

So yes, if I'd been in any way superstitious, I might have taken that vision – the appearance of that miserable, wretched creature – as some sort of terrible omen. Who can say? The others hadn't arrived at that point – apart from Nick, that is, and I'm not sure Nick saw what I saw.

We'd agreed to meet in the All Day Breakfast café pretty much opposite Ladbroke Grove tube station and I was first there, so I took a table with a decent view of the street. Not actually in the window itself – I was feeling far too raw for that – but set back a bit. I was more excited than nervous, I expect – yet suspicious, thanks to some deeper instinct, of both tendencies. I am not by nature a joiner: not a supporter of causes or grand adventures; not even a frequenter of clubs and societies. No-one of any intelligence and discrimination will be wholly unquestioning of the motives of anyone who invites you to bend your individuality to the common will. So here I was, absolutely prepared to play my part; yet reserving the right (so I thought) to do so in a somewhat ironic, distanced fashion.

Eleven came and went. My tea cooled. The world passed by the café window. I glanced regularly, compulsively, at the clock.

Nick was next to arrive. No greeting, just the merest hint of a nod, the tiniest suspicion of a raised eyebrow as he passed my table and headed up towards the counter. That look (mischievous, capricious) of devilry across his face. At first blush, you'd be forgiven for finding something terribly preening and self-

satisfied in that look. When I first met Nick, I thought he was going to irritate me beyond distraction. Everything about him seemed so false. So contrived. So pretentious. Nothing, where Nick was concerned, could ever be simple and straightforward – everything, no matter how mundane and banal, had to be reinvented from scratch. People like that can be terribly tiresome. Or, actually, just plain tiring. But I've always seen something else too. There's a melancholy and an almost terrible self-consciousness lying beneath the mischievousness, the sort of melancholy that may make you forgive anything.

Almost anything. It was also true that he could sulk terribly. He would deny you his eyes for what seemed like forever, then, in the full knowledge of their devastating effect (they were very blue) turn them on you with what felt like a dismissive shrug. Then it would be time for the contemplation of more mischief.

He returned with a coffee in a chipped mug. And in truth, this was one of those moments when I could have hugged him. I'd had visions of sitting here for hours, calculating every five minutes how much longer I should leave it. Now Nick was here I wouldn't feel such a fool, though obviously the others wouldn't turn up, not in a million years. In which case we, me and Nick, could pretend we'd just met by chance and whiled away a morning – which, after all, had happened a thousand times before. Or could have done.

“Nice day for it,” I said.

“Others been and gone?” he replied, flippantly, to no-one in particular as he sat in opposite me. He added a sachet of brown sugar to his coffee, stirred vigorously and then, as if he’d just remembered that it (who knows what) was all too much, he slumped into the depths of his plastic bucket seat.

And that’s when I saw him. It. Beyond Nick, over his shoulder, outside. Wretched, naked, dirty, ill, a man at the end of his tether. A man of my own age, similar build, he stumbled, fell forwards, caught himself, then leant heavily on the café window for support. He seemed to have been sobbing and it cost him a great effort to draw in a deep lungful of air.

Nick must have sensed something too for he sat up and tried to twist in his seat to see over his shoulder. For a fleeting moment the wretched creature outside caught my eye, beyond despair, beyond pleading.

The moment passed.

Nick began sliding into his former slumped posture.

And then he caught my eye and did a double-take. “Heavens,” he said. “Are you OK?”

I barely heard him. He sat up, an urgency about him now, and he glanced over his shoulder towards the window once or twice – as if some sort of danger could still be present. He’d have been on his feet I suppose, alert to all sorts of possibilities, if I hadn’t snapped out of it.

“Sorry, Nick. It’s OK.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes Nick. Of course.”

And so he relaxed, though I couldn't help feeling he was relieved more for himself than for me. I let go too.

He blew his cheeks out. “You had me worried there. You went as white as a sheet.”

“Sorry,” I said. “Just someone I thought I recognised.”

And I almost bit my lip as I said this. This was not the thing to say to Nick. He was always accusing me of keeping my friends from him. Or, more generally, or having a secret life. So I hastily added: “Nick? Was he naked? I didn't imagine that, did I?”

It was a stupid thing to say – and Nick, toying with an empty sugar sachet once more, merely rolled his eyes theatrically. As if to say, how *recherché*. Exhibitionists. The things they'll get up to.

And so, I suppose, we let it pass.

Peter was next to arrive. Sort of. Suddenly he was there, looming over our table and giving us his usual greeting – something that sounded suspiciously like, “Ow do.” We were all sure there was a hint of something northern, Yorkshire perhaps, in his voice. And there was something old-fashioned about his mannerisms that seemed to confirm this northern-ness: the way for instance that he would give this little (forefinger to forehead, just above his eyebrow) salute to acknowledge you in passing. Just that salute, maybe a nod of the head, nothing more, certainly no words. It was almost beyond parody.

Though he wasn't exactly tall, I don't think you could ever describe Peter as a small man – you could tell he was powerfully built. But the thing was, there was no getting away from the size of his head. Literally, I mean. It was massive. Twice the size it should have been. And his moustaches made it seem even bigger. Voluminous walrus moustaches. To cap it all (and there's no getting away from this either) his eyes bulged slightly too. The net effect of all of this was that his body seem inappropriately sized. There was something dwarf-like about him.

Even though it was also true that he was as broad as he was tall. Powerful forearms. A barrel chest that made his voice so deep and rich. Women, and this included Julia, loved to bathe in that voice. Caramel, she said it was.

So, yes, Peter came in and stood over our table. Slowly, ever so slowly, he let his eyes survey the room; and then, almost absent-mindedly, his gaze returning now to the door, he said: "Julia not here yet, then?"

Me and Nick exchanged a glance, signifying nothing much in particular; but he ignored this because he added: "I thought I saw her crossing the road a minute ago."

And with that, he stared paternally at me, clapped Nick across the shoulder, then turned to go. I'm sure he (reassuringly, as an uncle might to a nervous nephew) almost winked as, pulling the door open, he turned again to us and added: "I'll just see where she's got to."

And that was Peter all over. He was, Nick would always say, beyond all possibility of contradiction, a natural leader.

It seemed an age before he returned – and this time he had Derek as well as Julia in tow. The day had come. The hour. Our party was complete.

We would be making contact with others along the way, less committed members of the Society, perhaps, or less formally attached fellow travellers – those whose knowledge or expertise could prove highly useful at certain locations or for certain sections of the journey and who would link up, acting as guides for a time, before dropping by the wayside.

But all that was to come. For now, at the journey's start point, our party, five of us in total, was ready. Me and Nick, Peter, Julia and Derek. I must admit I felt a tingle of expectation as we prepared to move off, heading as best we might, in the direction of Powis Square.

2

I'd met Nick weeks ago, early springtime this must have been, in the library up towards Kensal Green. Just outside actually. The building itself has always pleased me. The exterior, I mean. Its façade. Often when I was leaving I'd stop on the pavement and turn about and look up and wonder at those funny little turrets with their funny little hats on.

I'd taken to spending most of my afternoons in there, sitting at one of the tables in the reference section, all manner of large volumes spread out before

me, totally oblivious, I realise now, to the world around. Sometimes I'd sit there right through to closing time, cosy in the knowledge that darkness was gathering in the streets outside, especially when the weather was wet or stormy; other times I'd pack up at half five on the dot and head off very business-like; others still, especially as spring began to take hold, I'd merely let my attention drift, getting up every so often throughout the day to go for a stroll, not caring if I returned to find my books tidied away and my place at my table taken by someone else.

In all those weeks, I confess I spoke to no-one and didn't so much as catch the eye of any of the staff. If I'd bumped into one of them in street I'm sure I wouldn't have recognised any of them; and they, I am equally sure, wouldn't have recognised me. You can always tell when you are being invisible – and may even cultivate this quality if you consider it a blessing.

So I was surprised when Nick spoke to me that day. As I left, I'd stopped as usual to look up at the façade and those funny little turrets with their funny little hats on when I felt a presence at my side, slightly offset, just out of my field of vision; and almost before I had time to start feeling discomfited or alarmed, this presence spoke.

“It's a lovely building, isn't it?”

I agreed that it was, my eyes now fixed rigidly on its cupolas, as if the very act of disengaging from them would somehow undermine or deny my agreement with this statement. So there we were, both staring at the upper

storeys of a public building. I was sure that, presently, he would move away without further comment, releasing me from my paralysis.

But no; and eventually, melted by a growing appreciation of absurdity of this situation, I turned to look at him. He, for his part, pretended to continue his admiration of the building's high windows for another few moments before he turned to me and smiled. My first thought then was that he was mocking me – and who knows now, perhaps he was.

It was, as I have said, early spring, perfect and still, at that point where twilight is in the air and you are not entirely sure whether late afternoon has passed over into early evening. There were tiny pale green leaves on the trees and lights coming on in the shop windows.

He said he'd seen me in there (he meant the library, naturally) several times before and he added, with a self-effacing laugh, that he had been impressed by the weightiness of the volumes I was consulting. I must be, he assumed, working on a substantial project. I thought at first that he was being ironic, this a sly (or not so sly) dig at me, because the truth was that I'd spend the afternoon browsing aimlessly in an illustrated (wonderful line drawings, evocative half-tones) office supplies catalogue from the 1930s. The reference bays housed a fine cultural heritage section – if you happen to be curious about what ladies' fashions were like a hundred years ago or what children played with in more innocent times, then this was the place to come.

As a rule I counted among my favourite reading materials an impressive set of window-pane sized volumes, six of them in total, that comprised the Complete Encyclopaedia of Ritual, Myth and Legend. But equally likely, I'd be found burrowing in the 1930s illustrated stationery catalogue.

So as I met his eyes, rather bravely I thought, I was searching for mockery there. I found none. And I reflected that, from a distance (and I assumed he had glimpsed me from afar) the stationery catalogue, large and leather bound as it is, looks for all the world like a weighty volume.

Out of politeness, I suppose, I asked him (the assumption being that he too was a library regular) what he himself was working on; but he waved away the very idea, saying that he just liked to read.

There must have been more small talk; then an inevitable embarrassed silence before, increasingly aware that I seemed anxious to get where I was going, Nick said he mustn't keep me any longer.

Not that I knew his name was Nick at this stage. We didn't get that far. And in fact it wasn't until the third or fourth time we bumped into each other that we got around to introductions.

3

So yes – Nick and me, Peter and Julia and Derek. Our journey had begun. It didn't take us all that long to get to Powis Square, as you can imagine. The streets were quietish: the traffic was intermittent and leisurely and the people

we encountered on the pavement seemed the genial sort – people with places to go but no particular hurry to get there. It felt to me (a sentimental fallacy, no doubt) that passers-by were smiling at us – or rather, I suppose, on our whole enterprise. I could have sworn I heard birdsong.

I, however, soon became increasingly out of sorts. When I'd visualised this day in my wildest imaginings, I suppose I had seen myself walking with Julia. And Nick too, in all probability. One on each side. Our conversation was to have been bright, intermittently brilliant, full of wit and charm and chivalrous subtlety, something intoxicating in the very air we breathed.

But as we set off, Julia and Peter fell immediately into an intense, almost conspiratorial conversation (seemingly the continuation of a previous and equally deep conversation) about a third party, known only to Julia and Peter, whose behaviour was evidently giving them cause for concern. Even more disappointing was Nick's decision not to leave them to it but, instead, to walk with them, listening intently, asking sensitively phrased questions, humbly and respectfully offering up gems of insight and proffering scraps of solace where the opportunity arose.

This was Nick's least attractive trait – the pretence that he had a genuine desire to help; whereas in fact he merely had an atrociously insatiable appetite for gossip.

I repeatedly tried to force my way into their little tete-a-tete but they had formed a tight formation three abreast and, from behind, it proved impossible. I

even skipped ahead and tried to distract them by engaging in some tomfoolery or other, tacitly evoking as I did so an all-embracing esprit de corps that they were clearly betraying. But that failed too; and after walking ahead, alone, for a short while, I dropped back and suffered to walk in silence with Derek.

Derek was notoriously quiet. More morose than shy, I always supposed – but then it was never easy being charitable where Derek was concerned. To be honest, I wasn't entirely sure why he was part of our group. He seemed so different, so set-apart in terms both of character and intellect from the rest of us.

In devising the schedule, we had each been asked to contribute individual choices of landmarks that we would all visit. Derek's were all, to my mind, excruciatingly dull. They belonged to a world of science and technology and, beyond that, to notions of conspiracy and surveillance. For instance, the Kingsway telephone exchange and deep level shelter. He had also tasked himself with explaining to us, in a series of short impromptu lectures as we walked, the essence of the Riemann Hypothesis, a labyrinthine and ultimately pointless mathematical exercise that requires at least a passing familiarity with the rather arid world of imaginary numbers. In lighter moments he proposed to recite some of the more algebraic formulations of the later poetry of Wallace Stevens.

It was true, though, that I had an even more deep-seated anxiety concerning Derek. Not long after I had joined, when our Journey was in the very earliest of

planning stages, a series of rumours began to pulse and surge through the Society. We were about to be betrayed, the insistent whispers said, in the most abject way imaginable. Not just the Project (as our Journey was referred to in the earliest stages of its planning) but, vile and incomprehensible as this was, the whole Society, the whole organisation, root and branch. What's more (and this was the part that was so hard for me, as a newcomer, to swallow) the identity of the would-be traitor was already known.

