sitting on his head or taking the loss by letting the houses go. He sold the houses at auction and lost ninety thousand pounds. The letter from this Harkashan was the same kind of a bolt from the blue. Only with this, there was not even the possibility of cutting his losses.

Since his wife died, things were coming up that he had no method for resolving. People said that grief was a process, that it was a matter of getting through it stage by stage. What rubbish all that was. In a process, you knew where you were in relation to what had already happened and what came next. Whatever came out of the blue, you could decide whether the best way forward was to first go backwards or to turn and go sideways. He had never strayed from his wife. Not even when he was a young man and he was taking trips to Hong Kong every two months. He could've strayed. It would've been easy and his wife



would never have known. But he didn't because he was sure that she'd never have strayed either.

He picked up his dinner plate and cutlery, took them over to the sink for rinsing and he stood the plate in the dish rack, the fork and knife lying next to it. He went back for the pan, scrubbed it clean and then leant it against the plate so that it would dry. He did this now, after every meal. That way, it would be ready for the next time. His wife was still in the kitchen. She'd moved from the place where she'd been standing in the doorway and now she was sitting at the table. She stayed there while he drank his tea.

\*

– You're having tea? Suddah said.

She'd come to collect the last of his wife's belongings.

– No.

– Then I won't have either.

– If you want tea, you can make it yourself.

He watched her take the kettle over to the sink.

– What's your sense of these letters? she said, shaking her head.

From her bag, she produced one of the airmail envelopes.

– Give that to me. All this is none of your business.

– I wouldn't have seen it coming, I tell you. But the one certain thing is, you have to tell him.

– No.

– If you won't, I will.

– No, you bloody won't.

Hemu was leaning against the counter and he stepped forward quickly to make a grab for the envelope. She was ready for him. She snatched it away and held it to her chest.

– Give it to me, he said. – It doesn't belong to you. You had no right to take it.

– Laxmi would want him to know.

She took the envelope and got up from the table, backing away from him further into the kitchen.

– You stay back from me.

He went forward, towards her, swiped at her again for the envelope and she kicked his shin. The kick stopped him. It was a hard kick, with the pointed toe of her shoe and it hurt. He bent to put a hand on the place and she hit him on the back of his head. A flat slap with her hand, which didn't hurt, but he was angry that here she was actually striking him.

– Crazy bitch, he said to her. – Have you lost your mind?

She told him to stay back, holding out her free hand. – You're the madman. Acting like a *paagal*.

Then, in a quick darting movement, which he wasn't expecting she moved to where the kettle was. She picked it up she waved it at him.

– Go back and sit down. Or else I promise you I'll let you have this whole kettleful.

He stood still, watching her.

– You don't frighten me, with all your hot air. Sit down. I'm making the call and you can't stop me.

When his wife was there, this woman was always there too, treating his house as if it were her own. How many times must she have come here and whispered into his wife's ear everything that he was doing wrong. Everyone knew her for a troublemaker. Anything like this, people's private matters that were no concern of hers, she was onto them in a moment, making them her own business. Was it any surprise that her own marriage hadn't lasted?

She'd divorced her husband less than a year after her youngest son got married. That alone made her a special case. More so when she refused to take money from him. She took a course in bookkeeping and found a job managing the office of an English man whose business was office cleaning. When the English man retired, she bought the business from him and she was still, even now, running it by herself. His wife said to him that Suddah wouldn't stand aside for anybody, which was right. She really was a first-class bitch. You could see she hadn't any time for men. Whatever a man could do, Suddah could do it better. She was holding the kettle out in front of her, the spout pointing at him. He was sure she wasn't bluffing. She really would douse him with the water if he tried to stop her. She'd enjoy it. It was what she'd wanted to do all these past years.

– Better if you'd been the one who'd dropped dead, he said. But he went over to the table and sat down.

She followed him with the kettle. – No, she said. Better it had been you. Then at least she could've ended her own life in happiness.

– Is it any wonder you couldn't stay married? What man could live with you?

She came forward and jabbed the kettle at him.

– You didn't deserve her. All you've ever done is look after yourself and take advantage of her good nature.

– That might be a description of your marriage. It's not the description of mine.

– Put your hands on the table where I can see them.

He did it. She'd become hysterical. In this state she could've done anything.

She was dialling the number.

– This is what you should be doing. If you weren't such a coward, she said. And then,

– It's ringing.

There was a pause and then she said, – Am I speaking to Harkashan Khubchandani?

She told him her name and that she was a friend of Laxmi's. Then, straightaway she corrected herself. –I'm a very close friend of Manju, she said. – I'm calling to give you bad news. Manju has died very suddenly.

Now, she was giving him all the facts. How Laxmi was out shopping for groceries and was wheeling her trolley back to her car, and that's when it happened.

– She was literally struck down in her tracks, Suddah was saying.

Then another pause and she was shaking her head.

– I can't explain it, not even to myself.

She said that she'd sat with Laxmi for an hour in the Chapel of Rest the day before the cremation and from the look on her face, she was definitely at peace.

– All the troubles of her heart had been taken away. I could hardly bring myself to come away. I didn't want to think of her spending her last night alone.

There was another pause and then she was nodding. She said, – It's true. Everybody who knew her could see the goodness in her.

She came and sat down close to where Hemu was standing.

– I have to tell you, she said. – I'm here with her husband. She had kept all your letters and I was the one who found them when I was dealing with her personal effects. Until that moment, nobody here had heard of you.

Another pause and then she said – You need to appreciate from his side only, all this has come at him completely out of the blue. He doesn't even know what to think.

After that, she waited again for quite a long time while Harkashan must have been giving his explanation. Then, she dropped the phone to her chest and whispered to Hemu.

– He wants to speak to you.

Hemu shook his head.

– He can't speak to you now. It's too much upset. Whatever you have to explain, you'll have to say it to me and I'll tell him.

When she ended the call, she shook her head.

– What? Hemu said.

– He said he wants to come. For her sake, he says. He wants to set the record straight.

– I'm not having him here.

– Will you allow me to at least take the letters?

– What for?

– They're his letters, she said. – I'll send them back to him. What good are they to you?

## Joanna

Drinking their wine from enamel cups, Joanna told Liz that she felt weepy every time she saw a woman with a pushchair.

– Hormones, Liz said. – If you had another child now, you'd feel like you were sliding into the abyss.

She got up and poured more wine into Joanna's cup, kissing the top of Joanna's head when the cup was full. They'd put up camping chairs on a patch of clear ground which, a few metres back from where they were sitting, turned into woods. This was where they were camping. Behind them, their tent was still in its bag and it lay, piled with the other paraphernalia of their trip in the middle of the clearing. In front of them a patchwork quilt of brown and green stretched further than Joanna could see. Beyond the fields, in the far distance of the horizon, stood the purple grey outlines of the Lakeland Fells, the sky turning different shades of pink and orange above them.

Liz had on the grey peaked cap she wore for walking. Her ponytail stuck out of the back of it and she'd pulled the peak down low to shield her eyes from the sun. Joanna had taken off her boots and socks. And now she leaned back in her chair and flexed her toes on the dusty ground. Liz filled her own cup and held it out to Joanna. – To you and me, she said. – Just us girls.

She pulled her knees up to her chin and hooked her toes over the edge of her seat. For a few minutes they sat quietly, each of them sipping their wine. In front of them, a kite hovered over the field. Then Liz nudged Joanna's arm.

– I forgot to tell you who I'm having dinner with next week.

– Tell me.

– Anthony.

– Anthony the civil servant? Joanna said, with her eyes still closed.

– He’s been promoted. Now he’s grade 7. It means he’s got his own policy to look after.

– Is that wise?

– It’s only dinner.

She leaned closer to Joanna so that Joanna opened her eyes and turned towards her.

– The thing about Anthony is, he gave me the best orgasms I’ve ever had.

She grinned again and Joanna smiled too. Always they came back to this. Liz was the vamp and Joanna played along. Liz did all the things that Joanna might’ve liked to do, if she dared. A giddiness to it, that was exciting, as if all the things Liz had done were available to Joanna almost as if they’d happened to her too. It was simple, how Liz made it sound. An easiness in her body, an enjoyment that Joanna worried she didn’t get from hers; as if Joanna had swapped pleasure for the plain and simple permanence of a marriage—a workaday relationship that Joanna had with her body. A compromise where she’d given up all the fun she could’ve had out of it, exchanged it in return for other benefits, that were more settled while Liz had held out, keeping herself free to do whatever she wanted.

She took Joanna’s hand again and squeezed. – Anthony used to make me come and come and come until I was literally about to pass out. Anyway, I got his email and it made me think, what I really could do with is some really boisterous sex.

Liz was the kind of friend who told you everything she did in bed with a man. She told everything without flinching, like it was important that you knew all the details of what she liked and what turned her off. Sometimes Joanna told her what she’d done with Suresh. Although she made small exaggerations to prove to Liz that she was wrong about sex with the same person for years and years always turning into a routine. They really were tiny embellishments, meant to show Liz that even if lots of couples went down that road, she and

Suresh hadn't. And who was to say that Liz's stories weren't embellished too. All this was a kind of competition that had been going on between them for a long time. A deliberate measuring of physical pleasure and the heights of enjoyment that each of them could reach. Whatever Joanna said, she never came out ahead. Liz always had a story that went further. Except that once Joanna described waking up from a dream feeling the jerks and twitches of an orgasm and Liz scowled and said she'd never had that. She sounded put out. And so Joanna made it sound like something that happened to her often, almost like she could do it at will, when the truth was that it had been just that once and it was disorientating to wake up like that, not knowing what made it happen. Joanna liked it that they could talk like this. She liked the feeling that there were things Liz would only tell her. Except that sometimes there was an edge to it—something calculating, as if Liz was deliberately putting her down. She felt like Liz was pulling rank, punishing her for taking more than her share of all the things that Liz said she wanted but when it looked as if they were within her touch, she pushed away. She implied that whatever Joanna wanted, it fell easily into her lap, whereas Liz had to scrap for what she got but that the scrapping only made it better when she managed to get it, more intense and more satisfying.

Later, when it was dark, they heard footsteps on the path that came from the house at the end of the path that lead down to the woods where their camp was. This was Jonathan, whose land this was, bringing them a sack of logs. Earlier, when they arrived, he carried their tent and cool box along the path. A tall man, curly haired, who'd seemed slightly surprised when they stopped their car next to the house. When they got out and asked him if they were in the right place, he said, – No, yes. Yes, I'm expecting you. Sorry, it's been a crazy day. He came around to the back of their car and lifted their things out of the boot. His way of moving was energetic. He was quick and light, like a younger man, Joanna thought. And when he showed them to the place in the trees where they could put up their tent, he talked to them



about the fields all around and pointed to a place they could go where he said you could see the full length of the valley and where they might see a kestrel. Now Liz was pressing food on him.

– Joanna’s the best cook, she was saying. – She made all this on that little stove.

Joanna liked this. The long evenings she and Liz had when they came away. There was nothing she needed to rush to finish. Always, before she left, there was the rush and the effort to leave everything for Suresh and the boys. To make it easy for them. All their meals cooked and wrapped and left in the fridge, the cooking times and temperatures written on post-its stuck to the outside of the foil. She left lists of phone numbers to call and the name of the ice cream place the boys liked to go, tick-box sex with Suresh the night before she left so that he couldn’t say she’d gone and left him in the lurch. The sex, like the cooking, gave her a sense of being efficient and purposeful. Not unpleasant. It was just being practical. Putting everything in order so that now she could let them go. Now she lifted her feet onto her chair and crossed her legs. She closed her eyes, listening to the sounds of Liz and Jonathan talking, their voices soft and soothing because they were standing close together.

Earlier in the day, they’d stopped at the motorway services. They bought coffee, and when they were drinking it outside at one of the picnic tables, a woman and her children came and took the table next to them. And straightaway their table was a clutter of drinking cups, bottles, soft toy rabbits and ducks, toy dragons. The woman had plastic containers filled with snacks, bags of nappies and spare clothes, foil packets of sandwiches, an array of flasks, baby wipes, plastic cutlery and muslin cloths. There were three children. The youngest child was a baby, which the woman nursed while two older girls ran whooping in circles around the table, stopping to argue over the snacks. – Stay close to the table, the woman kept telling them.

– Don’t go near the cars.

– Where’s my drink?

– Lily’s putting rice cakes in my orange juice.

The woman looked across at Joanna and said, – Three under four.

She said it beaming. Look at me, she was saying. I love all this. And look how well I’m doing. I have my children and they have me. We don’t need anything else. Don’t you envy me? She seemed to be saying. She was younger than Joanna and Liz, more matronly, a fleshy spread of legs on the bench where she was sitting. Maybe Joanna did envy her. The completeness of it. She knew what she was about, this woman. She was in her element in the thick of the spilled drinks and squabbling and snot and shit. It’s not as clear-cut as you think, Joanna wanted to say. It’s complicated. You’ll get bored. And then you’ll feel guilty. They’ll wear you down and you’ll hold it against them and you’ll feel guilty again. You’ll feel like you’re spread too thin. All around you, people are relying on you and you’re letting them down. And the person you’re letting down most is yourself because whatever you do, you never feel like it’s worthwhile. But she stayed quiet. She remembered being irritated by women who were quick to dart in with advice. The ones who’d bend over the pushchair and tell her the baby was too hot or too cold. Or the ones who took for granted that they knew how she felt, that having a family was the same for everyone. And still, she had it too. The need to let a stranger know that she was also a mother. That she’d done it already, what this other woman was doing now. She knew how it felt, and no matter how much she could say to Liz, she could never make her understand how much of an anchor the boys were.

When they’d finished, they walked across the carpark to where they’d left the car, and Liz linked arms with her. – I’m Louise, you’re Thelma. Right?

Joanna pulled Liz closer to her and they walked on in step with each other.

– Thelma, I’m going to Mexico. I think I can make it in two and a half days, but I’m going to have to haul ass. Are you up to this? Are you coming with me?

Standing over the campfire, Liz was asking Jonathan if he'd always lived here. A knack she had for asking the question that got straight to the subject that somebody wanted to talk about. He said that he'd bought the place at auction not having seen it. There were other places he'd been interested in, but the bidding went sky-high. This was what he could get. And the minute he got here, he stood in the field over there, he had a million ideas and he knew it was meant to be. He said that he was starting over after his divorce. Liz loved this. Grand schemes and pipe dreams. She could get people talking, and after ten minutes they were telling her all their secrets and their castles in the air. She'd heated the chicken that was left over from their dinner and tipped it into a bowl for him. He said there was a barn behind the house that he was renting to a carpenter or a painter, and for camping he'd found little nooks hidden in the woods and fields, some with shepherd's huts. The idea was you could come here, he said, and feel like you were the only people staying.

While he ate, he told them about the places he'd been and they told him where they'd been too. They told each other the places they wanted to go. Jonathan wanted to go back to Argentina, Liz to the Great Barrier Reef. Joanna said she wanted to walk the Bay of Fires trail in Tasmania. They finished their wine and opened another bottle. Joanna said she wanted to see the glaciers in Patagonia before they disappeared. Liz told Jonathan she'd go with him to Buenos Aires. She'd lie on her hotel bed and pretend she to be Eva Perón. Jonathan said that when her was there before, he'd learned tai chi.

– As in the martial art? Joanna said.

– Yes, but it's not fighting. It's more like meditating. Watch, he said.

He bent forward and pulled off his shoes and socks.

– I'll teach you the basic windmills, he said.

He told them it was important how they stood, how they placed their feet.

– Try to feel the ground with the full length of your foot, he said. – Make a good connection with the ground and use it to find your balance.

Joanna tried it, splaying her toes and trying to root herself. It was difficult. The top half of her body couldn't match the solidness it gave her legs when she planted her feet the way that Jonathan showed them. She wheeled her arms, trying to stay upright. Next to her Liz was doing the same. Jonathan was telling them to breathe in through their noses and out through their mouths.

– Close your eyes, he said. – You'll find your balance more easily with your eyes shut.

– I don't think so, Liz said, still waving her arms.

He went over to her and stood behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. – Now, close your eyes, he said. – I've got you.

He looked at Joanna over Liz's shoulder and said – Close your eyes. You won't fall.

– I think I've had too much to drink.

That wasn't true. She wanted him to come over to her, away from Liz. Somehow, they'd fallen into a competition. He came and stood behind her, told her to try with her eyes open and find something to fix her stare. He was right there, he said, and if she lost her balance, he'd catch her.

– I think I feel it, Joanna said. – But I'm getting a bit dizzy.

– That means you're doing it right.

He took a step closer and pushed her shoulders down. Then put his hands on her hips, telling her to keep them line with the rest of her body.

– I'm still not getting anything, Liz said, from where she was standing.

– Keep trying. Watch Joanna, he said. – She's got it spot on.

Afterwards, when [*what have they achieved*] and both of them said they wanted more wine, he showed them a pose, turning from right to left, scooping air in his right hand while he lifted his foot high off the ground. He could balance easily. A solid suppleness to him that was fascinating to Joanna, like a dancer.

When Jonathan left them, they went on talking. It was cooler now and they'd brought blankets and their jackets out from the tent. A log fell from the fire and Joanna got up to push it back into the flames. The time they'd spent with Jonathan had left a stiffness between them. Not tension exactly. Only that when Joanna sat back down and closed her eyes, she felt flatter than before. They hadn't spoken about Jonathan after he went back to the house, which was strange. Normally, by now they'd have put together his life story. They'd have taken what they'd gleaned and filled in all the gaps.

Then Liz said, – You know he liked you, don't you?

– I don't think so.

– He couldn't stop looking at you.

For several minutes they didn't speak. Joanna watched a flame, larger than the rest, reach up from between two logs.

Then Liz said, – I was thinking about Ian. I bet he could be filthy.

– Why do you make everything about sex? Joanna said, more sharply than she'd meant to.

Immediately she was annoyed with herself. She felt like a prude. She'd played into Liz's hands and somehow let her switch it around, so that now she was the injured one. Liz could do that. She could make Joanna feel prim. The accusation—it was that, an accusation—was that Joanna had grown staid, while Liz had been truer to herself by making sure she kept on taking risks. She disliked Liz making a competition of it. And she disliked herself for envying Liz her sexual freedom. The truth was that she envied Liz for being able to let go.

Liz could let go her inhibitions and be greedy in her taking of pleasure. She flaunted it to Joanna, that physical pleasure and the indulgence of it and it made Joanna feel boring and safe and unsatisfied, as if she'd given away something too easily and ended up with a bad bargain, which Liz would never have been gullible enough to do. But the truth of it was that Liz set herself up to fail. Everyone she met and liked, she put them on a pedestal—not only men, she was the same with women—people were fantastic, until they weren't. The first time something went wrong, Liz gave up straight away. She didn't have in her the energy and the determination and commitment to give herself completely to somebody else.

– Because I get lonely, Liz said.

Joanna got up and stoked the fire.

– I know, she said. – But that's why you're doing the group.

– How it works with these groups is you do all the exercises, all the talking and you feel better. The minute you feel better, you don't feel so hung up on changing things. You never end up actually doing things differently, it's just a way of making you feel better about the status quo.

– You can say that because you're more instinctive than me, Joanna said.

– I've had to be, Liz said.

She tossed her hair, lifting up her chin, which Joanna thought made her look condescending.

– I've never had anyone to fall back on.

Joanna said, – Once, in science, we were doing an experiment about force. You had to lock fingers with a partner and then push against each other. Afterwards, you had to say whose force you felt the most. All I'd felt was the other girl, the one I was partners with, and I thought she was going to say that all she'd felt was me. I was sure it was to do with balance and opposites. But, the other girl said she only felt her own force too. That's how I feel all the

time. All I can feel is other people leaning on me. It's like a physical weight. People lean on me all the time and I can't get away from it.

– Maybe it's not them leaning. It might be you wanting to be leant on.

– You think I'm playing the martyr?

– No.

Liz reached over, put her hand on Joanna's arm and rubbed slowly backwards and forwards. – I'm saying, you need to start pushing back.

Liz's take on what Joanna did for Suresh and the boys was that she did it more for herself than for them. She thought it was Joanna needing to be needed. With Liz, it was simple. Joanna's dilemmas could be split down the middle into an easy either-or—don't do it that way, do it the way I'd do it if I were you—whereas she made her own more complicated. Liz's dilemmas had to be scrutinized and talked over for hours, with Liz wanting to Joanna to endorse whatever she thought or felt. Joanna would never say to Liz that all the times they spent going over her relationships that they weren't going anywhere. She'd never say that if the idea was to find a man Liz could stick with, it was all pointless, because however much she said that was what she wanted, it wasn't. What she wanted was to be chased and flattered. The drama of it. But really, she couldn't have let a man into her life permanently. With most of the men she saw, she was bored after three months.

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The next evening, when they'd come back from walking, Liz went up to the house to find Jonathan. She wanted him to tell them a place they could go for a drink. Joanna went in the opposite direction, on a path along the hedgerow where there were blackberries. While she walked, she picked them and ate them. When she reached the end of the field, she crossed

through a kissing gate into the next one and saw Jonathan ahead of her. She walked with him, talking and eating. She told him where they'd walked. The caves they'd been in at Rydal and the climb up Loughrigg Fell.

They walked to the end of the path, which brought them to a fork where the main path wound to the left, towards a stile into the next field, and where a smaller path, more overgrown took them through a gap in the hedge and turned into the trees. Jonathan said he was going to the right.

– I'm going for a swim, he said.

– Here?

– There's a stream that comes off the main part of the river.

He pointed to the right of where they were standing.

– Come with me, he said.

– OK.

It was easy. Just like that she said it. Without even thinking. It was just a word. He was looking at her, not smiling exactly. A straightforward and level look, right at her, as if this were an ordinary thing. He looked relaxed. She was trying to match him with the same look, but her heart beat faster than normal. It was nothing. Nothing had happened. No rules had been broken.

– I'd like to see.

He said it wasn't far and he stood to the side so that she could go first, ducking through the gap in the hedge. The path was narrow, with the hedge on one side of them and tall grass on the other. Joanna went in front, with Jonathan close behind. The field ended and rows of tree started. She couldn't see which way to go, so she stopped and he came to stand next to her, letting his hand rest on the small of her back. The heaviness of it resting there made her throat tight so that when she swallowed she made an odd watery sound. She had to



force her muscles to make them work and it made her cough, embarrassed. He moved his hand away and stepped back.

– We're almost there, he said

The place they reached was shady, deep in a thicket of trees that reached towards each other from either side of a wide stream. The high branches criss-crossed and overlapped, making a canopy over the water. On either side, the banks were grassy. All around them smelled muskily wet, of grass and untouched earth. It had the feel of a grotto, the way the shards of sunlight slipped in through the trees. He'd brought her stooping and clambering through branches and tall undergrowth to get here. They'd come no more than a hundred metres from the path, but the place was closed off from the open fields all around. The ground sloped down to the bank. It was slippery, still dewy, and as they went together towards the water, taking small shuffling steps. He held onto her, his hand on her shoulder this time and showed her a tree that was growing at a slant across the water. The trunk leant out to the middle of the stream and a length of rope was tied around it, trailing into the water. He said that was how they'd get in and he stepped cautiously towards it. He said he'd go first, so she'd see how to do it.

– There's a current running that way, he said. – It's not a strong current, but you'll feel it pulling you. Stay close to me and I'll show you where to go.

She stepped forward to see where he was pointing and lost her balance. He caught her. One hand on her elbow, the other on her hip. It shocked her. A just lit match fizzing between her legs.

– The main thing, he said. – Dunk yourself in as fast as you can. The first ten seconds is excruciating cold. Then you start moving and it's amazing. You'll feel a strength in your whole body you didn't know you have.

He bent down to pull off his shoes and when he straightened, he pulled his shirt out of his jeans. His shirtsleeves were rolled back and forearms were suntanned. He looked relaxed, as if this were an ordinary thing. It was just what people did. It was fine. Nobody could say she'd done something she shouldn't have.

She moved to pull up her top. She meant to pull it over her head and then unhook her bra. A single, quick movement. But she stopped. She couldn't do it.

– Actually, she said. – I might've changed my mind.

He asked her if she was OK. If he'd done something he shouldn't have.

– No, she said. I'm sorry.

She was already moving back, away from the bank back to where the trees started and the field behind.

– I think I'll just go back.

– Are you sure you're OK?

– It's fine. Don't worry.

She was away from him. He was out of sight

When she got back, Liz wasn't at the clearing where their tent was, just their rucksacks and jackets lying where they'd dropped them on the ground next to the tent. She went forward, stooping underneath the tent's porch while she pulled up the zip. She crawled onto her sleeping bag and lay down on her front, her head turned in the direction of the path so that if Liz came back, she'd hear. She slid her hand inside her trousers and then her knickers, and she began going in small circles with her finger, rough and hurried strokes, while she worked out an image of herself and Jonathan in the water. The two of them standing up. Her chest close to his, the warmth of him against her and cold water all around. She pictured her legs wrapped around the tops of his. His hands on her hips, guiding her backwards and forwards. She tried to get the feel of it, their movements and the gentle

movement of the water crossways to their backwards and forwards. She moved her hips to get the feel of it, but it was hard to come. She switched to another image. The two of them on the grass at the side of the water. She put herself on top, looking down at his hands holding her breasts. Still, she couldn't get far enough. Something was holding her back and to finish she had to think of herself with Suresh, his mouth on her breasts. A dejected feeling when, at last, she managed to come, and that she was no good. What did it say about her that she could only come thinking of Suresh. For several minutes she lay still, until the sound came of footsteps on the path making her roll over onto her back and take back her hand, wiping her fingers dry on the front of her trousers.

## Hemu

The day Hemu arrived in London, he walked from Victoria Station to Piccadilly Circus. He had come by ship from Bombay to Genoa, then by train through Switzerland, Germany, France and finally he took the boat train from Calais. Now, he stood in the large square and looked at the electronic billboards all along one side: Gold Leaf, Cinzano, Wrigley's, Coca-Cola, Air India. He read each of the advertisements, committing to memory the names of the companies because this was his first sight of London and it would be something to tell his children. The massive Swiss clock advertising Guinness gave the time as ten thirty. He took off his watch and turned the hands backwards to London time. People were surfacing from the staircases and walking past him. He slid swift glances at them. The women were in coats that stopped above the knee, and the men wore smart overcoats tied with belts. A few were in hats. Serious looking people. He wondered where they were going; if they were on their way to work. Although it was late in the morning to be starting work. The men and women walked past looking straight in front of them. None of them turned a head in his direction. He was relieved because his suitcase was an old one. He buttoned his jacket and smoothed his hair. He had a map written on a sheet of office paper, with the tube station drawn as a circle in the corner. A pencil arrow was telling him to go up Shaftesbury Avenue, which was one of the roads going out of the square, and then right onto Neal Street. The directions were for The Punjab restaurant, where a colleague of his uncle knew the owner. If he went there, this colleague had said, they would give him a meal and help him find lodgings.

The cook who answered his knocking gave him two rotis with some *sag paneer* and agreed to look after his suitcase until he came back for his lunch. He checked his watch and turned back towards Piccadilly, changing direction beyond Charing Cross Road onto Dean Street. Dean Street was narrower with cars parked along the kerb. This time of day in Colaba

the streets were noisy with the shouting of men on push-bikes and motor-cycles calling to drivers as they tried to weave in and out of the cars. On Colaba Causeway, you could still see horse-drawn carts and their drivers who, in the midst of all the commotion, looked as if they had all the time in the world. Traders in doorways would be calling out, looking to do business. There it would have been the height of the morning's activity, but here it was calm and the feeling of having the streets to himself was unfamiliar. It made him anxious, standing there with time on his hands. People had told him that London was like nowhere he'd ever seen. – Imagine, his aunty had said. – The place where royalty lives. That's what you'll find when you get there.

He went on, taking note of the names of the places he passed. The Golden Lion pub, Casa Pepe, which had pictures of dancers in long dresses painted on its front. Further along was a fancy place where they sold shoes made by hand. Here he stopped again and looked at a pair of brogues that cost five pounds and seven shillings. Imagine if he could come back with money and buy that same pair. They would measure his feet and keep the measurements on a card with his name on in a box under the counter. He would keep on going back and asking them for the same again. They would know how to make the shoes how he liked them. They'd have all the information written down. An alleyway on his right brought him onto Frith Street and from there he came to the gardens in Soho Square. Inside, the gates the gardens were clipped lawns bordered by trees, neat paths, and every few feet there was a wooden bench. He sat down on one to smoke a cigarette. In the garden's centre circle was an ornate half-timbered building, which he thought must be an old chapel or some kind of a tollgate. But when he walked up to it, it was the gardener's hut and this made him think of home. In countless corners of Bombay you could find buildings that the British had thought up. So much time and trouble to put up something so grand-looking, which they would decide to keep as a tool shed.

Crossing different streets on his way back to the restaurant to the ones he'd walked down on before, the rich smell of coffee coming from a Turkish cafe, where made him hungry. He turned left to make his way back the The Punjab, finding himself on a street where every sign was neon and advertised a striptease club. Here there were adults' only cinemas showing films called *The Fruit is Ripe*, *Hungry for Love* and *Of a Thousand Delights*. He stopped to look at a poster outside one of the cinemas, which showed a woman wrapped in a sheet, bare shoulders and come-to-bed-eyes. And going past open doorways that led onto staircases going up God knows where, he slowed his pace to look inside at the postcards taped onto the walls. Written on the cards were the telephone numbers of photographers' models whom he was certain were actually ladies of the night. It would have been easy to take out his pen and write five different numbers on the palm of his hand. As he walked on, he went back and forward with this thought. Was it the girl herself who would answer the phone? What were you supposed to say to her? What would she say back? It was definitely something to bear in mind. He found his way back to The Punjab, feeling guiltily aroused.

The restaurant manager told him everything was good. They'd found him a place to stay.

– Come, the man said. – It's the fellow over there. He needs somebody to share his rent.

He showed Hemu to a table at the back of the room, where another man was already eating. This man stood up to shake Hemu's hand and gave his name as Vikram. He said he was a research student.

– My plans are in business, Hemu said.

– That I don't know.

Vikram said he was writing his thesis on the application of Wolff's law of bone remodelling in orthodontics.

– I guarantee you don't know that bone is actually a living tissue. How it works is like this.

He wiped his hands on his napkin and picked up his fork.

– If mechanical stress is placed on the bone, then over time the bone will remodel itself. It will become stronger so as to resist the load, no?

He showed Hemu that he was trying to bend the handle of the fork and that it would not yield.

– I'm looking at how the rate of bone remodelling changes over a person's lifetime.

A waiter brought Hemu's *dahl*, and when he passed out of earshot, Hemu leant forward and lowered his voice. – On my way here, one street I walked down had only striptease clubs.'

Vikram shook his head. – In those places all you'll get is get robbed.

– What about the cinemas?

– The cinemas are OK. I can take you.

– I wouldn't mind going, Hemu said.

The house Vikram took him to after they'd eaten was at the end of a stucco row close to Westbourne Grove. They were tall houses, with an iron balustrade running the length of the second floor, an ornate spiral of helices that years ago must have made the houses look elegant. Once they ago would have been impressive, but now their painted fronts were pock-marked with patches of exposed red brick where chunks of rendering were missing. Vikram opened the front door and took him into a narrow dark hallway. There were bare floorboards along the corridor, which smelled of cooking oil, and up the staircase. Going up the stairs, there was a strange smell that he couldn't place. – What you can smell is damp, Vikram said.

– It’s mildew. The whole house has it. Feel, he said, putting his hand against the wall. Hemu did the same. It was cold, as if no matter how warm it was outside, the brick would never get warm. – That’s solid brick. It drinks water like a sponge. He showed Hemu the gas meter, which needed to be fed with shillings. – You better pay your way, Vikram said. – Otherwise all hell will break loose.

Vikram’s was the back room on the first floor, with a large sash window that overlooked a row of identical windows in the houses behind. In the other first floor room lived a Gujarati student, Amit Thakkar, whose subject was electronics.

– Watch him, Vikram said. – That room is full of electrical circuit boards. He’ll have the whole bloody street up in flames before he’s finished. In the rooms above were two Bangladeshi engineers who were researching the optimum dimensions of suspension bridges and two more dentists who were at Vikram’s college. There were two more rooms on the ground floor and these were taken by two law students, which was handy Vikram said, because the landlord was a double-crossing bastard. After the first month, when Hemu spent cold nights wrapped tightly in thick blankets on a mattress under the sash window, one of the lawyers left to get married and Hemu took his room. It was warmer but it cost two pounds and five shillings per week, which he found expensive. But now he had his own space and he could store his stocks of teapots, milk jugs, and whatever else he was selling.

While the others were in their libraries writing up their research, Hemu was selling door to door. When he wasn’t on his rounds he went to Tottenham Court Road and looked at what they were selling in Heal’s, which in those days was ceramics in bright colours, black and white tablecloths, and wire toast racks. He sold to women who were keen on the cheap and cheerful homewares in his basket, and who were friendly, joking with him and sometimes even offering him tea. Not like the rich ones he’d seen first day in Soho, who drank their tea in cafes. Those people must have been living in the smart houses with notices



that said NO HAWKERS. The women who bought from him were looking for bargains. They were young wives with babies. Always there was washing hung up to dry and the rooms had the same musty smell as the student house where he lived. It surprised him that they opened their doors to him and invited him in. They asked him where he'd come from. Sometimes they offered him a biscuit with his tea. He started buying toy cars in boxes that were copies of Corgi cars, Fisher-Price fakes, robots and roller skates, also cheap pots of hand-cream.

– It's because they're feeling sorry for you. Vikram said. – They can feel better about themselves if they know there's somebody worse off than they are and who they're helping in a small way.

Selling to these housewives, Hemu learned that if something didn't sell fast, he would never shift it. It was better to take the hit and move on. Sometimes he gave away for nothing what he couldn't get them to buy. It meant that they were more likely to buy from him than from the other men who went around with their baskets of odds and ends. He bought his stocks from the warehouses near Tilbury docks, when he learned quickly that all the leverage was with the warehousemen. Acting tough got him nowhere. He was not the big man. They knew before he opened his mouth what he was. Instead he made friends with them. He worked out that if you showed you were willing to walk away, they would give a bit. He also learned to wait out the silences that fell in between the numbers, because speaking too soon only ever meant the price would go up. And he learned that the real money was in electronics. For that, he needed to be patient. He needed a bigger investment than the sums he was putting into the homewares.

The money for his first crate of TVs came from a loan he took from Amit Thakkar's uncle, who was a wholesaler of fruit and vegetables. The terms of the loan were that as well as paying interest on the money, Hemu had to work an early morning shift in the warehouse

until the loan was repaid. This meant that his hours for selling were less, but was a calculated risk. Many years later, when he could talk easily about asset turnover ratios and economies of scale, he liked to tell people that commercial awareness was something you either had or you didn't have. It could not be taught. He also like to say that UK manufacturing going down the toilet was the best thing that ever happened to him. – What you've got to remember, he told people, – was that in those days the English still had Empire mentality. They had too much over-confidence. Even if they could have seen it with their own eyes, they would never have believed that in Hong Kong they were opening factories five times as fast as they were closing down in UK.

When the boxes were too big and too many to store in his room, he found a warehouse for rent on East India Dock Road. Now he was selling directly to shops, mostly to places on Tottenham Court Road and he called himself an electronics wholesaler. Sometimes he told people he was an import-exporter. By 1972, he had saved thirty-six thousand pounds, which was enough to buy a house. He sent a telegram to his uncle in Bombay: BUSINESS GOING WELL – NEED WIFE.

