

UNSPEAKABLE ACTS: STORIES

and

MEANS OF DISCOMFORT: NARRATIVE AND ITS DYSFUNCTIONS IN THE SHORT FICTION OF DAVID MEANS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is presented in two sections; the first (primary) section is the short story collection, *Unspeakable Acts*, and the second, 'Means of Discomfort: Narrative and its Dysfunctions in the Short Fiction of David Means,' consists of an essay identifying and addressing the role of narrative dysfunctionalities in the work of David Means.

The stories in *Unspeakable Acts* share certain thematic preoccupations. In the first instance, while broadly realist in instinct, most of the stories examine, in one way or another, the way in which life – lived as much in the imagination as on the streets – has at times a shimmering quality that nudges it towards the mythic. The second preoccupation is with the act of storytelling itself, the way in which characters and narrators attempt – and often fail – to narrate their presence in the world in a way that allows them to make sense of their existence.

'Means of Discomfort: Narrative and its Dysfunctions in the Short Fiction of David Means,' represents the first critical work on the American short story writer, David Means. Close readings of his stories are made with the intention of identifying forms of narrative dysfunctionality that exist within them. The term 'dysfunctional narrative' is drawn from the poet C. K. Williams, who uses it to define an inability to tell satisfactory stories about the self. In the thesis, the term is used as a guide to thinking about the ways in which Means's stories work to impede a reader's sense-making instincts and so lead to a form of readerly discomfort. The effect of these dysfunctionalities – which occur at the levels of content and form, story and discourse – is to project the stories beyond their textual confines into a postnarrational void, an afterlife, which implicates the reader in the act of making meaning.

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A Note about ‘Notes on a Love Story’

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UNSPEAKABLE STORIES: ACTS

‘For why do our thoughts turn to some gesture of a hand, the fall of a sleeve, some corner of a room on a particular anonymous afternoon, even when we are asleep, and even when we are so old that our thoughts have abandoned other business? What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally?’

- Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*

DAWN

IT WAS STILL dark when he gave up on the possibility of sleep. A restless night it would be, then, as he had always expected: tossing and turning, pondering outcomes and eventualities and wondering how brave he might be, when the time came, what he had within him in the way of forbearance or strength. He couldn't beat away the thought that his knees would give, or, worse, that his bowels would. He wanted more than anything to put on a good show for Jack and Matty, so that they might learn something, something that could never be spoken or articulated in words, but that they might attempt to speak or articulate, later, when they had wives and families of their own. He wondered how much he would hear or know before consciousness ended, or

whether the central nervous system would take over and occlude everything, dulling into nothingness even the simple acts of recognition, association and anticipation. But thinking, as so often, did no good. It just extended things, pulled them out of shape. And so the night went on. Julia had taken a sleeping pill, as agreed – it would have been unbearable if both of them had been awake – and the rise and fall of her breath alongside him was calming in some measure. From time to time he switched on the bedside light and stared intently at her closed eyes, tracking the pulses and twitches, the fine tracery of vein, following the curve of her cheeks, the line of her chin, the well of her neck, committing it all to purposeless memory. When dawn came he went to the window and drew the curtains. It was thunder grey, the sky, cold and unforgiving, the clouds low and thick, seeming almost to touch the top boughs of the horse chestnut next door. They had their summer furniture out already, the swing bench and the paddling pool. Behind him, his wife snorted and tossed her head but didn't wake and so he remained where he was, gently flexing his knees as the light lightened and day came on. At six, he knelt by her side and shook her awake. She blinked her eyes and then, seeing him, raised herself from the pillow and hugged him tight. It's nearly time, he said. You stay here. I'll get the boys ready. She continued to hold him. He rubbed her shoulders and then disentangled himself. He went to each of their rooms in turn, waking them and helping them into their clothes. They were quiet, uncertain, still caught by sleep. In the breakfast room, he gave them cereal and juice, watching them as they ate. When they had finished, he took Jack to one side and explained where

everyone should stand and how and when to operate the Venetian blinds, indicating the alarm clock on the window sill. The boy nodded seriously, biting his lip. That part completed, he went up to Julia. She was sitting at the dressing table, doing her hair. She had on a string of pearls and a long summer dress. He came up behind her and kissed her neck, pushing his face into her skin. I didn't know what to wear, she said. You look fabulous, he said, and nuzzled his face again into her neck. I'm going to go down now, he said. Everything's ready. The children know what to do. He ran his hand over his wife's bare shoulders and down her arm until they were joined only by their fingertips and then he went. There's no need to say anything, he said. He left by the front door, checking that the bin was out, and then circled round to the back of the house. Apart from the sickness in his stomach he felt calm. He took a chair from the shed and placed it on the patio, facing the breakfast room window, the blind still drawn. He smoked a cigarette, pacing up and down the lawn, looking up at the windows of the house. When he had finished, he looked at his watch and went to the chair. From his pocket, he took the bandana and fastened it around his eyes. Then he waited. The alarm inside the house went a fraction of a second before the alarm on his watch. He heard the Venetian blind shoot up. He swallowed hard to compose himself and then raised the gun to his temple and fired.

MARTA

SHE WAS STANDING behind the counter wearing a red T-shirt. She had her back to him but then she turned. As she did so, her black hair flicked sideways. Across her chest, the shape of a child's face was picked out in coloured thread.

‘I am Marta,’ she said, extending her hand.

In that instant, he knew. He could see it all: the meeting in the back room of the shop, catalogues and books strewn across a great table, her assistant bringing in glasses of water and a tray of carquinyolis. He could see, too, how they would, without appearing to think very much of it, find a

reason to have dinner. In the restaurant they would sit face to face, inhaling the rich scent of zarsuela coming from the open kitchen. They would talk, professionally at first, the meeting continuing while the slow gestation of the night began. Words would cling to their mouths, their purpose not yet certain, before spilling out in waves of rising intent. They would have wine, coffee, then vodka; all the paraphernalia of the table – glasses, spoons, plates – set out in front of them like the pieces of a game.

‘I feel,’ she would begin to say and then stop, puffing out her cheeks, pushing her dessert towards him and putting her hands around her belly as if she were pregnant.

It would be late when they left the restaurant. They would walk the narrow streets of the gothic quarter, channelling their way past dark, recessed buildings; La Seu, the other cathedral, floodlit, its pocked surface picked out in shadow. The air would be warm, the expectant Mediterranean heat. The smell of the sea would come towards them, drifting in from Port Vell, away beyond the night-traffic thrum of Passeig de Colom. There would be lanterns suspended between pillars in the backstreets, cellar doors open, music, a glare coming from a doorway.

In the corner of a square, packed tight between upright buildings, there would be a bar, easy to miss. The men would lean in, inclining their bearded faces, moving slightly to the cracked, tinny sound that came from speakers at the far end of the narrow room. They would sit in the corner near the door, on high stools, looking in. Outside there would be scooters, people smoking, their feet on the bumpers of tightly parked cars.

‘This is where I grew up,’ she would say, nodding to the dark, extinguishing a match by shaking it with her fingers.

After some more drinks, she would reveal she had some pills in her bag, two, left over from the weekend. Her teeth would chatter as she spoke, hunched forward, her hands clamped between her legs. She would shuck off her cardigan. The skin of her arms would be brown and freckled. She would take the pills, two little circles wrapped in tissue paper, out of her bag and hand one to him. He would say that sometimes these things have to be done and she would bow her head in agreement, smiling and shouting back: of course, yes. And they would flip the pills into their mouths and, taking a sip of their drinks, smile at one another as they swallowed.

It wouldn’t take long to feel it: the trembling in the fingers, the tingling in the arms, old blood pushed aside by new blood. He would rattle his box of cigarettes, tap his lighter on the table, chew his gum. She would talk, increasingly animated, her widening pupils leaving their traces in the air when he blinked.

Then they would be dancing. They would continue to talk, or rather shout, bending their heads together, nodding as the volume rose. More drinks. Water.

Around the corner, there would be a club, a proper one, with vaulted rooms, down some stairs. The crowd would be thin – a Monday – but enthusiastic enough. They would stand at the bar and she would lean across, shouting out the apparently complex explanation of a particular drink, her hands mimicking the way in which a bottle is poured at one moment and a

scattering of ice added the next. Again they would dance, moving from the edge of the throng to the centre, swaying their bodies around others, then closing in on one another, taking a hold of the outside of an arm, skin gripping skin, as if every move had been rehearsed. Round and round they would go. As she danced, she would raise one arm above her head and put on a pout, stamping her feet and turning like a flamenco dancer. Above them, lights, beams and colours would play across the air, rebounding off the mirrored walls.

Abruptly, the club would close. On the street outside they would kick the cobbles and wait, neither ready to make the next move. They would smoke and talk, stretching things out, still anxious and edgy even though it was clear that what would happen would happen. They would dance a little more, to the sound of music they couldn't place, almost beyond hearing, as if a single cassette player had been set on the window ledge of an apartment building in a distant quarter of the city. Their cigarettes would fizz in a patch of fluid between the cobbles. People would walk by and the sound of their feet would echo around the emptying square. And then he would say something about not being ready to sleep, about another drink at his hotel and she would agree and they would go back, walking arm in arm, two-in-the-morning heat between them, until the automatic doors opened and the cool of the lobby washed over them as they waited for the elevator, the desk staff in the background as still as statues.

Seen now, at night, under bright lights, his room would seem less promising than it had earlier, when the morning sun had streamed in

through the shades. The shape of it would be awkward, the tone harder, less forgiving. He would sweep his bags roughly from the bed and they would lie across it. She would want to eat and he would call for room service. When the man arrived – a high collar, carrying a tray with a silver-domed plate – she would take charge, standing on one leg, shoeless, having the tray placed on the bed, talking quickly, easily.

He would look at the clock. It would be coming on for four. In the bathroom, he would breathe deeply as he pissed, the porcelain winking at him. He would bend his head towards the mirror as he washed his hands.

Back in the room, she would be standing by the window, smoking.

‘A joint?’ he would ask.

She would nod.

They would go out to the balcony, looking out over the courtyard, its wrought iron tables stacked for the night. A red glow would bleed upwards from the lush heads of plants. He would lean against the railings, his head to one side, listening intently.

‘Look,’ she would say, clicking her fingers and pointing to the sky.

As he looked she would take her index finger and put it flat against his lips, a childish piece of magic.

When it happened, it would be the little differences: the way her hand moved, the puckered shape of her nipples, the tightness of her breathing.

‘You must wear a condom.’

‘I don’t have any.’

‘I do.’

She would slip from under him and move across the room, crouching by her bag, her skin white in the dark. She would throw it to him, making her way across the bed on her knees.

‘You do it,’ she would say. ‘I can never.’

It would last. The heat between them would grow. At the end, she would be on top of him and fall to his chest, heaving, her breathing laboured. Eventually, awkwardly, she would lift herself off, feeling between her legs.

‘Put a.’

‘What?’

‘It is lost.’

In the shadows, not panicking, he would help her draw it out of herself, plucking at the caulish membrane.

‘Don’t worry. I have it.’

He would breathe.

‘Shit,’ she would say.

‘What?’

‘It is empty. A split, I think.’

He would wait on the street outside the night chemist, feeling the new chill. People would drift down the centre of the avenue, flags around their shoulders. The sky would lighten.

‘He would not give it to me. We have to go to the hospital and get it there.’ She would slam the door and stand in the pavement looking back through the windows. In the light of the interior he would catch a glimpse of

the attendant as he moved away from the counter and walked face down to the back of the shop. 'Fucker.' Waiting, she would light a cigarette. 'It is because you are English. He probably thinks you are a football hooligan. You have desecrated a daughter of Spain.'

'I am joking,' she would say in the back of the taxi. Outside, palm trees and baroque, floodlit buildings. 'Some are like that, some are not.'

At the hospital they would have to wait in a grey corridor. They would sit in moulded plastic seats.

'Don't worry. It will not be a problem.'

A doctor would come and stand in front of her, a neat moustache, an antique air. She would talk to the doctor. The doctor would gesture to him. She would talk some more, holding her hands out.

'You wait here,' she would say.

At last he would sit forward and think about his wife. She had always said it would be hard, as if she could see the future. That morning, he had barely been able to leave her, sitting on the edge of the bed and strumming her hair as he waited for a taxi.

To her annoyance, he always travelled early in the day when going on trips, never at night: waking her as he dressed, stumbling in the darkened room, crossing London at dawn, the train out of Liverpool Street, unmanned stations spooling by in the half-light. He liked to watch the sky unfold, scanning it for signs of life.

That morning, he had, sitting at the window, looked back on the receding city, the just-risen sun hitting the glinting top of Tower 42. As the

plane lifted off, the day was still being born, the long shadows of dawn receding into the hedgerows and trees.

He slept a little, papers on his lap. On waking, his mouth tacky, he saw that the seatbelt sign had been illuminated. They were passing into a storm. He caught a last glimpse of the landscape below, the dry stone shades of the Ardèche, before they were engulfed. The plane shook and then settled as they came out into a pocket of clear air in the heart of the cloud. It was as if they had flown into a vast cave. They banked left and he looked down at the strange landscape. Great columns of cloud funnelled upwards, the plane arcing between them and then coming out, with another shake, into clear blue sky. Below them, the Mediterranean glinted, the coast of Catalonia on his right-hand side.

By noon he was in his hotel room. After pulling back the heavy drapes, behind which hung a second, gauze-like blind, he stood before the wide window looking out. La Rambla. He had not seen it from this angle before and the view was distracting, unusually intimate. It was as if he should not be looking; as if, being so close and yet unobserved, he was prying on the private moments of strangers. The room was on the first floor and looked out over the roofs of the stalls and newsagents that lined the centre of the avenue. He could see down women's tops and into their handbags. A couple stopped beneath him, football fans. There would be a game that night. The man bent down and opened his rucksack, revealing a passport, a spare item of clothing – a T-shirt or similar – and a shaving pack. Above the central pathway hung birdcages; passers-by stopped, looked up and pointed, but did

not see him, a shadowy outline at the window of a hotel.

Even through the gauze he could feel the heat of the sun. In London, summer hadn't started. Two days of solid rain had put paid to the Lord's Test Match. He looked at his watch. There was time before his first appointment. Despite the sun, the room behind him was in a hazy fug, like twilight. He had a corner suite that ranged across the width of the building's floor, stretching from the window at the front to a small balcony at the back, overlooking a courtyard. On his bed, against the far wall, lay his bags. He used a rucksack especially designed to hold suits. It was easier to carry from airport to airport, hotel to hotel. Alongside it, his leather satchel, stuffed full of catalogues and samples. Together the two items of luggage, denting the surface of the sheets, took on the appearance of human bodies, two people lying prone, the strap of his satchel hanging like an arm across a human belly.

He lit a cigarette and returned to the window. Across the street, a line of people waited at a cash machine, their backs resting on the window of a bank. At the end of the line, a young woman. She was smoking and apparently nodding her head to music. She had canvas shoes on her feet, and when she dropped her cigarette she ground it out, twisting her right foot. The couple he had seen before was now seated at one of the cafes in the centre of the street, two coffees on the table in front of them. The man reached his hand out to the woman and closed his fingers over hers.

Although he had not stayed at this hotel before he knew it would only

take five minutes to walk to La Central. He could see the entrance to the street he would need to go down on the other side of La Rambla.

It is a city that he likes very much, but one with which he has only an oblique acquaintance. He visits twice a year, generally in May and November as the vagaries of the trade seasons dictate, staying for two, sometimes three, days before continuing his Iberian trip with visits to Madrid and Lisbon and sometimes Oporto. He knows the names of some of the streets and has read some of the history.

He is able to find his way from the hotel easily. Far away, traffic swishes across at the junction with the Diagonal. A little early, he smokes a cigarette on the pavement and browses the books in the window. Finally, he pushes the plate glass door and enters.

She is standing behind the counter wearing a red T-shirt. She has her back to him, but then she turns.

AND SOMETIMES

AND SOMETIMES FOR reasons he could not fathom and no adult took the time to explain He wouldn't return for days and he would forget He existed at least in terms of the rhythms of everyday life which went on and on and on time ticking Saturdays passing matches passing and he didn't forget out of spite because spite doesn't exist in a child but because that's the way he thought things were in every house on the street with lights and in the whole world even Africa in huts in some way it was the same and so it would go on like that until the night would come and he would hear without warning His

tread on the path and the sounds of the back door opening and of Him sitting at the table and of whisky being poured and of the popping sound His mouth would make when it released the stem of His pipe and things would be all of a rush in his head and upstairs lying in his bed his lizard eyes flickering left and right he would think without thinking and curl himself tighter and tighter in the dark as if to allow a gap any gap at all would be to leave an open space into which He might vanish again this time never to come back.

And sometimes it happened differently and He came home early while it was still light outside and he couldn't have been back from school for more than twenty minutes and he would be lying there on his back in the garden looking up at the sky squinting a closed eye at the sun and allowing the redness of his blood to filter everything and listening to the sounds of the grass or leaves or what unfurling at his ears and the birds the first birds of the year singing in the trees and he heard the gate creak and the dog went scurrying off nails scratching on the concrete of the path to see what strange intrusion this might be into the regular Friday order of things and then it was Him and everyone knew mother knew he knew the dog knew and He would go inside and he would be asked to stay outside in the garden with the dog and would sit there or lie there and listen or watch through the patio doors and sometimes He would stay for dinner and sometimes He wouldn't and sometimes He would leave after dinner and sometimes He wouldn't.

And then like that it was a Friday a Friday in spring or summer or late April or early May and all anybody had been talking about for weeks was the

Cup Final the match and who had tickets and who didn't and suddenly He came round the side of the house in a grey suit no tie the dog going spare at His feet and He was walking His hands in his pockets and His head up and His hair going and the sun in His eyes like someone returning from overseas or a war or something only He didn't have a tan because He hadn't actually been overseas or at a war but where He had been he didn't know and because it had been a gloomy and dank spring the earth smelling like winter and mud until this day a Friday in late spring or early summer when the first heat of the year if it can be called that finally broke after the long cold months that seemed to go on and on and on.

‘Come and see what I’ve found,’ He said.

Where was mother he wondered but His hands were in His pockets and He was standing above him and getting in the line of his sun and flicking His head and jerking it towards the front of the house in such a way that He could just as well have been saying to the dog that it was time for his walk but that wasn't what He was saying and so slowly slowly not rushing head down he got to his feet and then he almost fell against His waist and buried his nose in His shirt and the gaps where the buttons were and smelled that smell that was there upstairs in His wardrobe where His clothes were even when He wasn't and He bent down and ruffled his hair and kissed his head smelling back he imagined the smell that He had put there so long ago that would never be shifted.

‘I’ve found something for you shall we look?’

And he nodded his head rubbing his cheek against His shirt and then He turned and led him away and he followed Him back round the house and out to the front where a sleek white car without a roof was parked halfway up the kerb a car a strange car that he knew wasn't His or theirs whatever that meant or any car he had ever seen before.

'What is it?' he said.

'You have to look,' He said.

'But where is it?'

'In my car.'

'That's not your car.'

'Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. Be a shame not to look though don't you think.'

And so a game commenced in which he clambered over the open-topped car while He stood back on the pavement and said things like warm and warmer or whenever his clambering took him into the front seats which were leather and warm in the warm sun cold and colder and even when he contorted himself down into the passenger footwell wondering if whatever it was could possibly be hidden down there very cold frozen you are frozen into ice and then He would stand back and laugh and clap His hands and holding His pipe by the bowl and blow a stream of smoke upwards and at this he sat up in the car on the seats on his haunches like a little animal and looked up and made as if to scratch his head and say but where is it?

'There's somewhere you haven't looked.'

'Underneath?' he said.

And at that although He had said nothing and done nothing to give an indication he got out of the car climbing over the unopened door like he had seen people do on the television and halfway over He lifted him up in the air swooping him like a bird before setting him down on the pavement where he tottered and wobbled until eventually he stood still and waited while He laughed and blew His smoke and then he got down on his belly and squiggled his body against the tarmac utching himself under the low car which he was sure was lower than the car He normally had or they had whatever that meant and he squirmed around looking up at the wheel arches and the piping of the engine all coated in grime and dust and soot and at the knife edge creases in the bottoms of His trousers and at the shining brown leather of His polished shoes on the pavement spread out slightly from heel to toe waiting guarding the roadway protecting him from harm and then His voice came down and reached him under the car

‘Anything?’

‘There’s nothing here.’

And he scootched himself out again the gravel and grit dragging against the bare skin of his legs where the shorts didn’t cover and digging into the palms of his hands and sticking there making a mark of redness and his head banging against the underside of the car the pipes and everything scratching his head and then he was back on the pavement sitting and Him up above looking down and smiling and taking a puff on His pipe and looking like He was thinking until in one moment he looked up and saw his mother standing at the upstairs window looking down and not smiling just looking

and holding the curtain a fraction to one side as if to prevent too much light coming into the room in which she was standing and prying eyes too from the houses across the street and all around who of course would have known and probably talked about how it stood in this house the one in which they lived although not always together and then he was looking up at Him again saw that He hadn't stopped looking down at him still smiling His pipe in the air and saying at the same time as stroking His chin

'I know. I've remembered. What do you wear when you play football?'

'Football kit,' he said.

'Try another.'

'Boots!' he said. 'You wear boots!'

'Boots is right!' He said. 'And what do you think that means?'

'It's in the boot!'

After which followed a lot of scurrying and the scorch sound of plimsolls on loose gravel as he got up and he raced around suddenly possessed by demons in his eagerness and whooping and shouting and hollering like an American Indian or Huck Finn and shouting again and again and again and even making a motion with his hand to hold his Huck Finn straw hat on his head because this time he knew that it was true and this thing He had found would be there in the boot and not somewhere else that he hadn't thought of yet.

'It's in the boot!'

And He stepped across and opened the boot and sure enough it was there or something was a large object bigger than he had thought about the

size of who knows what but big enough to hold so many possible things and wrapped in plastic and tissue paper.

‘What is it?’

‘Why don’t you open it?’

And he did he began to tear and rip at the paper that was wrapping the thing whatever it was which was like a box and piece by piece it emerged from under its wrapping as he pulled and pulled and pulled and even he was smiling now and looking up at Him who was smiling still and smoking still on His pipe and blowing the smoke upwards in a stream through curled lips and he was wondering and he was wondering what would be revealed and then it became clear and it was revealed and he stood back and folded his arms.

‘It’s a box,’ he said.

‘It is a box,’ He said. ‘Why don’t you open it?’

And he went at it but the box was sealed at the joins with tape and he couldn’t pierce it with his fingernails which had only been cut the night before after his Thursday bath and he looked up at Him and He was still smiling still smiling almost laughing in fact.

‘Try this.’

And from His pocket He produced a thing a knife or something like a knife certainly a metal blade that He used at the kitchen table sometimes when He was there for cleaning out the bowl of his pipe and scraping away the build up of ash and burnt tobacco and he took the knife the blady thing and it smelled even then at that moment of smoke and ash and it slid

through the tape easily and quickly and the flaps sprung up and there inside the box was more tissue paper and wrapping and again he looked up at Him and.

‘Keep going. Here I’ll help.’

And He bent down and put His hands in the big box that surrounded the other thing and lifted it out and placed it on the pavement and this other thing that had come out of the big box it too had the shape of a box and again was covered in paper and wrapping and he immediately set to freeing it scrabbling at the wrapping and because it was on the pavement and not in the boot it was easier and the paper came off like a dream but then there again when it was all off and the paper tumbling away on the wind down the street he was met with nothing more than another box and he looked up again and He had turned away swivelling on the balls of His feet His shoes making a noise against the pavement and He was almost doubled over with laughter and he looked and said nothing but learned from what had happened before and reached furiously for the knife the blade and opened the box the second box and inside that more wrapping and he just lifted that out without even looking up at Him this time and it was light light enough at least for him to lift and it too this third thing had the shape of a box but was covered again in the tissue and the wrapping and he set about that too bending down like a dog digging a hole and tearing tearing tearing at the wrapping which flew out behind him in clumps and tearing too in his eyes but keeping going and then of course there was another box inside that and now he definitely wasn’t going to look up at Him who was silent now and

standing there with just the pipe in His mouth and he could see His shadow unmoving across the pavement and a lighter shadow where the smoke rose and through this box another box and another and another all of them now lying on the pavement at funny angles nestled into one another and still he could see nothing that wasn't just a box and so he looked up angry now really angry but not knowing how far to show it but still there He was standing there above him looking down and those arms crossed and that mouth turned down around the stem of His pipe dragging out His lips like a scar.

‘Don’t give up,’ He said.

And then the door of the house opened and there mother stood mother mother mother her arms crossed and leaning back against the frame of the porch and not saying anything nothing at all just watching and looking and seeing as he stood there still in dudgeon and motionlessness and He said turning to look at her but then looking back and down at him a half smile stilled on His lips this time.

‘Why don’t you open one more? Maybe there’s something there.’

And reluctantly he tore himself away from his standing position and bent down over the box a small box this time no bigger than a shoe box and rough and surly and swishing his arms all over the place and he thought oh please in this box let there please please please be something worth having in this box that isn’t just another box please at last and he pulled and pulled and pulled and the lid came off because it was a shoe box an actual shoe box but no shoes were in it but yes again another box and this time lifting it out

he threw it on the floor because it was so light as if there was nothing in there but air and no present no present at all and he stood there again all grouched up and full of anger and tears almost welling in his eyes for no reason at all and wasn't it just five minutes ago that he had been lying on the grass and looking up at the sky and thinking that the weekend was begun and school was finished and the sun but now this and now He had started moving not smiling now but a face with a serious look and His pipe in his hand and not in His mouth and He was picking up the box the box that he had flung across the street and bringing it back to him.

‘There’s one more.’

‘I don’t want it.’

‘You better not be messing him around again, I swear to God,’ Mother said.

‘Of course I’m not,’ He said that smile again on his lips. ‘Open it.’

And of course because really he did want it whatever it was he wanted to know at least what it was that there was something there and he began to open it and this time it couldn’t have been a ruse there could be no more boxes as there had already been enough boxes and another just wouldn’t fit and there was his mother and Him standing mother at the door Him on the pavement and he tore and tore and tore and inside there was an envelope and the box fell to the ground and the envelope was in his hands and He said:

‘Open it.’

And he danced and carried it in his arms so happy that no matter what was in it because it just felt so good to be holding something that had been given and he knew that it would be something inside because he felt it deep within him and it almost didn't need to be opened now because he had that feeling and he knew that it was something and what it was could never be as good as this moment or could it but then He said

‘Why don't you open it?’

And so he did he went right ahead and opened it with his mother watching from the porch still silent and unmoving neither smiling nor scowling just flat and Him on the pavement looking across and trying to attract his mother's sight but being incapable of doing so because she kept her eyes fixed on him her boy who was pulling at the envelope and tearing it right up and then she did speak knowing him and what he was like and the potential for him to cause damage to whatever was inside the envelope and she said:

‘Careful.’

And careful is what he suddenly became although the envelope by now was almost in shreds and the time for being careful was almost over and the thing that was in the envelope the two things in fact fell to the floor like fluttering feathers and there they were lying there apart but together and he bent down and picked them up and already half knew what they were but couldn't believe it because really he knew even then he understood that He had never made good on a promise never not one everything always came to dust with Him it was just the way it was even when he went to training or to

play a match it was his mother who took him there and not Him and mother who stood on the side lines and not Him and mother who washed his kit and not Him and even when he watched a match on television it was mother who sat with him and not Him but no here definitely in his hand were two pieces of paper two tickets that would change everything that would happen tomorrow Saturday the day that comes after Friday that everyone had been talking about at school and everyone knew about because it was their team their local little team who had made it for the first time in how long was it it had said in a special coloured part of the newspaper that he had been given and taken to his room and slipped under his bed and he couldn't remember but it was long ago before he existed and when things were black and white in the pictures and everybody wore suits all the time not just for work but at matches and everything and he looked up at Him who was standing still just as before a bigger smile and more smoke and he couldn't quite take it in and then just as suddenly it all became quite normal and absolutely the thing that was expected and now his mother was interested more interested anyway and she shouted over still not moving but interested definitely she was interested.

‘What is it, love?’

And he held them up in the air both of them. ‘Tickets,’ he said.

‘For the final?’

‘Yes, the final.’

And his mother hiccupped or did something like it and walked over and took the tickets looked at them made a great play of examining them

and then looked at Him and said quietly quietly but not so quietly that it couldn't be heard.

‘Are these real?’

‘Of course they're real.’

‘Only two of them were there?’

