



**An English Airman
Foresees
His Death**





An English Airman Foresees His Death

by

David Milnes

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An Irish Airman Foresees His Death

W. B. Yeats

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public man, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.





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These days it's commonplace to say taboo things and here's mine: I do not love my son. I do not even like him much. I hide it, of course, as everyone hides or disguises such feelings. When he provokes me I show nothing, not even mild irritation. I raise my eyebrows as if to say, You could have a point there, or Have it your own way, but inside I shout at him, I rail at him.

A few Sundays back he came here alone. His wife sometimes sends him over to keep him out of harm's way. I wonder why, Alex? Hmmn? . . . Well, never mind that. I took the chance to broach something I've been meaning to raise for some time.

"I want you to take the dog," I told him. "Take Mason away. Give him a new home, a new life."

He guffawed at the very idea.

"I don't want your *Mason!* . . ." Quite ribald laughter. "Really, Dad. Whatever next!"

I never wanted animals. Laura brought them into my





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life, then left them chained up, caged up, expected someone else to look after them. Who? Me? Don't be ridiculous. This is the way people carry on – assuming something on a whim of sentiment then slipping away, sloping off.

“I'm weary of responsibility,” I explained. “I don't want any more responsibility.”

He shut his eyes and kept them shut.

“Leave it, Dad . . . Mason is your dog. Unto his dying day. Poor animal.”

“Your mother – ”

“Dispute it no further, Dad! Please!”

He shouted at me. Blindly. Completely lost patience with me.

“It's pointless! What's the matter with you?”

“Your mother owned all the dogs,” I continued, speaking to the blank television in front of us; the screen seemed awfully dark and dusty and far off that afternoon. “You know that. I understand nothing about them. Never went to the vet. Not once. Never wanted animals.” Then I looked down at him, sitting beneath me in his mother's chair. More softly, I said, “Now, little Joe would love a dog. Rachael said so . . .”

At the mention of his family he stood and went to the bay window beyond my card table. He stared hard at the garden. He was on edge. I could tell he hadn't slept. Another lousy weekend. He's always moaning about his 'lousy' or 'rotten' weekends. No money. Never had any. And his happy marriage, of course.

“A cuddly puppy, Dad. Not an abused and neglected brute like Mason, gnawing at his entrails.”

Come to think of it, that was the Sunday for 'the great rapprochement': Rachael's mother was visiting for the first time in twenty bloody-minded years. It was a state occasion





but neither of us was invited. She may as well have been coming back from the dead, as far as I'm concerned. Never even met her, never seen a photograph. Widowed again is all I know. Take no notice – family soaps, intrigues, step-relations and so on. I like my mysteries in Len Deighton and Eric Ambler, not in life.

The Sunday Times was spread out flat on my card table, on my freshly brushed baize – genuine baize, not felt – open at the crossword. I caught him glancing down at it. Crossword is complete. Doubtful here and there maybe, but complete. He raised his chin, stroked his neck, averted his gaze.

“Can the old man fake an education doing crossword puzzles?”

He cast a backward glance at my shelves, lined with book club giveaways, of which I'm actually rather proud: Whitaker's Almanac (several years' worth), Jackson's FactFinder, Hartrampf's Vocab-BUILDER, Harry Lorayne's How to Develop a Super-Power Memory . . .

“One across. Two letters.”

Thanks, son.

I'll swear he thought that jibe up in his ugly little Nissan Micra on the way over. Middle-age is bringing this on. A pettiness, a bitterness. Nothing to declare for twenty years of adulthood. Married life adds a drop of bile as well, I should say. Just a drop or two.

More long stares out the window. I waited for another sigh. There was nothing to see out there. Sunday weather, Norfolk weather, dull as dyke water, dull as fenland skies, dull as obligatory family visits.

“Aren't you gardening any more?”

“No.”

“It's a mess.”





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“I don’t care.”

He looked back at me, smiling. “Should we put you in a home, then?”

Funny how he’d never have said that with his wife around.

“Hah,” I replied.

But he’s right. It’s true. I am a deeply lazy man. Ceylon taught me that. While waiting for the *Athene* I watched the tribes out there, the Coast Veddas, doing nothing all day, every day, week in, week out. I spied on them through the mangroves, smoking endless Navy Cut. They sat around in their coastal settlements, no shame or guilt about it. They had their food and drink from the sea, the rain, the trees, and that was it. Religion took care of the rest. Hinduism, I think. Ritualistic. Infantile.

Oh, but Alex thinks my laziness is awful. It’s sinful, in a very British way. The less you do the less you do until you’re just a parasite, a scrounger. He thinks in these earnest Christian circles. If you ever want something done, give it to a busy person, he says. But that always turns out to be him. He can’t see it’s a game: someone else is always knocking off at his expense. Laziness is as instinctive as sex or jealousy. It’s irreversible as water. Workers like him are precious to the rest of us, and watched over all their busy, fretting, pointless lives, and then dumped, expelled, when they’ve nothing left to give. We drones run the show.

So in the morning I read the papers, do my crosswords, read my thrillers, listen to my stereo – Bach and Chopin are current favourites – and from early afternoon I watch tv – news, cricket, golf – or listen to quizzes on the radio. If there’s nothing on I play patience to while away the hours. And he loathes it, can’t stand it, my sweet tooth for sloth. The sheer mass of hours and days whittled away like





this into a heap of waste. But he can't say as much and that fires up his resentment too. What he really wants to tell me is that I have always been a lazy scrounger, for as long as he's understood the difference between work and play. And he's right. Again. But he can't quite say it. Not yet. Though he has tried. He hasn't got the power, the money, to say that yet, and he never will have, so there's an end to it.

But that Sunday, after the gardening bit, he plucked up some courage. He asked:

"Why didn't you work, Dad?"

"Why didn't I work? I did work! From age fourteen, thank you very much. Nearly went down the bloody mines!"

"After your commission, I mean."

"The war, Alex. Try to remember. Keep up."

A pause while he regrouped.

"Your pension wasn't enough to live on, though, was it?"

He wanted to add: *'So you lived off your wife, didn't you?'*

I raised my lovely eyebrows and slid a look down and away at the same time, as if surprised he could stoop so low, but actually, I was surprised he could be so bold. He is a gutless son.

"You'd have to dig pretty deep to get to the bottom of that."

Which was enough to make him back off.

I don't understand where his assurance comes from to say such things, to challenge me in his mealy-mouthed way. I don't know where his smugness comes from at all. He's no longer young. He's not handsome. He's not clever. He's not funny. He's certainly not rich and never will be. Nor does he have that ghastly sexual confidence that lends some men their insufferable self-belief. So where does it





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come from, his assurance; his pomposity, almost. Certainly not from me. I've none myself, never believed in myself, never believed in him either. I never thought either of us would amount to anything, and we haven't.

The way he stretched his neck by the window – I can see him now – and stroked himself there, around the Adam's apple, that preening gesture, while staring at the derelict garden. He always does that. Stands and stares out the bay window at the garden, and preens himself in that way. Something proprietorial about it. Then smooths his hair – that's some of it too, the preening business. His hairstyle hasn't changed in thirty years. The same low-browed, pressed parting from left to right, with a wayward and awkward forelock, once lightly brilliantined but now curled up into a dry, crisp cone. He cups it in his hand, smoothing his hair, protecting it, that dry and greying cone, so unbecoming for a man his age. This is the hairstyle they gave him at his precious school, for being captain of rugger, or senior prefect, or for singing bass in *Iolanthe* or some such nonsense. Though middle-aged now his face is still open and naïve, with his hanging, fleshy lower lip – from his mother, that. Like the flesh of a pomegranate, I always thought, but dried up. What's happened to his body Lord only knows. The upper chest still has its prop-forward bulk, then his torso shrinks in unnaturally to the waist above his stocky legs. It's as if he wears a corset. It's a horrible, unnatural shape. Like that of a comic book hero, at the point where he enters the page top left, in full flight and colour, everything tapering away from the chest. He wears lambs' wool pullovers from Marks & Spencers all year round. Bottle green or beige. Or rather, bottle green and beige, because the armpits of the bottle green ones are stained beige. Whatever did Rachael see in him? She isn't ageing





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like him. She isn't giving up. Not her! She's just had her hair permed into the sweetest, darkest, slipperiest ringlets. I love them. I want to touch them, feel them, to drape their waxy softness over the back of my ancient, speckled hands.

So why on earth is he so assured? Apart from his wife, it's the only thing I envy him. This is something I always thought I would take for granted by now, but no, not a bit of it: extinction beckons – I hate it, I can see it, feel it, I know it's here, all around my chair, my recliner, I sense it everywhere – and I feel less and less assured about who or what I am, about what I've done and what it's worth, about anything at all, yet I still have to pretend the exact opposite. The calm, the serenity one is meant to assume, to possess almost as a right – Hah! Some feelings quieten down, subside, some you can't be bothered with any more, but some never go away. Not for men.