Nick had told me all of this just before an important evening meeting. Moments later, as I was pressing him to tell me more, I was distracted by the emergence of someone from an ante-room to the hall. I had never seen this person before and yet he acted as if he owned the place. I said as much to Nick and he merely nodded, thoughtfully.

“Who is he?” I added.

Nick merely raised his eyebrows and looked knowing.

It was, of course, I realised not long after, Derek.

4

Soon after that first encounter outside the library, I ran into Nick again. Actually, that hardly does the occasion justice. There was something uncanny about the way that he appeared (as if out of nowhere) at my shoulder one mid-afternoon as I was walking away from the library. As before, he took me completely by surprise – *for the truth* is that, on and off, I had been looking out

for him. Naturally enough, he intrigued me. Not least, I wanted to find out why on earth anyone would want to spend day after day sitting in a public library. So I'd begun taking more interest in my surroundings, the general comings and goings that could be witnessed from my seat in the reference section. If, as he had implied, he was a regular, our paths would soon cross once more. But confusingly, inexplicably, there'd been no sign of him; and as the days turned into weeks his image had begun to fade from my memory.

So when he did appear, as if out of thin air, I was almost jubilant – as if I had somehow proved a point to myself. He *did* exist. I think I must have greeted him like an old friend. And it was the oddest thing – we seemed of one mind as, without a word of further discussion, we continued walking side by side down the street – as though we'd done this countless times. I asked him how things were going. They were, he had to admit, fine. And he asked me, in turn, how I was keeping. And I had to agree that things were fine for me too.

And then, as we reached a street corner, he stopped and I became aware that he was suddenly hesitant, nervous even. It was all the more odd because he'd seemed so full of confidence and high spirits – both on this occasion and the time before. Now, though, he looked deadly serious.

I didn't mind? he asked me. Him talking to me like this. He'd hate to think he was becoming a nuisance.

No, I told him, good heavens no. Why ever should I?

It was many weeks before I could make sense of this conversation.

Most of what I know about Nick, I am almost ashamed to say, was imparted to me by Julia. Nick and Julia (as I began to appreciate not long after I'd met her) were friends of many years' standing and at one stage, just after the death of Julia's mother, they had apparently been very close indeed. I pieced much of this together myself – for they had been so intimate then that they rarely now spoke of this period in their lives. Not that it was any easier inducing her to share what she knew of Nick's broader history. She seemed eternally fearful of betraying his confidence. With Julia, the subject of Nick was one you had to approach with great sensitivity.

So in short, where my understanding of Nick was concerned, I was dealing in fragments of fragments. I did succeed in establishing, however, that Nick's story contained elements of tragedy. He had been trained almost from infancy in classical ballet and had gone, in his early teens, to one of the more prominent dance schools – but had ultimately been rejected for some perceived flaw in his physique. Undaunted and determined to forge a career from what he loved best, he had become a dancer in cabaret and other forms of musical theatre.

And then, still barely an adult, he was dealt a series of devastating blows. He'd been suffering painful inflammations that had laid him up and stopped him working for weeks on end. So depression was already becoming a regular cloud on his horizon. Now, though, a specialist delivered the diagnosis that was

to change his life utterly: his Achilles tendon had suffered a substantial degree of irreparable damage. With rest and the right treatment it would become more or less serviceable again but he could forget all thoughts of continuing in his current profession. That in itself would have been bad enough but it came at a time when a long term affair – the love of his life – was unravelling in an horribly messy fashion.

To cut a long story short, he suffered more than one protracted bout of chronically severe depression, the implication being (an assumption based almost entirely on the despair in Julia's eyes as she, reluctantly it has to be said, told this part of the story) that he had attempted to take his own life on more than one occasion.

He escaped, eventually, more or less intact, to Denmark, where he joined a community of artists – painters and sculptors mainly, I think, though I can't vouch for Nick's status as an artist either then or now. He led an almost idyllic (not to say charmed) existence for a number of years but according to Julia the whole enterprise imploded rather suddenly. I don't know the details, I'm afraid. He then spent a number of years as companion to a widowed lady considerably older than himself in a gloomy old Copenhagen townhouse, a nether world of aspidistras and cabinets, interiors filled with gloom and gloss black – all manner of lacquers, shellacs, Japanned varnishes and black ivories. When she died, Nick, totally contrary to expectations (Julia assumes) was left with nothing. He returned home completely destitute and eventually found

employment as, among other things, a psychiatric nurse, though his attempts to develop a career in this profession were hampered by his own recurrent bouts of depression.

That afternoon, obviously, I didn't know anything of this story. That afternoon, the second time we met, on a street corner not far from the library. And that second meeting ended even more oddly than the first. Because it was as if a cloud had suddenly enveloped him. He was fine one minute; the next, he became nervous and hesitant; and then he suddenly turned on his heel and walked off, muttering, as a parting shot, something about seeing me around.

6

Powis Square was of course Peter's choice. Our Journey's end (we very deliberately avoided talking of a pilgrimage or indeed of shrines – that would obviously be to miss the point) was Kingsley Hall in Bow. Kingsley Hall was, for us, twice-touched: Mahatma Gandhi had lived there for three months in 1931 and Ronald Laing, unprecedented dialectician of liberation, had begun his true ministry there in 1965.

But to reach our goal, it was our duty to pursue an appropriate route; and we each took responsibility for choosing way-stations that would build strands of meaning, strands that would braid together, contributing much to the meaning of the overall Journey as a whole. Peter's landmarks were all counter-cultural. Or rather, that nexus where counter culture is touched on or informed by the

notion of the fluidity and unsettled nature of an individual's character or persona. Thus Powis Square, number 25 to be precise, the notional setting of the 1970 film, *Performance*.

As we arrived, Julia still deep in conversation with Peter, my sense of anticipation began to rise steeply. There was of course the fact that this was the first staging post on our Journey and therefore, even to the most unsentimental mind, of highly-charged significance. But on top of that, I was curious to see what sort of precedent Peter might set.

I'd been anxious about this during the planning stage of our adventure and at several points I had asked Peter's advice. What did he want me to do at each of the stopping points I had chosen? What should I prepare? Was there a preferred format? Each time, he merely waved away my concern. I would, he told me, hit on whatever was appropriate. These things, he sought further to reassure me, tended to find a natural way of resolving themselves. The answer would come to me.

Perhaps it would. Perhaps, though, it hadn't; perhaps I was about to prove myself guilty of the most horrendous misjudgement. What I'd eventually settled on as my chosen format was a short talk – not unduly reverential without being flippant, informative yet pithy, minimalist even – for each location. I would then invite questions; and when I had satisfied everyone's curiosity to the best of my ability, I would call for a brief period of contemplative silence before suggesting that we should move on. But I was

prepared to rethink that whole approach if, in the light of subsequent events, this approach were to prove inadequate. I was, after all, keen to learn.

You'll understand, therefore, how unprepared I was for Peter's behaviour. We were standing there on the pavement, all of us silent now, all, I presume, staring like I was, up at the red door of number 25. It was set back from the street up a short flight of steps that bridged the basement area – and these steps were covered by a portico supported by a pair of classical columns. I think I had expected something slightly more seedy. But perhaps that was the point.

Anyhow, my blood chilled at what happened next. Because Peter was striding forward briskly, as if possessed by some sort of righteous anger. Up the steps he went; and next thing we know, he is banging on the door.

No answer.

He thumped again bish-bash-bosh with the meaty weight of his fist; and maybe I imagined it, but I was sure I could hear this assault on the door echoing coldly across a tiled hallway beyond.

He waited now. A minute, maybe more. Then again he was bringing his big fist crashing against the door.

We, the rest of us, were absolutely frozen to the spot as we bore witness to this. What on earth were we going to do when someone answered the door? Why was Peter seemingly so angry? I'll happily admit I was scared – but I was just as confused as I was scared.

And yet, it was about to get even more scary. Peter was now shouting. He was evoking the name of our Society and demanding in this name and by all common precedent that we be admitted and given sustenance and sanctuary. I think he said sanctuary. His declamation was wrapped up in all sorts of high-flown legal language – so much so that what I assumed at first was a spontaneous urge on Peter's part now seemed contrived, or even rehearsed.

And then we realised that Peter, silent now, was fumbling for something in the depths of his coat pockets. I assumed, crazily perhaps, that what he subsequently produced was a key, a large key perhaps, but a key nonetheless. Was this no more than a wonderful coup de theatre, staged brilliantly at our first stopping point, thus setting the tone for all the wonders that were to follow? Had he been given access to the building? Were the owners in on this?

But no. It wasn't a key. I think it was a chisel or a large screwdriver – but I can't be sure because it was dropped in the subsequent confusion. Peter's ranting and raving, you see, had begun to attract the attention of passers-by, some of whom had stopped, hesitantly, frowning, concerned, a little way off.

Julia it was who saved the day. When she realised that Peter was rather crudely trying to force the lock, she snapped out of the spell that had been holding us all and flew up the steps. I vaguely remember her screaming at him. Accusing him of being maniac. She was absolutely outraged and began tugging desperately at the sleeve of his coat, trying to pull him away. He, though, was having none of it. And indeed they might have been entangled like that for ever

– her tugging, him fending her off then pulling his coat straight, her flying back at him to try again – if me and Nick hadn’t woken up too and realised that the crowd of bystanders was growing and that the word “police” was now most palpably in the air.

The three of us succeeded in manhandling him down the steps and we (all five of us: Derek was still with us, naturally) made our somewhat ragged getaway in the direction of Westbourne Grove.

7

We began meeting up regularly. Initially, we just sat together at my usual table. Then one day he asked me (*sotto voce* so as not to disturb the peace) if I fancied a walk and I told him yes, why not, that sounded like a perfectly reasonable idea. It was, after all, a pretty decent sort of a day.

And so we walked. I can’t remember where. He asked me if I actually liked walking, going on walks, he meant; and I told him quite truthfully that I had never really thought about it, though it was true that often, when things had reached a seemingly insurmountable impasse, or when there was a need for good clear reflection, I often found myself walking and would sometimes realise with a start that I had no idea where I had been headed or for how long and was now completely lost. Completely and utterly and deliciously lost.

I immediately regretted saying all of this in quite the free manner in which it had been said: for a silence now fell between us, a silence that seemed

immediately to fret and fester. So when he stopped, much in the same way that he'd pulled us both to an abrupt halt that second time we'd met, I automatically assumed that he was about to take his leave in the same enigmatic fashion.

But no. Quite the opposite in fact. He said that, first things first, he must apologise for the unacceptable way he sometimes acted. Sometimes he just couldn't help himself. But he hoped, in fact he very much desired, that we might become friends.

I said I saw no reason why not.

And so we walked on.

Nick liked to walk. But more than that, he liked being outside. I mean, I suppose, that he revelled in the natural world. He was, in a way that I hope does not seem sentimental or trite, truly its child. In time, I came increasingly to see the world through his eyes. Or at least I aspired to. Not just to see, but to experience, to understand the world as he did.

We walked. Every day, we walked. And every day he showed me how much of what I saw I never really appreciated at all. He loved greenery of all kinds and trees in particular and he told me of his best-loved place: the overgrown corner of a forgotten cemetery that was like a forbidden world. It was always supernaturally quiet there, though beyond the rough old stone wall, itself as high as a house, there was a busy road hardly more than a stone's throw away.

There, as the rain-kissed mildness of late spring gave way to the warmth of early summer, in sight of his favourite tree in all the world – a towering

ailanthus – we would sunbathe on lazy afternoons. Or at least Nick would sunbathe. He was totally unselfconscious and unashamed but I have never been comfortable in the skin I'm in – and it was a struggle even to convince me to bare my arms (my thin white arms) to the sun's warmth.

I read mostly. Nick dozed, sometimes, lying (outrageously) as if in effigy on the top surface of a chest-high stone tomb. And when he awoke, we'd talk. Philosophy of a sort. The world and the surprising, unlooked-for beauties it contained. Life and our outlook on it.

He knew the names of all the flowers. A carpet of little blue ones, like tiny stars, grew around the tomb on which he slept.

The days passed. It was many weeks before he even so much as mentioned the Society.

8

One late afternoon, Nick asked what I might be doing later. I said I had not made my mind up yet. If I decided to postpone my trip to the Cote d'Azur, I told him, I was contemplating dinner at the Ritz. Nick suggested instead that I join him at a meeting he proposed to attend. It was to be held at the Salvation Army rooms up beyond the Westway. There was to be public meeting first – one of those dreadful lectures that do-gooding types often commissioned the hall for. A talk on sexual health perhaps. Or how certain articles of faith might help in the cultivation and maintenance of all forms of abstinence. If we were

polite enough to sit through this, there would be a light supper afterwards (very civilised and welcome in itself), at which point the second meeting, the real business of the evening, would be convened in an informal manner.

There's a lot of nonsense talked and written about secret societies these days, the implication being usually that all our destinies, jointly and severally, are in some significant part determined by an intertwining mesh of malign conspiracies. On several occasions recently I have seen the Society described in such a manner and in such a context. Nothing, in actual fact, could be further from the truth. Its existence is not even, to take one simple but somewhat fundamental point, actually a secret. True, you have to be invited to join. And yes, it is not listed in the phone book. But there are no oaths to be taken, no vows of silence demanded or penalties threatened.