‘Like gold dust.’

And at that she turned and looked at him still standing on the pavement hopping from foot to foot and looking at her who was still holding the tickets and then she clapped her hands and said:

‘OK. Tea time. Go inside and wash your hands. Chop chop. Quick quick.’

And she clapped her hands again and he went inside and inside the house it was cool and this was something mother had told him because although the sun was out it wasn't yet warm not properly nor summer time and out of the sun it could be cool and he should keep his coat on or at least near to him and this is what he found when he walked into the house and through the kitchen with the table ready with two places and not three that the house was cold and he was cold and his goosebumps came up and he went and washed his hands and then did a pee and washed his hands again and came back out and there was the kitchen still the same cold and he sat down and waited and outside he could hear the sounds of them talking but he couldn't hear the words and in fact he didn't want to hear the words but he could hear when mother spoke because of the sound of her voice and he could hear when He was speaking because of the sound of His voice which

was lower and he sat at the table and waited following the tracks of the sun on the wall where it reflected through the patio doors and then He was coming in to the kitchen and mother was behind saying:

‘If you want to go then you have to eat everything on your plate every morsel.’

And he knew that he would that it would be easy to do and then in bed he knew he wouldn’t sleep and he would fold his clothes first the ones that he would wear he had a shirt and shorts but not the socks but the socks looked stupid with shoes going up to the knees in that colour so that didn’t matter but now it was dinner and around him the plates and the knives and forks and He was pouring beer into a glass and one for his mother too and there were potatoes and chicken and there wasn’t enough for Him because He was there and then pouring more beer after they had finished eating and leaning back and holding his pipe in readiness and she looked at Him at the pipe really and pushed herself back from the table and said:

‘If you want to smoke you go outside.’

‘Of course.’

‘Of course,’ she said and smiled this time actually smiled but not the smile that she gave him a different smile and after that there was silence for a time and he sat and thought about tomorrow about how it had changed from what it was before just like that without really any warning and he wondered if it could always be like that that things could just change from one thing to another and he wondered about the things that had been changed the day that should have happened tomorrow and whether that day

that would happen no more had feelings about it disappointment or anything like that because really that day had existed but now it didn't and it was a different day and he was going to the final with Him.

‘Do you think we'll win?’ he said to Him.

‘Win? Of course we'll win. We can do nothing else. It's written in the stars.’

‘How do you know?’

‘These things are. I'll show you later when it's dark.’

And then his mother said:

‘I don't think so. Somebody needs to be getting ready for bed if they're going to get up in the morning.’

‘Boo,’ He said.

‘Don't start,’ she said.

And after she said this she got up and cleared the table putting the bowls on top of each other in a stack that balanced and then carrying them out to the kitchen and then He got up and cleared the rest of the spoons and the pot of cream and the pepper pot and the salt and he was alone and looking at the table with the crumbs on it and he knew that if he put his eyes level with the flat of the surface the crumbs would look like giant crumbs, like boulders.

‘Can I stay up a little longer?’

‘No. You'll be tired.’

‘He can stay up for a bit. We need to talk about the game.’

‘I said don't start.’

And now He had the newspaper in his hand the special supplement like the one he had upstairs under his bed and He touched his hand and he felt it the touch like an electric charge and together they went into the garden and sat on the grass where it was wet a little bit but not properly wet just damp and it came through the seat of his trousers while He spread the newspaper out on the grass and together they looked at the teams and there were just sounds the sounds of everything and he thought ahead to the next day how outside there would be people on the streets their normal Saturdays beginning and walking this way into town and that way out of town and for him too it became more normal the silent background receding beyond the cover of noises of talking and of cars and of buses which made a heavier sound like a man exhaling breath when they pulled away from the kerb and the noises grew the closer to the station they came and he looking up at His hand holding his pulling up his arm a little and shouting and chanting and all that from the terraces of the pubs on the approach and all of it went in locked in a series of images chum chum chum as if his eyes were cameras and there was shouting more shouting and His gait changed became looser more ragged he could see His shoulders slumping back the jacket almost rolling off and falling to the ground where the danger was it would be forgotten and left behind but that was tomorrow it wasn't here yet but He was here now and as He was here he leaned down and touched his shoulder and said.

‘Well now I suppose now is the time I should tell you the story that I’ve been saving up until you’re old enough to hear it.’

‘Story? What story?’ he said.

‘This one,’ He said. ‘Are you ready?’

‘Yes, I’m ready.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m sure.’

‘You have to promise not to breathe a word of it to anyone.’

‘I promise.’

‘All right then,’ He said, and He told him the story all of it right from the start with every detail He could manage omitting nothing sparing nothing even the heartbreak.

HO CHI MINH

THERE WAS A mountain of paperwork to get through, but finally she was able to fly back. She sat by the aisle, towards the rear. The seat next to her was empty, as was the window seat next to that. This was a luxury, she knew, a stroke of luck, and she allowed herself to feel the frisson of travelling alone, of being free. As the first complementary Bloody Mary was served, she wandered between realities – the possible, the impossible, the downright absurd. The cabin crew seemed attentive, more so than usual, and she saw,

or believed she saw, some semaphore at work in the way in which they handed her her drinks, and then, when it came to it, her dinner. It was possible, of course, that they knew something, had received some intelligence in advance of her circumstances.

After dinner, she called for another drink; then, the lights were dimmed. At a guess she would have placed them somewhere over the South China Sea. With her earphones in, she closed her eyes and allowed herself to drift in and out of sleep. She permitted it to such an extent that the distinction between the state of sleep and the state of wakefulness began to blur. When she was awake, she assumed she was probably asleep, and when she was asleep she had half a mind that she was actually awake. In one of those moments, when she felt herself to be both awake and sleeping, she saw – or seemed to see – a man, sitting about three or four rows in front of her, throw himself back in his seat as if startled by something. His head rose (or seemed to rise) over the headrest at an unusual angle. With his neck so contorted, she was able to see, or otherwise sense, the unusual way in which his hand clutched towards his chest, snaking up over his body as if it meant to strangle him. The person next to him was out of her seat in an instant, and the man fell to one side. This woman, the one sitting next to him, was taken by surprise. Nevertheless, she leaned back in and tried to prop him up, seeming to drive at him with her shoulders, as if keeping him upright were the key to it all, the secret to holding up the tide in the way of which she had suddenly, inexplicably, been placed.

In the delirious moments that followed, with her own head fallen slightly to one side, out into the aisle, she was able to make out stewards hurrying from further down the plane, seeming to arrive through the curtains as if out of cloud. Then a man came and another steward, carrying a black plastic case.

The next time her consciousness was intruded upon they had the man out into the aisle, lying on the floor, his head towards her. His eyes were open, or seemed to be, roaming the cabin, looking for something to latch onto, trying to make sense of the situation. The force that is expended when attempting to massage a body back to life is a thing to behold and she shrugged, or felt herself shrug, as a doctor – it must have been a doctor – pounded on the man's chest as if desperate to be let in at some door. In the background, a steward fumbled with the black case, trying to get the defibrillator out. Whether he did or not is unknown to her, because then she did fall asleep, properly, definitively, the unconscious kind, when nothing from the outside penetrates to the inside. If she dreamed in this period, she didn't remember it.

When she awoke, it was morning. When she looked across, she half-expected to see the shape of a body covered in a blue airline blanket, but there was nothing, nothing at all, just an empty space with no sign of what had been there before, if anything had. She was nearly convinced that she hadn't seen any of the things that she thought she might have seen. There was no announcement and breakfast was served with no discernible trace of distress on the faces of the cabin crew. Afterwards, a man from the middle

row of seats leaned over and asked if she would mind if he sat by the window seat for the landing. The question took her by surprise, but she agreed and he came over.

Soon enough, they were landing and she was back in Ho Chi Minh. She was happy to be there – happy to smell the smells and hear the sounds. It was home, now, she knew, if she hadn't before. She wouldn't leave. When she made it back to the apartment in District 1, Trúc was waiting for her on the street outside. She didn't know how he knew, perhaps he had been waiting there for days. She ruffled his hair and he followed her up the stairs. He had brought a parcel of food from his mother and he placed it on the low bamboo table. There were some bánh bột chiên and a bò tái chanh.

'Thank you,' she said, squatting down in front of Trúc and putting her hands on his little shoulders.

'Where Mitchell?' he said.

She had expected the question, but still she didn't know what to say. It was Mitch Trúc had come to see, she knew that. 'Mitch isn't here, sweetheart.'

'When he back,' he said. 'When?'

Trúc didn't hang around long. She didn't know how to explain it, but she'd go and see his mother tomorrow or the next day. She was tired. When she went through to the bedroom she saw all of his things. It was hard to believe that he had accrued so much. She genuinely hadn't noticed, but they say that about the things you live among – you don't notice them change. Now she has to pack it all up and send it to his parents. They live in

Brisbane, a flat in one of the towers overlooking the Gold Coast. How they'll make room for it all is not her concern but it concerns her nonetheless, making her wonder if she shouldn't just throw this stuff away, all of it, maybe keeping a few things for herself.

A DISTRACTION

HE IS VISITING a client in the country when he receives word that the ring is ready. The trip has been successful, pleasant even – the client is an exceptional host – but Umberto is now desperate to get back to the city. In the afternoon, he telephones the office and makes arrangements for an early return. This accomplished, he books himself a seat on the first train to leave the following morning. In the evening, a farewell meal – Umberto, the client, the client's wife. The client raises his glass in a toast.

‘Your happiness.’

When the meal ends, Umberto retires to his room. He calls Maddalena.

‘I have some news: I’ll be home tomorrow.’

‘So soon?’ she says. ‘I’m pleased.’

‘Yes,’ he says, ‘I have a surprise for you.’

‘A surprise? What is it?’

‘I can’t tell you.’

For a moment they talk on, covering the minutiae of their respective days. The conversation returns to the following day. He has some things to tie up in the office first, but they arrange to meet by the fountain in Piazza di Provenzano at seven, not a minute later.

‘At the Piazza? But, darling, you must tell me now.’ She is giggling.

‘Are you sure you want to know?’

‘Yes.’

He has tickets for the opera, he says – a gift from the client.

She squeals. ‘Should I wear a dress?’

‘You should definitely wear a dress.’

After the call, he puts his papers in order and climbs into bed. In his excitement, he cannot sleep, at least not properly. Visions of the past – of his youth, of wild dogs, of chases on foot – filter through the layers of his consciousness and mingle with images that can only come from the future: a telegraph pole, a view of the sea, a sharply bending road. Of course, he doesn’t know what to do with all this, lying there in the dark, the hum of night coming in through the shutters, but it keeps him up. Consequently he is awake – or thinks that he is – when the client calls for him, just as dawn is breaking, mist rising behind the stand of beeches in the park.

At the station there is time for coffee. The client talks of his family's history in the region, their deep roots. They watch as the train he is going to catch pulls up at the platform, a great exhalation from the brakes. The client pats his back and Umberto clambers aboard. There are very few passengers and he has a choice of seats. He takes one by the window, with a table. They move off, the carriage silent, save for the buzz of the overhead wires.

To begin with, he reads his book, but it is no good; he cannot stop his mind leaping forward to the events to come. Even to think of them makes him tremble. Rather than struggle on with the book, he places it on the table and folds his arms. Fields blur past the window. The levelness of the horizon soothes him and he relaxes into the luxury of looking ahead to the rising action of the day, going over his schedule, mapping out the steps he will have to take before seven o'clock.

As they near the city, the carriage fills with commuters. He stands, allowing someone else to take his seat. By and by, the countryside recedes and the train begins to rattle through the suburbs. He looks around at his fellow travellers, hanging from straps, or wedged into corners reading tightly folded newspapers. He smiles. In fact, he almost laughs. He is baffled by how downcast everyone seems, as if, in their eyes, no matter how often things go right, they will always go wrong in the end. Perhaps they look at him with the opposite feeling. In any case, he wants to reach out to them, one by one,

and lift up their chins; come on, he wants to say, everything will be fine, all it requires is patience, determination – a refusal to break.

He realises it is easy to think such things, just as it is easy, in retrospect, to plot a path from confession, to penance, to act of grace. Perhaps, though, it is enough to acknowledge that he is a fortunate man and then move on, without dwelling too much on the past, which in any case seems to be drifting out to a point beyond memory.

Even the weather seems to share in this feeling: for the first time in days, the sky is blue and deep. It is as if the universe has noticed him at last and decided to open itself up, revealing its secrets, its exceptional qualities. In particular, Umberto thinks, leaning forward to get a better look, the light cast by the sun is magnificent; there is a clarity to it, a freshness, that touches everything. Already he is certain that this is something he will remember later, when, with Maddalena at his side, he will look back and relive the moments yet to come.

They stop on the approach to the terminus. There is a gathering of possessions, a readying for arrival. When the train starts moving again it jerks, the carriages swaying and creaking over the tracks. Umberto positions himself in front of the doors and adjusts the knot of his tie in the mirror of the window. He is here and the day can properly begin.



As he crosses the river, he looks over at the city, at its even agglomeration of buildings. He knows the sight so well, like a familiar painting, and yet he

sees it as if with new eyes. Whether it is because of the sun or because of something coming from within him, he cannot say, but its monuments seem less grand, more playful. The golden hues of the churches are more prominent and tiny figures in brightly coloured clothing dot the castle ramparts. Taken together, these ancient buildings form a thread of wonder through the skyline. It is, without question, a fabulous construction, the painstaking accretion of centuries of endeavour, the bringing together of natural topography and human purpose. This is his city, he thinks, and he walks towards it as if on air, his head up, breathing deeply and hoping to encourage in those around him the feeling that this is, after all, a life worth savouring.



The early part of the morning passes uneventfully, the hushed routine of the office gilded by the secret hammering of burnished plates of happiness onto the doors of his heart. He sends an email to the client in the country, thanking him for his hospitality and outlining the action points that would be followed up. He makes some coffee, shares a joke with his boss about the client's wife, laughing companionably about the change she has brought about in him.

Soon enough it is eleven.

'What a day!' Gabi says.

'Magnificent,' he says, stretching his arms back and flexing them as if he were readying to take a dive into a pool.

They are on the roof of the office, their usual morning break. He lights his cigarette, turning it slowly in the flame of his lighter. Gabi is the company secretary. They are friends now, firmly so, but for a brief period – six, seven weeks – five summers previously, they had an affair. He thinks of it often, remembering it as if he were a voyeur looking in on remote and incomprehensible practices – dazzling afternoons, bewildering, the windows of her apartment open to the noise of traffic. When it ended – no fuss, no recrimination, just a natural cessation – he gratefully reflected that he had now had an experience long aspired to, something in which everything was allowed, nothing held back. There were things they had done that Umberto will never repeat, either in deed or word, but the fact of their having happened seems another weapon in his invisible armoury, something with which he could defend himself if called upon to do so.

‘So,’ Gabi says. ‘What’s new?’

He turns and looks out over the city. The skyline shimmers in the miraculous heat. He inhales and exhales some smoke, fluting it upwards into the air with a grin.

‘Well,’ he says, ‘there is something.’

‘Yes.’

‘I have an errand to run.’

‘An errand?’ Gabi leans forward, looking up at him and cupping her chin in her hand. She too emits a burst of smoke, in fact two bursts, separated by a little darting movement of her tongue. ‘Go on.’

Umberto cannot stop his face breaking into a broad smile. 'I am going to collect the ring,' he says.

'The ring!' Gabi laughs, rocking back in her chair and clapping her hands. 'So it is ready, finally?'

'Yes. I got the call when I was in the country.'

'Then I congratulate you.' Gabi puts her hand on his arm and kisses his cheek. 'And Maddalena too.'

∞

He leaves to collect the ring at one. Beneath the cherry trees that dot the avenues barely a patch of grass remains visible. There are people everywhere, tourists lapping up the sun, sprawling office workers taking their lunch. Stray fragments of conversation fill the air – of football matches, of friendship, of a murderer. Having been in the country for a few days, he is reminded of the possibilities for interaction the city provides: glances go in every direction, greetings, nods; connections being made, lines being drawn. It is not possible to know these people as individuals, of course, but as a mass it is a different matter. He recognises the collective identity, feels its pulse, and moves through the scene with an air of shared ownership, noting the way in which his shadow travels over the crowd, thinking himself connected to it by a link that can never be broken.

He looks at the buildings that line the avenues, their iron balconies visible through the tops of trees, the occasional *Pais* flag, fleeting glimpses of people at office windows. It all seems a part of him, as if, suddenly, he

belongs. He wonders if it will later be possible, in memory, to distinguish between things in any meaningful way, or whether they will become conflated as a mass. Take the building directly ahead: will he remember in years to come that it is clad with marble while the one next to it – otherwise identical – is of red brick, or might memory confuse the two? He wants to remember the scene precisely as it is now, with no omissions, no opportunity for error.

He will have no trouble remembering the building away to the right. It is the headquarters of Grafica. It was here, at an advance screening of a film, that he first saw Maddalena. Back then, the invitation alone – from Mario, who lived in his building – was enough to make him swell with a curious sort of pride, although in truth it meant nothing more than he had agreed to be part of a test audience. Still, as he stood there in the lobby, gauchely holding a beer, he had felt good, felt, for the first time, that he was part of the great city, had slipped into its flow of gestures and habits. Maddalena had come with Mario's girlfriend. They were introduced as they waited to go in, but there was no time to say anything, beyond a nod and a mumbled greeting.

∞

The film was unusual. With the city itself as a backdrop, it played out as a sequence of seemingly discrete tracking shots linked together in a voiceover provided by a series of invisible narrators, all played by famous actors, or familiar figures. Their faces drifted into Umberto's consciousness as he watched. If there was a story, it was hard to follow at first – difficult to see

how one thing connected to the next – but soon enough it became apparent that something was underway, some event was swelling in the background. Even so, he wasn't sure he would know how to talk about it when it was over.

At a certain point, bending to pick up his bottle of beer, his knuckle grazed Maddalena's ankle. He felt the smoothness of her skin, like polished stone, on his knuckles. In the dark of the auditorium, images flickering on the screen, he sensed the possibility – even then, at the very outset – that something might happen. But he was new to the city, still unaccustomed to its ways, and he didn't know how to make the touch go anywhere, what to do next. His hands prickled with sweat. As the film continued, he found that he was projecting himself into the events it depicted, becoming engrossed, absorbed by the drama to the extent of almost being a participant.

Without quite meaning to, he touched her again, his elbow brushing hers quite naturally as he shifted in his seat. She flinched, but then moved her elbow back towards his and left it there. The film swam towards him, a gorgeous image, but he no longer had the faintest idea what was happening.

∞

Umberto walks on though the lunchtime city, past the Pilastri. He is enjoying himself, feeling the warm air all around him, and the endless possibilities stretching ahead. He knows all the streets, could name them in an instant should a tourist stop him and ask the way. They form a grid, a permanence – his daily habitat. Sometimes, to test his knowledge, he sets

himself imaginary tasks, as if he is a taxi driver and has been asked to ferry someone from Terrail's to Benudo's, or from the Tullio to the Campo Santo.

As he rounds a corner, the marble façade of the Teatro del Palazzo rises over the cobbles to the right. A new opera season is about to begin. Bills can be seen all over the city proclaiming the opening night a sellout. The return of Cece, the great soprano, is the hottest ticket in town.

As he walks by, he imagines himself observed from above, the speed of his movement marking him out as he weaves between the people swarming this way and that. He knows precisely where he is going, the destination as clear in his mind as if it were in front of him already. With ease he conjures the fascia of the shop, the crumbling brickwork, the faded blue awning pulled down, its windows in shade, the darkness lending a glow to the glimmering displays of gold and silver.

Everything is in his favour. The crossing lights at Passeggio della Beata change as he approaches. Nothing breaks his stride until, on Via del Corso – the street that sometimes has stalls, t-shirts and dresses hanging from wooden poles – he finds there are works underway. Normally, he would go this way, slipping down past the frosted diamond glass of L'Edera, but the pavement has been dug up, revealing the city's layers, red clay piled on top of smashed paving stones. The street, consequently, is densely packed, people edging slowly forward, lingering to look at the clothes.

In an instant his mind selects the appropriate course of action. He swerves, the path of his travels describing a blemish-free arc, heading back to Viale dei Fratelli, past Santa Giacinta, then the Irish pub with its blue

board fronting and from there turning right into the shadows of Via del Moro. It is a longer route but, in the circumstances, a quicker one. Not only that but it affords him a view of the Piazza di Provenzano.

For centuries it has served the city as a space for great civic celebrations: festivals, peace rallies, public executions. These last had once been greeted enthusiastically by the people, who gathered early and dressed grandly for the occasion. Promenading in their finery, they exchanged gossip and rumour as they awaited the arrival of the carts. Even the victims chose their outfits with care, wanting to leave one final mark on the profane world.

It is one of the great squares and the view is known all over the world. The north and west sides are given over to various palazzi signorili, uniformly neo-classical, pure marvels of their time. There are protruding arcades at ground level, under which cafés and restaurants, fine shops and a printer's, set out their wares; above, grand balconies, from which banners hang, embroidered with the legend of the city's foundation. To the south, l'Ospedale dei Popoli, its shallow dome reflecting the sun, its narrow campanile standing alongside.

In the centre, Giambologna's fountain, by which Maddalena will be waiting at seven, spews its torrents into the air.

He enters the square by the Scalinata dei Francesi, the great sloping approach that forms its east side. He goes down the worn steps two at a time, his jacket splaying out as he does so. Without breaking stride, he moves on across the Piazza, still carrying some of the speed generated from the steps. A small child dawdles in his path, bending down and attempting to

catch something in the air. The child's mother, noticing the pace of his approach, yanks the boy out of the way, as if she is unwilling to impede his serene progress even for a moment. He notices these instances of serendipity, the smoothness of his movement through the crowds, and smiles broadly. He has chosen the right place, of that he is certain.

Around the edges of the Piazza the restaurant terraces are full; wine is being poured, bread baskets laid out. He performs a pirouette, taking everything in: the colonnaded square, the tapestries hanging from their stanchions, the people, the mood. A little like a child, he is unable to stop himself displaying his happiness. He nods to people, smiles. It is as if he is orchestrating the whole scene: drawing the waiters along on pieces of wire, laying a path for the wandering tourists, prompting the invisible kitchen staff in the creation of the smells that emerge from the cafés and restaurants.

Reaching the far side of the Piazza, he moves into shadow and enters la Caccia. It is a narrow, curling street up which it was once the custom to run livestock. The jeweller's comes into view. They – he and Maddalena – had noticed it one Sunday, lingering by its windows after a lunch with her parents. It was autumn, but bright. Maddalena was girlish, filled with wonder, constantly laughing and grabbing at his arm. Together they looked through the window, pointing at jewellery of the most exquisite originality. He shared in her delight, trying hard not to pinch himself in disbelief.

In the days that followed, Umberto made discreet enquiries about the silversmith. He learned his name, his reputation. For months he carried this

information around in his head, not telling a soul, terrified of taking the next step lest something should trip him up, lest he should be exposed.

The window display is unusual, as always. Several wooden plinths radiate outwards from a central point, like the scaffolding of a star. On each plinth rest intricate pieces, cushioned on red velvet. At the centre, in a circle of its own, an empty box. Leaning in to take a closer look, he tries to imagine, from the items on display, the manner in which the silversmith might have set about the task of making the ring. He luxuriates in this game of the imagination, conjuring images in his mind, consciously extending the moment, wishing it might never end.

Finally, he enters. The interior is dark and cool. Rough strips of pine separated by pillars of uncemented bricks have been placed against the walls. On these, in glowing glass cases, further displays. On the floor, scuffed boards and an assortment of patchy rugs. Along the back wall, a crimson curtain. From behind this curtain, the silversmith emerges.

‘Good afternoon,’ he says. And then, approaching closer, holding up his glasses, wiping his free hand on his apron: ‘Aha! It’s you.’

Umberto takes a breath. He has been walking quickly.

‘You want to see it then?’ the silversmith says, nudging him in the ribs.



Stepping out into the street, Umberto looks at his watch. It is three o’clock. He stayed a little too long with the old man, sharing a glass to toast his labours. With the grappa still warm in his throat, he feels a tremendous

sense of ease now that this part has been accomplished. He can feel the box in the pocket of his jacket and fights the impulse to stop and open it at every step. He cannot imagine tiring of its complexity, its trceries of silver, the stone lodged at its apex.

A little conscious of the time, he increases his stride, feeling a new depth to his movements, as if, progressively, moment by moment, he is becoming more fully realised, more true to his conception of himself.

As he re-enters the Piazza, moving back from shadow into sunlight, he glances over at the fountain. He thinks of how he might approach Maddalena later, flowers in his hand, the ring concealed behind his back. At precisely the spot he imagines her waiting, a man is hunched over a briefcase, talking on a mobile phone. He watches him, willing him to move away so he can better indulge his reverie. It takes a moment to register – it is something about the man's movements, the prissy way he holds his phone to his ear – but then the knowledge is upon him. It is Luca.

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Umberto stops. The crowds drift by. They come between him and this – this *man*. He feels faint and confused, feels as if he has been surrounded by a pocket of air that separates him from the things around him. It can't be Luca, he tells himself. Not here. Not today. It isn't possible. Indeed, it seems so absurd that Umberto wonders if he can trust his eyes. He has heard of – and experienced – those occasions when one sees an old friend in the street,

only for the old friend – or the image of the old friend – to dematerialise into the form of a complete stranger.

It has been so many years. With all the effort he has put into forgetting, that period of his past has taken on the quality of myth, to the extent that he can no longer distinguish between which bits of it are true and which are not; between what happened and what is dream. It could be Luca, he thinks, but it could just as well be someone – or something – else, a double, a doppelganger; a chimera, even, assembled from those parts of his past that refuse to stay buried.

Not knowing quite what to do, Umberto makes his way to a café and takes an outside table that allows him to keep the possible Luca in his line of sight. Raising one finger in the air, he orders a coffee. As he sits, the box containing the ring digs into his ribs. It is necessary first to gather his thoughts. He counts the years, thinks of Luca as he was then and compares the memory to the man, still sitting by the fountain. It is impossible to say for certain and a part of him wants to go up to this man, to touch him, to test whether he is real.

He looks again at his watch. Luca – or the man who could be Luca – is still on the phone, gesturing with his hands and occasionally taking a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his brow. His presence sullies the scene. Umberto lights a cigarette. There was a time when he had prepared for just such an encounter, going over in his mind how he might act, but with the passing of years that readiness has disappeared and now, quite suddenly, with the moment directly before him, it seems beyond contemplation. He

cannot even envisage what it would be like to have it out, not here, not in public. Luca's finger jabs the air. That he should appear like this, on this day, seems an affront, a rebuke against the years of vigilance, all that Umberto has done, all the changes he has made.

Luca finishes his call. As he begins to move, Umberto follows him, not wishing to let him out of his sight until he has settled on a course of action. It is infuriating, but it must be resolved; he has to know. The thought that he might bump into him later, with Maddalena, is too terrible to contemplate. He can see how it will be, with Luca coming up, fat arms spread wide, laughing in that way of his, the mole on his cheek glistening with sweat, a chuck on the shoulder, a pinch of the chin. Il Piccolo, he will say with a wink. Old friend. And tell me, who is this? No. He would not be able to bear it.

He follows Luca across the Piazza. The climb back up the Scalinata is agonising. Umberto hangs back, blending in with the crowd, as Luca climbs a few steps and then stops, climbs again and then stops again, turning each time to take in the view. At the top, he turns right, on to Viale dei Fratelli, and Umberto, dashing up the last steps, is able to keep sight of him easily enough. The afternoon crowds are thinning, time marching on. The office can wait, Umberto knows, Gabi will cover for him.

Luca is about twenty yards ahead. He seems to sway down the avenue, drifting into this shop and that, as if intentionally holding back the revelation of his destination. At length, he comes out onto the corner of Piazza Verona. He stops. He puts down his briefcase and looks into the

vortex of traffic, building already towards rush hour, the weekend escape, that leaks out onto le Carmo. What is he doing? Why is he here?



They are heading towards the river. It is lunacy to be following him like this, but he can think of nothing else to do. It is as if he has stepped away from himself, into another realm, another version of his life. At the water's edge, Luca stops and looks left and right, following the sweep of the river. Boats pass from both directions, tourist craft overladen like junks, barges carrying the necessities of the city east towards the docks. There are shouts from the decks, the reek of motor oil. Gulls turn in the air, calling as they follow the churning wakes.