Anyway, he left shortly after that.

During the war I did what I was told and the war was good to me. This is something Alex knows but never raises, for some scruple of his own. He knows I enjoyed myself. I had a good war. I flew through it and saw the world on the way. Of course there was terror at times, but mainly it was exhilarating, thrilling. It was as Alex says – roller-coasting in the sky. On the ground there was the real thing, the bayonet, the shrapnel, the mud and rats everywhere, but up in the sky there was just a red button on the joystick, and the man you killed or burned or maimed was wrapped up in a fancy,





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decorated, pretty machine, often tarted up with paintings, for goodness' sake – graffiti and cartoons! Even if you caught a glance of his face you couldn't really see it because of the goggles. This is all exposed now, of course, the truth of this, because it's what the computers simulate for boys like Joe, for the joy of millions of real boys and Peter Pans – *Fighter Pilot*, *WW2 Ace*, *Dogfight* etc. I haven't just given these to Joe at Christmas, I've bought them myself. Alex helped me get started, to load things up, sort out the bugs and so on. He loves computers. He thinks knowing about them, sending things whizzing about the screen, makes him intelligent. With a modicum of knowledge you can be so helpful, show off so much. Actually, his wife's overtaken him. But let that pass. The games themselves are not bad, but details are wrong. Instruments in the wrong place or things that simply didn't exist then. The Hurricane's stick was articulated, there just wasn't room for it not to be, but in the games it's a rigid shaft. Perhaps the real Hurricane cockpit is too stark and primitive and boring, and must be upgraded for today's child. What they don't give is any impression of the sheer confinement, of course, and the noise, or the heavy yaw when taking off, rudder locked over – or the terror, when that came, even while taking off, a few times. But the confinement. I'm not tall and lanky so I fitted in like a nut in its shell. Hawker might have designed the plane for me alone. My feet sat on the pedals as if I were in a shoe shop. But anyone over six foot had an awful time of it. Some talked about that more than combat. The cramps. Unable to move the limb to stop the cramp, to stop the muscle tearing from the ligament, and too distracted by it to defend yourself. I suspect some died on account of that. The battle on my ageing IBM – and how about an upgrade this Christmas, Alex? – is roughly the same if you take away the





noise, vibration, the smell and the cold at 20,000 feet. What I mean is the battle was just that quick – kill or be killed, burn or be burned – and the game captures that. Except you have ridiculous amounts of ammunition. The Brownings carried thirteen hundred rounds in each wing. A couple of minute's worth if you were lucky, though you only used it in two or three second bursts. You can't make much of a game out of that.

And yet there are the pictures on my wall, here, today, on display, and they've been there for forty odd years, on the opposite wall to the bookshelves, photographs from more than half a century ago, of me standing in line to shake Churchill's hand, when thousands who had a real war, infantrymen in their thirties or forties – fathers and uncles, poor sods! – on the western front, or teenage conscripts in ships sunk by U-boats, lie nameless under the mud or snow or sea, and have no recognition like that at all, no photo with the war-leader, the most recognized Briton in all history. Then to come back afterwards to the same old snobberies and mean-spiritedness, the same cousinhood or cozenhood owning 90% of everything – Private Property! Keep Out! Police Notice! By Order! – and have to pretend that you had done it all for king and country, just so that you could fit in somewhere and draw some paltry pay-cheque – I couldn't do it. Not after all that. What was life for? Pretend all over again? I hid in the R.A.F. until they grounded me, then scurried off into the countryside. Deserter, if you will.

Still they come, the enthusiasts of The Few, the idolizers and hero-seekers, and I have to keep up the old pretences. *This is what I mean!* I cannot escape these people, these stories, without disgracing or mutilating my life, yet, retold, the stories themselves disgrace and mutilate my life. What can I say to them? Some weeks I mutter just a few





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words to the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker, and even then can hardly muster the tritest pleasantries. Most days pass saying nothing whatever. Not a word. Not that I would have it otherwise. I don't want to meet people. Any of them. They sicken me. What a thing to say! So melodramatic! But it's a perfectly true and fitting thing to say. What can I tell these hero-seekers, anyway? I can't tell them my fellows were children, boys – the average age was twenty for the Battle of Britain! – I can't say they were not men at all because the men who come here are all Peter Pans too! You can see it in their eyes. They would have given anything to have had a war like mine. They think they missed out. With me they have to pretend to be doing some weighty historical research for their silly books. They never touch on the pleasures, the thrill of the thing. Wouldn't dream of being so indiscreet. Of course they want to know who I remember – Bader, Lacey – anecdotes of prangs or pranks, but they box that up as something different, peripheral, when actually it's at the heart of every question they ask. Then the material bit: the movements, strategies, the Jap at Singapore, which aircraft carrier etc., getting the details right – but again that's so boyish. The way boys play at war on their own, colouring in maps or marshalling armies and weapons, making it all into a board game. We tread carefully round the Jap, though: we'll get to that, or maybe not.

But still they come. Men of Alex's age, Alex's generation. The sons. Only the sons. Never the daughters, worse luck. Not interested. It's a Boy's Own world.

Mechanized violence – lovely phrase, exactly right; or I should say 'the mechanizers of violence', because someone actually did it; men, always men, designed and made these things – had developed for us a new and unique form of fencing, a test of wits and guts, a new sport, with both





combatants masked, unknown, loosed from the old code of knightly conduct. There was a dash of relief, perhaps, if I saw a parachute, but then gain height, gain gain gain and get above them, get away from the danger and the reality of it. They ask, Did the Germans shoot pilots in parachutes? Well, I never saw it but I can quite believe it happened. Makes sense. How can I bring these things together? Running out of fuel, bailing out over the English Channel, knocking the side panel loose and tumbling out above the dull sea, with land in sight, Kent in sight, and the flat grey sheet of metal sea below, freezing, waiting for me – how can I bring that together with my life as it is now? There's no guiding intelligence behind it at all. Nothing adds up. The ends don't meet anywhere.

Perhaps I should say this to the would-be historians and archivists manqué. After all, what do I care about their piffling books? Must they write them? There can't be any money in it. Why bother? Why glamorize yet another life? The endless glamorizing of things, the endless graffiti over the fuselage and the writing on the wall. They irritate me so, again and again, every bloody time, with their half-apologetic questions about the Spitfire, with that glint coming into their eye, or rather behind their bifocals – while I still don't wear glasses, except for very small print – when it comes to comparing British fighters. They'll even bring in Mosquitoes, given half the chance. But I give them no quarter, stop them in their tracks, because nothing could turn like the Hurricane, and that was at the heart of the business. I mean nothing in the air at that time could equal it because that aeroplane was so *strong*. We drew Zeroes into a spin because we knew they would break up – it was actually a tactic. The Jap couldn't pull out without his wings folding, without falling to pieces. Hurricane pulled





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out every time. Even when you had to heave on the stick as if it were a pickaxe. In the Battle of France the Spitfire never used the grass strips we used. The undercarriage just wasn't strong enough. It buckled, failed, busted. Strong, stronger, strongest – those are the only words to use about the Hurricane. No others do it justice. No others respect the facts as I knew them, first hand.

The News, Tomorrow's World, The Two Ronnies – while Laura was sick upstairs I sat tight in my study. Alex came down and asked me for the newspaper. She wanted to read the local paper. I couldn't find it and flew into a rage. "I don't know where the bloody paper is!" Alex was shocked. He thought it was the welling anxiety, the prescient grief. But at that particular moment it was not. It was simply his interruption, his piercing of the tv bubble and my reaction inside – Why should I feel? Why are you making me feel something I don't feel, or don't want to feel?

When she became very ill the stench in the bathroom was like a fire, a living scream from within a fire. If you're burned at the stake, your legs kick out as the muscle burns, then your gut blows out with your gas expanding until it pops like a balloon. I know screams, what they are. I've heard screams, the screams of full-blooded, deep-lunged young men who screamed on and on like that because the pain had nowhere else to go. They were burned at the stake. With a feeder tank of 100 octane in front of the cockpit, what did anyone expect? But hers was the curdled, gurgling, visceral scream coming up from the bowels themselves, expanding, blowing up, the scream of mortality inside. For God's sake do something, Antony! But I carried on, and she carried on. She still did all the cooking, and I let her. She brought in supper on a tray, or the milky Nescafé in the morning. I found her in the kitchen sitting on a high





stool at the sink, peeling potatoes. She needed to sit because she was so weak by then, and because of the weight inside her bowel. Peeling potatoes. King Edwards. Heavy lumps of food outside, heavy lumps of knobbly, undigested food inside. I stood there, holding open the kitchen door. When Alex was a boy I fixed a closer on the door to stop him slamming it all the time, cracking the plaster all around the architrave, creating more work – *‘That’s right, Alex! Go on! Give it a bloody good slam!’* – I stood holding the door wide against its spring without saying anything, and she didn’t turn from her potatoes at the sink. She knew I was there because of the whine from the door-closer and the draught, but she did not turn. She reached for another potato from the bowl, her elbow pivoted on the side of the sink. A huge, dirty King Edward. I could feel the pressure of the door-closer against my hand. I could feel the weight of the potato. I could feel the pressure in her bowel.