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Hemu's first trip back to Bombay was to meet the girl his family had chosen for him to marry. From his seat on the plane, he watched the lights of the city as they came in to land. And when he stepped out onto the rusty staircase, it was the smell of the place that he noticed first. A clammy medicinal smell he wouldn't have said he'd missed until now. There were other men on the flight like him, dressed up in suits and carrying their attaché cases. He wondered what business they were in and who was making more money, them or him? In his briefcase were sales particulars of a house in Harrow that he planned to buy if it looked like

the marriage would go ahead, and the photographs he'd had developed the photographs taken from each corner of every room in the house. He was also carrying business cards and sheets of notepaper with the name of his company, which was Dascom Electronics Limited. Both the business cards and the notepaper carried the company logo, which he had designed himself by turning the letter D around ninety degrees and adding dashes so that it looked like an electrical socket.

Inside the terminal building, his uncle and aunty were craning to see him. His aunty, Devi, saw him first and she came forward to grab his hand, then his face. She pulled him forcefully into a tight embrace and the mixture of soap and cooking he smelled on her clothes and skin made him, all at once, tired and hungry.

Lalchand, his uncle, shook his hand. – London's suiting you, he said. You've started cutting your hair like a Britisher.

He'd started wearing his hair in a quiff. The suit he had on was light brown, with a single button jacket

– He's looking like a film star, Devi said. – Like a young Shammi Kapoor.

Lalchand had borrowed a car to drive Hemu back from the airport - a Fiat 1100.

– I would never buy my own car, he said while he struggled with the catch on the boot. – There's too much expense in running it.

– Lata wanted to come, Devi said, – But this time of day is too late for her. These days she gets tired very easily.

A scolding hidden in this. He could've said he didn't control the scheduling of flights from London, but he refused to take the bait. Lata was Hemu's mother. When Hemu's father died, she'd moved into Lalchand and Devi's apartment. Lalchand was her husband's older brother. It seemed to Hemu that Devi and his mother made each other worse, each of them taking turns at making bullets in the background for the other to fire.

They set off and Lalchand worked the pedals heavily, making the car lurch and then stall. He said that he was out of practice and that the roads had changed since the last time he had been out this way.

Hemu said, – Then let me drive.

– Out of the question. Lalchand said. – This car has been entrusted to me exclusively.

Hemu rolled down the window and lit a cigarette.

From the backseat Devi said, – For how many weeks are you staying?

– My flight's booked for Saturday night.

Devi reared up. She leant forwards, the weight of her pulling on his seat as she levered herself until her head stuck out above the front seat.

– How can you come so far and stay for so little?

He was expecting this. He couldn't be away any longer than Saturday, he said, because he had a crate arriving from Hong Kong the next day.

– What crate? Devi said.

– Electricals. TVs mostly. Some radios, alarm clocks.

He liked how that sounded. The sound of it was letting them know that his business wasn't a two-bit outfit. Nowadays he could afford to have more cash tied up in a crate than either one of them had ever held in their hands.

– Lata will be broken-hearted. You'll have to tell her yourself what your arrangements are. Don't expect me to get involved.

– I'll tell her when we get back to the apartment, Hemu said.

His mother suffered with arthritis and there were days it was too painful for her to make it down the steps in the block where they lived.

– Let him be, Lalchand said. – If he's saying he needs to oversee his business, then so be it.

Devi sat back heavily in her seat. – All I'm saying is I can't see the sense in it. And neither will Lata.

For a while they drove on in silence. When he first told them of his plans to move to London, Devi and his mother tried to dissuade him. They couldn't see what was there in London that he couldn't have found at home. They listed all the obstacles that would stand in the way of an Indian in a foreign city. That he would do better among his own kind and that he would find it too cold, and he would forget everything about his home. What were they supposed to do, they said, bearing in mind that it was next to impossible even to make a phone call home and that the next thing would be he'd be married to an English girl who would never allow them to visit or stand for him to come home. But the truth was that they didn't want to lose the wages he brought home.

Tell me the benefit, his mother said, in moving from a place where you know all the workings of things to a place where you'll have to do everything the hard way, completely by yourself.

– What has India ever done for me? he said to her.

She couldn't see and he couldn't explain it to her. He couldn't explain it to himself even, that the point was to start from the beginning and do everything on his own. In London a man with a head for business could set himself up for life. If he could do that, no one could ever tell him that he was in their debt.

In the front of the Fiat he shook his watch down his wrist to unfasten it and passed it behind.

– Look at that, he said – How much you think I paid?

Devi held it for a moment and then passed it back to him. – How would I know the price of a watch in London?

– Take a guess.

– I don't know.

– Two hundred and twenty pounds. This is an Omega Constellation. One of the most accurate watches it's possible to buy.

– So, you're a rich man now, she said. – Too busy buying watches to visit your own home.

They were driving past the university. He knew the girl was enrolled there. A college student would be a good choice. He wanted a girl who was independent, and who knew the ways of things. That way he could let her manage all of his book-keeping.

– You drive a car? Lalchand said.

– Volvo.

– Volvo's a good car.

– Most reliable car you can buy.

– In that case, you must be doing well.

Hemu lit another cigarette. They were getting close to home and although it was late, the road was busy. His uncle jerked the car through the traffic, braking late and hard so that more than once Hemu's foot struck the floor involuntarily. Before taking the flight, a scene he'd run through his mind was him showing his uncle the house he was buying and handing over his business card. But the feeling he had now wasn't the one he was expecting. A feeling he couldn't put his finger on. He was used now to being his own man and it was easy to forget how it worked differently here. How his uncle and aunty, his mothers, all of them, think that family is family. That there was one pot and however much was in it, it was as much theirs as it was his.

– Even I'm looking into bigger premises, Lalchand said.

Lalchand's shop was on a side street off the southern end of Colaba Causeway. His stock was mostly second-hand cameras and he had a workshop at the back where he did

repairs. He'd talked for a long time, even before Hemu left, about a bigger shop with a developing room. He said he'd hire himself out as a photographer at weddings and such like and then develop the pictures himself in the back of the shop. He'd employ a manager at the front for the simple everyday transactions. Weddings, he said, were the business to get into. With weddings you could name your price and people were happy to hand over their cash.

Devi said, – Which weddings you're going to take pictures of?

– The main problem you've got in that shop is the stock, Hemu said. – Camera is a big item. People buy the best model they can afford and then hold onto it for years.

– That's why they need repairs.

– There's no money in repairs.

He paused to flick ash out of the window.

– You should move into travel accessories. Suitcases and travel bags. Binoculars would be good. For cameras you should be stocking Polaroid. SLR is too old-fashioned.

From the back of the car, his aunty said, – You should listen to him.

– In my opinion, nobody wants to spend money on travel goods.

Hemu shook his head.

– Hundred thousand Indians coming to UK every year. Every two years they want a trip home. When they get here they want to buy a camera and go around like a tourist. And this is not even accounting for all the Indians going to America.

– I can't see you coming every two years, Devi said.

– For me, it's different.

– How is it different?

– My travels are for business. Hong Kong is where I do all my buying.

– You can't get a flight that stops here?

– No.

He could have flown via India, but his life was in London now.

Then, Lalchand said, – You're sure you can afford to get married?

– If I didn't have the cash, I wouldn't be here.

He flicked the butt of his cigarette out of the car window and lit another.

– Don't smoke so many cigarettes when you meet the girl's family, Lalchand said.

– They're a very well-to-do family, Devi said. – The father will want to know all what you're selling and for how much.

Lalchand banged his hand on the steering wheel. – All of that makes no difference. Our family can hold our own with anybody.

Devi leant forward again, her head appearing over the seat a second time.

– Apparently, the grandfather was very rich. He owned half the land in Sukkur District. They lived in a house with three verandahs and the silver had been used to serve Queen Victoria.

– What rubbish, Lalchand said loudly. – Queen Victoria never bloody came to India. It was the son who came, not the mother. Prince of Wales came in 1875.

– If it was the son and not the mother, so what?

She jabbed her finger into Lalchand's shoulder.

– What I'm telling you is about the silverware. Isn't it the same silverware no matter which person came? For all we know, they've still got it in their home.

– Don't be stupid, Lalchand said. And to Hemu he said, – Excuse my wife. She's very stupid. She believes every tall story that any idiot dreams up and tells her.

Hemu closed his eyes and let the stop and start of the car take his attention away from what they were saying amongst themselves. When he opened them they were driving along Colaba Causeway. Halfway down Strand Road, the line of cars stopped for a cow that



stood serenely in the road, not moving until the driver of a car in front herded it to the side. While they were not moving, groups of boys in dirty shirts and shorts, some bare-chested, came up to the car and asked him for cigarettes and money. He waved them away and then rolled up the window.

The first meeting he had with his wife was when he went for tea at the apartment where she lived with her mother and father. It was two blocks away from the apartment where his family lived, so they had gone there walking. He went with his mother and his aunty, the two women dressed up in the saris they kept for formal occasions, made from silk rather than cotton. In the morning he went out to be shaved, and when he got back he put on a white shirt and his new London suit. While they waited outside the apartment for the door to be opened, he took off his glasses and put them in his pocket, and he arranged his shirt cuffs, pulling them out of the end of his jacket sleeves so that when he shook hands with the girl's father, his new gold cuff links would show.

They were shown into a sitting room, where the girl was perched on a pink sofa in between her mother and another young woman, who it turned out was her cousin. The three of them sat close together, the girl in the centre. She was pretty. A soft shaped face, not hard or thin. When he came into the room, she looked up at him openly, with a half-smile. The father was standing up at the end of the sofa. Across from them, on the other side of the room was another sofa, which Hemu sat on, with his mother on one side and his aunty on the other. It was a small room, but classier than his uncle and aunt's apartment. The low table in between the two sofas was a sheet of glass on short gold legs and the four portraits on the wall—which Hemu guessed must be all four of the girl's grandparents—had matching gold frames.

In Lalchand and Devi's apartment, there was no sitting room and the kitchen table was an old blue Formica one that was permanently stained with many years' worth of spills

and the rings left behind by the hot pans from which they served themselves at mealtimes. He wanted a cigarette and a drink, but no drink was offered and he had to make do with tea, which the girl got up and poured for him. They were using a Wedgewood tea service and when he spooned sugar into his tea-cup, the weight of the spoon made him think Devi's story about the Prince of Wales might have been true. On the same patterned plates were *aloo tikkis* and *kachoris* and bright green *pista* sweets and the diamond-shaped *kaju barfis* that were his favourite.

The week before, he and Vikram talked about what to expect from the trip. Vikram's advice was to be careful. Of course, it was important to show that he was making good money, but if he could avoid it, he shouldn't let the father press him into giving actual figures. This was the tightrope you had to walk, Vikram said, showing you were financially stable and at the same time not giving the impression you were willing to bankroll the entire family. Now, Hemu thought he should have asked for some more practical tips, like knowing whether he should speak directly to the girl. He played safe and talked about the chimes of Big Ben and how you could tell if the Queen was in London, because when she was home they flew the Royal Standard from the roof of Buckingham Palace.

After the tea, the girl's father invited him to go into another room. It was smaller than the sitting room, with a large desk and the walls were filled with bookshelves. Hemu was carrying his briefcase, and he put it on the floor to take the whisky the girl's father poured for him. The whisky was a relief. They talked at first about the line of business Hemu was in and Hemu thought that he handled himself well. He passed over his business card and the other man looked at it for a long time, having first put on his glasses. That also seemed to be a good sign. When he opened one of the desk drawers to put the business card inside, Hemu tried to see what else there was inside, in case there were other business cards given by other men.

The next thing the girl's father did was to turn around and take a book from the shelves. – Do you know Shakespeare's sonnets? he said.

Hemu said that he knew some of them, which was not true. The girl's father opened the book, which looked old and was bound in dark blue cloth. He read out, – Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments. Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds.

He looked up at Hemu and took off his glasses. – You know what that means?

– The meaning I take from it, Hemu said, – that marriage is to be worked at. The more you work, the more it will repay you.

It was impossible to know whether this was the right answer or if it was off the mark completely because the girl's father closed the book, returned it to the shelf and took another from a shelf higher up.

– My imagination is a monastery and I am its monk, he read. He looked at Hemu again and said, – Know your own mind and be your own man.

Then he passed the book to Hemu. He was pointing to a place low down on the page. – Do you know the place? he said.

Next to his finger was written Hampstead Heath. – I know it, Hemu said. – I've been there. It's quite wild, but there are places you can climb and look out over the whole of London.

When they went back into the sitting room, the girl was talking to his mother about the courses she was taking at university. His aunty and the girl's mother were discussing whether biryani was better with the onions sprinkled over the top or layered inside with the rice and vegetables. Hemu could see the curve of the girl's forehead between the parting of her hair and the straight line of her nose, which suited him nicely. She kept her hands folded on her lap and her legs crossed at the ankles. She was small and neat. A little package that he

was sure, if they got to know each other, would surprise him in all kinds ways with how she could adapt to living in London

The next afternoon Hemu asked his mother to make the call to Lalwanis home to tell them he wanted to go ahead with the engagement. While she was speaking he stood behind her and listened in case there might be a problem on their side. The times he and Vikram talked about marriage they always assumed that the decision to go ahead would be his alone. Now Hemu worried that the girl or her parents would say no. There was no question in his own mind that London had made him into his own man. Since the day he arrived there, he had not worked a day in the employment of somebody else. Physically he had put on a little weight, which he counted as a positive because looking too thin was the same as looking hard up for cash. Plus, he had his share of experience with women. Still, there was no way of knowing what information had been passed on by his family to theirs.

When his mother replaced the receiver, she burst into tears, which was a relief because he knew immediately that the Lalwanis had agreed to the marriage. Two days later, he saw the girl again. In the afternoon, he took her for tea at the Leopold Cafe. He called the girl's father directly and said that that was the place he wanted to take her. The father was willing to agree, he said, provided they went and came home by taxi, took a table at the front of the café, not at the back or behind one of the pillars, and were gone for no more than two and a half hours. When he arrived to collect her, she came out with her mother. She was wearing Western clothes, a blue pleated skirt with a pink blouse, which made her look young, more like a schoolgirl than a woman engaged to be married. The time before, when they came to the apartment, she had worn a sari. That day it was pale green. The pink suited her and as the taxi pulled out into the traffic he told her so.

In the cafe, he asked for a table at the window and for tea to be brought with a plate of *tikkis*.

– You like *tikkis*?

It was all he could think of to say

– They're OK. I like yoghurt curry.

– The other day you didn't speak.

– I was too nervous. I couldn't think what to say.

– Are you nervous now?

– A little. But not so much as before.

– You don't have to be nervous, he said.

He'd brought gifts for her from London, which were a pair of sheepskin gloves, a bottle of perfume and a box of Brazil nut chocolates. The gloves were expensive, from a shop on Bond Street and the perfume he'd bought on impulse coming through the airport. The name was L'Air du Temps and the bottle caught his eye because of the stopper, which was shaped like a bird.

– They're sheepskin, he said when she opened the gloves. – Sheepskin are the warmest gloves. You'll need them straightaway, if you arrive in winter. In December and January, it gets very cold. The other months, it's not so bad.

She lifted them to her face. – I like the smell.

– They're not too big? I didn't know the right size.

She put them on, flexed her fingers and said they fitted nicely.

– In London it rains every day, she said.

– Not every day. But first thing we'll need to do is buy you a good coat.

She nodded.

– Open the next one, he said. – You like sweets?

She took off the gloves and wrapped them in their tissue paper. He pushed the plate of *tikkis* over to her side of the table. He said, – Take one.

– You take first.

– London will be different from here.

– I know that.

– You're sure you want to get married? he said. – You know what it means?

She nodded.

– And you're happy to go so far away?

– Everyone's saying that now is the right time.

There was something else he wanted to show her, he said. He got out the paper wallet that held pictures he'd taken of a house he'd chosen for them in Harrow. First, he showed her the front, with the balcony and the arched picture window behind. – It's only for decoration, he said. – But it makes the house look very pretty.

He pointed out the lawn, the driveway, which was big enough for two cars, and he told her that if she wanted, she could learn to drive. The pictures of the inside, which he showed her next, showed the master bedroom, which had built-in wardrobes and three more bedrooms, all of them with new fitted carpets. In the kitchen, there was a built-in breakfast bar, with four tall stools. He pointed those out to her, telling her that in London you could find very modern designs. He saved until last the picture of the largest room downstairs, where you could see into the back garden through the large French doors.

– What do you think?

– It looks big, she said. – The outside looks nice.

– I can pay for the whole house for outright. Only now it needs the furniture. That's for you to choose. The interior will be your area.

He put the pictures back into their wallet and gave it to her. – You keep these, he said.

– I can go and look whenever I want.

While they were drinking their tea, she said, – I'd like to enrol at the university.

– All that we'll take care of when you arrive. You can pick whichever program you like and we'll find out how to enrol you.

– I already know. I want to do psychology.

– There are lots of places in London you can go.

He meant it. He had in mind that once she was settled, she would take a typing course. And afterwards, he could set up a phone and telex at home and she'd keep busy with his paperwork. He'd bring home the bills of lading and delivery notes for her to double-check and file. She'd type up his invoices and whatever letters he needed. She'd be able to write them better than him. She'd get to know what he sold, his suppliers and his customers. They'd like her. She'd be a professional voice, friendly when she made the arrangements for shipping, and he'd be free to make the deals.

He asked for more tea and another plate of *tikkis*. – Bring yoghurt curry also, he said to the waiter.

She said, – What books do you like to read?

– Mostly I read the newspaper. Weekends I go for a film. In London, you can see any film you want.

This was true only when he'd had a girlfriend. He was friendly with some of the girls who worked in the offices at the docks. Sometimes he would ask one of them if she wanted to go for a film. He took them to the Coronet in Notting Hill. Or they went walking in Hyde Park. They went hand in hand around the Serpentine and sometimes they'd take out a boat. He'd roll up his shirtsleeves and take the boat up and down the lake. In the evenings, they'd

find a pub. He'd take a gin and tonic for the girl and a pint of bitter for himself. Some of them wanted to know what it was like in India and he told them it was full of crooks.

When he took her back to her parents' apartment, the servant boy showed him straight into the father's study. For a few minutes he answered questions about when he would go back to London, what month would be the best choice for the wedding, and the plans he was making for their living arrangements. The questions had the feel of an interview, and he answered them all without hesitating, looking the other man in the eye. No reason he should feel anything but this man's equal.

– Good, the father said, turning his back.

He took a book from a shelf behind the desk and held it out for Hemu to take. It was a hard-backed book, with a ship on the front, which had large white sails. The ship was sailing on a flat green sea and there was a silhouette of a bird flying above it. The title written on the front was *The Rime of The Ancient Mariner*.

– This is a book about men of the world, the girl's father said. – I was impressed with how you called and made your arrangements. It was a very bold stroke, and it tells me you're a fellow who knows his own mind. I think you're going to do very well.



## Joanna

Joanna and Suresh were standing close together, their jacket sleeves touching, and Joanna enjoyably light-headed from the champagne that was being offered by waiters in white jackets. She was looking at Suresh and thinking how well he could pull off a tuxedo. He looked better than the other men she could see. He looked comfortable, as if he was often at events like this, where you had to put on evening dress. The cut of the suit made him seem taller and slimmer than she knew he was. He looked handsome. They were gathered in the entrance hall to the Royal Courts of Justice, stone eagles and lions looking down on them sternly from high up on the walls. The law firm where Suresh worked was throwing a ball for its partners. They were celebrating a hundred years of being in business. Alan Fletcher was striding over to them, pointing at Suresh. Even Alan looked handsome. A tall broad man, whose face was flushed. His dress shirt fastened tightly, the studs looking to Joanna as if they might burst open. It gave him a commanding look, the strength implied by the shirt studs and the long strides he was taking towards them

– Jeremy Davies says you're in the book, Alan said loudly.

He'd greeted Joanna with a wet kiss, his cheek clammy against hers.

– I've got a quarter of a page, Suresh said.

The firm's Managing Partner had commissioned a book to mark the anniversary. Some of the partners had been interviewed or had their pictures taken or had written about their most memorable times with the firm. Suresh had been interviewed because he was one of a handful of partners who'd started at the firm as a trainee lawyer and had never worked anywhere else. To Joanna the book was a waste of time. She said if it had been her, she'd have said she wouldn't be in it

– I've got fuck all, Alan said.

Suresh put one of his hands in his pocket and lifted his glass, smiling at Alan over the rim.

– They only wanted to hear from people who know what they’re doing.

– Fuck off. Richard Davies has written up some shit deal in Delhi. He had to have at cheese sandwiches in the fax room at the Oberoi for his Christmas dinner and it ended up winning Finance Team of the Year. Vain twat. I’ve got fucking hundreds of stories.

– Is your bit about a deal? Isobel asked Suresh.

– It’s a daft story. When I was a trainee I got sent to Toulouse with a banker’s draft to buy a plane.

– What plane was it? Alan said.

– An A320.

– And what happened?

– Nothing. Just a couple of guys in the factory winding me up about it only having one wing.

– And?

– That was it.

– Sounds fucking lame, Alan said.

A waiter stopped next to them and Alan swapped his empty glass for a full one.

Joanna did the same. Earlier, when they were dressing, she’d told Suresh not to let her drink too much and he laughed. – As if, he said. Joanna always held out against going to these dinners.

– Do we know if it’s a proper fucking book? Alan said. – Can I order it on Amazon?

Can I buy it in Waterstones?

– They’ve spent a lot of money on it, Suresh said. – I think it’s quite slick.

– That’s what I hate about you, you’re so fucking smooth, Alan said to Suresh. –

Fucking poster boy.

Joanna smiled. It was true.

– Look at him, Alan said. – Next to him, I look like a fucking peasant. The only reason I’m here is because my other options fell through.

– What were your others option?

– Cricket.

– Seriously? Joanna said.

– I had trials with Middlesex and Sussex. But I knackered my knee, so I’m here.

– I never know when you’re making things up, she said.

– Look at this.

He handed her his glass, bent down and pulled up the leg of his trouser. He had a long flat calf muscle. There was a thick scar running underneath his kneecap.

– You could’ve got that anywhere.

– Middlesex vs Sussex, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1992. Seventh over. I went for the showstopper catch, fell, and shredded by ligaments.

The line of the scar was raised and for a moment she was tempted to lean forwards and run her finger along it. But Alan’s wife, Isobel, was there too and so Joanna waited for him to stand up and she gave him back his glass. Isobel was lean from working out. She was a runner. Long distance. Another time Joanna had met her, another dinner like this one, she listed all the races that were on her bucket list. She’d do them, Joanna was sure. The impression Joanna had of Isobel what that whatever she was doing, she would rather have been off running, somewhere by herself. Who could blame her? Alan was loud and relentless. The two of them didn’t match up. Alan was never short of something to say. He was the kind of man who’d shout anybody down. Although they all were, the men who did this job.

Mostly the partners were men, and between them there was a constant pushing and jostling of asserting themselves against each other that would have exhausted Joanna. Perhaps it exhausted Isobel just to watch. She was difficult to reach, as if her mind was elsewhere, and she was anxious about something she didn't want to admit to. All the time they'd been talking, she'd been holding the stem of her glass tightly, even though she smiled and laughed every time one of the others had. What must Alan have seen in her and liked? And what made her stay with him? Joanna couldn't imagine how they must be with each other when they were at home and there was nobody else around. Or maybe they weren't. Maybe they just stayed out of each other's way. Perhaps they were different when nobody else could see. There must have times when they were caring towards each other. At nights they must talk to each other in the dark, without measuring what they're saying. What must people see when they look at Suresh and me, Joanna thought. Do they look and think we don't fit?

– Alan's started boxing. Isobel said to Joanna. – It's all he talks about.

– I fucking love it, he said. – The drills, how it smells in the gym when you walk in, fucking rank. Nobody talks about what they do. It's like complete anonymity. Nobody gives a fuck.

– What do they talk about then? Suresh said.

– There isn't any talking. You go in, get changed, get your gloves on and hit stuff.

He raised his fists and showed them a combination of punches.

– What I want now is a proper fight. I've got the basic punches. Now I'm learning combinations. Stamina work. Three more months, I'll be ready.

– I'd have expected boxing to be a young man's sport, Suresh said.

Alan shook his head. – It's mostly guys my age. In fact, I think we should start up a partners' boxing club, Alan said. – Stress management, all that.

Joanna could imagine Alan as a younger man, completely sure of himself. She wondered if he ever let his guard down with Isobel? He must, at some point. Or maybe not. Maybe the bravado was what she liked.

A gong sounded and they were called along a corridor that led them into a large hall.

– An actual gong, she said to Suresh as they walked towards the table. – We’ve never had that before.

– It’s like *Downton Abbey*.

She held his hand.

– See you at the bar, Alan shouted from behind. – After the speeches.

Dinner was in the Great Hall, A long, stone-walled room, with a high vaulted ceiling, grander than where the drinks had been. The walls were lit with the firm’s signature royal blue, and the lighting gave the room a watery feel that was like being in a cavern deep underground. It was dark, but not so dark that you couldn’t see the large judicial portraits that hung sternly on both of the long walls. After dinner, the Managing Partner, a short hawkish man, gave a speech where he talked for a long time about his wife. How they’d been married for thirty-eight years and she’d had given him five children. Joanna hated that expression. Giving children to a man was like they were something you owed him. Something he was due. This sort of man had to show off how self-sacrificing he was. How the years and years of deals and clients and money hadn’t made him cynical. If anything, they’d softened him. Narcissist. Although she’d have to wait until they were in the cab to say it to Suresh. It was impossible to know if the people they were sitting with thought the same as her. She looked around. All of them looked as if they were paying attention, except that Suresh was on his phone. She was thirsty now, drowsy and heavy from the dinner. The wine had stopped making her lively and instead a bad temper was taking her. She reached for her water glass,

knocking over her wine glass. The thud of it on the tablecloth made Suresh look up and frown. He mouthed to her, asking if she was OK and she mouthed back, – Let's go.

When the speech finished he came to where she was sitting.

– I promised Alan we'd have a drink with them. Half an hour and then we'll go.

– Can we just go?

But Alan was there too, standing behind Suresh. He was undoing his bowtie, unbuttoning the collar of his shirt.

– Right, he said. – Let's have everyone on the dance floor, right fucking now.

At first, they danced in a four with Alan and Isobel. An Ace of Base song was playing and Joanna and Suresh danced close together, his hands on her waist and hers wrapped around his back to rest on his shoulders. They swayed side to side backwards and she leant against him, letting him decide which way they should move. Next to them, Alan and Isobel were nimble and energetic. Alan held onto her, with his hand on the small of her back and they bounced and body rolled against each other in the near dark. Joanna caught Alan's eye and he winked. When the song changed, Alan let go of Isobel's back and twirled her around so that she was facing Suresh. He took Joanna's hand and pulled her away from Suresh. He held onto her waist and stood her slightly away from him, leading her with his shoulders. He was shorter than Suresh, the same height as Joanna and he leaned into her, his mouth close to her ear to say, – I love the tattoo.

Before dinner it had been covered by her jacket sleeve, but now her arms were bare.

– Keep still minute, Alan said. – So I can see.

They'd reached the edge of the dancefloor, near the stone arch they'd come through from the hall where dinner had been. Alan took Joanna's arm and pulled it straight. She liked how the tattoo looked, solid and dark on her arm. Conspicuous. She liked how it surprised her to catch a glimpse of it and for the briefest moment wonder what the mark was on her skin.

People commented when they saw it. And she liked that too, enjoying the reactions of people who were shocked more than the people who bent closer to look and then said how stunning it was. What had made want her a tattoo, people asked. And she said she wasn't sure exactly, which was true. The design covered her whole forearm, the black silhouettes of two trees. On the outside was an oak and on the inside the longer narrower shape of a beech tree. Their roots made a thick bracelet woven around her wrist.

– How pissed off was Suresh?

– He wasn't.

– I don't believe you.

– If Isobel came home with one, I'd go fucking mad.

Leaning in to speak to her, he pressed his hands more firmly around her hips, steadying himself against her. The heat of them seeped through her dress to her skin. His shirt was damp and so was his hair, brushing against the side of her face while he was speaking.

He said, – It must've hurt.

– A bit, she said. – At the start and the end.

– It looks good, he said. – Is it like a king and queen thing. You and Suresh?

– Maybe. I don't know.

He was right. They were a king and queen. He turned her arm so that the inside was facing up. The tree on the inside of her arm was a silver birch, its shape was narrower. He ran his thumb from the top of the tree down to her wrist and she thought he was going to lean forward and kiss her somewhere along the line of the tree, but he let go and then put his hand on her back.

– If I was getting one, I'd get the full chest, he said, – A wolf or a tiger, all fangs and big staring eyes and a banner underneath saying 'WEAKNESS IS A CHOICE.'

More people were dancing. It was hot and the air smelled of perfume. He turned her again and sidestepped her towards one of the lights that were all around the dancefloor. Suresh and Isobel had gone to stand at the bar. The song changed and Alan stepped back from her, dancing as if he was by himself. He stuck one arm in the air and put his hand on his hip, then jolted from side to side. All the time he was smiling at her. His enjoyment of the music was making her warm to him. He sashayed towards her.

– The thing about me is that I’m a bastard but I’m a fucking happy drunk.

– I am too, she said.

He said that he could tell.

He stopped dancing and leaned over to her.

– Most of these guys have lost it, he said. They act like they don’t give a fuck. And they really don’t give a fuck.

He leaned in further, shouting over the music, straight into her ear. – I’m not like that. I’m a stupid cock. But stuff still matters to me.

The song changed again. It was Rent by the Pet Shop Boys and Alan shouted out – I love this one. He started dancing again, more energetically, swinging his arms and then holding them out towards her while he sang.

– I’ve got my second-wind, he shouted.

She had too. The surprise was that this felt good. This was Alan clowning around to entertain her. Now he stood up tall, flung his arms above his head and spun on the spot. He could do all this, make light of it because it was true. He hadn’t been spoiled by all of this. He swayed over to her, took her hand and held it high, his other hand on her waist and he spun her around.

– Sing with me.



They sang together and he rock and roll danced with her, kicking his legs out in front of him and calling for her to do the same. The movement and the heat of the room was making her dizzy and she fell against him, resting her head on his shoulder.

–Keep singing, he said.

And he spun her again so that he was behind her and she leant against him. Suresh was watching her from the bar and she beckoned to him to come over. As he came close, she pushed away from Alan and went to meet him. The song chorus was playing and she pressed her hands on each side of Suresh's face, shouting at him with the music, – I love you, you pay my rent. She shouted it into his face and then she tried to kiss him, but he was pushing her away. He was moving past her. He went straight to Alan, grabbing him by his shirt fronts and shoving him backwards, sending him off balance. As Alan staggered backwards, Suresh went with him, got close to him and punched him. Alan staggered several more steps, but he kept his feet, bent almost double, and without straightening up he came back at Suresh, charging him and grabbing him around the waist in a rugby tackle. People around them stopped dancing and a woman shrieked. Now they were both on the floor, Alan kneeling over Suresh, but Suresh pushed him back and turned him over, onto his back. He knelt over him and pulled him up by the shirt. Alan's hands were around Suresh's neck, choking him, then they were dealing him blows on the sides of his head, while Suresh punched again, and even in the dark Joanna could see that Alan's mouth was bleeding and so was his nose. More people were around them. They were pulling Suresh off Alan and pulling Alan off the floor, and calling Joanna over to take him out.

In the ladies' bathroom, where she took him to wash the blood off his face and shirt, he leant over the sink and turned on the tap. She was standing behind him. He splashed water on his face and wet his hair. He leaned over the sink, his head hanging low and looked at her in the mirror.

– I don't know why I did that, he said.

She ran her hand up the back of his shirt and let it rest on his shoulder.

– I kind of liked it, she said.

Behind them, a toilet flushed, then. Straight away, another. Two women came out of the cubicles, over to the sinks. They were older than Suresh and Joanna. Two of the older pearl-wearing-stand-by-your-man types. They made Joanna think of the teacher at her school who bowled sticks of chalk overarm if she saw them whispering—and Margaret Thatcher—and lying on her bed with the UCCA guide, deciding where to go that would be completely different and where people wouldn't assume that because her marks were good that she wanted to be like them.

– Hello, the two women said. – Hello. Is everything alright?

– He's been fighting, Joanna said.

It was the wives like these two, who were much older than Joanna who made her nervous. Not nervous exactly. They made her feel flighty, like she didn't measure up. They had pearls and swept up hair set rock hard. Whatever they had on underneath their glittery tops and Chanel jackets, they wore it stiffly like armour. It gave them a hard and unyielding posture, like they were waiting for you to do something wrong. They acted like they were the firm's ambassadors, safeguarding it and their husbands' positions in it. Every time one of them asked her a question, she was sure her answer wasn't the right one. She felt like they were testing her and that she was failing.

– I wouldn't worry, one of them said. – They all do it.

The other one said, – Whatever it was, it'll have blown over in the morning.

They turned away to dry their hands. She'd wanted them to be shocked. They went on talking to each other. Simon's arriving on the twenty-third. They're here for ten days. And Francis is coming on the twenty-fourth. He's bringing a lady-friend this year.

Merry Christmas, one of them called as they went out.

When they'd gone Suresh said, – Imagine Christmas Day at theirs.

– I bet they wear black tie.

– Sherry at eleven. Lunch at three.

– You're supposed to have lunch before the Queen's speech.

– Are you?

– Obviously. Because then you can do a toast at the end.

– Scrabble at four, then presents.

– Sandwiches and mince pies at seven.

– The old boy with a hand up her skirt, quick fumble under her apron while she's scrubbing the pots.

He reached under Joanna's dress and squeezed her thigh.

– Her or the help?

– Her. They let the help off. He'll do the help on boxing day.

Suresh sat down on the floor tiles, his back against the row of sinks. She sat next to him. He moved his hand and left it resting, palm up on top of the skirt of her dress. She put her hand on top.

He said, – Sometimes I hate this fucking job.

– So, leave, she said. – Do something else.

He snorted and shook his head.

She said that she meant it and he said what else was there that he could do.

– You could do loads of things.

– There's no money in loads of things.

– I don't care, she said. She meant it.

– I do.

– Why?

She took her hand away from his and folded her arms. – Don't you ever think about drawing a line and saying I'm finished with this.

He said, – Not really.

– I think about it all the time.

He said that you get to a certain point in your life and it wasn't possible to start from scratch and she said that people do it all the time. He said that was people who think they'll grow their own vegetable and have no Wi-Fi. He said that they probably love it for two weeks and after that the only thing keeping them going is they don't want to lose face. Who wants to live like that? he said.

She said, – I feel like there's nothing we've got where we can pull together.

– What do you mean? We've got loads of things.

– Like what?

– Everything.

– No, she said. She pulled her knees up underneath her chin – I don't know how to say it.

– Are you saying I don't pull my weight?

– No, she said. – It's more that you do your thing and I do mine. I feel like there's nowhere we overlap.

She thought of herself on a day she was going to a university interview. She was standing in her nightshirt in the kitchen while her mother pressed her skirt. The skirt was a navy-blue pencil skirt, and hanging on the back of her bedroom door was a new blazer. When Joanna put the blazer on, it made her feel like she already had her degree and that she was in

charge of a whole department of people somewhere. She was holding onto her shirt, still warm from the iron. – Don't stand there creasing it up, her mother was saying.

– I could never stay at home, she said. – I could never not have my own career.

What had her mother said back? Maybe she hadn't said anything. She could only remember the hiss of the iron on the pressing cloth, steam coming up from the board. The way she saw it was that it was an unnecessary sacrifice that her mother had made. She wanted the rest of them—Joanna, her father and her brother—to be grateful. But Joanna wasn't grateful. Why should she be? People did what they wanted. They made their own choices, and why did they think that they were owed anything in return. Everyone—all of her teachers—were telling her all the time how many choices she had. They were saying that whatever she wanted to do, all she had to do was to get down to work, to put the time in and apply herself. And what reason did she have not to believe them?

Suresh asked her what she thought they should do.

– I don't know, she said. – Sometimes, I just want to try something different.

He smiled at her. – Should've married someone with a more exciting job.

– Like what?

