

Consumption
Memories of My Childhood
(Book I)

Benjamin Power

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First Edition.

978-1-326-79269-5
Imprint: Lulu.com

Cover Painting: *Sunset near Arbonne*,
Théodore Rousseau, ca. 1860-65.

*“In my previous book, **The Less Than Jolly Heretic**, I had wanted to run over the events of my life for others, to show them what had happened to me, and why I was as I am now. I had wanted to chart my relationship with my parents, and with those around me as I grew up, and all the things in our interactions over many years that had hurt me, all the unspoken things that, cumulatively, over a lifetime, brought me to my present-day melancholia, and my episodic psychoses. In this task I failed. I ended up writing more on the routine misery and the unexpected pain of my present existence than on my early life, peppered with casual observations and insights, and raw dark humour, and swiftly deviating into a political and historical exposition, and a scientific critique of psychiatry, artificial intelligence, Christianity, atheistic humanism, and deterministic materialism, where really I should have been speaking with the broken heart, not just the angry head. My hope with this fresh book is to try again. I owe myself that, for long years of doubt, inertia, and exhaustion, and probably a little stubborn laziness.”*

Benjamin Power, 12th September 2024

Consumption

I was born, eight weeks premature, in St. John's Hospital, on the outskirts of Chelmsford, a large town in the UK county of Essex, on the 12th of July 1985. Very weak at birth, I was expected to die, and thus at my Catholic mother's behest my parents petitioned a priest to administer my last rites. Mercifully for them, I pulled through, although I remained tiny and fragile, on continuous life support for over a month.

My memories of my earliest life as a baby are, understandably, beyond my reach, but I'll begin from my first visual recollections. There are earlier events naturally, but as to their contents from my own perspective, I have no idea bar to look at photographs taken of myself in my high-chair or cot.

As first I remember, I was sat in a long ceramic bath, with a little lukewarm water under me, staring at the old Armitage Shanks taps at the far end. The off-white hospital room was gloomy and unlit, but a weak sun filtered through the clouded glass of the window. I felt

a pain, my first recallable sensation. The coldness of the water, the chill of the air, and a sharp stinging down below. A catheter tube had been inserted into my genitals, and the area was moist and sore, bleeding a slight red trace. Looking up to my left over the rim of the bath I couldn't see anyone. I didn't know where I was, and I felt scared, alone in pain. I cried a little. But I was very small, and my memory ends at that brief flash. I was too young to know the context of where I was or why, something that was only explained to me much later. For all I knew then, I thought only that I had in some way been injured, or was in the process of being injured, though whether by persons in it or by the environment itself, my mind was too immature to discern. From this amateur understanding, sadness did not envelop me, but I was made fearful, linking the world to the ghastly sensation of my predicament in that medical room. There are better ways to begin.

Perhaps a whole year had passed. My first full memory (although second to the lingering opaque sadness of the hospital discomfort) was of me sat in my nappy in the back of a dark

blue Ford Sierra, on the right hand side of the passenger seats, tucked into the confines of a moulded plastic child seat, and being driven through the fields of Southern France in bright sunlight, rows of purple-green artichokes poking through the tilled soil to the right and left, stretching away to what seemed like the horizon, and then, as if a second later, of me clinging to the top of a flight of polished wooden stairs, looking up into the light, airy attic of a French farmhouse, huge dark wood beams above my head and lulling tides of ethereal dust motes suspended in the sunbeams, floating gently under an open skylight, the Sun's rays cascading down like a full, white pillar, and with the cool comfort of my 'Little Sheet', a scrap of spare white cotton sheeting with a blue and orange floral pattern on it clutched tight to my hand, functioning like a teddy bear, and very popular with me. Back then, I was awed by being alive, and somehow it always felt like Summer. Though my earliest childhood thoughts are patchy at best these days, I don't have any memory of the rain at least, and always that bright, straw-hued sunlight, the tweeting of small, brown sparrows in the bushes or the blue tits and

robins on the garden birdfeeder, and the sensation of solar warmth.

I was always quiet as a four and five-year-old child, not yet old enough to venture outside the house by myself, content to lie under the covers between the white textured wallpaper of my bedroom, avidly browsing the colourful children's story picture books that my mother had purchased for me, enthralled by the exotic animal art of *Hot Hippo*, *Greedy Zebra*, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, and *Bush Vark's First Day Out* (the latter of which came to resonate powerfully with me once I started school), with me lying under the soft white duvet of my bed, always with the sunlight beaming through the broad West-facing double-glazing of the windows above the small square garden, and a couple of teddy bears beside me, all given suitable names, like 'Gizmo', 'Bunny', 'Big Dragon', or my standard naming favourite, 'Mr. Bear'. When I didn't know how to read my mother would sit with me and turn through the pages, often for hours, and I would point to various pictures that interested me, commenting on the eccentric style (and occasionally the narrative),

delighted at the humorous antics of the animals in each story. I had toys to play with as well though.

One morning, on a Saturday, I was lying stretched out on my parents' bed, cuddling with my mother as she lay there half-asleep, a tight, comfortable atmosphere peppered with loud snores and the dry, pungent smell of her exhaled breath, with the periodic rolling motions of her body, clad in warm, woollen pyjamas with a picture of a Polar Bear on them, her pale, freckled skin hot and vital. I had learnt the days of the week and how to associate them before attending any school, as my mother read *Peter and Jane* books with me, establishing basic comprehension and verb and noun-use, and besides, I watched *Playdays* on the *Children's BBC* (which themed the daily episodes by day, cycled weekly), along with *Charlie Chalk* and *Big Bertha*, although *Trapdoor*, *The Clangers* and *The Magic Roundabout* were my firm favourites, the fantastical colourful settings with their idiosyncratic puppetry and charming clay animation, and the mischievous animal characters always the biggest appeal to me,

prone to mimicking Dougal the dog's dry-witted, humorous antics in his hunt for sugar lumps, or impersonating the languid, drowsy tones of Dylan the rabbit.

I was always up early in the morning, not long after sunrise, and long before my mother, and would habitually rush into their bedroom and leap onto the bed to snuggle with her. I think since the hospital I had always felt a little distanced from others in the world, not quite lonely, but atomized, as if physically displaced, and in need of a lot of comforting. I could distract myself, but in general I liked to check in, and to be checked on, and did not do well alone if I didn't know my parents were nearby.

Suddenly, I heard the door shut loudly downstairs, jolting me alert. I wasn't sure what was happening and looked up to my mother for consolation. She smiled down at me though, and said "sounds like Daddy's home! He has a surprise for you!" My father worked long hours at the time, as a project leader at a Northern Telecom (Nortel) site in Stevenage, a lead software engineer with a small team, following his time as a periodic contractor programming satellite technology. He commuted for over two

hours each way every day, to the outskirts of London and home, and was often called in on weekends. I'm sure he was around the house in the interim, but this is the first time I remember seeing his face.

I thought it was just a man walking into the bedroom, a tall, thin man with dark brown, heavily greying hair parted to the side, wild eyebrow strands, whitening like coiled wire, fresh stubble, and a big nose, panting and slightly fraught, a thin beige overcoat covering his deep red pullover and white, grey-striped office shirt. He had a large white plastic bag in his hands, his dry fingers already cracked around the joints, and with plasters over the red cuts on his fingertips from a skin infection stimulated by steady hours at his keyboard.

He was awkward as he entered the room, but smiling, toothlessly. "Look Benjamin, it's your Daddy!" my mother announced, and then my Dad spoke to me, his voice soft and deep, a pronounced remnant of his Derry Irish accent still present beneath his long years of Anglicized speech, "Hello Benjamin! Here, I thought you might like this!" He handed the bag to me, and I greedily took it in my hands,

and reached inside, pleased to receive his gift. It was a *Ghostbusters* figurine set, with two plastic moulded characters, Egon Spengler, and Slimer the ghost. I pushed the back of the clear packet until the cardboard burst and slid the two toys out onto the bed overjoyed. "Thank you so much Daddy! I love you!" I called, and heard him reply, "That's OK son, I hope you enjoy them!", standing there above me, a shy smile on his tired face, and moving to rest his hand on me and rub my shoulders a little, his long, sore, bony fingers cool and clammy to the touch.

My mother reached across and gave me a little squeeze, saying, "Wow! Look at that! That was very kind of Daddy. And well done for saying thank you." And so I sat there longer, very happy at my new toys, and distracted by them for the rest of the morning. I didn't notice by then that my father had left the room, to go downstairs and freshen up, and then to sit in his crème woollen armchair at the right corner side of the living room, just under the wide patio doors, and to read his weekend copy of *The Times* and *The Guardian*, lingering over the cryptic crosswords, three or four sheets of

plain paper on the ceramic-tiled mahogany coffee table to the right of him with the blue and white Dutch scenery on it, the delicate windmills and pipe-smoking, clog-footed labourers always covered in tiny, illegible numerical ideas, and indecipherable notes hastily jotted down in black biro.

I did not notice either, for many years, that my father would never, ever say “I love you” to me of his own volition, not once, and sometimes not even as a reply, though generally at those latter times he would rise to mimic the sentiment if it was presented to him. Perhaps he finds it an embarrassment to declare outright between two males, or an embarrassment in general, something inappropriately romantic and oversentimental, and I have never pressed him over the matter, as a shy, awkward, insular man himself, concerned always for his embarrassment levels, knowing he would be put out, and yet knowing, beyond sensing or hoping, and despite the lack of this confirmation in him, that he does love me, very much.

Still, this strange, sombre lack of an overt emotional bond has resonated with me my

entire life, ashamed at myself that my Dad could not bring himself to tell me he loved me openly, wondering shyly if I had disappointed him somehow, that shyness softly flicking into sadness, much as my Mum tried to compensate by telling me herself, “love you!” (I notice the ‘I’ seems difficult for her, as if she herself was not there, and the latter generic sentiment less troublesome on the mind) or telling me in the third person what came to be the familiar narrative, “your father loves you very much!” or, “look at how much he loves you, he buys you all this and he does so much for you...” as I began to worry that I was somehow excluded as a category of fatherly affection, and noticed this more and more.

I love my father. The deepest, most intrinsic love, and one I could never shift or diminish, even if I wanted to, bringing me to tears as I think it, either for the puissance of that ever-present love itself, or for the wan, soft melancholia of its futility, glimmering away a little like cloudy tears somewhere behind my thoughts, and then the swift-growing cost of its neglected return.

Saddest of all to me, and a source of

subtle shame, at the reach of experience, is the acknowledgment that I too, over the years, have learned not to say "I love you!" to my father, replacing this with "thank you!" and "I hope you have a lovely day!" and always the tiniest, covered-over pregnant pause as I come off the phone to him, made embarrassed too, conditioned by his muteness, wondering what his reply would be, hesitant, knowing he would squirm for a second, and that there would be a jarred silence, like the public reception of a soloist's wrong note, or a change of expression on his face, and loathe to see him experience that mildest of discomforts. Over many years of this, I think of all the missed opportunities, and the times I could have said such, and if I could have brought him happiness by doing so, but then I remember that in all those early years my first expressed love was never audibly reciprocated without what felt like obligation, even duress under my pensive eyes. Yet, given this, and beyond his base temperament, I never saw my Dad in sadness, not once seeing him shed a tear, or look down in face, or visibly disappointed, or indeed too expressive at all. If he has suffered since – and I'm sure he has – it has always been off-limits to me perceptively,

though I have scanned his face many times, and in context, looking for a sign.

I have yet to hear my mother ever add that 'I, though "love you!" comes quite routinely now still, at the end of most phone conversations, almost a token parting by now, and the done thing, unless she forgets, as can happen if she is excited by news from her day, or if she slips back into the habit of offering a shielded "and you too!" instead, as if I had announced "cheers!" or, "have a good day", another simple means perhaps to preserve an antiquated dignity, somehow a little repressed. She reminds me now and again when I ask that "in Dad's generation, the men didn't show emotion", her own explanation for me, rendering him always reasonable to me, and, in general, a lifetime of explaining him away for my sake, in addition to the religious outpourings, serves as her own contribution to steady pedagogy.

Perhaps also, I would have liked his touch more instead, much as I loved his many gifts, and loved to see him. I cannot really remember his body as a child, at least in a conventional hug, or display of affection, though I knew my

mother's warm jumpers well, and her comforting embraces. At times I could sit on my father's knee, and he would play the game with me where he rocked me back and forth, or side to side, or in a circle, me yelling with delight, and him putting on the higher-pitch falsetto of his excited voice, explaining to me about seismic waves, "first we have the P-waves!", rocking me on his knees in the simulated alternation of the compressions and rarefactions, then, seeing me hold on tight for dear life, moving my body more vigorously saying, "then there's the... S-waves!" effecting the transverse shear, and finally, after a brief intake of breath, growing excited himself and whirling me around on his knees making a rumbling noise, me screaming in glee, thinking I would fall, whirled round and round, as he announced, "and here's the... N-wave!" pretending that the air was exploding in the thunderous energy of a sonic boom. In a real earthquake the waves appear in different order, but I think he (and I) liked the effect of escalating motions, shaking me back and forth, and yet held tight around the hips, and myself gripping his kneecaps, never once falling to the floor.

Aside from these playful sessions, there was never any sense of physical contact about my father, so I came to look forward to them more and more, even though, as with most of our interactions, even these days, he preferred his role to be that of a teacher to that of a conventional parent, and I always sensed a predominant part of that game was for it to function as a learning aid, although, beyond curiosity, I was never sure why a small child needed to know such specific phenomena as the permutations of mechanical Earth waves, or to experience the propagation velocity of this vast acoustic energy first-hand.