As Luca moves slowly along the bank, Umberto feels a surge of strength pass into him, a pulse so strong that he is moved to shake his head. How easy it would be simply to sidle up to Luca and, without saying a word, place his hands on his shoulders and twist him sharply into the river. He would be gone – like that – taken away on the current. By comparison, a confrontation seems impossible, because to confront him would be to alert him to Umberto's presence and that knowledge would never be erased.

Still Luca ambles by the water, scanning the buildings on the far bank as if waiting for some sign. Eventually, he crosses, joining Via Lisboa, traversing Piazza Mentone, turning left into Via San Rolfo and then into Via Giuseppe Verga, where he comes to a stop outside the Hotel Huppert. It is the sort of unprepossessing place you would expect to see in a detective

drama on television, drab concrete, peeling stickers in the window. If Luca is to be in the city, Umberto thinks, it seems better somehow that he should be here, in a shabby hotel, in a narrow street, south of the river. Umberto stops and draws into an alcove. Up ahead Luca bends over his case, fumbling for something. At length he stands up and, casting his eyes left and right, goes smartly up the steps and into the hotel.

Umberto can do nothing but wait. He steps out into the street and looks up at the building. Its brown windows are shuttered against the light. This part of the city is quiet, off the track. He can hear sounds from far off, sirens, the low moan of river craft. Ten minutes pass, twenty. Then, a glint from the hotel's revolving door. Luca emerges, case in hand, again looking left and right, as if he knows he is being followed.

Moving quickly now – so quickly that Umberto has to lengthen his stride – Luca blunders down via Capri, past San Marco, its neat cloisters in shadow, and on into the Giardini Pubblici where he stops and sits on a bench. Once again Umberto has to wait, nestling near a bush, wanting neither to crouch nor to stand fully upright. Luca, sitting forward, his elbows resting on his knees, is on the phone again.

When he starts to move, he leaves the park through Palestra and cuts across Piazza della Scala until they are in front of Stazione di Monte, its great portico, that splendid arch, standing boldly in the face of the sun. Umberto follows him more closely than ever, not wishing to lose him in the rush of commuters streaming up the steps and into the great hall with its high windows, its coffered ceiling.

Inside, Luca stands scanning the departure board, watching the letters turn. Umberto can guess which train he is going to catch. Finally, the platform number clicks over and swells of people move towards the platform. Luca is one of the last, holding his position before slowly bending down to pick up his briefcase. He follows him onto the platform. When Luca stops, Umberto stands to one side, to allow other passengers to pass. Stewards help stragglers with their luggage, couples argue over what they need for journey. The vaulted roof of the shed is high above them, an atrium of light. Up ahead, Luca pauses on the steps, gives the platform a last look and then climbs aboard. Umberto waits until the train begins to pull out of the station, before feeling light enough, at last, to wave it on its way.



He buys flowers from their favourite stall on via Richardson and carries them in the crook of his arm, enjoying the speculative glances they draw from those around him. The air is heavy with fumes, the traffic backed up in both directions. People watch him from their idling cars; he can sense their eyes following him. Horns blare, drivers lean on their doorframes, straining to discover the cause of the hold up. The congestion stretches away into the shimmering distance, to the far end of via dei Fratelli, where a bus stands at an awkward angle, slewed across the carriageway. There are blue lights, a gathering of people.

With the approach of evening, a change comes over the people on the streets. All around him, arm-in-arm, carrying themselves with nothing but

pleasure and spectacle in mind, are couples in evening dress, splendid gowns that reach almost to the ground. Others are in groups of two and three, or more, strolling idly, conversing. Umberto is thrilled. He sees in it something of the masquerade ball and he is determined to play his part. He walks among them, as if in secret, behind a mask, turning to admire their finery.

Reaching the top of the Scalinata, Umberto pauses. The Piazza is awash. Groups are seated on the terraces, sipping drinks, smiling, laughing, putting up their hands to shield their eyes against the sun. Some gather on the balconies of private apartments, leaning at the railings, waving programmes, shouting to passing acquaintances, sharing jokes and good wishes.

Umberto has always had it in his mind to come upon Maddalena as she waits, to approach from distance, emerging out of a throng. He can imagine her looking up, noticing him, perhaps taking a few steps towards him and then seeing the flowers, his hand behind his back. She will give him a quizzical look, her head tilted to one side, before breaking into a smile.

The moment is near at hand, but he holds himself back. It is pleasurable to do so, the feeling of anticipation running through him like a current. Casting his eye here and there, he greets the people milling closest to him with a smile, a nod. When they nod back at him, it seems to Umberto that they know something already, that they know why he is here. The clock of l'Ospedale dei Popoli chimes seven, the notes echoing around the Piazza and bleeding back into one another. Still, he waits, pacing behind the wall at the top of the steps. People flood by, some picking up the hems of their

dresses and tripping down the Scalinata. He had imagined a crowd, but he hadn't imagined this. It is beyond all imagining.

To his left he hears a woman's voice.

'Isn't it wonderful,' she says, 'this part, before it has even started?'

'Hurry, hurry,' another says, following on behind.

'Wait,' a man says. 'We'll get a better view from up here.'

'Are you sure?'

'Of course. Look. They're coming.'

Umberto looks. In the Piazza, there is a parting of the ways, a disruption to the scene. The crowd moves back, hedged together, as, from multiple entry points – alleyways, side streets – performers make their way into the square. They are dressed entirely in black and each carries what appears to be a coloured tile, first holding them above their heads and then, swooping low, close to the ground. As the lines of performers dance and turn, converging on the centre of the Piazza, the crowd begins to clap in unison.

'What's happening?' Umberto says, leaning to the man standing alongside.

'A performance,' the man says. 'You'll soon see.'

'But I have to meet someone, down there, by the fountain.'

'You might be out of luck, then.'

Umberto takes out his phone and calls Maddalena. There is no answer. He tries again. No answer. As the performers near the fountain, they lay their tiles on the ground, forming a square, and then draw back into a semi-

circle and join in the clapping. More performers follow, in groups of four this time, some carrying, slung between them, wooden poles, others pulling what appear to be blocks of wood. Umberto watches as these performers join forces with the others and begin to erect some kind of structure. The wooden blocks are pulled into position, forming a platform. Into this, one of the poles is inserted, then another, then a cross beam. Again, the performers fall back, settling into two angled lines which make a funnel. Into this funnel, a final performer enters. She dances across the Piazza, tumbling and then holding herself before tumbling again. As she nears the structure, four dancers break from the funnel to join her. She is lifted into the air, her legs in split position, her hands raised to reveal, held taught between them, a rope. Held aloft like this, she is carried to the cross beam.

‘It’s a gallows,’ the man says, nudging the woman alongside him.

‘I can see that,’ she says, putting her arm around him.

There is a lull, the clapping stops. Umberto scans the crowd for some sign of Maddalena. Above the noise of thousands of conversing voices it becomes possible to hear the sound of pipes, of timbrels – a great tumult of activity coming from somewhere as yet out of sight. Everyone turns and looks, trying to discern where the noise is coming from. On the balconies, binoculars rove this way and that, their lenses glinting, before settling on a spot to the west of the Piazza, near the entrance to La Caccia, where a commotion has broken out. There is clapping, cheering, great jollity.

Umberto forces himself to look away, counting to fifteen in his head, before turning back to scan the Piazza. The crowd sways; some raise their

hands above their heads, resuming the clapping, while others scramble onto plinths and watch through their mobile phones.

Without a moment's notice, the crowd breaks and scatters across the square. Something is pushing them back, some procession, it seems. To the sound of drum beats, with performers tumbling in front of them to clear a path, a bank of men, riding three abreast, enters the square, their horses fighting the bit. Then come drummers and, after them, an open carriage, in which sits a large man, a black cloak wrapped around him. He has a thick neck, a bald head. Of course. Umberto sees what is happening, what scene is being played out. As the carriage moves slowly towards the scaffold, the man raises his clasped hands in the air. The crowd wails its disapproval, shrieking 'Shame! Shame!' and holding their downturned thumbs in the air.

Again, there is a lull. The man waits by the scaffold. Umberto watches, his eyes darting around the scene, willing Maddalena to appear. Then, the distinct sound of horses' hooves can be heard, a bugle. Into the square, a lone female rider, flanked by three attendants. The crowd begins to applaud, a ripple spreading and gathering force. All eyes are on the rider to the front. Her face is hidden by a mask. From underneath it, her long brown hair emerges, plaited to one side. She is wearing a dark blue dress and her back is perfectly straight, as if she is determined not to betray any sign of terror.

Umberto tries Maddalena again, but there is nothing. Meanwhile, the woman raises her hand, her fist clenched, as she arrives at the scaffold. The crowd mimics her salute.

Umberto looks around. And then – at last – he thinks he sees her, a flash of something recognisable, a dress, pushing towards the Scalinata. He is able to follow the figure for a moment or two, but then loses her in the scrum of people heaving to get a better view. Step by step, watching as he goes, he descends into the crowd. At a certain point, it is no longer possible to see the spectacle, but he can sense the direction in which it is heading by the reaction of those around him, their scale of jeering or applause. He pushes against the flow, ducking into little pockets of space that open up here and there, jostling his way through as the clapping resumes, the noise rising to a crescendo.

Soon – very soon – he will find her. Not for a moment does he doubt that she is here; it is simply a question of continuing to look. As he pushes on through the crowd, he wonders how he might describe her, even to himself. What kind of a woman is she? He knows his words will never capture her; knows that her movements will shake them off as soon as he has formed them. At weekends, she sleeps late, inhabiting the bed as if it were a country. With a coffee in his hand, he watches, catching the first awakening in her eyes, dreams still clinging to her, the extravagant curve of her throat as she rises.

UNSPEAKABLE ACTS

I MET HIM during a chaotic period of my life when everything was a blank. I had left my children, my husband, and come to London with the vague intention of recovering some part of me I thought I had lost. It was late summer. I did the usual round of things – churches, museums, public monuments.

One afternoon I spent hours looking at the Caryatids at St Pancras Church, marvelling at their grace and trying to locate the scars said to lie

across their bellies. Apparently, chunks had to be cut right out of their middles, to make them fit properly, but I couldn't see the marks. Eventually, I stopped looking and spent what remained of the day in an old haunt near Copenhagen Fields. When I lived in London before, a friend had a flat around the corner. I tried to summon the evenings we had spent together, but even the memory of contentment seemed beyond me, as if those things hadn't happened to me at all and instead I had read about them in a book.

As dusk came a man sat at my table. I watched him while he did a crossword, periodically putting down his pen to take gulps of beer. The next day he was there again.

'You like crosswords,' I said. He nodded. I asked him to give me a clue, which he did, but I couldn't work it out.

The next day was the same, and the next: he gave me clues and I didn't get them. In between times, we talked about incidental things – the flowers in the hanging baskets, rivers and the history of that part of London. He knew more than I did, telling me of the visit of Christian IV of Denmark in 1606; how his retinue had set up a temporary home on the site of the fields. Revels had gone on long into the night and herring, in barrels of Madeira wine brought up the river from ports on the east coast, were consumed in vast quantities. I didn't know what to say to that.

The next day, draining his pint, he said: 'I want to show you where I'm from.'

At Liverpool Street, we caught a train to Ipswich. I looked out of the window at the dipping sun, at estuaries and abandoned industrial buildings.

I told him that I wished I had travelled more, but that I hadn't and was left only with vague sense impressions of how other places should be. At Ipswich, we caught another train, a smaller one. To keep myself from falling asleep I memorised the names of the stations we passed through: Westerfield, Woodbridge, Melton, Wickham Market, Saxmundham.

At Darsham, we left the train and began to walk. The fields were scratchy with stubble and golden in the last of the sun. Migrating birds gathered overhead. Finally, he began to speak of our destination, telling me of a city that had been destroyed, of churches, monasteries, almshouses; of hospitals, a great harbour; of spicers, mercers and cutlers; of countless homes that had been broken up and carried away by the sea.

'All that remains,' he said, 'lies in ruins beneath the waves, enveloped in silt and darkness.' It seemed to me that he spoke with the fervour of the last surviving witness, on whom a great responsibility rested, but the whole thing seemed impossible.

'This is fiction,' I said, at last.

'No,' he said. 'It's all true.'

As it grew dark, the heath beneath us gave way to tarmac and I was just able to make out the shape of a church, then of houses, a handful of parked cars.

'This is it,' he said, 'or what's left.'

As we walked, he gestured to buildings I couldn't see, saying who had lived there, what they had done and how he had known them. At the end of the street, we came to an incline.

We climbed, the soft sand making me weary. I wondered why I had come, how I had got there, to that place.

‘Watch yourself,’ he said, ‘there’s a cliff.’ At the top, he put his hand on my arm. His voice was quivering with pride. ‘This is what I wanted you to see.’

Beyond, I could see moonlight on the water, the southwards curve of the coast and, nearer in, slick terraces of shingle. The stars were out, Nimrod lost in Orion, Osiris in the Dog Star.

‘Do you see it?’ he said.

‘What am I looking for?’

‘There’s a glow in the sea - look - as if it were lit from below.’

I told him I could see no such thing.

We sat down on the ground and he put his head against my shoulder.

‘Keep looking,’ he said.

I did keep looking, but I didn’t see anything. In truth I was conscious only of the great continent of emptiness opening in front of me and a powerful feeling of truancy as if, having slipped out of the regular run of things, I was now capable of unspeakable acts. Still looking, I began a fitful sleep, punctuated by odd moments of wakefulness when it seemed as if the sea was already on top of us.

At dawn, the sun on the water, he was nowhere to be seen. I waited, watching the tide rise up the beach, and then walked slowly down to the village and called a taxi. At Darsham, I caught the train to Ipswich. As I counted back through the stations, I found I was angry with him, furious

even. He had given me something to carry, but not told me what it was, who it was for, or for how long I would have to carry it.

JOHN DORY

WHEN SAM, HIS only real friend, is called away to his in-laws in the country at the last minute – some emergency – Peter faces the prospect of his birthday weekend with trepidation. There will be no drink and curry after work on Friday, no Saturday game of badminton at the Sports Centre while Sam's children have their judo lesson, and no Sunday lunch relaxing and talking easily with Sam and his wife, the children playing in the back garden. In

other words, he will be alone, and when you are alone, as Peter knows, the weekends are the worst, the long hours giving way to fevered visions, recollections and hallucinations.

Friday at work. He can do nothing right. On the other side of the partition, Graham phones his boyfriend to talk about their holiday. A fortnight in Greece. They fly that evening. Graham has a bag stowed under his desk and will go straight from work to the airport. They still need to get suntan lotion. They can't wait for the weekend to begin. Peter's mind is drawn to imagine the likely shape and tenor of his own evening – the walk home, against the flow, food in front of the television, a procession of programmes that he cannot follow, that literally seem beyond his grasp; a desultory skimming of social media sites, firing out a few messages, then bed, a wank, perhaps, although probably not, before falling asleep to the sound of people in the street, outside the pub, laughing, shouting, smashing glasses.

In the end – unable to bear it any longer – he leaves work a little early, not saying a word to anyone, a half-drunk cup of coffee steaming on his desk to give the impression that he hasn't gone home, that he might yet return.

Once out on the street, instead of turning left towards home, Peter turns right, in the direction of the most expensive supermarket in town. If the evening is to be spent alone in his small flat, he will make it a triumph of solitude and confinement – a celebration of his ability to do precisely as he pleases – loneliness as choice, being with himself, for himself, a freedom that so many people crave. As he walks, he settles on getting some prawns –

rare, large, exotic – and flash frying them with red chillies and ginger, perhaps throwing in a bit of garlic and lemon juice towards the end. He wants the heat, wants to watch as the fat, translucent commas of flesh turn opaque in the spitting pan. There are some egg noodles in a cupboard and he will fry these up, too, with some sesame seeds and some matchsticks of vegetable: carrot, celery, courgette. The finishing touch will be fresh coriander, extravagantly chopped and scattered. He imagines the crunch of it as it submits to the knife. Yes. Just so. All of which he will wash down with the crispest, coldest, whitest bottle of wine he can source. It will be both feast and act of salvage, a way of declaring his own value with expensive things that he cannot afford.

He gets the wine first – a Sancerre of frankly ludicrous expense, by some measure the costliest bottle of wine he has ever bought. It will need chilling, but he can always put it in the top compartment of the freezer as soon as he gets home – assuming, of course, that he remembers to take it out again. The bottle seems to glow in the basket as he gathers the necessary vegetables, all nice and organic, in pert little cardboard containers tied up with string. This is good. This is really good. This is precisely what he needs.

In the fish aisle, he pauses. He can't see any prawns. Because it is a Friday evening, all the different trays of fish have become mixed up, people browsing, wandering off and then returning, not putting things back where they found them. As a consequence, Peter has to root around a bit in order to be sure, but things are as they first appeared: there are no fucking prawns. It is enough to put the evening in the balance again. Infuriated, his chest

tightening just a little, he rifles again through what remains, lifting packets of cod, of mackerel, of plaice, and then putting them down again. He lays imaginary bets on not finding what he is looking for, so that, when he doesn't, he can console himself with imaginary winnings. On the point of giving up – without the key ingredient, everything else is ruined – he spies what looks like a last packet of prawns, half-hidden under some John Dory fillets and some Pollock. He looks more closely. It is a packet of prawns – tiger ones, at that.

Peter lunges for it. As he does so, someone else, a woman, standing just to his left, makes a similar move. Their hands reach the prawns at broadly the same moment, although Peter is convinced that a television replay would reveal that his touch was, by the narrowest of margins, the first. There is no replay, however, and consequently the situation is awkward, calling for delicate social negotiation.

Half-crouched, mid-lunge, still clinging to the prawns, Peter turns his head. There is a face, framed by a bob of black hair.

'Holy shit, Peter!' the face says. The face is Susie's face. It is a face he hasn't seen for – how long? – maybe fifteen years.

'Holy shit, Susie,' he says.

'My god,' she says.

'I can't believe it,' he says. '*Susie*. How are you?'

'Oh, god,' she says. 'Where to begin?' Despite this, Susie moves into information delivery mode with a speed that Peter finds bewildering, reeling off a string of life achievements one after the other. He wonders for a second

if she is as nervous as he is – and, if she is, why? By the time he catches up, by the time his hearing has become sufficiently attuned to isolate the sound of individual words, he is just able to hear her say: ‘and after that we just thought “fuck it” and moved back. Why not?’

‘Why not?’ Peter says, thinking of the prawns. ‘Of course, you did. Move back. Of course. Why not?’

‘Ten years, this year,’ she says. ‘It doesn’t seem possible.’

‘It doesn’t,’ Peter says. ‘That’s brilliant.’

‘Sam will be made up I’ve bumped into you. We’ve been looking for friends. We had no idea you were still here.’

‘Oh, I’m still here all right,’ Peter says. He worries about his expression. If it in anyway reflects his state of mind, it will be a sight indeed. He wants to put his hands up to his face, to smooth it all out a bit.

‘And what about you?’ Susie says. ‘How is everything?’

‘Oh, you know,’ Peter says. ‘Things are fine.’ The words come hard, each one sweated over.

‘You’re married, right? Is it Grace? I think I remember hearing something about a Grace.’

‘No, alas. Not me. No Grace.’

‘But I thought.’

‘Yes. I thought too, in fact, we both thought, but no. No Grace.’ He leaves it at that, not wanting to say anymore, not trusting himself to give the full explanation. If he says any more, he feels he’ll want to say everything at

once, the whole story, in all its unfathomable detail, in a single explosion from his mouth.

‘Ah,’ Susie says. Her face falls a little, but then almost immediately brightens. He takes it as his cue.

‘But I’m fine, absolutely. Life’s good. I’m free. You know? All good.’ He has said too much, he thinks. Already, in so few words, he has said too much.

‘Well, that’s great,’ Susie says. ‘After all, there’s more than one way to skin a cat, isn’t there?’

‘There is,’ Peter says, not quite seeing where the skinning of cats came into it. He wants to ask a question, recognising the fact that it is his responsibility to move things along, but he can think of nothing to say. His mind has gone white. He could ask about her parents, but there is the danger that they might be dead. Or school, some recollection, some shared memory? Instead, he just stands there, kind of smiling, but kind of not, too.

A silence opens.

In the lull, Susie picks up the prawns and looks at them carefully. ‘Well,’ she says, ‘what are we going to do about these?’

‘Are they definitely the last ones?’

She looks down at the remaining bits of fish. ‘I think so, yes.’

‘Well, you have them,’ Peter says, although he doesn’t mean it. He wants the prawns. Wants them quite badly, in fact. She has no idea.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Sure.’

‘Only Sam’s making paella – you should try it. He’s quite the chef, these days. In fact,’ Susie pauses, as if weighing up whether to say what she is going to say. ‘In fact, we’ll have you over some time. Yes, that’s what we’ll do. It would be lovely. Sam would love it. You can see the house.’

‘See the house, Sam,’ Peter says. ‘Of course. I’d love it.’ Even as he says it, Peter is wondering why she hesitated before asking, whether she is doing it out of form, or obligation, or whether she means what she says. He really cannot tell.

‘Oh, Peter,’ Susie says. ‘So amazing to see you.’ She bites her lip, as if she might cry. ‘I’ll facebook you.’

‘Great,’ Peter says. ‘You too. Love to Sam.’

‘And you’re sure you don’t mind? About the prawns?’

‘God, no. Look. I can have anything. I’m not fussy.’ He picks up the John Dory. ‘I can have this.’

At the checkouts, there are queues. He joins one, periodically edging his basket forward with his foot. They won’t ask him to dinner, he thinks. And if they do, he won’t accept. He can’t imagine what it would be like, sitting round the table, having to make conversation. He is nearly at the checkout when he remembers that really, while he’s here, he should get some other things – some toilet roll, bin liners, bleach, that kind of thing. He leaves his queue and gets what he needs. Back at the checkouts, the queues are still long. On either side of him, affluent couples, families with articulate children. Does he bear a grudge? He doesn’t think so. His life is confined,

yes. He knows this and the observation causes him almost no pain. It is what is.

Eventually, it is his turn. He pays. He takes his bags, begins to climb the hill towards home. As he does so, he hears a voice.

‘Peter!’

He turns. He cannot make out where it is coming from.

‘Peter! Over here!’

It is Susie. She is calling to him from the other side of the taxi rank, from the driver’s seat of a large yellow convertible, top down. Of course, Peter thinks. She beckons him over, waving her sunglasses in the air.

‘I just spoke to Sam. He says why don’t you just come over tonight? Short notice and I’m sure you have other plans, but what do you say?’

‘I,’ Peter says. He is about to say that he does have other plans, but then, somewhat to his own surprise, he doesn’t. Instead, he says: ‘OK.’

‘Great,’ Susie says. She beams. She really seems to mean it. ‘Come at eight. It’s Grove Road, number six. At the top. Bring that nice bottle of wine.’

At home, Peter puts the John Dory in the fridge, the vegetables in the rack, and the other bits in the cupboard. In doing so, he notices that he didn’t, in fact, have any noodles. Perhaps it’s a good job he’s going out after all. In the bathroom, he takes off his watch and gives his face a good wash, dampens his hair. He opens a beer, puts on some music and attempts to find a good shirt. Eventually, in the pile in front of his wardrobe, he finds one. Navy blue, a subtle print. It is creased and stained, but with a jacket it won’t show. He looks at himself in the mirror. His eyes sag a bit, but he’ll do. He

finishes the beer at the kitchen window, smoking a cigarette and looking at the houses across the street, trying to work out who is out and who is in. When the clock by the fridge says seven thirty, he leaves. He won't need to rush.

With the wine under his arm, he walks across to Grove Road. It is a lovely evening, he tells himself. There is bird song, there are people sitting outside the pub at the bottom of Denmark Street. The gaps between the houses widen, windows get bigger. He remembers he left his watch at home, on the cabinet by the sink. It doesn't matter. In any case, he has his phone. At a shop at the bottom of their road, he stops to buy flowers.

Number six has a wide gate, as tall as he is, fancy ironwork. He swings it open. There is a short gravelled drive lined on both sides by a high hedge, a slight bend, which then opens out onto view of a large Georgian house, squat, pale grey, five windows, a door. Peter feels slightly unsteady on his feet, the gravel causing him to walk with an overcompensation that drags him to the right a little. The convertible is parked in front of a double garage to the left. As he nears the house, through one of the windows, he can see the kitchen, vast, pale yellow, stretching through to a window at the back.

Sam answers the door. He is suntanned, broader than Peter remembered, a bit of a paunch, wearing shorts, a t-shirt, thongs on his feet.

'Yes?' Sam says, apparently without recognition.

Peter looks beyond him into the hall.

'It's Peter,' Peter says.

‘Peter!’ Sam says. ‘Of course it’s Peter! I didn’t recognise you. You’re early.’

‘Am I?’ Peter says. ‘I’m sure Susie said eight.’

‘She did,’ Sam says, ‘but it’s seven.’ He holds up his watch. ‘No matter. Come in. Come in.’

In the hall, perplexed, Peter hands over the wine. He tries surreptitiously to take out his phone, but it has lodged itself at the bottom of his inside pocket and he can’t reach it easily.

‘Sancerre,’ Sam says. ‘Very nice.’

‘And these are for Susie.’ Peter’s hands shake a little as he hands over the flowers. He doesn’t know why.

‘Of course. Come on through. She’s up in the bath.’

‘Ah. Sorry.’

‘Don’t be daft.’ At the foot of the stairs, Sam calls up. ‘Darling,’ he calls. ‘Darling. Peter’s here.’ After waiting for a moment, he turns back to Peter. ‘Deaf. Anyway. Let me take your jacket.’

Peter hands it over and watches as Sam puts it in a cupboard and closes the door. They go through to the kitchen. There’s a lot of pine, but it’s rough, old. And there’s a crack across the far wall. He tells himself it doesn’t matter, either way.

‘This is it, then,’ Sam says. ‘The homestead. Sell in London, buy out here and this is what you get.’

‘It’s lovely,’ Peter says.

‘We like it. It came up on the market. And we just thought, “Fuck it”, why not?’

‘Susie said.’

‘Now,’ Sam says. ‘I was about to drive to the shop – Susie forgot the wine in all the excitement of your coming. We’ll need more than a bottle.’

‘Sorry,’ Peter says, again, resolving not to say it again.

‘Not a bit of it, but if you don’t mind sitting here drinking a glass of your own, I’ll just dash off. I’ll be ten minutes. Twenty, max.’

‘No problem.’

Before he leaves, Sam hands him a glass from a cupboard. ‘Corkscrew in the drawer by the cooker. Beer in the fridge, if you prefer.’

Peter listens for the sound of the car on the gravel. When it recedes, he goes to the fridge. Pinned under magnets there are business cards, notices of appointments; they use the same dentist as him. There is a bottle of beer on the top shelf. He opens it – there is an opener hanging from one of a range of hooks above the sink – and carries it to a wooden table pushed up against a window. He sits down and, leaning back, takes a sip of the beer. Through the window he makes out the shape of the back garden, a green oblong of lawn, bordered by flowerbeds, which stretch back to a low, ivied wall. Beyond it, trees, beyond the trees, other houses, the city, its evening lights.

It’s all very nice – a nice kitchen, a nice house. He likes the tiling around the range, the counter behind with space for chopping next to the sink. He could see how he might use it, what changes he might make. On the table in front of him, there are envelopes, piles of correspondence. He leafs

through them, letters from banks, flyers for yoga classes, MOT invoices, child minders, piano teachers – the unfamiliar stuff of different lives. At the other end of the table, the bags from the supermarket. He gets up and goes over. He peers in. He cannot help himself. He sees the prawns, some garlic, some headache pills, a paper bag with what looks like a prescription in it.

In the silence of this strange kitchen, Peter wonders a little about luck, its role, about the matrix of grand decisions, out of which emerges, well, what? Me over here and you over there. He remembers his phone and is about to go and check it, when he becomes conscious of a faint sound – a baby crying perhaps, but he cannot be sure. He looks up at the ceiling, trying to isolate the source of the sound. He hears it again. It is a baby. He is sure. He goes to the door of the kitchen and listens. The hall is filled with the scent of the bath. The cry comes again, louder this time. Soon after, it is followed by the sound of slopping water, footsteps on tile, a door opening.

‘Darling,’ Susie’s voice calls down the stairs. ‘Darling. Can you see to him?’

Before Peter can reply that it is him, Peter, and not Sam, the door closes again, the water slops. He walks out into the hall. The carpet is plush under his feet, springy, recently laid. At the bottom of the stairs, he pauses, listens, wonders whether he should take off his shoes. Again, there is a cry. He climbs the stairs. From the bathroom, he can hear Susie humming. Off the landing there are four doors. Three of them are shut, but from the last, which is very slightly ajar, a faint glow emerges, as if from a shaded light. He

goes in. In the room, there is a cot. In the cot, a small child. The child looks up at him.