– You could've married a shark tank cleaner, he said. – Or a bounty hunter.

– The boys would've liked that.

– But we'd have to move somewhere like Minnesota.

– Is that where people go when they're fugitives?

– Probably, he said.

He stood up and held out his hand to her. She took it and he pulled her to her feet. He said they should go home and she followed him out to look for a cab.

## Hemu

Hemu woke to a noise. It was a thumping noise, like a dull hammering. He lay in the dark, his head turned towards the sound. The evening before, he had sat up late drinking whisky with his son. He recalled coming to bed, climbing the stairs unsteadily, his son's hand on his shoulder, and then sitting on his bed scrolling through the headlines on his iPad. Pictures of storm damage on the south coast. Thousands of people with no electricity. He remembered that. He must've changed out of his trousers and shirt because, now, when he put his hand up to his chest he touched hair and the open neck of his kurta.

The noise coming from behind the wall next to his bed went on. Unmistakably it was the rhythm of sex. His son going at it like a madman. It had to be. A burst of him going all out, then a pause and then he was at it again, as hard as before. Impossible for anyone to go non-stop like that. It was complete brute force, and the need his son had to go at it like that was an embarrassment. It was like how a blackbird takes a worm in its beak and pounds it against a stone until the worm gives up and dies or lies still long enough to be swallowed. This was the same rhythm.

Hemu knew this feeling, when all you wanted was to ejaculate and the harder you went at it, the more you put it out of reach. But those times, and he was sure of this, he was by himself. It wasn't even that his wife wouldn't have stood for it; he wouldn't have asked her to. Suresh kept on for a long time and there was no choice but to hear. Each time there was a pause, Hemu waited in case he'd given up. Sometimes you could go so hard and fast that you lost the enjoyment of it. And then it was better to let it go. But Suresh went on. In the end sound of his climax came. It was a groaning sound he made, like it was paining him. All of that effort he'd just made, and for what?

For a minute there was quiet. Hemu pulled himself onto his elbows and was about to reach for the lamp switch when Joanna started. She was gasping and sighing for all the world to hear. Taking her time over it. And anyone would've thought she was doing it on purpose: that she wanted her performance to be heard. It's what a woman does if she's flaunting herself. If she wants you to see her pleasuring herself. The sound was too much. It was turning him on, like a woman from a porno film. Nothing to do but pull the pillow over his face because what man wouldn't be turned on listening to all that. She climaxed with a last long sigh, like she was making it go on for as long as she could. When he was sure she'd finished, he sat up turned on the lamp. He put on his glasses and reached for his watch. The time was twenty-past five.

If his wife were here now, he'd be out of bed, threatening to march right into their room and ask did it bother them to know that the whole bloody house could hear them rutting like animals. And that even animals don't do it for all to hear in the middle of the night. It would've been his wife holding him back, telling him not to be an idiot.

– Let them be, she'd have said. – What concern is it of ours?

If his wife were here, he could've got it all off his chest. He could've acted more like himself.

He was in the spare bedroom at his son's house. It was a small room. The bed was a double bed, narrower than his own bed and it filled the space. Wedged in a corner, there was a chair where he'd put his overnight bag. A strange thing to be packing a bag to go and sleep a few miles away from his own house. But they'd asked him to come and stay, so here he was. Actually, it was his grandsons who insisted he came.

– Ma used to come and stay for Diwali, Rohan said. – So, now you have to do it.

It struck him how easily a child could put something into words that he couldn't have found the words for himself. It was this attitude people had towards him now, that there was

some slack for him to take up. All the different things his wife used to do, they expected him to take over. If you'd have asked him before what it would be like to lose his wife, he would have said what else was there but go on the same as before. He would have said how could losing a wife make you different in yourself. If it had been up to him, that's what he'd have done. He would've continued the same as before. But everywhere now, there were people making his choices for him. Now, the expectation was that he would come to his son. Before, it was his son who came to him.

Somebody had left books on the bedside table and he picked them up. The titles were *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* and *Money*. He wasn't a book-reading man, but he picked up the book called *Money*. He opened it and looked at the first page. The cover of the other book was blue, with the silhouette of somebody's legs. It was a man jumping into water in his trousers and boots. On the front cover it said the book was sad and beautiful. It was also a fiction book. Both of the books looked new. Joanna must've bought them. It would be like Joanna to buy them and leave them for him, thinking he might read them if he couldn't sleep. The *Money* book he could understand her thinking it would be his cup of tea, but the other one was a strange choice. What could've made her think he would pick up a book about a person drowning

On the wall at the foot of the bed were two painted canvases. At first he'd thought that they were the same painting done twice. Both of them were a pattern of curved white and grey lines. But when he studied them, the forms on each one were different. Still, it wasn't possible to say what they were meant to be pictures of. It might be you were supposed to look and decide for yourself what they were. He looked again from one to the other, but nothing stood out. There were paintings all over the walls of this house. It wasn't something he'd ever thought of, buying pictures to put up in the house. But his son and daughter-in-law seemed to like it. They went to art fairs and chose whatever they liked. If his son and daughter-in-law



had bought them, he guessed they were expensive, although he wouldn't have been able to say how much they cost. In his house, one painting hung in the dining room and that one was his wife's choice. She bought it because somebody that somebody else knew had come from India with paintings of horses and he was going around all of their houses selling them the pictures. He turned up one Saturday afternoon in a rented car, and carried the pictures inside. He put them out all around the room, side by side.

His wife wanted him to choose between this one or that one, but the paintings were too samey. He couldn't have said whether one was better or worse than another, only that some were big and some were smaller. His wife chose one of the bigger ones and he'd had to go backwards and forwards with the fellow until they could agree on a price. The price was too much because it was obvious from the start that his wife was hell-bent on buying, and even then the bastard insisted on cash. From time to time, it happened with his wife and her friends that one person knew somebody else, who knew another person and that person would go around all the different houses and sell whatever it was that they had. They were very faddy his wife and her friends. That year, each of them bought a painting. Other times it would have been chairs for the garden or cast-iron pots for cooking. One time, some idiot from Bombay went around all of their houses with two wooden sticks, saying he could rebalance the energy in each room.

Two weeks after the funeral, they'd scattered his wife's ashes near Windsor. His daughter found the place, which they reached by boat from a jetty in front of the castle. The boat man took them upstream from the town to a place where a separate channel forked off the main river trunk. This channel, which was sheltered and without any passing traffic from other boats, was the place officially set aside for the scattering of ashes. His daughter had arranged for a cage of doves to be put on the boat. The idea was that they would all take a small piece of paper and write a message to his wife, and the boat man would roll each one

into a scroll to be tied onto the birds' legs. After that, all the birds would be released, all at the same time. When the boat set off, his daughter gave out the papers for them to write on. Hemu looked over Adam's shoulder while he wrote. *To Ma – You are the best grandma.* Underneath the words he drew a picture of a cup, with long curls that were supposed to be steam. – That's because Ma drank lots of tea, Adam said. It was a nice thing to write, but there was nothing so simple that he could write. They were not a couple who exchanged written notes. No birthday or anniversary cards. Whatever they had to say to each other, they'd already said it. He turned away from the others to write his message. He put, *I wish you were still here.* Then, he rolled the scroll quickly so that nobody would see. He felt uncomfortable having to write something down. Something about it made him feel exposed. While the birds were being released they played the *shree Krishna Kanhaiya aarti*, which had been his wife's favourite.

Afterwards, they walked back into the town along the path that followed the riverbank. In town, they went for ice creams. Actually, it was a nice thing to do. It lightened the day. In the café, he took one scoop of rum and raisin and one of chocolate. And while they ate, he made the boys laugh telling them stories about his boyhood, about the trouble he got into for smashing windows with his cricket ball and the time he fell off his bike on a track where a cart had just passed and the spot where he fell was a pile of fresh manure. This was how Suresh and Mala wanted the ashes to be done. They'd told him that during school holidays Laxmi would drive them out to the castle for picnics. A whole group of them would go, they said. His wife's friends and their children. She put lamb *kababs* in hot dog rolls and made them ham sandwiches. They took cans of Sprite and Kit-Kats. There was a place they always went in Windsor Park, where they would eat the picnic, and then all of them would walk along the footpath into the town and buy Ninety-nines.

Hemu was sure that his wife's habit of walking was a more recent thing, but his children said no. They said that she'd always taken them for walks. She'd done it from when they were very little. It was surprising all the things you don't remember, or all the things you never think to find out. What was troubling him was that when he could've told them she wanted her ashes taken to India, he let it go. Early on, he could've closed it down, saying that she had left her own express wishes. But he didn't. His grandsons were keen on the doves, and the truth was that he didn't want to take the idea away from them. He reasoned it to himself that it was what his wife herself would've done if she'd been there to decide. But afterwards it was more complicated. He couldn't have explained why it was troubling, or why he couldn't just have said, – We should do the thing she wanted. As far as he could reason it, everyone had something invested in what should be done with his wife's remains. For each of them, there was some part of his wife's life that they wanted set in stone and there was no simple way of knowing which one carried the most value. Every other time, when it'd been a choice between this investment or than, his gut had told him which way to go. This time there was no way of knowing whose wishes were more pressing.

His wife was convinced that the first place you go to when you die is a kind of waiting room. In this room, you meet your spirit guides, who are mostly relatives that have died before you, or other people who have played a significant role in your life and they remember you even after they've gone. The name of this place, his wife said, was God's waiting room, because when you were in it, you sat down with your guides and they helped you take stock of everything you'd done and said in the life you had just left. Only then could you go and say to God honestly that you were ready to come back to the world and live better than you'd lived the times before. Of course, it was all bullshit. – I'll tell you what God's waiting room is, he said to her. – It's old people's homes. It's where your children put you

when you've lost all your marbles and they can't face cleaning up after you when you're shitting all over the place.

But a couple of times, in the mornings when he was awake early, when it was already daylight and it was too early to start work (these days his sleep hardly ever lasted all through the night), he sat up in bed and Googled reincarnation. One of those times, he read about the family of a boy who were certain that he was his paternal grandfather returned to life.

Another boy had a story about flying planes in World War II. This boy would wake up in the middle of the night shouting that his aircraft was on fire. Aged two, this boy could reel off a string of details about planes that he shouldn't have known anything about. He gave the names of the men he flew with and their ship. And when the parents investigated, all the details matched a plane that the Japanese shot down in 1945. He wanted to think that they were all fantastical stories, made up for people who actually wanted to be fooled. But the truth was, there was comfort in these stories, even for him. How was it better to go on thinking the other way, that you were here for only the blink of an eye and that when you went, it was just like someone switched off the light. The truth was that he preferred to think of his wife sitting in one of those waiting rooms, with people all around her. He didn't want to think that now she was nothing, just grey powder floating out to sea.

In the room next door, where his son and daughter-in-law were, it was still quiet. He smoothed his hair where it was ruffled from lying down and took his iPad from the bedside table. First, he checked the FTSE and the latest exchange rates, then he skimmed the FT homepage. He felt better. He was following the floatation of Foxtons to see if he'd be proved right that the shares were overpriced. These types of flotations were for amateurs, people who thought you could get rich overnight. So far (it had been a few weeks) the share price was still going up, but it was early days. Soon it would tumble, he was sure of it. He clicked on an article on tax avoidance and another about investing in the South Korean won. The article

said it was a good time to buy because manufacturing in South Korea was set to outperform Japan hands down over the next ten years. He made a note of this and of something called a Scentee, which a student in Japan had invented. The device he'd invented was a cartridge filled with scent that you plugged into the headphone socket of your phone. A packet of cartridges cost twelve pounds and you could sync them to your alarm so that you woke up smelling bacon or coffee. In his time, he'd bought all his stock from Hong Kong. Now it was Japan, China, South Korea. The Scentee was interesting. If he were still in that line of work, it was the kind of thing he'd have picked to sell well.

While he was reading, the door handle moved downwards and the door opened slowly. Rohan came in.

– Are you playing solitaire? he said.

– Do you want to play?

– Can we play the bubble popping game?

Rohan climbed into the bed and sat close to him. They both were concentrating on the screen. They played games and they talked about Rohan's school. Did he like his teacher?

– No, Rohan said.

– Why not?

– She's mean. And when she talks to you, her spit goes in your face.

– Apart from that..., Hemu said. It was a nice feeling, the weight of Rohan's head leaning on his shoulder. – School must be good.

– It's OK.

– You should be enjoying school. If you enjoy it, it'll make you very clever.

Rohan said that he was tired and he lay down. Hemu went back to reading the newspaper. The sleepy sound of the boy's breathing made him feel tired too, and he lay down. Now, there were sounds of talking coming from Suresh and Joanna's room.

The time on his watch was 7.15. Rohan had got out of the bed. The door of his bedroom had been left open. Footsteps were running down the landing and the two boys were shouting to each other. When they raised their voices, he couldn't tell if they were friends or enemies. Downstairs, Adam said that he wanted to make the pancakes and Joanna told him to go ahead. She told Rohan to lay the table. When Suresh came downstairs, he was already showered. His hair was wet and he had on loose trousers and a shirt. He nodded at Hemu and said, – Morning.

Impossible to know what was going through his mind.

Adam lifted a frying pan onto the hob and turned on the flame. – You can manage the hot pan? Hemu said to him.

– You don't need to watch me, Dada. I've done this thousands of times. I make the breakfast on school days, he said. – Mum pays me.

– You make pancakes before you go to school?

It wouldn't have been a surprise. With Joanna, every meal was a state dinner.

– No. Before school I do French toast and boiled eggs.

– How much you charge for toast?

– One pound for cooking. One pound fifty if I don't leave a mess.

– Next time, I'll teach you Indian toast. For that you can charge more.

– How much?

– At least three pounds. Indian cooking is very labour-intensive. You have to prepare the onions and the chillies.

He looked into the pan. The pancake Adam was frying had puffed up and the sight of it made him hungry.

– Let’s have you too, Hemu, Joanna said. She never called him Dad. – There are jobs for everyone.

She came over to where he was standing, close enough for him to be embarrassed again from the hullabaloo in the night.

– You can squeeze the oranges, she said. – Stand here and you can enjoy the view while you’re doing it.

She nudged his arm with her elbow. – Poor you. All this domesticity.

– I don’t mind, he said. – Only thing missing in this kitchen is a TV.

– Not in the kitchen, Joanna said.

– You should watch the news while you’re cooking, he said. – BBC and CNN are the best stations.

– Sometimes I listen to the radio, but mostly I’d rather read the paper.

He shook his head.

– You should do both. Newspaper and radio isn’t the same as actual video footage.

From where Joanna stood, she was next to him with her hands on her hips, the curve of her breast through her T-shirt caught his eye and made him uncomfortable. Printed across the front of her shirt was OKAY in large black letters. He turned to the juicer, which was an old-fashioned press made of glass, something unwelcome and sexual about the fit of his hand around the fruit.

He asked the boys if they wanted to learn how to make *masala* tea. At the stove, he told them that snapping the cinnamon bark in half before adding it to the milk pan gave the tea more flavour and he showed them how to crush the cardamom pods under the flat of the knife. Adam was tall enough to stand on the floor to press the flat of his knife onto the pods, but Rohan need to stand on a chair to see into the pan. Hemu took one from the table, placed it for him and lifted him onto it.

While they took turns spooning in the sugar, Rohan said, – How old were you when you could have tea?

– In my family, everybody drank tea from when they were very little.

– Were you allowed to drink coffee? Adam said.

He said that he only started to drink coffee when he came to London.

– Were you allowed to drink wine?

– In my time, Indians didn't drink wine.

He put his hand on top of Rohan's to steady it while he lifted more sugar from the pot into the pan. – We drank only tea or lemonade or milk. But Indian milk is very thin. There it comes from buffalos. The milk here is much nicer. It comes from cows.

– Why? said Adam.

– Because over there they don't grow enough grass for the cows to eat. When your Ma first came here, she couldn't stop drinking the milk.

At the table, Hemu sat in between the boys, Joanna and Suresh opposite. Suresh put his hand on top of Joanna's. Suresh dogs, two large Labradors, were further away, lying next to the door. On the table were Adam's pancakes and next to them a plate of bacon. There was fruit salad, a cheese plate with crackers, ham, toast and a jug of the orange juice they had squeezed. Joanna had put out syrup, jam, marmalade, and butter. There were yoghurts and muesli. Food was how Joanna made them all revolve around her.

Suresh was already talking. He was telling them about some rowing race. Something that happened at the Olympics. Out of the two teams that were in the final, one was the clear favourite. And right up until they were almost at the finish line, anyone would have sworn that they were going to win. Only right at the last minute, the other team overtook them. Because of that, there was a fuss. Everybody was saying it was physically impossible to make up so much lost ground so quickly at the end of a race, so they must have been on drugs.



What you had to understand, Suresh said, was the extreme physical exertion involved in competitive rowing. You had to bear in mind how these rowers pushed their heart rates to the limit where they were doing themselves damage. Coming up to the finish, their muscles would have been cramping and burning and that the pain would have been enough to make most people throw up or even pass out.

Something he's noticed about Suresh is that nowadays he likes to talk. He likes holding court. He takes his time, all the limelight on him. What happened next, with the rowers, Suresh was saying, was that there was a big investigation and what they found was that it was nothing to do with drugs. They found that with two hundred metres to go, the cox in the winning boat stopped shouting whatever he normally shouted and started calling the names of the rowers' children. That was the plan.

– Just that, Suresh said. – Each man had brought his kids to the training camp and showed them the boat. Which seat in the boat was his, how the seats slid backwards and forwards, the heaviness of the oars. This kind of thing. He pointed at Adam with his knife and gestured to him to pass the butter.

– And while they were doing all that, they were supposed to be picturing themselves on the podium wearing the gold medal. It's a special technique. It's called a future memory. It's like computer programming. You programme your brain so that when it hears the trigger word, it knows to override the burning feeling in your muscles, like you're in agony and you're about to have a heart attack, and you remember to keep breathing. So, you ignore all of that pain and you keep going. You push that bit harder. That's the difference.

– So what? Joanna said.

Joanna said. – It sounds like something made up, out of a self-help book.

She took the plate of pancakes, put one on Rohan's plate and one onto hers.

– It's a true story, Suresh said. – Look it up.

– What proportion of Olympic rowers do you think have children?

– I don't know.

– I can't imagine it's very many.

She was scanning the food on the table, as if she was choosing what to have next.

– And surely it only works if you're hearing your own child's name. How many are in the boat?

– Eight, Suresh said.

– So most of the time, you're not even hearing your own child's name. You're hearing someone else's.

Suresh picked up his coffee cup. – Everyone who heard this guy speak thought it was interesting,

– I think it's stupid, Joanna said.

He was annoyed. Hemu could see. And Joanna was letting him stew. She was pouring syrup on her pancake. She wiped a drip from the lip of the bottle and licked it off her finger. The she passed the bottle to Rohan. – Don't go crazy with it, she said.

He liked it about her, that she could take his son on and get the better of him. She could do it easily. In her own way, his wife had known how to stand her ground too. She had been very stubborn. He didn't mind. The last few years, he and his wife had stopped arguing. The house was big and money was no object. They had made all the compromises they would ever make and what sense was there in keeping on with the same disagreements. The funny thing about Joanna was—the thing he couldn't work out—was that if she could knock Suresh down without blinking an eye, then how could she let him go at her like he'd done in the night.

Next to him at the table Adam was eating a strawberry. Rohan said, – Can we do the painting straight after breakfast?

He meant the *rangoli*. The day before, Hemu had gone through the sideboard, looking for the boxes his wife kept for Diwali. Inside one were her tissue wrapped figures of Laxmi and Krishna, small silver statues that were part of the wedding trousseau her parents had given her. In another were clay *diyas*, small bags of bright coloured powders and stencils to make the designs.

– Dada, do you even know how to do the *rangoli*?

– I know the general idea of it, Hemu said, – You’ll have to show me exactly how it’s done.

He got out his wallet and looked inside it for the notes he’d kept for them. He’d kept two fifty-pound notes and he gave one to each other them, telling them, – Happy Diwali. Go and buy yourselves whatever you want.

Adam said, – Wow.

– Do you know what I used to get for Diwali? Suresh said. – I used to get a new pair of trousers and a shirt.

Rohan said, – When we do the *pooja*, do we have to make a wish?

– No. Stupid, Adam said. He was studying the face on his bank note.

Suresh said that resolutions were for the New Year in January. Hemu said Diwali was for the financial year. – You see how much money you’ve made in the last year and then you make a plan to do better in the next year.

– Do you want to make a resolution? Joanna said to Rohan.

Rohan nodded his head. Joanna pointed to the fruit salad and he wrinkled his nose.

– I think we should make resolutions, Suresh said, – Yours could be to eat one bit of fruit every day.

– Puke.

Joanna said – I read a book about a woman who wrote a daily resolution every day for everyone in her family. Every morning, she wrote out something that they should do that day on a bit of paper. She had to get up early, before the others were awake so that she could make up the resolutions and prop up the pieces of paper against the glasses of milk on the table. She did that so they'd read what she'd put as soon as they sat down. She had two girls, and in the story, she put down that one of them wasn't allowed to be nosey and one wasn't allowed to be vain.

– She sounds mean, Rohan said. – No offence.

– You're not really going to do that, Adam said. – You wouldn't be able to think of enough things to write.

Already these boys were polished and confident. They could do anything they wanted in life.

– No, Joanna said. – It was a sad story. And you can have too much self-improvement. She only made up the resolutions because she wasn't very happy.

– Why wasn't she?

– Because she was bored.

She cut a piece off one of the cheeses and ate it. Hemu thought that with Joanna, you never knew whether she was accusing you of something.

After breakfast, when Joanna had taken the boys into the garden for the *rangoli*, Suresh said to him, – Don't keep giving the boys money.

– What else am I going to do with it? Take it with me?

– I'm not saying don't spend it on them, Suresh said. He put his hands in the pockets of his trousers. – I'm saying don't keep handing out cash. There are other things you can do.

– If I put it in the bank for them, how is it different to if it's sitting in my bank?

– Take them out somewhere. You’re much better off giving them experiences.

They’ll remember stuff they do much more than any toy they’ve bought.

– Coming from you, that’s rich, Hemu said. – Every piece of shit that came in a crate from China, you couldn’t rest until you had it in your hands.

– It’s different for them.

One of the dogs came over to him and he stroked its head. – The boys need to understand that they can’t be motivated just by money and things.

– Only type of person who would say that is somebody who’s had everything gifted to them.

– And that’s me?

– Where do you think you’d be if I hadn’t paid out in school fees?

– Now you’re being stupid.

Hemu got up and stood by the door to the garden. Adam and Rohan were busy with the coloured powder and stencils. Adam waved to him, showing him his hands that were stained blue, red and orange, and he called to him to come outside.

– In five minutes, I’ll come, Hemu said through the glass. – Every opportunity you’ve ever had, I’ve bought it for you. When you’ve made as much fucking money as I have, then you can tell me what you think. Until then, I’ll make my own decisions how I spend my money.

When I was little, you were never there, Suresh said, – I go to work, I pay the school fees and when I come home I read the bedtime stories.

For a minute they stood without speaking. Then Hemu said, – How much you pay for that shirt?

– I’m not answering stupid questions.

– More than a hundred pounds?

Suresh didn't answer. He turned away and looked out on the garden. Hemu pulled at the collar of his own shirt, a blue polo shirt.

– Twenty-five pounds. M&S. I don't need to spend hundred pounds on a shirt just to show people I've got the cash.

– What about your car?

Hemu's car was a silver Mercedes S 500L. He bought it factory-made, with a heated leather steering wheel, panoramic sunroof and magic body control, which by itself cost over four thousand pounds. It had cost him close to a hundred thousand pounds and the money he spent did not trouble him because one thing he was sure of was that he had earned it.

– Hemu said. You think you're fucking clever, dressing yourself up and spending money. You wouldn't have lasted five minutes if you'd had to do what I've done.

Suresh shook his head and went into the garden. He knelt down next to Adam and picked up a bag of green powder. Hemu watched and then went outside too. Everything he'd said to Suresh was the truth and if Suresh couldn't take it, that was his problem.

## Joanna

It was a Friday morning. School was breaking up that day. In the kitchen, Anita pressed glasses of sparkling wine on them to go with their coffee and croissants.

– We've earned this, she said, holding up her glass and looking meaningfully at Ian. – And I'm celebrating. Yesterday I did my best 10k time ever.

Claire stepped over to her and hugged her while the others chimed in with congratulations.

A moment later, Claire had darted across to the bench next to the door where her bag was. She came back with a biscuit tin, opening the lid to show them what was inside. Liz saw first and shouted.

– Oh my God. They're us.

– I know, Claire said. I was terrified they weren't going to work. It was you, Ian. It took forever to get your hair.

Joanna moved closer to see. Claire had made gingerbread men and iced them with carefully accurate hair colours and styles and an outfit she'd thought up for each of them. They were twee and alarmingly well-observed, brightly and intricately finished with a standard of workmanship that was genuinely impressive.

Ian peered into the tin too, taking the biscuit that was him and holding it up in front of him. He said they were starting to be a bad influence on him. They were all shockingly indulgent, he said. Sometimes, he said, he had the feeling they were all coaching him as much as he was coaching them.

– There's nothing wrong with indulging yourself, Ian, Liz said. – Isn't that really what we're about here.

– Actually, you're right, Ian said and he took a small bite from the foot of his biscuit

You seriously could sell these, Liz said. – You could make them to order for parties.

People would go mad for them.

– Not really. The icing takes a really long time.

Claire moved to hold the tin out to Joanna.

– It was just for fun. Just for us.

The Joanna biscuit had her blond hair and the black shirt and black jeans she'd had on the last time. Her watchstrap was piped as a delicate line on the biscuit wrist, but the large round eyes Claire had given her looked glassy and the mouth, a garish 'o', seemed to Joanna like the face on a blow-up doll.

– I wish I'd known you were getting the tattoo, Claire said to Joanna. – I'd have loved trying to ice that.

The time before they'd met at Claire's house and they did the Wheel of Life. Fantastic, Claire had said. I've always wanted to do the Wheel of Life. She said that, Joanna thought, because Ian had said as they took their places around Claire's kitchen table that this time he was playing it safe. He told them he'd got a plan for the session and he wasn't going to be derailed. The Wheel of life was a circle printed onto a page that was split into segments that Ian said would give them a helicopter view of their lives. The segments were labelled recreation, health, romance and so on. There were sections for your career and professional development, and other sorts of projects you might have. Each segment was a grid of rows numbered from one to ten, which started in the centre and spread out to the edge of the circle. You had to go around and give a score for each segment. A zero meant that there was nothing at all about that part of your life you could feel positive about. A ten meant that it couldn't get any better. Obviously, you were aiming for a full circle. – Keep coming back to this, Ian said. – Think of it as a yearly check-in with yourself. The idea is you keep on building on what's already there.



Joanna started with Physical Environment and gave it ten. She loved her home. It's methodical messiness made it comfortable and steady. She'd worked hard to make it like that. And it wasn't just her, all four of them were attached to the house. She gave herself a eight for health because that was like touching the wood of the table so she wasn't tempting fate. She gave seven to Family and Friends and the same to Romance. It was out of loyalty to Suresh she did that, but it wasn't true. The truth, if she could've stood to write it down, was that her wheel was short of romance. Why write down a thing that was nobody's fault? She didn't agree that everything needed to be dealt with head on. And if she got on top of everything else, romance could easily flourish too. Wouldn't it mean, once she'd got the other stuff sorted out, that she'd feel more relaxed and automatically she'd enjoy herself more. She kept Career and Personal Growth and another segment called Fun and Recreation until last and gave both of them two. The lines she drew when she joined up each segment on her wheel gave it an odd balance, with the four sections she'd scored highest making a shape that looked a windmill's sails. When she'd finished, she looked slyly at Liz's page. Liz had given Romance a three.

Ian asked them if the wheel they'd got in front of them happened to be a wheel on their car, how smooth a ride would it give them?

Not so very bumpy, Joanna thought, studying her page. The windmill sails on her wheel were evenly spaced and it looked stable at least. If the wheel spun fast enough, the sails would hold everything up and you could get by. She explained this to Ian, pushing her page across the table. He prodded the paper and pushed it back. like he'd proved a point.

– What if I said, everything on your page is an avoidance strategy.

– I don't think so, Joanna said.

The others stopped looking at their own pages, more interested in the new edge in Ian's voice.

– What if it were a wheel on a bike? What sort of a ride would you have then

– Then it'd be different. Much more stop and start.

– I think that with you, Ian said, his index finger still pressed down the page. – The main thing keeping you going is motion.

Joanna thought and shook her head. – I'm not saying the gaps aren't there. I know what they are and I know they're there. What you're saying is that to go forward, all we have to do is look at our low scores and decide on something we think's going to push them up. It feels very arbitrary.

– The way to find realistic goals is by recognising whatever needs you have that aren't being met.

He looked around the table to see if the others were with him. It felt like he was making an example of her, like he was setting her up, so that he could win over the others more easily.

– The trouble is we get really good distraction. We turn away from our needs that are difficult to satisfy and we focus our energies on what's easy and immediate.

The others were nodding. It made sense. But most things did when he said them. But afterwards, when you thought about them, they still were right on the surface, but that was all. None of it had any depth. What had he ever said that got you nearer to a solution?

He was saying now, talking to them all and not just to Joanna, that the problem was she'd shut herself off. She'd stopped connecting with her deepest desires and that this needed to change. He said she needed to work on letting go of all the things that were distractions and bring herself closer to what she really wanted.

After the wine and biscuits, Anita showed them upstairs to where her living room was. At the bottom of the stairs, Ian took Joanna aside and asked her if he'd been too heavy-handed with her the last time.

– No, she said.

– Really?

– You wanted to make your point. It's fine.

– But you don't agree?

– I think the way you describe it is a bit forensic.

– Meaning?

– You make it sound like a crossword puzzle. The way you talk it's like someone's already written all the answers. I think of it more like you make it up as you go. Sometimes I think it's more like you only see at the end that there was a direction that you'd set out on.

– Fine, he said. – But either way, you need to commit to something. It's not going to come to you. You have to go to it.

They followed the others, who'd gone ahead into the living room and now were arranging themselves on the floor in a circle that Anita had marked out with cushions. The cushions, orange and red with mirrored sequins sewn on, reminded Joanna of the gifts Laxmi used to bring back from India, from Bombay Electric and Contemporary Arts and Crafts, which were the shops Joanna had liked on the trips they took together to Bombay. She was going to ask Anita where the cushions were from so that she could tell Laxmi and the thought was followed straight away by the blow of Laxmi not being there. Not at all or ever again. The sad strangeness of knowing for certain that Laxmi would love these cushions, but she wouldn't actually get to love them. She, Joanna, would have to think of Laxmi loving them, imagine her running her palm over them and saying that the fabric was beautiful. An odd feeling Joanna had that when she imagined this, it was almost as if Laxmi really had seen the cushions and stroked the fabric. What did it say about how much of her mother-in-law was still there, that the knowledge of what she would do and say was so certain? Joanna took the cushion onto her lap and rubbed her finger-tip over one of the mirror circles. There were so

many ways in which her mother-in-law was still there, that it was impossible to explain, even to herself, that she was not.

Apart from the bright cushions, the room was sober. Impressively so, with painted grey walls and a large grey rug on white carpet. It seemed to Joanna that all the plainness was set up to show off a vast chandelier. A creation of glass baubles, strung at different lengths from a wire wheel. The feel of the room was that it couldn't have been used often. It was too calculated. A sophisticated set piece for the kinds of get-togethers that Anita must like. In the middle of the circle, Anita had put out a bowl nuts and another containing foiled wrapped hearts. There was also a box of tissues.

The time before, they'd sat in Claire's kitchen, which was old and used, done in a country style, with open shelves and a large wooden dresser. The different coloured plates stacked in piles on the dresser had the feel of Claire and her manner of cracking on regardless. On the wall of Claire's kitchen there had been pictures drawn by her children and a vast whiteboard with a grid drawn on it. All their names down the side and the days of the week across the top. The grid squares were filled with dance classes and boy scouts, violin lessons and other appointments, reminders of all things that needed to be done. It was fascinating and overwhelming. The bins need taking out on a Tuesday. There was a system where they each took at turn. On Wednesdays there was something called Dragon Group, with Claire's name next to it. When Claire saw Joanna looking at the board, she said it was the ace up her sleeve. If she didn't have the board, she said she'd fall apart within a week.

They'd drawn lots to decide who would go first. Claire's idea. Liz was number one. Joanna was number two. Liz played them Vic Reeves singing *Dizzy*. When the song reached the first chorus, Liz started to cry. Claire passed her a tissue and then leaned towards her to rub her back. The song made Joanna think of Student Night on Wednesdays at The Palace, where *Dizzy* always came on at the end of the night and any boy could grab any girl, lift her

off her feet and spin her round and round until both were reeling, holding each other tight for balance and the boy could start kissing the girl as if by accident. A sign of the times, Joanna thought now, that it was the boy who had to start the kiss. A surprise that she can remember so clearly the sickly smell of vodka and coke when it mixed with dry ice.

The song she had to play for them was 'Radio Gaga' by Queen. She let it play now until Ian raised his hand to say it's enough.

– When I was growing up, there was a dinner my mum used to make in the summer that I used to love. Whenever I hear the song, I think of it being summer time and of my mum in the kitchen.

Ian told her to go on. – Describe the memory for us, he said. – So that we see what you see.

– So, it's evening and in the middle of the summer holidays. My dad always worked late, so he's not there. It's me, my mum and my brother. Where we lived, the kitchen door opened straight out onto the garden. We had a set of swings my brother and there was a place underneath an apple tree where we used to build a den. I'm probably eight or nine. Michael's a year older. We've been having a competition, who can swing the highest and now we're hungry. The kitchen table's already half full and my mum's at the sink washing lettuce leaves. It's been a really hot and on days like that, she never wanted to cook. Actually she never wanted to cook whatever kind of a day it was. But I think when it was hot, she felt like she had a good excuse. She used to make these enormous picnics. She'd buy cold cuts and she used to empty out of the fridge. All kinds of stuff. Sweet and savoury, all mixed together which never normally happened. We used to fill our plates with whatever we liked, slices of ham and biscuits and crisps all on the same plate. We used to like cheese triangles and we used to tear off a bit of the foil on one of the corners and suck out the cheese. For herself, she always put a glass of celery sticks, and she tipped a little mound of salt on her plate to dip

them in. She was always on a diet and she used to say that celery was good because you burned more calories eating it than it had in it to start with. She used to eat celery and drink PLJ.

– I remember PLJ, Claire said. – It works, though. It really does curb your appetite.

– You do the same thing when you cook, Liz said. – You’re trying to make the same meal.

– I know. I hadn’t thought about before. But I do.

– If you have dinner at Joanna’s, – Liz said to the others. –She always cooks like mad. She makes a hundred different things and she puts everything out on the table and it’s fantastic. I love eating Joanna’s food.

Joanna leant forward and took one of the chocolate hearts. She was warming to her story, high-spirited now from their faces, all of them taking in everything she was saying. – Most of what my mum used to cook was horrible. She used to get in from work and start opening tins without even taking her coat off.

Anita said, – I bet you were a latch key kid.

– I was. From when I was eleven.

– We all were. If you were a woman in the 1980s and you actually cooked anything from scratch, you were automatically a traitor to women’s lib.

– My mum wasn’t a women’s libber, Joanna said. – She thought it was a load of old rubbish. She just really hated cooking. That’s why I think the memory stands out for me. Because how I see her in it, she’s singing and washing the lettuce and she’s in a good mood, which she normally never was when she was making the dinner. And the feeling I get is that just at that moment, playing with my brother in the garden and my mum singing along to her cassette, the anticipation of all that food, being able to grab whatever we wanted. It felt like such fun. It felt like I had everything I wanted, completely within my reach. It was such a

strong and simple feeling of security and comfort and belonging. I really don't think I could ever feel as happy as that ever again. Not about anything. Not even my sons.