For many weeks after that Saturday in the bedroom, for years in fact, he would again come into the room in the mid-mornings, as I was sat with Mum, and present more toys to me, sometimes limited editions, or the more common figures that still I found the most appealing, suggesting he had put in time and researched the matter privately, so quite soon I had built up a veritable army of plastic models, and by then was more easily distracted, and what I thought was content. And then he would retire to his chair, to put his feet up on

the rest, and to eat an apple, munching it down to the core, every last bit, his false teeth loudly chomping, and to read through his papers, or through a *National Geographic Magazine* or an issue of *Scientific American*, the thick carnation pink fabric of the drawn curtains open behind him, and the TV on, the sound dial twisted until a low murmur came from the box, drinking his black Nescafé coffee and listening over his paper to the BBC News, turning the TV off afterwards, and continuing to read and to jot down numbers and notes.

I spent much of my time alone in my bedroom in the mornings, as my mother busied herself with the tidying of the house, and other domestic duties. I had a thick hardback book titled *The Natural World*, from *The Mitchell Beazley Joy of Knowledge Library*, flicking slowly through the detailed illustrations, with each main animal species laid out on a single page to a couple of pages, absorbed in examining the pictures. It was one of my favourite books to look through, captivated by the origins of life and the long time scale of evolution from the Palaeozoic, 400 million years ago, and the denizens of

Precambrian and Silurian oceans, with the rise of the first early fish, and then the detailed functions of cells, and the process of natural selection with diagrams of Darwin's Galapagos finches and giant tortoises, the world of plants, seeds and flowers, and yeasts and moulds, and my favourite opening illustration, showing Megatherium, a gigantic ancient ground sloth, and then fascinated by the lifelike full colour illustrations of squid, and octopuses, cuttlefish, hydras and sea anemones, staring for hours over eels, then streamlined sharks, ancient sturgeon, and awe-inspiring whales, dragonflies, marsupials, and the inhabitants of Northern forests and of the ice and snow, with a section on animal behaviour also, and a gripping illustration of fierce Arctic wolves surrounding a defensive phalanx of musk oxen bulls protecting their females and calves, and I dwelled on the book for years, along with *The World Encyclopaedia of Animals*, enthralled primarily by the majesty of the wide-winged, massive yellow moon moth, and the elegant selection of spiral-horned African gazelles, exploring each consecutive page of these books and lingering with the descriptive tableaux and with the beautiful forms of Nature in front of

me, obsessed with the processes and delights of life and living systems on this planet.

I simply loved it, except one single illustration. A black, bulbous velvet worm scaling a fallen branch to the left of one of the middle pages. This image used to terrify me in some unsettling way. I'd stare at it, after having enjoyed all the other pages and the myriad arrays of wild creatures. I found the animal so threatening, so alien and weird, with slimy front feelers like sharp grey horns, rushing along the wood like a living train, as if to attack, on tiny black splodges of legs, that I had to put my *Natural World* book down in the end, and was always afraid to open it from then on, afraid that I would open it on that page, and have to be confronted with the hideous, offensive sight of that bizarre invertebrate, black, scaly, and unappealing, like an devilish caterpillar slug. The stark black colour always scared me also, compared with the vibrant shades and pigments and aesthetic beauty of the more attractive animals. I imagined the unsettling creature magnified, unsure altogether as to the scale, and climbing up my body, hissing, ready to bite me on the neck.

Sometimes I would challenge myself, knowing it was there, and deliberately turn to that page, to see if I could master it, but the image's oppressive horror never faded with me, and, with the one image logged and filling my consciousness, the book was abandoned in the end, save to sit on my shelf these days, ever unopened. I think it would scare me today.

* * *

My parents are by nature gentle. Rarely if ever throughout childhood did I hear them openly argue, and I never felt any sense of tension or fear in the air in that regard. Sometimes my Mum would pester my father, or get caught up on some small detail, sensing an unintended slight, and then become snappy with him for a few seconds, but his exasperated, "Look, Mary..." response always established a firm and immediate *détente*, causing her to back down, and there was never fighting, or the sense of any lasting resentment, as the moment of frustration closed as quickly as it had started. This sense of dignified placidity

was imparted to me also, and in my very youngest years I was never shouted at or treated harshly. All bar one occasion.

I was on all fours in the front hallway, pushing my yellow four-wheeled crane toy back and forth on the amaranth-coloured carpet in front of the glass-panel of the front door. Mum was just around the corner in the living room, four metres from me, sat with Dad also, reading his papers, and relaxing on another pleasant Saturday morning. The weather was cool and the air moist, an overcast sky gloomier than I can remember from before, but the spacious rooms of the red brick semi-detached house, with beige walls decorated with a deep crimson floral pattern, soft padded furnishings and many windows, always compensated, and I felt happy, charging my favourite new toy along the floor excitedly.

Then my mother moved into the hallway. She was wearing her dark high-heeled nursing shoes and a pair of small gold stud earrings, with her pale green brushed cotton dress stretching almost to the floor and a navy blue and crimson jacket with padded elbows, the sweet, bitter, vetiver-like aroma of her perfume

on the air (a thick, dark, spicy blend, with a little hint of plum, always worn throughout my childhood, and never my favourite smell). She had an informal get together with her professional health visiting colleagues to attend down at the village hall, and needed to leave as soon as possible, leaving my father to watch over me. Of course, I had no idea of this at the time. All I understood was, "Mummy has to go out for a little while Benjamin" and, "it's OK, Daddy's here", but I was still inconsolable, my happy smile swiftly fading to a mournful, desolate frown, looking up forlornly from my toy vehicle as she edged past me along the hall, giving me a brief hug goodbye and worrying that she would be late, having left it until the last minute. "Don't go Mummy!" I called, "No, please, don't go!"

It was not that I did not want to be left with my father, for I loved his company when it was there. I simply needed my mother too at that moment, and liked her to be around also, that perennial need for comfort, and the security of knowing I was watched over by two pairs of eyes, the sense of safety that comes from a complete family. As she passed through

the crack of the opened front door, I sped along the hall after her, clumsily holding onto her skirt hem to prevent her leaving, tears on my cheeks. I simply didn't understand. A patient mother with me, her only response was to kindly turn around and say, "oh, I'm sorry to hear that Benjamin, don't be upset, I'll be home before you know it." Having said this, looking pushed for time, and a little flustered, my mother headed out the door, and down the five front steps to her car.

Quickly, I reached out for her, hoping to grasp her leg and cling on, desperate that my small weight could keep her with me, that my act of will could have prevented the growing absence, and the uncomfortable wait. As I stretched out, my other hand holding the crane truck, I lost control of myself on the carpet, and the little vehicle shunted forwards in my hand, the boom attached to the operator's cab pushing right into the decorative reeded float glass encased in the centre of the thin wooden front door, shattering it into big, sharp shards, falling all over the doorstep with a high-pitched cracking sound.

My mother stood on the steps aghast. "Oh God" I heard her exclaim, "Oh God, what have you done, Benjamin?!" I was still crying at this point, but more in shock and surprise now, upset at having broken the door, and caused a dangerous mess. Dad rushed into the hall. He stopped, and stared at the shattered door, his face fallen, echoing Mum's sentiment, and adding, "you naughty boy! Why did you do that?!" Swiftly, angrily, he pulled me to him, still crying, and put me over his knee and slapped me hard on my right thigh, leaving my skin sore and red. I screamed, unused to the sensation, and fearing him then, and continued to cry. All I could say was, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

Something changed in him then, and my father became soft. Swift as the anger had arrived in him, it evaporated, and his face lost its sternness. What he had mistaken for insolent defiance in my costly breakage appeared now as it had been, merely the accident of an over-excited, clumsy, fraught little boy. He set me back on the sofa, under the warm yellow glimmer of the electric chandelier lights, turned up to full brightness, and he put

his arm around my shoulders, and rubbed me better. My mother came back into the house briefly, and embraced me, as I continued to sob, and I told her I was very sorry. "That's okay, Benjamin. We're not upset at you. We just didn't want you to hurt yourself. There's no need to cry. Here, come on now..." and she passed my Little Sheet over to me, and said "well, I have to really go out now, but don't worry, I will be back before you know it" and with that left the house again.

Distracted by my sheet and my father's voice, and feeling exhausted and slightly distant, I slowly ceased sobbing, and was soon watching a videotape with him, *The Bison Forest*, my favourite program, a beautiful nature documentary talking about the history and wildlife of Białowieża, a huge primeval forest at the Eastern border of Poland. After a little while, I didn't even notice if my leg was still stinging. That same day, within a half hour, Dad patched up the broken door with temporary masking and had cleaned up all the shards with a dustpan and brush, and by the morning after, the glass panel had been replaced, good as new.

It hadn't been the physical pain that upset me. It was the disappointment and the shock, that I had hurt my parents' feelings, and angered them, to the point of unpleasant physical punishment, mixed with the shock of having damaged a tangible part of our house. From that point onwards I was always more careful in my play, but sadder also. It was like a sweet melody playing on the breeze had been extinguished, or like the beam of a torchlight switched off, and the unalterable specialness of the long 'moment' before it was over, along with my confidence. Summer had ended, and now I had to be on guard. I think some of me also resented them a little, though I couldn't say quite why.

When everything begins to tarnish, and the veil is pulled aside perhaps it runs both ways. Perhaps no one likes the idea of physical threat over them from those they love the most, now aware of what my wise, kind, generous, wonderful parents could do, if ever I was to fail again, and to upset them.

My parents never again resorted to hitting me, bar once the same year when my mother slapped me down from her as I was getting

irritable in my high-chair one day when Dad was at work, an irritability never present in my personality. Maybe it was age, and the difficult years common to all small boys, or maybe it was the first innocuous sparks of a future rage in me, at having been blamed, and punished, unfairly a little, for loving them too much. I will never know. That time, I was less forthright at apologising on the spot and did not come back softly to her and her side to make amends for almost five minutes.

* * *

These years remained overall a positive experience to me, but the unsettling edge was now ever-present, like a switch waiting to be flicked, and my mind was tainted by doubt and uncertainty. Never a very confident child by nature, having realised early on from my father's fascinating extended monologues that I knew so very little, and was in more powerful, prudent hands, lectures taken as he accompanied me down to the village pond to throw crumbs of white bread to the gathering

ducks, or as he pushed me on my plastic cart up to the swings in the Oxney Green recreational ground play-park by the allotments at the junction of Chequers Road and Ongar Road, or out further as the track dispersed into the open fields beside Victoria Road leading up and down across the arable countryside to the boundary of Cow Watering Lane that marked the edge of the village of Writtle, stopping to watch the herd of dairy cows in the meadow, or to laugh as a grey squirrel hopped across the path.

Sometimes, on a late afternoon we would visit Hylands Park, and I would accompany him along the moist overgrown paths through the woods beside the stately home gardens, jumping in and out of trickling streams under a thick, full canopy of dark green horse chestnut leaves, by sycamores, and hornbeams, and along the winding uphill path to the weathered stone lion statue, heavy patches of lichen gripping his faded heraldry, and by the old flint lodge, flanked by bluebells, and playing with found sticks, called to observe the bracket fungus clinging to a wet limb, or to giggle in delight as a rabbit darted across the

wide grass behind a massive fallen trunk. He talked about the plants, and the pollinating insects, and any animal species we saw along our way, and then about the world at large, and how it worked, and I listened, silent, enthralled, knowing better than to try to interject and risk his frustration, knowing he felt my interruptions keenly, and did not wish to be derailed, or disrupted by the many questions of a small, overexcited child, much as this frustrated me after a while more than anything, knowing he didn't need to hear anything I could raise myself. Nonetheless, despite my gathering physical confidence in the enticing natural world, at home I was prone to anxious worry, doubting myself and my environment, and otherwise unassuming, preoccupied with my reading, quiet as a mouse, as if I did not want to call any attention to myself and bring on undue harm.

Nighttime was always a problem for me. The delineated clearness and cleanness of day held so much potential for me, in a large, light house, or out in the breeze and the radiating sun, absorbed in my endless green wonderment, but as the sun set, and I was

required to head to bed, a consternation set over me, and soon I was experiencing bad dreams. Quick to respond to my morning tears, and to my small voice recounting tales of sharp-toothed hairy beasts, or of the dark scowling eyes and crackling talons of a horde of scuttling insects, my parents decided on a night light for me, and soon as I lay in bed at night, accompanied up the stairs by my smiling father with his favourite rhyming slang phrase, "up the apples and pears to your uncle Ned!", and tucked in by my mother with a kiss on my forehead, buried under the thick comforting heat of my many bears, clutching my Little Sheet tight to me, I could get to rest more readily, a smiling *Thomas the Tank Engine* nightlight glowing full and cheerful from a plug socket on the right wall opposite the right hand side of the sheets where I lay, sending a soft, pale blue glow across the varnished pine of the bedposts.

The bad dreams still came to me at times, but in general, I slept more soundly, and the impenetrable gloom and silence of the night-time house no longer felt like the fall of a flickering blaze of discomfort, even with the

faint groaning and tapping of pipes and now and again a creak in the floorboards, and then with the same piercing echoes of a hunting barn owl hooting from outside, the grunts of hedgehogs, the shrill barking scream of mating foxes distant over the fields, and the crackling patter of tiny green lacewings on the window. I knew I was protected for now from that always malevolent dark, the very fullness of it the real horrifying factor, a murky sheet of black fire that hid monsters, and a huge, implacable terror, all that could readily harm and engulf and devour.