Until I stood back, let the door shut, and returned to my study.

Sitting on a stool. Her belly distended as if six months pregnant, at sixty. Finally she couldn’t get out the bath. She called out to me – “Antony! You’ll have to help me now! I can’t get out the bloody bath!” Her exact words. Unforgettable. She never swore. So I took her to the hospital. You must admit my wife, I told them. Immediately. No further delays. No procrastination, no waiting lists. Call the surgeon. Now. I don’t care where he is, what golf course he’s on – I’m not leaving here until you bring him. Get him here! After the houseman examined her there was no more trouble. They put her in a private room and the operation was set for the next morning – a Sunday – first thing. Emergency. But when I came back the houseman had gone off duty and they hadn’t done it. They’d moved her





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into a mixed ward and delayed again. Again. That Sunday afternoon her gut burst, flooding her with excrement from within.

I could not sue. I turned it over and over in my mind, but I could not. Because I couldn't pretend, or if I did pretend, some clever lawyer would find a way through my pretences. With her collusion I had let things happen, take their course. But nothing any good ever happens unless you make it happen, unless you push push push against the inertia. Maybe she had given up completely by then, I sometimes think. In fact, I can hardly doubt it. At sixty. Just sixty. The burden of her sickness, from which she must have sensed there could be no real reprieve, and the burden of her disappointment with the way things had turned out, with me, with Alex – it had all become insupportable. Too little left to live for, too little that side of the scales. She had her faith to help her out: long talks with Alex about all that, tidying up mortality, making sense of it all. Shortly after retirement she'd started attending church again, when she felt the first symptoms, I suspect.

Of course my simpleton, priggish son came back at me. Not immediately. He left a decent interval, but then it must have got too much for his precious Christian soul. It all came tumbling out in blundering double-negatives.

“You are the only one who doesn't feel he didn't do enough, Dad. Didn't do his bit. No one else doesn't feel he didn't do enough. Just you.”

I said nothing. I was actually playing patience when he arrived. I heard his horrible Jap car on the gravel. He burst in on me, quite upset, tearful, out of control. I remained at the card table, laying out the cards in their lines, but very slowly.

“We all knew what you were like, but I told myself





it's too unfair to you not to trust you to do the right thing. Not to trust you to judge it for yourself."

I turned a royal card, a Jack, tapped it on the baize.

"You expected me to confront the doctors. The consultants. Challenge the experts."

"You handed her over to the experts. That's what you did." He was still at the door, holding it open, very distressed, letting out all the warm air from my fan heaters. I have no central heating whatever. Conked out ages ago. "Then you waited. You sat back and waited. You didn't push them and you didn't push her to help herself. That's what you didn't do, and what you should have done, Dad. And you know it."

"I can't take these people on. You know that. GPs. Consultants. Specialists. Medical people. For goodness' sake, Alex – I haven't your confidence, your assurance, your education. You know that. For your mother, you know perfectly well – "

"Then you could have asked for help, Dad."

That 'Dad' again did it for me. I put aside the deck and looked up at him:

"So what was it, then? Your pride? You wouldn't help unless I asked?"

"No. I got it wrong. I admit that. But you don't admit it."

"No, Alex. I don't admit it. I don't admit I got it wrong, in your ghastly phrase. Stew in your own guilt, Alex. I want no more of this, do you hear? You don't know what you're talking about!"

"You're going to be a very lonely old man soon, you know."

"That's my business."

"Well – "





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“Shut up, Alex. Just go away. You’ve said enough. Leave me in peace. You’ve done enough. Go away. Please! For goodness’ sake.”

Oh, they all said, Don’t hold on. Let go and get on with life. Some youngsters actually said that. Some horrible grand-second-step-nephews and nieces or something I’d never seen before. Sympathetic adolescents. Could anything be worse? All cock-eyed make-up, bulging bodies and undeveloped sensibility. *Get on with life, grandpa!* What did they think I was going to do? Emigrate? Make my fortune in the colonies? In my late sixties? As if life were somewhere out there to be grasped hold of, taken properly in hand and managed and moved along, like a career. The rubbish you have to listen to when your wife dies.

The warmth in the study from my fan heater and the Belling convector ends at the bay window, facing east. Those heaters cannot penetrate here. Standing in the bay, looking up the overgrown bank to the belt of trees and the church wall, you feel the full force of the cold the other side of the glass, from three fronts. You feel its mighty opposition to life, just beyond the frail and rotten sash windows. The mortal cold. Extinction everywhere. Its pressure, its draughts, squeezing out my tiny, ancient pulse of warmth. In the morbid silence I can actually hear my own pulse. This is the latest thing. I can hear it behind my right ear in the silence of the countryside, which is why I have the radio on all the time now, and a transistor radio in the kitchen, both set to Radio 3, so I can’t hear this pulse, the tattoo of my blood, my heart, building up to aneurysm, stroke, disability.

It had to be cremation. She said untended graves were





the most pitiful sight in the world. But was she right? Given my laziness, and our feelings for each other towards the end, of course she was right. But was she *right*? I'm not sure. Sometimes I think that I would have been more attentive than either of us could have foreseen. In a way she robbed me. I could have had a place to go. It makes a difference, knowing that the body is actually there, still exists, under the sod, rather than knowing it has been burned to boiler dust and mingled with the corpses of a thousand unknowns. Had there been a grave I would have had somewhere to go and talk things out. Alex put the dust under a tree he planted on the drive, a special pine of some sort, inexpensive and very slow growing. I cannot talk to a tree. I could have talked to a grave, and keeping it tended would have been a way of showing something, saying something.

What she had to put up with, even at the very end, in the hospital. When I'd gone they moved her out of that private room – without informing me – onto the mixed ward. She woke during the night in great pain, despite the drips. She woke in the small hours of that dreadful Sunday morning, at some godforsaken hour, to hear, and then see, and then smell, an old man in his pyjamas masturbating by her bedside.

When I visited that morning I shouted at the ward sister in her prim little office, with its brand new, shiny white coffee-maker. Never give these people offices. Keep them walking up and down the bed ends. Shouted at her. Bloody nurses! Bloody doctors! Bloody National Health! Bloody *indignity*!

The day outside is dull and brimful of stillborn English melancholy. When those chirpy adolescents, whoever they were, who'd had a little too much of my dry sherry after the service, because sherry was all I had, and





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they'd probably never drunk it before, when they said, Get on with life, they meant, of course, get on with it on their terms. Get on with the good times. Look to the future. 'You can make it to the millennium, grandpa!' Someone actually said that, or something very like it. And he received some grinning, cheerful, brace-toothed support from the others too. There was a chorus of them by then. To whom, on all of God's green earth, did they think they were talking? Alex cut across to help out but he was clumsy and no use, the worse for wear himself by then. He does like his tipple these days, our Alex.

To me it is beneath contempt – this modern drunkenness. Shameless, in-broad-daylight drunkenness. Any drunkenness disgusts me. Always has. I despise it. On their monthly visits, Rachael and Alex cook the Sunday lunch together. In the shopping bags, along with the beef and veg, there's always a bottle of Sainsbury's plonk he's sneaked in. Minervois or Corbieres. £3.99. He drinks most of it, rendering himself pretty much unfit for the afternoon's fatherly duties. In the garden last Sunday (we had a touch of Indian summer) I told him, "Go and play with your son, Alex. Dry out a bit." I omitted Joe's name. Your son, Alex. Duty calls, Alex. Dry out, Alex. He looked awkward, vexed, but he was too befuddled with the wine and the sunshine to work out how to get out of it, so he stumbled off to push Joe on the rope swing, leaving me free to chat to Rachael on her own.

Oh, rare and delicious treat!