She started to cry. She couldn't hold it back. All of this was so fierce a thing to throw yourself back into. The past few days she'd played her song on repeat. Any time she'd been by herself, she put on her headphones and played it loud. On the treadmill or making dough for the boys' pizzas, another time when she was out with the dogs, every time it stopped her in her tracks, the force of it—the memory—so strong a pull back to that time that there was no way of holding it off. Those times, she could only sit down and wait until the feeling had passed and she could move freely again, without the weight of it on her. Surprising, the rawness of it, and the force of feeling herself as a child again.

– I was looking forward to this. It's the first thing I really wanted to tell you all. But it's made me think of all kinds of things about my life now, how it's turned out, that I don't really like.

Wiping her face with a tissue, knowing that her eyes must've puffed up red, she said,  
– I feel like everything's too complicated. Or it might be that I overcomplicate everything. Even if someone gives me a compliment—someone the other day told me what a good mother she thought I was—I can't take it as a compliment. I feel like I don't have anything to give any more.

– You do, Liz said. – You just set yourself high standards. You think everything through and you don't cut corners. You can afford to let some things slip once in a while.

– That's what I mean. I feel like I've lost the idea of being able to let myself go.

– What I think you're talking about in that memory, Ian said. – Is a feeling that some people have when they're children of looking out at the world from a place where they feel very secure. Some people have that. Not everyone. It's meant to be what parents are supposed to give their children. But my feeling is that it can be a double-edged sword. As

much as people need that feeling of being centred to be able to keep going, there's a point where it can hold you back. It's as if you're afraid of getting too far away from that feeling.

– I didn't have that from my parents, Liz said.

Ian said, – I didn't either. I wouldn't normally say this to a group. I only got it when I got married.

Liz said that's why she's still looking for her soulmate.

A sombreness had come over them.

– You've got to find a balance, Ian said to Joanna. – You've got to keep a connection with that feeling of completeness, but you can't make it into something you want to get back.

– I agree with Ian, Anita said, – As an adult, you've got to accept that you're always going to feel like there's a downside to everything. It makes everything seem complicated. Because things are complicated. It's inevitable. I don't think complicated's a bad thing.

Ian said, – Even the people who do have a strong sense of security from when they were kids can find that as adults they've lost it. And what I've found with my clients is that it's the people who are very successful and who set themselves high expectations that are hit the hardest.

Joanna said that what she remembered most from being a child was how everything was about working hard. You work hard, you have more, you live better. That's how her mother and father lived. Their whole marriage was based on it—more than just the marriage; it was like the family code. The memory about the dinner stands out because it was a different feeling to how things usually were, she said. My mother usually didn't sing while she made the dinner.

She ate another chocolate, screwed up the foil and put it back in the bowl.

– Soon after that, the year after that summer, my mum got a promotion at work. She kept saying she wasn't sure if she should take it. I think it was my dad who convinced her. I



don't think I properly took it in at the time, but looking back, everything was different from then on.

She took another tissue.

– I think the main thing that happened was that both them got to really like having money. Looking at it now, from the perspective I have as a woman not that much older than my mother was then, it must've been like something clicked. All of a sudden, they were living the life they'd planned to have. Her mother, who'd always gone round the supermarket with a calculator, adding each item so that she wouldn't go a penny over the cash she had in her purse, was doing the shopping at Marks and Spencer's. She was buying all kinds of things that before she'd have said were a waste of money. They could afford a bigger mortgage and they moved house. Everything changed. And in hindsight, she can see that what she felt was that they'd left her behind. She felt like she had less when obviously she had more. But for them it must've been that everything had taken off the way they wanted. They were completely in sync with each other.

–That's how I think of you and Suresh, said Liz.

– But we're not the same. My mum and dad were both signed up to a particular way of living. In a material sense. They shared everything. And they enjoyed what they could buy because they both knew they'd worked for it.

Most couples have that, Anita said.

Joanna said, – The difference is that they needed each other's help to do it. Neither of them could have done it without the other. With Suresh and me, it's different. Whatever job I go out and get, it's never going to compete with his salary. So, I can't do my bit by making money.

–Why does that matter? Claire said. – You do your share in a thousand other ways.

–That's not how I feel.

– Isn't that what we're saying, Ian said. That we've all done our stint being parents and now we want to do the things that are really important to us?

– No, Joanna said. – That's not it at all.

How could she explain that however hard she tries to make her contribution, she feels like it's less because it has no cash value. How can she put a value on what she does when all the values she's learned and the values that Suresh learned put all the importance on earning money. So that now, she – even in herself and despite herself – finds it hard to give enough importance to what she does. And if the point of these sessions is to find what to do with the rest of her life, she doesn't know where to start because all she's ever been shown is to make sure the breadwinner's happy.

She said, – With my mum and dad, working and contributing financially brought them closer together. With Suresh and me, it's easy for us not to see what the other one's doing. We don't have that crossover of both doing the same thing. So instead of pulling together, we're each feeling like we're doing our own thing. I feel like I give more than I get back and I'm sure he feels the same. I think it upsets him that we don't appreciate how hard he works.

## Hemu

On the way to the restaurant, Joanna said to him, – Don't you think it's weird that he's over here?

He said that it was all Suddah's scheming. And that the trouble with her was that she couldn't stop herself from meddling in other people's business.

– All she's ever done is make trouble, he said. – It wasn't a friendship. It was one person with nothing who was jealous of another person who had everything.

Joanna said, – Laxmi wasn't a pushover.

– When someone's trying to push something on you that you don't want, he said. – The best thing is you push back a bit.

– I think you should be careful.

– Careful of what?

– Laxmi was your wife. It's up to you how you remember her. If you think Suddah's just stirring, don't let her try and control things.

Just then, the radio picked up the traffic news, which was good. It meant he didn't have to respond.

– It's not easy. Just stay calm and don't say anything you'll regret.

– Whatever I say, I won't regret. She'll be the one regretting.

They'd stopped for a red light on Gower Street. Rain was pelting on the windscreen. He liked the smooth, mechanic sound of the wipers. A solid smooth sound of top-quality German technology, the kind of slick efficiency you have to pay a lot of money for. In this car, he was on top of any situation. The gearstick was solid in his hand. The steering wheel needed only the lightest pressure and the response was immediate and smooth. It was a stupid thing, but it was as if the car was an extension of himself—how it did everything he wanted

and all it needed was a flick of either his finger or his wrist. His habit was to rest his hand on the gearstick, even though it was many years since he had driven a manual car. His right hand lay at the base of the steering wheel. The salesman who sold it to him told him it was the next best thing to a private jet; maybe even better, he said. He'd said that if you compared the number of hours in a jet to the number of hours he'd spend driving this car, the value for money he'd get from the car was unbelievable. It was his stupid sales talk. It didn't matter. He liked the car, so he bought it. Harkashan, he imagined, was the kind of man who drove a Honda. Most likely an Accord.

The lights changed and the pick-up of the engine was like butter. He almost said it to Joanna. The car felt light in his hands, but still he could feel its full length, a full five metres long. Any time he got the chance, he could put his foot down and it would take off. Today, the traffic was slow. He didn't mind cruising. If he could've found the words, he would've told Joanna that he was grateful she was here.

– Actually, he said. – I don't have to say anything to either of them. I can let them do the talking. Let them get whatever they have to say off their chests. Ask their questions. Then we'll come away.

– Whatever he says, I'd let it go.

– I know, he said. – I'm not worried about this guy.

He switched on the indicator. A flick of his finger followed by the comfortable tick-tock.

– Sometimes the best thing is to keep quiet and let the other man do the talking. People, when they say something to you, they expect something back straightway. The thing is not to give it to them. If you keep quiet, they can feel very unsettled. It makes them question what they're saying. The problem is her only. Sitting at the side and making the bullets for him to fire.

– It’s a shame, Joanna said. – I think she’s lonely.

– Don’t feel sorry for her. Ask yourself instead why is it she doesn’t have a soul in the world. Why else she’s making a beeline for this idiot dentist?

Suddah and Harkashan were waiting for them at a table in the window of the Punjab Restaurant. They’d taken chairs side by side, that faced into the room, and they were sitting with their heads together like two partners in crime. Outside, on the street behind them, shoppers half hidden underneath umbrellas braved the rain, making for the shops further along Neal Street. Suddah got up when she saw them, came out from the table, stepping first towards Joanna, with her arms open wide.

–We thought he wasn’t turning up, she said, leaning forward to kiss Joanna’s cheek and hug her tightly. – Such a long time I haven’t seen you. Have you lost weight, or what?

Her arm around Joanna’s shoulder, guiding her to the table.

– You’ve definitely lost. Don’t lose any more. Tell me something about the boys.  
When are you bringing them to my house?

Harkashan was on his feet too. He came straight over to Hemu, his hand stretched out. He had on light blue jeans, white tennis shoes and a grey sweatshirt with University of Oxford on the front. He looked like a four-star tourist. A mouthful of bright, capped teeth smiling like an idiot. He reached for Hemu’s hand and, when he had it, he put his left hand on top. He held Hemu’s hand tightly with both of his.

– Hank also wants to meet the boys, Suddah said.

– I want you to know how absolutely grateful I am to you for agreeing to meet me,  
Harkashan said to Hemu. – Your wife was a cherished sister to me.

– Both of you come, Suddah said, waving them to the chairs facing hers and  
Harkashan’s. – Sit.

Hemu stayed on his feet. The restaurant manager was coming over. Another handshake. Hemu was pleased. Now Harkashan would know who he was dealing with. This would show him, this Harkashan that he was well liked. And that he had his clout. He could turn up here any day of the week and have the manager come straight over and shake his hand. How many places could Harkashan go and be greeted personally like that? Some two-bit dentist from a place in California that nobody's ever heard of. Harkashan was exactly what Hemu thought he'd be—a daydreamer with expensive dental work. Even the dental work, which was the only thing about him that shouted money, must've been what his business partner had done for him for free.

– She was a very wonderful person, your wife, the manager said to Hemu. – I couldn't believe when I found out.

– It was very unexpected, Hemu said.

He'd got that from Suresh. At the funeral, Suresh had a whole stock of phrases in hand for everyone who was coming to give condolences. It was the shock of it, they all said. Who could believe that someone like his wife would go out like a light. At least she wouldn't have suffered, they said.

– Stroke? the manager said. He shook his head. – I never would've thought she could go just like that.

– She was a very active person, he said. He got that from his son also. – Very health-conscious. We couldn't have seen it coming.

That went down well with people—when he told them that his wife had done all the things you were supposed to because it made them feel less guilty about all the things they did that were unhealthy. He hung his overcoat on the back of the chair, adjusted his watch strap so that it felt more comfortable, and then he sat down.

– Am I right with what I Googled? Harkashan said. – This is the oldest Indian restaurant in UK, no?

– Oldest north Indian restaurant, Suddah said. – The oldest Indian restaurant is Veeraswamy. She put her menu down on the table. – Veeraswamy is a very exclusive restaurant on Regent Street.

– Actually, Hemu said. – Veeraswamy is not the oldest.

– Veeraswamy has been there since 1926, Suddah said. – Here is since 1946 only. It says so here on the menu.

– Veeraswamy is just marketing. The ownership has changed hands five-six times. You can't say it's the same restaurant that opened there first time around.

He looked at Harkashan. – It's become very upmarket, but it's over-commercial. The current owners have got fifteen-twenty Indian restaurants in London. They're turning over twenty-five million per year. Can you imagine, over thirty million US dollars.

He put his elbow down on the table and leaned forward. – This place is totally different. Here is fourth generation family owned. It's completely authentic. They own one restaurant only.

Suddah had taken out her phone. She was texting, like an idiot.

– Usha wants to take us for tea tomorrow, she said to Harkashan. – She's saying she'll take us to The Langham. You'll like it there very much.

She turned her phone over and showed Harkashan the case. It was a gold case, glittery, with LIVE—LOVE— LAUGH printed in red. – This is what she gave me for my birthday, she said. – It's how she was in life.

He wanted to ask her how could it be she was so happy if he was such a bad husband? It made no sense. But with women like Suddah, what point was there in arguing. Next to him, Joanna was asking Harkashan about the places he'd been to, and what else he was planning

for his trip. She was altogether a different type of woman to Suddah. You could tell the education she'd had.

Suddah dropped her phone back into her bag, which was also glittery gold.

– Are all of these family photographs, or what? she said.

She meant the many pictures hung on the restaurant walls. Mostly old-fashioned portraits in black and white. A couple of landscapes, also old. One Hemu could see was Gateway of India, with soldiers on horseback parading in front of it. He thought it was strange—he'd have expected them to put up the Golden Temple. It might have been there, without him seeing. He looked around him, turning on his chair to see what was behind. Two men doing business on a table nearby. Next to them a family of tourists. How must they look, the four of them, to these other people? Do they think that Harkashan and Suddah are husband and wife, or that he is the husband of Suddah? Before, when his wife was alive, he would've made the same impromptu guesses, assuming that a man and woman side by side at a restaurant table must be man and wife.

He said, – I know for sure the picture over there is the grandparents of the original owner. The father's parents.

In the black and white picture he was pointing out to them, a man in a turban and embroidered *kurta* sat in a rocking chair. A woman, posed in full wedding jewellery, was sitting on the floor at his feet was. She held a painted box and she was looking at what was inside. The man's hands were gripping the arms of the chair and he was looking past the photographer into the distance. A stern pair they were. Hemu didn't like these old portraits. What was the point of so many old things? Always looking back. He preferred not to look back. He preferred looking forwards. Whatever was in the past, it couldn't be changed. All you could do was to keep going forward. At least that way, you always had something keeping you busy. It wasn't a question of luck that he had what he had. Everything he had,



he'd made it happen himself. The type of man he had was always keeping one step ahead. People like Suddah and this Harkashan—what sort of an idiot was he to go around calling himself a stupid American name like Hank—were too busy looking over their shoulders at what people were saying about them.

The manager himself came to take their order and Hemu said to him, – Tell them, what's your favourite thing on the menu?

He said that he liked the *dahl* and the *keema*.

Hemu said to the others that everything here was good. He passed his menu to the restaurant manager, – You bring us whatever you choose. Whatever you think is your best selection.

Of course, he was showing off. He knew that. Why shouldn't he?

– One time I came here, he said to the manager. – And John Lennon was sitting right over there, at the bar. So, I took a seat at the bar too. Not the one next to him. I took one couples of places along. Then, he asked me what he should order. I told him he should try the *kababs*. You know what he told me? He said that he was trying to give up eating meat. So, I said, if that's the last meat that you ever taste, you'll die a happy man. Few months later, some idiot goes and shoots him dead in the street.

Joanna was laughing at him. – I swear to God, he said. – It's the truth.

– Did he have the kebabs? she said.

He said, – I don't know. By then, the fellow I was meeting had arrived and we had moved to one of the tables. But I got him to autograph one of the menus. Guess how much that autograph is worth now?

– Must be valuable, Harkashan said, shaking his head. – I would say at least three thousand dollars.

– Four thousand pounds.

– What rubbish, Suddah said. – If you had something like that, you’ve have put it in a frame on the wall. How many times I’ve been at your house and I’ve never even seen it.

He let it go. Harkashan was handing something to him. It was a book.

– This is the book that helped me the most when I lost my wife, Harkashan said.

– I’ve already told him you won’t read it. Suddah said. – I told him it’s a waste of money giving a book to you. But he wouldn’t listen.

The name of the book was *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. Hemu didn’t know it. He took it from Harkashan and held it. What was he supposed to do with a book? He turned it over. “This book is a gift to the soul,” it said on the back. It was the kind of thing his wife used to say.

Harkashan said, – I was given a copy after my wife passed and it really took the edge off my pain.

– If you aren’t going to read it, you can give it to me, Suddah said.

– What I realised when I read this book is that however unbearable it feels to lose someone you’ve lived with so closely, that you’ve loved and known so very well, their whole life is still there. The only thing is that the person themselves has gone. The life you had with them can never be taken away.

– I’ve read it, Joanna said. – It’s quite good. I thought it was going to be saccharine. But I found it very honest; very well-meaning.

Harkashan smiled. Big white teeth. Like a cartoon horse. – In my view, the best chapter is the one where the Captain makes him realise the importance of sacrifice. When I read that chapter, I saw my marriage, the whole of the relationship I had with my wife in a whole new light.

– He won’t read it, Suddah said.

The book was unexpected. He thought it would be the other way around—that Harkashan wanted something from him and that it would be his choice to give it or withhold it. He was wrong-footed. He didn't know what he should say.

– Thanks, he said. – I'll have a look.

He slid the book into the pocket of his overcoat. It was the kind of thing his wife would have done. To have picked out a book and handed it casually to a person she hardly knew.

Two waiters came with the food. He was glad. It seemed to him that the others were also glad to be distracted from their talking. For a while, they spooned rice and chicken and *dahl* onto their plates. There was no need to speak to each other. They pulled apart rotis and in the end, Joanna said to each other how tasty it all was.

– I wanted you to have this, also, Harkashan said.

It was a photograph he was passing across the table. It was a colour picture of a group. Harkashan said this was the picture of the university class in Bombay, where they had met. – She's in the front row, the third chair in from the right. I'm at the other side, in the back row.

The story was that the two of them knew each other because they were enrolled in the same university programme. They were studying a course in psychology. Harkashan said that was his interest at the time and that only later he'd changed over to dentistry. This is what Hemu wanted. He wanted Harkashan to feel he was the one who had to explain. If it was Harkashan doing all the talking, it meant that he knew that he wasn't getting the upper hand. Still, he was curious to look at the picture. His wife was sitting with her ankles crossed. Her hands folded on her lap. That must've been how the photographer had instructed them all to sit. She had on a light-coloured sari and her hair was tied back. Not a smile, exactly. In the picture she was looking out confidently.

– I want you to know, Harkashan said. – I had no idea you didn't know that we were still corresponding.

Hemu picked up his drink. The thing was not to be drawn into saying anything too soon.

– One of the reasons I wanted to meet you, is because I want to be certain that she still has your trust.

– But even you have to admit it's strange. Suddah said. – It wasn't only him she didn't tell. Even I had no idea.

– Imagine when you called me and I found out that none of you knew. I felt like an trespasser. At first, I felt angry; then I thought, she must have had her reasons. Even if I can't work them out, she would've had them. But since then I've been feeling like a person who doesn't exist. That's why I felt I needed to come here and meet you in person. One thing was to know that she's really gone. And the other thing was to set the record straight.

– Even her children didn't know. She waves a hand towards Joanna. – Or am I wrong? Did you know?

– No.

– I thought since you're coming all this way, you must have something to tell us, Suddah said.

Harkashan shook his head. – I've come for myself, and to pay my respects to the memory of my friend. I wanted to see what her life was and then I can let her rest in peace. I wanted the peace of mind that if I meet her again in another life, she'll know that I came.

– It doesn't make any sense, Suddah said. She started to cry.

– Don't you think that's selfish? Joanna said to Harkashan. – Hemu, none of this makes a difference to the kind of wife she was. I don't think you need to dwell on it.

– The feeling I have, if I try to step back and see what’s going on, Harkashan said. – Don’t let this stop you grieving for your wife. If you’re angry with her, be angry. It won’t last forever.

– I’m not angry, Hemu said. But he was. Mainly because of how Harkashan could so easily use the word ‘friend’ to talk about his wife. As if he could actually have known her as well as he was claiming.

– Anger is first, Harkashan said. – Sadness only comes later. You have to open yourself up to the anger. Only then can you let it go. Then you can let the sadness come. After sadness comes reflection.

Suddah said, – I’m angry. What reason could she have had for not telling me? It doesn’t make any sense. We were very close and we told each other everything.

– All this will pass, Harkashan said. – The anger and the sadness. And afterwards what you have are whatever memories you choose to keep. Whichever ones you choose.

– The other reason I’m here, Harkashan said. – Is to ask you in person if there’s something of hers I can have. I’d like a token of her to take back with me.

Hemu shook his head. Then he looked down at his plate. He never would have guessed, not even for a second, that the loss of a wife could be so complicated. It was so tiring. If he could get back to his usual life, he’d be better. He wanted to get back to that, and his usual way of seeing the world.

– You should give him something at least, Suddah said. – It’s what she would’ve done.

Harkashan said. – You don’t have to decide now.

Suddah put her hand on Harkashan’s arm, – It’s fine. One way or another, we’ll sort something out.

– For Christ’s sake, shut up. This is all down to you, Hemu said. – You shouldn’t even have got in touch with him.

Before she could reply he held up his hand to her. – Don’t say another word.

He looked directly at Harkashan. – I don’t have anything to give you. I don’t want your book and I don’t want your photographs.

He took the book out of his overcoat pocket and placed it on the table.

– You really are a very sad person. The best thing you can do is remove yourself from my life. Don’t get in touch with me again. Don’t come to my house. Don’t call my phone. I don’t want to hear from you ever again. And for certain, there’s no way you’re coming near my grandsons.

– You can’t behave like this! Suddah shouted out. – Who do you think you are? Bloody President Amin? Am I doing all this for myself? I’m doing it for her only. Because I know if I don’t do it, you never will.

She wiped her eyes with her napkin. Hemu looked at the people at the next table. They were not looking over, but they must be taking in what was happening.

– You think she was your wife and that’s all she was. You’re not the only one who’s lost. It’s not your choice how people remember her.

– She was my wife. And it is my choice.

Harkashan took his napkin off his lap. He said, – I should go and let you talk it over.

– No, Suddah said. – You don’t go. Sit. He needs to understand that he doesn’t have ownership of her memory. He can’t push us out.

She pointed a finger at Hemu, – For forty years, you’ve pushed me out. You’ve treated me like an irritant. I’m not accepting it any more.

– Joanna, Harkashan said. – What do you think?

– You should’ve waited. Or at least you should have written rather than turning up here. It’s too soon for all of this. It’s too sensitive.

– Don’t involve Joanna, Hemu said. – This is something just for the three of us.

– Joanna is involved as much as anyone, Suddah said. – She was very close to Laxmi too.

– For what it’s worth, Joanna, Harkashan said. – Meena always said that she couldn’t have wanted a better daughter-in-law.

– Don’t call her Meena, Hemu said. – Her name was Laxmi

– To me, she was Meena.

Harkashan leant towards Joanna. – Also, she was very proud of her grandsons.

Hemu stood up. – I don’t need either of you to tell me who she was.

He took a clutch of notes from his wallet, flung them on the table and walked out into the street. The rain driving down his front made him press his chin into his chest and draw up his shoulders. He turned left onto Shaftesbury Avenue. The rain was coming at him hard, drops of it running down inside his collar and splashing up from the pavement to wet his shoes and the cuffs of his trousers. He walked on, bending his path towards the buildings, away from the grey gutter water that spilled over the kerb each time a bus slushed past. He was taking long strides, pressing on determinedly to he didn’t know where. The thing was to keep on going. His arms were swinging to match his step, but in his chest, he was tight with rage, afraid that if his limbs stopped moving now, his heart would keep on beating much too fast. It would go out of control and he might have a heart attack. It could happen, right here on the street— his heart literally would blow a valve. It would blow itself to pieces inside his chest and then he would stop. He’d have no choice. That’s how it would happen, in a moment, seconds only, an implosion deep inside his own body, which wouldn’t be able to stop, and would send him lurching and staggering, pulling him down onto the pavement.

That would be it, a stellar burst, something spectacular and then, blank, dead nothingness. He was picturing his fall, as if he were above his body looking down. His own lifeless body lying there and a crowd gathering all around—complete stillness in the eye of the storm. That's how it must feel to die, he was sure of it. But it wasn't how he wanted to go, flat-out on the pavement like a beggar, with strangers fussing over him.

At Charing Cross Road, he didn't stop for the lights. He stepped out into the road, holding up his left hand to stop the cars, his right hand gripping the place on his chest where his heart was. Rain water in his eyes. He shouted – Shut up at the bastard who was honking at him and he kept on going, stepping up the pavement on the other side. People were looking at him like he wasn't right. A young woman in a raincoat had stopped completely. – It's fine, he told her. – I'm OK. He stopped now, short of breath. He leant forward, his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. It was better now. The compressed feeling in his chest was letting up. His breath was flowing back into his lungs. She was still there, the same young woman. He stood up to show her it was OK. Held up his hand in a wave. – It's OK, he said again. – I was feeling a little breathless, but now I can manage.

For those minutes that he couldn't get his breath, it had been frightening, but he was coming back to himself. He felt calm in his chest and in his head. His thoughts were clear. He could see all of it now. His wife had deceived him. Whatever her reasons, she'd kept something from him. But she had deceived Suddah too. That was at the bottom of it. Suddah couldn't stand it that his wife had kept something from her. Once she got hold of a thing, she would never let it go. She wouldn't be deterred now, until she had introduced this Harkashan to everyone his wife had known. She would make it so that everybody would look at him and think straightaway, there's the poor fellow whose wife was playing him for a fool. For forty years she was doing it. And the idiot never guessed a thing. He could see right to the bottom of it now. If his wife were here now, he would take her and show her the two of them, sitting



side by side. He would tell her, see what's happening—two minutes you've been gone and see what she's doing.

Somebody else had come and was talking to him. It was a young man. Younger than his son. Dressed smartly in a blue suit and a light-coloured overcoat. The young man was pulling on his arm, asking him if he was OK. He was saying to him that he needed to go inside. It was true. His shirt and jumper were soaked through. This young man's hand was on his elbow, showing him the way. He was taking him through a doorway. Inside the smell was familiar. It was the smell of popcorn. He knew where he was. He was on Shaftesbury Avenue and this young man had brought him into the cinema. It was fine. He had his bearings. He let himself be taken to where he could sit down. It was a black sofa he was sitting on. They were in a bar. Somebody brought him a cup of tea. He drank it, then he said he wanted a whisky.

People like Suddah, the minute they saw you'd done well for yourself, they couldn't stand it. Everything that you had, that you'd earned for yourself, they couldn't bear to see it. If she couldn't be happy in her own life, she'd do the best she could to make you miserable in yours. He turned around to where the bar was and called to the barman to bring two more whiskies.

– I want to buy you a drink, he said to the young man. – Sit and have a drink with me if you've got a few minutes. What's your name?

– Tom.

– Tom, how old are you?

– Twenty-nine.

– You've got a wife?

– Not yet, he said. He smiled, as if he were embarrassed not to have found anyone.

– You should get a wife. Until a few months ago, I had a wife. Wives aren't the problem, Hemu said. – Wives' friends are the problem. They can be very jealous.

He was telling Tom the story about Harkashan. He was getting the letter out of his pocket and asking Tom to read it. He'd brought the letter with him because he was going to give it back to Harkashan, but in all the fuss he'd forgotten it. Tom took the letter. But he put it down on the table. He didn't read it. He said he didn't feel right to read a stranger's private letters

– I like you, Tom. What line of work are you in?

– I make things.

–What things?

He got out his phone and scrolled the screen. He showed Hemu an image, which he peered at. It looked like a banknote, twisted and altered somehow.

– Let me see, Hemu said

He took the phone and pulled the image bigger. It was a five-pound note. It had been cut into strips and woven back together. It still looked like what it was, but it was muddled. The Queen's nose and mouth was still there, but not all of her face. One of her eyes was out of place.

– Is that a real note? Hemu said.

– Yes.

He kept on looking, moving the image around the screen. – It reminds me of something else, he said. – I like it.

The screen went black and he passed it back across the counter. – Put in the code and show me again.

When he looked again, he said, – I know what it reminds me of. That Johnny Rotten.

– The Sex Pistols, the barman said. – God Save the Queen.

– Only thing would make it better is if you'd used fifty pounds.

– If I was sure of selling it, I would have.

– How much you want for it?

Tom leant back against his chair. – I don't know.

Hemu got out his wallet and flicked through the notes.

– I'll give you five hundred pounds for it.

– Seriously?

– Yes, seriously. I like it very much.

He shook his head.

– You want more? Seven hundred.

– No. Five hundred is a lot.

– You don't think it's worth that?

– I don't know.

Tom was rubbing the back of his head with his hand. He wasn't how Hemu would've imagined an artist. He looked more like an estate agent.

– In your opinion, what is it worth? Hemu said.

– I don't know.

– The value is whatever somebody wants to pay for it. He took a bundle of notes from his wallet. – Is it that you think the value is less, or you just don't want to take my money?

You think I can't afford it?

– I want to sell it. I wasn't expecting like this.

– I'm a rich man, Hemu said. – I could pay you whatever price you name.

He pulled back the cuff of his overcoat and showed the barman his watch. – Look at this. How much you think I paid for this?

– I don't know.

– Never mind the actual price. He took back his hand. His overcoat was still wet. –

Where is the picture now?

– In my flat.

– Where's your flat.

– Kentish Town.

– I'm not going all the way to Kentish Town. Take the money and take a cab home.

Then you come back with the picture and I'll give you the money.

He could tell this Tom wasn't sure.

– I've been buying and selling for almost fifty years. When somebody wants to do a deal and you're not sure, go with your instinct.

– OK, Tom said. – We'll do it.

– You go to your flat and bring the thing back here. Then I'll give you the cash.

When he came out of the cinema, it was dark. True to his word, Tom had returned with the painting and he'd given him the cash. Five hundred pounds. He had the banknote, mounted in a small deep frame, tucked inside his overcoat. The rain had slowed to a drizzle. As he made his way back to his car, which he'd left in the underground carpark on Shelton Street, he got out his phone and typed a message to Joanna: NOTHING TO WORRY. I AM COMING TO YOUR HOME. He pressed send and then typed another message: LET ME ORDER PIZZA FOR YOU AND THE BOYS.

At Joanna's house, he could see through the lit square of the kitchen window that she was standing, her head turned away from him. He looked past her and saw the boys, both of them, Adam on one side and Rohan facing him. He could see that they had their paint pots out. Adam was sitting but Rohan was standing up, his brush raised. Rohan flicked the paintbrush, stood and looked down at the table and then flicked again. Adam looked up and said something. Rohan answered. He couldn't hear their voices. Joanna went over to them,

stood for a minute, making calm down gestures with her hands. Then kissed the top of Adam's head and put a hand on Rohan's shoulder.

He knocked on the kitchen window and all three turned to look. Adam got to the door first, shouting through the glass, – Mum didn't know where you were. She thought you'd got lost. She phoned dad.

– Where have you been? Joanna said.

He'd put the banknote on the kitchen counter so that he could take off his coat.

– I bought a picture.

– What?

– It's for you.

Joanna went back to the hob and stirred one of the pans. – Thank you, Hemu. But where've you been? Where did you go to buy a picture?

– Never mind that, he said. – On the way here, I've had a very good idea. Also, I need to take a shower. I got soaked to the skin in the rain. But first I need to tell you something.

– Hemu, is everything OK?

– Everything is fine. It's better than fine.

He put the picture down on the kitchen table. Then he sat down. He said, – I want you to come and work with me.

– What?

– I want to make you my right-hand man.

She was looking at him from across the kitchen island.

– This is all wrong for you, Hemu said. – When Suresh gets here, I'm going to tell him.

She came and sat down at the table.

Hemu said, – I need to make plans for after I'm gone. Everything I've built, I've done it to stand the test of time. What I have is a range of different businesses. They're all good, solid businesses. All of them are capable of outliving me. Not for one or two years, but for a long time. The sum of the whole is worth more than the parts. Do you understand what I'm saying?

– Not really.

She lent forwards and put her head in her hands.

– The absolute worst outcome is that after I'm gone, everything has to be sold off piece by piece. But that's what will happen if I don't have someone to take over. What I'm saying is I want to spend the time with you now, teach you how everything works and let you take it over. That way I'll have peace of mind. You'll also have something of your own.

Joanna didn't answer. That was OK. She couldn't have seen this coming.

– It's OK, Hemu said. – I'm not expecting an answer right away. What I'm saying is that at the start two heads are better than one. And then, once you've learned the operation, what I'm offering you, is complete freedom with my whole establishment to develop exactly as you see fit.

She pushed back her chair, as if she were about to stand up.

– Joanna, you and I are the same. At least in one way.

She laughed. – No we're not. We're completely different.

He shook his head. – People like you and me, what we're good at is keeping things on track—keeping things going. We have the ability to perform multiple tasks simultaneously. Suresh and Mala cannot do that. They're specialists. They each have one thing only they can do very well.

He picked up one of the paint pots the boys had left behind. – This isn't for you. I'm offering you something better.

– Hemu, can we talk about this another time. I've got to get on with the dinner.

– Forget the dinner, he said. – What I'm offering you is a serious thing. It will change your life for the better.

## Joanna

Once Joanna played Goneril in a student production of King Lear. She was a first year and at the audition everyone else seemed to know what they were doing, which was what she expected. The audition was a challenge she'd set herself, a kind of 'no pain no gain' experience that she could use as proof to herself that she could feel she was the right sort of person for the college where she was studying. After the last rehearsal, everybody went over to the Half Moon and while Joanna was squashed against the bar, Kevin the classics student who was directing came and told her she was going to be fantastic. By then Joanna was drunk and she told him how she'd almost dropped out because she didn't think she had enough rage to pull off everything she knew Goneril had to do. Kevin said he knew and that was why he picked her. He told her she stood out at the auditions because she looked so innocent, like she'd never harm an ant and that gave him the idea of how to play it. He said that the big idea was to show how one selfish thing leads to another and before you know it, everything's spiralled out of control.

All of this came out in Joanna's Morning Pages. How Kevin set up the audition was to have them all sit in a circle and read Act Two. They took it in turns, taking whichever part came next, reading that character's lines and letting the next person take the next lines. Kevin picked Joanna to go first. She read her lines, overdoing the old age so that Kevin stopped her and said he thought the play didn't really work if Lear was too dodderly at the start. He said that the king had to start off bullish so that he could fall apart. She remembered that all through the performances she slightly loved Kevin. She wanted to be comfortable in herself the way that he was in himself. He'd turned all the odd things about himself into charming eccentricities. All of this let him play to the crowd in a way that struck her as modest.



On impulse she texted the number she still had for him. *Remember me? I was Goneril...* He texted back that he did remember and with questions about where she was and what she was doing. Did she want to meet? Lunch maybe? *Yes. Don't tell me any more – save it all till we meet.*

She was enjoying the Morning Pages. There wasn't time to do them the way you were supposed to, so she wrote them straight after she dropped the boys off at school. She stopped for coffee straight afterwards and wrote them sitting on a stool in the window of the café. In the ten minutes between seeing the boys off and getting there it was an effort not to plan what she was going to write. She enjoyed that too. And the days she could manage it, it was worth it for the surprise of what came up when she wrote.

Now the boys were off school, she missed that time. She'd been writing the pages first thing, across the kitchen table from Suresh, before the boys got up. *Suresh thinks this is a waste of time, she wrote this morning. It's obvious. He's looking at me bemusedly, like I'm one of the boys. He's humouring me, but never mind. I'm not going to explain to him what I'm doing. Why should I? He thinks I'm writing about him. He thinks I'm putting down all my complaints about him. I know because he said so. Not when it was just me and him. He said it when Liz was here. Funny how he could only say it to me by saying it to Liz so that I'd hear. What he said was, 'That's her book of bile. It's the hundred and one things she hates about me.' I said I'd been surprised how little I'd written about him and he seemed disappointed. I said most things that came up her things from the past. Liz said that's what she hated about it. She said it was self-indulgent. The two of them agreed on that. I've started thinking that it's less about what you put than the act of putting time aside to do it. It tells me how much I put off because it doesn't fit in with Suresh or with the boys. I put what they need first and there's no time left. Obviously. But with the Pages I get a buzz from being pragmatic.*

*Sometimes I rush them, like I'm doing now, just to fill the space as quickly as I can. I put anything even if I know it's boring. But it's still satisfying. I'll try to say why.*

– All good? Suresh said when she put down her pen and closed the book.

– I think so.