‘Hello there,’ Peter says. ‘Who are you then?’

The child blinks, contorts its face and resumes crying. Peter reaches in and picks it up, placing the child, as best he can manage, against his shoulder. It seems to fit quite snugly against the crook of his arm.

‘There, there,’ he says. ‘No need for this.’

He walks around the room, stepping over discarded clothes, avoiding the flex of a hairdryer, bouncing at the knees a little as he moves. The crying stops. Peter has his back to the door – he is leaning in to look at a painting on the wall, thick brush strokes, black on white, of a setting sun – when he hears a noise behind him, a brushing of wood over carpet.

‘Darling,’ a voice says.

He turns. It is Susie. She is completely naked, her breasts, her belly, a dark patch of pubic hair.

‘Oh glory,’ Peter thinks.

‘Darling,’ Susie says, again. She walks towards him and reaches for the baby. When she has the baby in her arm, she stretches her free hand to the feel the fabric of his shirt. ‘I like this,’ she says. ‘Good choice.’

Peter watches as she settles the baby in its cot. When it is done, she returns to him, running her hand up and down his lapel. ‘You look gorgeous,’ she says. ‘I’ve always liked this jacket.’ She gives him a long kiss. Peter puts his arm around her and returns the kiss. Her skin is exquisitely soft, smooth. For a moment, they stand there, the two of them, in an

embrace. Peter grips her tightly, running his hand down her naked back to the curve of her bum.

‘Now, now,’ Susie says, pulling away. ‘What time is it?’

‘God knows,’ Peter says, holding onto her.

‘He’ll be here soon. And I,’ she says, standing decisively back, disengaging herself, ‘need to get ready.’

‘But, what if we just... There must be half an hour.’

‘Poor Peter,’ she says, turning to look at him as she bends down to open a drawer. ‘And on his birthday, too.’

He smiles, disarmed.

‘Now, downstairs.’

‘Alright, alright,’ Peter says. ‘If you say so.’

Peter goes downstairs. In the kitchen, he clears a half-drunk beer bottle from the table and pours the dregs into the sink. He takes some flowers from the counter and puts them in a vase, before carrying them through to the dining room and setting them on the table. From the dresser, he takes knives, forks and spoons and arranges three settings around the table. There are two fresh candles there already and he lights them with matches from his pocket.

He turns his attention to the food. From the bag, he takes the prawns, garlic, some coriander leaves, and carries them over to the chopping board near the range. After checking there are noodles in the cupboard, he begins to chop the garlic. As he is doing this, he hears the sound of footsteps on the

path. Peter turns and peers through the window. It is Sam. He has a bottle of wine under his arm, some flowers.

Peter opens the door wide with Sam still some way from the door. He has changed. Peter is not sure that he would have recognised him as readily as Susie did. He is gaunt, grey stubble. The years, Peter thinks.

‘Hello, hello, hello,’ he says.

As he nears the door, Sam salutes. He is slightly out of breath.

‘Are these for me,’ Peter says, making for the flowers. ‘You shouldn’t have.’

‘They are for your wife, of course. This is for you.’ He holds out the wine.

‘Excellent. Come in.’

In the hallway, the two men embrace. “It’s good to see you,” Peter says. ‘It’s been too long.’

When Susie comes down, she announces that they should have bubbles, something to celebrate the occasion. There is a bottle open in the fridge. When Peter has poured three glasses, Susie takes Sam through to the other room while Peter cooks. When the readiness of ingredients allows, he pops his head back through, to check on their drinks. As he fills their glasses, he gets the unmistakeable sense that the conversation between Susie and Sam is not for his ears.

‘Something I said?’ he says.

‘We’re having a private conversation, darling,’ she says. ‘Off you go. We’ll fill you in later.’

Peter closes the door and returns to the kitchen, rolling up his sleeves. He doesn't mind. In fact, he prefers it this way. He likes to cook alone, relishing its rituals as a means to suspend thinking for a moment. He allows himself to become transfixed by the slivers of garlic fizzing in the oil, the chilli. He cooks the noodles, bites one, they are perfect. He lets them cool. The vegetables, chopped matchstick thin, only need a couple of minutes. He sets them aside and gets at last to the prawns. He heats the pan until it smokes and throws them in. There is an immediate explosion of oil, the spits prickling on his exposed forearm. The prawns whiten, then turn brown. He angles the pan over the flame, letting them catch for a moment, a blackening of the tail. When they are done, he combines the whole in a large bowl. He carries it into the hall using both hands.

The door to the front room is closed. Not a sound comes from the other side. He tries to open it with his elbow but it doesn't work. He sets the bowl on the floor and turns the handle.

'Surprise!' Susie says, when he enters.

'Surprise! There is a cacophony of other voices, party poppers going off. The room is full of people, virtually everyone he can think of, shoulder to shoulder. They break into a chorus of Happy Birthday. Peter is amazed. Somebody takes the bowl from his hand and replaces it with a glass of champagne. Of all things, he hadn't expected this. No wonder Susie had played it so cool. Donald's here, Helen, too, Graham and Leon, Edward, Nic – the whole crowd. And is that? My God, it is.

'It's Sam,' Peter says, turning to his wife. He thinks he might cry.

‘I know. I thought you’d be pleased.’

The two men embrace. They haven’t seen each other for years.

‘I can’t believe it. How did you pull this off?’

‘I have my ways.’

‘I am the luckiest man alive,’ he says.

‘You bloody well are as well,’ a voice says.

Peter turns. It is Nat. ‘Nat,’ he says.

‘Peter,’ she says, leaning forward to give him a hug. ‘Joe’ll be here soon.

He got held up at school and missed the train.’

He looks from Susie to Nat. ‘Joe’s coming?’

They nod. ‘Your mum’s upstairs, somewhere,’ Susie says, ‘She’s looking after Max.’

‘This is too much,’ he says.

The party is a riot. He moves through it in a daze. A modest man by inclination, he has always had a modest sense of his place in the world, but now, tonight – with these people, in this room, with this wife – he feels as if all the decisions he has taken, small and big, some of which he can’t even remember, have been vindicated. As he is thinking this, Susie comes up behind him and kisses his neck.

‘Happy Birthday, darling,’ she says, passing him something oblong, wrapped in red paper.

He unwraps it. It is a leather box. He opens it. Inside is a watch, very plain, very simple, a brown strap.

‘Do you like it?’

He smiles and puts it on. 'Is that really the time?' he says, turning the face so that she can see.

'It is,' she says.

When he bumps into Sam again – outside, in the garden, smoking – he is drunk, they both are. There are fewer people now, but that's okay. They stand in groups on the lawn, leaning against the wall. They focus on one another intently, the booze, the moment all playing a part.

'Oh Sam,' Peter says. 'It's so good to see you.'

'You too, man.'

They hug again, swaying.

'How did she find you?'

'We bumped into each other in the supermarket, a few hours ago.'

'Bull shit,' Peter says.

'No bull shit.'

'Crazy. And what about you? How is, you know, everything? Life and stuff?'

'Long story.'

'Good story?'

'Some good, some bad, but that's for another time. This is your night.'

The party goes on. Joe arrives. There is a lot of drink, dancing. Susie takes her shoes off and jumps on the sofa. Peter joins her. They kiss. Photographs are taken.

'No flash!' she says.

In the end, it is just Peter, Susie and Sam, sprawled on the sofa, the sky lightening through the window, the wreck of the room around them.

‘I want some drugs,’ Peter says. ‘Can we get some drugs?’

Susie and Sam smile. They drink in silence for a bit.

‘This is the best,’ Peter says, clutching Susie close. ‘And Sam,’ he says. ‘Sam, Sam, Sammy. You’re still here. A survivor.’

‘I’m still here, Peter,’ he says. ‘I’m still here.’

Peter spreads his arms wide, as if to take in the whole room, the whole house, the whole of his life.

Eventually, Sam stands. He should go.

‘Are you sure?’ Susie says, lifting her head from Peter’s lap. ‘There’s more whisky, brandy.’

‘You can always crash here,’ Peter says.

‘No, not for me,’ Sam says. ‘I’ve not far to go. Busy day tomorrow and all that.’

At the door, they embrace, the three of them.

‘More of this, please,’ Peter says. ‘And soon.’

Sam walks down the drive, stumbling a little, his feet dragging over the gravel. When he reaches the bend in the drive, he stops, turns round and waves. Peter and Susie are framed for a moment in the doorway, their conjoined shapes silhouetted against the pale yellow light behind. Above them, in the sky, the last of the moon glints like a metal ball. Home, Sam thinks. Home.

MADRID

THERE WERE SOME guys sitting in front of her on a bench, directly in her line of sight. By sitting in front of her like that they were blocking her view of another guy, sitting further away, with friends, on the packed grass in front of the museum. If she couldn't see him, he couldn't see her, and this was important. She supposed she could have moved to another deckchair, but she didn't want to. Now that she was there, it was vital that he should notice her, and that she should do nothing whatsoever to attract his attention. It

was only in that way, she thought, that she would be able to take seriously what certain people – Claire and Rachel, in particular – had been saying. In any case, with the light fading and evening coming on, the guys on the bench would move soon enough. They would have better things to do, nights to go to.

At times, it seemed as if they were about to do precisely that. They got as far as standing up, leaning over to clasp hands, bump fists, only for them all to sit down again and resume their conversation. Somebody had said something, that much was clear, and whatever it was had prompted in all of them the wish to remain. In between their movements she was able to bob her head quickly over them or around them to see if he – the other guy, the one that she wanted to notice her without her doing anything to attract his attention – was still there. He was.

The guys on the bench were Spanish, she came to realise. She recognised the language, certain words, phrases. They were drinking beer and talking loudly and giving one another high fives. They were having a great time, loving this moment of togetherness in a city from which each of them, as individuals, felt estranged. As a group, everything was different, Problems of language and money, the question of the proper way in which to live, drifted out of mind. In this context, it was hard for them to separate, to draw themselves apart. Each of them felt the pressure, as if the first of them to go would ruin it for the others as well, breaking the spell they had cast over the day. In any case, when had it ever been so hot? somebody said. In all the months they had been there. When? These were moments to savour,

to go deeply into, although they were running out of beer. A few of them could always go and get some more, or they could move on to someplace else.

Time passed and as the light continued to fade her irritation receded. She had always had a soft spot for the Spanish thanks to a Spanish guy who had gone down on her on a school exchange. She had known about this – being licked out – had talked about it with her friends, even claimed to have experienced it, but never actually had, until that night in the dark heat of a room in Madrid. In return – gloriously, haphazardly and drunkenly – she had fumbled with him under the covers, with apparent success. When he came, he writhed about so violently that she thought they would both fall out of the bed. She couldn't stop herself laughing. He said something to her that she didn't fully understand and then they lay there together, talking. They didn't have sex. He slept with his arm around her, but she remained awake, not in a bad way, her arms crossed, staring at the ceiling of the room. She thought about what she had done and the possible occasions when she might do it again in the future. It was a step on the road. The next morning there was no awkwardness at all, just coffee, breakfast, a cigarette on his balcony.

At last, taking their empty beer cans with them, the guys on the bench left. As they did so, she noticed that the other guy was leaving too, collecting his stuff and walking off with his friends. She watched out of the corner of her eye. For a moment he stood there with his hands by his side looking at the ground. She thought he might walk in her direction, but he didn't. She sat there a little longer. The museum closed, the grass emptied and she had

the park to herself. At home she cooked some pasta, drank half a bottle of wine and smoked three cigarettes. She was in bed before eleven.

BARCELONA

FOR THEIR TENTH wedding anniversary Daniel arranged for them to spend a weekend in Barcelona, hoping to surprise Isla both with the fact that he had remembered at all and with a reminder of their honeymoon, which had also been spent in Barcelona. The idea struck him a few weeks before the actual date and it immediately felt like an important thing to do. In order to arrange accommodation at such short notice – it was the weekend of a crucial Barca v Real derby game and the hotels were full – it had been

necessary to contact an old friend of Isla's, Josep, who lived in the city, and who Daniel had met once or twice in London, and who had, on those one or two occasions, said that if they ever wanted to visit they should let him know and they could stay in his apartment, which was near the centre, while he would vacate and stay with friends for the duration of their trip. Daniel would rather not have done this – Josep and Isla had had a fling once, years ago, when they were students, long before he and Isla had met – but could think of no alternative if the trip was to come off as he had imagined it.

Planning everything out in his imagination brought Daniel a great deal of satisfaction. He could not wait to see Isla's reaction, both to the whole event and to the little things he had lined up for when they were there: small things mostly, like coming upon a certain view at a certain time of day, or appearing to end up by accident at a bar they had got drunk in on their last visit. It would be such a surprise for her, all of it. They hadn't done anything like this for years. Of course, Daniel swore Josep to secrecy and had no reason to suspect anything until, when he told Isla, one evening after work, that he had booked a trip for the coming weekend, the weekend of their wedding anniversary, she reacted not with shock or delight, but with calm assurance.

'Oh darling,' she said. 'I can't.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean I can't. I have something on. I'm sorry. You should have said.'

'What do you have on? There's nothing on the calendar.' As he said this, Daniel gestured to the back of the kitchen door. He was sure he had

checked, sure he had looked closely. He remembered doing it, as if it were yesterday.

‘Yes there is,’ she said. ‘Look.’

Sure enough, when he looked again, there was something, the scrawl of Isla’s tiny handwriting, in one of the little boxes. He had to peer closely to make out the words. *Conference (Warwick)*.

‘When did you put this in?’ he said.

‘Weeks ago,’ she said. ‘I’m sure I mentioned it.’

‘Weeks ago? But I checked.’

‘You can’t have done, honey,’ she said.

Daniel didn’t quite know what to make of it, this blindness on his part, and could only blurt out: ‘But it’s our wedding anniversary.’

‘I know. I know. And it’s important.’ Isla spoke slowly, in what Daniel recognised as her serious voice. She really wanted him to know that this was as important to her as it was to him. She ran her hand along his sleeve. ‘Love,’ she said.

He didn’t respond.

‘Love. We could do something another time, couldn’t we?’

Daniel was conscious that he was on the verge of sulking. It was a struggle to decide whether it could be justified or not, whether a case could be made. The importance of the weekend, the value that he had attached to it in his mind, swirled around him. From his perspective, he knew, its significance had become outlandishly inflated. It was, after all, only a couple of days, but to Daniel those days seemed possessed of a life-altering power.

And all that thinking he had done, all that imagining: places to go, restaurants, moments to remember. It was, now he came to think of it, a reaffirmation of his commitment to Isla and he wanted it to be recognised as such. He hadn't even considered that it might go wrong, or, if he had, he had done so in a minor key: a bad meal in a supposedly good restaurant, being ripped off by a taxi driver. In the end, he decided not to speak. He just folded his arms and looked at his feet.

'Love,' Isla said again. She had moved round to stand in front of him. 'We can talk about it later, but I have to get ready. I'm meeting Grace, remember?'

This might be the limit, Daniel thought, not for the fact, but for the timing, the moment when sulking becomes inevitable. 'Where are you going?'

'Just for a drink.'

'But.' He was about to gesture once more towards the calendar, but realised that it would be ridiculous. He knew everything about this drink with Grace. Isla had told him, had invited him, even implored him to come. 'We'll talk about it later?' He hadn't intended to make it sound like a question, but that's how it came out.

'I'm sorry,' she said, taking her glass upstairs. 'We'll talk about it later. Promise.'

After Isla had gone out, Daniel spent the evening mooching round the flat. He couldn't settle on a single spot. He lay on the couch, on the bed, he sprawled in the armchair in the study. As he did so, he mused over

everything that had transpired. Josep must have told her, he thought. The dirty bastard. He had half a mind to ring him up and ask him, but decided against it. What did it matter, really? Josep was Isla's friend, not his; there should be no surprise as to where his loyalty might lie. At the kitchen table, on his laptop, Daniel looked into the possibility of changing flights. There was a fee, but it could, as far as he understood the website, be accomplished. Fine, he thought. They could simply go another time. It wasn't a big deal, nothing to get upset about. He opened a bottle of beer and congratulated himself on his equanimity. In fact, the more he thought about it the more he became convinced that another weekend would be better. They could stay in a proper hotel, for one thing.

When Isla returned, however, she was in a different mood. Daniel was already in bed, reading. When he heard the door go, he pretended to be asleep, and listened to the sound of Isla dropping her bag in the hall, easing off her shoes. When she entered the bedroom, she sat alongside him and began to stroke his hair. He could smell the wine on her breath.

'You're awake aren't you?' she said.

Daniel smiled, but kept his eyes closed.

'I'm sorry about earlier,' she said. 'It was just a surprise. I didn't react very well.'

'It's all right,' he said, opening his eyes. 'I should have asked. We can change the dates. I've looked into it.'

'No. You were right. We should go at the weekend. It's our wedding anniversary.' She smiled.

‘Are you sure?’ Daniel wondered what role Grace might have played in getting Isla to change her mind. ‘I mean, we could go another time. I really don’t mind.’

‘I’m quite sure,’ she said.

‘What about Warwick, the conference?’

‘Balls to Warwick. You’re my husband. It’s not as if I’m giving a paper or anything.’ Then she added, as what seemed an afterthought, but which could just as well have been a theatrical diversion to conceal the fact that she already knew the answer to her question: ‘Where are we going?’

‘Don’t you know?’ he said. ‘I thought you knew.’

‘What do you mean know? Of course I don’t know. How would I know?’

‘Just wondered if a little bird had told you.’

‘No. No little bird. Where are we going?’

‘You’ll see.’

‘This is intriguing. Which little bird? Do you mean Grace? Does Grace know?’

Suddenly Daniel felt much better, as if a weight had been lifted. Perhaps Josep was reliable after all.

On the Friday, as they were leaving the apartment for the airport, Daniel grabbed, at the very last moment, on a whim, the copy of Graham Greene’s collected stories from the table in the hall. A colleague, Steve, had leant it to him months ago, after Daniel and Isla had watched *The Third Man* and liked it. Daniel hadn’t got round to looking at it and thought that maybe this

would be an opportunity. Then he could give the book back to Steve, lifting another weight from his conscience.

Isla was in a chirpy mood as the taxi weaved through the side streets around Paddington Station. She kept looking at Daniel, touching his arm, and asking: 'Where are we going?' To which he replied with a smile and by raising a finger to his lips: 'It's a secret.' Of course, at the airport, he had to reveal their destination, but he maintained the suspense for as long as he could, watching her as she tried to work it out, the expression on her face changing. When it finally dawned on her, as they neared the departure gate, she broke into a grin.

'Barcelona!' she said.

Daniel opened the book on the plane, shortly after they had levelled out. Isla was already asleep next to him, which he didn't think anything of at the time, although later, in retrospect, it would be one of the many things that gave him pause. He browsed the contents page, looking for the shortest story he could find. He wanted a quick fix, a hit, something that he could get into and out of in the least time possible, that he could race through and get to the end.

As it turned out, the shortest story was called 'The Overnight Bag'. The contents are worth summarising, because Daniel would later be convinced that in the course of reading the story some inexpressible quality of mood or atmosphere had seeped into him. It – the mood, or atmosphere – would come to shadow subsequent events with an unshakeable sense of

predestination, as if they had been written out and the only action remaining to Daniel was to follow their lines, no matter how twisted they became. The story concerns a man, Henry Cooper, travelling by plane from Nice to London, carrying an overnight bag. At the information desk he is given a telegram. It is from his mother. She wishes him a safe journey and looks forward to seeing him on his return. So far, so normal. As he read the story, Daniel felt a pleasant flash of recognition. On the one hand, this was because he knew the airport at Nice, could imagine its location, and, on the other, because, after all, he and Isla had just passed through an airport of their own and, although neither he nor Isla were carrying what could be called an overnight bag, they both had hand luggage and had, on boarding the plane, been faced with the dilemma of what to do with it, whether to place it on the seat, under the seat, or in the overhead locker.

In the case of the story, Henry Cooper is very particular about his overnight bag. He places it ‘tenderly on the ledge of the information desk as though it contained something precious and fragile like an electric razor’. Later, on the plane, he sets it down on the empty seat next to him and secures it with a seatbelt. When a woman, sitting alongside the seat on which he placed the overnight bag, asks him why he is being so particular, he replies that he doesn’t want it shaken about. When she places her own bag on top of his, he reacts testily: ‘I don’t want it squashed,’ he says. ‘It’s a matter of respect.’

Next to him, Isla shifted in her sleep, so that her face was turned towards him, rather than towards the aisle. Her head was back, her straight

brown hair half covering one of her eyes. She had a vague, almost apologetic smile on her face, as if, in a dream, she was having an experience that was both pleasant and troubling at the same time. Daniel looked at her for some time thinking this, trying to penetrate her consciousness, to glean her thoughts, before brushing his fingers down her cheek and returning to his book.

The woman reacts angrily to Cooper's concern regarding the bag: 'What have you got in your precious bag?' To which Cooper evenly replies: 'A dead baby. I thought I had told you.' This, as Daniel could well understand, sends the woman into paroxysms of bewilderment. She splutters that he shouldn't be doing this, that the baby should be in a coffin and not an overnight bag, that there must be regulations for this kind of thing. Although Daniel smirked, picturing what he imagined was a rather pompous old woman, he was forced to imagine what kind of regulations there might be for the event of transferring a dead baby from one country to another. He imagined there would be several forms to fill in. From this, he found himself contemplating a possible sequence of events that might lead to him, Daniel, having to conceal a dead baby in his own hand luggage.

Cooper explains to the woman that his wife didn't trust a foreign coffin. 'Then it's *your* baby,' the woman says. 'My wife's baby,' Henry Cooper corrects her. 'What's the difference?' 'There could well be a difference,' he says, sadly.

Daniel paused. He didn't quite know what to make of things. Cooper didn't seem a trustworthy character, not that Daniel thought that mattered

particularly, but his language seemed at odds with the reality it claimed. Well. He would carry on. There was a bottle of water in the seat pocket in front of him and Daniel took it out and drank from it, rolling the water around in his mouth as if to extract maximum benefit. He felt an itch in his side and, having scratched it, lifted his shirt to examining the surface of his skin. Nothing there but a small red mark, as if he had been bitten by a tick.

Daniel read what remained of the story. There was a rather bizarre and comic episode with a taxi driver, who drives Cooper home. Although it is a cold day, Cooper asks the cabbie to turn off the heating, out of concern for the dead baby. 'Dead baby?' the cabbie says. 'He won't feel the heat then, will he?' When Cooper reaches home, his mother is waiting for him. He places the overnight bag in the hall. She has laid out his slippers. They talk a little about his trip and he relates a peculiar tale about a severed human toe being found in a jar of marmalade. When his mother goes to put on the shepherd's pie, Cooper goes through to the hall. 'Time to pack,' he thinks. He has a tidy mind. And there the story ends. There is no further mention of a wife, a baby, and the true contents of the bag are left unresolved at the end of the story.

Daniel sat there with the book in his lap staring at the half-page of white space at the end of the story, where someone, Steve perhaps, had written, in pencil: *yes, well?* Daniel knew how this mystery annotator felt, or, rather, he knew how he felt and assumed the annotator felt the same. He turned back a few pages and began to read again, in case he had missed something, some clue. As he did so, however, the pilot announced their

descent into Barcelona. Daniel didn't like landing. In preparation, he slid the book into the seat pocket in front and turned to Isla. She was still sleeping and when he tried to rouse her she responded slowly.

'Is,' he said, shaking her. 'We're landing.'

She opened her eyes and looked at him, bewildered, as if she were returning from another realm of consciousness in which she had not been herself. 'Already?' She glanced quickly to either side, and then put her hand to her chest. 'My god, what a dream,' she said. 'It was like.' She paused. 'I don't know what it was like. Have you got any water?'

Daniel passed her the bottle and then sat back, watching, as she drank from it.

'Have I really slept through the whole flight?'

'Yup.'

'Completely ridiculous. I'm not even tired.'

Daniel reached for her hand and then closed his eyes. The plane shook as it passed through some turbulence. He thought about the story. It troubled him, made him uneasy. He couldn't have said precisely what he meant by that, even to himself, but already, as they made their descent into Barcelona, swinging wide over the city lit against the dusk, it preoccupied him to an unusual degree. He squeezed Isla's hand. She squeezed back.

Daniel was still thinking about the story as they went through passport control. The queue moved slowly. What was it that troubled him so? The obvious thing to think would be that it was the suggestion of the dead baby,

that this in some way hinted to an unspoken sense of loss within him regarding the decision he and Luisa had taken – long ago, before they were married – not to have children. They just couldn't be arsed, or so they told themselves. They were having too much fun. Although subsequently they talked it over from time to time, wondering about the difference it might have made to their lives and whether they had changed their minds, Daniel was clear that they had never regretted it. Yes, they had friends whose children they liked, spent time with, but they never wanted the same for themselves, they never felt a lack. It wasn't that. It couldn't be that.

In the baggage hall there was a further wait. Luisa was still drowsy from sleeping on the flight and she leaned against Daniel, one arm around his neck, as he stood there staring at the unmoving carousel, occasionally and distractedly kissing her hair.

The more he thought about it, the more Daniel began to think that the story was actually unpleasant, offensive even. Some coldness at its heart had made him shiver and he was not grateful for the effect. He wished he had never read the story, wished he had never picked the book up from the table in the hall, wished Steve had never loaned it to him.

There was quite a wait before the carousel got going and the people waiting – an assortment of families, couples, groups, people on their own, whispering into mobile phones – gave all the signs of growing impatient. As he waited, Daniel came to think that his problem with the story centred entirely on the character of Cooper. He didn't like him, it was simple: didn't like the way he behaved, the way he turned so felicitously from one situation

to the next, faded, it seemed, by nothing. Of course, Daniel, in thinking, had come to realise that there was no baby in the story in the first place, nor was there a wife. This made it worse, Daniel thought, grasping for a rationale for his distaste. They were all constructs of Cooper's imagination; versions of his life that he chose to wear in public like clothes, sending out a false message. Really it was this that Daniel didn't like, this duplicity. He couldn't think why it bothered him particularly now, except to say that it was suddenly as if he had been introduced to a certain quality in himself that either he had not known about or he had chosen to ignore or worked hard to suppress.

Around him, groups of people made comments about Catalan efficiency, looked at their watches, harrumphed. The delay frustrated Daniel too. It was, for the time being, as if they were in an in-between state, both there, in Barcelona, and not there, held back, in some way restrained, kept in England, or on the plane. As a consequence, with the story occupying a considerable part of his brain, Daniel didn't feel able to concentrate fully on his actual thoughts; nor could he commit himself fully to the act of imagining the anniversary weekend to come.

Finally, a half-hearted cheer went up. The luggage carousel had started to move.

With Isla cross-legged on the floor and Daniel standing with his arms folded, they waited and waited as bag after bag passed before their eyes. Other passengers came forward to collect their own belongings, hoisted them onto their shoulders or onto trolleys and headed out through the automatic doors to the arrivals hall. Beyond it, Daniel could glimpse the

darkening Barcelona night, its palm trees and taxis. Only once in his life had he had the experience of his bags not coming out onto the carousel. It soon became apparent that he was about to have the experience for a second time and it was as if he knew it before it had even happened.

Daniel looked at his watch. They would be late for Josep, for one thing. More than that, they would be late to bed, which would mean they wouldn't want to get up early, which, in the normal run of things would be fine, but as things stood, Daniel had plans for the morning, things he wanted them to do, not booked exactly, but certainly mapped out in his mind. They could be flexible, of course, but still. As the time passed and the number of people left waiting dwindled, Daniel began to develop a competitive streak, cultivating a sense of enmity towards the other people waiting, making judgements on their predicaments, weighing up whether they deserved the arrival of their bags more than he and Isla deserved the arrival of theirs.

'It's no good,' he whispered to Isla. 'Just you wait and see. They've lost it. They've lost the fucking bag.'

'Wankers,' Isla whispered back, each time someone else went to collect a bag.

In the end, it was just the two of them – Daniel and Isla – and a man of roughly Daniel's age, with close cropped blond hair, a blue suit and an open-necked floral shirt. He had noticed the man first back in England, at the departure gate, in the queue, and now here he was again. The carousel squeaked emptily along. Rather than looking at the man, Daniel concentrated his attention on the mouth of the carousel, looking for every

advantage, willing their bag to arrive, while at the same time knowing, deep down, that it would not. In the game of his imagination, the question of whose bag emerged next had become a matter of life and death.