Waking in the night, I would head downstairs as my parents slept, and pace quietly around the ground floor rooms, my first bouts of reflective thinking, mulling over the details of the disturbing dreams I had just experienced. A squat, low energy table lamp was always within easy reach in the adjacent kitchen but to reach it I was obliged to cross the full dark of the living room, and soon I found I could not, lingering in the hall, reliant on streetlamps and the natural moonlight for my illumination. The small red lights of the extension cord boxes on the floor of my

parent's living room used to scare me too though, in that still silent darkness of the early hours, a cluster of scarlet lights in the corner, just to the right of the expansive patio doors that acted as a great, thin barrier lens to focus the sense of prey-like exposure before the deeper, wilder darkness of the garden, untapped, deadly, and closing back in. Their soft, bloody tones and the muted corona they cast up the wall, like dying embers against the primal stones of a sealed burial mound never failed to repel me, stimulating a blanketing mantle of invasive perceptive weirdness if peered at for too long, never quite able to place what I was fearful of and without tools to distil the tangible essence of the consistent alien pain these steady, opaque experiences stimulated. Presently, that consternation waning somewhat and dissolving into my tiredness, I would re-climb the stairs with soft, nimble footsteps, and return to the reassuring panacea of my nightlight lit, teddy-heaped bed, my tormenting burdens temporarily reconciled and mitigated until the grim onset of another ferocious dusk.

Always tall for my age, I bathed alone

from around my seventh year, looking forward to heading upstairs to the short, square bathroom at the outside end of the landing to the left of my bedroom door. My mother would help me run the taps at first, but soon I knew how to decide on my own temperature, adding Matey bubble bath from tall bottles painted to resemble idiosyncratic smiling figures with the lid as their hat, and water toys from the Early Learning Centre on Chelmsford High Street, thin pipes and spouts and plastic hydro-systems with a water wheel that could propel a small counter up and down, water pouring from various platforms and holes in a self-sustained flow cycle. Always bathing now after dark, I could lie back after playing for a little, and close my eyes, relaxing in the steamy chamber, regularly for over an hour, the only sound being the ripples across the bath as I jostled or moved my hands, the full yellow light of the bulb above and the steaming, foamy warmth of the water suitable defence from the horrid night.

One evening, late on, just before my bedtime, I was in the bath. Relaxed, my eyes closed as usual, my head inclined backwards and resting slightly on the square white wall

tiles, running the fingers of my right hand along the grout and across the smooth plastic-like filler plugging the corners of the bath, with my face pointing up at the pale-yellow paintwork of the ceiling. Suddenly, I heard a tapping behind me, like a sharp object rapping against the transom window above the bathroom door, a thin wood frame, and darkness there behind, the landing lights turned off that night. I had always disliked that window being there, feeling exposed in the water, and glad that the placement of the bath obliged me to be faced away from it. More so, I disliked the dark behind when the lights were off, this long rectangular portal into the abyss of my fears, the glass clear, and thus impotent, never enough to compensate for that inky pit, the landing tall above the stairs, and big enough to hold anything.

My eyes shooting open, I murmured, in audible discomfort, fixating on the gap above the door, itself only thin decorative pinewood, unbolted, reliant now only on the mechanisms of the catch behind the long brass handle. As I stared up, my eyes spiralling into the centre of the glass, the silence gathered, an invisible quilt of smog, and tension in the air, that

terrible anti-silence when the walls themselves are ready to strike, raising the hairs on my arms and neck. And there at the window it appeared. A horrible, brown-furred snarling face, dark pits for eyes, huge sharp yellow canines and grasping incisors, and the thick rolls of a pulled back muzzle, an evil sight, a werewolf face, my father's simulated grunts and growls, then a low baying howl, Dad up on a stepladder, the mask pushed back and forth, and hands scrabbling at the window.

I screamed in fear and leapt up out of the water. Then I began to cry, still terrified, my body shaking, coursing with cortisol and adrenaline. "Daddy, why did you do that! Daddy, why! Daddy!" I called to him, as soon as I had regained a little sanity, still eerily scared, but angry too. My first experience of true anger. Terrified of fantastical dark wolves, but aware of the natural world as it is, he had fooled me for no longer than a second, but still, I did not appreciate having been made terrified, especially given my very genuine fear of the darkness, and this from my own father! It wasn't Halloween, and the knowledge that he had purchased the mask in advance with me some weeks back, not knowing it was to be put

to a purpose like this upset me.

“Benjamin, calm down. It's OK. Can I come in son? Can I come in?” He was calling to me through the door. “Yes” I said, and my father, without switching on the landing light, pushed open the bathroom door, letting in a chill breeze of air, and him silhouetted against the pouring dark behind, the wolf mask mercifully out of sight, and just his familiar red jumper, coming to comfort me. I jumped out of the bath again in shock. “Benjamin, it's OK. I was only joking. There, don't be upset. I was only joking, see? There's nothing to be afraid of.”

And this from the man who had just scared the wits out of me. I was not satisfied with his response at first, and still angry, my voice breaking as I screamed at him, “Why did you do that Daddy?! Don't do that! Please don't do that again!” and in return he told me, again, a slight scold to his voice beneath the shock and the exasperation, “Here, look now, I was only joking. You have to have a sense of humour. Come on now. You're OK” and went to fetch a towel and rub my shoulders and I moved to him, and began to cry on his arm, making sure I had covered myself properly

with my legs so that he couldn't see anything indecent. I got out of the bath shortly afterwards, and dried off, and went downstairs to sit with him for an extra hour after my usual bedtime. He made me a cup of watery black coffee and opened a packet of Rich Tea 'dippy biscuits' (as I started to call them) for me to dip in my drink. Despite my rational understanding, there was still fear in my limbs, and at the back of my thoughts, and I did not want to sleep. But sleep I did in the end, although I cannot remember if I had any dreams. Time flies for a while after this recollection, and I have difficulty enough piecing a chronology together from the few scattered visual remnants of these years, my memory evaporated over this period, only a second or two here or there, and not much use. I am aware my bad dreams continued though, into the long term.

A final memory from this point is that one late afternoon I had gone to bed early, to read my dinosaur classification books, followed by the *Usborne Book of Greek and Norse Legends*, illustrated by the British fantasy and science fiction artist Rodney Matthews, with a cover piece depicting the golden fleece of the ram

sired by Poseidon on Theophane the granddaughter of the Sun-god Helios, hanging from a gnarled oak tree on the Black Sea shores of Colchis with the huge serpent head of the dragon guarding the grove of Ares extending into the foreground in sharp, stylised protuberances and sinuous crimson scales, ready for Jason, the leader of the Argonauts, to put it to sleep with the potion of Medea. An unrealistic art direction for that myth, but one I found very appealing at the time. Simultaneously, I was playing with the orange crocodile toy I had then migrated on to, made from jointed foam, on a wire lead that could be twitched to move at the jerk of a hand, and led around the room like a puppy, pretending it was the gigantic dragon roving back and forth ever-alert over the bed, ready to devour the army of *He-Man* figurines and *Thundercats* warriors I had arrayed fighting across the bottom of my sheets.

I was so excited in my game, inspired by my reading, that, seeing that it was still light, I pulled out my *Thomas the Tank Engine* nightlight from the wall plug and brought it into the game also, moving the little face back and forth between the spartoi warriors and the

'dragon', an honorary character, like a god, or a smiling cupid, observing the action below.

Soon enough though, I became tired, and putting down my books I got into bed, and became so comfortable that I was too drowsy to rise again to plug in my nightlight. The white light switch by the wall was set to on though, and the main ceiling light beaming down on me, and so I was content enough to drift off. I don't remember my mother coming in to kiss me goodnight, but when I woke up once later in the early evening the light was still on, and so again I settled into sleep, under my bears.

Then, suddenly, I was awake, in pitch darkness. There was noise by my bedroom door. Shouts, and roars, and an adult imitating the sounds of ghosts, a wailing "woo" vocalization, and rattling of the door handle. I screamed out as I awoke, and began to scramble, clenching the sheets to myself and tossing left and right, the dark all around me, unable even to see the ceiling, the curtains shut, and that awful noise from Dad by the door. I am ashamed to say, in my panic, I urinated the bed slightly. I shouted at my father this time, "Daddy, what are you doing?! Don't do that! Don't turn my light off! Why did you turn my light off!" but he was

deep in his own game, and giggling now, coming into the room and reaching over me, still making grotesque noises and booing sounds, and didn't seem to care. I struggled and shrugged unhappily, and pushed him off me, and only then did he seem startled, as if a little put out. "Daddy, I'm scared of the dark! Why did you put me in the dark!" Without waiting to hear his answer, I called out loudly, "Mu...mmy!!" and my mother, coming up the stairs herself, rushed into the room saying, "What is it? What is it, Benjamin? What's happened?" I told her what had occurred, and how scared I had been, and that I had wet myself, and she nodded, and, without a word, told me to get up whilst she changed the sheets for me. I was relieved not to have to sleep in wetness any longer.

By now, the light was back on in my room. Dad was standing there, a little grin on his face, looking down at me bemusedly, as if he couldn't interpret my face, and couldn't see that I was visibly shaken. "Come on, I'm just playing a game with you Benjamin. There's no need to be upset. You left your light on tonight, and we have to save electricity to protect the planet. I was just pretending to be a ghost.

There's nothing serious to be scared about. See?" His tone was that of a rational scientist. "But Daddy, I don't like the dark, it's bad, and it gives me bad dreams..."

At this point my mother turned to Dad and said "Why did you do that? He doesn't like the dark. Don't scare him." and, on hearing that, my father became exasperated, and could only reply, "Oh don't be silly Mary, lighten up, there's nothing to worry about in here. He's safe." And then, addressing me again, with my mother listening, "There's no need to be worried about anything in here. Come on now, see. Nothing to be worried about. We'll get your bed sorted out again after your accident and you can go back to sleep." "Remember his nightlight!" my mother added. My father repressed a sigh, "Yes, see, as your Mummy says, here's your nightlight, it's been unplugged for some reason..."

I was quiet again now, angry, but hurt, hurt more than anything, and passive on account of it. Some wretched part of me again gave my father the benefit of the doubt, and I began to question myself. Perhaps I should have been more careful with my nightlight. He was only joking after all. He didn't mean any

harm. Maybe it didn't make a difference after all as to whether my dreams were haunted. Most of all, why did my body disobey me? Why did I humiliate myself?! And then, conflicting me, why did Mum not do more to fight my case, why did she not tell him off properly, like she had begun to tell me off, like when I wouldn't quieten down in WH Smiths and was charging up and down the toy aisles, or when I slipped her hand in the shopping centre and almost wandered off.

As my parents left to let me sleep, I heard Dad say to my Mum, “what’s the matter with you people? Can you not take a joke!” and heard her say back, “well Billy, he's a sensitive boy, he just didn't like it for some reason, alright?”, but they were getting out of earshot by then, and I did not hear any further reply from her after that. From then on, my nightmares grew steadily worse. Always dark shadows, and red eyes, and huge gleaming wolf teeth snapping out of the night, and horrible worms and insects and slimy leech-like faces flitting back and forth in my vision, and, for the first time, redness, like a dragon, or like blood. However, by then of course there was enough bizarre and misery-inducing

horror arriving daily in the real world to render my terrible nocturnal pains only one nagging facet of a very unhappy experience, and yet somehow paradoxically, an invasive facet I acclimatised to in due course, in sombre fatalism. My laughter had become a thing of the past.

* * *

Behind my bed there was a tall set of double doors, painted a thick white emulsion, leading to my clothes storage rack, an airing cupboard about 2m by 1m in area, unlit, and packed with the outfits my mother had purchased for me, arrayed on a low wooden rail of thin metal coat hangers. Outgrown baby clothes, and cotton shirts, and French children's fashion ware from an expensive boutique on Chelmsford's Moulsham Street, and then more of my larger bears, and a substantial supply of spare duvets, sheets, and pillowcases. My mother would enter my room each morning and help me pick my clothes for the day, deciding, with my help, what she thought would look best on me, and correcting me if I put together a combination she did not

think suited and thus required me to change, something I acquiesced to, having no fashion knowledge of my own, and, as with much else of my existence, assuming her superior in knowledge and wisdom, a foolish decision on my part later on as my mother's choices led to much embarrassment and ridicule once I had commenced my public schooling.

An innocuous space, convenient and practical, but my mind still played tricks on me. As I lay in bed, I felt uneasy knowing of the gap behind the headboard, and then the darkness of the cupboard space inside the doors. It was not necessarily the direct feeling of a fearsome beast behind me so much as the knowledge of the space itself, a primal sensation of being watched, or of something in the shadows, perhaps the shadows themselves, essentialized to a malevolent will of their own. I found undressing difficult, loathe to disrobe and thus disarm myself in the presence of a manifest unnameable threat, and, upon stripping down to my white cotton Y-fronts each night (a choice of underwear decided on by my mother), I would move quickly, in jerky, panicked motions, on edge, slipping as soon as possible under the sheets, and immediately

reaching for Gizmo and usually a second or third smaller soft toy, only satisfied that I could relax when I knew my head was under the covers, some small barrier to the ominous abstract gaze of the penumbral closet, the twin doors lodged like flimsy sticks, a first morsel in the gaping maw to nothingness, that strange aura of deep chthonic horror extruding across the carpet lying a metre or so to the rear of my anxious body, the bleak numinous, like a sharp electric fuzz of fear-inducing stillness, nothing moving, but the locked air of the room closing in, harrowing, and real, as if explicable.