It is also true that it is Ancient. But that in itself is hardly a crime. That, and the fact that once upon a time it boasted Grand Masters, has tempted people to compare it (or mentally file it alongside, despite the obvious absurdities) various forms of Freemasonry. The truly interesting thing of course, is that, in recent memory, the Society had fallen into such disrepair and disuse that it had almost disappeared entirely from its former heartland. It had indeed been languishing for nigh on 20 years. True – two decades is but the merest blink of an eye when set against the Society's long and august history – but still, genteel decline is hardly what you'd expect of a secret organisation supposedly set in perpetuity to exercise covert influence on the levers of power.

Rather, if the truth be known, its ends are (and will always be) poetical and philosophical; and as such it is a child of the eternal Enlightenment. That hasn't meant that it hasn't (if you'll excuse the double negative) faced intermittent threats of a horribly pernicious nature. No-one possessed of sane objectivity, however, could accuse it of being crudely political in its aims.

Back then, on that fateful evening, when I was introduced by Nick to some of the Society's more prominent members, I didn't know any of this. Everything was laid before me with simplicity and lucidity. The whole story. The complete facts of the matter. I knew almost immediately, as I started listening that nothing could ever really be the same again.

I remember, in particular, an exposition made by one of the members. I thought at one point that it was Peter but subsequently, looking back, I can hardly believe that this could have been the case. He talked of perception, lenses, colours, the spectrum and of the work of Sir Isaac Newton in deepening our understanding of such matters.

And he (Peter, if indeed it was Peter) ended by quoting some conclusive words from the man (Newton) himself. "I do not know what I may appear to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, while the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me."

That evening, I had no inkling that I might have in some way been singled out. No presentiment; no, nor even the slightest of presumptions, that I at some stage in the future might be asked to join – and that I would, more in awe than unalloyed joy, find myself accepting.

9

Almost all of Nick's choices related to the natural world. Parks, gardens, unexpected curiosities, nooks and crannies. A scrap of hidden wasteground, say, choked with brightly flowered weeds and butterflies, a swarm of colour.

It was all so right and somehow inevitable. And yet, the truth, the strange truth, is that this wasn't Nick's original plan at all. His original idea was that we agree to make a slight detour from the course that had originally been set down. He wanted us to swing to the northern part of the city to visit Noel Road, once home of the playwright Joe Orton; and then further on to Meeksville, where Telstar was recorded and where later a terrible tragedy had taken place.

It wasn't to be. He was quietly but firmly asked if he might consider another course. It was not that his choices were in themselves poor or inappropriate (it fell to me to face that sort of criticism) but that our route must stick to a more direct easterly course. And he was more than happy to agree.

Which was how we came to find ourselves in a park, searching in the long grass and bushes beyond an urban copse for the web, hardly bigger, it was said, than a two-pound coin, of one of the tiniest and rarest of our native spiders.

There was a great feeling of anticipation bordering on unashamed excitement; a sense of fun and playfulness.

Which I ruined. We were moving slowly and carefully, with Nick as our leader, searching for our goal when (and there is no polite way of putting this) I let everyone down.

Something came over me. I felt faint. We were hunched, creeping forward almost as Commandos would, when I stumbled and fell. I think I must have passed out briefly because the next thing I know, Derek is over me, peering anxiously into my eyes and I have a sense of the others gathering behind him, voicing their concern in that understated way people have when they're confused and disorientated.

The crisis, if crisis it was, was soon over. I heard myself moaning rather feebly; then full consciousness returned in a rush and I was overcome by a sense of acute embarrassment as I struggled to sit up. While Derek helped me right myself (though, perhaps wisely, he also gently restrained me from anything too ambitiously vigorous), I could hear the panic in Nick's voice as he kept asking what was going on. I could sympathise with his sense of alarm – because for a good few moments no-one could be sure about the answer to that question, least of all me.

And yet it was so easily explained. The sun was not long past its highest point in the sky and in any case, as I'm sure I mumbled to Derek as he led me out of the long grasses and back towards the open park, me slightly wobbly, the

others following rather sheepishly, I'd suffered from hay fever as a child.

Perhaps, what with the long grass. The pollen. You know.

They sat me in the dense shade of a spreading tree and I began reassuring them, increasingly vehemently, that I was all right really – and that they should stop crowding me and let me alone to get my breath back and generally leave off making such a damned fuss. Which they did in the end; and they were all eventually persuaded (but not without some ostentatious shows of reluctance) to slope off back into the bushes to continue their spider hunt. All except Derek, that is. He elected to sit with me, silently.

And it was a particularly impenetrable silence. Overbearing, even; especially when squeals and giggles from not too far off in the undergrowth began making me aware, in no uncertain terms, that my comrades' concern for my well-being could prove astonishingly short-lived.

So I was forced to make efforts to engage.

"Derek," I said.

"Yes," he said.

A particularly emphatic squeal, this time clearly from Julia, wrenched at me. It was only after I'd gathered myself that I was able to begin again.

"Derek," I said.

"Yes," he said.

And now it came to me, for I added: "What do you think of Peter?"

No answer; and it began to dawn on me that he too was distracted, straining to hear and to interpret whatever rustlings and other noises were reaching us from the bushes.

I'll admit that I was perhaps a little irritable at this stage. The heat. My inexplicable infirmity. And more than anything, the fact that I still hadn't spent much time with Nick and Julia. Worse, I had now made myself foolish, at best, in her eyes.

This time, as we both strained to distinguish, at a distance, the others' progress, I was sure he was at last giving consideration to my question. He did that, Derek – he considered things. He thought before he spoke, mulled things over. He wasn't stupid as such. Not slow. Definitely not. It's just that everything he said seemed so bland. His own opinions I mean. His own carefully weighed opinions. He could actually come out with some clever stuff now and then – but when he was being clever it always seemed second hand, something he'd read or heard someone else say. Some piece of half-baked wisdom, uncontroversial and passionless. He was kind, I suppose. Positive in outlook. But blandly so. So, yes: a blank page. He had a distinctive, frazzly shock of brown hair, so you couldn't mistake him at a distance; but, up close, you realised his features were totally anonymous behind those old-fashioned heavy framed glasses. They were soft. His features, I mean. Softened into almost non-existence, ill-defined, blurred. There was very little that was witty or fun about him. He'd take an age to think about something you'd said to him

then respond with something so spectacularly unremarkable as to induce an overall feeling of numbness that penetrated you to your very core.

He was so bland that it absolutely had to be true that he was hiding something. And I suppose if I'd been the possessor of a more subtle mind and imbued with more native cunning, I'd have been more candid (with the vague intention of drawing him out) in sharing my thoughts about Peter with Derek.

Not that I had any coherently formed thoughts about Peter.

The tree shading us capped a grassy prominence – a knoll giving views out across the park in all directions. A faint breeze played over lush curtains of leaves all around, creating ripples and cascades in a thousand shades of green. Distant figures – children darting and chasing, solitary women walking dogs – swam and shimmered in the heat.

It was a world drowned in silence, however – and the source of this silence was with us beneath that tree.

“If I didn't know any better,” I added, “I might assume he was abusing his position.”

Derek glanced at me, did this double take thing, and seemed absolutely taken aback. I thought he was going to reprimand me – quite justifiably – but in another instant his set expression of philosophical benevolence had all but re-established itself.

In the end, all he said was, “There they are.”

And it was true. Made manifest: Julia and Nick and Peter. They had managed to circle unnoticed right round to our side; and now here they were, somehow flushed and triumphant coming towards us across the sunlit grass, the light so bright out there beyond the shadow of the tree that it almost hurt your eyes.

10

I was on the fringes of the Society for what seemed like an age – but which was, now that I look back, a mere matter of weeks. I'd attended regularly with Nick and was allowed to watch and listen to the deliberations of the Project Committee. Right from the start I couldn't help but be impressed by the scope of its ambition. The fortunes of the Society, as I have already indicated, were at a low ebb. This had come to pass (according to the most widely accepted historical analysis) because there had been a brief period when it seemed that all or most of the aims of the Society had been realised. The Society took no view either way as to whether it had been instrumental (even in the smallest degree) in helping this situation come about – but this general turn of events had, in some people's eyes, rendered its role superfluous, anachronistic and superannuated. A threshold in a phase of human evolution, centuries in the making, had now been crossed. The Society was therefore redundant. True, there were many who argued vociferously against this analysis; but it was hard,

even for those who never for one second accepted this view of history, to pursue the Society's ends with the same vigour and enthusiasm as before.

In short, it began to languish. Its membership dissipated, some records were lost, properties abandoned. And the irony is that this was done largely in a spirit of joyfulness – because hadn't the battle been won? It didn't take long, of course, for the full extent of that fallacy to be borne home. Darkness still reigned and in many places it was indeed deeper than it had ever seemed before. But what was to be done? The whole organisation was still in retreat and falling into ever greater disarray. You would not need to be an unmitigated pessimist to argue that it had gone beyond the point of no return.

And yet, here and there, there were pockets of determined resistance, small undeterred cells determined to keep the flame alive. Ours was one such. And as luck would have it, it was one of the more aggressive and go-ahead. Now it was preparing an audacious project designed to restore, almost at a single stroke, its fortunes. You couldn't help but be moved by such a spirit.

I, of course, little suspected that I would have anything other than a supporting role in all of this. I had now been inducted into the Society, naturally, but the prime movers were hardened veterans and I, as an awestruck novice, was more than content merely to absorb from them as much as I could.

And then Raymond, poor unfortunate Raymond, fell by the wayside. Raymond was charged with what you might loosely term logistics. It was his responsibility to plan our route and he had already begun undertaking

feasibility studies to assess the various options. His job was to ensure that we could be in at the right place at the right time and furthermore that we could be appropriately resourced. But he was dogged by desperately bad luck, especially when it came to attending meetings.

I believe, perhaps harshly, that vanity played no small part in his downfall. Often he would arrive, several hours late, sweating and perspiring profusely, just as the committee was winding up its business. He had, he would explain, caught the wrong bus and it had been a while before he'd realised his mistake, by which time said bus had managed to reach the terminus. Or he caught the right bus but in the wrong direction. One time, he told me in confidence, he'd got off a bus (the wrong one in all probability) and being unsure of where he was, he'd merely followed the group of people ahead, thinking they too were going to our meeting, and found himself attending a lecture in the British Museum.

He was terribly accident-prone, its true. Once (I witnessed this personally), when someone offered him a boiled sweet, he unwrapped it and instead of dropping the wrapper into the wastepaper bin he contrived to drop the sweet in instead. This was bad enough but he then proceeded (following to its conclusions some perverse form of logic) to pop the wrapper into his mouth. He didn't spit it out either. He beat a retreat, backing out of the room chewing thoughtfully. People generally affected not to notice, because he was prone to all sorts of quirks, eccentricities and hugely exaggerated mannerisms; but

many's the time, when he thought no-one was watching him, I saw him try and fail to light his own cigarette, even with one eye screwed shut.

So, in short, I believe it not improbable that Raymond's downfall was caused in part by the fact that he was short-sighted and didn't want anyone to know – feeling, perhaps, that if he owned up to the fact, he might find himself disqualified from participation in the mission.

Anyway, one thing led to another such that, following a brief extraordinary meeting, I was asked if I would consider taking Raymond's place on the expedition. There would be a reallocation of roles within the team obviously – and as Jo, a friend and ally of Raymond's, had indicated that if Raymond were not taking part, neither would she, it was also proposed that a second new team member also be drafted in at this point. To wit: Derek.

I was too astonished to take much of this in. It was understandable that someone like Derek be drafted in. He was, after all, a well-established member. But me? It barely made any sense. As it sank in over the following hours and days, I started to appreciate just how enormously privileged I was to be taking part in this historical undertaking.

11

The mid-point of our journey, spiritually and emotionally if not in terms of miles travelled or time taken, was to be Westminster Abbey – in particular, the

Cosmati mosaic pavement, laid out in all its jewelled splendour before the high altar.

Unsurprisingly, the Cosmati pavement was one of Julia's choices – for when it came to taste and discrimination, she was far and away the most sophisticated member of our party. I'd seen her from afar many times before I was formally introduced to her – and each time, when I'd asked who she was, I'd been told it was “The Princess Julia”. At first I assumed this was a form of facetiousness – an unthinkingly cruel commentary, perhaps, on perceived airs and graces. And yet, it was said in such a matter-of-fact manner that you had to wonder. No nod, no wink, just “The Princess Julia” – as if this were the most natural thing in all the world.

And when she was actually introduced to me (I can't remember who by – it wasn't Peter, nor, I am almost certain, was it Nick) the person performing this introduction made no bones about it. He said it to her face. The Princess Julia. And she, for her part, far from taking offence, blushed almost demurely, slightly bashful yet secretly pleased.

And it was true – it had to be said that she did dress beautifully. Stylishly. Despite everything. Even a man who knows nothing of such things – and I am one – could see that. Stylish and yet simple. She wore straightforward summer dresses. A hint of a bygone era about them – the 1950s, say, or the 1960s – like Audrey Hepburn perhaps. One, my favourite perhaps, was a dress with a bright flower pattern, primal graphic shapings of greens and reds and blues, vivid

against their white ground. She wore flat shoes. Her luxurious light brown hair was cut straight and shortish. A fringe at the front; and a styling that curved inward. A bob I think it is called. There was something of a bygone, more innocent age in that hairstyle too.

She was petite; she always sparkled.

Her great grandmother, it was said, had been a White Russian aristocrat at the time of the 1917 Revolution. The family had fallen on desperately hard times – and yet, despite this, Julia had in her early 20s had contracted a morganatic marriage (it was said) to the junior line of an ancient and august royal family in continental Europe. It had been a disastrous marriage, however, and her sense of failure had almost done for her. Thus she had retreated for many years from the world.