Eventually, a bag did emerge. From distance, it looked like theirs, but just as Daniel was thinking this, the man moved forward, with a glance across at them, as if he were fully conversant with the rules of the game, understood the gravity of the situation.

‘That’s our bag,’ Isla said, into Daniel’s neck.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘Wait a minute,’ Daniel said.

At the carousel, the man, having lifted the bag off, had paused. He examined the bag closely. He opened one of the compartments and peered inside, rummaging around with his hand. Eventually, he looked up at Daniel, one arm still in the bag. ‘Actually, this isn’t mine,’ he said. ‘It must be yours. Sorry.’

‘I wondered,’ Daniel said. He looked at the man.

‘Same type of bag,’ he said, calmly, before handing the bag to Daniel. ‘Same colour and everything.’

‘Well,’ Daniel said. Now he looked at the bag, just to be sure. It was theirs. ‘Thank you,’ Daniel said. ‘It is ours. Perhaps someone has taken yours by mistake.’ He had meant to say it generously, but in the circumstances he feared that it sounded sarcastic, a little bitter even.

When he returned to Isla, with the bag, she squeezed his arm. 'Well done, darling, saving our bag from the nasty man.'

'I'm sure it was a genuine mistake,' Daniel said.

'Nonsense. He would have nicked it if you hadn't said something.'

After they had cleared customs, they stood outside the terminal waiting for the bus. The air was hot, oppressive. Daniel rifled through his hand luggage.

'Shit,' he said.

'What is it?'

'I left that bloody book on the plane.'

'Oh, love,' Isla said. 'Do you want to go back?'

'No. It's not worth it. We're late enough as it is. Maybe I'll call tomorrow. Only it's Steve's.' He was about to say something else, something about the story, about how it was probably a good thing he had left the book on the plane, when it became apparent that Isla's attention had been caught by something over his shoulder.

'Look,' she said. 'It's that man. The one from the carousel.'

Daniel turned and looked. It was him. He strode out of the arrivals hall. It appeared his bag hadn't arrived. He walked straight across the pedestrian crossing, causing taxis to stop, and got into a car that was waiting for him at the side of the road. A woman was in the driver's seat but she didn't turn to look at him as he got in. As soon as his door closed, the car moved off, the man's gaze meeting Daniel's as they drove past.

'Was he English?' Isla said.

‘I think so. He sounded it, didn’t he?’

Suddenly, Isla doubled over and yelped in pain.

‘What is it?’

She gathered herself quite quickly, standing up fully and taking a deep breath, in the way that somebody does when encountering a challenge. ‘I don’t know.’ She put her hand against her stomach. ‘This sudden pain.’

‘Where?’

‘Where I’m touching,’ she said. ‘Where do you think?’

‘Sorry,’ Daniel said. ‘Do you mean here?’ He moved his hand to cover the spot.

‘Yes, there. I’m sure it’s nothing.’

‘It didn’t seem like nothing,’ he said, taking her head in his hands.

She nodded. ‘It’s nothing. I’m fine. Just a cramp, or something. It’s passed.’

Daniel took her in his arms and held her close, kissing her head and smelling her hair.

The bus arrived and they got on. Daniel looked out of the window as they moved through the outskirts of the city, past car dealerships, warehousing, industrial estates. In the story, Cooper never got the comeuppance he deserved. This was the thing, this was why he was annoyed. He invented this line about the baby, creating, in the minds of both the woman on the plane and the taxi driver, the experience of a trauma that in fact had not taken place. Cooper’s just desserts, Daniel realised, would have

been to find himself suffering precisely the traumatic experience he had called into being for others.

‘What’s on your mind?’ It was Isla. She reached for his hand. ‘Are you all right?’

‘I’m fine,’ he said. ‘Just thinking about the bloody story I read on the plane.’

Soon enough, they were at Plaça de Catalunya. It was alive with people. They decided to walk to Josep’s apartment on Calle Valencia. They had a map and it didn’t seem far. It was about 11 o’clock. They strolled arm in arm through the evening crowds and Daniel at last felt the pleasant lassitude of heat and travel. This was what he had wanted: to be walking these streets, at this hour, with Isla at his side. The feeling washed over him at first, but then went deeper, as they caught sight of familiar things, half-forgotten, but no less powerful for that. There were restaurants they had eaten in, shops they had shopped in, buildings they had wondered at.

‘It’s good to be back,’ Isla said.

‘It is.’

As they left Passeig de Gràcia, the crowds thinned and they entered that region of Barcelona in which they had spent so much time wandering on their last visit, their honeymoon, ten years previously. Here, again, they saw the elegant apartment buildings, with their wrought-iron balconies, the intricate designs in the plaster. They felt, or at least Daniel felt, an immediate familiarity in that atmosphere of dusty night, the air warm, the shuttered shops, the little cafes still open onto the street.

‘Do you remember all this?’ Isla said.

He smiled.

‘Why are you smiling?’

‘Because I was remembering all this just as you asked me.’

She squeezed his shoulder and they walked on, under the shadows of trees cast by the streetlamps, past the all-night florist, a chemist.

‘We were so convinced we would live here,’ Isla said. ‘Do you remember? I was going to get a job at the university.’

‘There’s still time,’ he said. ‘We still could.’

She didn’t say anything for a few paces and then squeezed his arm again. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘We still could. Anything’s possible.’

As arranged, Josep was at his apartment to meet them. Daniel could hear his voice, crackly, through the intercom, as he buzzed them into the building. In the tiny elevator, so small that the two of them with their luggage could only just fit inside, Isla held her hand in front of her stomach and winced.

‘Is it that thing again?’

‘Yes. Just a little, you know.’

‘I know. Are you sure you’re all right?’

In the light of the elevator, her face was pale. He lifted her hair out of her eyes and felt her forehead.

‘There’s no fever.’

Josep met them at the door. Although Daniel had only met him on those one or two occasions in London he remembered him well, as if,

although he hadn't been conscious of it, Josep had occupied a considerable part of his subconscious mind. He didn't appear to have changed. In fact, it's possible he was even wearing then the same suit he had been wearing on the previous occasions Daniel had met him, a narrow blue two-piece, elegantly cut, and a crisp white shirt. His dark hair was, as it had been, cropped close, revealing a little bit of thinning at the forehead, and it struck Daniel then, for the first time, that he looked remarkably like that other Josep, the manager of the Barcelona football team.

Josep embraced them both, Isla first and Daniel second, and then returned his attention to Isla, holding her face, cupping it in his hands.

'Isla,' he said. 'You are here.' When he said her name, his accent had the curious effect of making Daniel think that he was talking to someone else, someone who was not his wife but someone else's, someone who he had not in fact met until that moment.

Suddenly, Isla buckled over in pain once again.

'Isla!' Josep said, stretching the second syllable. 'What is it?'

Isla flicked her eyes in Daniel's direction, before looking at Josep. 'It's nothing. Just a cramp.'

'Are you sure, darling?' Daniel said. He turned to Josep. 'There was another one, at the airport.'

'Then we should call a doctor,' he said. 'Of course.' He spoke English very quickly, the words running into each other.

'No,' Isla said. 'It's not that bad. I just need a painkiller.'

‘Come on,’ Josep said, ‘follow me.’ He ushered her through to the bedroom, turning to Daniel to say that he could drop the bags there, where they stood, before taking Isla into what Daniel presumed was a bathroom. Daniel stood there for a moment, before following them through to the bedroom, where he put the bags on the bed. He stood and listened at the door of the bathroom, but beyond a vague murmuring of a male voice and then a female voice, he could make out little above the sound of the extractor fan.

Daniel went through to the main body of the apartment. It was extensive, stretching across the whole top floor of the building, a large living area at the front, a pair of chaises longues to one side, set at an angle to each other, and bookcases lining every wall. There were two balconies, the shutter doors folded back. Daniel went over and stepped onto the balcony to the left. Across from where he was standing, there was another apartment building, more or less the same, the same shuttered windows, the same wrought-iron balconies, the same intricate detailing in the fascia. Again, he thought of their first trip, of how they had then aspired to live in just such an apartment block, both as the one he was looking at and the one on which he was standing. He lit a cigarette. Perhaps because of the heat, the night, the street sounds and the familiar smells, it was easy to remember the pleasure he had felt on their honeymoon, the lightness and the gladness in their hearts – a kind of bursting sensation that had threatened to leave both of them in hysterics for no reason other than their happiness.

Daniel was thinking about this when Josep came to join him on the balcony. 'I'm sure it is nothing serious, but I have called the doctor. Just to be safe. He lives quite close by. He will not be long.' As Daniel motioned to go back into the apartment, he held up his hand. 'No. Stay. Finish your cigarette. She is resting. I have given her an aspirin.'

'What do you think it is?'

Josep smiled. 'I don't know. I'm not a doctor.'

'But what do you think?'

'I think it is nothing serious. Something with her stomach perhaps. She will be better after rest. The doctor will know. Maybe she's pregnant.'

'I think that's unlikely,' Daniel said, smiling. Josep would know what he meant.

'Yes, of course. Would you like a drink?'

Josep returned with two tumblers of whisky. They stood on the balcony and drank.

'Ten years,' Josep said, raising his glass. 'Amazing.'

'Yes. It is.'

'You know, when I first met you, I didn't think you were good enough for her, for my Isla.'

'But now?'

'Now, I think you'll do.' He smiled. 'You care for her very well. She tells me things. And this trip.'

'I know how lucky I am,' Daniel said. 'Don't think I don't.'

Daniel turned away and leaned on the balcony edge, looking out at the apartment block opposite. Beneath them, despite the hour, traffic roared down the avenue. 'I love it here,' he said. 'These apartment buildings.'

'Yes. It's not the same in London, I think. Here we can see right into people's lives.'

Of all the windows in the building across from them, only two were lit. It was, after all, a Friday night and Daniel supposed that most of the occupants were either out, having dinner or drinks, or away from the city for the weekend. One of these windows, in the top right hand corner of the building, gave on to a room that appeared to be lined from floor to ceiling with books, more like a library than an apartment. There was a man, or what Daniel thought to be a man, sitting at a desk, with a brass lamp, writing, or reading, or in some other way engaged in an activity for which sitting at a desk was necessary. In the other, lower down, two floors below, partially obscured by the half-open shutter door, a man lay on a sofa in his underpants watching a football match on a large television fixed to the wall.

'You would like her, I think,' Josep said.

'Who?'

'The woman at the desk.'

'I thought it was a man.'

'No. Woman. She is a professor. German. Quite well known in Spain. She has led a glamorous life. Her husband is an antiquarian book dealer from Colombia. You can visit his shop. It is just around the corner. I know him a little.'

‘And what about him?’ Daniel said, referring to the man in his underpants. ‘He is a man, isn’t he?’

‘Yes. He is.’

‘What can you tell me about him?’

‘Nothing. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him before.’

Standing there together, sipping their drinks, smoking, Daniel allowed himself to become engrossed in watching the young man. Really, he did very little. He watched the game, occasionally scratched himself.

At that moment, a buzzer rang.

‘That will be the doctor,’ Josep said, looking over the balcony, directly below. ‘Yes, it is him.’

Daniel looked over the balcony too. Beneath them, fifty or sixty or seventy feet down, there was a man in a black suit. He held in his hand a brief case. At the kerb, a black car, quite large, old. A Jaguar, Daniel thought, or a Daimler. Josep shouted down and waved, before taking a last drag on his cigarette, flicking it over the balcony and turning back into the apartment.

They waited in the hall and listened as the lift hauled the doctor up to their level. He was a short man, glasses, beard, grey hair, which was slicked back over a well-tanned scalp. Daniel was introduced. The doctor and Josep spoke. Daniel thought that there were certain words that he recognised, like husband and London perhaps. The three of them went through to the bedroom. It was dark and Daniel stood leaning against the doorframe.

‘How are you darling?’ he said, as Isla raised her head.

‘Okay, I think. I’m sure it’s nothing serious. It’s ridiculous all this fuss.’

Josep then spoke to the doctor in Spanish. The doctor lifted Isla’s t-shirt and poked at her stomach, his small hands like paddles. Isla murmured when he reached a certain point. The doctor said something to Josep.

‘Can you describe what it feels like, Isla?’

‘Like a swelling, like there’s a ball in there or something.’

The doctor looked up towards Josep and nodded, after which Josep turned to Daniel and said that they should leave them – the Doctor and Isla – to it. The two of them then made their way back through to the living room.

‘It is okay,’ Josep said. ‘He thinks it is nothing serious. An inflammation, perhaps, something like that.’

‘Good.’

‘Another drink?’

‘Why not,’ he said.

Josep settled himself on one of the chaises longues and invited Daniel to sit on the other. As if understanding Daniel’s thoughts, he said: ‘It won’t be long.’

‘It’s all right,’ he said. ‘I’m just a little anxious.’

‘Of course,’ he said.

There was silence between them for a minute as they both sipped their drinks. Daniel cast his eyes around the apartment. He was about to say

something about it – about how nice it was, or how he liked it – when Josep spoke first.

‘What plans did you have for your trip?’

‘Well. We’ll have to see. It depends on Isla, but there were certain things I wanted us to do, repetitions of what we did on our honeymoon, or things we didn’t have time for. There was a place we visited last time we were here – over by the harbour, in Barcelonetta, hidden away down a back street, but I can’t remember the name. I think I could find it, if it’s still open. I think I have it in mind for us just to stumble over it and it to be the same as last time.’

At that point, Josep looked up. ‘Ah, the doctor.’

Daniel turned around and saw him standing on the threshold to the room. He stood with his feet together and his arms in front of him, the fingers of both hands meeting. Josep went over to him, but the old man beckoned him into the hall. Daniel strained to listen, but not only were they speaking a foreign language, but they were also whispering.

‘Well,’ Josep said. ‘He thinks it is possible it might be an ulcer, but it is not serious. Isla should have it checked out when she gets home, but for now the doctor has given her something to help her sleep. She should be fine in the morning with rest, although rich foods won’t be a good idea if that’s what you had in mind.’

The doctor gathered his things. Daniel rose, went over to him and thanked him in Spanish. The doctor nodded, curtly, first to Daniel and then

to Josep, before leaving. Again they stood for a moment listening to the workings of the lift.

‘Strange little man,’ Daniel said. ‘Like someone I’ve seen in a film.’

‘Yes, you mean Ferreiro in *Pan’s Labyrinth*.’

‘That’s it. Exactly.’

‘It’s funny. He got so many jokes when it came out, but he does look like him, exactly like him.’

Eventually, Josep started moving around the room, gathering various things, car keys, a wallet.

‘I would stay and keep you company,’ he said. But I have to go to my friend, to Katya’s. I am late and she has work early in the morning. You understand what I mean.’

Daniel nodded.

‘There is food in the fridge, if you are hungry, or’ – and here he walked past Daniel and out on to the balcony and pointed back down Valencia towards the centre of town – ‘there is a little place two blocks away, open late. It’s quite good. Steak and such.’

‘Thank you,’ Daniel said. ‘

‘Here are the keys and here, I’ll write down my number in case you should need to contact me.’

They shook hands near the door. ‘She’ll be fine tomorrow. Just you wait and see.’

Daniel thanked him and held the door open, casting light into the hallway, as he waited for the lift.

After Josep had gone, Daniel went through to the bedroom. Isla was already in bed, under a cotton sheet, curled, with her legs brought up to her chest. She looked up at him, the light from the hallway causing her to squint.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

‘What for?’

‘You know.’

‘There’s nothing to be sorry for.’

‘I was sick.’

‘You were sick?’

‘In the bathroom. I was sick.’

‘My poor baby,’ he said and rubbed her back. ‘And how do you feel now?’

‘I really don’t know. A bit zonked. I suppose I just need to give the pills time to work.’

In this position they remained, looking at one another in the half light, not speaking.

‘What will you do?’ she said.

‘I don’t know. I might read. I might go out for a bite to eat.’

There was a pause. ‘You don’t mind?’

‘Mind what?’

‘You’re not angry, I mean?’

‘Angry? God no.’

‘About this. About me being like this.’

‘I mind that you are like this, because I don’t want you to be ill, but I’m not angry. Not at all.’

‘In the morning, I’ll be fine.’

‘You will. Now put your head down and get some sleep. I’ll keep watch.’

She put her head down on the pillow and he kissed her. He went through to the bathroom, splashed some water on his face, then sat on the toilet seat. His own head was throbbing from the heat. In a cabinet under the sink, there were some pills, he took the last two and put the empty packet in the bin.

He went back through to the bedroom and knelt by the bed. He intended to speak to Isla, to tell her that he loved her and that he would be there, in the next room, if she needed him. His arm was on her shoulder, which was bare above the cotton sheet. Her eyes were closed and she didn’t move.

‘Are you awake?’ he said.

She didn’t respond.

Daniel stayed there for some minutes, looking at her face. In the end he didn’t do anything. He didn’t wake her or speak to her or anything. He just watched her sleep, the rise and fall of her body.

After a little while, he got up and left the room, taking the bag he had used as hand luggage with him. He remembered that he had left his book on the plane, then he remembered the story. He would have liked to read it again, if only so that he could forget it more easily. As it was, he couldn’t

quite leave it behind. He thought about how ridiculous it was as he went to the fridge to see what food there was. There was some cured ham, some Manchego and some quince jelly. He put some of the ham and cheese on a plate along with a spoon of the jelly and carried it to the dining room table, where he sat with his back to the open doors of the balcony. Just as he was about to raise the first morsel of ham and cheese to his mouth, he caught sight of an open bottle of wine on the counter, next to the sink, and went back into the kitchen to fetch the wine and a glass, before returning to the table. He poured the wine. The food was good, just what he needed. After he had eaten, he carried the plate back through to the sink and rinsed it.

He was tired, but not sleepy. Not wishing to lie in bed, awake, with the danger that he might disturb Isla, he sat for a little while in the only armchair and drank the rest of the wine. He felt the oddness of unfamiliar territory – the late hour, Isla asleep and him awake. He couldn't bring himself to read any of the books that lined the shelves of the apartment, most of which were in Spanish in any case. He went back out to the balcony.

He wondered about Isla, about how she was. Wondered what the doctor meant by ulcer. How serious it was. He had heard of ulcers bursting, but that wouldn't happen. It couldn't. He was fantasising. Worse than that, he was catastrophising.

From where he was standing, it was possible to look down, at an angle, on the hexagonal junction of Valencia and one of the cross streets. Periodically, a little clump of taxis streamed past, the odd car, a motorcycle swerving at pace down the road. A gaggle of people stood on the street,

smoking, fanned out around the doorway to a bar. Not far from them, Daniel's attention was caught by an old woman and an old man walking up the cross street and round onto Valencia. They were beneath him, but on the opposite side of the road. The woman was bent nearly double and carrying plastic bags with what Daniel presumed to be food inside. Certainly, he thought he could see a baguette sticking up, perhaps the outline of a bottle of wine. The old man was pulling what appeared to be a trolley behind him. It was only by looking closely that Daniel could see that it was an oxygen tank, and from there he was able to follow the tubes that led from the cylinder to the man's nose. Every few paces the couple stopped, the woman putting down her bags, the man, drawing level with her, putting out a shaking arm and grasping her by the hand. After a time, a woman broke away from the group outside the bar and came over to the couple. Although Daniel was high up, he could hear the sound of her voice. She took the bags from the old lady, who touched her arm. Then they walked across the road and disappeared from view.

As he looked at the empty space that they had left, Daniel felt like the world was a very remarkable place indeed. It wasn't specifically because of the good act he had just witnessed, although it certainly helped. Even the couple by themselves would have been enough: the great sense of life that they hauled in their wake seemed to verge on the miraculous. Was it easier, he wondered, in a city like Barcelona – in a country like Spain, for that matter – to romanticise the lives of the old? Their history seemed more transparent, its lines more clear: you were either on this side or you were on

the other side. Did he even think like this at home, or was it only here, or abroad in general, that he came upon thoughts of such a character?

He went through into the bedroom and got undressed in the dark. After brushing his teeth, he got into bed. Isla turned towards him in her sleep and mumbled something that he couldn't make out. He put his arm around her and pulled her to him. Whether it was the sight of the old couple, or Barcelona itself, or what, Daniel renewed the vow that he would do whatever he could to protect her. The reasons didn't matter, but such things were easy to forget, with all the ins and outs of normal life. They had a chance of being different, however. He lay there for a little while in the dark, feeling both optimistic for the future and completely terrified by it. Just as he was on the point of falling asleep, an image, prompted by the story he had read on the plane, drifted into his mind: Cooper, in the near-silence of his room, unpacking the overnight bag, his mother in the kitchen, dealing with the shepherd's pie.

The following morning, Daniel woke to find the bed next to him empty. He could smell the familiar smell of Isla's shower gel or shampoo. The bedroom door was open and through it he could see all the way to the front of the apartment. The shutters were open and the sun streamed in. He called Isla's name, but there was no reply. He got up and pulled on a pair of shorts and walked through. He could see her on the other side of the window, sitting on the balcony in the sun.

'Morning,' he said.

‘Morning, darling. You slept well.’

He kissed her head. Her hair was wet. ‘What time is it?’

‘Almost ten.’

‘Ten! How did that happen?’

‘I didn’t want to wake you, not after all the palaver last night.’

‘How about you. How did you sleep?’

‘Not so well. I’ve been up for hours, but the sun’s lovely,’ she said, stretching her arms above her head.

‘What do you think you can cope with today?’

‘I’m not sure. Not too much, perhaps, but maybe we could go out and get breakfast somewhere. I’m starving. Did you have any ideas?’

‘I did, but we don’t have to do any of them.’

When Daniel had showered, they left the apartment and rode the elevator down to the lobby, before stepping out into the sunlight of a Barcelona Saturday. It was fiercely hot – hotter than he had expected; it was only May. As they walked, Daniel’s anxieties of the night before seemed to slip away. Everything was going to be fine; nothing was going to happen. They wandered for quite a time, with no particular destination in mind, feeling the heat on their backs and the pleasant sensation of being far from home. When they found that they were nearing the Sagrada Familia, they turned back. In the end, having almost done a complete loop, they sat down at a table on the pavement, a place just a couple of blocks away from where they were staying. They garbled their order apologetically in half-Spanish, half-English, but the waitress was sympathetic and brought them coffees

and a selection of pastries. There were a handful of other people sitting at other tables, reading newspapers, consulting travel guides.

‘How’s the pastry?’ Daniel said.

‘Not sure yet. It’s a bit sweet. There’s apricot in it or something.’

‘I hate that,’ he said. His own pastry was very dry, more of a cake.

When they had finished, Daniel lit a cigarette and offered one to Isla.

‘That’s better,’ she said, once it was alight, puffing the smoke out with real satisfaction.

‘What shall we do tonight, do you think? It is our actual anniversary after all. Do you think you’ll be up to something? A meal, maybe? We could go back to that restaurant from last time.’

‘Let me see how this goes down,’ Isla said.

At that moment, her phone went. She answered it. It was Josep. Once Daniel knew that, he allowed their conversation to fade into the background. He watched the traffic, the play of the light through the trees.

When Isla finished the call, she related its contents. Josep had suggested that he take Daniel for lunch, allowing Isla to rest a little more, giving her the opportunity to be fully restored for the rest of their weekend.

‘Is that what you want?’ Daniel asked.

‘I wouldn’t mind a little more rest,’ she said. ‘What about you? Would you mind?’

‘If you’d like me to go, I’ll go,’ he said. ‘I never say no to lunch.’

‘No, you don’t,’ Isla said and smiled. ‘And it will be OK with Josep. He won’t get on your nerves.’

‘Not at all. We had a nice chat last night.’

She phoned Josep back and it was all arranged. Daniel had another coffee, they both had another cigarette. It was pleasant out there on the street and he was able to bat away all negative thoughts.

When they were done, they strolled back to the apartment. For the next couple of hours, they lazed on the balcony. Isla read some essays she had to mark and Daniel attempted a crossword in a newspaper he found in the bottom of his bag. Not long before two, Josep texted. He was outside. Daniel kissed Isla and went down.

Josep was parked by the kerb, in a convertible BMW. He had sunglasses on, shorts, his legs enviably brown and hairy. Daniel jumped in and they roared off into the traffic.

‘How is Isla?’ he asked.

‘All right, I think. It’s good of you to take me for lunch.’

‘It’s nothing. There’s a little place I think you’ll like. It’s not special. In any case, you must save your energy for tonight.’ He turned and looked at Daniel, a smile on his lips and, Daniel imagined, in his eyes behind his sunglasses.

Daniel smiled back. ‘Now, now.’

‘You know what I mean,’ he said. ‘Tonight’s the night, no?’

‘You mean our actual anniversary?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes it is,’ Daniel said.

They drove down a wide avenue, a grand arch ahead of them, set back in a park that Daniel remembered visiting before. There had been buskers underneath and he and Isla had danced, a little drunkenly, and had their photograph taken by a procession of strangers. Josep had his eyes on the road. They were driving towards the sea and soon it came into view, glinting, the sails of boats peaking the horizon. Daniel thought of Isla back at the apartment, the cool tiles beneath her feet. He hoped she was reading, or sleeping, or doing whatever it was that made her comfortable.

‘She’ll be OK, won’t she?’ he said, leaning over to make himself heard above the traffic. ‘I don’t have to worry.’

‘She’ll be fine,’ Josep said. ‘Relax. We’re nearly there.’ He swung the car to the left and they drove down a road lined with restaurants, their tables spilling out onto the wide pavement. The vista seemed familiar. Daniel was sure he had seen it before. Away to the right was a large, low, sandy-coloured building. Daniel had seen it before. It was the maritime museum. ‘We’re not going here,’ Josep said, nodding to the restaurants over to the left. ‘This is for the tourists.’

He turned the car left again and drove slowly down a side street, white and terracotta buildings on either side. It was less grand than the area in which Josep lived and the smaller balconies in this part of the city were draped in flags, pledging allegiance to a bewildering array of what Daniel presumed to be football clubs. Again, it all seemed familiar. Then, as Josep pulled into a space on the left, it became apparent why. It was the very place

that he and Isla had been to on their honeymoon, the one he had been talking about the preceding night as he and Josep stood on the balcony.

‘But this is the place I was talking about last night,’ he said.

‘Really?’ Josep said. ‘I had no idea. This is a place I always visit.’

‘And you had no idea?’

‘None.’

He had no way of telling if Josep was in earnest or not. Perhaps he – Daniel – had told him, or Isla had, long ago, after their honeymoon, and subsequently forgot. Whatever the reason, as he walked along the pavement, Daniel telephoned Isla. He wanted to tell her about the extraordinary coincidence, which had, in some way, caused his spirits to soar. You won’t believe this, he was going to say, but the phone rang and rang, the unfamiliar ring tone of a foreign exchange, then it went to voicemail. Assuming she was sleeping, Daniel left a message, telling her not only about the restaurant, but also that she needn’t feel any pressure to feel better for the evening; he would, he told her, be more than happy just to stay in and curl up with a book.

The restaurant was much as Daniel remembered it, only busier. The previous time, with Isla, had been a weekday and they had had a pick of tables. With Josep, however, they had to share a table with an older couple, a man and a woman, their faces as if lacquered through exposure to the sun. It was clear that Josep was a familiar face, as he nodded to the waiting staff – all men, wearing dirty white t-shirts and blue jeans. A counter separated the tables from the kitchen, which stretched to the back of the building, maybe

five chefs working away on various types of grill or surface. The counter itself was covered in open dishes, already prepared and ready to be picked up by the waiters and carried to the tables.

‘Everything is good,’ Josep said, raising one of two cold beer bottles, which had appeared in front of them. Around him, the room was alive with voices.

‘I know,’ Daniel said. ‘I’ve been here before.’

‘Of course,’ Josep said, smiling and chinking Daniel’s bottle once again.

The beer went down smoothly. It was precisely what Daniel needed, cold, sharp. Josep shouted out an order to a passing waiter, who returned with more beer. Daniel had a thirst on, it was clear. He found himself wanting to convey to Josep the strength of his feeling for Isla, how fortunate he was. Josep seemed to understand, both what he was saying and why he was saying it.

With the heat and the beer things became distinctly heady as they tore at the little plates of food that were brought in rapid succession, the waiter dropping the rattling dishes on the table as he rushed by carrying any number of other dishes for other tables: grilled prawns, aubergines, some kind of fried mashed potato.