I still kept my Little Sheet on the bed, for old time's sake, but as my early years went on, I found it more and more unsatisfying for the lack of solid form, or warm fur and a comforting face, less effective as a soothing aid against terror, and the personalities I had invested in the bears gave me greater pleasure, buried in the supportive press of my appealing friends. Only in the day would the bedroom be a safe enough location for me, even with my nightlight, as the power of light itself was counteracted by a new sensation that put me on edge, and, for these memories, rain pattering on the double-glazed glass, and the

white walls murky, and suddenly barren. Without the Sun, the room was not warm in temperature, and no amount of pale coloured paint could address the gathering gloom and unwholesomeness mingling with that drizzle, a soaking sadness, the ceiling itself overcast, and a rising damp, cloudy and grey, like loss. The closet was always there, that cold, predator gaze penetrating my back, the hairs on my neck risen, and the knowledge that I was, despite my father's world-wise amusement at my fanciful ideas, and all his exasperated words of science, not quite alone.

* * *

Downstairs, my Dad continued to sit in his chair each evening, and throughout the day on weekends, when in the house at least, devouring his papers, then absorbed in difficult cryptic crosswords set by *The Guardian* (though if denied this mental training pleasure, he would accept the conventional general knowledge word puzzles of an American-style crossword as featured in *The Times*) and binary analysis for his tiring job, always a heavy workload, taking his

materials home to mull over for the week, kept busy, and otherwise gripped by a love of popular science and of the great liberal order around him, as by a lifelong amateur naturalist's enraptured fascination.

As he read in the corner, devoted to his materials, I would come down and sit perpendicular to him on the long crème sofa, and read gathered editions of *The Funday Times*, the amusingly named children's supplement of the adult UK Sunday newspaper, briefly browsing the *Beano* comic antics of *Dennis the Menace* and his belligerent dog Gnasher, then *Beryl the Peril* and *Scooby-Doo*, and then swapping the thin papers for books I had brought from my bedroom, my favourite at the time being an illustrated *Tolkien Bestiary* compiled by David Day, pouring over the tight, black, gothic pen-and-ink wash work of the Orcs and Wraiths and Wights by the British fantasy illustrator Ian Miller, a jutting Expressionist style, all angular beams and spikes and macabre bestial faces, staring deeply into the background lore of Tolkien's universe, and attempting many of the paragraphs.

More likely than not, my father would

have a Gala apple in his hand, munching the moist white-yellow flesh down steadily as he read, a messy eater, sucking on the fruit, and dropping seeds and droplets of juice onto the upholstery of his chair, bite by bite until only the core remained in his hand, and then continuing to take little nips, round and round until the tiny, stringy, browning carpels broke on the stem, chewing the seeds as well, or spitting them into his hand and placing them on the table, and despite warning me at first that they contained a cyanide compound, before stuffing the entire soggy remnant into his mouth, and continuing to slurp on the grisly husk. Eventually, all that was left was the dark brown stem, twiddled between his thumb and forefinger as he read, or placed back in his mouth and sucked on, almost indefinitely. I found the entire process disgusting on his part, and did not like to be in the room as he was eating his apples, resenting the noises I would be subjected to, and somehow the feeling that the fruit should be enjoyed, as Nature intended, but should end long before he continued to exploit every last piece, the texture change at the fibres around the carpels providing enough warning to an eater to finish by their very

nature. Watching him, I felt sickened, and soon refused to eat apples myself, which until then I would peel and cut into pieces with a knife, supervised by my mother, and eat them from a kitchen dessert bowl.

Sometimes I simply asked my Dad to eat more quietly, and especially not to spend a half hour afterwards sucking audibly on the stems, then leaving them piled up on the coffee table. He brushed my complaint requests away though, telling me not to be silly, seeming put out, and adopting a defensive line of “nonsense, all I’m doing is eating!”, laughing slightly (dribbling more trickles of juice down his face), then taking the stems in his hand and reaching forward with them, to present the sticky strands to me, making moaning noises “Ooh! Ooh!”, the thin, sharp smell of apple juice drifting across the room from his open mouth.

I found this increasingly distasteful, and later, though I tried to distract myself and pretend he was not performing his messy ritual, I found due to his sheer apple consumption rate that I could not be in the room with him at all, heading instead back upstairs to my bedroom, reluctantly piling up my books and comics, my face fallen, and the airy expanse of

the living room sacrificed for another day. I wondered if he had always eaten like this, and why he did so, confused by the vulgarity of it all, that visceral disgust, as if the snipped, browning core was a lump of rotting flesh, or a piece of long mouldy food waste fit only for burial in the bin and unsuitable for public show, hurt that he did not understand what was upsetting me, and that regardless that he refused to stop eating in this manner, displaying a total lack of respect for my feelings, however much my disgust was idiosyncratic. After all, my mother sometimes ate apples herself, although in her case always ended her snack around the outer core, and would dispose of it promptly, albeit conditioned a little as I was by Dad's behaviour, not quite promptly enough for my liking. I was developing a phobia of his fruit-eating habits, and a weird phobia of others' apple eating in general.

Then Dad chose to respond to me in a different manner, a manner that has haunted me for my entire life, and, as a teenager, stimulated many angry accusations, and much denial, as my father, and increasingly Mum too, either dismissed these events altogether,

saying “I can’t remember that”, and feigning shocked bemusement at their bizarre nature, a muteness easily seen through, or, on eventual acknowledgement, would downplay them so significantly that I was left in rage, shouting at them to tell the truth, aghast that they could not apologise, and then told off for raising my voice.

As I came into the living room, I saw my parents standing chatting by the big white radiator on the left wall leading up to the aperture of the kitchen, the door always open, and the crème-upholstered woollen sofa lying appealing to the right, a perfect place to read for an hour or two. Above the radiator was hung a small rectangular tapestry, a recreation of a medieval design showing beautifully embroidered birds in a gleaming fruit tree, a faint nod to Celtic art in the uplifting design. My father was talking avidly to my mother, discussing an anecdote from his workplace about his amicable relationship with an Indian colleague, Shyamji, and about the latter’s close family relationships in the East of London. He would often tell anecdotes about Shyamji, amused by his wit, or perhaps by his own, and by his predilection for salted cashew nuts,

taking half an hour (in Dad's story) to consume a single nut despite Dad telling him flatly, laughing, "Shyamji, finish your nut!"

Though these handful of 'water cooler anecdotes' were popular with Dad over the years, an office banter and camaraderie like a *Dilbert* comic strip, one never learned much detail on his actual projects, beyond overview, or much on the long-term directives he was following, or for whom. I gathered later that this was because he had signed the Official Secrets Act. Indeed, in addition, Mum told me much later on that she found some of his friendship antics unlikely, considering Dad was known for his quick, sarcastic temper at work, and, though begrudgingly respected for his highly innovative programming skill, fierce intelligence, and hard-won experience on difficult tasks, he was also found by his team to be a challenging workmate, and a difficult friend, and they were on the whole relieved when he retired after forty years in the career.

As I looked up at them chatting amicably, my mother nodding, and giving a little laugh now and again, I saw he had an apple stalk in his hand, twirling it between his fingers, the wet, pulled flesh of the tip particularly

unappealing to me. “Daddy, please could you put that in the bin?” I said to him, “I don’t like it.”

At first Dad was slow to respond, as if he was ignoring my comment, or could not see that I was being serious. I felt the nausea rising a little in me, staring at his juice-slicked hand, the tart smell of apple juice on his breath, trickles still gleaming on his wet lips. I repeated myself, “Please could you put that in the bin?” Then he grimaced and put on a forced exaggerated frown. Holding the apple stalk tight between thumb and forefinger, he leaned down and pushed it into my face, waving it back and forth in front of my nose, making grunting calls and moaning noises, “Grr! What’s this?”, “Ooh! Ooh!”, as if playacting with me that the stalk had come alive and was yelling out and hissing, a living thing, some foul little beast ready to attack, taunting me with this routine, poking the chewed-down flesh at the tip of the curled black stem into my own mouth area, making strange animal grunting noises the while.

Naturally, I screamed in horror and fearful disgust, and hid behind my mother, pulling her right arm around me as a shield,

and calling to him, “Stop Daddy! Stop! Please stop!” and then screaming incoherently, terrified, and starting to cry, a shiver of sick fearfulness rising in my body, stepping backwards, not wanting to be anywhere near the weapon he now had made of the stalk in his fingers, like a thin black leech dripping poison, or a velveteen worm, slithering at me from the unceasing malignity of his aggressive control, a hostile ‘pet’ under his pitiless command.

“Mummy! Mummmmy!!! Stop him, please! Please Mummy, stop him!” I screamed, forcefully, pleading with my mother to do something, as she stood by saying nothing, and Dad continued to drive the little stalk down into my face in callous pokes, but she continued to stand by idly, not saying a word, bar a brief mumble of “Come now Billy, I don’t think he likes you doing that.” And Dad, always the more dominant of the pair, ignored her, and continued his game, until I fled the room, tears erupting down my cheeks and a horrified, torn expression, unable to express the sheer wretchedness of how I felt, and the devilishness of my father, my bully (long before I even knew that term), unrelenting, and

unchecked, having humiliated me before my mother, and her impotent, or, more likely, unwilling to help me, rendered passive by long years in his company, buoyed along by his hands-up protestations of jest and simply stating to me, level and unaffected, as I rushed from the living room, tripping over myself to get away, “it’s OK, Benjamin, Daddy’s just playing a game with you. It’s his sense of humour. He doesn’t mean to cause any harm. Come on Billy, stop now.” And my father guffawing, and saying to her with a funny look, within my fading earshot, genuinely bemused, “what’s got into him?”

This strange, feral ritual on my father’s part continued from then on. He would be somewhere in the room, and would come over if he had one, and drive the stalk down at me, always making the bestial noises and grunts and groans, and scowling his face to signify “what’s this?”, and I would continue to scream, hysterical, and to beg my Mother to stop him, and she would merely stand there, letting his arm brush past her, and allow me to be horrified and hurt, and insulted to my core by him, absolutely aghast, and only later would she say to me, if I asked, “Daddy’s sense of

humour is like that. If he notices someone doesn't like something he'll do it more. The best thing you can do is pretend you're not bothered by it." And, to my shock and anger, she put the blame onto me for the situation, for not dealing with it as she recommended, and as if me, a little child, unable totally to stop my father from his grisly routine, was squarely at fault, and as if it was my own responsibility alone to address this, and to control the hurt and physical shock experienced, and besides, it was only a game.

These stalk-waving incidents – and they were many – effectively ended my childhood, leaving me traumatised, and unsure how to think about them at all, knowing the sheer bizarreness of the circumstances, and the ridiculousness, and embarrassed, not sure how to broach the subject with other adults, if at all, knowing I would be potentially given some very odd looks, or further ridiculed. And so, I did not share them with anyone else, and they continued to haunt me in the background, inexpressible, to this day.

Now, when I even see an apple core on a table, or a stalk, or the seeds in a stock photo of a cut apple half, preternaturally the nausea

rises, and, though I do my best to immediately repress this, I have been known to vomit, or at least to retch, and usually avert my gaze or leave the area. I recognise this as ridiculous, and somehow silly. After all, of all reasonable things to be afraid of, who has a fear of cut apples? But then I remember (and how could I forget?!) these terrible childhood tortures on my father's part and I wearily understand in self-reflection, even if I am still embarrassed, feeling, despite it all, unjustified in my shock.

* * *

It was in my early years that I was first introduced to the Christian religion. Shortly before bed every evening my Catholic mother would come to me as I sat in my room and say prayers together. As I lay in bed, she gently recited the Prayer to the Infant Jesus, followed by Hail Mary and Hail Holy Queen, then Prayer to the Guardian Angel, finishing with a variant Prayer to the Father. At first these five prayers were enough for us, me listening to her quietly, or increasingly piping up with my own voice as I learned the words by repetition, but soon enough The Lord's Prayer was added, and so I would come to memorize them all, dwelling on

the holy words, considering my meekness and fallibility as a mere little child (and my inherent sinfulness), and the goodness and power of God in the Trinity, the pureness and justness of Mary and Joseph always a secondary awe to me, knowing I was watched over. Then a little time would be set aside for me to pray independently, usually in bed, but later as I got older on my knees on the carpet with my head bowed and eyes closed. I would address God silently, invariably commencing with an apology, and listing all the things I thought were wrong with myself, in some embarrassment, and why I had made the mistakes, interspersed with more apologies, and inquiries into his wellbeing, in naïve politeness, followed by a timid request that he assist me in being a better person for the week ahead. I would pause, and stall, and never know quite how to address him, always concerned that I was not being formal enough or was 'saying the wrong thing' and thus would appear rather foolish in his eyes. Only when prayers were over would I consider going to sleep.

Curiously, even at this age I rarely if ever prayed directly to Jesus, instead addressing my

prayers solely to God the Father, but I was aware of what was written about him and his life, having attended weekly Sunday School at Our Lady Immaculate Church on New London Road in Chelmsford. I was taken by my mother to Mass every Sunday (and sometimes during the week), and would sit in my pew until the opening prayers and readings and the Gloria had been recited, whereupon Father Brian O'Higgins and Father George Stokes would come down to the front of the sanctuary in front of the altar and sit down on the steps to talk to the gathered children, telling us short morality stories and parables for a few minutes like kindly grandfathers before the elderly ladies of the church would gather us together and take us out through the thick wooden doors in an orderly procession to go to the basement of the adjacent church hall and learn about the birth of Jesus and his life's teachings, the Children's Liturgy delivered in a child-friendly fashion, with colouring in and pictures to cut out. Sometimes my mother would accompany us as a lay minister, and shepherd the children in creating their pictures, which were displayed all along the walls of the room. We would return when the Homily was over to

recite The Apostles' Creed and prepare for the Eucharist, sometimes wearing our paper hat designs back with us respectfully into the church, in a welcoming crowd of adults.