But yes, there was nothing unrefined about Julia. She had been educated at all the best schools and knew about all of the good things in life. She could talk authoritatively about paintings – fine art paintings, the sort that hang in the world's great galleries. So of course she knew about the Cosmati pavement in Westminster Abbey.

Which was where we were headed. By now, predictably perhaps, we were not as far advanced on our route as we had expected to be – and some of party, not least Julia, began quickening the pace. I was filled with as much anticipation and enthusiasm as any of us – I think we all wanted to ensure we had earned the luxury, as far as our schedule was concerned, to do justice to

this next stopping point on our journey. For me, there was also an added consideration, in that the sun was now high in the sky and I was already yearning for the cool interior of a cathedral. I felt I could almost sense its echoing clarity.

But at some point I started to lag behind. As a child, I had been regarded by some (largely, I seem to recall, by the male acquaintances of my mother's) as weak-chested. I didn't know then what this meant, nor can I truthfully say I do now. True, there was stage between about the ages of ten and fourteen, when I was frequently off school – and was sometimes bedridden. But I am sure I've come, over the years, to exaggerate in my own mind the amount of time (days, weeks, months) involved. On reflection, I'm not at all sure I missed much, even in aggregate, in the way of education.

Yet I can't deny that I sometimes, to this day, suffer the odd attack of breathlessness – quite over and above any episodic attacks of hay fever. And so it was again. Perhaps if I had taken more time to recover from my lapse in the park then I'd have returned all the stronger. As it was, I was already beginning to struggle. On the other hand, I knew full well that this breathlessness was merely a temporary inconvenience – it would pass and I would be back up to full fighting strength again.

Surprisingly, perhaps, it was Derek who called a halt. He'd dropped back from the main group when he realised I was falling behind (the others barely seemed to notice) and we, me and Derek, walked for a hundred yards or so in

silence – hardly surprising given the fact that he was not entirely a bubbling wellspring of conversation. But neither of us wanted to acknowledge the possibility that I resented his presence at my side. To be pitied by the least charismatic member of the group made me feel my deficiencies (if deficiencies they were) all the more keenly. I know that sounds (and indeed is) terribly uncharitable.

However, equally unforgivable at the time was the fact that he didn't actually say anything to me until after he had shouted to the others. I can't remember what it was he shouted but I do know that I snapped at him for his troubles.

"I'll be alright." Or: "Stop fussing." I think I may even have started to swear under my breath.

By now I was sitting on a low wall enclosing a small paved area outside (ironically enough) a doctors' surgery. As the others joined us, gathering round, it was of course Peter who took charge. He placed a palm upon my forehead, then placed fingertips on my wrist to gauge my pulse. He even made an elaborate show of examining my eyes.

"Mmm," He said. "Mmm."

Julia suddenly seemed quite panicky and she was all for dragging me into the doctors' surgery. They (the medical staff) could be cajoled, I heard her arguing, into seeing me, treating me as an emergency if you like, even though we were at that point well outside consultation hours.

I'm sure we all knew how impracticable her arguments were. You didn't have to be a desperate pessimist to know with some certainty that the surgery would be deserted at that hour. No-one in. Not a doctor. Not as such. Not at that time of the day. Not a doctor that would, in a million years, agree to see me. Not that there was any need to be seen. Anyway, all I needed was a couple of minutes sit down. And I'd had that now. It was such a hot day, that was all.

Peter and Derek had walked a few paces out of earshot and now had their heads together; Nick was sat on the wall beside me and Julia was generally pacing and fretting back and forward in front of us.

"I'm sorry Julia," I said. "Really I am."

She smiled wanly at me – and then, clearly having come to some sort of resolution, she seemed to relax and joined us on the wall. We sat there staring out at the passing traffic only vaguely aware that Derek and Peter's strategy meeting seemed to be drawing to a close. It hardly seemed relevant any more. We were once more joining the ranks of the invisible. Here we were, sitting who knows where, on a low wall, partially shaded by an acacia tree, a pleasant breeze stirring now and then in its leaves. Nothing else really seemed to matter. Me, Nick on one side, Julia on the other. So we were barely aware also that, although Derek was pacing back towards us, Peter was striding off down the street in the opposite direction. Derek, when he came back over, turned to watch him go – as if unsure about how to face us.

At last, almost reluctantly, he spoke. “He says he’ll get you something at the chemist’s.”

We absorbed this news; and it was Julia who spoke up first: “Which chemist’s?”

Derek looked down at his shoes, looked up, looked away, turned, seemed to scan the roofline of the buildings opposite; then he let his eyes settle on Julia once more.

“He says there’s sure to be one.”

Already I was struggling to my feet, protesting against the ridiculousness of this whole business, demanding that we call him back before the whole thing degenerated into something beyond farce. But Derek had already raised a hand – both hands – in a calming gesture. “No,” he said. It seemed to pain him to have to break this to us. “No,” he repeated. “He says he wants to.”

And of course by now we were beginning to admit to ourselves the inexorable nature of these unfolding events. Because this was indeed one of Peter’s quirks. He had a thing about chemist’s shops. Catch him on the wrong day and you could trigger what was, to all intents and purposes, a monomania. Several members of his extended family had worked at various times in chemist’s shops; many years ago (another place, another time, the woman now long gone), he had married a girl whose mother had once worked in a chemist’s shop. Peter himself, as part of a project of dubious provenance, had ranked all

the chemist's shops in the London Borough of Hounslow, against four separate criteria.

So, when Derek told us where Peter had gone, our hearts sank. He might be gone some time. We rolled our eyes. We probably even made disapproving noises. Which peeved Derek somewhat. "Well I couldn't have gone after him and just left you lot, now could I?"

And yet, though our hearts began sinking, we needn't have worried. Not on that score at any rate. Peter was soon spotted returning at high speed. He had found a chemist's shop. It was fated, he said – there it was, just up the road, a very fine example of its type, a little old fashioned, with giant flasks (glass teardrops for stoppers) of coloured water in a display window. All was well. We had to hurry along, we were long overdue in Westminster.

And the odd thing is that, despite any reservations we might have had, jointly and severally, we all followed Peter to the shop. And in. Five of us. The shop wasn't exactly tiny, but still – five of us. A gang. And of course we felt uncomfortable. Lurking in a sheepish group just back from the counter as Peter approached a nervous-looking assistant.

A young girl, she was. Not yet eighteen, I'd reckon. Peter, with somewhat of a flourish, asked her for something. We couldn't quite hear what it was he had asked for – but we could quite plainly see the incomprehension on the girl's face. Then he said something else and she blushed. To the roots of her hair. It was astonishing, the colour she turned.

Behind her, just a glimpse through an ungenerous hatchway, we could see a white-coated someone moving about, busying themselves in dispensary. To the side of the hatchway, the dispensary door – it was closed but the assistant, backing off from Peter, felt behind her for the handle and, having opened it a crack, slipped through. It was sort of elegantly done – but yet it lacked dignity.

We could hear voices through the hatchway. The girl's. Then a woman's. Then the girl's again, querulous this time. Then a man's, somewhat scolding. Then a mélange of all three.

Silence. Then the door opened and a woman (in her thirties, glasses, hair up, stern) presented herself.

“May I help?” she offered. She said she was the pharmacist.

Peter said that she could, indeed, help; and he asked for something – again I couldn't quite make it out. And when the pharmacist frowned he offered, doing his ostentatious best not to sound condescending, to write it down for her. There was a pad on the counter and, having solicited a pen from her, he began scribbling, explaining that he'd forgotten his script pad but here was his name anyway for reference and he was sure she would look favourably on his request.

She looked confused. She shaped to say something but then thought better of it. Her gaze strayed further back into the shop to embrace the rest of us, standing chorus-like, a statuesque group of witnesses.

Then she retreated through the door into the pharmacy.

“Wait here,” she fired as a parting shot.

More voices.

The door opened and the young shop assistant girl stepped out again. But she did not engage with us beyond a brief smile. She merely stood fidgeting, self-conscious, behind the counter. She pretended that we weren’t even there.

Now, a deathly silence. But Peter was in his element. He smiled at the shop girl. He turned and he beamed reassuring at us. And of course there was always something compelling about Peter, whatever else you might say of him. I suppose it was that massive head. Those fleshy lips that refused to be hidden even under walrus moustaches. And, of course, those eyes. Something spooky about them. The pupils pinpoint dark within light blue irises that were almost grey. Bleached out. The fearless way he could hold eye contact. There was an aura of authority about him. Unmistakably so. When put to it, he had a commanding voice. And he had indeed had an education. There was talk that he had once been a Grade 7 counsellor, a position he had worked up to from relatively humble beginnings as a psychiatric nurse.

And now, at last, the pharmacy door opened again and a rather severe-looking gentleman stepped out. White coat. Glasses with heavy black frames. Hair thinning and the hint of a comb-over.

“Dr Peters?”

Peter, without hesitation, confidently, made himself known.

“I, sir, am the senior pharmacist.”

“Indeed?” said Peter.

“Olanzapine?”

The senior pharmacist consulted, for maybe the third or fourth time, the piece of notepaper he held in his hand. I couldn't help feeling that his fingers were trembling but I can't swear to that – we continued to be slightly detached from the heat of the action.

“Olanzapine?” he repeated.

“That's right. My colleague here has had an asthma attack.

The senior pharmacist frowned. “But this is not an asthma drug.”

Peter raised his eyebrows, glanced back at us – and then, returning his full attention once more to the pharmacist, smiled indulgently. “My dear sir,” he said. “I'm sure you make every effort to keep yourself abreast of the most important developments in medical science.”

You could see where he was taking this – but he got no further. The pharmacist cut him short.

“You say you are a doctor?”

“A psychiatrist, yes.”

“Practising where?”

“Currently?”

“Yes.”

“Ealing Hospital.”

“Ealing Hospital?”

“John Connolly Wing.”

“And how is John?”

“Oh, you know.”

They stared at each other for a while – and I know not what passed between them silently as they did so. And then the pharmacist had turned about and was heading back into his den.

“Wait here,” he offered, as a throwaway, over his shoulder.

Wait here. Again. Could it be that there was yet another pharmacist in there? An even more senior member of the tribe. A grand master pharmacist.

Wait here.

And the thing is, I’m sure that Peter would have done so. Blithely, perhaps. Or with an absolute sense of righteousness. And the thing was, there was something terribly convincing about him. Despite the walrus moustaches and the week-old growth on his cheeks and his chin. Despite the slightly frayed look to the cuffs of his herringbone overcoat (which at this point was over his arm, in any case). Or the barely perceptible aura of ripeness that his lumberjack shirt gave off, especially on generous, late summer days such as these.

And do you know, there was a sense in which he really was a doctor. But slowly, one by one, we backed off. I think Derek was first to drift and he pulled us along behind him. A chain reaction of sorts, as if a static charge bound us (ever so loosely but inexorably) together, Derek pulled me, I pulled Nick, Nick

pulled Julia – and Julia, physically this time, drew Peter, his elbow grasped firmly in her hand, in her wake. We drifted out.

Miraculously though (I think the coolness of the air-conditioning and the cleanness of the shop's ether-like ambience may have had something to do with it), I was cured.

Still, it was with great sadness that we left that chemist's shop.

12

The Cosmati Pavement contains all the cosmological secrets of this universe. In it are encoded our absolute origins and our final ends. It was laid under the direction of the Italian master craftsman, Peter Odoricus in 1268 in the reign of King Henry III. It is made from red and purple and green porphyry, onyx marble, coloured glass and antique (giallo antico) yellow limestone, transported by Odoricus from Italy, much of it having been recycled from ancient monuments. To these he added materials found closer to the site – Devonian limestone, alabaster, black limestone and grey-green Purbeck marble. Its patterns of squares and circles depict a complex cosmology according to the Ptolemaic system. There is a brass inscription.

13

The thing was, however, that the chemist's shop episode (and the understanding that Peter was motivated entirely out of kind feelings towards

myself) made it all the more awkward for me to say what I felt I needed to say to Nick about Peter. If anything, Peter seemed even more prone to insufferable smugness following his performance. I know this sounds a terrible thing to say – but I think it was clear to everyone that the group dynamic had fallen out of equilibrium. An adjustment was perhaps overdue. This was clear at any rate to myself and Nick – Julia I was not quite so sure about. It seemed to me that she was now laughing (in an ever-more forced and exaggerated fashion) at just about every mildly amusing remark that Peter made. And he, for his part, was now managing successfully to monopolise her.

But after the chemist's shop episode (and the knowledge that he'd done what he'd done entirely on my behalf), it might have seemed that I was being ungrateful if I'd said anything to Nick. Thus the awkwardness.

Me and Nick were walking together. Derek was behind – not too far behind but just, I reckoned, out of earshot. Peter and Julia were lolling along behind Derek – miles behind, in fact.

“You don't feel,” I said in all innocence to Nick, “that he's monopolising Julia?”

“Who?” he asked. (He really did let his mind wander sometimes.)

“Who? Peter of course.”

“Oh,” he said. And then a moment later, having glanced back over his shoulder: “Do you really think so?”

“Nick!” I responded, the exclamation mark clearly audible.

A notion, it has to said, had already been forming in my mind. A means of easing us all, painlessly onto a new footing. A new understanding.