Recently my head has started to nod if a conversation is slightly nervous and endures beyond the opening skirmishes or pleasantries. Nothing too serious, but noticeable. Such an agreeable old chap, don't you know! Well, the stress and agitation of being alone with Rachael





in the sun set it off immediately. Charitable as always, she said nothing about this nodding, which I know full well is perfectly visible and must look very odd, very ancient indeed. But, good Christian that she is, she said nothing. Actually, I can't believe in her as a serious church person. She's too damn *sensual*. I suspect a deeper life, a troubled, double life, maybe. Alex got her too young and no mistake, which is what caused the rift with her mother. On that thought, I asked how the reunion had gone, 'the great rapprochement', even though Alex had warned me not to. "Don't go there, Dad." But I don't like mysteries and I've got more guts than him.

She looked away, to Alex pushing Joe on the rope swing, but she wasn't really watching them.

"Not so well, I'm afraid." She was speaking to no one. "Long gaps aren't good for family relationships, I discovered."

"Bit hard," I prompted. "Bearing a grudge against your own daughter for twenty bloody years!"

"They kind of die out."

"Twenty bloody years! I ask you!"

"It's not quite like that."

"Oh? Why did she visit, then? What's up? Is she broke?" Always my first suspicion.

Still without looking at me, she said, "She's rich as Croesus, Antony."

"Hah!" I laughed. "Sounds like the kind of old bird I'd like to meet!"

Now she did look at me. "Maybe you will some day," she said, with that knowing, teasing smile she has, that suggests secret plans, schemes, duplicities. An actress's smile. "But you better watch out if she comes here, sees this place," she warned, still teasing. "Stay sharp." She turned





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back to look at Joe, who was shrieking on the rope swing now. Alex was pushing him wildly, with drunken abandon. Then she looked at me again, frowning and smiling at the same time, about to add some jibe she knew she shouldn't but just couldn't resist. "She's a gold-digger, though, Antony, not a grave-digger, so I don't think you'd get on."

Tee hee hee. I shrugged. Part of that shrug was a sadness to think that if the old girl really was rich, Alex didn't seem to be in line for a penny of it. Really, the way people's feelings interfere with what matters in life, with the hard arithmetic.

So I invited her to see my whisky advertisement. It's in a cupboard in my study. She'd pricked my vanity with that jibe about not getting on with her mysterious mother, not being rich enough or sharp enough for her.

When I retired, in between making notes for the great testament, one of the few ads for employment I took seriously was by Whyte & Mackay, for a screen test. Change of direction, one might say. It so happened I was exactly what they needed for their billboards, and for a few weeks of the winter of 1969 I was on watch all across the nation, beaming down on the snow and slush from decrepit corners in derelict northern towns, bearing down on the mink-stoled shoppers on Oxford Street and Piccadilly Circus, keeping an eye on city gnomes from across the tracks of Moorgate underground . . . What success the image had I do not know. Probably none at all because there was no offer of any further work. I was handsome enough, I suppose, but perhaps the military look was out of fashion by then to the right quarters of whisky-drunks. Be that as it may, a dozen of us had posed, and I was chosen. In a corner of a studio in Maida Vale, I sat in a buttoned leather club chair, wearing an army Captain's uniform (the common touch), surrounded by bookshelves,





panelled walls and lighting apparatus. There was a barley-twist standard lamp by a rosewood table, on which sat the bottle of Whyte & Mackay. The oaky light of a gentlemen's club, or regimental mess, fell from the lamp onto a cut crystal tumbler in my hand, and onto my swept back, brilliantined hair and sober smile. I keep the photo in a backed envelope on the top shelf of my gramophone cupboard. To get to the upper shelves I have a miniature step-ladder in there, which gave me the height to stare down Rachael's summer dress. Couldn't help myself. Couldn't miss a chance like that. Then I stood next to her in the cupboard while she looked at the photo. Her dark ringlets were so close to me, to my face, a thousand dark and mischievous silken ringlets. In the dimness of the cupboard she could have been a decade younger too, in her late twenties even.

"So that's what your study's all about," she said.

I took the photo back and looked at it myself.

"Quite the part, weren't you?" she added.

She was right to mock me. My study is panelled, but not with beautiful seasoned oak. I did it with contiboard. And the shelves around my recliner are all lined with the wrong books, of course – Whitaker's Almanac, Jackson's Factfinder, Hartrampf's Vocab-Builder, Harry Lorayne's How to Develop a Super-Power Memory . . .

"I wanted you to know how famous I once was, you see."

"Is that all?" she asked, raising her eyebrows, her arms folded lightly under her lovely breasts.

Oh, you're far too sharp for Alex, I thought. You must bring him some earthly misery, all right. Oh yes.

Muttering something about Joe, she slipped out the cupboard and away from my study, back to the cool hallway and the garden and her family.





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I went to the kitchen and made them tea and cut up the Madeira cake. I always buy a Madeira for their visits: Alex needs something sweet and spongy to soak up the wine before the drive back, though she drives more often than not these days. He kips in the front seat like an old man in a deck chair. I brought the tea and cake out on a tray and we sat in the last of the sunshine. She came round and poured the tea. Alex followed. Joe stayed still as a stopped clock on his rope swing, holding on for attention that he wasn't going to get, for once.

"I wish my wife were still alive," I said to Rachael, watching her pour for her husband, for me, "to see how you've brought Alex such happiness."

She glanced at me, then looked quickly down at the teacups, as if she'd given something away by meeting my pilot's eyes just then.

Which she had.

Not long after they'd gone, forty minutes or so, still plenty of light (they arrived late and left early, as usual) a Datsun Cherry, very red and ugly, came up the drive, with a middle-aged couple inside, the man driving. He took a long sweep, far too long, around my gravel and parked to face back down the drive. After switching off the engine he sat there a moment, staring ahead. He'd seen me watching from the kitchen window, sitting at the head of the refectory





table. I hadn't moved since Rachael's indicator light gave its farewell wink through the trees at the end of the drive.

The hatchback door of the Datsun was rusty beneath the number plate. D reg. All these Jap cars have me surrounded.

No one got out. He said something to his wife, or companion, nodding at the windscreen as he spoke, as if repeating something he'd said to her many times and which he now said yet again with spelled-out patience and irritation, as if what he was about to do was something that had to be done, gone through, endured, yet again, and there was no choice in the matter.

Who was it? A salesman? Insurance? But with his wife? Or some long forgotten relative come to seek me out. Driven all the way from the East Midlands, bearing momentous or portentous family news. Stories of the imminent bankruptcy of my millionaire nephews! Could I help? Could I see my way clear to . . . ?

Awful sorry, and all that.

He opened the door and set foot on my gravel, my drive. Brown, polished slip-ons with elasticated sides, and beige socks with a blue diamond pattern. Ah, my airman's eyes! He got out the car and stood there a moment, in his suede jacket and open shirt, hitching his trousers, cavalry twill, and taking in my house, my trees, the caw of my crows, the whole of my three acres. Then he turned, resolved, and shut the door. A short man, mid-fifties, with a puffy chest and narrow waist. An older version of Alex's body shape – this was a connection I did well to make, as it happened.

Missus stayed in the Datsun.

I went out to the porch and closed the kitchen door behind me before opening the back door. I stood waiting on the porch step. A couple of paces before he reached the





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step, he stopped and smiled and stretched out his hand, and for some reason he also set his head on one side, actually cocked his head at me, like a bird.

“Antony Rose?”

His hair was soft and brushed forward. It should have all been grey but instead it had a faded, nicotine tinge, as if he were an inveterate chain-smoker. His forelock didn't lie flat but curled inward and underward. Maybe his wife did that for him, curled his nicotine fringe. No sooner had I thought this than I knew it was true. She did that for him. Lucky fellow.

I had a tea towel over my arm.

“Can't shake hands,” I said. “Doing the dishes. Are you lost?” I said ‘lawst’. It just slipped out. “Are you selling something? If so, not today, thanks.”

He just smiled at all that and his crow's-feet wrinkled up around his nondescript brown eyes, and at the same time all these bird notions took flight. Suddenly I was a boy again, at the seaside, poking anemones with a bamboo cane I'd found on the beach.

“Group Captain Antony Rose, if I'm not mistaken, sir.”

She has done this, I thought. I know what this is about, all right. Oh yes. This is her work, and this is why they were late today; not what she said. This fellow was no autograph hunter in search of the last of The Few, even though the promotion to senior commissioned officer was just the kind of flattery I was accustomed to from those people.

He came forward the last two paces and took from his suede jacket a plastic box of business cards. He opened the box and removed one for me. I took it and looked at it. I stared at it so long I heard his slip-ons shift on the gravel.





The card was magnolia and luxuriously thick. On it was a sketch of a long, bleak building, reminiscent of a Victorian workhouse, but the lines of the building were broken up by trees in full green leaf. The trunks of the trees were shaped unnaturally with supple curves, and there was something about these curves that drew the eye. They made the trees sway in the breeze, like dancers. They were actually women's curves. The female form. A quite unbelievable crassitude.