Josep knew about the food, how it was prepared, why it was good, what its origin was and Daniel – three, then four, then five beers down – was happy to hear him talk about it. His knowledge was impressive, as was the speed with which he spoke in English, the fluency, as if, Daniel imagined,

with just the two of them in freely flowing conversation, the language which he had learned all those years ago, when, as a young student in London, he had first known Isla, was properly coming back to him.

The dishes of food came and went. There were desserts: burnt custard, raspberries, an almond rice, all in little terracotta ramekins, each containing no more than three or four spoonfuls' worth. Daniel didn't have to lift a finger to do anything, other than eat and drink. In the bathroom, he looked at himself in a cracked mirror. His face was flushed with the heat and his clothes were damp. When he returned, a fresh glass of beer was on the table. He looked at Josep and smiled.

'Last one,' he said.

'There's no rush,' Josep said. 'Let her rest.'

'I know. You're right,' Daniel said. 'But I can't help worrying.'

'It does you great credit,' Josep said, nodding. 'To you and Isla.'

For the first time, it dawned on Daniel, that Josep had been drinking as much as he had, and that he was similarly affected. 'Yes,' he said. 'To me and Isla. I'm sorry she's not here. She would have loved it.'

'I'm sorry, too. Although, if she was here, I suppose I would be somewhere else.'

'Where would that somewhere else be?'

'At Katya's.' He smiled.

'And who is this Katya?'

'Oh, a friend. More than a friend. I don't know. We have known each other for a long time and the situation remains the same.'

‘And you’d like it to change?’

‘Maybe. I don’t know. I think so.’ Josep leaned forward and drained the last of his beer. ‘We go?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ Daniel said. ‘What about the bill?’

‘There is no bill.’

‘I can’t allow it,’ Daniel said. He was drunk. He knew it.

‘Okay,’ Josep said. ‘You leave the tip. However much you think.’ He shrugged his shoulders and gestured to the table in front of them, covered in debris, prawn shells, bits of bread.

Daniel took out his wallet and counted out three ten euro bills and threw them onto the table. Josep gestured with his eyes to one of the passing waiters. ‘You are a very generous man,’ he said, patting him on the back as they stepped out onto the street. ‘Too generous.’

As they sat in the car, waiting for the roof to come down, Daniel said: ‘You’re all right to drive, aren’t you?’

‘By the law, no, but by me, yes.’ Josep smiled, released the handbrake and sped away from the kerb.

He drove quickly, weaving dextrously in and out of the traffic. On instinct, Daniel put his hand against the doorframe.

‘Too fast?’ Josep said.

‘No, no. It’s fine.’ Daniel watched the city speed past, people waiting at crossings, hauling luggage down the street in the light of the sun. He looked at his watch.

‘It’s half past five,’ he said, holding it up.

‘I know,’ Josep said. ‘Isla will have had a good rest.’

Daniel thought of Isla, wondering whether he should text her and warn her of his return. He decided not to. They would, he reasoned, be there in no more than ten minutes. It was impossible to think of his life without her in it. This was the lesson of ten years of marriage: to be without her would be unbearable, like falling off a cliff together but surviving alone, on some rocky ledge, with only seagulls for company. He would be back soon, would be able to hold her in his arms, for the rest of the day and night if necessary, to not worry about Barcelona, or the things they had planned.

Josep pulled the car up to the kerb. Daniel thanked him and ran into the apartment building. He couldn’t wait for the lift and he ran up the stairs, taking them two or three at a time. As he burst through the door, he was panting, hot.

‘Darling,’ he shouted. ‘Isla!’ But there was no reply. He went into the bathroom, which required him to go through the bedroom. The bed was crumpled but there was no sign of Isla. He didn’t yet feel a twinge of panic. She would be out the front, perhaps asleep on the balcony, he thought, as he urinated, while at the same time calling out behind him: ‘Isla! Darling! I’m back.’

When he finally went through to the front of the apartment, there was no sign of her. The doors to both balconies were open and a faint breeze was coming in. He went out onto the balcony, just to be sure, but she wasn’t there either. Perhaps she had gone for walk. It was at this point that Daniel began, not to panic exactly, but to feel alert, as if his body or his gut were

telling him that he needed to have his wits about him, that something was taking place that needed his attention. He went back through to the bedroom. Nothing. He went through to the second bedroom. Nothing. He went back to the first bedroom. He stood by the bed and called her phone. There was no answer. As it rang, he looked at her bags, which had been neatly placed against the back wall of the room. Alongside them, a small pile of clothes. It was the clothes she had been wearing earlier, neatly folded. It went to voicemail. Daniel dialled the number again; the result was the same.

All at once, he felt as if the ground had become unsteady beneath his feet, that it was in fact disappearing, crumbling and falling away and that he was tumbling through the air. But even as he felt that he was tumbling he felt also that he had seen this coming, almost precisely this, that he had, in fact, subconsciously predicted its coming, to himself, as he and Isla had sat at the coffee shop having breakfast that morning, when Isla put the telephone down and told him of Josep's suggestion. He had known then, with a cold, iron certainty, that Isla would not be at the apartment when he returned. Despite this sense of having known that what was happening was going to happen, he felt an equal sense of disbelief: this could not be happening; it was impossible.

He went back through to the other room. He called her phone, again, but again it went straight to voicemail. He called the number Josep had left, no answer. Daniel went into a mania, tearing through Isla's belongings, her clothes, her bags, without a thought for what he would say on her return, desperately searching for some evidence of where she might have gone. He

went into the bathroom. There was water dripping from the shower head, her toothbrush was wet.

Uselessly, he stumbled out of the apartment and onto the streets, still trying to maintain an outward veneer of calm, thinking that she would have gone for a walk or a coffee. He went back to the café they had visited that morning, but she was not there. He walked onwards, not really knowing which way to turn, going into every coffee shop he passed, gazing through the windows of pharmacies and grocers. He looked up and down the pavement, wandering into the road between bursts of traffic to get a better perspective. For a moment, he thought he could see her, or her hair, bobbing between the heads of all the other pedestrians, but it wasn't her, or at least he didn't think it was. It was busy and hot. At each junction he seemed to catch the lights at the wrong moment and stood there, almost jogging on the spot, looking this way and that, waiting for them to change, which seemed to take for ever. He called her again and again, his thumb hovering over the redial button, but each time it went straight to voicemail, and each time the thought that she might be on the phone to someone else receded.

When the street he was on came to a junction with a wide avenue, he sat down on a bench to gather his thoughts. He told himself that everything was fine, that he was overreacting. He phoned Josep, but there was nothing, not even a voicemail. He felt stupid, angry, that he should never have gone for lunch. He would do anything to turn back the clock, to undo what he had done. When he resumed his search, he realised that he didn't know where he was, that he had taken so many turns that now even the direction of the

apartment was beyond him. Everything around him seemed both familiar, that he had seen it before, and utterly new, that he had never seen it in his life. He started to feel a little crazy, his vision strange, as if he were not looking through his eyes alone, but through a telescope turned the wrong way around. The whole thing was futile, a farce.

His phone rang. It was Josep.

‘Isla’s gone missing,’ Daniel said. He could barely breathe.

‘What, wait,’ he said.

‘She’s not at the apartment. I’m out looking for her.’

‘Okay, okay,’ he said. ‘Calm down. I can explain.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean I know where she’s gone – or where she was planning to go.’

Josep explained: while they were in the restaurant, Isla had telephoned. She felt guilty about not feeling well on the trip and wanted to cook him – Daniel – a meal that evening. She had asked Josep for a good place to buy ingredients and he had suggested La Boqueria at the top of the Ramblas. ‘If she walked,’ Josep said, ‘it will take her a while.’

‘Oh Christ,’ Daniel said. ‘I don’t believe it. I was frantic.’

‘Relax,’ Josep said. ‘Go back to the apartment. Have a drink.’

Daniel did go back to the apartment. As soon as he got inside, he felt immense relief, as if the unthinkable had been averted. He went into the bedroom and rearranged Isla’s things. His hands were still shaking and he didn’t do it right, the piles were uneven, not as Isla had left them, but he would be able to explain.

He went back to the front of the apartment. The air was warm and the evening light came into the room. He stepped out onto the balcony and looked up and down the street. It was a regular Saturday evening in Barcelona. People sat at tables outside cafés. Isla would be back soon. They would cook together, eat, make love.

When he caught sight of her, Daniel's heart leapt. He wasn't expecting her to be there at that moment. She was walking up from the cross street, carrying bags from the market. He could see a loaf of bread, a bottle of wine. He looked away and then looked back again, to make sure that his eyes were not deceiving him. It was definitely her. She was wonderful to behold. She moved hurriedly, her hair catching the light, her sunglasses back on her head. At the pedestrian crossing she stopped and looked up. She saw Daniel and began to wave, a smile breaking across her face. She must have thought that he had not seen her, however, that he was frozen in some reverie, because she began to wave more vigorously, like someone from the deck of a ship. As she did so her arm must have knocked her sunglasses off her head. They fell forward and to the right. Isla's face changed into one of alarm as she stooped to grab them before they fell to the ground. In doing so, like an amateur juggler losing control of her batons, she succeeded only in throwing the sunglasses further forward and up into the air. Instinctively, she made a move to grab them, bringing her foot forward, but it caught against the bag she was carrying. It was going to cause her to stumble right out into the road, Daniel could see.

As Daniel watched all this unfold, the frames began to move more slowly. He had no conscious sense of what to do, but his mind – his blessed mind, as if it wanted him neither to witness nor imagine what seemed about to happen – did something he would never, ever be able to account for, something that he would not even remember. He went into a sort of delirium, as if spinning rapidly through a range of highly detailed landscapes, so detailed that he could not possibly take them in, the succession of images overwhelming his cognitive processes until everything, including his consciousness of where he was, had turned completely white.

He was on the patio of a bar, under an awning, having a drink with some friends. Somebody – it was Nando, he thought – was saying something, telling some anecdote. For some reason, Luis could not remember how it started and so he was finding it hard to follow, although everyone else appeared gripped. What was it about, he wondered. As he did so, his telephone rang. He answered it, standing up and turning away from the table. It was Penelope. She was excited, he could tell.

‘Things are under way, Luis,’ she said. My waters have broken.

‘They’ve broken?’ he heard himself say. ‘My god, are you all right?’

Of course, she was all right, she said. She was on her way to the hospital, her mother was taking her. Would he please hurry?

‘Oh, my darling,’ he said. ‘I’ll hurry all right.’

Luis leaned back into the table. He held up his hand. ‘Nando,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry to interrupt your story, but I have to go.’ He paused. He was as

calm as he could manage, knowing the importance of the things that were about to transpire.

His friends looked up at him.

‘It’s happening,’ he said, extinguishing his cigarette. ‘She’s in labour. I’ve got to go to the hospital.’

‘It’s happening! Fuck!’ Nando said.

They all came forward at once, to touch his arm, to pat him on the back. They all knew that it was possible, but it wasn’t expected to happen so soon. This was early, Luis knew.

‘Can we help, Luis? Can we do anything?’ Christina said.

‘No, but I have to leave. This is it.’ He could cry, right there, he wouldn’t mind. He knocked back his beer and took his helmet from the table.

‘Let me drive you to the hospital,’ Roberto said, lighting one of his little cigars. ‘My car’s around the corner.’

‘No it’s fine,’ he said. ‘It will be quicker on the bike.’

‘But you shouldn’t drive,’ Christina said.

‘I’m fine,’ he said. ‘I have to go.’

They all stood and cheered him as he left. The bike was parked on the pavement. He straddled the machine and fired it up, testing the engine as he nosed it impatiently across the cobbles, people passing in front of him, unaware of the urgency, until eventually he dropped down onto the road.

He was away, out into the packed evening streets of Barcelona, that grand city where his heart had met its match. The sun slanted down through

the trees. The machine throbbed beneath him, as if it knew that speed, its speed, was of the essence. He negotiated the cars, packed tight in the narrow side streets and then turned, with relief, onto Valencia, that wide, beloved avenue, with ample scope to overtake. He wove between the slower moving cars and buses, slanting his body, releasing the throttle, feeling the machine respond, the buildings flashing past as his speed increased. It wouldn't be long. All he could think of was the hospital and how to get there, what to do when he got there, whether he would have to wear a robe. He could see it all, could imagine it all. Fabulous. Fabulous. As he rode through the streets, tears began to rim his eyes. It had been a question of choice, for both him and Penelope, a question of choosing the life that they wanted and leaving behind the ones that they didn't. And now it was happening. At the same time, it was the grandest of sacrifices, giving up one type of life, so that another might be born. He allowed himself to become carried away with it all. At the hospital everything would change. Up ahead, there were some lights. Out of habit, he glanced at the pavement, to see what was what. To his right, he became aware of a woman walking quickly up one of the cross streets, looking up, not at the road, waving at something above. Suddenly, he wasn't sure why, she stumbled, was stumbling, out into the street, directly into his path. He was still travelling at speed. He couldn't believe it. He was going to hit her, there wasn't time to react, he thought. Even as he thought it, however, as if some sixth sense, some instinct, were taking over, he found that he was easing back on the throttle, while putting every sinew into the action of shifting the bike's course. He didn't know how he was doing it, but

he was. And then like that, he missed her, by the narrowest of margins. He was past her, fishtailing in an s-shape, until he recovered his balance and sped on towards the hospital, towards his wife.

AN ACCIDENT

JOHNSON WAS COMING for dinner. She spent the whole afternoon cooking. There was a peach tart, which had to be set aside to cool, a jointed chicken to marinade. Harry walked in circles around the kitchen, holding his blanket above his head. She let him eat some sticks of carrot sitting on a stool next to her as she dusted icing sugar onto the tart. When will your father be home? she said. She put the chicken in. Six, he had said, Six. It was half past six. The doorbell rang. God, he's here already. She rang her husband. He's here

already, she said to his voicemail. I told you this would happen. Where are you? What am I to do with him? Just please hurry. I don't care. She answered the door. Johnson, she said, throwing her arms wide. How lovely! Harry stood behind her, hiding in her skirt. Come out Harry and say hello to Mummy and Daddy's friend. You look marvellous, said Johnson, bowing low and handing her a bunch of flowers. You glow. The English weather suits you. The way he said it suggested that he knew, that Robert had told him. That they had talked about it. Well, that was something. Oh Johnson you shouldn't have, she said. Come through, let me find some water for these. Here, sit in the living room. Harry sit with Johnson and tell him about your toys. In the kitchen she rang her husband, resting her hand against the counter for support. He's brought some flowers. I don't know. How long? An hour? How can you be an hour? Which motorway? She was about to say did you tell him when the line went dead. She returned to the room. Johnson, she said, let me fix you a drink. Fix, he said. I always think it strange when you Americans say fix a drink. Is the drink broken? And he held his arms out. Well, she said, suppressing a sigh, I could make you a drink. Would that be better, Johnson? If I made you a drink. Let me make you a drink. Harry threw his arms wide. Juice, he said, moving his little fists up and down. In a minute, Harry. Johnson. Please tell me. What would you like? What are you having? I'm not having anything. No drink? Johnson said. He seemed to find the prospect absurd. No, Johnson, she said. He looked at her. Didn't he tell you? she said. I'm pregnant. I'm sorry, Johnson. Is it a shock? Perhaps I shouldn't have told you. Perhaps. Forget I said it. No, no, Johnson said. But

this is a cause for celebration. He held his hands apart, he beamed, his waistcoated belly to the fore. Do you have champagne? We do, I'm sure. Then I'll have some of that and drink a toast to you. Surely you can have a small glass. She left Johnson where he was and went out to the conservatory where the second fridge was, where they kept the champagne. There was a bottle. She looked out of the window. It was getting dark, the shadows of the trees moving. Her phone rang. She went back to the kitchen and answered it. It was her husband. What do you mean you've broken down? How? Are you with someone? I can hear someone. Who is it? Where are you? Then you have to get out of the car and stand behind the barrier. Please. Oh, Robert, this is too much. No. I'm not crying. I know it's not your fault, but I'm here with Johnson and it's getting dark and. What? How? I feel sick. How can you even say that? Answer me. Robert? Robert? Robert? The line went dead again and she slammed her mobile down against the pine surface with such force that it shattered, the battery scudding out onto the floor. Now, now, what on earth's the matter? It was Johnson. He was behind her, standing in the open door. Oh, Johnson, she said. You shouldn't have. I came through to help with the champagne. What's happened? He has broken down. I'm sure it's nothing, the recovery services are on their way, but he will be late. Ah, Johnson said. It is my fault for coming early. I am making him seem later. Really, when he gets here, he will not be very late at all. It's kind of you to say so, Johnson, but I'm sorry nonetheless. This isn't what you expected. Nonsense. I expected nothing but the good company of good friends and that is what I am getting. Johnson, she said, that is a nice thing to say. Shall I

open the champagne? Yes, open the champagne. I presume he cannot be far. No, not far I imagine, Johnson. You go through. Harry will be wondering. I'll just turn the chicken down. Go back through, Johnson. Take the champagne with you. After he left the room she bent down to pick up the battery from her phone, but it wouldn't fit back into place, a piece of plastic wouldn't hold. She put the pieces on the counter and drew a glass of water from the tap. She drank it in a single gulp. It will be fine, she said, out loud. It will be fine. She returned to the room. Here she is, Johnson said, talking to Harry, who was sitting alongside him on the sofa, the mother resplendent. What does Harry think of the new arrival? I don't know. I'm not sure he thinks anything about it yet. All that to come, Johnson said. Such excitement. Now, the champagne. There were two flutes on the table beside him. She watched him as he stood up and then bent over the bottle, twisting it and easing the cork out, then allowing it to pop. Pop, he said, and poured one glass. Pop. He poured another. Sorry, Johnson, she said. I'm just going to try the landline. He's probably forgotten the number. She went out into the hall, picked up the receiver and dialled the number, her finger hovering over the unfamiliar keys. It rang through to voicemail. She dialled again. The same. When she went back through, Johnson seemed not to have moved. He was still bent in the motion of pouring the champagne. Nothing? he said, not standing up, but turning his neck to face her. She heard a creaking sound, as if Johnson's joints hadn't been oiled. Nothing, she said. Straight to voicemail. How concerning, he said. But I'm sure there's nothing to worry about.

PATRONAGE

IT WAS TALL Edward who called me out on it. He came round one evening, unannounced, to see how I was. I didn't want to let him in. My flat was a state, I was a state. I hadn't been sleeping, everything was up and down. I crouched in the hallway, out of sight of the letterbox, waiting for him to go away, but he knew that I was there. Straightaway, it was obvious that he could tell I'd been smoking. He came right up to my face and sniffed the air. You need to cut this shit out, he said. You need to get a grip, make something of your life. You're letting a lot of people down.

He was right, I knew it. But even without the drugs, it would have been an uncertain, fragile period. My parents were both dead – mother first,

father next, in quick suggestion. I was waiting for their wills to clear probate – there wasn't much there, but there was a tangle, my mum's sister in Australia, making some claim about something. Really, although it's a terrible thing to say, I just wanted the money. As I waited, a number of potential courses of action hovered before me, but I couldn't decide which one to pursue. They stretched and shimmered like roads, or mirages of roads, crossing and re-crossing, before eventually breaking off into smaller and smaller pathways, multiplying infinitely and traversing strange landscapes that I couldn't quite make out.

The next afternoon, I had a doctor's appointment. I hadn't been out for days, almost a week, and it was odd to be in town, like I was there and not there. Outside the library, I bumped into Anna. Anna was beautiful. I'll say that now. It was as if God, or whoever stands for God, had taken the best bits of every girl you've ever known and said, OK, I'll put these over here, just for safe keeping. That might give the impression that she was cobbled together, or broken, but she wasn't: she was completely whole, completely herself. Of course, she had no sense of this, which made it both worse and better.

Over coffee she asked me if I'd like to read a poem she had written. This wasn't completely out of the blue. My mother had been a poet and many people expected me to follow in her footsteps, but that was never my plan. I didn't have the talent. Nor did I have the will to throw myself to the lions as my mother had. I knew that Anna wrote, knew that she was good – I had seen her read, seen the pieces she had published in journals, little magazines. A lot of people wrote at that time and I had sympathy for them

all. I had seen what it could do. When I said yes, I'd like to read the poem, she handed me a sheet of A4 paper. Don't. Lose. It. She said. She said it with a crooked smile, carefully enunciating each word. This was a reference to something else of hers that she had given me – a book that I had temporarily misplaced, rather than lost. When I finally gave it back to her, she asked me what I thought and I had to admit that I hadn't read it. I just hadn't had the inclination. I made up some excuse, but it came out wrong and just seemed implausible, when I wanted her to take it seriously. It was like a joke between us, although not quite a joke – at least, I thought it was a joke, but she might have felt differently.

I looked at the time. I was late for my doctor's appointment. I took the piece of paper with the poem on it, folded it and put it in the inside pocket of my jacket. I kissed Anna on the cheek. Don't worry, I said, mimicking her enunciation. I. Won't. Lose. It. And I meant it, too. I really did.

In the waiting room I thought about the poem. I took it out of my pocket and gave it a quick scan. I could tell that it was good, that she could write, that she was really a poet. It was just there in certain words that she chose to use. However, I knew that if I wanted to enter it fully – as my mother used to say, to dive beneath its surface and swim through its waters – I would need to give it my full attention. This was no second rate deal. I folded it up and put it back in the inside pocket of my jacket.

The doctor's appointment was fine. She weighed me, took some blood, asked me how things were in life. She knew me quite well by that stage. I told her that mostly things were fine, but that I'd recently started having

palpitations, more than usual. This wasn't quite true, but I felt that I had to give her something, or otherwise these meetings would stop. Perhaps she knew the game that I was playing. She didn't think the palpitations were a problem but thought, given my history, that it would be prudent to run some tests. I left with a docket for an appointment at the hospital. She said she'd see me again, afterwards, but that I should look after myself in the meantime, give myself treats, allow myself to enjoy the world.

I went to a café with the intention of reading the poem, but Jimmy was there. The city I lived in at that time was fairly small and there was always a good chance of bumping into someone. It was okay, though. And Jimmy was okay, too. I didn't mind seeing him. His wife had been ill, but now she was in recovery. He sat down and told me how rough it had been – real dark nights of the soul. What about you? Jimmy said. How are you doing? Oh, I don't know, I said. It's hard to say. Nothing to compare.

Tall Edward was in the café, too, at another table. He kept looking at us over the edge of his laptop, as if he was my brother or uncle or something. Jimmy kept talking. I mean he wouldn't shut up – the nature of mortality, the things you feel when you're standing on the edge of a cliff, a drive they had taken on the day she got the all clear. I shouldn't give the impression that I minded listening, because I didn't, not at all. I let the words wash over me and tried hard to picture Jimmy and his wife in the positions and circumstances he described. I couldn't imagine it really, because I didn't know them that well, didn't know their history – the little things that came to stand out in memory.

When I looked at my watch I realised it was quarter to six. I had forgotten about badminton. I played badminton every second Wednesday at six, with a woman called Jen. We had worked together at one time. It used to be the case that there were four of us who played, but now it was just Jen and me. I'm not sure why we kept it going, some loyalty to something that had passed perhaps. I'm sorry Jimmy, I said, but I've got to go. Let's talk again soon. I was serious. I was going to make a conscious effort to see more people, to be out in the world more.

I ran to the car and drove to the sports centre. I was going to be late. I was always late. I got changed as quickly as I could, screwing up my clothes and throwing them into one of the lockers. My kit was musty, I hadn't washed it properly, or at all.

By the time I arrived, Jen was already on the court, going through her stretches. I apologised. I could tell that she was narked and I didn't blame her. We got straight on with the game. Perhaps because we weren't doing so much talking, it was a good one that night, very close. There were lots of long rallies, both of us determined not to be beaten. At the same time, it seemed as if neither of us wanted to win, choosing not to put away the smash when the opportunity presented itself. At least, I know I did this, but perhaps it was because I felt guilty about being late. At the end of our allotted time it was three games all and we were both sweating freely. We showered and dressed and had a quick drink in the bar. We were about to have another one when I remembered I had no food at home, not a morsel.

I drove to the supermarket, pulling into the car park five minutes before closing. It had started to rain quite heavily and I dashed through the main doors with my jacket pulled half over my head. There was not much left on the shelves. I was starving, however, and threw things indiscriminately into the basket: chick peas, ham, croquettes, biscuits, milk, bread, spinach, some jam doughnuts. I went through the automatic checkout, but there was a problem with my card in the machine and a supervisor had to be called. It took a while for her to arrive. It seemed that every checkout in the line was experiencing some problem or another. Every time it seemed like she was going to reach me, she was called or dragged off in another direction. Eventually, she got to me. She apologised and then all she wanted was to see my signature and some other form of ID, which I had in the shape of my driver's licence.

I dashed back across the car park, my jacket over my head once again. When I got to the car, I found that I didn't have my keys. I went back into the supermarket, almost bumping into the supervisor, who was coming out to find me, holding my car keys in her hand. In the car, driving home, windscreen wipers battling the rain, I thought about what Jimmy and his wife had gone through, wondering if I could ever go through something similar, or whether I'd just give up.

At home I cooked the chick peas, stirred in the spinach and piled it all up on some ham, the croquettes on the side. I ate from a plate on my lap. Afterwards, I poured myself a glass of vodka and lay on the sofa. Through the wall I could hear the children next door being readied for bed.

Something had gone wrong and somebody was in trouble. I turned on the television. The Olympics was on, or the round-up was. It had been a successful day, the presenter said. I was just getting engrossed in the women's gymnastics final, when I noticed the light on the washing machine. It was flashing. I had put a load in that morning and forgotten about it. Although I was enjoying the gymnastics, I knew that if I didn't empty the machine immediately I would forget about the washing and it would become musty, like my sports kit had been, and need to be washed again. I didn't want to go through all that.

I went back into the kitchen and emptied the machine and hung the clothes on the drier. Because I was in a hurry, I rushed the job, becoming frustrated when I couldn't turn a shirt the right way. As I was doing this, I realised that the dishes still had to be done. When I had finished with the wet clothes, I turned my attention to the sink.

There was no hot water. I had been meaning to call a plumber, but, what with one thing and another, it had slipped my mind. I could have washed the dishes in cold water, but it didn't seem right. In any case, I had to boil the kettle three times in order to get enough water to half fill the bowl. I evened it up with cold from the tap, until it was cool enough to put my hands in it. Afterwards, I went back to the sofa to watch the rest of the Olympics round-up. On my way, I kicked over the glass of vodka, sending liquid over the carpet.

I couldn't face clearing up the mess. I just left it there, the scent of vodka and damp carpet drifting into the air. Fuck it, I thought and spun up a

joint, a really big one. I had decided to ration myself, but I designated this a legitimate moment. Over time, I believed, the legitimate moments would become fewer and fewer and I would ration myself all the way to cessation. I immediately felt better, more relaxed, more in control.

I was just becoming engrossed in the women's gymnastics final again, when it ended for the day, the competition delicately poised. The coverage switched to swimming. They were still at the heats stage and I couldn't get into it. I switched off the television and prepared for bed.

I had my pyjama bottoms on and was brushing my teeth when I remembered the poem. Of course. It would give me something to read before I fell asleep. I went back down to the hall to my jacket and reached into the inside pocket. My pen was there, but the poem wasn't. I was sure I had put the poem in the inside pocket. I even had a vague memory of patting the pocket at various intervals during the day to check that the poem was still there and had found that it was. Although I couldn't remember doing it, I must have put it in my bag. I went through to the study, but the bag wasn't there. In the end, I found it – the bag – in the lounge, next to the door. I searched through all the compartments but I couldn't find the poem.

I began to feel bad. Perhaps I had taken it out already. Perhaps I had even read it already, but if I had, I had no recollection of the content, beyond one or two words or images that had inveigled their way into my consciousness: an oyster, a table. I could remember the physical shape of the poem, laid out in three equal stanzas, and the extent to which it filled the page, but I probably could have discerned that when Anna first handed it to

me. I racked my brains trying to think of that moment, but it seemed shrouded in a mist. I could remember that she had given me the poem, but I couldn't remember any details of how it had happened: how she had handed it to me, whether it was already folded or whether I had folded it myself. It was immediately clear to me that I had made an immense betrayal, one that, if not atoned for, would have lifelong repercussions. Anna had given me her poetry and, in doing so, had given me a weird kind of trust. I had to find the poem, no matter what the cost.