Hemu arrived to collect the boys. He was taking them for *dosas* in Bayswater and afterwards to watch *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden. They were going by Tube and the idea of the three of them travelling together made her nervous. What if Hemu was distracted and Rohan wandered off? The week before, when they'd met Suddah and Harkashan he'd gone missing for two hours, not picking up his phone, and when he turned up he said he'd gone for a walk to clear his head. She didn't believe him. Now he'd stopped just inside the front gate. She could see him through the kitchen window. He'd stopped to take a call.

– If something happens to Dada, you have to call me straight away, she said to Adam.

– Is Dada ill?

He put down his pen and frowned at her.

– No.

– So why would I need to call you?

– It's not just for today.

She smiled at him, wanting him to not to think something was wrong.

– If something unexpected were to happen, I want to make sure that know what to do

– I'd call you or Dad.

Rohan was folding a sheet of paper into a plane.

– Or you could call 999.

– I'm sure nothing's going to happen like that, Joanna said.

– Mum, I'm not stupid, Adam said.

She smiled at him again and the doorbell rang. – I know you're not. It's just me.

– You've put up the picture, Hemu said when he came inside. – It looks nice.

The evening he gave her the picture, she pressed him on where he'd got it. He said he'd had a dizzy spell and the man who stopped to see if he was OK had made the banknote.

– He did me a favour, Hemu told her. – I just wanted to do something in return. So I bought the picture. I don't have any use for it myself.

In the kitchen, he went straight to the boys, still sitting at the table. He stood behind Rohan and put his hands on Rohan's shoulders. – All ready to go?

He had on the same black overcoat he'd been wearing the week before at the restaurant. He looked dapper in it. Solid, monied, his hair combed, shirt with the drycleaner's creases pressed into the front. He looked imposing. And she was reassured. She was also nervous. She asked him did he have time for tea and he said, – Half a cup only.

– Hemu, she said, while she filled the kettle. – When you asked me to work for you, was it a serious offer?

– Yes and no, he said. – Why? You're thinking of saying yes?

– Only it'd been a funny day.

He sat down on the chair next to Rohan and put his car keys on the table.

– All of that's been dealt with. I've given him back all the letters. And I gave him some earrings. He can give them to his daughter. Or do whatever he wants with them.

– That was thoughtful.

She was testing him because it was impossible to read him. There was nothing to show what he was thinking.

He said, – I thought about it all evening that night and all of the next day. Actually that night I didn't even sleep. And I thought, what harm is there in humouring him?

– And you're happy with that?

– What can I do? Where’s the benefit to me if I hold a grudge against the fellow?

He paused and she wasn’t sure if it was a genuine question. Then he said, – Actually, when you think about it, it doesn’t change anything.

She put the mug of tea down in front of him. Rohan said, – Can I have tea?

– You can have tea at the restaurant. They’ll have very good tea there. Even I’ve only got time for half a cup now.

He drank from his mug and then passed it to Rohan. – Here, he said. – You can take one sip.

– And about you and me working together?

– Listen, he said. – All that was off the top of my head.

– Don’t think I haven’t thought about it, Joanna said. Because I have.

He got up from his chair to spoon sugar into his tea.

– Either way the offer stands. You and I would make a good team. You should feel you can do whatever you like.

– It’s not that I’m ruling it out completely.

Hemu shook his head. – Take as much time as you need. Talk it over with Suresh. If you decide to do something else and then change your mind, the offer will still be there. It doesn’t matter how long.

– Is it that you need help?

He smiled and for a moment Joanna thought he was angry.

– It’s you I’m thinking about. You have lot of things going for you. You should do something with your talents.

He shook his head.

– Don’t let it go to waste.

– I’m not.

He held up his hands. – Don’t be angry. I’m not telling you what to do.

– I’m not angry. I’m just not sure.

He smiled again. – You misunderstand. I don’t want to tell you how to be. Everything you’ve done with Adam and Rohan. I’m not saying it’s a waste. Not everyone could do what you’ve done.

– It’s not like I still don’t have my hands full.

– What I’m saying is the time will come, sooner than you think, you’ll have time on your hands. You should be thinking now what you’re going to do with it. Don’t wait for something to come to you.

– I am thinking, she said.

Hemu cleared his throat and took his mug over to the sink. He rinsed it under the tap and put it on the draining board. Had she ever seen him do that?

– Even I’m making plans. I’ve been talking to a fellow, a wealth manager. Succession planning. You and Suresh will need to see him too. After Christmas I’ll set up a meeting. If you could speak to Suresh and let him know.

– Main thing is I want to make sure is that everything goes to them.

He turned so that he was facing the boys.

– One day, when you’re both grown up, you boys are going to be very rich.

– Really? Rohan said. – Mum?

– But that doesn’t mean you can be lazy. You have to be like me. You have to continue working hard so that you can give your grandchildren everything that you’ve had and some more. If you leave behind more than you’ve taken for yourself, you’ll have done the right thing. Do you understand?

They did seem to understand. Both of them were looking at him seriously.

He clapped his hands together loudly. – Now, who's ready to go?

– Have you put the house key somewhere safe? she said to Adam, checking to see he was buttoning his coat and that Rohan had his gloves.

He undid the top pocket of his coat and held it open to show her the key inside.

– I should be home before you, but text me when you're on your way back.

– Take your time, Hemu said. – I don't have anything to rush for. I can sit with them for as long as you want.

\*

The address Kevin had sent was on Lower Marsh, across the road from the Old Vic theatre. You'll know which shop is mine when you see it, he'd written in the email. The shop was a jumble of bookcases and tables intricately put together. It's what you would build, Joanna thought, if you were filming a novel that Iris Murdoch or Penelope Fitzgerald had written. On the floors, books were piled in stacks and packed into every corner. The lighting was old fashioned, hanging metal lampshades and the brightest light came from a tall window on the back wall. From what she could see, still holding back so that she could look around without Kevin seeing her from where he was sitting, behind a desk at the back of the shop, the shelves were many, built up around the walls and in rows like the book stacks in an overstocked library. The effect, so strikingly a work of painstaking creation, was tangibly reminiscent of the feeling she loved of drifting into a big novel so that she felt she was there, actually living in the world it described, snug in the company of the characters. An attention to detail so thorough that the narrow aisle down the middle of the shop partly lit by a shaft of light falling from the window caught dust motes like the confetti in a snow globe. At the end

of the aisle, framed by a large mirror on the wall behind him, Kevin was sitting typing on his laptop.

Kevin's fair hair was longer than she remembered. It fell loosely over his face and several times while she watched, he lifted his arms and pulled his hair back as if he were going to tie it back. This must be a new habit. It showed how he'd put on weight, giving a broadness to his chest and shoulders that was also new. He'd changed the glasses he used to wear, which were round wire frames that gave him his nickname, to heavier black ones. John-boy Walton they used to call him, not just for the glasses. He liked to wear checked shirts. He had on a blue jumper, which gave him a chunky look. The impression she had was that he would look at her and think she had aged more, or changed more from how she used to be. An old-fashioned bell rang when she pushed open the door and he looked up. He came to meet her and caught her in a bear hug, which wasn't what he'd have done before, but it was nice.

– I saw you checking me out.

– You look good. I like the long hair.

– You haven't changed at all, he said.

She shook her head.

– Really. I'd have known you anywhere. You're exactly the same.

– I'll give you the tour, he said. – It'll take three and a half minutes.

The conversation, a rush of news while he showed her the idiosyncratic sections he'd made. Was she married? Who to? Who he was married to. Her boys. His little girl, who was three. He said the shop was newish. They'd been open for ten months. His wife's father died last year and they've moved to his house, which was in Clapham. It was the house where his wife grew up. And for the first time ever, they had a decent amount of cash, so they'd sold

the small flat they'd had before and sold almost every possession they owned, and put everything into the shop.

– There's method in it, he said. – I want people to come in thinking they're after one thing and find something they weren't even looking for.

– I love it, she said.

– And there's a cynical element to it too. Obviously.

He pulled his hair back again. How stocky he'd become. It looked good on him.

– I want people to come in for one book and buy three.

He grinned at her, and she thought of when he used to come to her room and ask to borrow five pounds til the end of the week. It made her sad that so many years had passed and they hadn't been in touch.

– Truthfully, it was a complete nightmare. We've done a big refit. We had problems with the council. I'm just hoping we can get through the year. We're living in our overdraft. I've been waking up in the middle of the night and it feels like we're doing something incredibly self-indulgent.

For a moment, he was distracted, noticing a book placed incorrectly on one of the shelves. He pulled it out, looked at the back and then put it next to his laptop.

– I think I might have overdone it with my sections. I wanted to do something a bit out of left field, but I've overthought it.

– I like it, she said. She ran her fingers along the edge of one of the shelves. – You could put a book in one section one week and then decide it had to go somewhere else. It's like the books are talking to each other.

He picked up his keys and his gloves from the table where his laptop was and he flicked the gloves playfully against her arm. – So now that you're a kept woman, you can get lunch.



There was a pub across the road.

– What about the shop? she asked him.

– It's my shop, he said. I can close it whenever I want.

On the way, they talked about her parents. How her dad still went to the office every day and her mum had gone to college to do the degrees she missed the first time round because of getting married and being pregnant.

– She's doing her dissertation, Joanna said. – It's on climate change. She's turned into a bit of an activist.

Kevin said. – I wonder if she'd come and do a talk at the shop. I want to stay open in the evenings. Arrange for talks, get people in, give them a drink, hope they buy something.

– She might. She's being quite militant about it. I'm a bit jealous.

He got out his phone and typed something on it. – I'm going to ring her today. She could be our debut performance. It's Gillian, right?

She said, – I can't believe you remembered my mum's name.

– Remember how your parents used to turn up on a Saturday afternoon and take a group of us out for dinner to the Italian? I always thought it was so generous-spirited, how they'd come along and round up whoever was about.

– My dad's always been keen on the grand gesture.

– I was envious.

– They were checking up on me. Making sure I wasn't pregnant, seeing who my friends were. With my dad, I think he wanted the experience he'd missed out on because he never went to college.

– Your dad was good to me. He lent me money once.

– I didn't know that.

– He told me not to tell you. It was for a suit. I had a job interview.

– He never dished money out to me like that.

– I think he felt sorry for me.

He rubbed the back of his neck slowly with his palm. – I tried to give him the money back but he wouldn't take it. I sent him a couple of bottles of whiskey with a thank you letter.

– And?

– He wrote back saying it wasn't necessary, but appreciated, and that if I ever needed anything, I should get in touch.

She was annoyed by this. The ease of his helping Kevin out. Somebody he hardly knew. With Joanna and her brother, he had them on a frugal budget for term time and in the holidays they had to find jobs. It annoyed her to hear of this other side to him, which he must've deliberately kept from her, as if he saw something in Kevin that he wanted to reward.

Kevin said, – I was over by where you live last week. I bought a load of books from the estate of an old guy who'd lived in a flat on West Heath Road.

He said that the old man had left almost a thousand book and that he'd bought a selection off the daughter. When he was there, the daughter had watched him all the time, probably because she thought he was going to slip a few things into his bag without paying for them. She acted like she was casting pearl before swine, but it was fine because he'd spent an afternoon going through the shelves and finding treasures.

– It's pretty up there, he said. It was an old council flat that looked out over the heath. Must be worth a small fortune.

When they'd finished eating, they stayed on for coffee and she asked him outright if he felt conflicted about the money for the shop coming from his father-in-law.

– No.

He laughed again and made the same gesture she'd seen him do before, rubbing the back of his neck.

– I thought about doing something less risky, he said. – But sometimes you have to take a risk. I don't mean just the money. I mean, you have to say, I want to give this a try and if it's a disaster, then it is what it is. If the worst happens, you take it on experience and try something else. I can live with that

It was right what he said. She was thinking about Hemu. Would it be so bad to take him up on his offer of joining him in his business? There was no shame in taking someone's help when they offered it to you.

– Listen, he said. – We've both fallen on our feet. There's no guilt in it.

– It's nearly four o'clock, Joanna said when they were paying their bill.

– Do you need to get back?

– No. I've got plenty of time.

– Come back to the shop. Let me find you a book.

On the way out, he held open the door for her. –I'm glad you got in touch, he said. – We'll do this again, right?

– Yes.

In the shop, while he went looking for it, she looked through his shelf of books that were set in Japan. – I think you'd like something dreamlike.

He came up stood close to her, handed a collection of stories that were set in Tokyo

– I'll give you something else too.

– It's fine.

– Holiday reading.

– I don't have time to read much now.

– Then, you should make time, he said. – Do you know Mavis Gallant's stories?

– I don't think so.

– You'll love them. They're all about people ending up somewhere completely different to where they thought they were going. She writes about things being not what they seem.

– Give me something I don't know I'm going to like, she said, turning towards him with a book in her hand. – But not from over there.

She meant the corner section he had for second-hand books. – Used books give me the creeps.

– Why? He gave her a smiling frown. – It's like somebody has softened them up for you.

– It's like wearing someone else's underwear.

– Prima donna.

He was standing close to her and she elbowed him. He reached up and put his hand on the side of her face. He stroked his thumb on the skin behind her ear. The bell over the shop door rang and he stepped backwards to peer into the aisle between the rows of shelves. A man's voice said, – You're here now; you weren't before.

– I was playing hookie. How are you, Peter?

– I've brought those reviews we were talking about.

Kevin winked at Joanna and turned towards Peter, who'd arrived at the row of shelves where they were standing.

– Peter, this is Joanna. Joanna - Peter. Joanna and I were next door neighbours at college.

– Remind me which one.

– Merton.

– That’s right.

Peter was carrying a satchel, which he opened and pulled a sheaf of papers from.

– Do you have the Jean Yves Tadis biography of Proust?

– I think I do.

– Do you know Proust? Peter said to Joanna.

– I’ve had a go. He doesn’t really do it for me.

– What you find is that it really does bear a slow reading. The detail seems to gain another dimension when you take your time.

– He’s right, Kevin said.

– If I were you I’d give him another try. No other writer since has been as good as him at making time for the subconscious mind to come to the surface.

Kevin said, – I think you’ll enjoy the debate on James’s influence on Proust.

– Oh, yes, definitely, Peter said. – I will.

He’d taken the book from Kevin and was flicking through it. Kevin looked at her over his head and winked.

After Peter had gone, Kevin came back to where Joanna was standing. She was in the same place, leaning against an armchair. He put his hands on her shoulders.

– You did that on purpose, she said.

– What?

– You left me hanging on.

– I did.

– You were enjoying it.

– So were you.

He said. – Take your coat off.

While she was undoing the buttons, he lifted her hair from underneath her scarf and when she looked up, he kissed her. The feel of it was soft, hesitant, as if he wasn't sure of her response. She kissed him back, also holding back. He must've felt that she wasn't sure because he stopped. He lifted his head to look at her and she put her hand on the side of his neck to kiss him again. This new kiss, that when they leaned into each other again, was sure and meant, and she slid back to lean against the bookshelf, letting him follow her. Something giving way in her legs while Kevin pulled off her scarf.

– Where can we go? she said.

– There's a room at the back.

– What if somebody comes?

He went over to the door and turned the lock.

In the storeroom, there was no space to lie, or even sit, so they leant against the door and it clicked shut. He fumbled with the belt on his trousers, managing to get the spoke of his buckle stuck in the belt hole, and while he struggled to free himself, he kept apologising. It was difficult to find each other at first, and they tried with stop-start jolts and small shuffles of their feet until Joanna, with her shoulders braced against the door and one knee wedged against the wall, was able to hold him inside her and they found a rhythm that was deliberate and greedy. She closed her eyes and let her hands fall from his shoulders to his hips, letting him decide now when to go faster and when to slow down, giving herself up completely to the delight of not knowing which place on her body he would touch next.

## **PART II: CRITICAL COMMENTARY**

### **Contemporary Uses of Omniscient Narration:**

#### **Theories and Case Studies**

## Introduction

The opening sentence of my novel *All this is for you* reads, ‘Hemu Daswani never thought he would outlive his wife.’<sup>1</sup> How does the narrator claim to know of Hemu’s expectation that he will die before his wife? And what does the narrator mean by presenting the information as ostensibly straightforward exposition? The range of responses to these questions includes a narrator who acts like a person who knows Hemu well, or a narrator who temporarily steps inside Hemu’s consciousness to experience his thoughts directly, or a narrator with direct access to Hemu’s thoughts, a unique form of literary telepathy not available to people in real life. The apparent simplicity of this opening may suggest to readers a different approach, in which the narrator may deliberately be using sleight of hand to steer the reader in a particular direction, or perhaps drawing her into Hemu’s own misjudged expectations? What else, other than the obvious, might the narrator be suggesting and how should the reader intuit other ostensibly straightforward expository statements? What does the sentence imply about Hemu’s relationship with the other members of his family? These are key questions in critical debate evolving alongside developments in practice of the use of omniscient narration in realist fiction.

More than an ordinary bystander limited by what can be observed or intuited by a person in real life, my novel’s narrator has direct access to the thoughts of two main characters and an ability to take on the cadences of their thoughts and feelings. At other times, the narrator stands apart from the story-world, offering a bird’s-eye view. While the narrator’s privileged access to the characters’ inner lives and the unrestricted ability to move

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel White, *All this is for you* and *Contemporary Uses of Omniscient Narration: Theories and Case Studies* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, Goldsmiths College, 2018), p. 7.



backwards and forwards in time is characteristic of traditional literary omniscience, the performance of the narrator's privilege is more nuanced and complex because the capacity to inhabit the inner voices of Hemu and Joanna does not imply a definitive understanding of their motives or their actions. Rather, this ability implies a difference between the omniscience demonstrated by the narrator of my novel and a more traditional omniscient narrator due to an absence of intrusive authorial comment and an abstention from drawing conclusions as to who is accountable for the novel's events.

*All this is for you* is a novel concerned both structurally and thematically with point of view. Its conflicts are family conflicts taking place between people who know each other well—husbands and wives, parents and their adult children—but who more often than not fail to understand each other. The idea of co-existing points of view as a defining element of human relationships is a central feature of my creative writing, and *All this is for you* alternates chapters from the point of view of Hemu with those from the point of view of Joanna as a principal structural device to explore these matters. My use of a third-person narrator who divides its time equally between the protagonists aims to avoid direct competition between the two for a reader's sympathies. Instead, I challenged myself to engage a reader's sense of impartiality and empathy with the different viewpoints of both characters.

In this commentary, I discuss the use of omniscient narration as an effective method for creating an ample space for readers to engage with the multiple perspectives involved in the complexities of close family relationships and to explore ideas of selfhood: in particular, how do the protagonists retain a personal sense of identity alongside their roles within the family? I contest the view that the omniscient mode lacks the flexibility to present the complexities, uncertainties, and unresolvedness of close human relationships, arguing instead that the sense of space it establishes between the reader and the story-world facilitates a

degree of subjectivity – a territory on which a reader engages with the story-world in a way that is coloured by his or her own personal experiences and interpretations. In particular, I interrogate literary omniscience as an effective device for presenting complex characters who display uncertainties of motive, an inability (or unwillingness) to engage in self-reflection, and a failure to articulate their most unresolved and deeply felt emotions. I consider the extent to which an omniscient narrator may be an effective device for articulating the emotional conflicts that the characters are unable to articulate themselves, the implications of using an omniscient narrator that demonstrates neutrality, and the ways in which a narrator's neutrality may enhance the dramatic presentation of my central theme of the complexities of close human relationships. I seek, throughout the commentary, to reflect on differences arising in relation to the sometimes distinct concerns of critics and practitioners, noting Wayne C. Booth's observation in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) that, 'it is not surprising to hear practising novelists report that they have never had any help from critics about point of view.'<sup>2</sup>

Chapter One considers the theory of literary omniscience. I discuss the continuing relevance to contemporary realist fiction of an analogy that compares the processes of authorship to God's creation of the world. Further, I debate how theories of point of view, free indirect speech, and focalization approach literary omniscience. The commentary avoids pursuing a strict definition of literary omniscience or suggesting an exhaustive list of elements required for a narrator to be considered omniscient. Instead, I examine the practice of literary omniscience as a collection of discrete techniques concerned with the development of character and theme to be employed, rejected or configured according to the particular narrative effects a fiction-writer is seeking. Chapter Two contemplates the practical matters

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983), (Kindle edition: University of Chicago Press, 2010), Kindle locations 2752-2755.

arising from these theories, with case studies of Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*,<sup>3</sup> selected stories by Alice Munro, and Elizabeth Strout's *Amy and Isabelle*.<sup>4</sup> The chapter focuses on the use of an omniscient narrator to conduct complex debate regarding conflicts of selfhood and the difficulties these conflicts bring to characters' close personal relationships. I discuss the dialogic effect of the narrator's observations alongside characters' private thoughts that are accessed by the narrator's privilege and consider a central idea of the practices of these writers that their characters do not entirely understand their own motivations. I consider also the relationship between actual lived experience and narrative: in particular, the presentation in these works of characters who adopt the real life tendency of people to use narrative strategies to create a personal sense of identity and to obtain a sense of meaningfulness in their lives—a reversal of the more common question of how real life influences narrative: asking how narrative influences real life. Chapter Two concludes with my reflection on the influence of these writers on the narrator of *All this is for you*.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (1961), (Kindle edition: Vintage, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Strout, *Amy and Isabelle* (1998), (Kindle edition: Simon & Schuster UK, 2011).

## CHAPTER ONE: CRITICAL CONTEXTS

### 1.1 The problem of literary omniscience

The *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for ‘omniscience’ defines its meaning associated with literary theory as ‘an attribute of the author or a third-person narrator: a full and complete knowledge concerning all the events of a narrative, and the private motives, thoughts, etc. of all the characters.’<sup>5</sup> A more extensive definition in the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* describes:

an ‘all-knowing’ kind of narrator very commonly found in works of fiction written as third-party narratives. The omniscient narrator has full knowledge of the story’s events and of the motives and unspoken thoughts of the various characters. He or she will also be capable of describing events happening simultaneously in different places—a capacity not normally available to the limited point of view of first-person narratives.<sup>6</sup>

These definitions point to a version of omniscience integrated with classic realism, one in which the narrator appears as the mouthpiece of the author and demonstrates so direct and compelling a narrative authority as to claim the single definitive perspective on the story

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<sup>5</sup> ‘omniscient, adj. and n.’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2018, <[www.oed.com/view/Entry/131256](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/131256)> [accessed 21 July 2018].

<sup>6</sup> Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, (Kindle Edition: Oxford University Press, 2015), Kindle locations 8757-61.

being told. They provide a starting point for a discussion on the precise meaning of literary omniscience, noting as the mode's central feature the narrator's extensive and privileged knowledge of the story-world, however they do not contemplate its capacity to adjust to the requirements of contemporary fiction. In particular, these definitions do not contemplate the use of omniscient narration by writers of fiction concerned with engaging readers in the complexities of human relationships by means of multiple perspectives on the same story events. Instead of an overseeing narrator offering a fixed and definitive account of the story-world, fiction of this type calls for a narrator capable of mediating the several perspectives of characters that co-exist alongside each other without asserting the persuasiveness or legitimacy of one over the others. Therefore these definitions are unable to recognize a form of omniscient narrator demonstrating a degree of knowledge beyond what could reasonably be expected of a person in real life, but which falls short of a complete and definitive knowledge of the story-world. Nor do these definitions approach the related matter of how variations in an omniscient narrator's performance of privileged knowledge affect genre and theme, for example, how the withholding and timely disclosure of information may be used to achieve particular dramatic effects, effects that Meir Sternberg describes as 'narrative's three universals—suspense [...], curiosity [...], surprise [...]'.<sup>7</sup>

A long-standing critical disapproval of literary omniscience identifies a timeworn mode of narrative too inflexible, judgemental, and wedded to the intrusive presence of the author to cope with the 'inward turn' of fiction in the hands of writers such as Henry James, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf. This position emerges from established narrative theory that plots novel development through Modernist and Postmodernist phases, suggesting that this a process of abandoning the 'authoritative rhetoric'<sup>8</sup> of omniscient narration and

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<sup>7</sup> Meir Sternberg, 'Omniscience in Narrative Construction: Old Challenges and New', *Poetics Today*, 28:4 (Winter 2007), p. 729.

<sup>8</sup> Booth, Kindle location 530.

replacing it with more reflexive narrative modes that are better suited to presenting the complexities, uncertainties, and unresolvedness of actual lived experience.

W. G. Sebald summarizes the canonical position on the shortcomings of the omniscient mode, claiming that,

fiction writing which does not acknowledge the uncertainty of the narrator himself is a form of imposture which I find very, very difficult to take. Any form of authorial writing where the narrator sets himself up as stagehand and director and judge and executor in a text, I find somehow unacceptable.<sup>9</sup>

David Shields argues in similar terms that uncertainty is the characteristic element of actual lived experience: therefore, fiction that fails to reflect uncertainty has no claim to be realist. ‘To think with any seriousness is to doubt,’ he writes. ‘Thought is indistinguishable from doubt. To be alive is to be uncertain.’<sup>10</sup> Mieke Bal has rejected the entire concept of literary omniscience, describing it as, ‘both phantasmagoric and ideologically manipulative.’<sup>11</sup> Bal and Shields highlight central difficulties that writers attempting to use an omniscient narrator as an objective and impartial narrative voice must seek to overcome. These objections, with Bal framing the mode as a kind of optical illusion, suggest that literary omniscience operates as a ‘sleight of hand’ that fiction-writers perform when they attempt to conceal their deliberate manipulations of temporality and privileged access to the character’s thoughts to

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<sup>9</sup> James Wood, ‘An Interview with W. G. Sebald’, *Brick*, Number 59 (Spring 1998), < <https://brickmag.com/an-interview-with-w-g-sebald/>> [last accessed 8 June 2017].

<sup>10</sup> David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, (Kindle edition: Penguin, 2010), p. 137.

<sup>11</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology, Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 72.

present them as a credible version of the spontaneity of real life. Taking a different approach from critics whose objections to literary omniscience may be described as ideological, Wallace Martin approaches the problems of the mode in more pragmatic terms. He notes a central challenge of fiction-writing, suggesting that, ‘from the perspective of narrative theory, the problem confronting the would-be realist involves form as well as content. What is required is a method combining the advantages of third-person narration with the authenticity secured in the first person.’<sup>12</sup>

The principle of ‘show don’t tell’ attempts to deliver the above combination. The principle, which continues to hold significance in the practice of fiction writing, was elaborated in Percy Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction* (1921). Lubbock outlines novel development around techniques, notably Henry James’ centres of consciousness, which dramatize the story-world. He writes that, ‘the art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be *shown*, to be so exhibited that it will tell itself.’<sup>13</sup> On this view, a novelist’s job is to enable readers to experience a story-world through the characters’ actions, words and perceptions, rather than by means of description and other forms of commentary from the narrator. A group of realists whose work is frequently cited as exemplars of this principle includes Anton Chekhov, Gustave Flaubert, and Ernest Hemmingway, all noted for their use of techniques that create atmosphere and, in the case of Hemmingway’s iceberg theory, through the writer’s selection of what information to leave out. The effect, deemed to enhance the art of the novel, is to engage the reader in actively interpreting subtext and drawing her own conclusions on the story-world based on a reflexive sense of empathy with a novel’s characters. ‘Don’t show me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass,’<sup>14</sup> is Chekhov’s counsel to writers, advising that they focus

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<sup>12</sup> Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, (1987), p. 132.

<sup>13</sup> Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction*, (Kindle edition: Jonathan Cape, 2016), loc. 665.

<sup>14</sup> Avrahm Yarmolinsky, *The Unknown Chekhov*, (New York, Noonday Press, 1954), p. 14.

on the details of a scene that allow a reader to more place herself in the story-world, experiencing it as if she were standing in the shoes the character. Flaubert's similar guidance for authors to be, 'present, everywhere and visible nowhere'<sup>15</sup> lends itself to a dichotomy in which literary omniscience appears as a static and historical element. Applied strictly this method suppresses the heavy-handed authorial intrusions of traditional omniscient narration, in which the most significant relationship is the one between narrator and reader with the characters playing a supporting role.

In practice, however, the distinction is less stark, with Wayne C. Booth suggesting that showing not telling has been seized upon by critics as a convenient port in the storm of how best to manage the complications of mapping novel development and the techniques that characterize its progress. Booth describes an over-enthusiastic collective effort of critics to champion 'showing' as a new form for the novel, the sole means of moving on from outmoded 'telling'. The problem with this approach, writes Booth is that these efforts amount to a 'legitimate defence of the new which soon froze into dogma.'<sup>16</sup> He adds that, 'when such rule-making descended further into the hands of unabashed commercial critics, it was simplified to the point of caricature.'<sup>17</sup> Booth's caution is significant for a debate on the continuing relevance of literary omniscience as narrative mode capable of significant nuance and variation, which makes it suitable for fiction concerned with the complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties of lived experience.

In *How Fiction Works*, James Wood challenges the view that novel development is characterised by the increasingly absent author, suggesting that instead of disappearing from their novels authors have engaged in inventing techniques that disguise and downplay their interventions. He writes that 'omniscient narration is rarely as omniscient as it seems. To

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<sup>15</sup> Gustave Flaubert, (Letter 1852).

<sup>16</sup> Booth, Kindle location 554.

<sup>17</sup> Booth, Kindle location 567.



begin with, authorial style generally has a way of making third-person omniscience seem partial and inflected.’<sup>18</sup> Applied to the show don’t tell principle, the implication is that it is misleading to suggest that showing covers all narrative that refers to the characters’ thoughts and language, and that telling does the same in relation to the author’s thoughts and language, and that every sentence in a novel will fall clearly into one category or the other. Wood argues further that,

as soon as someone tells a story about a character, narrative seems to want to bend itself around that character, wants to merge with that character, to take on his or her way of thinking and speaking. A novelist’s omniscience soon enough becomes a kind of secret sharing.<sup>19</sup>

Wood is signalling the use of free indirect speech as a significant technique that writers employ to manage too strict a distinction between thoughts and forms of expression that readers are intended to understand as the author’s and those to be understood as a character’s. Free indirect speech is a deliberate manipulation of this distinction so that the author’s voice (in the guise of the narrator) merges with the character’s, making it a significant tool for writers seeking a narrator who demonstrates elements of classic omniscience but which also has the capacity to draw a reader into a sense of the spontaneous experience of the story-world described above. The main practical advantage of this technique as a form of omniscient narration is the playing down of authorial invasions into the minds of characters

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<sup>18</sup> James Wood, *How Fiction Works*, (Kindle edition, Random House, 2009), pp. 7-8.

<sup>19</sup> Wood, p. 8.

and a quietening of the writer's own voice inside the story-world. However, the use of free indirect speech requires a considered approach. Since *All this is for you* is a novel concerned with the complexities of close relationships and the conflicting viewpoints that co-exist among characters sharing close family bonds, the narrator's voice plays an important role as the mediator of the different voices and perspectives that emerge. At times, I have found it convenient to preserve the narrator's voice as distinct from the character's, and it has been necessary for the narrator's voice to merge with that of either Hemu or Joanna, most often to put into words a feeling that they could not or would not articulate for themselves. The case studies in Chapter Two of this commentary explore the approach I have taken with these matters by examining the advantages and challenges that literary omniscience has posed to my use of a third-person narrator presented as an impartial intermediary between reader, character and writer.

## **1.2 The Author-God analogy**

A major obstacle for theorists who support the continuing relevance of literary omniscience and for writers seeking to use the mode in a contemporary context is its long-standing association with aligning an author's act of creating the story-world of her novel with God's act of creating the world. Paul Dawson's recent study of the practice of literary omniscience in contemporary fiction describes this analogy as the 'foundational metaphor'<sup>20</sup> of the omniscient mode. Dawson draws a distinction between the ideological function of the metaphor, concerned with theories of authorial creativity, and the elaboration of theories of narrative method, which consider the mechanics of storytelling. With the focus on narrative

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Dawson, *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator: Authorship and Authority in Twenty-First Century Fiction*, (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013), p. 34.

method, the central difficulty of the Author-God analogy lies in how it confronts a narrator's knowledge. Accounting for the basis and implications of an omniscient narrator's knowledge is problematic, in part because it calls for an approach to forms of knowledge that outstrip those available to people in real life. Equally problematic is the sureness of what an omniscient narrator knows of a story-world. The qualities of certainty, a lack of self-reflection, and the absence of doubt, together with the superhuman forms of knowledge available to an omniscient narrator contribute to the view of literary omniscience as a device lacking the capacity for nuance or for supporting multiple views of the story-world.

However, Meir Sternberg argues that an omniscient narrator's superhuman knowledge is the characteristic element of literary omniscience. He claims that omniscient narration continues to be a significant narrative device and, further, that the Author-God analogy holds central importance to a narrative theory of omniscience. Sternberg maintains that the concept of an all-knowing god is so universal that it continues to serve as an appropriate reference point for narrative theory. He writes that,

humans have always easily coped with omniscient narrative, because the divine model and its previous literary instantiations have supplied them with all the epistemic know-how necessary for the purpose. They know all that they need to know, in the appropriate, pattern-(re)constructive sense of knowledge.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Sternberg (2007), p. 728.

On this view, the debate regarding the hows and whys of what an omniscient narrator knows is immaterial. Instead, Sternberg suggests that using the Bible as a model of superhuman knowledge allows for narrative theory to accept literary omniscience as a matter of narrative fact. Therefore, attempts to categorize the degrees of an omniscient narrator's knowledge as, for example full, limited or restricted, are misplaced. All omniscient narrators know everything about their story-world, and the sole element of variation is in the performance of this knowledge to readers.

Central to this approach is 'superknowledge', which Sternberg uses to describe an omniscient narrator's extensive awareness of the story-world. 'Superknowledge' is Sternberg's term for knowledge that is available to a narrator that is unavailable to people in real life. This knowledge includes a characters' thoughts and unexpressed feelings, past events that would not be known to other characters because, for example, they are private or beyond the scope of the story-world, and knowledge of the future that goes beyond the reasonable speculations of people in real life. Extended beyond factual knowledge, the term also implies heights of perception and understanding that surpass the abilities of real people. Sternberg writes that, 'high epistemic privilege arises therefrom not in God's image—as if ready-made and uniform—but in God's most suitable image as all-knower, always relative to the discursive job underway, the author's or the reader's and analyst's.'<sup>22</sup> According to Sternberg, literary omniscience can acknowledge its ideological origins without continuing to subscribe to them. His pragmatic approach allows the debate to focus on the broader and more practical matter of narrative authority: in particular, the endless variations that are possible in the performance of an omniscient narrator's privileged knowledge and the effects that fiction writers create by its use.

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<sup>22</sup> Sternberg (2007), p. 684.

Jonathan Culler's and William Nelles' separate challenges to Sternberg dispute the pertinence of the Author-God analogy to the analysis of narrative mode, with both setting out an alternative approach to the relationships between writer, narrator, and reader than one based on the concept of literary omniscience. Culler can find no other basis for the concept of literary omniscience than the Author-God analogy, which he argues is flawed since 'it conflates and confuses several different factors that should be separated if they are to be well understood.'<sup>23</sup> The principal factors Culler refers to are the extent of an author's knowledge of her story-world and the quality of that knowledge, neither of which, he argues, the foundational metaphor clarifies.