The Grosvenor.

"Is this a hotel?"

"No, sir."

Proprietors: Frank and Jane Simmonds.

"Looks a bit shabby to me. I don't need a hotel anyway."

"The Grosvenor is a rest home, sir."

"Is it now?" I asked, stropping the card. Then I told him: "You'd better come in."

Extraordinary. Superhuman, the effrontery.

Little wonder Frank had to suppress his wife's doubts in the car.

Must get to the bottom of this, I thought. Sort this out, once and for all.

The Grosvenor, indeed. Always there has to be that idea of the upper classes, the idle rich. The Grosvenor, The Beaumont, The Windsor, The Mayfair, as if you were going to end your days strolling around private art galleries, racing enclosures, billiard rooms, tropical hot-houses . . .

Pretending that I hadn't noticed his wife, I closed the porch door behind him and ushered him through the kitchen door. I gestured to him – no words – to sit down at the refectory table. He did so, his back to the window. I remained standing.





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“Well?”

He knitted his hands and held them in front of him on the table. He looked at his knitted hands, touched thumbs before speaking again. I moved closer, to the opposite side of the table, the tea towel still over my arm.

“Just an enquiry, sir. Jane and I have been running The Grosvenor for thirteen years, which is long enough to know what our clients want, and how to provide it for them with the highest levels of comfort and security.”

“Who told you to come here?”

“Your reaction is understandable, and not uncommon, Mr Rose. No one told us to come here. No one at all. Your son and daughter-in-law – a delightful couple, if I may say so, and a great credit to you – came to look round The Grosvenor. That is all.”

“My son told you to come here? Or was it her?”

“No. He did not. They did not. Emphatically, they did not, sir. I took it upon myself.” He looked up, all earnestness and deep concern. “What we offer is best described first hand, and in a friendly, non-threatening and open way, prior to any visit.”

“Any visit? Any *visit*?” But I had to block my anger. Had to think. Get to the bottom of it. “Well, now. Are you expensive?”

“We’re at the top of the market, sir.”

“Because I haven’t any money. Did he tell you that?”

“It wouldn’t be a problem.”

“No?”

“We would handle all that – valuation, solicitors, everything.”

“Ah . . . I understand,” I said. “At least, I think I do.”

The nodding had started. I was nodding at him as if I agreed with him. The excitement was too much for the old





pipes and wires, despite my tiresome walks around the three acres, my attempts to keep fit, stay strong, stay sharp, on guard, for this kind of thing; defend oneself to the last from the plots and schemes and machinations, the bloody enemy, the traitors all around.

“From what I understand, sir, with your pensions – ”

I raised a hand to stop him – couldn’t bear it – but I had to find some other movement to channel the excitement away. I took the tea towel from over my arm and folded it neatly and set it over the back of the kitchen chair, opposite Frank Simmonds. I smoothed the tea towel over the back of the chair.

“What I have to do,” I said, looking down, smoothing the tea towel along its blue stripes, as if it were some precious flag, “is speak to my son about this.” I sounded a little faint and cleared my throat. “About this visit. Your visit. Not mine. Not my visit to you, to the Grosvenor. Your visit to me, to the rectory. Because it is most unwelcome, you see. Your visit. Most unwelcome. Do you understand?”

He got up immediately, but not in any hurry or panic. “I do understand, sir, and I am very sorry.”

He’d queered the pitch and he knew it.

I stood back and let him open the door himself, then followed him into the porch. The porch was full of cobwebs and leaves, I noticed, seeing it with my guest’s eyes. I let him open the porch door as well.

But his car was empty.

She was having a stroll around the grounds!

“That’s funny!” he said, embarrassed.

We heard a crunch of gravel as she came round from the front of the house.

He laughed. “There you are!”

“Lovely place you have here, Group Captain!” she





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declared, very brazen, looking up at me. I hadn't moved from the porch step above her.

Every pore of her face had been filled in. It was as if her hair had been tied back from her head while her face was dipped, like an animal's butt, in some chemical slime. The grease of it was all over her neck too. Her hair was raven black and far too long – the wild gypsy look. She was not a woman yet, just an adolescent in her early fifties. Everything garish, pubescent. She wore bulbous, sea shell earrings that looked far too heavy to be comfortable, and fistfuls of sunken treasure barnacled her fingers. She looked away from me and down the sweep of the drive. It's a two hundred yard curve to the gate and the lane beyond. Two hundred yards minimum. Quite magnificent. These people, these gypsies, do not belong here, not to my slice of Norfolk, my slice of England. They have no right to be here. No right to listen to my crows cawing, my pigeons cooing. No more right than Rachael has to sell it from under my feet.

“Take the guts out of a million,” said Simmonds. He glanced up at me and nodded, appraising, respectful. Ah, the stupendous power of money.

I withdrew and closed the porch door without another word for either of them. But I stayed in the porch, watching, until they'd both turned and walked back to the Datsun with whatever dignity they could muster, opened the doors, climbed in and started it up. That rusty tailgate. D reg. He waved out the window before putting on his seat belt, and then she lowered the window and waved her coral rings halfway down the drive.

Well. It has begun.





The new Leisure Pool is a large, black-timbered bungalow on the edge of town, sunk fifty yards from the ring road on a concrete plinth. The PVC windows are not the usual aching white but a soft shade of burgundy, which in the rain gives the whole place a red-rimmed and rather tearful aspect. You park round the back. Beyond the new galvanized fence, always dripping with dew for some reason, are open, shiny, slimy fields, on all sides. At the moment the soil is freshly ploughed and black, and the fields are empty. Autumn. No movement anywhere. Under a grey sky *The Leisure Pool, off the Ring Road in Wet Fields*, is a study in oils from my private collection: Rural Life, Circa 2000.

In bathing trunks I am what I am: foul hollows, hairy tufts, unsightly folds. But for someone in his late-seventies, any doctor would tell you I'm in good shape. Fairly lithe and supple. Work hasn't flogged the life out of me, and I'm not fat or sick from its compensatory ills – too much drink, food, self-indulgence. Gave up smoking decades ago. I've always looked after myself, kept reasonably fit. Hence this new venture, The Leisure Pool, which is free on Mondays and Wednesdays for gentlemen of a certain age, between 8.00 a.m. and 10.00 a.m. I have Male Changing (such crass signage) entirely to myself.

For my first dip I dug out a pair of navy blue trunks that I hadn't used for twenty years. They were exposing, repulsive. For my second I swapped them for some colourful baggy shorts – the things teenagers wear. My legs stick out, knobbly-kneed and spiky, in exactly the way men's legs stick out on those lewd seaside postcards. I am the living inspiration for those ageless cartoons.

That first dip, however, in the twenty-year old





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trunks, didn't go entirely as foreseen. I executed a graceful swallow dive, very pleasing – but felt the tepid water rush over me like a premonition. After just a few strokes, as the blue base of the pool began to lighten below, I felt my lower half falling, failing, then slowing me down, pulling me under. I didn't look – I couldn't – but I knew the lifeguard was watching from his elevated seat. I stopped moving and let my feet carry on to the bottom. But there was no bottom. Before I could really believe what was happening I was beneath the surface without any air inside me. I pushed up and snatched a wild gasp.

“Take hold!”

Then there was just the blue, and the heavy black lines on the bottom, and the sense that I must not breathe, *must* not breathe, though my chest felt crushed by fifty fathoms. Arms and legs started an automatic, useless floundering against the thickening blue. Then the red ring pushed at me, under me, nudged my flank, a hard red ring on a wooden pole. I took it and in a moment I had surfaced, and the drama was over. Air! Sweet, warm, chlorinated air! Crouched at the poolside, the lifeguard was drawing in the pole very cautiously, just a few inches at a time.

“Don't move. Hold. Tight as you can.”

Oh, the soft, tepid, chlorinated air!

At the side I reached instinctively for the guttering.

“No. The ring. Keep hold of the ring. I've got you.”

He trapped the pole under his knee, reached under my shoulders and clamped me there, then drew me out the pool as if I were a child. He set me on the tiles and clasped my hands about my knees and made me rest with my head forward, on my knees, while he held me steady. After a minute he must have been assured there would be no need for an ambulance and he took his hands away.





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“Shallow end for you, matey.”

“Yes,” I muttered between my legs. “Oh yes . . . Thank you . . . Thank you . . .”

I was acutely aware of my ancient blue swimming trunks at that moment. Their perished elastic and bobbed fabric.

“Might get yourself a new cozzie, too.”