At home my instruction continued, my mother instilling in me from almost as soon as I could speak and comprehend how important it was always to be truthful, and polite, and kind, to always say please and thank you, and to always be good to other people, treating them nicely, no matter who they were, and especially if they were poor or unhappy. If you upset someone by accident, you should always say sorry, and you should certainly never be rude, or disobey what adults told you. It was most important of all to be decent, and pious, and never to take the Lord's name in vain, and not to behave in any way that would disappoint God, as otherwise we wouldn't be allowed to go to Heaven.

Hell was only highlighted to me in the negative, and never dwelled on in any great detail, my mother evidently quite content with the notion that her soul was safe, much as I filled in the gaps for myself later, and was more worried than ever about the latter, considering myself unworthy, outside of God's great mercy,

despite always trying to live by what had been taught to me, afraid that I would not do well enough, terrified of personal error. That the horror of the eternal flames themselves did not worry me as much as the tangible act of disappointing God (though Hell was certainly scary) is testament to the personality I had formed, even by this young age, which was one of devout fearfulness, a moral perfectionism with the potential to manifest great shame at personal weakness, or little failures, although it is worth saying that I did not feel it my place to extend this personal high standard to other people, understanding fallibility and expecting goodness from others, but not beyond their natural capabilities, which were, after all, none of my business to decide upon.

* * *

I have only one single sketchy visual memory of my short time at the pre-schooling nursery class of Widford Lodge Preparatory School in 1990. I was standing meekly at the side of a long, cramped, wood-beamed dinner hall, rows of extended wooden school benches set against the tables, with schoolchildren sat

all along them, each with a small, waxed gable carton containing milk and a plastic straw. I assume it was a morning break. The noise was terrible, a raucous din of high-pitched voices and shouts, the continual shifting of bodies on the benches, and the banging of milk cartons on the cheap lacquer of the foldable tables, small pools of spilled milk gathering across the massed surfaces. I was by myself, and did not know anyone, the urban school generally catering to pupils from an area of Chelmsford that, though close enough to Writtle by vehicle, was separated on foot from my cul-de-sac at the corner of Chequers Road and The Shrubberies by over a mile of Greenbury Way and then the A414, leading straight past the grounds of Highlands House up to the junction at Widford by the corner of Chelmsford Golf Club, and the children had no recourse to venture down it to my peaceful village, nor would it have been a safe walk even had they been old enough to walk alone, at least until one had passed the recessed gates to Hylands Park.

An elderly female teacher was standing beside me. She leaned down, noticing I had lingered by the side of the hall and not entered

the heaving queue to pick up a carton of my own, and brusquely handed my daily milk to me. "Here you go. Don't forget your milk. You have to drink this, it's good for you!" She had not noticed that I was shy, and hesitant, and, one assumes, was simply impatient, anxious that the daily rota of milk drinking then morning lessons was to be completed with no hitches, the tight running of British public schools a familiar exercise in hair-raising vigilance, in a boisterous all-male throng of excitable young boys. I was reluctant though. I knew from my experiences at home that milk was not a drink I took to easily, and not something I was accustomed to pouring on my cereal or mixing with porridge, my mother having noticed early on that it left me queasy afterwards, unhappy, and occasionally on the point of physical sickness, as did other dairy products such as butter, eggs, and cream. I was not obliged by my parents to add milk to my food when in the house, and it was suspected, though never tested by a doctor, that I was lactose intolerant.

My father too experienced a mild dairy allergy historically, and rarely took milk in his coffee, or butter on his toast, unaccustomed to

such “luxuries” as I’d heard him say, though my mother layered on the full-fat products thickly, slathering bread and cakes in salty butter and piling on mounds of sugary dairy cream at any opportunity, and thick vanilla ice-cream, our many trips to village tea rooms a firm favourite with her, perhaps compensating for a wartime childhood in Ireland of severe austerity and food rationing, when even “an orange was a special treat you received at Christmas.”

When I wanted a drink, I drunk tap water, genuinely enjoying the natural minerals of the cold, alkaline hardwater taste, although my father always insisted to me that I utilized his portable kitchen-top water-filter jug, much as this ruined the taste for me, bored by a flat, bare lack of flavour, dry to the mouth, unrefreshing, with no bite and a dull consistency, and I resisted when I could. I found the thick, concentrated fruit flavours of Robinson’s squash far too sweet and sickly for my tastes, even when diluted heavily, and cola or commercial carbonated lemonade was not something that ever appealed. For my diet, I ate a range of fresh vegetables and fruits, notably pineapple, Galia melon, peaches and nectarines, and small summer fruits, or whole

pomegranates, picking the tiny delicious purple seed clusters out of the spongy husk with delight, and would enjoy lettuce, cucumber and tomato salads, sometimes eating almost a whole cucumber at a time, and, as a favourite treat, my mother's vegetable soups, thick with leeks, carrots, swede, potatoes, and barley, supported by the ham and pineapple pizzas, and meaty pasta bolognaises, and, inevitably, the McCain's oven chips she cooked for me or satisfying myself daily with a few pieces of wholemeal bread, spread with crunchy peanut butter. Never much of a fan of chocolate or sweets, I had picked up a taste for salt, and regularly enjoyed whole packs of salted rice cakes, eaten plain, albeit left to go a little stale, and thus softer on my teeth.

I asked the teacher softly "do you mind if I don't drink this? It makes me sick, and I don't want to be sick. Please may I have a glass of water instead?" Her face fell, and she scowled at me then, a scary expression, her shoulders broad and tense, and her feet planted dominantly, a wide dark shadow over me. "No, don't be silly. You have to drink your milk. That's the school rules. Here, put this in your

mouth” and she poked the plastic straw into the small paperboard container and, taking my own hands, raised it in front of my concerned face. “But I’m afraid it’ll make me sick Miss. At home I get to drink water. Please, I don’t really want to...” “Nonsense, you’re at school, and it’s what everyone has to do. Stop being ridiculous and making a scene!” and, at this, I acquiesced, seating myself briskly at the end of a bench, head down, and, after a brief mournful pause, commencing my drink. The teacher was still standing next to me looking down, and the other pupils, noticing the novel disruption as children are always drawn to, had taken a little interest.

The milk tasted warm, and full, and a little sweet, the creaminess clinging to my mouth, and already I began to feel off-colour. I was hurt that the teacher had obliterated my free-choice, given my circumstances, but knew only that I must oblige her on this, or risk letting myself down by disobedience, always a greater worry than any threat of punishment, the latter of which was, to my mind at the time, a result easily to be expected, and accepted as nothing out of the ordinary, a just response to disorder and all the many permutations of

wrong-doing perpetrated by a flawed character.

Attempting to rise when I had finished, the nausea struck me, and a second later, despite my distraught attempts to cover my mouth, I vomited, horrible watery milk spluttering out all over the table in front of me, and down my blue school jumper. Immediately, all the pupils around me began to laugh, throwing themselves theatrically out of the way, a mocking chorus of “eww! That’s disgusting! Look! Look at what he’s doing!” The teacher herself looked disgusted, and visibly angry, her shoulders hunched. “What are you doing?! Why did you do that! Why can’t you drink your milk nicely like everyone else!”

And thus, I came to know mortification, and to understand embarrassment to that firm, painful finesse, and always with me, always ready to expose me, and expose me to myself, and all I had messed up on, or done wrong in. I hated myself then, for making a scene, and for the humiliation before the scolding teacher, and the jeering eyes of the school. I burst into tears, and still retching slightly, collapsed on the floor of the hall and continued to cry, softly, quietly, trying my hardest not to disrupt

further. The teacher paced about me, livid, looking for a cleaning staff member to assist with a mop and a cleaning cloth, and for a long time that morning, the children continued to laugh to themselves and at me, but angry too, unsmiling when they saw me, feigning the reprimanding nature of an authority, having assimilated the teacher's stern displeasure, and chiding me, "why did you do that? Why are you so disobedient! You're disgusting! It's only milk!" I was extremely unhappy then, and yearned for my time there to be over, knowing I had only recently begun, and that it would get no better, and despising not just my body, but my very mind's inability to behave as everyone else behaved (in my eyes), sad that I had let my teacher down, and torn, knowing I would be unable to do any different in future.

I was glad when my schooling there ended abruptly after only a few weeks, almost as soon as it had begun, and before the end of the first term, the teacher having raised a formal complaint to my parents that I "wasn't drinking my milk properly" and my mother, for once understanding of the situation, grew annoyed, and, having discussed the matter with Dad, without another word I was

suddenly transferred by them to Felsted Kindergarten School on Braintree Road at the East boundaries of the quiet country village of Felsted, twelve miles north of Chelmsford, set deep along the rolling hills and valleys and winding country lanes of a beautiful pastoral expanse, by woodlands and flower meadows, horse stables and tiny hamlets, flanked by the gleaming fields of wheat, and rapeseed, and sunflowers. It was a fresh start, and I yearned for it, awe-struck at the Autumn majesty of the idyllic countryside, associating the delightful English country vista with the age-old processes of organized learning itself, and anticipating a better school experience.

* * *

Sadly, my memories of my time at the upper primary class of FKS are scant. Perhaps it may come to be understandable why I imagine this is, but it remains a shame, as, though I lingered in Felsted for many years after this, it would be nice could I have more to draw from over this period of my life. Felsted Kindergarten has shut down now, having gone bankrupt, and has been removed from modern

internet maps and school listings (and indeed is almost impossible to find detailed information on via search engine, even of a historic nature) but I did have the opportunity to pay a short visit to my old grounds in the Winter of 2017, to pace along alone in the cold, crisp woodland air, and to reminisce about these distant, partially forgotten years, before the final British snows within my living memory descended, and wiped everything away.

I do remember one lesson though, perhaps drawn out in reality to a series of lesson periods over a few weeks, in which we discussed dinosaurs, and, for the first time in my life, I gathered favour from other pupils, for bringing to class my then-favourite book from home (a title I unfortunately forget the name of), on dinosaur classification, and awing the other small boys with illustrations of *Albertosaurus*, a 9-metre long carnivorous tyrannosaurid subspecies and the apex predator of its Late Cretaceous ecosystem, with a massive skull, huge teeth adapted to the forces exerted by feeding, and a powerful bone-crushing bite, and *Brachiosaurus*, a gigantic, long-necked, high-browsing sauropod from

the Late Jurassic proposed to stand over 12 metres in height and to weigh up to 58 metric tons, as long as 22 metres from head to tail, with curious nasal openings in the bones atop its skull perhaps functioning as an ornamental nasal crest of inflated air-sacs or even, according to some scientific proposals, a trunk-like proboscis for heightened reach towards the foliage of the huge ginkgoes, conifers, and tree ferns of the period (though my book at the time suggested an amphibious 'snorkel' function, which has since been discredited in 2001). My classmates were not particularly interested in the varied conjectural information and facts imparted to them, but they loved the imposing, monster-like images, and the males in the class crowded around my book.

Indeed, occasionally my Dad would take us as a family to London in his car, searching out of the window for a suitable underground car park, and I remember the excitement of stepping out of the vehicle onto the cold, echoing floor of the capital city, and from there to walk around the multitude of stuffed animals preserved in the cabinets of The Natural History Museum in Kensington, and to

attend their spectacular dinosaur palaeontology exhibitions, visits which I always enjoyed, pleased then with the ornate terracotta architecture of the building, bedecked with Romanesque arches and columns, and the light and space within the main hall, and of course the exhibits, although as always I was relegated to second-fiddle, unable to ask too many questions or even sometimes to look at the exhibits for myself in the detail I required once he had begun one of his extensive monologues from his own vast knowledge of what we saw. With especial firmness, he disliked it if I came up with a suggestion or hypothesis of my own that, if not in contradiction, was at least not covered by pre-existing knowledge, or a left-field perspective that, though broadly accurate, especially given my age, was not phrased in the language he anticipated, in that it did not match seamlessly to his own words.

For example, he did not like me questioning if there were additional reasons why the dinosaurs became extinct following the end of the Cretaceous period 66 million years ago where it is theorized that a massive asteroid impacted the planet, by suggesting

that a change in sea levels or a decline in certain plant life might have added to the destruction of their ecosystems through a food chain collapse that affected insects, or herbivores, and then the carnivores that preyed on them, and that this occurred prior to or in parallel with the main K-T event, with this earlier-onset decline due to volcanic activity (and perhaps a succession of heavy storms and heat waves from solar activity through an exposed atmosphere, then a cooling climate from dust), as with the Permian extinction 252 million years ago, me having avidly watched my videotape prior to leaving on the earthquakes at Mount St Helens in March and May 1980 that led to the largest debris avalanche in recorded history, the latter eruption on par with that of Vesuvius in 79AD, spewing 1.5 million metric tons of sulphur dioxide into the atmosphere, with a huge pyroclastic flow that devastated vegetation and buildings over an area of 600 km². Dad, however, wasn't overly impressed with my multi-facet explanation, and brushed me aside, saying "no, no, probably not. That's not it. Listen to me instead. As I say, we just need to focus on the asteroid strike. No dinosaur fossils

are found from the Paleogene period onwards suggesting it caused widespread destruction almost immediately. You can see the gigantic impact crater dating from this point today in Mexico's Yucatan peninsula." Nowadays, I also accept the Chicxulub crater 'Alvarez hypothesis' as being the primary factor. I was still crestfallen at the time though, sensing I had been exposed by him as an idiot. We moved on quietly, me not venturing any other hypotheses. It's interesting to note that a new species of tyrannosaurid dinosaur was discovered in 2010 in Alberta, Canada believed to have lived about 79 million years ago, named *Thanatotheristes* ("death-harvester") from a single skull specimen, and suggesting that any gradual extinction may have occurred more slowly than could be at first suspected. I would do better now than to run this past Dad.