“Do you think he really fancies his chances with her? I mean, just look at them.” And then I had to move quickly (“Not literally,” I scolded. “Not now.”) to stop Nick doing exactly that, in the most unsubtle manner possible.

And so a notion began to coalesce more vigorously. I had in the past witnessed a rather goatish aspect to Peter’s character. It didn’t take much for this to come to the fore, I’d noticed; and once he was in full flow, there was no stopping him. He would become obsessive, vulgar, obscene. One time, when walking with him, I’d witnessed him pass crude judgement on a provocatively dressed young woman we’d passed in the street. He’d improvised on this initial theme for many minutes—and then I listened in horrified fascination as this polemic spiralled out of control as he began outlining (in a manner that was at once both fantastical and spitefully angry) what such young women like having done to them and indeed what they deserve having done to them.

Another time, we had both been on the fringes on one of those rambling group discussions on the merits and beauties of Platonic love. As we came away, he began muttering (more to himself than for my benefit) that there was only one type of love worth knowing about and it certainly wasn’t love of intellectual beauty – and again, he seemed hot under the collar and barely in control of himself as he did so.

I merely felt, I suppose, that if Julia were aware of this side of Peter, it might be better for all of our sakes. So I clasped Nick's wrist and having indicated that we should let the others catch us up, I gave his wrist an extra squeeze – a plea, I suppose, that he should trust me.

“Peter,” I hailed him (not, I hoped, too heartily) as he approached. He and Julia had hastened towards us, thinking, obviously that something was amiss. “Peter. We have urgent need of you. I'm almost sure you know the answer to this riddle. Me and Nick were just trying to remember it.”

Now he looked keen and expectant – clearly he'd detected no undercurrent of mischief on our part. But of course he revelled in this sort of thing. He liked to think that people could depend upon him for his deep fount of wisdom.

“It's that thing. You know. What is the one thing that all men seek?”

“Men meaning, in this case, mankind?” And here gave an almost imperceptible glance towards Julia. “Man, meaning woman too?”

“Well, yes of course,” I conceded.

There was a silence as his focus drifted and I could sense him yearning, beneath those vast moustaches, to wet his lips. But I could never have predicted what was to happen next. Because, in a small voice, little more than a whisper, he began:

“We have a little space within our heart that is as great as the vastness that is the universe. The heavens and the earth are there, and the sun, and the moon,

and the stars. Fire and lightning and winds are there and all that now is and all that is not.”

We stared at him, all four of us, utterly astonished. And yet something was urging me not to give up; to rescue something from this. Because, after an indecent pause, in a voice that must have sounded jarringly matter-of-fact, I asked: “You are talking, no doubt, of love?”

He looked surprise, hurt even, as he nodded.

“Yes, but what kinds of love are there?” I persisted.

And Peter, almost as if he had been waiting for my supplementary questions; as if, indeed, it had been scripted in some form of pre-ordained dialogue, continued:

“There is a bridge between time and eternity and this bridge is the spirit of man. Neither day nor night cross that bridge, nor old age, nor death nor sorrow. He who sees, knows, and understands this, who finds in this his love and his pleasure and his freedom and his joy, becomes master of himself. His freedom then is infinite.”

We all stared at Peter. He had finished now, we could see that. But still, none of us wanted to be the first to speak. And I was aware that there were tears in Julia’s eyes.

We were, as I think I have already indicated, scheduled to meet up with or to visit friendly parties along the way. I was never particularly convinced about the wisdom of this – at best, I reasoned, these were distractions; and I maintained this line even while conceding (and fully appreciating) the diplomatic nature of our mission. Quite rightly, though, given my junior status, my views on this subject did not carry much force and my impatience, inasmuch as it was noticed at all by my fellow travellers, was tolerated with benign indifference.

Too often, these meetings of remarkable minds were actually nothing of the sort. We were, undoubtedly, to some, the subject merely of (more or less idle) curiosity – and the upshot in such cases was invariably a gratuitous attempt on our hosts' part to express nothing more substantial than a numinous sense of fellow-feeling and good wishes. Or, equally pointless, were those occasions, achingly awkward and wooden, seemingly blighted by a formality whose rules (if indeed they existed at all) no-one really understood. And then, arguably worst of all, there were meetings with those who clearly hoped to exploit us for their own political ends – people associated with more or less revolutionary groups, who found (or pretended to find) common cause with our aims.

But one particular occasion sticks in the mind – and it is worth mentioning now, though it occurred rather later, as it were, in the day. The location was a tiled Italianate villa on an avenue leading from the park. When I say tiled, I'm not just referring to the roof – in places the walls too were inlaid with glazed

terracotta tiles in breathtakingly beautiful arrangements of pattern and colour. There was nothing garish about this – the colours were for the most part subdued, celadon greens, pale blues and modest primrose yellows predominating, and it was tastefully done – but I'd be lying if I said I'd seen anything like it before or, indeed, pretend that I found the effect anything other than hugely striking. It seemed to me a magical location, a stage set for intrigue. And all the more so because this villa was set back from the road and partially hidden behind trees, predominant among which was a huge weeping willow. We arrived around sunset, at that time in the day when twilight is gathering around, the world becoming contemplative in that still point between day and night, and you may find yourself immersed in the whispering narrative of your own thoughts. In that mood (and we were all seemingly reflective at this point) the house loomed, as we approached it, like something out of a dream.

I'm not entirely clear who was present that evening because at some point I slipped away into the garden and missed some of formal introductions that took place after the lecture – but I suspect we were not the only guests attending formally as a group. When our host rose to speak, there must have been at least one hundred people in that room – I'd hesitate to call it a drawing room, for it was vastly more substantial than that. It felt more like the reception lounge of a decent-sized hotel – or, perhaps more accurately, a Belle Epoch salon. Curtains like vast tapestries replete with all manner of braid and tassels; deeply-piled

carpets; pedestals, urns, swathes of cut flowers. A staircase ascended ostentatiously from the salon's far end and much of the room's furniture had gravitated in that direction, arranged in a loose arc as if defining a stage. And indeed it was into this arena, carpeted steps rising behind her as a backdrop, that our host was eventually to step.

She was a substantial and somewhat (it seemed to me) intimidating lady in her early 50s, not yet at the blue rinse stage but clearly caked in make-up. There was something depressingly life-less and mask-like about the face she presented us. She stood before us, large bosomed, indomitable and profoundly unglamorous, in a voluminous floral-pattern smock that almost entirely covered a pair of shapeless black slacks. She wore plain flat shoes on her tiny feet – so small that they seemed almost comically inadequate for the job of supporting a woman of such substance.

And yet it soon became apparent that she had real charisma. She didn't really have to do much to call the meeting to order. No need to shout or tinkle a glass – she merely began speaking in an everyday (and yet, clearly, not so everyday) voice – and almost immediately all chatter ceased. Even to the furthest corner where I was standing, having detached myself from other others.

She invited those in the room to come forward and to take up the empty spaces in the sofas and armchairs ranged two or three deep around her. She was imperious, suggesting to those unlucky few unable to seat themselves that they might stand in close behind. And they did. They lapped her up.

She began by setting forth her own modest views (though of course she would be pleased, not to say flattered, if it were to become apparent that we shared these views) on what is important, philosophically, in this life.

I'd drifted forward with the rest, of course; but I'd hung very much to the back and found myself on the periphery, standing by a pair of French windows. They were slightly ajar, their heavy curtains parted almost invitingly; and as our host, warming now to her theme, paused briefly to sip from a glass of water, I took the opportunity to slip outside.

Twilight had long since passed and there was something reassuring about the darkness outside – though of course it was not entirely pitch black. A thread of light spilled from the French windows' curtains; and deeper within the garden, there was a smattering of uplights, placed here and there to turn trees into monumental living sculptures. Faintly, from somewhere deeper within the darkness, there was the sound of a fountain and the air was filled with the heavy scents of jasmine and honeysuckle.

Every now and then, I could hear the odd ripple of laughter or a smattering of applause from within; but all of that now seemed far distant and inconsequential.

It seemed an appropriate place to wait. For I was sure I knew what was to happen next. When the time was right, when the opportunity arose, Derek and Peter would seek me out. They would come for me and confront me – because

it was they who had been most upset by my earlier behaviour at Westminster Abbey. They were the ones who would feel they had to act.

I'd found one of the garden's darker parts – shrouded by the hanging curtain of the gargantuan willow tree. And I must have fallen into an almost trancelike state; so I have no idea when it was that Nick joined me there – or indeed, whether he had been there the whole time; but I became aware, at last, of his presence in the darkness nearby.

“It's you,” I said.

“It's me,” he said.

“I wasn't expecting you,” I said.

“I know,” he said.

“Nick, I...”

But he was shaking his head – and then he was placing his finger to his lips. Hush. Hush your mouth.

15

I'd not exactly conspired with Nick. I'd merely put to him a hypothetical proposition – if I asked him to create a diversion, how, I pondered, might he go about it? And he of course asked me why I should desire such a thing. I in turn responded that there might be something that I needed to say to Julia. He, seemingly agitated now, began shaking his head. Frowning. If there was something I needed to say to Julia, why didn't I just say it to her?

Obviously, I told him, it might be something that I perhaps didn't want the others to hear.

He bristled at this. I sensed he felt slighted.

What was it, he asked. What was it I wanted to say to her?

I was only speaking theoretically, I reminded him.

This seemed to reassure him – superficially at least.

I'd put this whole scenario to him in all good faith at the time – but in the minutes that followed, I started to realise that this little exchange, inconclusive as it may have been, might yet serve my purpose in ways I hadn't initially intended or foreseen. If nothing else, it might now be reckoned that Nick had been forewarned – should any unexpected turn of events manifest themselves.

And of course, predictably, there were no opportunities to talk privately to Julia before we arrived at Westminster Abbey. Also predictable was the effect that the building should have on us – as we entered under the weight of its towering stone, we were silenced. Echoes; the light from stained glass windows modulated by the gravity of column and vault; a smell of mouldering prayerbooks, flags, beeswax. We wandered trancelike for many minutes, each in his or her own private world – until, having orientated ourselves, we began, jointly and severally, to be drawn towards the Cosmati pavement. We spread out along its edges – and one by one we began taking our lead from Julia. She had closed her eyes and seemed to be meditating, absorbing herself utterly in a

work whose beauty could not ever be taken in at a single glance, no matter how sustained.

All of us, save for myself. I watched, curious as first Nick then Peter then Derek closed their eyes. Curious, detached almost, I watched. Their eyes closed.

And then, with an inevitability I recognised immediately, Julia opened hers. She was snatching a glance. Glances. At Derek, at Peter, at Nick. Just to check. And then me. It was my turn. She glanced; glanced again; then her eyes widened. Surprise, shock maybe, disappointment perhaps – and then, inevitably, recognition.

I nodded almost imperceptibly to her.

Her eyes narrowed.

I nodded again and this time I stepped back ever so quietly from the edge of the Cosmati pavement. And I beckoned to her. To come round. And she did so. She stepped back, ever so carefully and quietly, from the edge. We both backed off from the others, our paths inevitably converging. She was still frowning, searching for something in my eyes.

Then we met.

“Nick?” she whispered.

“Julia,” I responded.

I pointed to a door nearby and smiled. And she, almost despite herself, smiled too. So I took her hand and pulled her after me. We made our escape though a cloister.

“Let’s make a run for it,” I said out loud, laughing. Then, as we reached the roadway, somehow we were running. And laughing. Running and laughing. It was glorious – the world a blur, the wind in our hair. We ran, pulling each other on, heading from Broad Sanctuary in, I suppose, the direction of Victoria Station.

Inceasingly, though, I could sense her dragging on me. Eventually she succeeded in pulling me to a halt – and I could sense that the atmosphere had changed.

She was verging on anger now. “What is this?” she insisted. “What are you doing?”

We faced each other. Suddenly, I felt awkward, exposed. I could sense people glancing at us as they passed by, to see if everything was OK. So (“Julia, there’s something I have to say to you”) I convinced her to walk a few steps with me into the side road we had just passed. But now it was almost as if she were pursuing me. “Well?” she was demanding. “Well?”

Now I could close my eyes. “Oh Julia,” I said. “Do you not see?”

Silence. What was she thinking?

“Oh,” she said at last.

It was her turn once more to close her eyes – and when she opened them again, she forced me to look into them. She'd grabbed me by the arms by now and her grip was astonishingly strong. Her eyes questioning mine, eventually she said, pleading but more than pleading:

“Please don't hurt him. I couldn't bear it if you hurt him. I'm not sure he could take it.”

I don't know how long we stood there together like that. Man and woman. And then her eyes widened again – though this time there was a look of mischief there. “We must go back,” she said. She gasped and clasped her hand to her mouth in horror. “Of course we must. We must.”

We did. She skipped; I followed a good several paces behind, the gap between us lengthening but never threatening to build into even a single degree of separation.

When we returned we found a solitary Derek standing by the Cosmati pavement. “Where on earth have you two been?” he said in what I instantly felt was a disappointingly blasé manner.

Julia ignored that. “But where are the others?” she asked.

“We assumed something awful had happened to you. Nick even thought you must have been kidnapped. But we split up – Nick to search every nook and cranny of the cathedral and Peter to comb the streets outside. I've to wait here in case you returned to square one. Which you have.

“Well that's all right then,” said Julia.

I suppose I must have looked rather sheepish. I said nothing.

The smell of mouldering prayer books, beeswax; stained glass light; echoes.

“Yes, they’ll be back,” Derek reassured us.