Just three weeks ago this young man saved my life, yet now we are sworn enemies. There you have the fickleness of the human heart! Who’d go to war over what people feel or think? Ridiculous. I now see this lifeguard as a lout, a lump, an idiot; and to him, I am – what? Just a pain in the arse. I can hear him say it. Pain in the arse. Or, ‘that old shit’. Something excremental, of course. I am the new irritant in his life, the spoiler of Monday’s and Wednesday’s precious rites.

The sauna too is available free of charge to us ancients on Mondays and Wednesdays, between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. It’s tucked around the corner from the second row of showers. No signs anywhere. And pinned to the door, along with the manufacturer’s official warnings and disclaimers, is a long laminated list of forbidding, misspelled rules in blue felt-tip. The lifeguards’ work.

When I discovered the sauna the second lifeguard was already in there. They should both be at the poolside, of course, but for my swim they take it in turns. The other is always in the sauna. Until I came along I suppose they were accustomed to sharing a sauna together, and a swim and shower afterwards, perhaps, before they took breakfast in the cafeteria. Full English, on the house, whipped up on Mondays and Wednesdays by the flirty, frumpy mum behind the counter. The lifeguards are her ‘lads’. The pool doesn’t reopen to the public until 10.30, so in effect they begin work





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no less than two and a half hours late, after a sauna, dip and free breakfast, all at the local burghers' expense.

My arrival has changed all that. I like the sauna too. Worse still, I might tell my friends about the empty pool and the empty sauna. I might bring along a coachload of elderly, unsightly, sinking, stinking bodies for them to deal with. I have interfered with their laziness, their peace of mind, their withdrawal from work and responsibility, and they hate me for that. Yet three weeks ago one of them saved my life.

If I sauna before I swim, which guard will be in there when I open the door, and will he be naked? The one who didn't save me – Aaron – tries to embarrass me away by appearing stretched out like a pornography item on a lower shelf. Or sitting hams on hands, glistening with sweat, stony-faced and overbearing. It doesn't work. I like the sauna. I take it twice a week. It's free. It keeps the colds away.

My rescuer was Mark. I've picked up their names from echoey shouts in the changing rooms and across the pool, and from flirty mumsy in the empty café. How can we get used to living together, to intersecting here twice a week, we three? And now things are complicated by the arrival of a pretty, Mediterranean looking school-leaver, on trial as the new cashier/receptionist. She smiles perpetually at everyone. Mummy and Daddy must have told her she has a nice smile and that she should use it, profit by it, until someone wipes it from her face. So she sits in her glass booth smiling, in her best skirt and blouse, white and navy, not much more than a school uniform, which also smiles in its own way, safe, warm, snug, a lump of sex-bait in a keepnet for the long-jawed pike – Mark and Aaron. The whole bungalow's hot as a hospital, paid for by the bourgeois burghers who never use the pool or sauna, who don't even know about it yet or want to know about it. Every day, at





stroke of eight, she enters her cashier's booth, takes off her red-riding-hood winter coat, and her lambs' wool scarf, and organizes her belongings – handbag, packed lunch, magazine – and then what? She deals with me. And then what? She deals with some lewd approaches from Mark or Aaron, or the pair of them together. (Since her arrival, I've heard them laugh and brag in the changing rooms of Aaron's prowess as a "virgin-buster".) And then what? She checks her face in her compact. She reads her magazine. She eats an egg sandwich at elevenses. She silently breaks wind but the smell is trapped safely in her booth. She serves a young mother and her children. She checks the time. She checks the rolls of tickets, the neat silver rows of brand new locker keys. A large family comes in and she checks the ages of everyone. Some enter free, some don't.

There are those, like Alex – pacifists of course – who deride my years in uniform as too easy and protected, a withdrawal from the challenges of civilian life, shut away in camps and compounds, everything found, clinging to the breast of the state. But I'd have it all over again, every day of it, not change a minute of it, up to this very moment, stuck in my grand, freezing, rural slum with my bills and isolation, I'd play every game of patience out at two or three a.m., rather than have what this girl has now. Youth in a booth. Life suspended from the hands of a swimming pool clock. And the long hours drag round to what? To the astrology chart in her magazine, to tonight's video, to the better life in the new millennium.

When I leave, my unsightly tracksuit covered up by my charcoal Crombie, my towel and costume in a bright orange roll under my arm, my wet hair scraped from my shiny, protuberant brows, and my face a touch raw and blotchy from the sauna, when I leave I knock on the glass





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of her booth with my car keys. She's deep in her magazine. Startled, she looks up into my dentured smile.

“Bye!” I say loudly, still smiling. “Have a nice day!”

“Bye for now,” she says, flustered, smiling back. She gives a short wave, from the wrist only. “. . . See you later.”

Have a nice day!

See you later!

Enjoy!

The Leisure Pool doors open automatically. I pass through but stop under the phoney black eyes of the bungalow as if it were raining, but it is not raining. The doors shut behind me. The car park lies empty before me like a runway, under the low dead belly of the autumn sky.

Where to? Where to now?

Nowhere. Nowhere. Nowhere.

Only Home, and no one.

More than a hundred empty spaces.

Mine the only car. A lozenge. A metallic oyster Austin Allegro, set square in the new white lines like some piece on a board game, pointing this way, pointing to me, waiting for me. What a picture this is – another study in oils. Paint the Battle of Britain pilot, still sprightly, still dapper in his old-fashioned way, exiting The Leisure Pool in his charcoal Crombie, over navy blue tracksuit, in his ancient, balding, suede Hush Puppies, with his stub of orange towel rolled under his arm, walking across the empty car park, catch him mid-step, under the louring sky, ten feet from his oyster Austin Allegro. My existence is full of these studies in oils. Every day brings a new masterpiece. Paint a fat young Dad coming out the automatic doors of B&Q, Sunday morning, with a sheet of orange melamine on his shoulders, hurrying across the car park in the rain. Paint the hairdresser knocking off early Friday lunchtime, hastily locking his door behind





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him, setting out at brisk pace for orange scampi-in-a-basket at The Boar's Head . . . Such delights! Such joys!

But the prize – the Turner prize – goes to Youth in a Booth, to the schoolgirl's face, looking up so startled and anxious from her magazine, that fleeting guilt and panic in her eyes at the sharp rap of my car keys on the glass, and then her relieved and grateful smile, and her eyes glazing over as she's drawn back by the impulses in her lap beneath the soft folds of her navy skirt, and her marigold magazine. She's grateful to me for being only what I am, not her boss or Mark or Aaron, with their predatory demands, but just me, a set of smiling dentures in an elderly, pink and lonely face, leering into her teenage soul.

What flesh. So soft, unwrinkled, full-lipped. Her wonderfully dark and stupid eyes. A well-loved face. A girl much cherished by her father, no doubt. Some Latin lover who brought the genes for those doey eyes to these hard, cold, dirty shores, which I defended with my life more than half a century ago.

Fifty-nine years ago this year. There was another fuss, but I ignored it, as usual. There'll be a fuss every year now, as we die out, one by one.

And so there bloody well should be.

“These damn bills!”

“What about them?”

“Can't pay! Won't pay!”





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“Oh, come on, Dad. They’re your bills. Not mine.”

“You’re falling at the first fence, Alex!”

“We’ll talk next month . . .”

I’m leaving the other business – the Grosvenor business, Mr & Mrs Simmonds business – until the next visit. Make it count. Might leave it until they’re actually getting back in the Micra and I’m about to wave goodbye – surprise attack, show a little forethought. *“Will you be dropping by The Grosvenor on your way home?”* Too messy, though, perhaps. Too bloody. Less chance of control than on the phone.

Which is in a broom cupboard in the freezing hallway. All year round it’s cold and damp in there. From early autumn your breath actually condenses on the wallpaper. The skirting is coming off the wall. It’s a horrible place to communicate. I lined it with the same wallpaper – thick, red, embossed in gold – that I’d used in the dining room. Some tarty idea of class I had in the sixties. Lack of background showing through again. To her credit, Laura said nothing at the time. I’d put weeks of work into the dining room and I’d kept it locked and hidden throughout, till I was ready to show her. A true labour of love. She could be sensitive when she wanted to be. But I can’t remember what inspired this phone booth. Why did I make it? It was an ample cupboard, of the kind found in plentiful supply in rectories, halls, manses and so on, and very useful. Why couldn’t I just leave it alone? Why this doll’s house idea of converting it into a telephone booth? To imagine the younger self in here with scrapers, brushes, knives, a bucket of wallpaper paste, hanging that saloon bar wallpaper with such loving care . . . Ridiculous. Just the waste of it all, the small sad waste of time.