Though I tried (and still do) to take in every word he said, sometimes I differed, and was left unable to focus from then on, disappointed at the one-way nature of any conversation, and once falling asleep in my chair after he had talked for $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour or so, which brought me great embarrassment upon my mother gently shaking me awake.

His life with me has, overall, been a fractious extended lecture. Not once can I think of anything I've said that has impressed on him, or indeed impressed him, on any topic, in any academic discipline or societal review. The most I could expect has always been "Yes, oh, well, yes, maybe, but... no, no, you've got that wrong, it's actually..." and all this has achieved really, beyond filling me with vast streams of one-sided knowledge, is to murder my confidence.

The week after the dinosaur class, a shadow-puppeteer visited the school. We were presented with a mesmerizing gothic show of flat, fine-limbed 18th Century black puppets cut from thin wood and card, articulated so their shadows would dance and spin across a lamp-lit translucent screen like the macabre magical characters of Grimm's Fairy Tales, with gnomes and pixies and cunning goblins, feather-hatted huntsmen, baroque devils and fearsome wolves. I was taken aback by the immersive, spectral quality of this ancient art, sitting at the front left-side of the class wide-eyed, my books having come to life. The first school year had almost ended, and the class was being treated to a rare, traditional

spectacle, a relic of an older European age.

When the show had finished, still overwhelmed by the eerie strings music played on a tape recorder in the background, and the captivating audience of storytelling I'd just been privy to, I filed out of the classroom along with the rest of the class, to wait on the rear athletics field behind the short, tarmacked playground until my mother arrived to pick me up, anticipating her grey Ford Orion to pull into the car-park at the front of the school and her to emerge and come over to me, and so be told all about my exciting experiences as a participant in a shadow play, for we too were given an opportunity to hold up some of the cut-outs, and to motion them about in front of the light, providing shrill calls of delight, and groans and howls, and appropriately humorous creative voices.

It was early to mid-afternoon on a warm Summer's day, and the baking Sun poured down over the school grounds and across the farmers' fields and blooming hedgerows to each side, and I remember bumble bees and cabbage white butterflies circling the patches of daisies, ragworts and dandelions clustering the pitch, and a light, warm breeze with scents

of manure and drifting wood smoke, and tall, elegant foxgloves along the ditches by the hawthorns and blackthorns and the first soft pink flowers of blackberry bushes. Knowing it would be a little while, I lay down on the grass about halfway down the right-hand side of the pitch, a few metres from a pair of older girls, too old to be pupils in my year, and went to doze, with my teacher still waiting by the rear door to the playground, observing everything.

The girls were talking among themselves. One had strawberry blonde hair, curly, and slightly unkempt, and a country face, and the other had straight, shiny black hair and tanned, olive skin, a Mediterranean appearance, though both had thick Essex accents. I found it soon impossible to ignore that they had begun to look over at me and to point, giggling among themselves about something and I began to grow very uncomfortable, not used to attention, and intimidated slightly, sensing I was being mocked. After a while of this, with me doing my best to feign ignorance of their presence, the blonde girl motioned me over. My heart sank, but, somehow, as I always did then, I acquiesced, not confident enough to dismiss her, or to decamp to another part of the

field. Soon, I was standing next to them, awkwardly, as they lay on the warm green grass of the pitch.

“You’re not very tall are you” the blonde said to me, and the dark-haired girl laughed. I mumbled something, perhaps a “no”, unsure of how to reply, and, given an empirical observation of our relative heights, just being honest. I wasn’t sure what sort of response they wanted. Then, as now, I’ve never been very enthusiastic towards jibes and sarcastic jokes, and rarely engage with them in the spirit they are intended in, humourless and morose when presented with a line of dialogue that isn’t funny, and one that can often mislead. Insincerity in speech galls me. I knew I was tall for my age, as I had always been told so by my mother, and by her female relations, but when the girls themselves stood up they were a good head and shoulders above my height. Then she said “here, come with us down here” and giggled again, and offered me her hand. Trusting, unsure of my companions, but desperate for the jibing to cease, sensing the vague attitude of my mother in them, or at least a maternal femininity, despite their young ages, I took their hands in my own, them each

side, and, without a thought to my surroundings, or to my teacher or mother, I was soon led down to the end of the pitch, skipping a little by the end of it, and over the verge of the hedgerows at the end, to the right of a small, overgrown white metal vehicle gate, down a slight sloping ditch and into the treeline. They had wanted to show me something.

Shortly afterwards, my memory comprehensively ends. I have never understood this event. It was dark inside the treeline, and cooler, and the girls were soon gone and indeed forgotten as I turned and looked around me, thick brambles poking down from the ferns and tree-roots of the gully, enclosed on all sides, and, as I discovered, not alone. Suddenly, two bodies appeared from behind the trees, around my height, unknown to me, short black spiky hair, rough clothing, and glowering expressions, pushing at me with their hands so that I reeled backwards. And then a piece of twine swung down, juddering, pushed in its motion by hand, with a broken Martel bottle attached to it, more broken glass below me, laid out in a childish trap, and a call of “look at that, make

sure it gets him!”, and then the bottle powering at me and my horrified gaze, just catching me on the lower side of my face, under my left eye on the cheekbone, not enough of a stab poke to seriously damage me, but cutting my skin a little in a sharp, terrible scratch, and I felt blood from the nick, like a later shaving cut. My mind went fuzzy then, and I felt my vision collapsing to the floor, spiralling down foggily in bilious shock. Falling among the powdered shards and small gravel stones and the first mulch on the red earth, grazing my arms and legs, though thankfully in school clothes and protected somewhat, I scrambled away down the ditch into the thick, earthen leaves, and tufts of grass and remember no more of that experience, save to look to my left and see a tall, dark body, an adult present, or a teenager perhaps, and another behind blending into the trees in front of me, leading down the wooded sides of the squat gully, four people in all. The last I remember is a rough warm hand on my shoulder, nothing like my father’s bony clamminess, tugging me gently and firmly to the side, and stale tobacco breath by my ear, and then wetness and pain on my neck, like a hug, but with the soft gumming of teeth. Then

nothing but black, and that last, locked picture in my head behind it, as if on a paused video screen, and those final moments with the glass, and, no matter how I have searched since, over long years of reflection and wondering, no further image at all, for what feels like a long stretch of that day, and no sensation of a memory of any sort.

At some point later in the afternoon, as the Sun had cooled a little, and the light no longer baked the ground in its thick glaze, indicating the first, far off onset of the evening, and perhaps an hour later – and time means nothing here – I emerged, alone, shaking and trembling, with grazed knees, and small cuts and bruises, from the woods. I do not remember walking out, or why, or how, only that I was once more back on the field. The girls were nowhere to be seen, though I did not think to miss them. Only that I wanted my mother and wanted her very much. There were tears in my eyes and on my sore cheeks, and, though my little wound had sealed, my face was haggard, and I was drained of energy, a throbbing all over, stumbling reluctantly, as if in a daze, back up the field towards the rest of the children, gathered then in groups and lines,

almost ready to go home.

My mother was there then, standing by the right side of the school along the side entrance, the teacher gone, away across the playground, by the door to the rear of the building, distracted by so many pupils, in a busy little country school. She saw me in my state, and frowned, gasping a little, and rushed over, her dress the colour of a peacock's tail, in pretty lines of iridescent blue, red, and green, and orange flowers, and a scarlet suit jacket over it with buttons of imperial red. By now my tears had faded, and I simply stared at her, with my aching grazes, and skinned knees, and the dry mud and dirt clinging to my calves like soot and said nothing.

“Benjamin, what happened?! Are you ok?” my mother uttered, concerned, but not very concerned, and I said nothing. Then she added “Are you ok son? Did you fall? Did you fall and hurt yourself?” and I wept then, and nodded, not knowing how else to speak, and, sobbing, came to her for a comfort hug. “We’ll take you straight back home” she said, “and we’ll clean up your injuries and put some plasters on where you hurt yourself playing. I know it can be very rough scenery out in the field, and it’s

easy to slip. Don't worry, you're in good hands. We'll make you all better as soon as possible" and I moved from her hug, and got into her car, allowed to sit in the front seat for once, and was taken home, still silent, always silent, my mother talking a little to me about something I cannot remember as she drove down the long evening lanes, the sun reddening in a haze over the yellow fields, and I sat way down in the seat, the seatbelt pulled down over my stomach, my legs curled up tight in the lock of my forearms, foggy, and faint in mind, with soreness all over, and with nothing I could have been able, or, tragically, *allowed* to say.

I never mentioned this incident to my parents afterwards, not once, for at least twenty-eight years, though I knew of it the while, even when they were, in some way, aware that I had had bad times at school. They still have no real clue, and I was brushed aside with an "Oh, that's terrible. Oh, did that happen to you? How awful!" of polite disbelief when I did mention it to my mother, crying and raging down the phone, her reception the same as if it were a coffee morning anecdote in passing, or a fanciful tale for inadvertent amusement, as narrated by my aunt in one of

her drunken outbreaks of hysteria. Each new time I tried, periodically over years, I'd hear an "Oh? Really? That's not good to hear" from her, as if her memory too was missing over the occurrences, and she was instead hearing for the first time, and, dogmatically, she has always been known to tell others that "his early life was good" and "no, nothing ever happened to him, he had a good life with us" and words to that effect, all a further torture for me, as if she was honest, and as if it were her place (and her place alone) to say.

I'm not even very sure myself of how to explain what happened, and given the weird, horrible circumstances of it, I am sure I will never know, but it did nothing for my fear levels forever after that, and, I am sure, has left some indelible imprint, even though it is, for now, locked to me. I did not blame my mother at the time for not helping me, and was unsure even how she could have, and I could not register the pain myself, and, bizarrely, forgot soon enough as times moved on, relegating it to a small corner pocket of an otherwise full and engaged mind, but as an adult I raged mercilessly at her for her disbelief, and was more than wounded. Beyond her brute self-

interest, my mother is too innocent for this world. Her firm, devout Catholic faith from childhood has inculcated her with a confident optimism that the world is good and noble, and that, beyond poverty, and the highlighted news campaigns and foreign fundraisers of her church bulletins, and the petty trials and tribulations of her large, bickering family's life, nothing ever really goes wrong, and swift conquered evil is never in ascendance, though of course without vigilance one can readily fall to sin (and other people's iniquity).

In the bleak, chilling air of December 2017, having journeyed all day, I paced back down that frost-coated field alone, my partner having remained on my request some way behind. I was glad she had agreed to drive me back "to view my old school" and glad even more, for once, than she did not ask why. I stood there, by the gulley, the trees different now to how I knew them, sparse, and trimmed back, cawing crows nestling in the high trees aside, and the depressed terrain now exposed to chilling light, and the first subtle glimmers of falling flakes, extinguishing on the ground like glassy cinders, from high in a wide, white-grey, overcast sky, the lowering clouds pouring

across the long red soil of the fields behind, storming into the distance, dim across the vast, far-reaching plains and downs of Essex.

I took a single grainy photo, feeling nothing, and left again silently. What, really, had happened to me there, and what had been intended? Who were the children? Who were the adults or the teenagers? Why was I targeted? What could have been the cause for any of it? Why did they hate me? These questions have always haunted me, and really, I have no answer to them. And, as further self-inquisition, knowing of terrible sadism, and of molestation, as a mere six-year-old child, how could my mother, my own flesh and blood, not read between the lines, and not see the signs before her that day, or have the human courtesy and intuition to ask further, as opposed to burying me prematurely? And why could I not speak up, or ever really do myself that favour? There are too many questions. Three decades have passed now, and it is too late. All I really have is my nightmares, as an adult still, and my photo.



* * *

By the beginning of the next year, seeing my unhappiness in the house and my begging that I was not taken back to school, and registering the severity of my dismay, again my parents transferred my schooling, although this time I cannot remember their reasoning. If they know more of this matter than they have let on to me, they have never discussed it with me. Either way, at the start of the school year in 1992, aged seven, and without a word more spoken on where I had left, I entered Felsted Preparatory School pre-prep, in the final year

class, for one year of remaining pre-schooling before I began at the main Preparatory School. Soon, buoyed along by the promises of an enticing new environment, the distant pain and fear and agony of the previous years dissipated somewhat, in the novelty of a new class, and with the steady throng of children and teachers and colourful new faces engulfing me and stimulating me, lost for now, I simply forgot, thinking those true horror thoughts voided and inert, a bad dream ending under the forgiveness of time and a good world, whereas really, for reasons beyond my then control, I had merely repressed them. Most importantly, regardless of anything else, I was in my parents' hands, and thus was obliged to obey them on their latest choice, as with any decision, come what may.