And, in time, they were.

16

There were other memorable stopping points, of course. A Roman archeological site. The phone box where the cover photograph for the Ziggy Stardust album was staged. We were invited to attend a brief ceremony in our honour at The Museum Calouste Gilbenkian. We also had been given permission by its trustees to visit the studio once used by Holman Hunt.

That sort of thing.

17

We must have reached Queen Square at some point between eleven and midnight. We had dined tolerably well and were in high spirits – though a good portion of the journey still remained before us. We had chosen a route through Queen Square as it would take us past the Italian Hospital, an institution, so he told us, important in the history of Derek’s family.

The centrepiece of the square is of course its garden – and we had imagined resting here on its benches for a few moments in quiet introspection. However, we found the garden’s gates locked and it would have been folly to have

attempted to climb the railings, especially as there were so many people around. To the south of the square, there is an un-railinged area planted with a handful of trees – a copse almost – let into the paving stones; and this little area was swarming with life. We had somehow expected the square to offer us a quiet moonlit scene. Instead, we were confronted with what seemed like a fairground, so bright and animated was it. Under the trees there were a couple of benches and these seemed to have become seething pyramids of humanity. Chattering, wrestling, arguing, singing, laughing, crying; young, noisy, excitable. But these benches were merely the focal points – there were scores of people generally milling about as well as a general drift of people passing through. And there was another lesser focus of activity – a little knot of people listening to a busker with a guitar. He stood and sang a sad song (counterpoint to the madness all around) strumming nonchalantly, leaning back against the garden railings. There were people working the crowds too – at least two harder-faced men moving back and forward, selling something. The closer we got, the louder and more chaotic it all appeared; and the louder it got, the brighter it all seemed. High spirits were in the air; and they were infectious. The air was sweet with cigarette smoke and the headiness of a musky sort of perfume.

I almost immediately sensed that some among us were likely to be seduced by all of this – and I was about to say as much to Nick when I realised that he had already detached himself from our little group and was wandering, almost

star-struck it seemed to me, towards the busker. I thought at first that he was perhaps going to join in. Harmonies probably. But he walked right past the busker and I suddenly realised, as Nick turned and set himself (that faraway look of absorbed concentration in his eyes), that he intended setting up on his own account. Nick always carried with him a set of felt-and-rag juggling balls – and now he produced these from the depths of one of his many pockets. Nick could juggle. There was never any doubt about that. I'd seen him once or twice before and he was more than accomplished; but I'd always assumed it was something he did for his own amusement. To relax and help him take his mind off things. I'd never seen him perform before. Nor had I any inkling that he had this desire.

Unfortunately, I had little time in which to form a critical opinion of his act – because by now Peter was dancing. He had barged his way to the front of the busker's audience and was hopping from foot to foot in an ungainly, uncoordinated fashion. Totally out of time, of course. He was like a diminutive Russian bear. No rhythm or consistency. Not even a hint of it. But he was concentrating – you could tell that because his tongue was beginning to loll alarmingly. Initially, the busker's instinct was to take all of this in good part. He seemed predisposed to appear amused yet flattered (justified, even) that he was stimulating some form of animated response in his public; but soon (and all of this evolved in what felt like seconds) his smile appeared strained. Because you could sense laughter. The audience had drawn back to give Peter

more space. They'd begun watching him, not the busker. Some of them were tittering. And of course the busker began to suspect that Peter was mocking him – or worse, posturing aggressively.

We were going to have to intervene. To lead Peter gently away. I turned to Derek and Julia, expecting both to have reached a similar conclusion. And that, I suppose, was the point at which the possible scale of this disaster began to be borne in upon me. Because Derek was staring in confusion over to the lively goings on by the benches under the trees. And there was Julia. She was chatting in animated fashion with a group of young men – no older than teenagers really, urban gypsy types, bearded but soft of feature, wearing earrings, neckerchiefs. They seemed to be pressing cigarettes on her; and she, it appeared from where we were standing, was somehow failing to dissuade them from being over-familiar.

We were both paralysed, me and Derek. I could dimly perceive this truth. My excuse was the fact that I was utterly torn. I didn't have a clue as to who I should be rescuing first: Peter or Nick or Julia.

But things were about to get a whole lot worse. A girl's face had appeared in front of mine. She was looking into my eyes, curious yet strangely mischievous.

And she was saying: "I know you from somewhere, don't I?"

I was craning to see past her, to staying in touch with what was happening with Julia, but she, this girl, mirrored my every action. Her face, in mine, looming ever closer.

And all this time I'd become increasingly aware of some sort of a commotion. It had been the least of our worries, something taking place at the northern end of the square. Shouting, an ugliness in the air, chanting, sporadic outbreaks of rhythmical, aggressive clapping rhythms. Now this ugliness seemed to be coming closer.

But the oddest thing had happened. The girl had stopped asking me who I was and had taken my hand. And now she had captured my whole attention. There was something odd in her eyes – a wildness a rapture, a passion.

The chanting – the raucous ugliness – was coming ever so close; and now everyone seemed more than aware of it. All heads had turned and the atmosphere had changed utterly. And yet (it still seems dreamlike as I recall it), I was almost oblivious. The girl had reached her lips towards mine – and I, almost despite myself, had bowed my head towards her's.

So I have no idea how the mayhem started. The chanting stopped; then there was the sound of running feet; then girls screaming, hoarse shouting, scuffling. It was all a blur. A vague swarming sensation, people seemingly scattering everywhere.

Someone wrenched at my shoulder from behind and as I span backwards he shouted something in my ear. I think it was: "Oi you, lover boy."

I fell. Blows were landed.

I suspect it was all over in seconds but it seemed like hours. What I remember most is the light. It seemed to evaporate. Where before it had all seemed so bright and colourful, the square suddenly seemed a shadowy place, grey and mustard coloured, dirty and empty of all life.

And yet almost miraculously, we were together again. Julia was kneeling at my side, cradling my head, lifting it, me, gently. Derek was also kneeling, asking anxiously if I was alright. Did I hurt? Any bones broken? I could sense Nick bending over me too – and Peter acting as lookout, light on his feet (or as light as he could be) facing out from our little group into the wider world, scanning for danger.

And indeed, dazed as I was, I could hear that the storm had not yet truly passed – the violence had merely dispersed into the narrow network of streets and alleys leading from the square.

But no, nothing was broken – not even my spirit. Quite the reverse as it happens. As I struggled to my feet, a great anger rose within me. We could hear cries of distress from a street leading from the west side of the square and I was immediately alive to this. And yet, as I made to move off in that direction, Peter grabbed me. He said nothing, though I could read it all in his eyes. So I turned away from Peter and looked to each of my friends in turn. I saw nothing there, not even shame, just a blankness.

Then Derek laid a hand upon my arm. “We should move off in an orderly fashion, as a group,” he said.

“An orderly fashion? A group?”

I was truly enraged now. Outraged.

But before I could express what I felt, Peter had jumped in too. He was jittery now, shaking slightly, a tremor in his voice. It was not our duty to imperil the mission by getting sidetracked, he told me. His head was shaking now, principally to emphasise his point but mostly because he couldn’t help himself. We could not, he continued, be deflected.

“Sidetracked? Deflected?” I demanded.

They tried, all of them, in their various ways, to hush me – but I would not be silenced. I was burning now with righteousness. “Sidetracked? Do you not see? This is the test. This is where we are tested. Our mettle. It is our duty to help these people – do you not see that. It is our duty as human beings.”

They stared at me. Not blankly now. There was distress in their eyes. Julia especially. Nick. Maybe Derek too. And yet they shook their heads as if I were I hopeless case. They began to move me. Literally. They grabbed me bodily and made me put one foot in front of the other, pulling me, dragging me, towards the east side of the square. And I’m sure (it is still all a dream to me, or a nightmare rather) I began weeping at this stage. They were tearing me away.

And that, of course, might have been that.

If it were not for the fact that, as we began to reckon once more our intended course, we heard weeping. It was coming from the lane leading off the south east corner of the square. And this now was too much for me to bear – for I could see, not far off, huddled in a doorway, the girl who had captured my attention earlier. She was weeping pitifully, another girl trying to comfort her.

Too much to bear – and I broke free of my escort detail. At least I tried to. Instantly, Julia grabbed hold of my sleeve, much as I'd seen her grab hold of Peter's sleeve earlier (a lifetime ago, it seemed now) outside 25 Powis Square. Except, unlike Peter, I could not easily shake her free of my arm, even temporarily. She was crying now, I could sense that. She was crying, even before I was moved to turn on her and wrestle her aside. She was crying, then she was shouting at me – but I did not care. I knew where my duty lay.

So in the end I succeeded in breaking free of her and I hurried over to the girl crying in the door way. She taken a fierce blow to the side of the head and an ugly area of bruising was already coming up. I hugged her, I comforted her. And her friend too. I reassured them. They were safe now. She told me that the heel of her shoe had broken off in the melee and that made her begin crying all the more pitifully.

And then I became aware of Derek once more. He was standing there above me, his hand on my shoulder. Ever so gently, the most subtle of pressure, he was trying to pull me off. No words, just his hand on my shoulder.

It was all too much. I stood up and told him exactly how I felt. He was a coward. We were all cowards – and none more so than Peter. This proved he was no longer fit to lead. Now was the crunch time. We must all decide. We must search in our hearts and do what was right. We must choose and act accordingly.

While I was saying this, I was aware that the two girls had got to their feet and they were thanking me and saying they didn't want to cause me any further difficulties because they could see they were upsetting my friends. Derek was still trying gently but firmly to lead me away – but I could sense too that he was steeling himself for something more telling and I was wondering in a vague and strangely detached fashion whether I could dodge whatever he was going to throw at me – and if I failed to dodge it, what it would feel like. The thing was, he was succeeding in dragging me back. Up at the top of the street, still not far in from the corner of the square, I could hear Peter swearing at me and Julia wailing now as if all her worst nightmares had come true all at once and I could sense Nick trying to comfort her.

But anyway. The two girls limped off, one hobbling because she had a broken heel. Then she teetered and fell right over. And of course she began weeping all over again and I could take no more. I broke free of Derek yet again and as I went to help the girls all I could hear in my ears was the sound of Julia really cursing me violently now.

I awoke to the sound of singing. A youngish woman, I thought. A lively mischievousness in the rise and fall of her voice – a captivating sound that held both joyfulness and yearning. Something more mature too – coarser, careworn, a timbre of melancholy. I listened to her for ages. She must have been working below in the courtyard. But at what? What was there to do down there?

I got up, slipped over to the window and pulled aside the dirty scraps of rag that had been hung as curtains. I could see nothing below but still I could hear her voice singing, gently, a lilting sound, almost like a lullaby.

Yes, it must be true, I thought. It must be spring. Spring at last.

April, was it? Or was it March?

True, it was a dour sort of a day, gunmetal grey, overcast, a cold dampness permeating all things; yet the light was more insistent, more sure of itself. Standing there at the window, I shivered in my nakedness and scurried back under the blanket on the bed.

How many weeks had gone by, here, in this tiny room? Four bare walls, window with rag curtain, door, mattress on the floor, wooden chair. I could not even say for sure what colour the walls were. Indeterminate. The grey of damp plaster.

I shivered, hugged myself, recapturing the warmth I had sacrificed in the pursuit of Spring.

I felt better, much better, I realised. Well enough to go for some sort of a walk.

19

I had spent a week or more (maybe as much as a month) with Elsie and her friend in a rookery of an old Victorian terrace house. It had once been a glorious dwelling place – three storeys at the front, four at the back, its split levels served by half landings off a generous staircase. And that's not counting the basement either, which was a warren of low vaulted chambers.

But the whole terrace had clearly been condemned years before and by now only a handful of isolated structures remained – just about all of the houses that hadn't been knocked down had mouldered away. Ours, the end house in the street, now a solitary tower of crumbling building, was enfolded in a palisade of ten-foot high corrugated iron, and a thicket of almost impenetrable buddleja bushes. Its neighbour was long gone and we were propped up by great hulks of rotting timbers, aslant against the bared party wall like flying buttresses.

It had been squatted for years, long enough and consistently enough for it to have acquired its own firmly-fixed oral history, the kernel of which I had related to me many times by many different inhabitants during my first few days there. Its rooms were large and all save the kitchen were laid out with two or three or four mattresses. Outside of half a dozen veterans, the population seemed to turn over with a slow but inevitable regularity and I gave up trying to

calculate how many of us set sail in that great creaking ship each night – but I reckon the count was never less than forty.

It was a noble undertaking in some respects: there is a camaraderie that comes from a common purpose and a foraging for survival; and in the all-encompassing embrace of the evening, the velvet darkness, with its candles in dark rooms and its disembodied stories, its songs and its improvised music, you are soon aware of an almost atavistic sense of being and belonging.

And yet I was never truly comfortable there. Its history was related to me with greatest fervour by a red-haired woman who had once been a great beauty – you could easily see that this was so and there was still an echo of this truth in her bearing. She told a compelling tale and the moral of her story was the notion that the squat – its founding values, its motivating principles and the sum total of the spirit of its occupants, past, present and future – was in its own way a heroic undertaking. Here, she told me, after relating its saga at length, was an enclave of right values maintained perilously in a hostile world.

This notion of a noble undertaking should have had some form of resonance with me, close as it was to the unspoken assumptions of our own great Society, whose aims were so dear to my own heart. But even during my short stay I saw much that disturbed me – many acts that were (at best) irredeemably petty and cruel. Weakness of any sort was preyed upon relentlessly, unthinkingly; and there was an unmistakable undercurrent of persistent and, I fear, instinctive criminality.