I closed the door and retreated to my study. There





are only two rooms I keep warm downstairs – kitchen and study. Upstairs I move my bed into the bathroom as soon as the evenings draw in. It's heated, after a fashion, by the immersion tank in the airing cupboard. Downstairs the kitchen and study are warmed by my fan heaters and our ancient Belling tower convectors. Each of these rooms is at the opposite ends of the house, connected by the hallway, the no-man's-land. Even at the height of summer you never stop in the hallway, unless summoned by the phone. There's a multifuel burner I installed thirty years ago in the study, but in one's seventy-ninth year coal has little charm. I bought a lorry load of logs last autumn and swore to keep the fire in day and night from mid-October, but I was conned: the logs were damp and green and fly-tipped on the gravel before I'd a chance to protest. Some burly peasant woke me up banging at the study window.

“Logs!”

I stayed still when he woke me, face of stone, and stared at him from my recliner. Stared at his gestures, his invasion, his red, weathered, unshaven, trollish, peasant face, his shiny stubble in the afternoon light.

“Logs!”

His yellow teeth. His dirty knitted hat, navy blue, like a trawler fisherman.

“Logs!”

In the end I gave them all away to a family in the village who had storage to dry them out.

So I went to Alex with my electricity bills. I know he can't pay them from his churchmouse salary, but he could come to some arrangement with the bank, as I keep telling him. The house is his. Laura left everything to him. I can't sell a stick of the contents either. That's how bad things were at the end. The house was in her name, bought





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with her inheritance, and she made Alex her executor. She wrote in the will that I could live here as long as I wished, but that's granted under the law anyway, thanks very much, dear wife of mine. Not something you could ever bequeath me, my love. She left me nothing. Absolutely nothing. So I say to Alex – go to the bank and borrow on the house, use the cash to pay the bills and do some maintenance, keep the place weatherproof. Fix the central heating. I want to be free of these things, these responsibilities. He won't have it. Stalwart Christian that he is, he'd rather I froze to death out here than put himself in hock to the bank.

But these days I suspect there's more to it, some other strategy, hatched by his lovely wife. Some secret plan. If my existence here becomes not only too uncomfortable but plain damn unaffordable, I may be more inclined to move out. Well, I've made my offer: buy me a bungalow by the shops. Or build me one. Still time. Not some rented dump full of third-hand furniture – *buy* me something decent outright, off-plan, gas-central heating, and do it out nicely. New television. Lovely bathroom suite. Show-home kitchen. You'll have the cash from the house, I tell Alex, and the bungalow to sell when I'm dead, and I'll be warm all year round for the first time in my bloody life. I'd sign a contract leaving everything to him. An irrevocable contract. Everything, dear boy. Dear son of mine. But he won't do it. He says this is not the time to sell a rectory in three acres. Best hang on, he says. We have to wait for the right 'window', he says. Meanwhile all my windows are rotten and I'm freezing to death in here! I've been hanging on by myself for twelve bloody years! I need warmth and shelter now, Alex – not when you can make a killing on the property market. Then he says, What about my attachment to the place? Where would I put all Laura's stuff in a bungalow?





She has some valuable pieces, heirlooms: the card table, the dining table, the piano. Where would I put these things? He says his house is too small to take the dining table, let alone the piano – well, I don't know because I've never been there, to where they live, but this stuff is worthless junk anyway, nothing to worry about. He won't let me sell the piano for a hundred quid to pay a damn electricity bill. The house must stay as it is, he says. You cannot live in empty rooms, he says. Besides, he's attached to the piano. Why? You could never play the bloody thing, I tell him. I chafe him now as I chafed him as a schoolboy.

One winter exeat, which I hadn't been looking forward to for some reason – we'd begun to live beyond our means and I was irritable the whole time – I told him I'd cancelled his piano lessons. They weren't worth it, I told him. He'd taken to working out Beatles tunes in the treble clef and improvising pop numbers of his own. He played a lot of rubbish and I told him so. He burst into tears, ran from the dining table. I'd ruined the Sunday lunch. Laura was upset too, of course. Sunday lunch (we didn't bother with it on our own) was his last treat, she said, virtually in tears herself. Then she was quiet and sombre, and I wondered how I could make amends on the journey back to his school, just a couple of hours away.

But why did I never love my son?

The answer is simple, and I have known it all too long.

It is because I did not do the work. I did not change the nappies, I did not feed him, wash him, brush his hair, did not clean his teeth for him when they finally appeared, after all that sleepless, teething misery – I remember that well enough, of course – in fact, I hardly ever bathed him, the very least a dad is meant to do. But above all, and I





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know this is the worst, the very heart of it: I never played with him. I made things, did things, but that's not the same. I made him a desk to study at on his own, a tree house to get him out into the garden, an attic playroom to shove him upstairs. I put the train set on trestles, and made My First Science Lab safe under a foldaway hood. But no good, no good, My First Science Lab safe under a foldaway hood.

Once he was away at school some golden years followed. We spent my commuted pension on the central heating and a new bathroom. I did the decorating: humble origins coming into their own at last. It was my father's trade. I took great trouble and it became a source of pride, my thoroughness and the quality of my craftsmanship. She appreciated that. She came back from work and noted my progress from room to room, ceiling to ceiling. In the evenings we lit a fire and played Scrabble or read the papers, watched a programme or two, nothing much. We felt a vague unease about how peaceful life had become, how much less work it all was, without Alex around. So much less noise and mess and stress. No doors banging, no thumping up and down stairs, no jumpers and rubber boots all over the place. I could listen to my favourite musicals uninterrupted – *The Music Man*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Oklahoma*, *My Fair Lady*, *The Desert Song* . . . Funny how much I despise that stuff now, as we all do, as if it were the rubbish of childhood. Garish, tawdry sentimentality. The stuff of Radio 2. David Jacobs. These days I become obsessed for months with the classics. Gould's Goldberg Variations. Brigitte Engerer's Chopin nocturnes. Just these two have lasted me nearly a year. Never wear thin.

With Alex away there was peace at last and I could put the finishing touches to my study, my own nest.

Ah, by law, no man – No Man! – should be allowed





to build a study, a nest! Nests are not for humans. They are for mice and rats and birds. Yet you see them everywhere in England, and books are full of them, particularly English novels. Cosy studies, book-lined hideaways – shelves lined with books full of book-lined hideaways! – Sherlock Holmes' womb in Baker Street, Oxbridge college rooms with glowing fires – oh, so many lovely *dens*! There's no end to it. Such a regressive, infantile, English thing.

Life outside didn't count. The upheaval of the sixties was foreign news. We became too contented, I suppose, with each other's company: with talking about the garden, about decorating projects, about cooking and suchlike. A sense of progress, purpose. Rebuilding and reforming. The dates ringed on the calendar for Alex's exeats and holidays became for me (but never for Laura) like dental appointments or bills due.

Alex didn't mind his new life too much, not after the first year or so of bullying and finding his feet. The school was religious and he was game for that. He needed to believe in another Love by then, I should think. He shut up his feelings, in that boarding school way, and became altogether much less taxing when he came home. He became well-mannered, too. Self-contained, self-possessed. Nothing much seemed to surprise him, for good or ill. Yearly reports were average or mediocre but never poor.

He was good with his hands – something from me, and my own father, I suppose – sports and crafts, and that went down well at his place. When he was twelve they let him make a go-kart, a proper machine. The engine had to be specially ordered. A Clinton two-stroke, 50cc. I had to pay £40 for it in advance with a cheque to the bursar's office. One exeat in the spring, in May it must have been, when the thing was finished and they'd trialled it for safety, we





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brought it home on the old dinghy trailer, and as a surprise treat took a detour to a disused aerodrome in east Norfolk. Laura had planned the route for me and she'd made a picnic. I had a gallon of fuel prepared, two-stroke mix. Bardahl oil, only the best. And nothing went wrong. A military operation, all according to plan. We filled up the tank, I pushed him off and the engine burst into life straightaway. Wonderful smell of the two-stroke exhaust on the chilly aerodrome air. He went thrashing down the strip at top speed, about 25 m.p.h.

While he toured the aerodrome we sat and read the Saturday papers in the car, ate the picnic and drank coffee from the Thermos. Half an hour or so passed uneventfully. Then, after he'd buzzed by us for the umpteenth time, all went quiet. We looked down the aerodrome but he was out of sight. "Fuel," I said. "He's run out of fuel, that's all." Of course, Laura was worried and wanted to move the car, but the picnic stuff was still out and I was sure nothing serious could have happened at 25 m.p.h. "Stay here," I told her. "I want the walk anyway." I fetched the can and funnel from the boot and set off down the runway on my own.