Autumn at home was a time for the outdoors, as I continued to read in the garden, or to draw, taking sheets of plain paper out to the patio slabs and copying images of the garden wildlife such as the red admiral butterflies that flitted across the long purple blossoms of the buddleia bush by the rear gate, and to explore nature, looking forward to weekend walks with my parents through

Danbury Woods and the lakes at Twitty Fee, or down to the level crossing at Ingatestone, and, following the curve of the river, off around the bend at the bottom of the hill and up into the wooded meadows and cornfields of a beautiful countryside, looking for herons, and kingfishers, and field mice, and elusive voles. Only outside, in this splendour, was I truly happy, although I could content myself in the short-term with our own small plot of greenery.

In the back garden was a low, wide plastic container, once used by me as a sandpit when I was a younger child. Now filled with rainwater, it functioned more like a small, square pond, and I was accustomed to head up to the lake at the top of The Shrubberies cul-de-sac, pushing through a tight layer of nettles and wired wooden fencing, and emerging into a hidden pocket, between the houses as the end and the boundary of Ongar Road, with my fishing net in my hand and a plastic bucket, and from there spend a half hour pond-dipping, transferring tadpoles and sticklebacks and assorted pond-skaters and aquatic insects back down the street merrily in pints of lake-water to place them into my sand-pit “aquarium” out in the back garden, along with

water weeds, and algae, and all I thought then was needed to maintain a small independent eco-system. In time, aided by my additions of store-bought fish-food from our pet goldfish, Sam, and crumbs of bread, and probably the natural contents of the water itself, the habitat flourished, much to my father's surprise and disbelief.

With the coming of Spring my father held a barbeque in the garden, over to the paving slabs by the side-gate under the red brick wall behind the holly bush, setting down a disposable instant BBQ grill tray in a safely cleared spot, and reverently lighting multiple areas of the flammable sheet that ignited the charcoal briquettes with a Cook's safety match. From here he would bake jacket potatoes, wrapped in silver foil, and pork ribs, and small, homemade hamburgers of pressed mince, with a bowl of fresh salad standing by to be passed out onto the paper plates. Naturally, this tasted excellent.

I was playing that day by my sand-pit pool as my father busied himself around the barbeque. The surface of my pond was coated in a thick, webbed layer of frogspawn, and it delighted me to examine, gently poking my

fingers along the mass of eggs, and looking for the first fish-like tadpoles emerging into the water. Deep in my natural reverie, and glancing over the orange plastic rim of the pit to the stones beside it, I saw suddenly, and with some shock on my part, and sadness, the pale, upturned body of a dead frog, grey green, dripping a little mucus.

I'm not sure why I acted as I did that day. Usually, when I saw a dead animal, as with the infant pigeon carcasses occasionally fallen from the trees in the wood or the run-over shrew corpses on the roadside, pecked at by owls or foxes, I would leave it well alone, knowing of diseases, or at most brush it to the side of the verge with my foot (though sometimes by hand), and then into the bushes, so as to impart a final solemn dignity, shepherding the poor little body away from the public gaze of a world I knew could be forthright in its mockery, and very much in case the creature 'woke up again', as I always hoped, given time and a place to 'rest'.

Perhaps it was that very quality of that moment that led me to a different decision, surrounded by the teeming life of the pond, and with the heady charcoal fires of the

barbeque wafting thick, hot smoke into the air. Maybe I couldn't bear to have death among this, this example of movement, and of all the returning passion of a gathering Spring world. Whatever the reason, I picked up the frog's limp little form in my hand, death no longer so obvious to me, and contented myself to move him also, hopping the clammy, stiffening body across the grass of the garden like a rubbery toy, and making "ribbet!" noises, bringing 'Mr. Frog' over to my pool elatedly, and showing him all the life within it, peering down at the vital motions of his extensive progeny, overjoyed, the gaping wound stretching all across his back no longer an inconvenience.

However, as playtime finished, and the meals began to be ready, something small in me realised the ridiculousness of what I was doing, and the irreverence. I felt bad then, though still locked in my game of life. With Mr. Frog no longer so warm to me, or so appealing, I hopped him across the floor of the garden, and, seeing him for what he was, a mute sad little form in my hands, unresponsive to his litter, tired, and broken beyond repair, I took one last look at him, feeling unwholesome all of a sudden, and threw him onto the compact

barbeque, requiring the cremation of his departing life-force, a final, respectful send off.

Immediately, upon seeing the sizzling body in the flames, I began to howl painfully, thick tears dribbling from my eyes, wracked by misery. Guilt rose in me. What had I done? I had killed a frog! He had been alive, and I had killed him! What was I? How could I have done such?! Locked in tortured reverie, I continued to cry inconsolably, as my father, having observed everything, came over to me in aghast confusion and asked me, “What is it, Benjamin? Why are you upset?” to which I replied simply, in total horror, “I’ve killed him Daddy, I killed an animal!” “What are you talking about?” my father said to me, more exasperated than ever, swiftly taking me in his arms and holding me safe from the still-smoking barbeque. “The frog was dead, Benjamin. The frog was dead!” to which all I could reply, again and again, was “no, he wasn’t!”, “no, he was alive, I saw him, he was alive and moving, and I killed him!”, in floods of tears. I took my hand then, in anger at my stupid self, and beat it against the side of my head, calling to the little body, by now a steaming husk, “I’m sorry frog, please forgive

me, I'm sorry!" But I knew then the frog was dead, and my friend was gone.

Appalled, my father called into the house for my mother who came out in a rush, pulling me to herself, embracing me, and soothing me. "Benjamin", she said, "Please Benjamin, calm down. That frog was never alive when you had him. He had a big wound on him, look, see? It's ok, you didn't do anything wrong. You're ok. The frog was dead. You're ok, come on now." She pointed to the long groove raking the frog's back and made the obvious assumption that it had been attacked by a bird, its beak ploughing a devastating channel, and probably instigating a quick death. All I could say to her then was "but you weren't there, Mummy, you weren't there, you didn't see what I did!", and she replied, "but I was watching through the window..." (though I did not really believe her) Still, slowly, between the both of them, over many hours, I was calmed down, taken inside in the failing light, a sudden coldness enveloping the garden, at least as I felt it.

For decades on from that event, as an adult, I brought this 'incident' up in times of distress, as an example of my badness, and my weak soul, and a justification for what I would

then do. I decided, only after many years, searching and re-searching for the memory in long analysis, and asking my parents in detail, always an incredulous unbeliever, hoping that they were wrong and I was correct, that, after all in fact, I did not murder the dead frog. But something happened that day. For once, my first buried emotions of self-loathing came to the fore, brought out into day by the sheer power of those few minutes, seeing life and death, and knowing *somehow* that I was, after all that had happened, and despite my age, closer to the latter, having subsumed what I knew others felt of me, and, now guilty for my own life's existence, seeing less of my own fragile form that was still myself at all, as in a distant dream, and not just one more facet of this soiled, fickle, fast-fleeting world. A world where frogs can die, by a glimmering pool of their own new life, and that life unconcerned the while.

It was around this year that I started to notice specks (and more) of blood appear in my underpants in the morning, and a sharp, terrible stinging down below when I sat down to use the toilet, fading to a low, scratchy ache at other times. Indeed, the blood came out so

bad at times, bright red, and lumpy, that I was left scared and concerned, disliking the worrying sight, and unsure as to why my bottom was in pain. The internal fissures of this wound, opening and sealing again over many years right up to the present, have always bothered me a little, and I have never known why it first opened. The pain was awful, if not life-threatening, and I was obliged at times to sit on a cushion to protect me from the raw, burning sensation to my rear. For many years I could not readily discuss the matter with my parents, too shy to make mention of what is a very delicate area, and to me, despite my mother's clinical attitude, a testament to her long nursing training, a 'rude' one. At 16, following a water holiday windsurfing accident where I fell on a centreboard and snapped my coccyx, I was obliged in recurring pain a few months later to attend physiotherapy, whereupon the orthopaedic professional spotted in passing that I had the scars of rectal damage, but at the time she put it down to my recent injury, unaware that I had had this disturbance for far longer. My mother suggested to me a change of diet, on the off chance that haemorrhoids were the culprit,

but no growths were ever discovered, and instead the area remains merely tender, and at times very, very sore, with external and internal injuries from some unknown source. Naturally, I have never been too eager to expose myself to the eyes of medical staff over this discreet, embarrassing issue, but for all of my life since these early years, I've wondered why, assessing whether or not there is any more nefarious reason for my lower hurt. Ultimately, I have no idea. Events later on certainly would not have aided the situation, and by now it is too late to tell.

* * *

I remember well the shame of my first introductory class at the pre-prep in September 1992. The teacher, following asking us all our names, proceeded to ask us a little of what we knew about the world. "Which country are we in?" To which the class, in unison, answered "the UK, Miss", my quiet, mumbled answer, "England" being, even then, too much of a stretch of the imagination. "Who is in charge?" To which answers ranged from, "my Mummy" to "Mr Pomphrey" (the

prep school headmaster) to, as I suggested along with a few voices, the head of the Conservative Party and prime minister “John Major”. Finally, the question was buoyantly enquired, “and who is in charge of America?” to which silence fell over the class. Sensing the silence’s opportunity, and my own knowledge, and yearning to give a useful answer, I piped up, my first ever solo answer in any class, “George H. W. Bush, Miss” to which the teacher replied, “yes Benjamin, that’s correct.”

I was overjoyed at the moment, my nervous hesitation falling away, and was about to say more, on Saddam Hussein’s weapons, and on the fallout of the Gulf War, and the cost to the United States, and the toxic usage of depleted uranium, facts that I had picked up from being talked to by my father and by my cousin, the latter in the US Army at the time, but then, as swiftly as she had praised me, the teacher interrupted my delight in my meticulous recollection by suggesting instead “um, no, no, actually wait, that’s not true. No, class, I think it’s actually Bill Clinton in power there. Yes, Benjamin, it’s not George Bush, but you came quite close.”

The rest of the class continued to stare

silently. I felt their eyes boring into me, as if, though they had been ignorant altogether on the matter raised, my own incorrect response, outdated by a year, and with additional contemporary knowledge I thought would be of interest, was somehow a worse reply than no effort expended at all. I felt very embarrassed then, going over my stupid answer again and again in my head, very upset that I had made an error. Errors have never come easily to me, and I was appalled by my slip, no matter the inconsequential nature in the long run.

Much later, as an adult, I discovered that I had indeed answered the teacher's question correctly, and that Bill Clinton only entered office on the 20th of January 1993, having won the presidential elections in November 1992. Perhaps the teacher, personally invested in the matter to some unusual degree, was merely looking forward to his arrival, as with the discussions anticipating Joe Biden following the presidency of the much-maligned Donald Trump in modern British classrooms.

For the rest of my time at the pre-prep I was too shy to volunteer answers out loud in class, and would not speak up unless specifically asked, a situation I dreaded. My

confidence, already very low from my experiences at home, did not improve, and I found it hard even to talk to the other pupils, afraid that again I would somehow 'get it wrong' and put my foot in it. They in turn, sensing my sombre quietness and awkwardness with a certain distaste, shied away, and by the end of the first term I had few personal acquaintances, and no one really that I could call a school friend. The class played happily together, naturally separating into groups of girls (a first admissions set that year for an otherwise all-boys school) and boys, but I was always out at the edges, shy, forced instead to content myself by examining the natural world of the playground when not in class, peering up over the fences at the magnificent Autumn fields beyond, listening to the small birds high above in the pine trees, or the rooks nestling in the churchyard across the road, or gently pursuing a blackbird as it hopped across the grass in search of worms, and playing with the fallen sticks and pinecones scattering the ground by the sandpit, and only occasionally could I gather the enthusiasm to join a group, where I hid quietly at the back, and did not instigate any of the

games. I did not defend myself, when, sensing my weakness and timidity, one of the girls, named Dandy, routinely came up to me, and kicked me hard on my shins, causing them to bleed, and I was never defended by another child, even as the boys too, sensing easy pickings, began to take an interest, if only verbally for the moment, referring to me as “the pansy” and “Flower Power”, and laughing when I admitted to them I didn’t like playing football, which I considered boring and repetitive, and didn’t support a professional team, of which their favourite was, almost always, and despite living in Essex, Manchester United.

Indeed, my thorough lack of interest in football was one of the prime reasons that my parents, in some heightened suspicion of me, took me at this age down to the village surgery to request an autism evaluation. My Dad had been accompanying me to the recreation ground football posts by the play area on Paradise Road, on the Southern edge of Writtle, encouraging me to kick the ball into the goal, and me, bored silly by the game, and craving novelty, playfully insisted on standing in the goal mouth kicking the ball outwards,

preferably as far from the goalposts as possible, giggling, having invented my own variation, which irritated Dad enough to make him speak to my mother about it later, who then went on to check for further 'signs', such as my not wishing, at their request, to disassemble a *Duplo* tower block I had constructed so as to build something else (as I was simply proud of my laborious construction, seeing it like a mini-sculpture, and hesitant that I could construct something as good a second time round), as well as "insisting on jumping over the same part of the stream each time we visit the park" (I simply enjoyed that experience by force of habit, and there was nowhere else to cross with the same exhilarating sensation), and finally, perhaps not unexpectedly, given that I was used to being heavily bullied, "he dislikes noisy groups of children." Though the GP listened to their unfounded complaints, did a few simple tests on me, and gave me the all clear almost immediately, telling them quite bluntly to go away and stop speculating, I was left upset by this lack of faith on their parts, and the initial zeal of their incorrect sentiment offended me a little, acknowledging to myself that, for some frustrating reason, they had

been very quick to pathologize my innocuous – and totally normal – childhood behaviours, and still somehow, despite capitulating outwardly, could not quite take the doctor’s firm “no” for an answer, confident in thinking themselves equipped to know my health better.