I was silent witness to many acts that were gratuitously vicious or spiteful – and my instinct that, inasmuch as I was a newcomer here, I should say nothing and do less, often left me burning with shame.

So I was pleased when Elsie suggested we leave and make our way elsewhere. Elsie's friend had already moved on following a series of increasingly torrid arguments between the two – and, as luck would have it, word had reached Elsie that there was a room to be had in a working men's hotel down near the river.

It was more or less a bedsitting room, with its own electric hob and modest sink behind a floral-pattern shower curtain in the alcove. We shared a toilet and bathroom with the inhabitants of our floor and the floor below.

The hotel manager had the room immediately by the street door and it was supposedly his role in life to monitor comings and goings – sitting out in the common passageway on crude wooden folding chairs with whichever of his cronies happened to have passed by. But it seemed he was often incapacitated; so, in effect, all-comers were free to roam the building.

And it was a rough district – far rougher than the area around the Victorian terrace we'd just come from. Working girls congregated on the street corner (we were off a fairly busy street leading between the river crossing and the old docks highway), and public disorder was commonplace, not least among the male business associates of these girls. A miasma of sour disappointment and festering violence emanated from the public house just opposite and the air,

especially in the maze of narrow and darkly threatening tenement streets leading down to the river, seemed always to be laden with damp and the odour of putrid decay. It was an area interminably suffused by a brown, gloomy light.

The hostel itself was a maelstrom of perpetual chaos. There were daily break-ins and robberies and assaults; and all manner of vile transactions were contracted on the stairs and landings. No matter how diligently we set cleaning rotas, the stairs remained chronically filthy.

But we were not destined to remain there for long. One weekend, Elsie's face erupted in a rash of red spots; by the Wednesday, she had decided to spend a couple of days sleeping on the sofa of a friend who lived further down the estuary, in the hope that a change of air might alleviate her symptoms; and by the next weekend she'd sneaked back when I was out, taken her things and left me a note. In it, she asked me to forgive her and hoped that we might meet again at some point in the future, when we'd both discovered happier circumstances, because it (it, meaning, I assumed, us) had been fun in its own way.

So. That's when I took another decisive step eastward.

I did try to rejoin my unit, of course. I mean, obviously I did. Many times that winter, I trudged all the way across town to Queen Square in the hope that they had posted someone to wait for and retrieve me. Many times also I positioned myself at strategic points on the intended route. Holborn, London Wall, Mile End. But not a sign. It became obvious to me that the project had

come to naught and that the group had, disgracefully, unforgivably, broken up – thanks almost entirely to the inadequacies of our leader, Peter. Many times, when I thought of this, I was beside myself with miserable rage.

At every stage, not least during the next phase of my displacement, I inquired after my comrades. I never lost hope that news would filter though to me by however unlikely a route.

Because by now I had accepted an invitation to over-winter at the renowned hostel on India Road. These were mild days – and to pass the time I began attending outdoor discussion groups, held in parks and other set-aside pieces of ground. I felt there was something awesomely pure about the desire to hold our debates outdoors whatever the weather. Something vigorous and uncompromising.

Everything we did, it seemed, we did with style. We lived on soup served up in the crypt of a fine Hawksmoor (I assume it was a Hawksmoor: it bore all the hallmarks) church beautifully executed in Portland stone. I don't know what the church was called nor exactly where it was (or indeed) is.

I can't pretend that I was unreservedly accepted into the bosom of this group – but then that suited me, in my own way, too. It allowed me opportunities to observe my companions in a detached yet sympathetic manner. I know I regularly provoked laughter – largely arising from the fact that I was not yet wholly familiar with the group's common reference points – but that seemed a small price to pay. I actually came to enjoy clowning and generally playing up

to my new-found reputation – I was regarded as being, if not exactly dim-witted, then a little slow on the uptake.

Take, for instance, the way that we dealt with Irish Michael's disappearance. Irish Michael was a huge character, a fast talking spieler who always carried a glass bottle of milk with him wherever he went and who always absolutely reeked of petrol. He was the sort of man who trailed laughter in his wake wherever he went. Ye he was a hard man – and he was always hinting that he had been a soldier and, what's more, that he had killed in the pursuit of this profession. I enjoyed his company immensely. He was an absolute fixture.

And then one morning he was gone. No sign of him. As the morning passed and there was still no sign of him I became increasingly agitated. Had no-one else missed him? I thought this unlikely – he was such a character. But then why had no-one said anything? Eventually, towards the middle of the day, as the thought of soup animated us (as it always did) and we began making a move, I spoke up. Had no-one seen Irish Michael? A heavy silence followed. Then someone said, looking down at his own feet, that it had been Irish Michael's turn to head up east. That was the expression. To head up east. I turned to another in the group and without being prompted he confirmed this. "Yeah, gone up east," he said.

"What?" I stammered. "What do you mean?"

But they all just shuffled by me without answering.

Later, when I persisted, they either ignored me or told me to get lost. And when I returned to this topic a third time (a suitable period having elapsed), this time they laughed – at first incredulously and then with what seemed to me a barely concealed bitterness and aggression.

I was so rattled by this that I actually turned to Tony. Tony was arguably the most unreliable of our party, seeing as he suffered intermittently from scary attacks of blindness that near enough drove him out of his mind. His saving grace, however, was his absolute refusal (or inability) to follow the common herd. But Tony, even Tony, giggled nervously when I drew him aside later and asked if he knew what was going on.

As he giggled, though, I felt the penny drop. Or at least I thought I did.

“Do they mean the sanatorium? Or the infirmary?” I’d heard talk that there was some such institution not far from our daily circuit. Maybe this was a piece of intelligence I’d picked up from the young cleric – the one who now and then insisted on helping ladle soup, dispensing jolly good cheer as he did so. Perhaps I’d heard him say something about it. Something about an infirmary.

But Tony just kept on giggling and he even found the courage to shake his head at me, almost contemptuously, as he did so.

That’s what we do. We wait to head on up east.

An infirmary – or no, in my imagination, it became greater than an infirmary – more a fabled white city. A city built entirely of the same Portland Stone as the church from whose crypt we were served our soup.

And then of course there was the terrible night. Some members of our group – a hard core – sometimes insisted on sleeping under the stars. These were the incorruptibles, the salt of the earth, the last hope for us all – and I saw an uncompromising grandeur in what they did.

I decided, in a show of solidarity, to spend some nights sleeping out in the open. Quite unexpectedly, on the night of the last day of January, the temperature dropped.

I found myself in hospital – and in fact the only lasting damage was the amputation of one of my little toes – but I heard later, many weeks later, that one of our number, Johnno I think his name was, died of the cold that night.

Good, however, can emerge from the most unlikely of circumstances – and it was while awaiting discharge following this episode that a man approached me on the ward and said he had a proposition to put to me. He was a dapper little man. A doctor, he said – but no white coats for him. He wore a brown chalk-stripe suit, three piece, with a tailored, figure-hugging waistcoat. Cream-coloured slip-on shoes with buckles. He had a harelip, hidden (though hardly hidden) behind a downy moustache.

He told me that one of his functions was to liaise with community outreach – a programme set up to help people in precisely my sort of situation. He added that, if it was alright by me, he'd put me forward for a room in a flatshare run

by a sheltered housing corporation. I'd still technically be convalescing but he could visit me once a week or more if I liked – just until I was on my feet again.

That's how I came to be in the room with the dirty scraps of rag for a curtain. And he did come to see me. The dapper little doctor with the downy moustache and the harelip. He would come and sit on the edge of my bed – or rather the old mattress laid bare on the floor that I called bed. He would examine me – though on more than one occasion I suspected I could smell drink on his breath.

One time, at some point in the evening this was, he came and sat on the edge of my bed and told me he had something to tell me. There was a long silence and eventually I asked him what.

So he turned to me and immediately turned away again and I could see he was agitated and that his face had turned a strange colour. I was genuinely concerned for him – but curious too. I just sat there in bed, propped up on pillows against the wall, observing him.

And there's not much to tell, really. He tried meeting my eye again, failed, began coughing – and somehow worked himself into a terrible choking fit. In the end he had to get up and flee the room.

I never saw him again. I thought I'd be evicted from the flat – but quite the reverse. From that point forward, no-one even asked me for my rent.

Day after day, I wandered farther and farther in pursuit of spring. And one day, I thought I'd reached the very edge of town. I found myself in a park – recreation ground might be more accurate – that seemed to go on for ever. It didn't start in a promising fashion, it's true. From the high road, it looked merely like a strip of waste ground in the gap between a long-abandoned works and a scrapyard. An ancient fence, concrete fence posts bleeding rust, blackened barbed wire on top, smothered here and there by bramble patches. Dogs barking from deep within the scrapyard. The derelict factory, a vast building that must have been a monstrosity even in the 1930s, brick built, had a saw-tooth gable end and dull yellow stains, like the spotted markings of some poisonous animal, on its corrugated iron roof panels.

Ahead, there seemed only to be an electricity pylon, its spars and barbed wire outrigging tangled with unspooled cassette tape and other ragged scraps of polythene that flapped languorously, whipping noisily now and then as the breeze stiffened.

But pass beneath this pylon and the terrain opens out. To the left, almost as far as the eye can see, there are football pitches. Hundreds of them. To the right, the ground dropping off gently, a piece of less tamed land – longer grass, tufts and hummocks, wild flowers, the odd low bush. And even farther off, a copse and the course of a stream, choked with rushes. Farther still, defining this whole park, seeming indeed to define the whole horizon in an expansive sweep, a belt of trees.

Down into the meadow land, I could see a figure sitting on a folding stool at an easel. I wondered what he could be painting. That distant treeline perhaps. It was only just coming into its new green, with here and there a tower block (because of course in reality we were not yet at the true edge of the city) rising above. I was at least a hundred yards away from the artist and he was facing away from me so I had only an oblique view. But there was something about the set of the shoulders, the hint of a profile. And of course the hat. He was wearing a Tyrolean sort of a hat. A Tyrolean hat with a bright green feather in the hatband.

As I watched, a crowd of kids began to gather around him – truanting kids, cocky, looking for mischief. They were 13 or 14 years of age I suppose – not yet youths but on the verge of that. As they gathered around the artist it was obvious even from this distance that they were gauging the entertainment possibilities here. They made sly attempts to draw him out, to irritate, to goad him. At one level this might have seemed harmless to the casual observer – but I could all too easily imagine the growing undercurrent of menace here.

I wanted to do something. At the very least, I wanted to reassure myself that all was well. I needed only to walk over, in that general direction. But I found I could not. I was somehow paralysed.

As I stood there, impotent, close enough to witness but not to intervene, one of the boys – not the biggest by any means but clearly the toughest – took it upon himself to snatch the artist's hat. He held it in his hands, staring at it,

astonished, for an instant, at his own audaciousness. And then he accepted the fact of his own triumph and brandished the hat at his comrades, laughing as he did so. And as the laughter became general and uproarious, to put a seal on his moment of greatness, he put the hat upon his head with a great flourish – and having modelled several demure poses he began to promenade up and down provocatively, right behind the artist, in a succession of exaggerated walking styles.

I knew that something terrible was about to happen here. Yet I was frozen. And then the strangest thing happened. As he intruded ever closer, the boy clearly wanted the artist to leap to his feet and attempt to stand and snatch the hat back. He'd fail of course – the boy would dodge his grasp in a manner that would utterly complete his humiliation. And then things really would turn ugly.

But it didn't quite happen that way. He turned alright. The artist turned. But he remained seated. And he merely smiled. He smiled beatifically.

I turned to leave. The spring breeze gusted once more and I became aware that my cheeks were cold. They were wet and there were tears in my eyes.

22

Strange to say I didn't return the next day. Oh yes, it's true to say that I walked to the park. But I stopped at its gates. (Or rather the patch of worn ground and crumbled brickwork where once its gates had been.)

I turned once more. I walked for hours through the streets.

And somehow I suspected that the same thing would happen the day after that. I'd get to the gates, stop and turn back.

I was wrong though. That's not the way it turned out. It was late morning – another breezy day, clouds scudding, bursts of sunshine that only hinted now and then at a long suppressed memory of warmth. I crossed the park towards the wilderness. And there he was again. The landscape painter, wearing, as he had been before, a Tyrolean hat complete with flamboyant pea green feather,

This time, I came right up to him; and although he didn't turn as I approached, I sensed he was aware of my presence behind him. Neither of us said anything for a while as I looked, over his shoulder, at his work-in-progress. I found it hard to focus on the picture but in the end I think I managed to make some sort of complimentary remark about it.

And he asked in his turn whether I took pleasure in art. Or indeed, the arts. Arts plural. Painting. Music. Theatre. Dance.

I said that I did. In my own modest way.

And he said with a laugh that sometimes modesty was an over-rated virtue.

And so I sat down. On the grass. To the side of his stool.

I do not know how long we sat in each other's company, without exchanging a further word. You could hear the wind now and then in the trees, the odd measure of muted birdsong, the distant hum of a city and the world turning upon its axis. He worked with great concentration. But not a word between us. Hours maybe. I don't know.

And then I brought myself to do it.

I asked: “Do you know me?”

Still he worked on, though I half-convinced myself at one point that I glimpsed the faintest hint of a wry smile upon his lips.

And yet I persisted: “Do you?”