But the real reason I walked off alone was that I didn't want Laura there when I found him. I wanted to have my son to myself for a moment. Maybe there was some mechanical problem we could talk about and sort out. I'd ask how the kart handled, how fast he thought it went, something like that.

Only then, walking down the runway with the can and funnel in hand, actually pacing the concrete, did I think of all the other aerodromes and airfields – the rough grass airfields, and the hastily pasted concrete aerodromes like this one – all over East Anglia, Lincolnshire, Humberside, Kent and the south east, that we'd flown from about thirty years before. Thirty years! Because this must have been 1970





or thereabouts. Just thirty years. I'd never been stationed near this one but I'd flown from strips just like it, and I'd maybe flown past this one, over this one, or damn near it, only thirty years before that day. My tyres coming down and hitting concrete just like this at Watnall or later Coltishall – now a prison, for goodness' sake. But it was at that moment, walking along the runway with the can and funnel in hand, staring down at the tufts of dandelions and wild oats in the shuttering cracks, that I realized the past, my past, was not what I'd always taken it to be. My life didn't exist as an unrolling record, a pilot's log – nothing like that. There was no accumulating biography, no epic account, as I'd always imagined, that could be set down as testament of some kind, though testament to what I've never really had much idea. Rather, my past only floated about, like spores, in other people's memories, and just the memories of those in the same narrative, same War and Peace. Like the dandelion spores across the concrete, but in other people's minds, across the mad, backyard junk of other people's minds. When a person forgot about me or died there was some shrinkage, until bit by bit the whole thing just disappeared, the story wasn't remembered by anyone, wasn't told any more, and then it ceased to exist, it was erased. It literally had never happened. The concrete felt solid beneath my feet and I knew well enough what I was doing and where I was heading, but this new sense of the story of my life to date, in which I'd taken some pride, and which I'd wanted to set down, record – this new sense that it was only a story, no matter how precious, or to whom so precious – had taken hold.

Ten years before my walk down that runway, in 1960, the American airman Joseph Kittinger was suspended by helium balloon in a basket more than nineteen miles up.





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The glove of his pressure suit split during the ascent and his hand swelled to twice its size and his wrist began to bleed, but he didn't tell ground control and kept going. Beneath him he saw Earth as no one had ever seen it before, and no one has seen it since. Once his trip was done, it was for all time. He *felt* outer space behind him, actually there, behind him, over his shoulder – oblivion, blankness, nothingness, call it what you will, both at and on his very shoulder, behind his back. No abstractions. No artistic representation, no poetry, no philosophical or religious idea, for Joseph Kittinger this was a physical sensation, a first-hand physical experience. He felt it, the dark, the endless dark, at his shoulder, for fourteen minutes, the time it took before the basket aligned itself to the trajectory for his landing in the Mojave Desert, and he had to jump, from nineteen miles up. He understood in a way no one else can have understood before or since, suspended there in his broken suit, his wrist bleeding, that nothing at all exists outside our green envelope, our accidental planet. And he had the integrity to say as much, later, when he'd recovered and he was interviewed. Just on account of a technical enquiry into new parachute design, he became the only man in history, and a fit, strong, sane and mature man, to look down on the earth from the point of view of a descending angel, and to know with an absolute certainty in that moment, that all such speculation and wondrous imagery about angels, gods, or extra-terrestrial life of any kind, all philosophical or religious enquiry about the nature of what we really know and don't know, was just so much solipsism, the chatter of men and women down there in the forests, the streets, the deserts, or in the churches of suburbia or the magnificent cathedrals of our much vaunted cities. Nineteen miles up, with outer space pressing at his shoulder, bleeding lightly at





the wrist, it was impossible for Kittinger not to understand that there is nothing but oblivion ahead, and behind. The rest is accompaniment, chatter, music, hope, prayers to nothing, and to no one. He could not help but understand the truth of that. The ineluctable fact of it.

Alex was sitting in the go-kart at the side of the strip next to a fresh hillock of de-icing grit. Norfolk County Council supplies for the winter. Such forward planning! He didn't turn as I approached. Funny that he should have felt the need to leave the road, as it were, when there was not another soul about. It also struck me that he hadn't got out of the kart, nor started back towards the car to fetch more fuel himself. Uneasiness returned, instinctive fear for my own flesh and blood. Of course, I knew Laura and I had been escaping something, sending our boy away and dedicating our lives to our home, ourselves, instead of to him, as was our duty. There was always this cumulative sense of things unpaid for beyond the school fees, whose dreadful burden distracted us from this other debt. Was he sitting there crying his heart out in his go-kart, sensing, on the soulless runway, under the grey and indifferent skies, under the shadow of next winter's de-icing grit, his own absolute aloneness in the universe, and our unforgivable neglect? A bit premature, such intimations of mortality, surely?

I became more worried when, as I approached, he yanked the steering wheel from side to side, as if he were bent upon destroying this thing on which he'd spent so much of his love, and so much of our money. The kart was a very bright, glossy, post-box red, and as solid and heavy and safe as a post-box too. On hearing my approach, without looking back at me, he lifted himself out, knelt down and undid the petrol tank cap.

“Out of gas?” I asked, mock-American.





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He looked up, frowning. His forelock, flattened by the 25 m.p.h. headwind, was fanned low across his brow. His hair was mousy then, and his skin peppered with blackheads.

“You forgot the oil,” he said.

I shook the can and smiled, kept up the American: “Ready-mixed, kid . . .”

“Oh.”

He held his hand out for the can and funnel.

No, Well done, Dad. Or, Thanks, Dad. I so much wanted him to say something like that just then.

I dropped the funny voices, then dropped to my knees behind the kart.

“This is really well made, Alex. Zooms round, doesn’t it?”

Good God, what words to choose! I could feel him wince. I touched the flanges of the cylinder, examined cables and welds, trying too hard, while he refilled the tank.

“A full tank lasts forty-six minutes,” he said. “I timed it. I’ll make sure I stop near the car next time.”

“You weren’t to know, Alex.”

He looked at me. “Of course I wasn’t!” He left the funnel in the jerry-can. “That’s why I timed it!”

I stood up, gave up.

“I’ll give you a push.”

He ducked the thankyou by making a show of scrutinizing the carburettor, as if I didn’t know what a carburettor was. Then he pulled the front of the kart round from the grit mountain to face into the runway again and climbed back in. I pushed him off without another word. Pull and push.

At fifty yards he gave a short wave, speeding away as fast he could.





Today I got rid of Mason, which took the best part of the morning. I covered the back seat of the Allegro with an old tartan travel rug, stained with picnic memories, and enticed him in there with some dog-biscuits and the scent of a $\frac{1}{4}$ pound scrag of lamb, the cheapest loose meat the butcher could offer. Once we were on our way, I stuffed that in the glove-box, safely wrapped in a polythene bag.

We drove north and west for an hour, Mason and I, deep into the fens, then headed onto B roads and finally a lonely farm track. My map reading skills remain impeccable. The journey could not be too long or he'd need to excrete, but it had to be long enough to establish a distance from which we could never meet again; about seventy miles, I reckoned. I got him out the car easily enough and he immediately urinated against the rear wheel; while he did so, I closed the door on him forever. The lamb was already in my pocket. I walked ten yards away, towards the gated entrance of a field. The spot was wonderfully remote and desolate for such a farewell. The engine of a faraway tractor turning in the headlands the only sound, and just a few inky trees and a solitary farm building sketched on the grey horizon. From the map I knew these belonged to the estate of East Winch Farm. Mason's soon-to-be-adopted home, perhaps. It sounded like the place for a hard life but no worse than what he was accustomed to. I hung the bag of meat on the gate handle and rent it to release the full force





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of its scent, and let nature take care of the rest. In the rear view mirror I saw him guzzling away as I drove off. After a moment's indecision, head dipping to and fro, he left the meat and gave chase. But I was already doing twenty miles an hour. After a few seconds he fell back exhausted by the sprint, and I carried on to the B road junction and headed south and east towards home sweet home.

On return, I made the call. In the mood for it.

“Why did you send him?”

“We didn't.”

“So who did?”

I leant against the shelf in the freezing telephone cupboard and gripped it with my free hand till my speckled knuckles were white and bloodless.

“Dad, he came to see you of his own accord. We didn't tell him to come. Calm down. We didn't send him. Fact.”

“I swim twice a week now, you know. I take saunas too. I use a computer every day. Physically and mentally I am perfectly fit. Did Rachael put you up to it? Hmmn? You should keep a more independent mind, Alex. Did she? Was it her? I'm getting a bit suspicious of your lovely wife.”

“Shut up, Dad. You've got it all wrong. All wrong.”

“Explain.”

A pause, a sigh.

“We have to think long term. Someone has to. But