The incompatibility of the association of authorship with God's knowledge of His creation begins with Culler noting that while authors rightly claim a more extensive knowledge of their story-worlds than the material contained in the novel itself, there are limits to what even the author can claim to know. For example, while it is reasonable to assume that an omniscient god would have extensive knowledge of the lives of the children of Emma Woodhouse and Mr. Knightly, the same assumption cannot not reasonably be made of Jane Austen because 'novelists are not omniscient in this sense, about aspects of the lives of their characters not touched on in the book.'<sup>24</sup> Culler also queries how much of the information passed to a reader has the quality of God-given knowledge, writing that, 'when the novelist writes that Mr. Knightley came to dinner, she cannot be wrong, but that is a power of invention, of incontrovertible stipulation, not a matter of knowledge.'<sup>25</sup> Rather than being concerned entirely with a form of superhuman knowledge available to authors, the

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<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Culler, 'Omniscience', *Narrative*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Jan., 2004), pp. 22-34, p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> Culler, p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> Culler, p. 24.

range of narrative effects contemplated by the term ‘literary omniscience’ includes the ‘conventional performative power of language, or, at best, omnipotence, not omniscience.’<sup>26</sup>

Culler positions literary omniscience around ‘four sorts of phenomena’ to indicate the principal techniques an author uses to establish the incontrovertible authority of her narrator over the story. These phenomena are ‘performative authoritativeness’, meaning the generalized statements a narrator makes about the story-world, which the reader is expected to accept on face value; the omniscient narrator’s privileged access to the characters’ inner worlds; the intrusions that remind the reader that she is being told a story of which the narrator is in complete control; and the narrator’s reflections and counsels that underline the meaning the writer intends the reader to take from the story.

‘Performative authoritativeness’ distinguishes between straightforward expository statements and ‘generalizations, aphorisms, opinions, moral views—which by convention are *not* taken as constitutive of the world of the novel and may receive varying degrees of acceptance from readers.’<sup>27</sup> Culler cites the opening of *Emma* (1815), which describes Emma Woodhouse as ‘handsome, clever, and rich’,<sup>28</sup> as an example of straightforward exposition covered by the convention, comparing it with the opening of *Anna Karenina* (1878). Tolstoy’s opening states that, ‘all happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way’,<sup>29</sup> which Culler offers as an example of the type of statement that invites a reader’s further consideration. However, the description of Emma is less a matter of straightforward exposition than Culler suggests. Austen’s opening sentence performs a sleight of hand in which the terms ‘handsome’ and ‘rich’ lend an initial sense of factual authenticity to the description of Emma as clever. This apparent simplicity disguises the fact

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<sup>26</sup> Culler, p. 24.

<sup>27</sup> Culler, pp. 26-7.

<sup>28</sup> Jane Austen, *Emma* (1815), (Kindle edition: Random House, 2007), p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Leo Tolstoy, trans. by Louise Maude, *Anna Karenina*, (Kindle Edition: Random House, 2010), p. 1.

that the novel hinges on Emma's (and the reader's) recognition that being clever is not as uncomplicated as might first appear.

In the cases of *Emma* and *Anna Karenina*, the use of an omniscient narrator is deliberately ambivalent, calculatingly disguising whether it express the narrator's privilege or a friend's generalization. The purpose is, instead, to draw readers in one direction so that as the novel debates its themes more fully, they become aware that the opening statement is more layered than it originally seemed and that, in fact, it sets up the central questions that the novel explores. The opening sentence of my novel works in a similar manner. The statement that Hemu does not expect to outlive his wife may be, as Culler suggests regarding *Emma* 'a permissible sort of generalization,'<sup>30</sup> such as friends may know about each other, but it is more nuanced.

Regarding the reporting of innermost thoughts and feelings, Culler suggests that focalization resolves many of the difficulties. 'If there is a consciousness about,' he writes, 'as there is in focalized narratives, we feel less need to invent another person who knows what goes on in the first character's head.'<sup>31</sup> However, access to a character's private thoughts remains difficult when they are not being focalized. Culler suggests that the idea of telepathy is more acceptable since it avoids religious associations and captures a more episodic reading of a character's mind than the idea of omniscience, which he suggests is characterized by 'narrators who know everything all at once'.<sup>32</sup> However, it is difficult to see how a more viable theory is arrived at by replacing one mystical concept with a different concept that is still essentially supernatural.

Nelles seeks to place literary omniscience at a remove from all ideological associations, aligning it instead with the more worldly model of infallibility. He disputes the

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<sup>30</sup> Culler, p. 27.

<sup>31</sup> Culler, p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> Culler, p. 29.

sense of indivisibility implied by the Author-God analogy, which he claims is too restrictive, an all-or-nothing approach to literary omniscience, which positions the mode as a, ‘limiting dichotomy that prevents us from exploring alternatives models.’<sup>33</sup> Further to the difficulties posed by a concept characterized by indivisibility, Nelles suggests that a tendency to confuse omniscience with reliability has further misdirected the debate. ‘As far as factual or mimetic matters go, virtually all narrators are reliable—lying narrators are very rare’,<sup>34</sup> he writes. Matters of fact and public record are straightforward; however, the views and judgements expressed by a narrator may be more nuanced. Quoting Jane Austen’s ‘truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife’,<sup>35</sup> Nelles notes that the writer’s real purpose here is not to ask readers to accept or discount a statement being claimed as a fact, but to reflect on how the characters and the events of the novel intersect with it. The infallibility alternative that Nelles proposes as a replacement for these unhelpful concepts relies on a ‘toolbox’ approach, ‘with different novelists using the different tools within it in distinctive ways’ and which operates around the ‘four core attributes’ of omnipotence, omnitemporality, omnipresence, and telepathy.<sup>36</sup>

In both cases, the proposed terminology appears problematic since it fails to address the most significant criticisms of omniscient narration. In the case of Nelles’ infallible narrator, if the central objection of theorists to the omniscient mode is that it is too certain and too unyielding in its capacity to accommodate doubt or differences of perspective on the story-world, it is difficult to see how an approach based around infallibility is better placed to remove those concerns. Describing a narrator as infallible suggests a single definitive view of the character and event, and that the relationship between narrator and reader is passive on

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<sup>33</sup> William Nelles, ‘Omniscience for Atheists: Or Jane Austen’s Infallible Narrator’, *Narrative*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (May 2006), pp. 118-31, p. 119.

<sup>34</sup> Nelles, p.120.

<sup>35</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), (Kindle edition: Vintage, 2014), p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> Nelles, p. 120.



the part of the reader in accepting the narrator's view. This approach does not allow for a mode of omniscient narrator, envisaged by the case studies in Chapter Two, in which an omniscient narrator operates as a complex moderator of information. Deployed as a type of moderator, the narrator's principal task is to present the story-world from an ostensibly neutral position. The aim is to present the characters' conflicts of selfhood and the complexities of their relationships without appearing to lead readers to particular conclusions.

Despite these views, Dawson notes that contemporary writers continue to choose omniscient narration and he asks, 'how then, are we to evaluate novels which employ an ostensibly redundant nineteenth-century form in the twenty-first century?'<sup>37</sup> The lingering ideological subtexts of the Author-God analogy pose a significant obstacle to an approach to literary omniscience which allows the focus to move to its fluidity and away from a perceived dogmatism. However, in the absence of the foundational metaphor, theorists have struggled to provide a rationale for the omniscient narrator's privilege. These elements are well illustrated by the conflicting approaches of Sternberg and Culler. If, as Sternberg argues, the longevity of the omniscient mode is rooted in its inherent flexibility, its capacity to 'not only change pattern, but even to come and go according to our frame of reference',<sup>38</sup> must it not also be the case that, as Culler suggests, it also displays several essential elements by which it distinguishes itself from alternative and even similar modes? The following sections consider how the different methodologies of free indirect speech, point of view, and focalization take account of the presence of an omniscient narrator.

### **1.3 Free indirect speech**

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<sup>37</sup> Dawson, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> Sternberg (2007), p. 684.

Roy Pascal begins *The Dual Voice* (1977),<sup>39</sup> his important study of the uses of free indirect speech in the nineteenth-century novel, by writing that, ‘novelists have always sought to present the inner life, the mental and emotional activities and responses of their invented characters, and for this purpose have used direct and indirect means.’<sup>40</sup> For novels using a third-person heterodiegetic narrator, the emphasis of Pascal’s claim is on the presence of a narrator who knows the minds of a novel’s characters and who can engage readers in the conflicts of the characters’ inner lives. He identifies as a flaw in the earliest accounts of free indirect speech, which sought to classify the technique as a function of grammar,<sup>41</sup> that the characteristic feature of free indirect speech is the use of a third-person narrator to allow readers to experience the story-world from within the private inner worlds of the characters.

Dorrit Cohn’s *Transparent Minds* (1978)<sup>42</sup> builds on this interest in the rendering of a character’s psychology using the term ‘narrated monologue’ in place of free indirect speech. She defines ‘narrated monologue’ as ‘the technique for rendering a character’s thought in his own idiom while maintaining the third-person reference and the basic tense of narration.’<sup>43</sup> By using it in preference to free indirect speech she is attempting to highlight the technique as a relational concept in which a writer can vary the degree to which the narrator’s voice merges with that of the character. She links ‘narrated monologue’ to her associated concepts of ‘quoted monologue’ and ‘psycho-narration’. If ‘narrated monologue’ is most closely aligned with free indirect speech, then ‘quoted monologue’ can be most closely associated with the third-person narrator’s direct reporting of thoughts, and ‘psycho-narration’ with the most indirect narration of these elements, in which the character’s voice takes over entirely from the narrator’s to reproduce the character’s uninterrupted thoughts. The rationale

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<sup>39</sup> Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice*, (New Jersey: Manchester University Press, 1977).

<sup>40</sup> Pascal, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> Pascal refers to a 1912 article by Charles Bally as the first use of the term ‘*style indirect libre*’.

<sup>42</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (1978), (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983).

<sup>43</sup> Cohn, p. 100.

underlying these three terms is to provide a scheme for evaluating how directly or indirectly a writer allows her narrator to access the private thoughts of characters.

Given this focus on orientating free indirect speech around the issue of how readers engage with the private worlds of characters, it is reasonable to ask whether the narrator remains significant to the concept. Pascal considers these matters in relation to the narrator of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, noting that, 'Flaubert wanted to hide the very function of story-telling as it were, to allow the story to tell and interpret itself, as far as this was possible; hence the narrator should, as he put it, 'transport himself into his characters.'<sup>44</sup> He writes further that the principal concern of Flaubert's realism is 'an imaginative self-submergence in the object, participation in the imagined character's experience, and communication of this intuitive experience.'<sup>45</sup> There are clear similarities between this description of Flaubert's use of free indirect speech in *Madame Bovary* and Yates' interest in a type of fiction, he describes in a 1972 Ploughshares interview in which a reader's immersive encounters with fictional characters leads her or him to reflect on their own personal experiences.

Such an approach appears to oppose a relationship between reader and character that is more closely associated with classic realism. The accepted view of the classic omniscient narrator is of a figure or voice that holds readers at a remove from a novel's characters and whose views and judgements they are intended to accept as the definitive perspective on the story being told. However, Pascal's study goes on to suggest in relation to Flaubert, that a more nuanced approach can be taken regarding relationships between narrator, character, and reader. He argues, that while free indirect speech and the idea of the unobtrusive author both play a key role in encouraging readers to become immersed in the experiences of characters, this does not imply still less requires a complete absence of narratorial comment.

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<sup>44</sup> Pascal, p. 98.

<sup>45</sup> Pascal, p. 98.

An important element in the type of reflexive realism practiced by the writers whose work features in the case studies in Chapter Two of this commentary is the balance of the subjective experiences of characters alongside the more detached and objective view of the narrator. Therefore, Pascal's analysis of *Madame Bovary* offers helpful guidance on the use of free indirect speech in practice, and in particular in relation to the decisions a writer makes as to how to balance the characters' voice in the form of expression, with the narrator's more neutral voice.

Having noted 'Flaubert's intention to render the narrator invisible', Pascal writes that, when Flaubert uses the narrator's voice, 'often the narratorial passages are loaded with valuation.'<sup>46</sup> He refers, by way of example, to the description of Emma's home town of Yonville, which he notes is presented using ostensibly objective language, but which also contains 'an occasional sly comment', such as 'the comparison of the statue of the Virgin in the church with a Sandwich Islands 'idol'', which Pascal considers 'an authorial piece of malice.' This is true also of the narratorial passages in *Revolutionary Road*. For example, Yates' description in the opening chapter of the arrival of theatregoers to the performance of *The Petrified Forest* reads,

the audience, arriving in a long clean serpent of cars the following night, were very serious too. Like the Players, they were mostly on the young side of middle age, and they were attractively dressed in what the New York clothing stores describe as Country Casuals.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Pascal, p. 100.

<sup>47</sup> Yates, pp. 6-7.

The description is neutral, except that the final phrase contains a discreet authorial judgement, with the reference to the marketing strategies of New York clothing stores suggesting a vain preoccupation among the audience members with their dress. The change in tone in Yates' description is subtle and, for a moment, it brings the narrator close to an outlook that will soon be associated more directly with the novel's protagonists.

Cohn's concept of 'narrated monologue' is also significant because she attaches considerable importance to how a writer manages the different degrees of directness in the reporting of a character's private thoughts. She notes that in the more indirect reporting of thoughts in the form of 'narrated monologue', 'by leaving the relationship between words and thoughts latent, the narrated monologue casts a peculiarly penumbral light on figural consciousness, suspending it on the threshold of verbalization in a manner that cannot be achieved by direct quotation.' She suggests further that 'this ambiguity is unquestionably one reason so many writers prefer the less direct technique.'<sup>48</sup> Regarding characters' conflicts of selfhood, a significant element of their struggles involves what they feel but cannot easily articulate. The feelings may be so fleeting or oblique that even the narrator is held back from articulating them. The concept of narrated monologue benefits, therefore, from recognising the subtleties of the relationship between a character's voice and the narrator's voice in giving readers a sense of what is felt but cannot easily be said.

However, the closeness of the narrator's voice and one or more of the characters is also signalled by Pascal as a 'problem that is inherent in the use of free indirect speech.'<sup>49</sup> He notes that Flaubert manages the problem by giving 'enough of a characteristic tang'<sup>50</sup> to the speech patterns of his characters to enable reader to identify when the narrator is speaking

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<sup>48</sup> Cohn, p. 103.

<sup>49</sup> Pascal, p. 104.

<sup>50</sup> Pascal, p. 104

using its own voice and when the voice belongs to one of the characters. How much importance should be attached, therefore, to the signalling of clear distinctions between objective narratorial comment and the use of free indirect speech? Pascal considers this question in relation to two aspects of *Madame Bovary*, both of which are relevant to the case studies which follow and to the approach I have taken to the use of free indirect speech in my novel. The first aspect concerns what Pascal describes as ‘the less formed, less articulated mental processes of a character, at a stage when they have not taken a recognisably verbal shape’ and ‘when non-articulate reactions are to be given, when we are to experience the mode in which a character sees a scene, responds to a landscape, etc.’<sup>51</sup> He considers a passage of Flaubert’s description of Emma’s coach journeys to Rouen, noting that ‘the precision and correctness of the description’ matches her sense of anticipating the meeting with her lover. However, he finds ‘the grand view of the city’,<sup>52</sup> which forms the middle section of the description to be problematic since it appears to be the author’s composed and reflective view rather than Emma’s own. The difficulty, Pascal writes, occurs if a reader understands the description of the view to be Emma’s response to the cityscape. The problem, he suggests, with Flaubert’s use of free indirect speech is that ‘since there is a relative lack of signals of its onset, one therefore may be misled the more easily when a descriptive narratorial passage occurs.’<sup>53</sup> His conclusion is that Flaubert, either by deliberate act or by omission, has not, on this occasion, made a clear distinction between narratorial comment and the use of free indirect speech.

Similar ambiguities are found in *Revolutionary Road*. For example, in the following passage, which describes Frank Wheeler’s state of mind when he agrees to his wife’s plan to move to France in pursuit of their dream life:

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<sup>51</sup> Pascal, pp. 104-5.

<sup>52</sup> Pascal, p. 105.

<sup>53</sup> Pascal, p. 105.

And of all the capitulations in his life, this was the one that seemed most like a victory. Never before had elation welled more powerfully inside him; never had beauty grown more purely out of truth; never in taking his wife had he triumphed more completely over time and space. The past could dissolve at his will and so could the future; so could the walls of this house and the whole imprisoning wasteland beyond it, towns and trees. He had taken command of the universe because he was a man, and because the marvellous creature who opened and moved for him, tender and strong, was a woman.<sup>54</sup>

It is difficult to know whether to attribute this figurative and rather writerly passage to Frank, or whether to decide that this is the voice of Yates' narrator using a more poetic form of expression than usual in an effort to capture Frank's relief and joy in having it confirmed that his wife admires him. In either case, the effect is jarring. A more arresting passage of free indirect speech might rely on more down-to-earth idiomatic phrases. If the comment is to be attributed to the narrator, its heady style is out of step with the more measured forms of expression the narrator uses elsewhere. The result is a passage that stands out from Yates' usual sure-footedness in judging these matters. It falls between free indirect speech and narratorial comment, suggesting a slip in the same terms as Pascal ascribes to Flaubert when he writes that, 'in the splendid set-piece description Flaubert's aesthetic interest has overcome

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<sup>54</sup> Yates, p. 121.

his artistic, he indulges his own response to the city landscape instead of constructing Emma's.'<sup>55</sup>

Pascal goes on to consider whether the reporting of a character's non-verbal responses to a scene ought accurately to fall within the scope of free indirect speech. His conclusion is that it should, suggesting that these episodes in which her 'impressions are recorded' encapsulate,

the essence of the free indirect form, namely, the reproduction of the inner processes of the character, expressed in the same syntactical form as objective narrative and embedded firmly in the narratorial account, but evoking the vivacity, the tone and gesture, of the character..<sup>56</sup>

#### **1.4 Point of view**

The relevance of a theory of point of view to the critical debate on omniscience is evident in relation to an approach to narrative examined by Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Booth polarizes narrative mood around ideas of reliability and unreliability: effectively a binary distinction between the unreliable first-person narrator and the reliable third-person narrator. 'The common idea,' writes James Wood in *How Fiction Works*, 'is that there is a contrast between reliable narration (third-person omniscience) and unreliable narration (the unreliable first-person narrator who knows less about himself than the reader eventually does).' He continues that, 'actually, first-person narration is generally more reliable than

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<sup>55</sup> Pascal, p. 107.

<sup>56</sup> Pascal, pp. 107-8.



unreliable; and third person “omniscient” narration is generally more partial than omniscient.’<sup>57</sup> Regarding the practical application of a theory orientated around the person of the narrative voice, the limitations for writers of the first person are clear. The narrator is limited to what he or she can know and how perceptive they are. Characters such as *All this is for you*’s Hemu do not suit a first-person narrative because they are not in the habit of self-reflection. Similarly, Joanna would manage equally badly as a first-person narrator owing to a habit of overthinking and losing the thread of her own narrative. However, a stricter approach to a third-person narrator, one that positions itself outside the story stumbles on the vexed question of its privileged access to characters’ thoughts. The question of how narrators can be both involved in the inner lives of the characters and detached from them signals the need for categories of third-person narrators that can, in effect, borrow some of the subjective qualities of first-person narrators and apply them to a narrative style that incorporates the objective elements of the third person.

Attempts to arrive at discrete categories of points of view have produced mixed results, with developments in the variety and type of narrators being used in practice outpacing the attempts of critics to categorize them. This is especially true in the case of third-person narrators: the realist novel has seen and continues to see an evolution around methods of access to consciousness and the effects that can be achieved both in terms of self-reflection and engaging readers in discussions of the human condition. Since an important territory for novels such as mine and the works I examine in Chapter Two, is the divergence between how a character presents himself or herself to the world and the internal conversation they have with themselves, any critical theory of narrative omniscience ought to accommodate the methods by which a writer balances the subjectivity of a character’s inner

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<sup>57</sup> James Wood, *How Fiction Works*, (Kindle edition: Random House, 2010), p. 5.

world with a more objective narrative voice that can engage a reader in an analysis of the character.

As a starting point for a cohesive theory, Norman Friedman's 1955 essay 'Point of View in Fiction: The Development of a Critical Concept' describes point of view as a method for analysing how writer, narrator, and the story subject stand in relation to each other. Friedman sets out eight separate categories, that are intended as a framework to understand these relationships, with their focus on matters such as who is talking to the reader, from what angle, using what 'channels of information', and from what distance to character and event. The categories, which follow a movement towards diminishing authorial interventions, begin with 'editorial omniscience' (characterized by extensive authorial commentary and analysis) and ending with 'the camera', which aims to deliver 'without apparent selection or arrangement, a "slice of life" as it passes before the recording medium.'<sup>58</sup> While these categories are useful as a series of signposts in the evolution of the novel and an acknowledgement of the multiplicity of positions that a third-person narrator can take in relation to character and event, they are flawed in that they assume both a unity of method on the part of a writer and the underlying assumption that a narrator can be captured entirely by a single one of the categories is not supported by the practice of fiction writing that seeks to vary the narrative voice at different times in the same novel.

Choice of point of view, argues Friedman, is governed by authorial purpose, whether that is 'tracing the growth of a personality as it reacts to experience', or 'the way in which personality and experience emerge as a mosaic from their impingement upon the sensibilities of several individuals', or alternatively, the desire 'to catch a mind in a moment of discovery.' This argument assumes that writers approach their work with a single and clear

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<sup>58</sup> Norman Friedman, 'Point of View in Fiction: The Development of a Critical Concept', *PMLA* 70:5 (December 1995) pp. 1160-84, (p. 1179).

purpose regarding what they are seeking to achieve. The reality is that writers discover their purposes (which may well be several rather than singular) in the process of the writing itself. Writers borrow elements from a range of narrative modes, shaping them to the requirements of particular episodes in the work. Accordingly, the most viable theories of narrative style allow for the presence of multiple elements rather than a commitment, decided by the writer in advance, to follow a particular model. One of the ways in which Friedman falls short of a comprehensive theory is that he invites simplistic responses to questions such as ‘who sees?’ His answer can only contemplate a first-person or third-person model.

This point is taken up by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, when he describes the limitations of point of view to provide a complete theory of narrative mode:

Perhaps the most overworked distinction is that of person. To say that a story is told in the first or the third person will tell us nothing of importance unless we become more precise and describe how the particular qualities of how the narrators relate to specific effects.<sup>59</sup>

By acknowledging the more substantive qualities of narrators in addition to quality of person, Booth progresses the debate on point of view, highlighting reliability as a central element of narrative mode. He notes that the degree of reliability invested in a narrator controls the degrees of distance between writer, narrator, character, and reader for a wide range of possibilities for dramatic irony. This focus on more substantive matters offers greater scope as a method for exploring intricacies of omniscience by seeking degrees of variations in third-person narrators. In particular, this focus acknowledges possibilities for points

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<sup>59</sup> Booth, Kindle location 2513.

of intersection, rather than absolute divergence, between third person and first-person narrators: circumstances in which third-person narrators borrow elements of first-person narrative and vice-versa, for example Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*, a first-person narrator exhibiting the reliability, distance, and commentary more usually associated with a traditional omniscient narrator.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the debate on point of view moved away from the division of narrative into first- and third-person as the most appropriate method of analysing narrative mode. For example, Sternberg argues in *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction*, more definitively regarding insufficiency of person as the principal element of point of view. Sternberg writes that,

the weakness of the distinction in terms of 'person' brings out all the more forcefully the advantages of isolating inherent and relational features of narration instead of classifying narrators *in toto*, and of viewing each (actual or possible) narrator as a variable, ad hoc rather than as a mutually and hence predictable complex of features.<sup>60</sup>

From the perspective of a practitioner, this is a more useful approach. Sternberg continues by suggesting that privilege rather than person should be considered the key variable of point of view. The use to which privilege is put and the narrator's awareness of an audience for the story are the mechanics by which point of view may be understood, and a writer's choice of narrative mode is more concerned with the how and when of passing on the story material to a reader, rather than with who is running the narrative. This effort to

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<sup>60</sup> Sternberg (1978), p. 279.

consider the third-person narrator as an anonymous and disembodied voice, rather than as an entity with the same traits of a person that we associate with a first-person-narrator, also helps to break down the difficulties I have described in relation to omniscience, notably the problems we encounter when we try to explain how the omniscient narrator acquires its extensive knowledge. Similarly, Sternberg's theory turns the debate away from the polarization of narrative voice around a binary system of classification, which is too simplistic and avoids a more useful debate on the substance of how relationships between writers, narrator, characters, and readers work. More helpful is Sternberg's further efforts in contrasting 'omnicommunicative' narrators with narrators who deliberately suppress information, passing it to readers in a highly managed manner to build and disperse suspense. The texts Sternberg refers to are largely nineteenth-century novels, but his distinctions based around a narrator's communication strategies provide useful guidelines for examining the observational qualities of the narrators appearing in the following case studies.

Martin argues that point of view's reliance on the categorisation of narrators as first-person or third person is not viable in practice. Martin challenges the validity of reliability as a central element of point of view, claiming that reliability is an insufficient tool for the analysis of narrative mode because it does not provide a method of analysing the range of methods used by narrators to reflect the different consciousnesses involved in a narrative. Given the importance in practice of free indirect speech, Martin concludes that focus is a more useful tool for analysis and that theories of point of view must include theories of focalization.

## **1.5 Focalization**

The central argument of this commentary is that omniscient narration can offer a reader several co-existing perspectives on the story-world of a novel and that these perspectives provide her or him with a significant territory on which to interpret character and event, in part, by means of self-reflection. I argue further that in so doing, the omniscient mode is capable of significant nuance, enabling it to underpin realistic presentations of the complexities and uncertainties of relationships in real life. In this section I focalization as theory which may address the negative critical views of omniscient narration, which are concerned with a lack of the inherent flexibility necessary to present lived experience in the manner described above.

Focalization is a narrative concept first developed by Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1972)<sup>61</sup> and developed most notably by Mieke Bal. Bal's work in the field of narratology is extensive. However, since the interest of this commentary in focalization is limited to arguments in favour of an inherent flexibility of literary omniscience, it will be sufficient to consider Bal's chapter on focalization in *Narratology* and Genette's response to Bal in *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (1988).<sup>62</sup> I consider also Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's efforts at a comprehensive categorization of the different types of focalization in *Narrative Fiction* (1983).<sup>63</sup> Rimmon-Kenan's scheme of categorization predates Bal's development of the original theory, however these are discussed in a series of 'Afterthoughts' collected in a new chapter in the second edition of *Narratology*.

Genette's original theory centres on the way in which narrative information is regulated. Since this approach is concerned with what information is being passed to a reader and by what means, rather than with who is passing it, it has the advantage, when compared

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<sup>61</sup> Gérard Genette, trans. by Jane E. Lewin, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1972), (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

<sup>62</sup> Gérard Genette, trans. by Jane E. Lewin, *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (1988), (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

<sup>63</sup> Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction* (1983), (New York: Routledge, (2002).

with theories of point of view, of having the capacity to analyse a narrative in which several voices speak to a reader in the same passage, even the same sentence. Focalization allows for these different voices by separating a seeing eye (the character) from a speaking voice (the narrator). Genette's approach considers narrative through a perspectival lens, concentrating on the positioning of the narrative voice through which readers hear the story-world in relation to the eye that 'sees' it. He groups these interactions according to the broad categories of zero, internal, and external focalizations. Zero focalization corresponds most closely with the key elements of traditional omniscience, namely the narrator's unfettered privilege combined with a greater insight into the story-world than any of the characters can claim. Internal focalization describes stories that are filtered through the consciousness of one or more characters. Finally, external focalization describes narratives characterized by a more observational style in which the narrator-focalizer does not directly describe the thoughts and feelings of any of the characters. Having separated the eye from the voice, Rimmon-Kenan suggests that it is possible to make further inroads into different narrative effects by drawing distinctions between how the two elements of seeing eye and speaking voice interact with each other in terms of space-and-time perceptions, the cognitive and emotive elements of narrative that establish atmosphere and mood, and lastly an 'ideological facet', that considers how the focalizer's values may further contextualize the narrative information being presented.<sup>64</sup>

As Rimmon-Kenan notes, focalization 'has the great advantage of dispelling the confusion between perspective and narration which often occurs when point of view or similar terms are used.'<sup>65</sup> This means that focalization is capable of addressing narrative situations in which multiple perspectives are actively and simultaneously engaged. To

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<sup>64</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, pp. 78-84.

<sup>65</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, p. 73.

illustrate the point, Rimmon-Kenan cites the following passage from James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916):

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo....

His father told him that story: his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face.

He was baby tuckoo. The moocow came down the road where Betty Byrne lived: she sold lemon plat. (1963, p.7.)<sup>66</sup>

Rimmon-Kenan notes that, 'the language not only conveys the perceptions of the child, it also contains childish expressions. Yet it is not Stephen's language, nor is Stephen the narrator in the passage.'<sup>67</sup> The language in the passage remains the narrator's language and not the character's, nor is the character the narrator. The narrator and the character are both involved in the text at the same time, with the narrator speaking what the character sees. The form of expression is not entirely the character's; rather, it is the narrator reporting it by means of a conscious mimicking of what the character has or may have said. Focalization is, therefore, broader than the related concept of free indirect speech. The above example would not satisfy Cohn's 'litmus test'<sup>68</sup> for identifying when a passage is free indirect speech since, the reader does not 'instinctively "redress"<sup>69</sup> the phrase to mean that what is written is what Baby Tuckoo 'thought to himself'.

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<sup>66</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, p. 73.

<sup>67</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, p. 74.

<sup>68</sup> Cohn, pp. 100-1.

<sup>69</sup> Cohn, p. 100.



Nevertheless, deciding whether a passage of focalized narration can also be considered free indirect speech is far from exact science, as evidenced by the following passage from *Madame Bovary*, quoted by Pascal:

Her profile was so calm that it could not be deciphered. It stood out clear in the light, in the oval of her bonnet, which was tied with pale ribbons like blades of reeds. Her eyes glazed straight ahead through her curving lashes and, although wide open, seemed a little hampered by the cheekbones, because of the blood that gently pulsated beneath her delicate skin [...] Her head inclined towards one shoulder, and you could see between her lips the pearly tips of her white teeth.

Is she playing a game with me? Rodolphe wondered.

Pascal argues that the description is free indirect speech because ‘the wondering question of Rodolphe, so unemphatically linked to the description makes it clear (if there was any uncertainty) that we have been absorbing *his* impression of Emma.’<sup>70</sup> H. Porter Abbott cites the same passage, using it as an example of focalization: ‘Flaubert’s narrator maintains a strict, external third-person narrative voice but lets us look through the eyes of someone else.’<sup>71</sup> In Porter Abbott’s view, for a passage to be considered free indirect speech, there must be a shift of voice (in the narrow sense of the character’s idiomatic speech rather than in the broader sense of her discourse) and not simply a shift of perspective or, using the

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<sup>70</sup> Pascal, pp. 102-3.

<sup>71</sup> H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2002), (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 73.

metaphor commonly applied to focalization, a shift of seeing eye. It may, therefore, be argued that focalization allows for a more nuanced analysis of the merging of a character's voice with the narrator's than that permitted by free indirect speech., which requires the complete substitution of the narrator's voice by that of the character. If this argument is followed, it answers one of the difficulties Pascal finds with Flaubert's use of free indirect speech referred to in the previous section. The passage he cites, describing Emma's arrival in Rouen can now be explained in terms of Emma as the 'focalizer' but rendered using the narrator's form of expression. The view of the landscape is hers, even if the actual words are not. The description, full of a 'plethora of similes and metaphors'<sup>72</sup> is Flaubert blending Emma's consciousness with the voice of the narrator to engage the reader in the atmosphere of her expectant arrival at the place where she will spend the afternoon with Léon.

If focalization has the advantage of greater nuance regarding the different and several consciousnesses that may be involved in a text, it has at least one significant limitation. Formulated around the idea of a seeing eye, the theory gives rise to difficulties in relation to knowledge. In particular, the image of the seeing eye begs the question, what is implied by the concept of seeing when it used in this way? A seeing eye appears to imply a more fixed type of knowledge, one that is concerned with what can be perceived by the senses, compared with the all-encompassing type of knowledge envisaged by the idea of an omniscient narrator. This more extensive type of knowledge is more easily reconciled with ideas of what may be felt by a character or intuited.

Sternberg refers to this issue, criticising focalization in terms of an unjustified narrowing of the field in which his alternative and unmitigated concept of literary omniscience operates. He writes, 'observe how Genette's approach keeps narrowing on its

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<sup>72</sup> Pascal, p. 107.

way to this slant. First, among all the axes of perspective, it confines itself to the epistemic.<sup>73</sup> He takes further issue with Genette's categorizing of focalization by degree, with the terms 'nonfocalized' or 'zero focalization', in which there is the greatest overlap between the seeing eye and the telling voice, most closely resembling a traditional concept of literary omniscience.

Note the definitional slant toward information limited and excluded, rather than that always possessed and communicated even in the "focalizing," so that the roving omniscient marks the negative pole of "*nonfocalized* narrative, or narrative with *zero focalization*"<sup>74</sup>

According to Sternberg, the principal advantage of a concept of literary omniscience is its breadth; it allows writers unmitigated access to any and all types of knowledge, from certain and reliable fixed to speculative and suspect, gathered by any means. Such a position adds weight to Sternberg's arguments, particularly when they are applied to fiction such as the works examined in the following case-studies, which use the forms and structures of classic realism to pose questions of how much can people know about themselves and each other, and which seek to expose the difficulties people encounter in communicating meaningfully with those they are close to. The unlimited range of types of knowing, which include the inferences and assumptions implied by Sternberg's 'superknowledge' provide equal opportunities for the broadest interpretation of knowledge on knowing, with the result that nothing is off-limits and the value and significance of all knowledge is mediated by the text itself and the reader's response to it.

### **A Note on Mikhail Bakhtin's 'dialogism'**

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<sup>73</sup> Sternberg (2007), p. 713-4.

<sup>74</sup> Sternberg (2007), p. 715.

Since *All this is for You* is centrally concerned with presenting the different perspectives on a shared set of family values held by characters in close relationships with each other, an extension of this concern is the different ways in which narrative causes these perspectives to interact with each other. In ‘Dialogue in the modern novel’, David Lodge makes the following reflection on arguments he made regarding poetics and the novel in his earlier book, *Language of Fiction* (1966),<sup>75</sup> to signal the limitations of traditional novel criticism:

Novels are narrative discourse, and narrative is a kind of language in itself that transcends the boundaries of natural languages within which stylistic criticism operates most competently and confidently. It was my neglect of this simple and obvious truth in *Language of Fiction* — my attempt to reduce all questions of meaning and value in language to questions of specific verbal usage — that now seems to me a fatal flaw in its theoretical argument, and a limitation (perhaps not quite so fatal) of its critical power.<sup>76</sup>

He goes on to discuss of the significant role of dialogue in novelistic discourse, quoting from Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1963, trans. 1984): ‘for the prose artist the world is full of other people’s words, among which he must orient himself and whose speech characteristics he must be able to perceive with a very keen ear.’<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> David Lodge, *Language of Fiction*, (London: Routledge, 1966).

<sup>76</sup> David Lodge, ‘Dialogue in the modern novel’ in *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism*, (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 75.

<sup>77</sup> Lodge (1990), p. 75.

Bakhtin, a critic whose work spans a 60-year period beginning in the late 1920s, wrote extensively about the forms of language and dialogue, and their central role in both narrative and real life. His theories span the disciplines of philosophy, language theory and knowledge theory, and are relevant to this commentary because they argue that the novel is an inherently dialogical form. The principal text in which Bakhtin sets out his theory of the novel is his essay 'Discourse in the Novel' (1934-5).<sup>78</sup> His starting point is that since the novel is a relatively new narrative form, novel criticism has borrowed its approach from existing models of literary criticism that developed around poetic and epic forms. The problem with these existing models, Bakhtin argues, is that they are 'oriented toward the single-linguaged and single-styled genres, toward the poetic genres in the narrow sense of the word.'<sup>79</sup> Novels, by contrast, are 'polyphonic': according to Bakhtin, they always contain many languages and many voices.