Still in my pyjama bottoms, I went out into the garden. It was no longer raining and the last of the light was just leaving the sky to the west. I looked up and down the path, but the poem wasn't there. It wasn't in the car either. I pondered over it for a moment and then drove to the supermarket to see if it had fallen to the ground as I dashed across the car park. As I drove, I had to close one eye, to stop myself being blinded by the lights of the oncoming traffic. I knew that this was precisely the sort of thing that Tall Edward had been talking about, but I didn't care.

When I got to the supermarket, there were so many bits of paper – receipts, general trash etc – stuck to the wet tarmac that it took me what felt like hours to check them all. Afterwards, I drove to the café and the doctor's. Of course, they were closed and I could see no sign of a piece of A4 paper. Desperate now, I ran over to the library, taking a torch from the back of the car. I shone the light into the dark empty windows, but the light just shone back at me. I looked at walls in case somebody had found the poem and put it up there for me to find, but it was no good.

I drove home and slumped exhausted into bed. As I lay there in the dark, all manner of thoughts and fears turning over and over in my mind, I worried that by tomorrow I would have forgotten about the existence of the poem altogether. I reached gropingly for my phone and set a reminder in my calendar: 'Find Anna's Poem,' it said.

The next morning over breakfast, an alarm went off on my phone. 'Fund Anna's Poem,' it said. Although I quickly understood the mistake I must have made, the wording of the reminder acted like a light coming on. For the rest of the morning, I thought about it: whether it was possible, how it might be achieved, what my motivation was. I called my parents' solicitor and asked what the situation was vis-à-vis the outcome of probate, how soon we would know. He said that as far as he was concerned everything looked extremely positive, but I shouldn't get too excited: it wasn't that much and if it was to do me any long term good it would need careful management.

It was the only prod I needed. The more I thought about it, the more excited I became. This was something I could really do, that I could get my teeth into, something that could give my life a shape, a purpose. And who knew where it might lead. Once I had decided, it was easy to take the next step. I went online and arranged for an immediate transfer of fifty pounds into Anna's account – I still had the details from when she had bought some tickets for a concert and I had paid her back. Then I set up a standing order, to deposit the same amount into her account at the end of every month. I didn't tell her what I had done, I wanted her to notice. In the meantime, I

made my preparations, trawling the internet in search of announcements of poetry competitions, funding, residencies. I called my mother's old editor, telling her that I was interested in taking a more active role.

When I bumped into Anna again outside the library a few days later she didn't seem to know about the money. She asked me about the poem. This was the awkward part, but it had to be gone through, if everything else was to fall into place. I told her that I liked it, that I liked her use of language, which I knew to be unusual, the way she conjured mood and the way the poem, at the end, transformed our expectations, subverting the form itself, undermining it, and leaving us uncertain of what precisely we had experienced. She made a noise that suggested she didn't believe me or didn't think I was taking her seriously, but I said that she couldn't be more wrong. Just you wait, I said. She asked me what I meant. You'll see, I said.

Later that evening – I was at home reading everything of hers the internet could lay its hands on – Anna called. She said that she had been online, that she had noticed a deposit in her account, for fifty pounds. Did I know anything about it? I tried to think of a clever way to say it, to describe what I had done, but I couldn't. I just said what I thought, what I had been thinking about, in relation both to her poetry and to my future. I didn't dress it up in the slightest and I said that I hoped she wouldn't be offended, that she wouldn't think I was taking advantage of her.

She didn't speak for a little while. Then she said that I must be joking. I told her that I wasn't, that this fifty pounds was just the start. I said – and meant – that I believed that if poetry is to flourish in the current climate

then poets need our support and that the responsibility falls on each of us, every one, not just the experts. It's time for me to get off the fence, I said. She couldn't believe it. Are you for real? I told her that I was, that I was absolutely for real, but that it wasn't just about her, it was about me too. I was very careful to emphasise that point, to demonstrate that really I wasn't just being generous, that I had my own interests at heart too. It would be hard work, I told her, but I would be there with her, every step of the way. When she finally believed that I was in earnest, she asked me what the first step was. Send me everything you have, I said. Even the crap.

This all happened a long time ago and now, when I stand alongside her at the arts events – receptions, openings, launches, private views – that have become our milieu, I smile and I look back and laugh at those early days when I was trying to recover from the death of my parents and she was a struggling poet who just needed someone, anyone, to believe in her.

SCAVENGERS

A YEAR PASSES, like that – two, three. They go over like storm clouds, heavy, threatening to burst. To Mark, it is like being in a daze, as if the logic of it all, how it actually fits together, remains just beyond his grasp. It all takes its toll, even as the house – a narrow Victorian place with a long thin garden stretching down to the railway line – begins to take shape. It is quite a transformation. In the summer vacation, he watches the work get done, padding out every now and then from the front room in his flip flops, seeing it as his duty to oversee, if not perform. There is a rigmarole with the council over clearance, which Jane sees to; the electricity people have to send a man to re-connect the house to the grid. There are other unexpected costs –

damp proofing, new slates for the roof, money to the land registry, the water board. More and more and more. When the money runs out, Jane's father chips in.

'It is nothing,' Henry says, surveying the wreck of the garden, cement mixer whirling in the background. 'The money is there. It might as well be used. We need to get you set up.'

Mark tries to say no, but his objections are blustered aside. Henry is difficult to refuse, eager to help. He even comes over and does the wiring, staying for a fortnight.

'I've only got the one daughter,' he says, clapping Mark on the back. 'There's no such thing as too much trouble.'

When it gets cold, the work stops. They have to insulate the windows with bubble wrap. It has an effect on the light, the way it enters the building, and does very little to trap the heat. The winter is deep and long.

It is the following spring, Good Friday, in the afternoon. Mark is reading on the sofa, a little Tolstoy, to keep up with his Russian project. When the doorbell goes, he thinks about not answering it. He is absorbed in the story, its gruesome etiquette of death. If it rings again, he tells himself, he'll get up.

It rings again.

It is Henry. He has brought with him Daisy, his second wife. Mark hasn't seen her since he and Jane went to Aberystwyth, two summers ago. She is younger than Henry, but not outlandishly so. Nonetheless, it caused a tremor that lingers, barely felt, in the voices of Jane, her brothers.

‘Surprise!’ They say in unison, Henry and his wife.

‘What are you doing here?’ Mark says, his hands shaking. He is not properly dressed. Behind them, a flat-bed van is parked in the street, the hump of the back covered in green tarpaulin lashed down with bungees. ‘Does Jane know? She didn’t mention anything.’

‘Is she here?’ Henry asks. ‘No? Doesn’t matter. Thought it was about time we got that garden sorted.’ He drops an overnight bag at the bottom of the stairs on his way to the kitchen. ‘And don’t worry about food,’ he says. ‘We picked up a takeaway.’

‘And beer,’ Daisy says, raising a box in her arms. She smiles at Mark as she passes. ‘Nice pyjamas.’

‘Oh yes. And beer,’ Henry says, not turning round. ‘We wouldn’t forget the beer.’

When they are settled in the kitchen, he excuses himself, goes up to the bedroom and telephones Jane. He explains the situation.

‘What?’ she says.

‘Your father is here,’ he repeats, slowly. ‘And Daisy.’

‘I don’t believe it.’

‘Neither do I. Can you get back?’

‘Why are they here?’

‘Can you get back?’

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘Yes I can.’

‘Did you know about this?’

‘No. Of course not. I would have said something. Told them not to come.’

He hangs up and returns to the kitchen.

‘Jane’ll be a while,’ he says. ‘Might as well put this in the oven.’

There are a lots of paper bags, foil parcels. Daisy helps him transfer them to the oven. As she does so, she lists the dishes, saying whom they are for.

When that is taken care of, they sit together at the kitchen table and wait. Jane’s father and Daisy talk about their home life – lunches, trips out, progress on their own house. Mark wonders about Daisy, what she gains from such a life. When Jane’s car pulls into the drive, he excuses himself once again and goes out to meet her. She is flustered.

‘Have they said anything?’

‘Not much. I told them you were at work. A meeting.’

‘Yes,’ she says, her voice rising as they enter the kitchen, ‘a meeting. Sorry everyone.’ She smiles, kissing her father, embracing Daisy.

They eat the curry in the kitchen, setting the foil containers in the middle of the table, everyone helping themselves. The beer, they drink from the bottle, her father going round and opening them with his lighter, seeming to delight in watching the tops arc across the room. They talk, generally, for some time. It is convivial. Henry likes a yarn and it is hard, even for Mark, not to get swept along.

‘About this garden,’ Henry says at last, after spooning some daal into his mouth. ‘I think it’s probably best to stick with the terraces, despite what I said before. They just need shoring up.’

‘That’s what we thought,’ Jane says. ‘We’ve been talking about it, haven’t we?’ She lifts her head towards Mark, and places her hand over his on the tablecloth.

‘Good,’ Henry continues, ‘that way you can have veg at the top, near the kitchen, and then a lawn at the bottom for sitting out. Shouldn’t take too much work. It’s all more or less there, the shape of it, anyway.’

‘And for the shoring up?’ Mark ventures.

‘Come with me,’ Henry says, rising from his seat.

‘Let him finish his food, Dad,’ Jane says.

‘My advice is leave them to it,’ Daisy says, passing Jane another beer.

‘It’s all right,’ Mark says. ‘I think I can cope.’ He squeezes Jane’s hand as he passes.

He follows her father to the road. They unlash the bungees and draw back the tarpaulin. Underneath, there are hundreds of logs, more than Mark can imagine them needing. All the cords have been split in two, right through the heart.

‘What is it?’

‘Wood.’

‘I know that. What type?’

‘Cedar. Have a feel of the heft of it.’

Mark takes hold of a piece. It feels too light for its bulk, but he pats it approvingly nonetheless.

‘A man from one of the villages has a timber yard,’ Henry says. ‘He cut them for me in exchange for a consultation. His lungs are bad. They’re not exact, but they’ll do.’

As he helps him lash down the tarpaulin, Mark says: ‘You know, you don’t have to do all this. All this stuff.’

‘Nonsense. I like it. Keeps me fit.’ The two men stand for a moment looking at each other across the back of the trailer. ‘Speaking of which, how are things?’

‘Things are fine, better than fine.’

‘And in here?’ Jane’s father rubs his knuckles on the side of his head.

‘Fine,’ Mark says.

‘No funny business?’

‘None.’

‘That’s the spirit.’

After they have eaten, Mark does the dishes. By the time he is done, Jane is already asleep. He, however, cannot sleep. He is overly conscious of her presence, the shape of her, curled like a sleeping animal under the duvet. In the end, he goes back downstairs and smokes on the patio. The garden is a mess, strewn with rubble and crap. He cannot visualise the transformation, the work that will need doing.

After a time, he becomes aware that he is being watched, a movement on the glass of the patio door, the blind flickering. He doesn’t do anything,

gives no sign of having noticed. He smokes another cigarette before re-entering the kitchen. When he does, whoever was in the kitchen has gone.

He wakes early, alone. Jane is downstairs already. He can hear the radio through the floorboards. He digs out an old pair of jeans, a T-shirt. In the kitchen, he wordlessly puts on the kettle. When her father and Daisy come down, they sit at the kitchen table and eat, the patio doors open. After a time, her father gets up and begins fiddling with the doors, pulling them along on their runners, gazing down the line, then sending them back into their stays, listening for the click.

‘Aren’t these brilliant, eh? So smooth.’

‘Yes, Dad,’ Jane says, looking over her shoulder, smiling. ‘We know.’

The four of them work in the garden all morning. At one, they stop briefly for sandwiches and a beer, and then work on into the afternoon. They clear the surfaces with rakes and hoes, before re-marking the terraces with string and then malleting the treated logs into place. Mark and Henry take off their shirts and hang them from nails on the fence. It is a lovely spring day, very little wind, and the work, although not back-breaking, is tiresome and repetitive.

‘What now?’ Mark says, after the last log slots into place.

‘Up to you. There’s still the beds to be dug over.’

‘I was more thinking a sit down,’ Mark says.

‘All right,’ Henry says. ‘If you can’t take the heat.’

They make their way back up to the house. As they do so, Henry flicked his shirt at the back of Mark's legs, trying to trip him, shouting out to the women up ahead: 'The boy's given up! Call the doctor.'

'Dad!' Jane says, coming down to meet them, putting an arm around Mark. 'That isn't funny!'

While the others stay out in the sun, listening to the football on the radio, Mark goes in for a lie down, drawing the blinds in the front room. As he lies there, he returns half-heartedly to his book, wishing he had more time to spend with it, more time to become absorbed into its dilemmas, the perversity of its morals. Not long after five, he goes through and suggests fish for supper.

'I'll nip down and get something from the sheds.'

'I'll come with you,' Daisy says.

They drive down in Mark's car. They have to sit for a while, backed up in a queue waiting for a space in the car park. It is busy, holiday crowds swarming here and there. In the wide expanse of the car park, away from shelter, it is blustery. They can see kites dancing above the dunes in the distance, seagulls wheeling. Daisy wants to get an ice cream and they sit opposite each other on a picnic table and slurp at their cones.

'You're very lucky,' she says, gesturing in a circle, 'having all this so close?'

'I know it,' Mark says, licking some ice cream that has run down the side of his cone.

'No regrets, then?'

‘None.’

‘And Jane? How’s she?’

‘She’s fine, really. We both are.’

A wary seagull lands at the end of the table, wings flapping. The conversation stops as they watch the bird pick at a crisp packet wedged between the slats.

‘Look at the size of that,’ Daisy says. ‘Christ.’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you ever wonder, given their size, why we don’t eat seagulls?’

‘I can’t say that I do, but I’d guess it’s because they’re pretty disgusting. They’re scavengers, after all.’

‘You want to try one?’ she says with a smile.

‘Not really.’

After they finish the ice cream, they walk along the water’s edge and look at what the sheds have to offer. They are all open, taking advantage of the weather, the longer days. Mark surveys the catch, set out in angled crates and packed in ice, but doesn’t know what to choose. He finds the sight of the dead fish repellent, as if they are all covered over by the same slimy membrane, milky and loose. He stands there for some time, weighing it up.

‘Come on, Mark,’ Daisy says, swaying her hip to nudge him. ‘What do you fancy?’

‘You choose,’ he says. ‘You’re the guests. This one’s our treat.’

‘Don’t be daft. We’ll pay our way.’

‘All right, but you choose what we’re having. I can’t think.’

‘It’s not very exciting, but how about plaice? I know a great recipe. Easy as pie.’

‘Plaice it is,’ he says, with a sudden flourish.

Mark watches as the fishmonger wraps the four thick fillets of white flesh in paper and then puts them inside a pink plastic bag. The man’s fingers are gloopy, and dotted over with fragments of fish skin, possibly bone.

As they walk back to the car, Daisy links her arm through his and rests her head against his shoulder.

Mark smiles.

‘That’s better,’ she says. ‘You know Henry thinks the world of you?’

‘I’m not sure that he does,’ Mark says.

‘He just worries about his daughter. He worries about you, too. That’s normal, isn’t it?’

The plaice is delicious. Mark helps to prepare, chopping onions and tomatoes, grinding fennel seeds. They make a basket of chips to go along with it, broccoli, lemon wedges.

They have the radio on while they eat, so that Henry can listen to the qualifying for the Grand Prix. In the gaps, they talk – Jane and Daisy, Henry and Mark – about the house, about what to do next.

After dinner, although it is cool, they take chairs and sit outside at the top of the garden. Jane’s father talks about the future, making extravagant gestures, asking questions that seem not to require particular answers. It is

difficult to keep up with him when he is like this. Occasionally, Jane makes some reference to the past, to a shared history that Mark knows only in fragments; the rest he fills in as he chooses. As it grows dark, the talk continues. Every now and then they pause to watch a train go by, rattling along, sparks flashing as it rumbles over the points.

Once again, in the night, Mark cannot sleep. Jane stirs as he leaves the room. He goes downstairs to the patio and smokes. Between cigarettes, he sits with his arms on his knees, leaning forward. Once again there is that movement of light over the glass. He is sure there is someone there, but, again, when he returns inside, the kitchen is empty.

In the morning they finish off the garden. They have done a lot, it transpires, even if plenty still needs doing. Over lunch, Jane's father enumerates the tasks to come. There is the grass, for one thing, and a shed that either needs hauling down or renovating. They leave in the early afternoon, a long drive ahead. Jane leaves soon after. Mark watches from the window as she reverses her car onto the road and drives away. He goes back to the sofa, back to his book. He cannot remember how far he has got and he has to turn back in order to refresh his memory. Some parts are familiar, yet others have left no impression whatsoever. Even so, it is a good book, he thinks, the things he cannot remember adding up to as much as the things he can. He lets a few minutes go by, then gets up and goes to the kitchen. There are some bits of curry in the fridge and he takes them out and eats them from the foil containers, standing at the window and looking out at the garden.

BEETROOT

IT WAS A Tuesday, crisp, clear and autumnal; one of the first days of the year when your breath hangs in the air as you walk. He drove to work with a sick feeling in his stomach, like a school-bound child who hasn't done his homework. Because he was late, the car park was almost full and he was forced to nose around in search of a space. It crossed his mind that if he couldn't find one he would be wholly within his rights to drive home. But there was one space left, right at the back. As he parked the car the announcer on Radio Four gave a run down of their forthcoming programmes. At 10 o'clock, Jenni Murray would return with *Woman's Hour*.

Woman's Hour! He dreamed of a world in which he didn't have to work and he could pad around the house, guiltlessly listening to *Woman's Hour*.

The sun was warmer now, and he could feel it creeping up his back as he walked across the car park towards the office. Some birds sat singing on an overhead power line, gathering for an early migration. He pushed against the heavy revolving door at the entrance to the office. The swish of it transported him from one world into another, like a vortex.

He would remember that morning very clearly, probably because of what happened later. At about 10.30, he went up to the roof for a cigarette. As he stood there, blowing smoke over the edge of the building, he wondered what Jenni Murray might be talking about on *Woman's Hour*. He wondered if she might be talking about thirty-something men who have no direction in life, who drift, like smoke on the wind. He thought again about being at home, about being under the duvet, a warm cup of tea to the side and the radio on.

When he returned to his desk he found that the post boy had dropped a package on his desk. It was a piece of work that he had been waiting for. He tore open the jiffy bag and read quickly, his eyes moving smoothly over the page. In his line of work, there are lots of things that seem promising when they are just ideas, but really to be able to judge that promise he needed to see something on paper. When he got to the end he called the person who had sent it in to say thanks and to say that it was good, more than good.

He sat back in his chair and felt that glow of warmth that he got when things were going well. He thought again of Jenni Murray, what she might

do after the show, where she might go, or if she would be obliged to remain in the office, until five, like everybody else.

It was then that he saw the email. He read quickly through the first paragraph, and he knew already – he could feel it in his stomach – what the pay off would be. Thanks a fucking bunch, he felt like writing back: thanks a fucking bunch, you fucking wanker. But he didn't write back. He picked up his jacket, swung it over his shoulder and walked out of the office.

Just outside town there is a small farm, with a shop and a café attached. It sells sandwiches and drinks, but it is also a greengrocer and a butcher, selling produce fresh from the land. At the back of the café there are some enclosures for pigs and goats. He drove there in a fury, his fingers clenching the steering wheel. He took a seat on a bench near the pig enclosure and took some deep breaths as he watched the pigs snuffling around. They were black and creamy in colour, with quite clear markings. In the corner of the enclosure there was a hut, like a large dog kennel, with straw poking out of the entrance. He peered into the shadows and saw an eye shining back at him. Then, out of the darkness, it became clear: it was an enormous fat mummy pig, and at her teets six little piglets were suckling. He could see them writhing blindly against the straw like maggots.

On his way back to the car, he stopped by the farm shop to see what they had. He noticed some beetroot, which must have come straight out of the ground that morning. They had stringy tops and were covered in mud, although their dark redness still shone through. They were good and plump and he picked up two of them and headed for the counter, where he paid

cash, before leaving a little change in the collection box. He was calm now and drove back to the office with the windows open.

He sat at his desk and worked and worked and worked. Every now and then he kicked the bag of beetroot at his feet and thought about how he might cook them and about how they might taste. Another parcel was delivered, only this one wasn't so interesting. He read some marketing copy and took great pleasure in crossing great chunks of it out. Finally, he went over to the design department to talk about some cover images. He liked to visit design. The people were relaxed and funny; they had a proper perspective on life. Before long they got to talking about beetroot.

'You should roast them,' Maggie suggested.

'I just might do that,' he said.

When he had finished with design, he swung by his own desk, shut down his computer and picked up the beetroot. As he rode the lift downstairs, he remembered the email he had received before lunch. He was pleased that he hadn't let it spoil his day. As he drove home the news was on the radio, but he didn't listen carefully. He just let it babble away in the background.

When he got home he went straight to the kitchen, took the beetroot out of the bag and put them on the chopping board. They were pretty large. He washed them in the sink and used a potato peeler to peel them. Then he cut them in half, as Maggie had suggested. He dug out a small roasting tin and put a splash of olive oil in the bottom, before arranging the beetroot in the tin with their flat sides down. He remembered to turn the oven on, and

gave it a chance to heat to 225 degrees centigrade. Meanwhile, he took some garlic, some olive oil and some balsamic vinegar and made a dressing, which he poured over the beetroot. He then sprinkled some dried mint over the top and, having covered the whole roasting tin with foil, he slipped it into the oven.

According to Maggie, it would need 45 minutes. He set the timer and sat at the kitchen table and attempted to do the crossword. It was only the quick crossword, so he filled in most boxes pretty easily, but there were some clues that gave him trouble. Fourteen down really made him pause. The clue was 'Skedaddle, (7)' and it took him a while to work out that the solution was 'VAMOOSE', which was not a word he used every day. When he had finished the crossword he started to read the paper, but he couldn't concentrate because his mind was full of anticipation for the beetroot. He turned to the sports pages and managed to work his way through an article about a cricketer who, having been the most dominant batsman in the English game for nearly twenty years, had become only the sixth batsman in history to average above 100 over the course of an entire summer.

The timer pinged and he walked over to the oven. He pulled down the door and hot, sweet air rushed towards him. With gloves on his hands, he lifted the roasting tin onto a mat and ripped back the foil covering. The smell was just as he had expected: earthy and rich and full. At precisely that moment, his flatmate walked into the kitchen.

'Do you want some beetroot?'

'Maybe. What does it taste like?'

‘I don’t know. I’ve never tried it before.’

‘Let me have a look.’

He stood back and together they peered into the roasting tin. He felt unaccountably proud. The four humps of beetroot were a deep ruby red and the oil glistened around them, catching the light as the sea catches the sun.

THE RUSSIANS

IT IS THE Day after their visit – the Monday – and I am staying on late at work. It is not necessary for me to do this but I am doing it. There are quite a few others here. A tender is due, you see, and, although my role in it is minor, I am eager to hang around, to give the impression of utility, the impression of being here.

On the internet, I make some investigations into a film I once saw, but can now barely remember. It was about a boy who lived on a beach and befriended a pelican, possibly in New Zealand. I can find no reference to it.

Perhaps it wasn't a pelican. Perhaps it wasn't New Zealand. I make some notes. My memory is bad.

At a certain point, boredom triumphs over the desire to give the impression of utility, and I decide to go home. Enid will be waiting. I look around the office. Those who remain are hunched in front of their screens or huddled in alcoves. As I move to leave, they all turn to watch me. They have grave looks on their faces, as if they think I am about to embark on some absurd voyage from which my return is in doubt.

Outside, the weekend's good weather has passed. The luminous days are gone, as Enid's father said yesterday, after lunch, gesturing to the darkening sky, palms open. He is prone to exaggeration, expansiveness, good at telling stories that seem greater than they are. Perhaps that's why I like him so much. In truth, it is blustery, tepid, a little damp. No more than that. It's possible – *possible* – there will be a storm later.

Across the street, the offices are empty, their photocopiers standing rather forlornly in the flickering light. I stand and look, tracing their reflections in the window. I would normally smoke at this point, but I feel no desire to move for the tobacco in my pocket. Instead, I pull on my coat, cross the road and head down the street.

At the junction, where I would normally turn right towards home, I find that I am turning left. It happens so simply, without fuss, no more than a tug on my shoulder, the briefest pull, no great drama.

Within five minutes, I have reached the pedestrian precinct. My vision – indeed, all my senses – have become unusually sharp, attuned to the

intensity of the merest detail: the damp patches on the paving stones, the air on my face, the roar of a motorbike. From above, I am sure that I can hear the clouds moving. There is a whispering sound as they go past one another, like great ships in the night. On either side of me, the long glassine lines of department stores stretch diagonally forwards. Through their high windows, the shapes of mannequins are faintly visible – ranks of them, their arms raised like heralds.

At the end of the precinct, moving rapidly now, I turn – or am turned – to the left. It is curiously pleasurable to move in this way, with no aim, no intention. It as if I am being carried along, held up on a bier.

I go down into the underpass. A woman is coming towards me, breath rising, huddled into a coat, pushing a pram with a squeaky wheel. I hear everything so clearly – her breath, the wheels – that it's as if she has reached me already, when in fact she must be at least forty yards away, more, even. I feel a strong desire to wave my arms at her, to shout – 'Hey! Hey! Look out!' – as if trying to warn her that she is about to come upon some terrible accident. But it's no good: she reaches me, passes me, and then she is gone.

Back on street level, I notice things that are just outside my field of vision – a shadow dance of glimmers, glimpses, movements, that kind of thing. A young couple drag themselves up the steps in front of the Forum. Again, I want to put on a show of warning, to urge caution, but I know that it's futile, that I would only appear to them as I am, a man, walking up a hill towards a theatre.

At the theatre, I turn left, into the alley behind the hotel. Its still fascia rises to balconies, lit windows open, the murmur of televisions, talk. I duck my head into the plantation garden, but it is empty, its fountains still. I stop for a moment in the darkness and listen, hearing the roll of the sea, far off, coming against the harbour wall.

Presently, across the street, on the corner, I come upon a large house surrounded by railings. It has an air of familiarity, like every house I have ever seen rolled into one. A number of cars are parked outside, black, rain-spotted. In one, a hearse, a man sits in the front seat reading a newspaper and eating an apple. He looks up as I pass, drops the apple from his mouth, and then quickly looks down again, embarrassed, as if I am not supposed to have seen him.

I open the iron gate and enter the garden. Light glows dimly in the large downstairs window, centring on a spot in the middle of the pane, where a kink in the glass marks a sag. I can see no people from this angle, only furniture, of the sort you would expect to see in an entrance hall, the sort that gives nothing away: a grandfather clock, mirrors, a rose table with a lamp.

I go up to the door and knock. Although I have been walking quickly, I feel no tightness in my chest, and my breathing is controlled and assured as I wait.

Soon enough, the door opens and a man appears. He is short, stocky, wearing a black waistcoat, a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. His grey hair is scraped back over his forehead. Behind him, two

ladies in black are taking off their cloaks and heading up a wide staircase. The man and I stand there for a moment, eyeing each other.

‘Come in,’ he says, finally.

He has a slight accent, but I can’t place it. I allow him to lead me across the hall. I think we are going to follow the women up the stairs. One of my feet even begins to rise in preparation, but at the last moment the man stops. It is a very precise, slightly fussy manoeuvre. He turns to me, his hands pressed together.

‘No,’ he says, indicating a door off to the side. ‘You go in here. There are others, but you’ll get your turn.’

Sure enough, when I enter, there are others ahead of me: three men, in fact, of forbidding stature, whiskered, well dressed, wearing long coats, ties. Two are seated on a bench that lines the far wall. The other leans against this wall, his legs indolently crossed. He flicks a coin into the air and catches it, showing the result to the two seated men, who tilt their heads in response and exchange smiles. The door closes behind me. They nod as I move to sit alongside them, shifting their coats to make room. In front of me, three candles are ranged on a low table laid with a red velvet cloth. I hate situations like this. It is a nightmare knowing whether to speak or not.

After a moment of silence, the men resume their conversation. They are speaking a foreign language. Russian, I would say, if pressed. It is hard to identify where one word ends and the next begins. The depth of their voices doesn’t help. When they speak they do so with their chins dug in against

their necks, and the consequent rumbling resonances of their words hang in my ear a moment too long, causing a tingle.

[They are in Paris. It is a Saturday, high summer. Out of a pristine sky, a storm breaks. They dash into Saint Sulpice to escape the rain. A choir is rehearsing Rachmaninov's Vespers. At least, that's what the board says. Dripping wet, they slide into a row and listen, heads bowed, as the conductor takes the choir through the opening movements. When the astonishing basso profundo comes in, they crane forward to get a look at the singer. He stands aside to the right of the choir, a bear of a man, wearing tracksuit bottoms. His voice is just extraordinary. They are mesmerised by its depth, the way it resounds in the air.]