No hint of a smile now. He merely gave the tiniest shake of his head.

So I stood. I backed off. I retreated. And just as I was on the point of turning on my heel to walk purposefully from the park, I heard him call.

And as he rose, he added: “I will be here, again, tomorrow.”

23

I waited hours for him the next day. I paced back and forward, I sat cross-legged on the grass, I lay flat out on my back and stared at the sky. I wish I could have slept. But I did not. It wasn't until the middle of the afternoon that I saw him coming towards me, a mile off maybe across the football pitches. He took forever to reach me.

Still I lay there in the longish grass, propped up on my elbows and then, eventually, he was standing over me.

“Come on,” he said. “We’ve a long way to go before nightfall.”

I raised myself to my feet – and now, at last we were face to face. I could read nothing in his eyes. There was something terribly familiar there; and yet much that was utterly unfathomable and alien.

“Nick? It is you, isn’t it?”

Nothing. Not the merest flicker. He merely turned and led on.

24

We walked for the remains of the day. We crossed down-at-heel estates and tower block territories; we cut through suburban streets that hinted now at then at country lanes; we followed canal towpaths; we flirted with the badlands, skirting commercial units and business parks, catching fleeting glimpses of municipal golf courses, sewage works and distant, pinnacled Victorian hospitals; and we were fed, through busy junctions, into labyrinths of narrower streets and taller buildings.

We walked (and sometimes it felt as if he were leading me round in circles) until I was utterly exhausted. And then, as twilight approached, it seemed to me that we had entered the grounds of some sort of an institution, though I could see no large house or buildings of any sort. Neither, it was true, were these grounds particularly manicured or carefully cared for.

And yet, as we passed under an archway in a tall, ivy-covered wall into a gloomier, more enclosed part of the grounds, I experienced a fleeting feeling of recognition. Surely this was a burial ground – not dissimilar to the one that contained Nick’s favourite tree in all the world, the towering ailanthus.

A false sensation, however. A rogue memory. This was no burial ground. As became apparent as we emerged onto a tennis court.

I'd been aware that we'd been circuiting a tall privet hedge – aware too of the tall chain link fence this hedge partially clothed. And then we went through a gate in a gap in the hedge and there we were, standing on a cinder surface.

More than one court, I imagine – the enclosure was probably large enough to contain at least three, though now there was only the vaguest hint of markings on the surface, which was in a mild state of disrepair. The fence was rusting and the pavillion had seen better days. I was aware of all these things, even in this fading light.

The pavilion was a wooden structure, like a gazebo or a summer house, whose roof extended to cover a substantial wood-decked veranda – and leading down from the veranda was a modest flight of wooden steps. The building had a pagoda style roof with sections damaged or missing, there were swallow's nests under the eaves, and everywhere the structure's paint was chipped or blistered – you had to suspect that behind their closed shutters, the panes of all its windows would be broken or at the very least blinded by dust and cobwebs. But here it stood, cheerfully unashamed and almost surreal in its setting.

And only now, after I had taken all of this in, did I realise that there was a chair – a piece of utilitarian white plastic garden furniture – placed on the cinders so that it was facing the pavilion steps. Nick indicated that I should take this seat. As I did so, the door of the pavilion opened and I became aware of much activity within.

Eventually two people emerged, manhandling another chair. A substantial piece of furniture this – a weighty and emperor-sized Queen Anne wing chair with cabriole legs and upholstered in pale blue and gold damask silk. Scuffed and moth-eaten, it's true, but, as chairs go, commanding. They placed it on the veranda at the head of the steps, facing me.

And now I was aware of people filtering out of the pavilion's inner space, skirting the Queen Anne chair and seating themselves on the steps. Saying nothing, moving softly, they filled every space, forming a gallery against me.

I turned, seeking Nick's guidance and reassurance – but he was no longer standing behind me. Others were, however. A steady stream of people were entering through the gate and forming up in a loose arc. There were no faces that I could say for sure I recognised – though of course I knew who they were.

It was almost dark now; and we'd have been totally enfolded in the night were it not for the lanterns, three or four of which were hanging within the veranda.

And so I sat there. I felt strangely detached from all of this. I can't say I was apprehensive. True, it was oddly quiet – given the large number of people now present. And though there was a surreal and unsettling aspect to this near silence, it was strangely reassuring too. I certainly didn't attempt to engage with any of the people ranged before me. Nor they with me.

And now the master himself entered. I had assumed in a vague sort of way that the presence of the master would somehow terrify me. Or at the very least I

would be overawed. But now, facing him, if I shivered, it was surely due to the chill evening air.

But he was not taking a lead role in this. Instead, one of the men at his feet, one of those who'd been sitting on the bottom step, stood and faced me. There were no preliminaries.

“You are charged with desertion. What have you to say for yourself?”

I said I denied it. And that, if anything, I was the wronged party in this case. My adversary asked me how this could be so; and I said I would gladly explain. I did. I told him in some detail about how Peter's inadequacies as a leader had come increasingly to manifest themselves – and how those inadequacies had eventually fomented a crisis.

“Harsh words.”

“I know. I speak them with a heavy heart. But I believe them to be true.”

“An uncharitable reckoning – when you remember that this is a man who on many occasions has shown you great kindness.”

“I know he meant well. But I'll have to say that some of his efforts were misguided.”

“I was not thinking so much of recent circumstances but events of a more distant memory.”

“What do you mean?”

He turned slightly and, with perfect timing, one of those in the ranks still sitting behind him offered up a document folder. Opening this, my adversary gave the documents within a cursory glance.

“Peter helped you, did he not, many years ago? During a period in which you were experiencing great difficulties. You failed to inform us of that fact, did you not?”

“I presumed it was up to Peter. What he chose to reveal about himself.”

“Indeed? And yet, when he first made overtures of friendship on your joining the society, you utterly rejected those overtures, did you not? You told him you had no recollection of ever having met him before. You told him he must be mistaken. Or, indeed, deluding himself.”

“I... It wasn't... He...”

“Speak up. We must hear your answers.”

I was confused, hot, tongue-tied.

“Well?”

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps?”

“Yes,” I said. “I suppose it’s true that there was some misunderstanding. But can I just say...”

“No. You may not. Now, as to the night in question. There was, at some point, a scuffle. A disturbance in the street. And you used this as an opportunity

to draw Julia aside. You suggested to her, did you not, that the Journey, as had originally been conceived, could not now go on.

“This is ridiculous.”

“Further, you told her that it had been compromised from the start. That it had, in effect, been betrayed. And that this latest incident proved that the undertaking was in terminal disarray. You questioned, in fact, the very legitimacy of the society itself. And then you tried to convince her to go with you. To this end and you began leading her down one of the quieter streets leading from the square.”

“No. It was not like that.”

“Julia resisted. An argument developed between you. But now Nick and Derek arrived, demanding to know what was going on.”

What could I say? A terrible injustice was being perpetrated. But I was drifting at this point, terribly tired. I was starting to feel I’d agree to anything if it would keep them happy. And all this talk of Julia was inevitably making me think of her. Where was she? Why wasn’t she here? On the other hand, why should I expect Julia to show herself when even Nick, at this point, had decided for some reason to make himself scarce.

“They were demanding to know what was going on. And you shouted at them. You told them to open their eyes. That it was all over. That they – and you – could no longer trust Peter. That he had betrayed the cause.”

“No.”

“But he was not your leader, was he? Peter, I mean.”

“What? Of course he was.

“Was he? We will return to this presently. Suffice to say, however, that you became ever more vigorous in your attempts to justify your actions. You told Derek and Nick that it didn’t matter to you either way but that they must decide – they could chose to accompany you and Julia if they wanted, but one thing was sure, you, the pair of you, were not going back.

“No.”

“At which point Derek, realising that Peter was still back at the square and may now be in trouble, decided to go back for him – charging Nick, in the interim, to keep a hold of you and Julia. Is that not so?”

“No. A hundred times no. It was not like that.”

“At which point, Derek having departed, you made a passionate plea to Nick. The three of you, you stated, could and should go it alone. You urged them, pleaded with them. Do not throw away this opportunity, you urged. Julia by now had more or less come round to your point of view. Nick was more sceptical. So again you attempted to force matters. You pulled Julia after you leaving Nick, distressed and unable to decide, calling after you one moment, turning and hoping urgently to see signs of Derek and Peter the next.

“No.”

“Eventually, something in him snapped and he, Nick, came running after you. But this was not exactly the outcome you had hoped for – because he

caught hold of Julia's arm and began pleading with her not to follow you. And, bizarre as this may sound, a tug of war developed. You holding onto one of Julia's arms, Nick onto the other. And there could only be one outcome, couldn't there? You and Nick came to blows. It wasn't much of a fight. You soon knocked him down. But it was a Pyrrhic victory, wasn't it? Because Julia went to him and began comforting him. Not only that, she began shouting and screaming at you. She said some very cruel things, didn't she? She told you that she didn't want to see you again. She told you to go now, to make yourself scarce, to clear off."

"No."

"Which, eventually you did. I imagine, as you wandered the streets in the aftermath of all that excitement, that you managed to throw in your lot with some of the ruffians who had been the cause of all the trouble in the first place. Is that not so?"

I stared at him. He stared at me. We'd have stayed that way forever probably if I hadn't been so tired.

"Well? Is that not so?"

"Perhaps."

"I'm sorry, I must again remind you – you must speak more clearly, so that we can all hear.

"I said perhaps."

“Thank you. So, you parted company with the group. You left it, I assume, in the vague hope that, as the chaos subsided, it might in some way reconstitute itself under the leadership of Peter.”

“Yes. I hoped so.”

“You hoped so?”

“Yes. You must believe me. It was always my most ardent desire that our mission succeed.”

“Except that it was not so.”

“No?”

“No. How, for instance, do you account for the manner in which you feigned illness?”

“Feigned? What is this? I can’t believe what I’m hearing.”

“Because of course you have never suffered from asthma or indeed any other type of respiratory infirmity.”

“As a child...”

“As a child?”

It was easy to meet his eyes now. Mine were burning. These questions were beneath contempt.

“Well, it is a mere matter of detail. The important point, you will no doubt maintain, is that you wanted the undertaking to succeed. You would have us believe that?”

“Yes.”

“Under Peter’s leadership?”

“Yes.”

“Except that Peter was not leader of the group, as you well know.”

“What do you mean? Of course Peter was leader.”

“Do you recognise anyone gathered here this evening.”

I again scanned the faces all around – but none were familiar.

“Go on. Take your time, now. Look carefully.”

Time and again, as I scanned the faces before me, my eyes kept returning to the master. And now, I had to admit, there was something familiar about him.

“The master,” I said.

“Indeed, the master. Do you recognise him now?”

“Yes. I do. He looks a little like Derek.”

“He looks a little like Derek. Indeed, he does, doesn’t he?”

And of course I saw it now. This was Derek. This was so obviously Derek that my heart sank. How could I not have seen this? How could I have been so blind? So useless? The universe contracted; something in me shrivelled and died. I flushed with shame.

“The journey, as you will now be well aware, was the last stage in his initiation.”

And so... clearly he had passed. Clearly, then, the undertaking had been a success. I could feel my face crumpling. I felt like weeping for joy.

He was nodding. They were all nodding. And then my adversary said: “It only remains now to decide what is to be done with you.”

And now he was no longer addressing me but those who were here as witnesses. He told them, not that they needed reminding, that in cases such as this, a man in my position might volunteer to retrace his steps and to walk naked a part of the journey.

An image flashed before my eyes. An image, terrible in its clarity. And now, at last, something was dawning on me. Now, finally, it was all beginning to make sense.

So I interrupted my adversary.

He turned, mid-sentence, frowning, astounded at my audacity. And when it was clear that he intended to ignore this rudest of interruptions, I spoke out again.

No, I said. No.

I told him that I had already done this. I told him – all of them – that I was indeed the naked wretch I had seen through the café window on Ladbroke Grove. This had in fact been me.

Now, for the first time, there was a hint of commotion. A murmur in the air behind me.

No, I said.

I was shaking my head, yet I was smiling. I could see it all now, of course. Now, at last. The whole story. It flashed before me again.

“I would rather have the injection,” I said.

And someone said: “So be it.”

The master vacated his chair. A line of stern faces filed past me; and soon I was alone, sitting on that white chair. Or not quite alone. Peter, miraculously, had appeared from somewhere.

I bared my arm.

There was such compassion in his eyes as he bent towards me. I could see the needle was terribly dirty.

“None of it was true,” I told him. “I am innocent you know.”

25

It was getting light when I woke up. Or at least there was a hint of brightness in the sky. Enough light, at any rate, to be aware that all my worldly goods were strewn around me. Everything I owned. Everything I had ever owned. Further, I just about perceived that I was in a clearing in a wood. Leading from this clearing was a broadish pathway overhung by trees and the branches of bushes; and down this track, a good hundred yards distant, there appeared to be a mound. From this distance and in this light it wasn't clear whether it was a natural hummock or a heap of brick and rubble. Behind the mound, seeming to tower above it as a backdrop, there were more trees. Monumental trees, a veritable forest, it seemed.

But one thing was sure. There was a figure on the mound. No – perhaps two figures. And as the sunrise began to fringe above the distant treeline the picture hardened. Two figures in partial silhouette.

Soon, it would be light enough to make out these figures. The nearer one, his hands held before him as if beckoning to me, would be Nick. Behind him, higher on the hill, Julia, still hesitant perhaps, but a joyous smile upon her face.

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