Bakhtin's concept of language and dialogue is broad. Language is never unitary, it is always heteroglot, and 'languages' include many different 'social languages' within a single *national* language' and 'different national languages within the same *culture*.'<sup>80</sup> Within these different 'social languages', it is possible to identify further 'professional' languages described by Bakhtin as a '*professional* stratification of language, in the broad sense of the term "professional": the language of the lawyer, the politician, the public education teacher.'<sup>81</sup> Even within literary language, Bakhtin writes that there is 'a certain degree of social differentiation, a social stratification, that in other eras can become extremely acute'<sup>82</sup> meaning that even the text of a novel is not fixed in terms of meaning. Rather a text's meaning changes over time and within the changing contexts of the different social,

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<sup>78</sup> Mikhail. M. Bakhtin, ed. by Michael Holquist and trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, 'Discourse in the Novel' in *The Dialogic Imagination*, (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 275.

<sup>79</sup> Bakhtin, p. 266.

<sup>80</sup> Bakhtin, p.275.

<sup>81</sup> Bakhtin, p. 289.

<sup>82</sup> Bakhtin, p. 290.

historical, and political experiences of readers. Therefore languages, both in literature and in real life, are therefore spread across different geographical locations, across different social groups and different periods in time. Bakhtin's term for this spread is 'heteroglossia', described by Wallace Martin as a 'jostling of disparate languages.'<sup>83</sup>

The wealth of different 'social languages' proposed by Bakhtin underpins his view, termed 'dialogism', that these different languages must constantly interact with each other. Extending beyond the direct dialogue of everyday life, Bakhtin suggests that these constant interactions are the way in which we attach meaning to our experiences. These meanings are in a constant state of development resulting from how they are continually informed, re-informed, and altered by their interactions with the different languages of, for example, different professions, different cultures and different historical periods. Therefore, dialogue, according to Bakhtin, is entirely subjective and relational. Furthermore, the idea of the novel as an inherently dialogical form represents its unique capacity for presenting lived experience as narrative: an idea summarized by Martin when he writes that,

Traditional theorists assume that narrators use words to represent or convey a picture of "reality" (factual or fictional) to an audience. But when a character speaks, the words are not a substitute for, or representation of, something else. The language of the character *is* the character, just as the words you and I speak *are* ourselves in the eyes of others.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Martin, p. 149.

<sup>84</sup> Martin, p. 51.

Since the principal subject of this commentary is a discussion the technical elements of perspective that have informed the development of my novel's narrator around my central theme of the complexities of human relationships, further examination of Bakhtin's theory is beyond its scope. I refer to Bakhtin in parallel to the theories mentioned above to signal the broad range of elements, both structural and thematic that influence novelistic style. In particular, Bakhtin's 'dialogism' highlights matters of structure and theme as being interrelated. Martin writes that the idea of 'dialogism provides a reminder [that] categorical distinctions, such as that between first- and third-person narrators, are often less important than the distance between types of discourse, since the latter can obliterate the borderlines created by grammar.' Marina MacKay suggests, in similar terms, the significance of dialogue as form, writing that 'for Bakhtin, then, the many-voiced novel is the truest, most *realistic* reflection of the modern condition.'<sup>85</sup>

This idea of an interconnection between structure and theme complements Yates' project, explored in *Revolutionary Road* that people in their real life relationships find difficulties in communicating meaningfully with each other. Not only do people misrepresent, misunderstand, and misread each other, the obstacles they encounter in attaching meaning to their experiences and articulating what they think and feel play a significant role in driving their conflicts of selfhood. In the same way, the conflicts of my novel emerge, in large part, as a result of a 'jostling of different languages'<sup>86</sup> around the different responses of the characters to the novel's central questions of what success is and what constitutes a good life. Hemu, Joanna, and Suresh have different views expressed in different languages. The different 'professional' languages of the lawyer, the businessman and the self-help group all feature. Couched in terms of Bakhtin's 'dialogism', my novel

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<sup>85</sup> Marina MacKay, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 13.

<sup>86</sup> Martin, p. 149.

explores close human relationships by asking how effectively the characters' different languages can accommodate each other. The distinct cultural and historical languages present in the Daswani family are also significant. Hemu embodies the languages of the first-generation immigrant: the refugee turned economic migrant turned entrepreneur. The language of his son, Suresh, is that of the second-generation British-born Asian: highly educated and now immersed in the language of lawyers. Joanna's language holds the attitudes of the British class system: social aspiration and a liberal education. These different languages collide around the novel's central figure of the self-made man and his all-encompassing work ethic, with the characters tasked with making sense of questions including: What do the struggles of one generation mean for another? In what language do the characters articulate a more personal sense of self? And, what legacies, described as family values, do the characters want to pass on to their children?



## CHAPTER TWO: CASE STUDIES

### 2.1 Richard Yates

This case study considers the ways in which Richard Yates employs the narrator of *Revolutionary Road* to present the conflicts of selfhood of protagonist Frank Wheeler as a principal element fuelling tension in his close personal relationships. The significance of this enquiry lies in the central importance of conflicts of selfhood to the development of *All this is for you*'s two protagonists. Like my novel, *Revolutionary Road* is narrated in the third-person and demonstrates elements of traditional omniscience, notably the narrator's access to the characters' unspoken thoughts and feelings, an extensive knowledge of the story-world arising in part from an ability to move backwards and forwards in time, and the role of detached observer rather than participant. Centrally concerned with the performances of Frank's everyday life, Yates uses a combination of focalization and free indirect speech to explore the gap between Frank's private sense of self and the strategies he uses to present himself favourably to the other characters.

Set in 1955 in the commuter-belt suburbs of Connecticut, *Revolutionary Road* begins with a disastrous amateur theatre performance in which Frank watches his wife, April, play the lead role. Disappointed that the play has not lived up to their expectations, the couple revert to a long-standing conflict in which they blame each other for the frustrations of not managing to live the more sophisticated and Bohemian lives they aspire to. The end of hostilities comes with April's idea of making a fresh start in Paris. Her plan is that she will work, and Frank will be free to find himself. Initially the idea brings them closer together. Frank revives April as his 'first-rate girl' and in doing so rediscovers himself through April's

description of him as ‘the most interesting person I’ve ever met.’<sup>87</sup> Privately, however, for Frank the idea of April as the breadwinner is emasculating and he worries that he will fail at the opportunity to re-invent himself as the ‘intense, nicotine-stained, Jean-Paul-Sartre sort of man’<sup>88</sup> he wants to be. When, unexpectedly, April discovers she is pregnant, the couple give up the idea of moving. Secretly Frank is relieved, but April’s frustrations increase. She threatens to terminate the pregnancy, also emasculating for Frank, and Frank attempts to change her mind by re-styling himself as the suburban stereotypes that, at the beginning of the novel, he and April rejected. He takes on the role of the solid husband and encourages April to perform the corresponding role of the competent housewife. He believes he is succeeding, but he is mistaken. The novel ends with April’s death from a haemorrhage caused when she tries to give herself an abortion.

In *Dismembering the American Dream*, Kate Charlton-Jones identifies Frank as typical of Yates’ characters: men who are ‘dreamers who envisage a better, richer, more successful and more romantic life,’<sup>89</sup> but who are ‘self-deluded, deeply flawed individuals who either show determined optimism while all about them things are going wrong or who wallow in despair and look for others to blame.’<sup>90</sup> The gap between the man Frank is and the man he would like to be is significant territory for Yates and is explored using an omniscient narrator who combines the direct reporting for Frank’s thoughts with more detached observations that are not limited by the strictness of maintaining Frank’s point of view. However, unlike a more traditional omniscient narrator, the narrator of *Revolutionary Road* avoids making value judgements about Frank. This absence of intrusive commentary means that that while the narrator knows Frank’s private thoughts and feelings, the reader must

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<sup>87</sup> Yates, p. 25.

<sup>88</sup> Yates, p. 23.

<sup>89</sup> Charlton-Jones, p. 5.

<sup>90</sup> Charlton-Jones, p. 5.

interpret them and decide for herself what drives him. Yates described the absence of judgement as a significant aspect of his practice, explaining in a 1972 interview with Geoffrey Clark DeWitt Henry his preference for ‘the kind of story where the reader is left wondering who’s to blame until it begins to dawn on him (the reader) that he himself must bear some of the responsibility because he’s human and therefore infinitely fallible.’<sup>91</sup>

Charlton-Jones describes how Yates’ prose in *Revolutionary Road* ‘uncluttered by verbosity or arcane language, demonstrates remarkable narrative control as it moves seamlessly from one perspective to another.’<sup>92</sup> These elements are significant features of the version of omniscient narration that Yates employs in the novel and which depart from a more traditional version of the omniscient mode. The narrative control referred to by Charlton-Jones is evident in the absence of intrusive comment, which avoids the author’s judgements and sympathies commonly associated with the omniscient mode. The seamless shifts of perspective in which the narrator moves between observational commentary, external focalization, and occasional uses of free indirect speech are also an important feature of the narrative style of *Revolutionary Road*. Disrupting the more traditional attachment of the omniscient mode to the narrator as the principal focus of the reader’s attention, the dual-voiced narrative, in which Yates seeks to balance Frank’s voice and the narrator’s ensures that the reader’s direct engagement with Frank takes place alongside the reader’s interaction with the narrator.

This dual-voiced approach is signalled early in the novel, with the introduction in the opening chapter describing April as she performs her role in the play.

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<sup>91</sup> Geoffrey Clark DeWitt Henry, ‘From the Archive: An Interview with Richard Yates’ (Winter 1972), *Ploughshares*, 115 (Fall 2011) <<https://www.pshares.org/issues/fall-2011/archive-interview-richard-yates>>, [last accessed 8 June 2017].

<sup>92</sup> Charlton-Jones, Kindle locations 561-65.

She was twenty-nine, a tall ash blonde with a patrician kind of beauty that no amount of amateur lighting could distort, and she seemed ideally cast in the role. It didn't even matter that bearing two children had left her a shade too heavy in the hips and thighs, for she moved with the shyly sensual grace of maidenhood; anyone happening to glance at Frank Wheeler, the round-faced, intelligent-looking young man who sat biting his fist in the last row of the audience, would have said he looked more like her suitor than her husband.<sup>93</sup>

In the first sentence, the neutral description of April's good looks is the narrator's, but the more idiomatic form of expression used in the second sentence feels more like the biased opinion of somebody who is personally involved with April. The phrase, 'it didn't even matter' used in relation to April's body subtly introduces Frank's perspective. It is difficult to see how it would matter to the narrator that April has begun to put on weight, but it might matter to her husband. The narrative has shifted from one in which the narrator is watching April to one in which the narrator is watching April at the same time as Frank watches April and the narrator is watching Frank watch April. This technique of simultaneously presenting several points of view to the reader is a central feature of the narrative style Yates applies in *Revolutionary Road*.

This technique introduces also a relational aspect to Yates' characterization, which in the above passage, hints at the importance Frank attaches to performance. April's appearance on stage and her performance are important to Frank because, in his view, the audience's

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<sup>93</sup> Yates, p. 8.

perception of April reflects on him. An impeccable performance by April will indicate to others the sophisticated and cultured couple Frank wants them to be, and this explains the need for him to reassure himself that a slight flaw in her appearance ought not to matter. What conclusions the reader is to draw from all this is left open by the narrator, who offers no comment on what thoughts and feelings are passing through Frank's mind. The result is that Yates leaves it to the reader, as he sets out in the Dewitt Henry interview, to note the vanity involved in Frank's brief worry that April's appearance is less than perfect. His ultimate purpose is for it to dawn on the reader that she or he too might easily feel a momentary embarrassment seeing her spouse's flaws as other people might see them, and in doing so worry that other people may think less of them. Yates appears to be establishing Frank in a less than complimentary light and then suggesting to the reader that she or he is no better.

Immediately after the theatre performance ends, Frank goes backstage to find April. The narrator watches him as he walks through the auditorium, noting that,

Smiling, he was a man who knew perfectly well that the failure of an amateur play was nothing much to worry about, a kindly, witty man who would have exactly the right words of comfort for his wife backstage; but in the intervals between his smiles, when he shouldered ahead through the crowd and you could see the faint chronic fever of bewilderment in his eyes, it seemed more that he himself was in need of comforting.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Yates, pp. 12-3.

The narrator's observations are focalized through Frank, setting the tone of his feelings without the use of free indirect speech to express them in Frank's own words. The phrase beginning 'a kindly, witty man' is closest to free indirect speech, suggesting the kind of pep-talk that Frank might be giving himself, but the passage remains in the narrator's voice.

The narrator's observations are proved right when Frank reaches the dressing room. He blurts out to April that the play 'wasn't exactly a triumph or anything'<sup>95</sup> and immediately realises this was the wrong thing to say. The narrator describes Frank's response,

He pocketed both hands and curled the tired toes inside his shoes, looking down at them. Would "You were wonderful" have been a better thing to say, after all? Almost anything, it now seemed, would have been a better thing to say than what he'd said. But he would have to think of better things to say later; right now it was all he could do to stand here and think about the double bourbon he would have when they stopped on the way home with the Campbells. He looked at himself in the mirror, tightening his jaw and turning his head a little to one side to give it a leaner, more commanding look, the face he had given himself in mirrors since boyhood and which no photograph had ever quite achieved, until with a start he found that she was watching him. Her own eyes were there in the mirror, trained on his for an uncomfortable

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<sup>95</sup> Yates, p. 15.

moment before she lowered them to stare at the middle  
button of his coat.<sup>96</sup>

The report of Frank's toe-curling is true omniscience because it is impossible for the narrator to see what Frank is doing with his toes inside his shoes. However, the telepathic intrusion does not draw undue attention because by now the reader is used to the narrator's commenting on performative gestures of this kind. Furthermore, the technique of establishing what Frank is feeling by means of the performative gestures he makes is a significant method used by Yates to disguise his narrator's privileged access to Frank's thoughts since it plays to the narrator's role as an observer rather than casting the narrator as an overseeing figure with a complete knowledge of Frank.

The phrase beginning, 'almost anything, it now seemed...', is a further example of Yates stretching the use of focalization, taking it to the cusp of free indirect speech. This use of focalization over free indirect speech highlights the narrator's role as an observer, assigning a lower profile to the narrator as a mind-reader. This effect is to moderate the effects of omniscience. By controlling his narrator's performance of the knowledge obtained by means of the privileged access to Frank's private thoughts and feelings, Yates creates the 'whisper of distance' that Charlton-Jones describes. This distance, however slight, is significant because as the narrator steps back from the direct reporting of Frank's thoughts a shift occurs, equally slight, in the narrator's authority. The difference between reading a character's mind and then reporting directly what has been discovered and paraphrasing those thoughts using a form of expression that however similar to the character's, remains that of the narrator allows for a small but significant moderating of the narrator's authority. The narrator's role appears to move away from what Sebald describes as 'stagehand and director and judge and executor' and towards that of an ostensibly impartial recorder of facts, that require further interpretation by the reader. This aspect is important to Yates' objective of avoiding stories that seek resolution by attaching blame to one of the characters. As a characteristic feature of Yates' style, it has also wider implications for the use of an omniscient narrator because it undermines the argument that the omniscient mode has a limited capacity for engaging with uncertainty, ambiguity, and the complexities of lived experience that much contemporary realist fiction seeks to explore.

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<sup>96</sup> Yates, pp. 15-6.

One of the scenes that most clearly exposes the gap between Frank's private self and the man he wants others to see takes place when April proposes the move to Paris.

Announcing the plan to Frank, Yates' narrator begins with classic omniscience. The narrator observes April and provides an undisguised summary of what Frank is thinking.

It was, she insisted, such a marvelously simple plan that she was amazed at having never thought of it before. But she had to keep interrupting herself, with mounting impatience, to tell him not to laugh. This laughter of his was not quite genuine, nor was the way he kept squeezing her shoulder as if to dismiss the whole thing as an endearing whimsey. He was trying to conceal from her, if not from himself, that the plan had instantly frightened him.<sup>97</sup>

From here, the narrator moves closer to Frank using the now familiar technique of Frank as the focalizer.

But he knew better than to interrupt her now. She must have spent the morning in an agony of thought, pacing up and down the rooms of a dead-silent, dead-clean house and twisting her fingers at her waist until they ached; she must have spent the afternoon in a frenzy of action at the shopping center, lurching her car imperiously through mazes of NO LEFT TURN signs and angry traffic cops,

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<sup>97</sup> Yates, p. 114.



racing in and out of stores to buy the birthday gifts and the roast of beef and the cake and the cocktail apron. Her whole day had been a heroic build-up for this moment of self-abasement; now it was here, and she was damned if she'd stand for any interference.<sup>98</sup>

The effect of Yates' use of focalization here is that the summary of April's day, told from Frank's point of view but using the narrator's words, is that the passage reveals more about Frank than it does about April. The narrator's choice of words describing how Frank perceives April is telling. An 'agony of thought', a 'frenzy of action', the imperious lurching of her driving, and the 'heroic build-up for this moment of self-abasement' endow the passage with an ironic tone. These overblown phrases add an element of bathos, which allows readers to see that Frank's instinct is to undermine the plan. However, these are the narrator's words and not Frank's. Yates opts not to use free indirect speech and to continue using Frank as the focalizer. The effect, familiar now, is to signal the distance between the narrator and Frank, which allows readers to perceive the scene through a careful layering of observation (the narrator's take on Frank's take on April) and the combination of this distancing and layering creates space for readers to draw their own conclusions on the dynamics of the relationship being presented.

Throughout this conversation with April, Frank is monitoring his performance, noting in April's responses which arguments and phrases are more effective and how well he is maintaining the view he wants her to maintain of him as the Bohemian intellectual. Using Frank as the focalizer allows Yates to layer the conversation with a series of observations by Frank of himself, in which he notes, for example a fear that 'he could detect a note of honest

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<sup>98</sup> Yates, pp. 116-7.

doubt in her voice – a faint suggestion that it might be possible to persuade her he had been a little wise guy, after all – and this was distressing’,<sup>99</sup> and that ‘one of the ways he could tell he was losing the argument was that his voice had taken on a resonance that made it every bit as theatrical as hers.’<sup>100</sup>

Frank’s reservations about the move to France intensify when his firm offers him a promotion. The significance of this plot event lies in the opportunity it gives Yates to further expose the conflicts inherent in Frank’s perception of himself as a ‘Jean-Paul Sartre type of man.’ The key scene in which Yates explores these conflicts takes place when Bart Pollock, a senior manager in Frank’s company, invites him to lunch to discuss the new position. Beginning with the walk the two men take from the office to the restaurant, the narrator’s involvement as both detached observer and privileged witness to Frank’s private thoughts is the principal device by which Yates presents Frank’s conflicts. The scene begins with the two men walking from the office to the restaurant.

“NOW TED BANDY’S A nice fella,” Bart Pollock said as they walked rapidly uptown, “and he’s a good department head, but I’ll tell you something.” He smiled down along his gabardine shoulder into Frank’s attentive face. “I’ll tell you something. I’m a little sore at him for the way he’s kept you under a bushel all these years.” “Well, I wouldn’t say that, Mr. – Bart.” Frank felt his features jump into a bashful smile. “But thanks anyway.” (“I mean what the hell else could I say?” he would explain to April later, if

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<sup>99</sup> Yates pp. 119-20.

<sup>100</sup> Yates, p. 120.

necessary. “What else can you say to a thing like that?”)

He had to skip and quicken his step to keep up with Pollock’s long stride, and he was uncomfortably aware that these little hurrying motions, combined with the way his fingers were fussing to keep his tie from slipping out of his jacket, must make him look the picture of an underling.<sup>101</sup>

Here, Yates combines the voices of the narrator and Frank, to establish as the central structure on which this scene pivots, the narrator’s attentive observation of the small details of the scene, the narrator’s privileged access to the re-imagined version of the lunch that Frank will present to April later, and the narrative distance created by the use of Frank as the focalizer in preference to the close-up perspective of free indirect speech. The narrator’s description of an unequal physicality between the two men reflects Frank’s ongoing anxiety relating to the performance of his masculinity. Bart’s downward smile takes in not only Frank’s ‘attentive’ expression, but the reference to his gaberdine shoulder also picks up an idea of social performance related to an implicit authority demonstrated by Bart’s businessman’s clothing. Drawing the reader’s attention to these small details is an important element of Yates’ approach to creating atmosphere and establishing the broader contexts of the characters’ situations. Frank’s voice would be a less effective tool in this instance because the focus of his thoughts needs to be elsewhere, notably on planning how he will present this conversation to April.

A key effect of this technique is that it lays bare the conflicting impulses that are acting upon Frank in this scene. The narrator’s access to Frank’s private thoughts reveals to

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<sup>101</sup> Yates, p. 205.

readers how Frank contemplates a personal idea of performance, noting how his choice of words and actions may be adapted to the circumstances and the role he is seeking to play. In this case, a difference in the narrator's observation of Frank's gestures and the reporting of his thoughts indicates that while Frank is flattered by Bart's praise, he is aware also that April would think less of him if he were to admit to her that he was pleased to have impressed businessman Bart.

Yates amplifies Frank's conflict by linking the lunch with Bart to a businessman's lunch he was brought to by his father as a boy. The effect of this coincidence, apparent from the narrator's description in which Frank is the focalizer, is that Frank is unsettled by a lingering feeling that his father was disappointed in him. Again, the use of focalization followed by the direct reporting of Frank's thoughts reveals how Frank is already planning to present matters differently to April, reverting in his retelling of the lunch to a version of himself that is closer to an idea of his best self. While the use of focalization makes it clear that Frank is not sure that Bart *has* brought him to the same restaurant he came to with his father, in his imagined retelling of the story he is more certain: "Isn't that the damnedest thing?" he would demand of April tonight. "Exactly the same room. Same potted palms, same little bowls of oyster crackers – Jesus, it was like something in a dream. I sat there feeling ten years old."<sup>102</sup> In the retelling, Frank moves away from an uncomfortable memory that dents his confidence, recasting himself as a stronger man, more capable of rising above the situation and more in control of his self-esteem.

At times, the use of external focalization appears to effect a complete merging of the narrator with Frank. When the narrator observes that Bart 'shot his cuffs and leaned massively on the table, eyes bulging. Beads of sweat had begun to appear among the big tan freckles of

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<sup>102</sup> Yates, p. 206.

his head'<sup>103</sup> the reader is seeing through Frank's eyes. At other times, such as those when Frank is re-writing the events of the day into a narrative he will present to April, in which he is more in control of presenting himself as the better man, the narrator's neutral observations provide the counterpart against which readers can measure Frank's words.

He went on talking as he ate but he was quieter now and more dignified, using words like "obviously" and "furthermore" instead of "fart" and "belly button." His eyes no longer protruded; he had left off being the backwoods tycoon and was resuming his customary role as balanced, moderate executive.<sup>104</sup>

The effect of the narrator's presence alongside Frank the shifts in perspective between the two different voices is to draw readers into the emotional complexities the lunch with Bart presents for Frank. The effect highlights also the ways in which the characters miss each other's points, make incorrect assumptions about each other, and further Yates' project of exploring the ways in which people fail to communicate meaningfully with each other. For example, when it emerges that Frank avoided mentioning his father's employment with the company during his interview for his current position, Bart wrongly interprets the omission: "I'll tell you something, Frank. I admire that. You didn't want anybody giving you a special break here and a special break there; you wanted to make good on your own. Right?"<sup>105</sup> Frank's response that, "No, it wasn't exactly that. I don't know. It was pretty

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<sup>103</sup> Yates, p.208.

<sup>104</sup> Yates, p. 209.

<sup>105</sup> Yates, p. 212.

complicated”<sup>106</sup> leads Bart to elaborate, amplifying the misunderstanding and highlighting the difficulties of fully comprehending another person’s experiences.

“Wait a minute. Let me see how good a judge of character I am. I bet I know what happened. This is just a guess, now.” He winked. “An educated guess. I bet you went ahead and let your dad think his name had helped you get the job, just to please him. Am I right?”<sup>107</sup>

Bart is both right and wrong. The narrator’s reporting of Frank’s memory of a visit to his parents’ house recalls that he did allow his father to think that the family connection had helped Frank, but while Bart perceives this as evidence of Frank’s nobility, the flashback exposes a disdainful pity for his father, revealing that, returning home from the visit, Frank had ‘regained enough composure to pound his fist on his knee and say, “He beat me! Isn’t that the damndest thing? The old bastard beat me again.”’ In an ongoing conflict of competing narratives, Frank feels he has lost out to his father. At the lunch Bart also beats Frank, because Frank accepts Bart’s narrative over his own. Again, it is important that the narrator does not spell this out, but allows the reader to make the connection.

Using these narrative strategies Yates presents Frank’s various attempts at constructing a meaningful sense of himself by means of the different roles he performs in his everyday life. Although much attention has been given to the efforts of writers such as Yates to present real life as narrative, *Revolutionary Road*’s interest in the performances of its characters in everyday life draws attention also to the ways in which the strategies of narrative inform and shape our perceptions of ourselves in real life. Sternberg’s description of an all-knowing storytelling voice deeply embedded in the collective consciousness that shapes our understanding of the human condition also allows for this reciprocity. The

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<sup>106</sup> Yates, p.212.

<sup>107</sup> Yates, p.212-3.

significant role of the omniscient narrator lies not only in the performance of that storytelling voice to readers, but also as a point of view that allows readers to observe how fictional characters shape their experiences to tell each other the stories of their lives.

The ways in which people tell the stories of their lives is also a central concern of Alice Munro. The following case-study considers Munro's use of focalization and free indirect speech in addition to her approach to temporal ordering in a range of stories that feature female characters who are conflicted by their close personal relationships and their ideas of individual selfhood.

## **2.2 Alice Munro**

In the opening chapter of *Reading Alice Munro (1973-2013)*, Robert Thakkar examines Munro's early stories, finding in them the core elements of a dialectic narrative style that she would refine into a distinctive method of 'dual-voiced retrospective narrative.'<sup>108</sup> He is referring to a practice, similar in approach to Yates', which centres around the simultaneous use of the voices of the narrator and a character speaking alongside each other to provide a complex and layered perspective on the story-world. Thakkar's chapter considers three early Munro stories published in an undergraduate literary magazine, in which he identifies the main elements of Munro's practice. He writes that in two of the three stories, 'the third-person omniscient narrator is heavy-handed and Munro's narrative tone didactic', but the third provides 'a glimpse of the narrative techniques that would become her hallmark',<sup>109</sup> indicating the success she has found in obtaining from the omniscient mode a more nuanced and less instructive tone.

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<sup>108</sup> Robert Thakkar, *Reading Alice Munro (1973-2013)*, (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2016), p. 42.

<sup>109</sup> Thakkar, pp. 23-4.

Describing Munro's 'Story for Sunday', which tells the story of a young woman's disappointment when she realizes that she has been taken in by a womanizer. Thakkar writes that while Munro's 'omniscient third-person narrator concerns herself with the story's setting, [...] Munro concurrently reveals Evelyn's sense of anticipation over seeing Mr. Willens, the Sunday school superintendent, once again.'<sup>110</sup> The effect of the two voices appearing alongside each other, essentially a manipulation of viewpoint, is to demonstrate how over the course of the intervening week, Evelyn has idealized the previous meeting with Mr. Willens. 'The story's significance', Thakkar writes, 'is that it illustrates the beginnings of Munro's commingling of past and present, holding the two realms together for the reader to see.'<sup>111</sup>

In Munro's early stories this technique appears most often in first-person narratives: the narrator is an older person reflecting on an event from her past. Later, most notably in *The Moons of Jupiter* (1978) and *The Progress of Love* (1982) Munro develops the same technique for use with a third-person omniscient narrator and character focalizer. In both cases, her purpose is an exploration of how people hone their memories to create a personal sense of identity. The presence of two voices, one a more detached observer and the other a more subjective participant, identifies a gap between what actually happened in the past and what is a person's memory of it in a later present. This gap is a significant territory for Munro, in which she explores her theme of how her characters construct identity. This exploration functions in a similar way to Yates' exploration of the gap that exists between a person's private self and public self. The method is a characteristic element of Munro's approach to fiction, which Thakkar describes as one that 'sees the world in flux. Thus her pronouncements are few and her insights tentative and fleeting.'<sup>112</sup> He quotes Munro in a

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<sup>110</sup> Thakkar, p. 24.

<sup>111</sup> Thakkar, p. 24.

<sup>112</sup> Thakkar, p. 40.



1973 interview with Jill Gardiner in which she describes the importance of the dual-voiced aspect of her stories. Munro reflects that,

the adult narrator has the ability to detect and talk about the confusion. I don't feel the confusion is ever resolved [...] I feel a kind of satisfaction in just approaching something that is mysterious and important. The writing in the art of approach and recognition. I believe that we don't solve these things—in fact our explanations take us further away.<sup>113</sup>

'Labor Day dinner', which appears in Munro's 1982 collection, *The Moons of Jupiter*, is concerned with relationships between Roberta, her partner George, her teenage daughters and a long-standing friend, Valerie. The story explores Roberta's sense of estrangement from the other characters, focusing on how her perceptions of herself in these relationships contribute to how she sees herself. Shifts in perspective are significant, and in addition to the story's interest in the architectural structures of the characters' homes, Munro creates an atmosphere of the physical and emotional spaces the characters occupy. Through these structures, Munro explores how the characters understand family dynamics and family roles. These multiple spaces and several perspectives create a sense of the relational aspects of personal identity, with Munro's focus on how the characters perceive themselves in terms of their relationships with each other.

The story's central event is a dinner at Valerie's house, with Roberta's emotional outlook characterized by an argument with George that has been going on for two days. Told

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<sup>113</sup> Thakkar, p. 40.

through a combination of omniscient third-party narration, who observes the characters, and character focalizers, the key technical element of Munro's storytelling is the balance of focalization and free indirect speech. The story begins with Roberta and quickly establishes her as a woman struggling to define a personal sense of identity as she feels torn between the competing commitments of her relationships with her partner, George, her daughters, and her friend Valerie. Roberta's voice is markedly quiet in comparison with the other characters, who all appear more self-possessed and opinionated, a feature that underlines the idea that Roberta perceives herself in terms of her relationships with others.

The following passage, which appears at the beginning of the story, demonstrates the story's central technique of combining the narrator's voice with Roberta's. During the drive to Valerie's house, Roberta's thoughts are on the situation between her and George. Munro writes,

They are driving between high stands of corn, and she thinks how ugly the corn looks — a monotonous, coarse-leaved crop, a foolish army. How long has this been going on? Since yesterday morning: she felt it in him before they got out of bed. They went out and got drunk last night to try to better things, but the relief didn't last.<sup>114</sup>

The extract begins with the narrator's direct report of what Roberta is thinking. However, while Roberta finds the corn simply ugly, the narrator goes on to a writerly description that amplifies Roberta's state of mind, attaching to it a series of images that reflects Roberta's vulnerability caused by the attack she feels George is directing at her and

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<sup>114</sup> Alice Munro, *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), (Kindle Edition: Random House, 2007), pp. 136-7.

which she feels is undeserved. The images are the narrator's and not Roberta's. However, Munro does not allow the narrator to take over. The next sentence, deliberately elliptical, is free indirect speech and it brings the reader's attention back to Roberta. In the remaining two sentences Roberta is the focalizer, with the response to Roberta's question to herself coming in the now more neutral voice of the narrator. The narrator's voice, varied and complex, alongside Roberta's is crucial to the creation of atmosphere in this scene, going beyond Roberta's own form of expression to amplify her mood and to provide the expositional details that contextualize her situation.

The juxtaposing of the narrator's voice alongside Roberta's is central to Munro's practice of writing stories that are constructed from multiple overlapping layers in order to build greater resonance than if the reader had only a single perspective. For example, the same passage written in Roberta's voice and using free indirect speech might read, *how ugly the corn looked. And how long had this been going on. Since yesterday morning. It was in him before he got out of bed. A relief last night, going out and getting drunk. But it didn't last.* Written entirely from within Roberta's consciousness, the passage is flatter, lacking the imagery that the narrator offers of the corn rows resembling clumsy soldiers, which I suggest Munro does not give to Roberta because it would not be in character for Roberta to use such a phrase. Munro's use of a clearly present narrator gives the passage a more three-dimensional feel, allowing the reader a clearly constructed vantage point from which to observe Roberta and her reflection on herself. Furthermore, the technique provides a sense of distance, allowing the reader to observe Roberta from several positions, at arm's length as well as from close up. The skill lies in balancing the two voices so that neither dominates the other. It is neither Roberta's story nor the narrator's: the two voices share the story-world, and the distance the narrator provides allows readers an enhanced and reflexive space in which to engage with the story.

The narrator's commentary on the landscape is a type of authorial intrusion associated with classical omniscient narration, drawing attention to the storytelling voice and away from the reader's direct engagement with the characters. For a writer so concerned with the textures of lived experience, this represents an interesting strategy. A significant element of Munro's practice is her focus on the ways in which people tell the stories of their lives, fixing on certain events from the past and refining them to hone their sense of identity in the present. Her highlighting of the storytelling role of an omniscient narrator accords with the importance she attaches to storytelling as an element of real life.

With the narrator's voice appearing from the start as a significant feature of the story, changes to its tone are significant. At the start of the story, the narrator has the confidential tone of a friend who might be telling Roberta's story from the position of somebody to whom she has confided her anxieties and who's counsel she may have sought. As the story continues, with Roberta speaking to Valerie, the narrator retreats to a more arm's length viewpoint and the tone of the narrator's voice is aligned with a more classical omniscient narrator.

This ability to move closer and further from the characters contribute to the narrator's authority, which is consistent with a traditional omniscient narrator. Equally, the narrator's extensive knowledge of the characters' pasts contributes to this effect. In the same way, the narrator's ability to articulate the characters' emotions with greater insight and succinctness than they are able to themselves is a significant trait of classic literary omniscience. A further indicator of a narrative authority that is close to that of a classic omniscient narrator is Munro's narrator's attentiveness to detail: for example, the detailed descriptions of the characters' homes fall outside the scope of what the characters might talk about between themselves but are significant tools for establishing the wider contexts and atmosphere of the story.

In *Alice Munro's Narrative Art*, Isla Duncan describes Munro's narrative style as polyphonic.<sup>115</sup> The term, associated with music, signals multiple contradicting melodies appearing in the same piece. In *After Bakhtin*, David Lodge writes that a polyphonic novel is a 'novel in which a variety of conflicting ideological positions are given voice and set in play between and within individual speaking subjects, without being placed and judged by an authoritative authorial voice.'<sup>116</sup> Lodge is applying Bakhtin's theory of the dialogic novel, noting Bakhtin's view that polyphonia in the novel endows it with its characteristic quality of heteroglossia. Munro's practice illustrates this approach in the form of the short story. Her stories reject the view that a narrator demonstrating elements of classic omniscience will always overshadow the voices of the characters. Duncan refers to comments Munro made in a 1986 interview in which she describes her use of multiple points of view: 'What I want [...] is a lot of overlap. I want things to come in as many layers as possible.'<sup>117</sup> The layering of multiple points of view is significant to Munro's temporal sequencing. She is referring to the texture of lived experience as something other than linear or chronological. Her focus is on the transience of identity, particularly through memory, which she perceives as an evolving process of the re-invention of self. Equally important is the direction that these evolutions take, not necessarily towards greater insightfulness or self-awareness but closer to a sense of what Munro describes as 'going on.'<sup>118</sup> Munro's use of omniscient narration is a constant movement between entrenching and undermining a classical concept of omniscient narration, adapting it to the demands of her fiction. The effectiveness of Munro's approach lies in highlighting the ways in which the ambiguities and complexities of close personal relationships contribute to a person's sense of identity. According to critics who argue that

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<sup>115</sup> Isla Duncan, *Alice Munro's Narrative Art*, (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Mac Millan, 2014), p.41.

<sup>116</sup> David Lodge, *After Bakhtin, Essays on Fiction and Criticism*, (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 86.

<sup>117</sup> Duncan, p. 2.