One of the men coughs and I turn to look at him. There must be a look of complete bafflement on my face, because he leans across. He lifts a fist to his mouth as if he is going to clear his throat. Then, at the precise point at which it seems he is about to speak, there is a creak, a slow one, that elongates its way into the room like a cat. The men all turn a fraction of a second before me and, in the lag, I am able to observe in their eyes the briefest flash of something, some cortex suddenly awake.

Eventually I turn, too. A door is opening. From its shadows, a woman emerges. She is dressed entirely in black and a veil covers her face. She bows curtly to the three other men and walks towards me. I tense as she approaches. Drawing near me, she holds out her hands. She does it in such a

way that I feel compelled to reach up and take them. She smiles when I do this, the faintest movement of her pale lips through the lace, and draws me to my feet.

Joined in this way, we stand for a moment. I look at the men. They are looking at me. Their eyes are fairly wide. With a brief application of pressure to my hands and a tilt of her head, the woman conducts me through into a third room, larger than the second. There, she manoeuvres us until we are standing on a rug in front of an unlit fireplace. The room is cold. There is an icon above the mantel – a dark face surrounded by a halo of gold; on either side, various watercolours, of hunting scenes, ships coming into harbour. The woman begins to speak.

‘There is something I wish to discuss with you,’ she says. Her voice is calm, composed. ‘It is a little delicate.’

I nod.

‘Well, then,’ she says. ‘Is it true that I am being laughed at?’ As she says the words, she makes a move with her head, tossing it over her shoulder, almost snorting like a horse, towards the room we recently left.

‘The men outside?’ I say. ‘I don’t know that they were laughing. I didn’t see that.’

‘Perhaps you should look a little closer then. Perhaps you do not know them as I do. At all events, why are they here, tossing their coins and laying their bets and making their jokes?’

‘Perhaps,’ I say, ‘it is best to believe that they are here simply to pay their respects.’

‘Probably you are right,’ she says, steering me across the room to where a coffin stands open. The dead man is wearing a dress suit – a white collar, a white tie. He has a flock of unruly black hair, swept back, and a neat moustache and beard, flecked with grey. A silk handkerchief, white, covers his neck and his shoulders seem a little hunched, as if the coffin is just that little bit too small. I find it impossible to read his face. There is no sign of trauma, or despair, or surprise. The mouth has been stitched up and, although his eyes are closed, something twinkles where the lids have been joined, like a run of ice or tiny crystals.

‘Here he is. In the final days he gave nothing away. He was as he always was. In the very last hours, we talked in the same way we would had he been about to set off to see a client in the country.’

‘He certainly looks at peace,’ I say, and leave it at that.

For a few moments, we stand in silence. Then the woman crosses herself and steers me back across the room. On the threshold she raises her hands to my lips. ‘Thank you for coming. Your visit does my husband a great honour.’

The men look up as I re-enter the room. The door closes behind me. I look hard at them, trying to discern by their actions and habits of dress in what relation they stand to the deceased; which is the colleague, say, which the brother, and so on. I wonder who stands to profit and who to lose. Several times I try to speak, but each time either the first door opens and some other person enters, or the second door opens and the widow emerges

to conduct someone else through. In the end, I leave. The doorman bows curtly as I pass.

Back on the street, I look at my watch. It is past midnight. I have missed several calls, all from Enid. The temperature has dropped. The air is crunchy, and the windscreens of the parked cars glitter with dew. I walk a few unsteady paces and then stop. My hands are shaking. I hold them up in front of my face. Beyond them, the sky is completely clear.

[That night in Paris. After the rain clears, they hail a cab, not worrying about the expense. Back at the hotel, they get out of their sodden clothes and put on bathrobes. Despite the storm, it is still warm, muggy. They open the doors to the French balcony and stand for a while looking at the city in the aftermath of rain. Below them, train tracks snake out from Gare Montparnasse, slick bars of light, the windows of the Saturday evening trains glowing in the gloom.

When the lightning strikes, they are on the bed. There is a great sound, like the crack of a whip, or the popping of bulbs. The room explodes into the most intense purplish light. It is so bright that for a moment it is as if they can see right through other.

‘Holy fuck,’ she says slowly. ‘What the fuck was that?’

The lightning comes all the way into the room, a secondary bolt seeming to dart in through the window, pronging around the iron bedstead. They are not hit, they are never in any danger, but the experience of it

becomes in due course part of the mythology, part of what stitches them together.]

At home, the lights are all off and I climb the stairs without switching them on. In the bedroom, Enid is sleeping. I get undressed by the door. Naked, I open the curtains and look out over the garden, the fresh soil of the terraces like coal in the moonlight. The storm hasn't happened yet. Or, if it has, I missed it. In bed, I draw Enid to me, running my hands up under her nightshirt until I am touching as much of her skin as I can. She is warm. The warmest thing I have ever known.

NOTES ON A LOVE STORY ⁱ

IN THE EVENING – it was Friday – he picked her up in the car from the back entrance on Jermyn Street. The traffic was heavy and they moved slowly round St James's, cars edging forward, bumper to bumper. On Piccadilly, hotel porters ran this way and that, flagging down taxis, and pushing luggage trolleys along the pavement. It was October, just before the equinox, and the last rays of sun glowed on the curves of the buses idling alongside.

As Sam drove, Sarah crouched down in the footwell and changed out of her uniform, her arms at unusual angles.

‘I’ve got something to show you,’ he said.

That morning, he had received his copy of the *Paris Review*. It was the first story he'd had published. When it arrived, he stood in the kitchen, at the breakfast counter, staring at the brown paper package. He must have read it five or six times, finding it hard to believe it was his. The font, the layout, the positioning, placed between two poems, one by Jorie Graham,ⁱⁱ another by Paul Muldoon, contrived to distance it from the story he had laboured over for months in the back bedroom. But there it was, his name, Sam Longwood, in sixteen-point Cambria. Just to be sure, he checked the contents page. *Sleeping Dogs*, by Sam Longwood, page 155. The editor had put a note in the package. *We are pleased to have it. Plimpton.*ⁱⁱⁱ

He handed the magazine to her as they drove down Whitechapel Road.

'My God,' she said. 'Is this it?'

She read it as they sat in a tailback near Gants Hill. He watched her as she read, his right hand resting on the steering wheel. She pored over every word, her hair slipping down from behind her ear. When she finished, she looked up. She edged across in her seat, put her arms around his neck and hung there. He could smell her perfume, the one he sniffed, quietly, in the bathroom when she was away on trips.

'I'm so proud of you.'

They arrived late, and had to park at the edge of the estuary,^{iv} in the dark, and wait for the tide to recede. Three hours in the cold and then, stone by stone, the causeway^v emerged. The house,^{vi} an eccentric, rambling, wooden construction, rose like a lighthouse at the north-eastern tip of the island.^{vii}

‘What shall we do? Eat, walk? Walk, eat?’

‘Walk, then eat.’

It was nearly midnight when they set off, walking briskly by the light of the moon, inhaling the brackish air of the salt marsh. The path led inland to the south-west and then hooked east towards the raised bank of an earthen sea wall. As they approached, across an open field, they heard the noise.

‘What’s that?’ said Sarah.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Come on. Run.’

She set off, the material of her padded coat swishing, her breath puffing out and trailing in the air behind her. By the time they reached the foot of the bank he had overhauled her. The noises – whatever they were – grew and grew. They climbed together, leaning into the slope, pulling themselves up, grabbing clumps of thick, brittle grass. At the top, they saw.

Geese. Thousands upon thousands of brent geese.^{viii} They floated, moving with the gentle ebb of the estuary, bobbing amid the moon, the stars, the clear sky, and the tracks of the Milky Way, which lay reflected silver-white on the black surface of the water. And the noise. Deafening. It rose into the air, turning and twisting. They had heard bird calls before, many times, but this was different. These birds – like an army gathering on a hillside in the grey dawn before battle – were talking to each other, shouting and shrieking across the flats, their voices rebounding off the water and quivering in the reeds.

‘My God,’ she said. ‘Look at them.’

And then.

‘Look. Look up there.’

‘Where?’

‘There.’

He raised his arm and pointed. A thick blanket of cloud – like a wall, or a wave, or a mountain range – was being drawn across the sky. It raced towards them, the white wisps of its towering front edge swirling and roiling. It seemed close enough to touch. One by one, the stars were gathered in, the acres of clear sky, the moon.

He crouched down to get the camera out of his bag.

‘No,’ she said, lifting her hand. ‘Just watch.’^{ix}

On it rolled, the bank of cloud, seeming to gather pace as it passed over the wrecked wooden hulk of a Thames barge,^x its rotting mast listing to port. And then it was above them, engulfing the air; something monstrous, immense, unparalleled. A ripple broke the surface of the water and the geese – the thousands of geese – rose politely and then fell again, one after another. Sarah and Sam stood on the bank, their eyes turned skywards and their mouths open, like witnesses to a rare and ancient ceremony – an initiation rite, a sacrifice. For a moment, there was quiet and it seemed as if something grand and important, a secret as old as the world itself, was being whispered to them. They clung to one another, dwarfed, as the clouds rolled on and on, away over the estuary and out to the open sea.

And then, a honk, then another and then another. The geese. Their shouts had resumed.

THE END.^{xi}

i. 'All stories are love stories.' So begins Robert McLiam Wilson's 1996 novel, *Eureka Street*. It is a spare and haunting beginning but if you tweak it a bit, if you strip the line down further, to its barest essentials – subject-verb-object – you will find a formulation that might be etched on a primary-school wall: stories love stories.

Around the time Wilson's novel was being published, another novelist and short-story writer, Neil Davidson, was recovering in hospital after a nervous breakdown brought on by difficulties he experienced in completing his third novel, *The Hallucination* (see below). Alex Johns, of the *Observer*, was interviewing him for an article on the consequences of creativity. The interview took place on a Saturday morning in August 1996. I was in the room.

The television, on a wall bracket, was tuned to the third Test Match between England and Pakistan, taking place at the Oval. Having been asked a question, Neil would turn his attention to the unfolding action on the screen. For minutes at a time, he would appear to become lost in the movement of the white-flannelled players. Then, without taking his eyes off the game, Neil would lift his head, tilt it slightly to the left and respond. One question had been to do with the pressure to produce. This is how Neil replied:

'Writing a novel,' he said, 'is like a love affair. You can't look for one. You have to wait for it to happen.'

Shortly after noon, I left them to it and returned to my flat just off Borough High Street, where I settled down to my Saturday stint of three hours' writing. Against Neil's advice, I was working on something that I had actively sought out: a novel, inspired by

Dostoevsky's *The Adolescent*, about two middle-class teenagers who commit a gruesome murder. I had reached that point when the suspicion that a certain project is flawed crystallizes into unarguable fact. By the end of the three hours I had resolved, finally, to abandon the venture. At the time, still an apprentice, I had to fit my writing around a full-time job. Consequently, not only was I beset by feelings of inadequacy at my inability to realize the fictional world I had set out to create, I was also angry with myself for wasting so many hours on something so obviously unmanageable. Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish Nobel Laureate, writes powerfully about the blackness that descends when a writer cannot write:

‘Let me explain what I feel on a day when I’ve not written well, if I’m not lost in a book. First, the world changes before my eyes: it becomes unbearable, abominable ... during these dark moments, I feel as if there is no line between life and death.’

That is how I felt that afternoon, as if there was no line between life and death. I spent the remainder of the day in a daze, ironing shirts and preparing to go to a party being held that evening to celebrate the wedding anniversary of some old friends. I didn’t want to go – the last thing I wanted was company – but I had been best man at the wedding. I had to go. I forced myself out of the door and, in an attempt to clear my head, walked over the bridge as far as Shoreditch High Street, where I caught the bus, the 277.

Sarah was standing in the garden, towards the back, talking to a friend of mine.

She came back to mine that evening. Neither of us expected that. It was nearly dawn by the time she fell asleep; I listened for the change in her breathing. When I was certain she was sleeping, I lifted her arm from my chest and crept to the back bedroom, switched on my computer and began to write.

The story had come to me, fully formed, earlier that evening as we stood under the trees. 'How It Will End'. I imagined it all, from its magical beginning at a party in North London to its shattering conclusion, the force of which would reverberate week after week, month after month, year after year. It was as if a space had opened up in front of me, a bubble that stretched from the present, to the future, and then back again. I wasn't even thinking about stories and yet there it was, complete. W. G. Sebald is good on how things can come to us when we least expect them: 'Every writer knows that sometimes the best ideas come to you while you are reading something else, say, about Bismarck, and then suddenly, somewhere between the lines, your head starts drifting, and you arrive at the ideas that you need.'

I knew that I had to get something down, even if it was just the frame, the shape. I wrote until ten and then slipped into bed and curled against the warmth of Sarah's back.

I didn't tell Sarah about the story. It would have been too hard to explain. What I did do, the next afternoon, was send a postcard to Neil in his hospital bed.

Neil, I wrote. I was interested to hear you say, yesterday, that a novel cannot be looked for. I agree with you, but last night, at that party, I met someone, and, in my giddiness, I'd like to turn your line around. A love affair is like writing a novel. You can't look for one. You have to wait for it to happen.

ii. American poet, 1950 – present. Attracted controversy when, in 1999, in her capacity as judge of the Contemporary Poetry Prize at the University of Georgia, she awarded first place to the South African poet Peter Sacks. Not only did Graham know Sacks, she would, in 2000, become his wife. The things (allegedly) we do for love.

iii. George Plimpton, 1927–2003. American writer and fabled editor of the *Paris Review* – second only to William Maxwell (Fiction Editor, *The New Yorker*, 1936–75), in terms of his encouragement of young writers, especially those who practise the art of short fiction.

iv. The Blackwater Estuary lies at the mouth of the River Blackwater, in the county of Essex in south-east England. It is among the most productive estuaries in the United Kingdom, providing a protected habitat to a wealth of seabirds, including the Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*), the Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa islandica*) and the Common Shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*). It is also home to the Colchester Native, one of the most sought after varieties of oyster in the world.

In the autumn of 2001, Sarah and I spent a week in Paris. I had been invited by Penelope Fletcher Le Masson – the Canadian owner of The Yellow Flower bookshop – to take part in a literary festival.

The bookshop, named after the William Carlos Williams poem, was at that time on Rue Clovis opposite the entrance to the Lycée Henri IV, the school from which Marthe collects the narrator of Radiguet's *Le Diable au Corps* and takes him shopping for furniture. It is the moment in the novel at which we realize they will fall in love.

I read two stories that night. It was the first time Sarah had seen me read. She sat at the back. It is the best reading I have ever given.

Afterwards, we walked in a loop through the Marais, back across the Pont des Arts and into Saint-Germain-des-Prés. It was a Saturday night and the terraces of the haunted cafés were full. Penelope had booked us a table at Le Petit Zinc, a restaurant on Rue Saint-Benoît in the 6th, and one of the finest seafood restaurants in the city. On arrival we were greeted by a blackboard on which was written:

Vient d'arriver ! Huîtres indigènes de Colchester

The restaurant was packed.

Incidentally, that week we stayed at the Hotel d'Angleterre on Rue Jacob.

Formerly the British Embassy, it was where the Treaty of Paris, ending the American War of Independence, was signed in 1783. One hundred and thirty-eight years later a couple, newly married and very much in love, arrived from Oak Park, Chicago. The couple were the Hemingways, Ernest and Hadley. While in residence, in Room 11, Ernest wrote 'The End of Something', that cruel, cold story about the end of a love affair.

v. The causeway connects Northey Island (see below) to the mainland and is believed to be the site of the Battle of Maldon, which took place on 10 August 991. A band of Viking raiders, under the leadership of the fearsome Anlaf, fought with an Anglo-Saxon force led by Earl Byrhtnoth. The day before the battle, Anlaf offered to withdraw in return for a payment of Danegeld. Byrhtnoth, a proud man, rejected the offer, spitting at Anlaf's feet. The next afternoon – the morning had been spent waiting for the tide to recede, just as Sarah and I had waited that evening – battle was joined on the causeway. It was a bloody fight. Byrhtnoth was mortally wounded by a poisoned spear and although his men fought bravely they were eventually overrun.

After the battle it is said that Byrhtnoth's retainers carried his body home to his wife, Ælfflæd, who stitched a tapestry memorialising her husband's deeds.

The battle was recorded in an epic poem composed sometime around 995. The only extant copy of the manuscript was lost in the nineteenth century; an eighteenth-century copy, the Elphinstone Transcription, resides at the British Library. One of the most celebrated lines from the poem is this, attributed to Byrhtwold the Aged: 'Heart must be braver, courage the bolder, mood the stouter, even as our strength grows less.'

vi. The house was designed and built in the 1920s by Norman Hart (1872–1967). Hart, a distinguished British journalist, academic and diplomat, is the subject of Neil Davidson’s unpublished *The Hallucination*. Now a mere footnote to history, Hart was a significant figure in world affairs for almost fifty years. He was the author of over forty books, most notably *The Grand Hallucination* (1910), in which he developed his controversial theory on power. The theory was tremendously influential and the book, translated into over twenty-five languages, sold over 2 million copies.

Davidson’s novel covers none of this, preferring instead another hallucination: the story of Hart’s love for Ellen Hawthatch. Hawthatch was the daughter of Robert Settle Hawthatch III, proprietor of the *St Louis Globe-Democrat*, for whom Hart worked as a reporter from 1894–8. The couple fell deeply in love and, in 1897, Hart asked Ellen to marry him. She accepted. However, Hart, a man ascetic in both manner and countenance, broke the engagement in 1898, fearing his reserved nature would never allow the couple – and particularly the free-spirited Ellen – to be truly happy. Despite the entreaties of her father he refused to change his mind and fled back to Europe, to Paris, where he acted as correspondent for a number of American newspapers, covering, among other things, the progress of the Dreyfus case.

Hart threw himself into his work, but he could not banish Ellen from his mind. He wanted to renounce his decision, or for her to tell him that she could not live without him. In 1901 he returned to America with the intention of throwing himself on her mercy. On the boat from Southampton he met an acquaintance of her father; the summer before, Ellen had married someone else. Hart was shattered. On arrival in New York, he transferred his trunk to the next outbound steamer and returned to Europe.

Hart never forgot Ellen. He dedicated all his books to her and, upon his death sixty-six years later, his family were outraged to discover that she was named as the sole beneficiary of his will.

I told this story to Sarah on the night of our stay on Northey, in the house now owned by David and Sarah Ryan, direct descendants of the Hawthatches of St Louis. The house is still there, and can be rented for weekends or longer. It is the perfect spot for bird-watchers, for writers and for lovers.

vii. Northey Island, located in the Blackwater Estuary. The night before the Battle of Maldon (see above), Anlaf's men camped on Northey. They ate a supper of Colchester Natives, dredged from the bed of the estuary using wooden grabs not unlike wide brooms.

viii. Brent geese (*Branta bernicla*) can be divided into two separate strands: dark-bellied (*Branta bernicla bernicla*) and pale-bellied (*Branta bernicla hrota*). Pale-bellied brents breed mostly in Canada (especially the Queen Elizabeth Islands) and the south-western flank of Greenland, and spend the winter in the milder climate on the western coast of Ireland; dark-bellied brents breed in the Arctic tundra of Northern Russia and winter on the estuaries of south-east England. The Blackwater Estuary provides a winter residence to approximately 50 per cent of the global population of dark-bellied brents. They arrive in England from their Arctic breeding grounds from mid-October to early November, where they remain until the following spring. More like humans than swans, the notion of a single life partner – of enduring love – is an ideal rather than a constantly achieved reality for brent geese.

ix. Photography played a large part in our relationship. Sarah was the more accomplished, and I always deferred to her judgement on composition, aperture speed and other technical considerations.

Early in our relationship we spent a week in New York. We were in the first flush; everything we tried came off. The weather, for example, was perfect. We took a risk, travelling in late March. The week before our arrival – we both checked the weather forecast with something bordering on obsession – the eastern seaboard of the United States was in the grip of a cold snap: snow, ice, plummeting temperatures. We prepared to pack polo necks, winter coats, even face masks – we had heard about the winds that whipped down the avenues and cross streets. Then, perhaps even while we were in the air, spring broke. The snow melted, the ice disappeared and the thermometer soared. By the time we landed, it was mid-teens and shirt-sleeve order.

One morning – it was a Thursday – we went to a Diane Arbus retrospective at the Whitney. It was a wonderful show. As well as showing much of her work, the exhibition focused on her working method, how she would surround herself with collages of things that interested her: photographs, images, sketches, newspaper cuttings, menu cards, quotations. Some of the quotations were etched on the wall. This, from Plato's *Euthyphro*, was one: 'A thing is not seen because it is visible, but conversely, visible because it is seen.'

That afternoon, walking through Washington Square – we walked everywhere on that trip, traversing Manhattan from east to west, from north to south – I started taking pictures. She was wearing a red jacket, the collar turned up to her chin. The film was black and white – Sarah's idea, she had been taking some shots of the wires of the Brooklyn Bridge – and as I crouched, Sarah turned in the middle of the square. She looked over her shoulder, eyes like Sophia Loren.

‘Hang on,’ I said. ‘Hold that pose.’

I had seen something.

Weeks later, when we picked up the photographs from Joe’s Basement in Soho, we discovered that what I had seen had – as Plato said it would – become visible. It was love that I had seen: love in her eyes, in the smoothness of her skin and in the way her hair – the brown made black by the film – was caught, flung out, almost horizontal, as she turned to look at me. For years, that photograph hung on the wall in our bedroom, her eyes a seen and visible reminder that in each other we had found something rare, something precious.

x. The barge is *The Mistle*. She is still there, stranded, rotting away on the salt marsh, her timbers turning to mud, fibre by fibre. Thames barge no. 91336, she was built in 1891 by the noted shipwrights John and Herbert Cann of Harwich. She was bought by Samuel Horatio Horlock, who employed her to carry wheat and other grain from his loading station at Mistle, Essex, to the East India docks on the Thames, from where the wheat was distributed and carried to all corners of the British Empire. No one can recall how she ran aground. Today, she is commemorated in the name of the Mistle Barge, a public house in Maldon. The proprietors of the pub, Professor David Marsh (University of Essex) and his wife, Amanda, met and fell in love while part of a team conducting a survey of the wreck in 1987.

xi. It ended for us in 2003. It happened suddenly. I suppose I had always known that it would. For seven years we had been in love. Although we never married, we did once come close.

We were on holiday, a driving tour that had taken us from London, through France, and along the Côte d'Azur. We drove into Italy, on a road that swept, on stilts and in tunnels, through the foothills of the Ligurian Riviera. We were about an hour past Genoa when Sarah jabbed at a spot on the map, a town. We didn't recognize the name.

'Let's stop here,' she said.

Levanto. It nestled in a crook at the base of a series of mountains that rolled like an after-wash from the Alps down into the sea. There were olive groves, steeply terraced vineyards and churches clinging precariously to the hillside. We stood by the water in the early evening. Children played in the shallows while grandmothers kept watch from the shore. I was on the point of getting down on my knees; the words had been worked out, and the ring, fashioned from the lid of a beer bottle, was tucked in my pocket. Then, an intervention. On the beach a man died, quite quietly, without fuss, lying on his towel. We watched the crowd gather, the ambulance, the *Croce Rossa*. By the time it was over, the beach cleared, the moment had passed.

In 2002 my first novel, *Old Tom*, was published. I dedicated it to Sarah. *For Sarah. For Love*. It didn't set the world on fire, but it did attract a handful of positive reviews. The following year my agent, Peter Strange, suggested that I enter the National Short Story Prize. This was a new prize, inaugurated to inject life into what was thought to be a moribund art form. The prize money was significant, £15,000. Despite the money, I told Peter I didn't have anything appropriate.

'Don't be a prat,' he said. 'You're shit hot at the moment. You'll have a chance.'

Still, I didn't have anything. Peter persisted.

'Go through your drawers. You'll have something. Tidy it up. Wing it over to me. If you can't find something, bang something new out. It's only 5,000 words.'

I sat in the back bedroom and thought hard. I remembered. I did have something. 'How It Will End'. I had almost forgotten about it. It was still there, in the bottom drawer under some folders of household correspondence. I still hadn't told Sarah about it. It was the only thing I had kept from her. I looked at it. It was dreadful. I couldn't send it. Then Peter phoned.

'Got anything? Deadline's end of the month. Come on. I'm relying on you.'

I went back to the story. It took two weeks of hard work. I convinced myself that it wasn't about us, about me and Sarah. Even so, I didn't tell her anything. I reasoned that it would never see the light of day. Either Peter would tell me it was awful, or the judges would toss it aside without anything more than a cursory look. I sent it over to Peter two days before the deadline.

'It's fucking brilliant,' he said on the 'phone. 'Sensational. You're going to win this bastard, I can feel it.'

Weeks passed. I was like a criminal whose crime hasn't been discovered. Then, a letter. I had made the longlist of twelve, which would be cut down to a shortlist of five in due course. I had to go out to pick up some photographs that Sarah had taken the weekend before at Dunwich on the Suffolk coast. When I got back, Sarah was in the kitchen, the letter in her hand.

'This is brilliant news. Why didn't you tell me?'

I didn't say anything.

'I've put some champagne in the fridge. I thought we could have a little drink to celebrate.'

Her eyes were shining, so happy.

'I don't recognize the name of the story. "How It Will End". Have I seen it?'

I went out while she read it – I said I needed some cigarettes. In the story, as I imagined it that first night, I had seen our end in our beginning. I thought it was odd, even then, that I should see so much at the start; but then, is it so different from Beckett's image of birth astride a grave? Love, like life, only travels in one direction. The beginning is where the end starts. The end *is* in the beginning. On that score, at least, it was legitimate. When I first re-discovered it in the drawer, it was rough, quite general, and, at a push, I could probably deny that it was about us. But in the process of revision I added episodes, things that had actually happened. Blackwater. Levanto. Paris. It all went in.

I had always imagined the end coming because of something insignificant, something bizarre; something that would come out of nowhere, like that cloud formation that raced across the sky that night on Northey.

When I got back she was sitting at the table in the kitchen, her head in her hands, the story on the table in front of her.

'How could you?'

'I'm sorry.'

'Is this it?' She picked the story up and then let it fall. It slid off the table and on to the floor. 'Is that what I am? Is that all I've ever been? Fucking material? For your precious career?'

'Hang on,' I said. 'I'm doing this for us.'

'Don't you fucking dare.'

James Salter, the American novelist and short-story writer, has a story. It is called 'Give'. In it, with his customary elegance, his coolness and concision, he describes the life of a young couple who devise a system to prevent the habitual annoyances of married life spiralling out of control. Salter calls it 'a way of getting the

pebble out of the shoe'. It is the 'give' system. It works like this. If either partner has an unappealing habit, or tic, something small or insignificant that over time might develop in such a way as to irritate the other beyond proportion, the partner is allowed to ask for a 'give'. A give is a request to abandon. It is a way of calling a truce, of stepping back from the brink before something insignificant becomes unmanageable.

Had I known of the 'give' system, I would have asked for one then, when I saw that look in Sarah's face. *Don't you fucking dare.*

'Give,' I would have said. 'Please, please. Give.'

She left. It wasn't entirely because of the story. That just served to widen some cracks that had always been there, beneath the surface, real cracks hidden by unreal love. It happened five years ago, nearly six. Last summer, she married someone else.

In *A Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes proposes that falling in love follows on from being told stories about falling in love. 'The loved being is desired,' he tells us, 'because another or others have shown the subject that such a being is desirable.' We believe what stories have taught us to believe, and our belief in love, as in most other things, is a construct of our culture. We write stories, but, at the same time, stories write us: they tell us what to do, what to think, what to feel. We fall in love; love falls in us. With that, we are back somewhere near the beginning. All stories are love stories. Stories love stories. Love loves love. Love stories love love stories.

Since Sarah left, I have published two further novels. I dedicated them both to her. *For S. Still*. I suppose I should stop, but I find that I don't want to. I find that I know how Norman Hart must have felt, that consuming blackness, as if there is no line between life and death. Still I hope that one day I will go to answer the door and she will be there on the step with a bag, that strand of hair slipping down from behind her ear.

‘Give given,’ she will say. ‘Give given.’

I’m even writing a story about it. Right now. At the moment. In this instant. Unlike
love, the story never ends. It never ends. It never ends. It never ends. It never ends. It never ends. It
never ends. It never ends. It never ends. It never ends. It never ends. It never ends. It never ends. It