<sup>118</sup> Geoffrey Hancock, 'An Interview with Alice Munro', *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, Number 43 (1982), pp. 75-114, p. 102.

the omniscient mode is redundant, the presence of an omniscient narrator is assumed to be a strong indicator of monologism rather than polyphonia. However, Munro demonstrates that the presence of an authoritative narrative voice is capable of nuance and does not automatically imply that the voice of the narrator is the single voice that carries the whole of a novel's narrative authority.

Multiple perspectives are key to 'Jakarta', which appears in Munro's 1998 collection *The Love of a Good Woman*. The story begins with the third-person narrator's external focalization of a scene between friends, Kath and Sonje. The women's friendship has grown from a shared disapproval of a group of neighbourhood women they call 'The Monicas'.<sup>119</sup> With their vast collection of belongings, including 'beach umbrellas, towels, diaper bags, picnic hampers, inflatable rafts and whales, toys, lotions, extra clothing, sun hats, thermos bottles of coffee, paper cups and plates, and thermos tubs',<sup>120</sup> these women embody a form of child-centred domesticity that both Kath and Sonje reject. Beginning with an arm's length description of a scene that positions Kath and Sonje at a remove from the other women, Munro establishes the narrator as the main storytelling voice. The highlighting of the narrator at this early stage is important because as the story continues, the reader meets shifts in perspective, time, and location that undermine conventional story arcs.

Having set up the Kath-Sonje relationship and continuing with a scene in which the two women argue over differences in their attitudes to marriage, the story unexpectedly jumps forward several decades to a scene between Sonje and Kath's now ex-husband, Kent. Sonje is now living alone, Kent has remarried twice following his divorce from Kath, and Kath appears to have been dropped from the story. Following a scene in which the narrator makes observations about Sonje's home and Sonje and Kent engage in polite small talk, Kent

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<sup>119</sup> Munro (1998), Kindle location 1153.

<sup>120</sup> Munro (1998), Kindle location 1153.

reflects on the evening of a dinner party hosted by Sonje and her then husband. Like the story's first section, the second begins with a passage of description voiced by the narrator. Munro signals a shift in perspective in which Kent becomes the focalizer and the focus reverts to the earlier time period writing that, 'the books and papers stacked in the hall reminded him of the house that Sonje and Cottar lived in above the beach'<sup>121</sup> The story continues with Kent's memory of the evening, in which the tension results from Kent's conservative perspective alongside Sonje and Cottar's leftist friends. In this section, the reader understands that Kent is now the focalizer and that the focalization has shifted from external to internal from passages such as:

He didn't even take these people seriously, as the enemy. They hung around on the fringes of real life, haranguing and thinking themselves important, the way fanatics of any sort did. They had no solidity, when you compared them with the men Kent worked with. In the work Kent did, mistakes mattered, responsibility was constant, you did not have time to fool around with ideas about whether chain drugstores were a bad idea or indulge in some paranoia about drug companies. That was the real world and he went out into it every day with the weight of his future and Kath's on his shoulders. He accepted that, he was even proud of it, he was not going to apologize to a roomful of groaners.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Munro (1998), Kindle location 1317.

<sup>122</sup> Munro (1998), Kindle location 1346.

The flashback ends with an inconclusive reflection from Kent in present that, ‘he did not disagree with his younger self now. He thought he had been brash maybe, but not wrong. But he wondered about the anger in that room, all the bruising energy, what had become of it.’<sup>123</sup> The section continues with a further exchange of small talk between the older Kent and Sonje. Sonje talks of the houses they lived in when they were neighbours, reminding Kent that it used to irritate him when Kath would not engage in a conversation he wanted to have with her about the type of house they eventually would buy. Kent reflects that he ‘could not remember that happening. But he supposed it had. Anyway it was what Kath had told Sonje.’<sup>124</sup> This is a typical Munro sentence, one in which her point is that memory is subjective. A central device of Munro’s fiction is the presentation of recollections of the same event in the past that differ from person to person, or which show that one person’s memory of an event may change over time. Her use of this device highlights her stories as an exploration of the techniques of narrative that people use in their everyday lives. Memories are revised according the demands and contexts of the present and, as such, it is common for Munro’s characters to either make alterations to a memory or to adjust it by means of a different perspectival slant. With so many layers of perspective, the role of the narrator as the central voice holding everything together is important. Notably, however, the narrator refrains from drawing conclusions on the different ways in which the characters seek to rely on their memories.

### **2.3 Elizabeth Strout**

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<sup>123</sup> Munro (1998), Kindle location 1349.

<sup>124</sup> Munro (1998), Kindle location 1371.



Strout's 1998 novel *Amy & Isabelle*, tells the story of a mother and daughter whose already strained relationship is tested further by mother Isabelle's discovery that her daughter, Amy, has been involved in a relationship with her maths teacher Mr Robertson. Isabelle once aspired to be a teacher, but when she became pregnant with Amy and Amy's father returned to his wife, Isabelle set up home by herself, moving to a small mill town in Maine and becoming secretary to the mill manager. The novel takes place over several months of an unusually hot summer. Sixteen-year old Amy has started a job in the same mill office as Isabelle, working as a temporary replacement for Dottie Browne, who is recovering from a hysterectomy. Using as its principal settings the mill office and Isabelle and Amy's home, the novel focuses on Isabelle's shame and Amy's recriminations. Isabelle is ashamed of what Amy has done and ashamed of herself for not protecting her daughter, while Amy blames Isabel for the relationship ending and for Mr Robertson's decision to move away from the town. Due to these tensions communications between Amy and Isabelle have become limited to the basic interactions of their meal-times or other domestic and work-related dealings.

Narrated by a third-person omniscient narrator, the novel alternates between the points of view of Isabelle and Amy, which are presented by means of internally focalized passages with the two protagonists. Strout relies also on long descriptive passages and observations from the narrator. As such, the novel's principal storytelling voice is the narrator's. In addition to the alternating points of view of Amy, Isabelle, and the narrator, Strout build the story of Amy's relationship with Mr Robertson by means of a combination of scenes in the present with flashbacks. Most notably, Stout withholds until the end of the novel the circumstances of Isabelle's discovery of what has been taking place between Amy and Mr Robertson. These circumstances are that by chance the mill manager, Avery Clarke saw Mr Robertson's car parked in the woods, with Amy and Mr Robertson having sex inside. This belated revelation illuminates the tensions between Isabelle and Amy that have been the

subject of the preceding chapters. Regarding theme, the novel explores how Amy and Isabelle, caught in their private anxieties and insecurities, withdraw further from each other following Isabelle's discovery of Amy and Mr Robertson's relationship.

The narrator's role as an observer of interactions between Isabelle and Amy is central to Strout's presentation of their relationship and the novel's central conflict. The narrator's access to the private thoughts of both is significant also since neither character is willing or able to discuss her thoughts and feelings openly with the other. Strout's use of an omniscient narrator to presents the main characters' separate points of view and the thematic interest of *Amy & Isabelle* in the difficulties its central characters encounter in communicating honestly and effectively with each other, present clear similarities of narrative mode and theme to those appearing in *All this is for you*. This case study considers three questions related to Strout's use of an omniscient narrator in *Amy & Isabelle* to engage readers in the stories of characters who are caught up in conflicts which cause them to withdraw from each other: How does the narrator's descriptive commentary create atmosphere? How does Strout manage the risk of other characters overshadowing the two protagonists and creations distractions from her story arc and character development? Why does Strout include so many dialogues that are not directly concerned with advancing the central tensions of the Amy-Isabelle relationship?

A feature of the early chapters of *Amy & Isabelle* is the use of the narrator's long descriptive passages that appear at the start of many of the chapters. These descriptions concentrate on place, establishing setting as an important element of the story-world. In particular, the geography of Shirley Falls, the town where the novel is set, the oppressive atmosphere created by the listlessness of an unusually hot summer, and details of the house where Isabelle and Amy live all figure centrally in the narrator's descriptions. This signalling

of the importance of place reveals an approach similar to Munro's in *The Beggar Maid*. *The Beggar Main* is set in Munro's fictional town of Hanratty.

There was Hanratty and West Hanratty, with the river flowing between them. This was West Hanratty. In Hanratty the social structure ran from doctors and dentists and lawyers down to foundry workers and factory workers and draymen; in West Hanratty it ran from factory workers and foundry workers down to large improvident families of casual bootleggers and prostitutes and unsuccessful thieves.<sup>125</sup>

*Amy & Isabelle's* Shirley Falls is also separated by a river into the poorer district, called The Basin and the more prosperous district of Oyster Point. The narrator describes the Basin, noting that 'the houses here were often loose-looking and large, with three stories, one apartment to each floor, and usually a tilting front porch.'<sup>126</sup> Whereas the 'other side of the river, known as Oyster Point, was where the few doctors and dentists and lawyers of Shirley Falls lived.'<sup>127</sup> Like *The Beggar Maid's* Rose, whose home in West Hanratty is a source of shame, Isabelle and Amy's home foreshadows the same anxieties as a constant source of tension. Located on the outskirts of Oyster Point, close to The Basin, Isabelle and Amy's house is the shabbiest Oyster Point home and it represents the relentless sense of inferiority that isolates both characters from their more affluent neighbours.

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<sup>125</sup> Munro (1978), Kindle location 87-97.

<sup>126</sup> Strout (1998), Kindle location 303-15

<sup>127</sup> Strout (1998), Kindle location 315.

In her essay, 'Where do you think you are?', Marilyn Simonds writes of the homes of Munro's characters that,

the isolation of such houses creates the intimate setting for some of Alice Munro's darkest stories [...]. The isolation itself doesn't prompt the acts [the characters carry out] (human nature takes care of that), but the secrecy that isolation allows creates the moral dilemmas that Munro explores so ruthlessly in her fiction.<sup>128</sup>

The same is true of Strout's *Amy and Isabelle*. Amy keeps her relationship with Mr Robertson secret from Isabelle and Isabelle withholds from Amy the identity of her father. Amy was conceived when Isabelle was seduced as a teenager by a friend of her father and when Isabelle learns of Amy's affair with Mr Robertson, she cannot reveal to Amy the shame and disappointment she feels at failing to protect Amy from the same harm that she suffered at a similar age. In the same way, Amy cannot reveal to Isabelle the feelings of loneliness that drew her into the relationship with Mr Robertson or the sadness of its abrupt end.

A consequence of these themes of secrecy and isolation is the challenge they present to Strout regarding her omniscient narrator's privilege. While both characters' restraint renders indispensable the narrator's privileged access to their thoughts and feelings, the privilege is limited by their equally strong determination to hold back not only from each other, but also from themselves. I suggest that the narrator's descriptions of place provide an elliptical solution to the problem of dramatizing the inner conflicts of characters who are

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<sup>128</sup> Marilyn Simonds 'Where do you think you are?', *The Cambridge Companion to Alice Munro*, (Kindle edition: Cambridge University Press, 2016), Kindle location 1089.

unwilling to communicate with each other and who turn away from private reflections on their situations. While Strout uses this strategy as an effective method of creating atmosphere and to avoid too direct an exploration of the conflicts occurring between Amy and Isabelle, the method also presents risks in the form of tensions with other aspects of the realist form. While there is a strong argument for a narrator of *Amy & Isabelle* for a narrator who takes control of storytelling (because the protagonists cannot or will not), an intrusive and controlling narrative voice remains a major obstacle of the omniscient mode. Such a voice also functions a constant reminder to readers of the artifice of fiction and has the potential to become an agent that impedes the reader's direct engagement with the characters. Further risks arise regarding the resolution of story arcs that are built around an elliptical storytelling voice due to the difficulties that arise with the use of a narrator whose extensive knowledge and unimpeded control of the story-world may give rise to the reader's feeling that resolution is being artificially withheld. The important risk for a writer using these strategies is that the aesthetics of presenting real life's spontaneity and unresolvedness intrudes on the integrity of a story-world that is supervised by an omniscient narrator.

Not only do Isabelle and Amy shy away from each other and from private personal reflection, both remain quiet in the presence of the novel's ever present secondary characters, including Isabelle's colleagues in the mill office and Amy's classmates. Given the two protagonists' shyness, how does Strout use her omniscient narrator to balance the voices of the main characters with those of louder and more charismatic secondary characters? An important scene, which occurs in Chapter 2, is Amy's first meeting with Mr Robertson. Amy and her classmates are surprised when they arrive for class to discover that Mr Robertson has taken over from the injured Miss Dayble. Mr Robinson's surprises the students further when he beginning his class saying, 'I would like to hear from you.'<sup>129</sup> By now, the reader knows

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<sup>129</sup> Strout (1998), Kindle location 392.

that Amy will avoid speaking to him. It is therefore unsurprising that the narrator steps in to speak on behalf of the students:

No teacher had asked them such a thing before, and some of the students moved in their seats with nervous pleasure, while others sat motionless, considering this. Outside, the winter sky was far away, remote. The room seemed an important place to be, the oiled wooden floors giving support to something substantial, the smell of chalk and perspiring bodies holding the hint of excitement, of promise.<sup>130</sup>

This passage prioritizes the body of students collectively as a single voice over than Amy's individual voice to begin a scene in which the reader's observation of Amy is a key element. The reader, observing Amy through the narrator, understands that she is simultaneously wanting to avoid being the focus of Mr Robertson's attention and being tempted to follow the lead of the students who are responding to him.

In this scene, Strout uses of several points of view and varies the distance between the narrator and the characters to underline Amy's shyness and keep her involved in the action. In the first sentence, the narrator adopts the collective voice of the class, appearing to speak from a vantage point in the midst of the students as if she or he were one of them. With the next sentence, the narrator reverts to the role of a more detached observer paying close attention to the students' actions. The following sentence, 'Outside, the winter sun was far away, remote', is ambiguous. The more atmospheric tone does not fit easily with either the collective voice or

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<sup>130</sup> Strout (1998), Kindle location 404.

the class or with the narrator's precise and attentive observations of the students' actions and gestures. It suggests a dreamy mood that a reader may associate with Amy, however, until this point Amy has not appeared as a conspicuous presence and there is nothing to indicate that this phase free indirect speech or that Amy is the focalizer. It is difficult, therefore, to decide whether this is an intentional shift in perspective by which Strout means to bring the reader's attention back to Amy or whether it is shift by the narrator to a more figurative mode of observation. It is difficult to decide similarly, whether the ambiguity is intentional or whether an accidental lapse in point of view with the writer unsure of whose voice this is.

This ambiguity represents a notable difficulty posed by the use of focalization over free indirect speech. Unlike free indirect speech, in which the narrator's voice and the character's voice remain distinct, focalization is characterized by the merging of the two voices. In certain circumstances, the ability to merge the narrator's voice with that of a character can be used for a particular effect, for example when the writer wants to remind a reader of the narrator's observational role. In particular, the use of focalization can signal the suitability of a omniscient narrator for a narrative in which one or more central characters is unwilling or unable to articulate the substance of the conflict they face. However, the passage cited above illustrates the risk of ambiguities, which are a downside that writers must seek to avoid.

Following the narrator's commentary at the start of the maths lesson, a section of dialogue begins between Mr Robertson and members of the class in which different students respond to his request to hear from them. Four students reply to Mr Robinson before Amy becomes involved, and rather than by Amy instigating the exchange, Mr Robertson asks her directly to respond. In this section, therefore, Amy's role is distinctly passive and Strout relies on the narrator's privileged access to her thoughts and feelings as she observes the conversations taking place around her as the principal means by which she is included in the

scene. At first the content of these observations, in which Amy is the focalizer, concentrates on a physical description of Mr Robinson. The details of his appearance that Amy notices include, ‘a sturdy thickness to him’, his hairstyle, which, in particular, ‘was longer than what she expected in a middle-aged man’, and the clothes he wears, ‘a maroon tie with his pink shirt, and a brown sports coat.’<sup>131</sup> These observations are neutral and might just as easily have been made by the narrator. They suggest little about Amy’s character beyond her impression of him as a rather bohemian but authoritative figure. Any other person might, therefore, have made similar observations. Strout’s approach of using Amy as the focalizer appears to be a simple reminder of Amy’s presence in the room rather than a serious effort at adding to the reader’s knowledge of her character. Regarding more practical matters, the switch to Amy’s point of view also has the advantage of keeping Amy within the reader’s frame of attention, ready for the shift soon afterwards to Amy’s more direct involvement, which now becomes less abrupt.

Amy’s observations of Mr Robertson reveal also a more subtle use of focalization. In this scene, Strout use of Amy as the focalizer allows her to draw the reader’s attention to certain elements of a scene and to avoid a sense of imbalance where the central characters appears peripheral to one or more secondary characters. Used in this manner, focalization demonstrates a key feature of omniscient narration, namely its capacity for movement between several perspectives and vantage points. This movement allows a writer to draw the reader’s attention to the main character as a figure within a wider scene rather than limiting her or his view to the character’s own frame of reference. In this way, a writer may create also greater scope for the reader to mimic the constant movements of narrator by taking up different perspectives and angles, which contribute to an enhanced and more layered view of the story-world.

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<sup>131</sup> Strout (1998), Kindle locations 415-26.



Following the observations of Mr Robertson focalized through Amy, the point of view returns to the narrator, who notes that, ‘the class was not entirely won over, in spite of the man’s wonderful voice.’<sup>132</sup> Strout’s use of ‘wonderful’ signals the shift away from Amy and back to the narrator as, I would suggest, if Strout wanted to present this observation as Amy’s she would have used a more idiomatic adjective that a reader would instinctively associate with a sixteen-year old girl. The narrator notices further that, ‘his hands were large, as though nature had intended him to be a taller, bigger man, and there was something exquisitely gentle in the way he moved the chair. Again, the choice of a word such as ‘exquisitely’ signals the perspective of a person who is older than Amy.

Due to the importance of this scene to the main plot-arc, Strout’s strategy of focusing the reader’s attention elsewhere than on Amy is unexpected. Why does she not place Amy as the scene’s most important observer? Why does she include the narrator’s parallel observations? I suggest that Strout’s approach allows the reader a more complete experience of what Amy is feeling, as if she or he were in the classroom beside Amy in addition to the experience of inhabiting Amy’s individual view. The dual perspectives of Amy and the narrator in this scene effect carefully-struck balance in which the reader simultaneously observes Amy from the outside and from within.

When Amy answers Mr Roberston’s question about what she wants to be, the narrator comments that, ‘she saw how he ran his fingers slowly over his beard, a spot that was almost reddish in color, right below his lip.’<sup>133</sup> As an alternative, Strout might have left out the beginning of the sentence. The alternative version would read, ‘He ran his fingers slowly over his beard...’ In the second version, the narrator is less visible. In the first, Strout’s decision to include the narrator changes the reader’s vantage point, with the effect that the reader’s

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<sup>132</sup> Strout (1998), Kindle location 426.

<sup>133</sup> Strout (1998), Kindle location 447.

attention is drawn to the observing presence of the narrator and to the external perspective rather than the internal one and despite her voice being quieter and more reserved than those of her classmates, Strout avoids the reader losing sight of her. This strategy of keeping the narrator inside the reader's field of vision reminds the reader that there are multiple angles from which to consider the story-world. Amy's, while important in this scene, is, nevertheless, not the definitive view, and the narrator's more experienced sounding voice serves as a signal that Amy's view may be coloured by inexperience.

Strout's dual-narrative technique in this passage is similar to the dual-voiced retrospective narratives used by Munro. Both writers are centrally concerned with representing to readers that events taking place in the story-world are open to more than one interpretation. However, unlike Strout's Munro's technique often centres around an older person's viewpoint on a memory of her or his younger self. In *Amy & Isabelle*, Strout's dual narrative is focused around the two distinct voices of character and narrator. Munro is therefore more concerned with a person's shifting sense of self, whereas Strout concentrates on the diverse views that different characters take regarding plot events. In each case, the underlying practical question for readers is to be clear as to which voice the writer intends as the principal source of reliable narrative information. Munro's dual-narrative techniques often draw the reader's attention to the character, with the narrator's voice occupying a secondary role. *Amy & Isabelle* uses a classic device of omniscient narration, that of the narrator as the reader's most significant source of reliable information.

Strout's use of dual-narrative in *Amy & Isabelle* is closer than Munro's retrospective dual-narratives to a classic omniscient narrator. However, Strout's narrator departs from classic literary omniscience because her narrator's commentary is less conclusive as to the characters' motivations and to the reader's sense the plot events being resolved with fixed judgements on the characters. For example, in the scene described above, the narrator stops

short of conclusively expressing a view subjective view of what Mr Robertson's behaviour might reveal about his motives. The reader perceives Mr Robertson's manner as slightly affected, indicating his vanity in deliberately seeking to gain the students' admiration. This motive is suggested, but there is a deliberate and calculated vagueness in the narrative mood. A risk inherent in this strategy is that too little information is given to readers, and that readers are denied the opportunity to fully invest in the characters.

A sub-plot that advances alongside the central conflict between Amy and Isabelle concerns a news story regarding a missing girl. For several months Debby Kay Dorne, a local schoolgirl, has been missing. As the summer progresses, news stations are reporting on the ongoing search. The disappearance story catches the interest of both main characters, with Stout giving considerable space to their conversations about Debby and what might have happened to her. Since these conversations are not concerned with directly advancing the main plot, why does Strout accord them significant attention? A practical reason for including the Debby Kay Dorne sub-plot is that since the protagonists are reticent the tensions between them, they must nevertheless speak to each other about something. Often, particularly in the early chapters, the dialogue between Isabelle and Amy is limited to their domestic routines. The story of the missing girl gives them a substantial subject to discuss, which not directly concerned with the principal conflict between them.

These discussions provide also opportunities for the observational narrator to comment on certain behavioural aspects of the novel's central relationship. For example, the narrator introduces Debby's disappearance with the report that, 'Amy and Isabelle were so intrigued by this that for three days they had eaten their dinner off TV trays.'<sup>134</sup> As they watch the news report sitting side by side on the sofa, the narrator reports the following exchange: "Very sweet," Isabelle said, and then more slowly, "very, very sweet," and Amy

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<sup>134</sup> Strout (1998), Kindle location 807.

moved closer to her mother on the couch. “Sssshh,” Isabelle said, “I want to hear what he has to say.”<sup>135</sup> The significant detail is the narrator’s observation of Isabelle’s response to Amy moving closer to her, which keeps the reader’s focus on the Isabelle-Amy relationship and demonstrates the subtle methods by which the narrator controls where the reader’s attention is directed. In this case, the narrator’s observation does not intrude on what is taking place between Isabelle and Amy. If Strout were to focalize this observation through one of the characters, the fact of that character noticing what is taking place would cause a different effect, requiring a response from the character and the scene would become more directly concerned with the central conflict.

Following the news report, the narrator reports that,

Amy could not stop thinking about it. Lying in bed, waiting for sleep, moonlight touching the frost on her window, she pictured the scene again and again: the girl in a green winter jacket falling on her driveway, notebook and lunch bag sent flying, skidding across the ice; the mother coming out of the house quickly. “Honey, are you all right?” The mother would be tired-looking, but pretty, Amy thought, and she would help the girl inside, help her take off the green winter jacket, hang it on a hook by the door. Amy pictured Debby lying down on the couch while her mother brought in the quilt from her bed, kissing the girl’s broad forehead, brushing back the curly hair.

Perhaps she said, “Don’t answer the door.” The dog Amy

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<sup>135</sup> Strout (1998), Kindle location 814.

pictured as something small, the kind that got excited when strangers came to the house, racing back and forth, scattering rugs, maybe knocking over a plant or two, but a dog that lay around quietly when he knew everything was fine. And maybe that morning he had been lying on the couch with Debby while she scratched his head and watched a game show on TV.<sup>136</sup>

It is the narrator who provides this account of Amy's idealized version of a different family life in a passage that relies entirely on the privileged access to Amy's thoughts. Compared to the alternative of using free indirect speech for this passage, the narrator's point of view is significant in terms of mood and distance. This is the direct reporting of Amy's thoughts and her longing for a different life is wistful rather than reflective.

However, the direct reporting of thoughts in the narrator's voice also carries risks. A difficulty of Strout's approach is a tension between the narrator's unrestricted access to the characters' thoughts and feelings and the parallel unwillingness to offer value judgements or draw conclusions. Why does so perceptive a storytelling voice, characterized by its attentiveness to detail, avoid subjective commentary? Having established the narrator's voice as the principal storytelling voice, why does that voice refrain from offering resolution regarding the characters' motivations? This difficulty also challenges Yates narrator in *Revolutionary Road*. *Revolutionary Road*'s epilogue chapter shows that Frank has moved on following April's death. He is able to speak as confidently as ever about the ways in which therapy has helped him come to terms with what has happened. However, there is a hollowness to what he says, which renders it unconvincing. The narrator presents this

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<sup>136</sup> Strout (1998), Kindle location 814-25.

situation without subjective comment, therefore amplifying the reader's sense of incomplete resolution at the end of the novel. The point, we assume, is that resolution is present here in the form of acceptance by Frank and the narrator that whatever happens, life goes on.

Munro's use of dual-voiced retrospective omniscient narration is less affected by these difficulties because the narrative is more strongly focused on the character than the narrator.

However, Munro's omniscient narrators rely also on more conspicuous manipulations of temporal ordering.

These elements suggest that the principal challenge faced by writers using the omniscient made is the difficulty of working out what limits and restraints to apply to the idea of complete knowledge. It is therefore possible to add to Sternberg's division of omniscient narrators into those who are omniconnunicative and those relying on the withholding of information for suspense, those whose role is that of a mediator of multiple perspectives. The key variable of this third category of omniscient narrator is not, therefore, connected with the amount of information that is made available or the rate at which information is given to readers. Instead, this type of omniscient narrator is principally concerned with the balancing of narrative information, ensuring that the different points of view remain constantly in dialogue with each other, with the reader, and with the themes that the novel is exploring. In addition, the combined presence of multiple viewpoints appears as a series of checks and balances in which the narrator's extensive knowledge is moderated by a range of different perspectives whose effect is to ensure that a single fixed and definitive view is avoided and at the same time, the narrator does not appear to be undermining the resolution of character and/or plot.

#### **2.4**    *All this is for you*



## **Conclusion: Hemu and Joanna**

When I started work on *All this is for you*, I was most concerned with the challenges I anticipated when writing the Hemu character. Although I am familiar with the historical and cultural contexts of the Sindhi community, and despite the importance of the figure of the self-made man in my own background, the challenge of writing convincingly from within the point of view of a man more than thirty years older than me, who is from a different country and possesses different values to mine was daunting. I had no such concerns in relation to the Joanna character, a British woman similar in age to me and living in similar circumstances to mine. However, my experience has been the opposite. Of the two main characters, Hemu has presented fewer difficulties in practice than Joanna. The two protagonists are similar in so far as they encounter difficulties in finding meaningful ways to communicate with other members of their family, but their experience of language is entirely different.

In this commentary, I discussed *Revolutionary Road* as a model for an approach to presenting characters' emotional conflicts, in particular those arising from tensions with close family relationships. The interest of Yates' novel is in the role of his narrator in providing a closely observed and unflinching account of conflict between a husband and wife, which occurs as a consequence of the characters' deeper conflicts between a private sense of self and the selves they present in public. In particular, a central question that drove my investigations of Yates' narrative mode was an effort to determine why, as a woman reading *Revolutionary Road* almost 60 years after its publication, do I feel sympathy towards Frank Wheeler. Given the attitudes to gender that Frank embodies, his role in the novel, and his unwillingness to accept any form of accountability in relation to the difficulties that exist between him and his wife (and for which his wife ultimately pays a tragic price), I would expect to perceive Frank as the villain of the novel. However, after numerous readings, the



first almost 20 years ago, this has not been and is still not the case. Yates' use of a narrative voice that encourages the reader to stand back and reflect on the events of the novel taking account of the several perspectives of the characters and, in addition, her or his own perspective, is a key element of this response. In this research I explored a range of critical views as well as examining my own fiction-writing practice to better understand the techniques involved in *Revolutionary Road*'s narrator in order to inform my approach to a narrator for my novel.

In Yates' fiction, a particular type of character, with an inclination to engage in the self-reflection, assists the narrator. However, a significant difficulty with the Hemu character in my novel is that he is not such a character. Hemu is a man who is dedicated to hard work, with the expectation that whatever problems he encounters he can resolve them provided he has the means to pay for a solution. He has neither the inclination nor the tools for the same self-engagement that comes naturally to a character such as Frank Wheeler. Hemu's reluctance to self-reflect was a significant factor in my decision, early in the writing, to avoid narrating in the first person. As Pascal notes in his chapter 'The narrator problem':

There are other difficulties arising from the form of the first-person novel, which have frequently led authors palpably to strain its capacity. Henry James, when contemplating its advantages and disadvantages in the Preface to *The Ambassadors*, admits that it might have permitted him to 'smuggle in' certain sorts of formally illicit terms, but expresses his unease over the 'freedom' taken by the authors of *Gil Blas* and *David Copperfield*, where the hero is both the subject and the object of the story.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Pascal, p. 3.

However, if Hemu has difficulty in articulating how he feels, I was concerned also that a third-person narrator might lead to the opposite problem. In the voice of a more emotionally intelligent narrator, Hemu's conflicts might appear too straightforward or simplistic, and my central aim of drawing readers into the difficulties of dealing with emotional conflict would be diminished. I found that there was a subtle balance to be negotiated regarding Hemu, concerning how best to engage reader in these struggles, notably the death of Laxmi, when Hemu himself shies away from them. Alice Munro refers to this difficult aspect of character development in a 1982 interview with Geoff Hancock of *Canadian Fiction Magazine*. Asked by Hancock if her characters are 'seeking for self-knowledge', Munro answers that,

they move towards discoveries. Because everybody does, I think. But some people don't admit their discoveries and turn aside from them. Or maybe just don't even see them. They come up against discoveries but don't discover them. That's what characters do sometimes. The discoveries may not be pleasant.<sup>138</sup>

Similarly, in an interview in which she discusses her novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie summarizes the difficulties such an attitude may present for omniscient narrators.

I have always been suspicious of the omniscient narrative. It has never appealed to me, always seemed a little lazy and a little too

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<sup>138</sup> Hancock, p. 102.

easy. In an introduction to Giovanni Verga's novel, it is said about his treatment of his characters that he "never lets them analyze their impulses but simply lets them be driven by them." I wanted to write characters who are driven by impulses that they may not always be consciously aware of—which I think is true for us human beings. Besides, I didn't want to bore my reader to death, exploring the characters' every thought.<sup>139</sup>

The development of Hemu, therefore, needed careful management of the balance between a realistic rendering of his own emotionally reticent voice and a controlled use of the narrator's observations. The availability of free indirect speech was limited for Hemu because the private conversation he holds with himself inside his head is not as expansive as with a character such as Frank Wheeler. In the same way, unlike Frank, who is a more performative character, Hemu is more straightforward and he does not demonstrate a wide gap between his private self and the self he shows in public. Writing passages in which Hemu appears as the focalizer helped to balance the limitation of free indirect speech, however I was concerned that an overuse of Hemu as a focalizer would diminish a reader's sense of his mounting frustrations at the difficulties involved in articulating his feelings. This was a concern most notably in the chapter in which Hemu meets Harkashan, as his emotional conflict in this chapter is significantly amplified. However, these difficulties were mitigated considerably by the distinction between Hemu's voice and the narrator's. Since Hemu sounds so different to the narrator, there is a clear sense when the narrator is observing him in a detached manner and when readers are inhabiting his inner world. This element sets clear boundaries between

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<sup>139</sup> Interview with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, <[https://www.bookbrowse.com/author\\_interviews/full/index.cfm/author\\_number/1362/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie](https://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm/author_number/1362/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie)>, [last accessed 22 September 2018].

character and narrator in which a meaningful space exists for readers to engage with Hemu from within his point of view and, at the same time, by means of a more detached observational perspective.

If the difficulties with writing Hemu arise from a character who, when faced with significant emotional challenge, does not have the words to say how he feels, Joanna is largely the opposite. A character such as Joanna risks becoming too embroiled in language, with the result that her meaning is lost. This tendency made character development troublesome, as I found it difficult to provide direction and purpose to her role in the novel as a counter view to Hemu.

A thematic element of the challenges of Joanna's characterization is that in a Bakhtinian sense, she is speaking a different language to both Hemu and Suresh. Raised in a family that gave great importance to the role of the breadwinner, and then marrying into a family dominated by Hemu's work ethic, it is difficult for Joanna to assert a point of view that pivots around an alternative set values in which her contribution to family life would carry greater weight. As she tells the 'This is Me' group, her contribution to the family has no monetary value, and she feels that not only are her efforts undervalued, but that this lack of recognition hampers her personal sense of direction. Since the activities that are valued most in the Daswani family are those that earn a lot of money, she suffers from feeling held back knowing that she cannot compete with Suresh or Hemu.

The impact of theme on the technical challenges of writing Joanna was most closely concerned with a similarity between her voice and the narrator's voice. Compared with Hemu, not only does Joanna lack the idiomatic patterns of Hemu's Indianized English, she also lacks an equivalent to the Bakhtinian professional language that Hemu, as a businessman, also speaks. Similarly, I was tasked with the challenge of a passive tone in Joanna's voice, which is in contrast to Hemu's more bombastic manner of speaking. It was

important to preserve this passivity because it results from and characterizes Joanna's lack of confidence. However, this meant that her more reserved manner, less individualized by lacking the spontaneous outbursts seen in a character such as Hemu, who finds it easier to speak his mind, resulted in a voice that was much closer to that of the narrator.

The findings of my research into the range of techniques encompassed by the term 'omniscient narrator' suggested that I pay greater attention to refining the narrator's access to Joanna's private thoughts. My more extensive use of free indirect speech in early drafts captured Joanna's lack of direction, but in a style that failed to use Joanna as an effective 'focalizer' since the speech patterns of her thoughts presented without mediation by the narrator, closer to her internal monologue, lacked a sense of storytelling purpose. The solution, following the examples of the works selected for the case studies was to use free indirect speech more sparingly and an understanding of the theory of focalization provided me with a more nuanced technique for presenting her thoughts. Additionally, the life coaching group, which I added later in the project, provided Joanna with access to a form of 'professional language', meaning that some of the indecision and purposelessness that characterized the speech patterns of her private thoughts could now be expressed as dialogue with other characters.

Overall, the experience of managing the omniscient mode in *All this is for you* supports James Wood's comments suggesting that the key to using an omniscient narrator with confidence lies in the balance between ostensibly neutral observation and the effects of a more 'partial and inflected'<sup>140</sup> voice. My research of the critical theories offering an explanation and a method for analysing literary omniscience found that none is perfect or comprehensive. The desire of critics to resolve the tensions inherent in a narrative mode that is closely identified with literary realism, and which rests on the apparent ability of a narrator

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<sup>140</sup> Wood, <<https://brickmag.com/an-interview-with-w-g-sebald/>>, [last accessed 8 June 2017].

to engage at will in the act of mind-reading continues to present significant difficulties. Despite approaching my research with considerable scepticism regarding the continuing relevance of the Author-God analogy to contemporary realist fiction, Sternberg's defence of it remains more persuasive than the alternative approaches I discussed, which fail to offer credible explanations for a narrative device that evades worldly rationalization.

Nevertheless, the conclusions of my research support my early editorial decision, based at the time entirely on instinct, that a form of omniscient narration would be better suited than a first-person narrator to the story I wanted to tell. I hope this research upholds a view of omniscient narration as an inherently flexible narrative mode, that provides fiction-writers with considerable opportunity to reflect on the ever more complex relationship between real life and narrative. Furthermore, in an era of arguably fluid gender roles which would appear to give greater opportunities to people (women in particular) to balance a personal sense of self with the limitations arising from family roles, the central questions posed by Yates' *Revolutionary Road* and more generally in the work of Munro remain pressing: Where does the family role (daughter, son, mother, father, wife, husband) end and where does the individual begin? To the extent that fiction is can engage with such questions, the omniscient narrator remains a significant device for novelistic discourse.

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