So it came to be that one day, taking a break in between morning and afternoon classes to use the pupils’ public toilets I found myself standing next to another boy at the urinals, named Jamie, and older than me by almost a year, with a wave of bright, blond hair and a partially oriental expression, a very popular face among the girls of my class, and a sporting build at odds with my tall yet lanky frame, with me always a skinnier child, and not developed by the rough and tumble of the football games. As I stood there, thinking myself alone at first, and trying to urinate standing as I had seen others do, up until then having always sat down on the toilet by force of habit, Jamie leaned over and looked down at me, examining my urination. Without hesitation, he commented “you’re not pissing straight! What’s wrong with you? You must have a right-angled willy!” I was mortified. Sure enough, he was correct in some sense, for as I

stood there trying desperately to maintain my pose so as not to soak my beige school shorts, I found I could not aim myself adequately, my privates disobeying my command, and, instead of a steady stream, my urine emerged in high-pressured drips, tricking both into the bowl and then veering wildly off the sides, splattering the front of my shorts, causing visible damp patches. I wasn't sure what to say. Jamie was giggling wildly, and ran out of the toilets to tell his friends outside "Ben's got a right-angled willy! Listen to this, Ben's willy is right-angled!!!"

I was always Benjamin in the family household, and around relations, until I went to school, where everyone, without fail, teachers included, called me 'Ben', although I had introduced myself by my proper name. I protested for a while, but it made no difference. Nowadays I have long stopped trying to correct people, and openly take the name Ben, sometimes introducing myself as it to save the inevitable shortening later. In general, shortening someone's first name is usually an affection among good friends, suggesting a certain intimacy, and perhaps romance. It suggests you at least know them and like them.

Or so I thought at least. As with everything else in the modern world, it almost feels like they're just saving time somehow, in the way people still type shorthand texts even though it makes limited difference, the millennial generation onwards utilizing messenger programs and emails that do not constrain one to the tiny texting box limits of a 1990s Nokia. Maybe they can't be bothered to remember a new person and pick the 'next best thing'. Maybe they don't care at all, and, as they like to define for me, "it's not worth worrying about". A tiny inconsequential power-grab. Who could find insult in that? I don't find it insulting. I notice it regularly though, and have done my entire life, and I am left somehow quizzical, just wondering why, given that I have expressly requested to be called 'Benjamin' by others. Back then though, as with all things, I simply acquiesced given over to the fatalism that I would be treated poorly, and consistently poorly, always outside of my control, and that nothing could ever be done to amend what was life itself after all, a terrible, unyielding process.

At home, I mentioned my awful school day to my mother, and the experience in the toilets, then of being mocked and ridiculed

outside by Jamie and by a couple of the other boys who had heard his story. She seemed concerned all of a sudden. “Oh, is that right?” she said, “Benjamin, I’m going to have to take you to the hospital. Remember when you went before, and they made you better down below? I think it’s time we had that looked at again.” In truth, I could barely remember what my mother was taking about. I had that sole disturbing memory of the cold room and the tepid water, but nothing was clear to me, and besides, it had been so very long ago. It was then she explained to me, in simply worded tones.

Because I had been so premature as a baby, when I was born my private parts had been attached to the side of my body with an excess flap of skin and the doctors needed to perform an operation on me shortly after to free them and then to drill a little hole so I would be able to urinate. The time had come to make this hole bigger. That was most likely the reason why I was having difficulty urinating properly standing up. I would be booked into the hospital that same day, and the doctors could then examine me, and perform another little operation, which would fix me for the rest

of my life.

My mother did not at this stage, nor ever, adequately share with me why I had been circumcised also. I too had noticed early on at school that I was not like other boys in this respect. I knew that something had been done to me, at the request of my parents, but I had no idea as to their reasoning. In later life I was only told “it was a medical procedure for your health”, which I doubted, knowing they were conflating this cosmetic procedure with the real hypospadias operations I underwent, but decided in the end that they must have had a religious motive, though, as my mother is a strict Catholic and my atheist father himself also from an Irish Catholic background, it’s unclear why they felt the need to mutilate me via this generally Jewish practice. As always, my parents made their decision, and I had no part in it.

This time around the pain in my loins was terrible and I felt every second of healing in unclouded agony. When the operation had been completed I awoke in another frigid hospital chamber, a catheter again emerging from the tip of my genitals, obliged to get up off the bed and lower myself into a long, cold

metal bath to the right, the tube stinging me as its weight jerked it around in my wound, a sharp, fierce burning sensation, lasting a couple of seconds at a time. Standing behind me was an older female NHS nurse. Her tone was brusque, as if she was in a hurry that day. "Come on now Benjamin, we need you to pull out your catheter gently. The operation's over, so could you pull it out please?" And so, I put my right hand down, having got clumsily into the bath with much pain, and began to pull. The catheter wouldn't move at first. All I felt was the intense stinging along my urethra. I felt exposed, and embarrassed, not wishing to be seen by them, or seen in this state. Gradually, though, with much discomfort, I managed to slide the tube out, with a tiny plug of blood coming free, to land in the water, further scaring me. My genitals still looked out of shape, mangled and sore, but I was relieved that it was over. I wondered then, more than the anatomical correction of being able to urinate properly, if the bullying I was subjected to at school would cease now on account of this uncomfortable remedying, but of course it never did. The remainder of my pre-prep year was spent in sadness and

isolation, hiding away alone, playing quietly, or sitting at a side desk in lessons, knowing who to avoid, just waiting for it to be over. Thankfully, the year seemed to speed by regardless.

* * *

Public education in general was a nightmare for me at Felsted Preparatory School and then at the main senior school, my first steady experience of terrible loneliness and a source of daily fear and sadness, bullied relentlessly for almost ten years, day in day out, never accepted by the other pupils, and always an ostracised outsider, quiet, timid, and increasingly morose. I was routinely mocked for coming from a poorer background than the other children, down to the Škoda Favorit my father drove, a car I had begged him not to acquire, since a recent discussion among my classmates, all from families with Jaguars, Mercedes, and BMWs, had mentioned it specifically as “the worst car in the world” and “a piece of crap” though our favourite family car, the Sierra, was at the time on its last legs and over the next fifteen years the Favorit proved

nothing but reliable.

I was also mocked by three of the boys, especially by a boy named Thomas, for our choice of holidays. Usually, we would take a week's self-catering in Mâcon, in South West France, trekking out across the breathtaking Beaujolais hills from a heavily wooded hill-top time-lodge beyond the western bank of the Saône, on the borders of Burgundy, 40 miles north of Lyon, or to Switzerland, to a small hotel on the shores of Lake Geneva, or twice with a package flight to Tenerife's Los Cristianos to tour the volcanic Mount Teide in the cold, thin mountain air under a vast blue sky, and visit the Las Margaritas banana plantation and the butterfly sanctuary at Mariposario del Drago in Santa Cruz, and to delight ourselves in the zoo and oceanarium at Loro Parque, and then explore the archaeological ruins of the Cave of the Guanches, but we did not ever have the money for regular 5-star accommodation luxuries in the glitz and glamour of "suitable destinations" like Los Angeles, Dubai, or The Maldives, and, though I found my own foreign excursions splendid and enthralling, this affordability point sat very badly with them. As Thomas

remarked to me in disgust, as if talking to a peasant, “you go on such conventional holidays!”

The fact that our house had “a number and not a name” and was semi-detached and on a residential street as opposed to their assorted mansions and 100-acre country estates was a source of much mocking humour with the other pupils, and that, when not in uniform, I wore what I considered everyday clothes as opposed to designer wear, and especially on account of my parents being Northern Irish, somehow a terrible, irreconcilable flaw to them. They were brought up in front of me and mocked over their accents, and for being “stupid paddies” and “IRA members”. I was told how fat, and simple, and ugly my Mum was, and she quickly became the butt of their regular ‘jokes’ with me, insults which hurt me very much. My parents, both from the city of Derry by birth, had fled to this country in the 1960s to avoid the escalating societal turmoil of The Troubles as much as for my father’s economic prospects. They had grown quickly used to English hostility, something that, as a Norman-Irish child growing up in England, I was yet to fully

understand. The Normans built their country from its very foundation as a modern nation in 1066, but still, to the pupils, due to my parents' accents, it was only the seemingly benighted Northern Irishness that was obvious to them.

I slowly grew accustomed to that gross degree of excessive snobbery through, thoroughly hostile from the start. They had never wanted to be friends with me, looking down their noses, aghast that I was not from a wealthy background and that I could not present them with the latest popular technological devices and expensive 90s fads, and could not awe them with wealth or extravagance, their parents' fleets of luxury cars and glamorous lifestyles, the golfing, and sailing boats, and home tennis courts and cinemas, and heavy cash gifts, and, on one occasion, the set piece of arriving to school by private helicopter.

My one ray of hope was that I kept many hamsters as a child, delighting in their chubby teddy bear faces and their soft warm fur, and held enraptured by their fascinating antics, these tiny bodies trundling over the sofa, or busy in their wheels, always trying to escape and explore, with amazing climbing abilities. I

took pleasure in deciding where in their cages to sequester small additional food items and sunflower seeds, or where to hide a treat for them to uncover, or something new to explore or climb over, altering this pattern for a little variation, and to maintain their curiosity and interest levels, scooping them up in my hands, having trained them to my smell and touch so they wouldn't nip (calmly letting them bite me as babies until they could decide of their own accord that I was not for eating, thankfully a fairly brief process), or just stroking them and feeding them by hand, laying out a small line of seeds stretching up the steps to the ceiling floor of each house. They were one of the few pleasant consolations in an otherwise dismal and predominantly unhappy childhood, although I was always distraught when they died of old age, burying them all in individual plots in my back garden, in an ice-cream tub each with some hamster-friendly cotton wool and a couple of sunflower seeds and other food items, praying beyond anything that they would 'wake up', streaming tears, and inconsolable, ready again for my bullies to laugh at their deaths and call me a wimp.

In the first year of the prep school we were

introduced to the Pet Club building, an insulated shed opposite the Physics 'room', a cold portacabin erected at the very end of the school by the gardening allotments. Some of the girl boarders would bring their animal companions to school, all rabbits, mice, Guinea pigs and hamsters, and store them for the term, going out each day to feed them their necessary hay and fresh vegetables, and to periodically change their bedding. I had popped into the room a few times to have a look at the lovely creatures and to say hello, but I did not wish to move any hamsters in myself, considering the shack slightly dilapidated, and perhaps not warm enough for my liking, plus wondering if the animals would become lonely. It is lucky, in a way, that I did not.

In the first few weeks of the first year, a terrifying 9-year-old bully named Maxwell broke into the Pet Club one morning, and killed all the animals inside, squeezing them to death and pulling their limbs apart (and, so one rumour goes, biting off the heads of the poor hamsters). I felt so much for the girls that day. So much more though, I felt for the animals, traumatised at his alien cruelty, a very scary little boy indeed. He had the tanned skin,

deep set, staring canine eyes, wild dark hair, and feral look I imagined in the historical wolf-boy Jean Garnier from my Usborne supernatural guide to *Vampires, Werewolves & Demons*. He was known to have bitten other pupils and would turn on them unprovoked. Thankfully Maxwell was expelled immediately that day, and, as far as I am aware, placed in some official treatment setting somewhere, but the memory lingers, haunting me. Thankfully I did not see the remains of his many victims. It is clear he was a psychopath. I never knew his story, but I shuddered later, wondering what had happened to him to make him this way by that young age, what abuse or neglect had been inflicted on him at home, what terrible thing, though I could not humanely ever feel pity for him. Perhaps expensive British public schools attract bizarre people. Those with much money, and near-always enough to compensate for their less than salubrious tendencies, and a great dearth of compassion.

Most of my schooldays were spent alone, hiding from bullies and ignoring certain routes and chokepoints through the expansive country public school, always scared, sad and

low, expecting the worst, and often getting it, still ambushed outside, mocked daily, and beaten up at times, for the first five years of Prep school, and then just mocked in the Senior portion. Friendships between the pupils made early in the Prep years, I was excluded and always on the outside, never invited to anything by them, though occasionally tagging along. The pupil body remaining the same for the Senior years, in-groups, and tight cliques firmly in place, I never had a chance by then to make friends, and their opinion of me was long cemented. I saw faces fall if I appeared in their company, and they would audibly grumble “why did you have to let him come!” School discos, and social events, and school trips were a further exercise in loneliness and social exclusion. Ten years experienced in social silence, bar the routine shaming and fear and embarrassment, I’m surprised I lasted it at all, very used to tears and to harrowing isolation, always sad, and shielded in my thoughts, hidden away with no-one to talk to, knowing I had no-one to back me up or to console me. Anything I thought, or found interest in, or was moved by, was forever off-limits, unsaid, and unacknowledged. It’s as if I didn’t exist

there.

I would occasionally tell my parents, but nothing was ever done, and they barely noticed my intense suffering and sadness. I learned to keep it all inside and that it was not worth me commenting on to them, as it would bring me no comfort in aftermath. My mother continued to socialise with the mothers of my many bullies and remained in friendly contact with them for many years afterwards, sending me occasional cards and letters telling me how those parents' offspring were doing and the successes they experienced as they got older and began to attend and then graduate from university, getting married and having children, winning awards, and establishing lucrative careers. Having naturally assumed I was ok without consultation, and having not paid any attention back then, they never asked me how things were, maintaining a firm historical blindness and a deeply selective memory, and their historical narrative now is that my childhood was happy, safe, and blemish free, totally oblivious to the entirety of that torture, a great insult to me, and the most frustrating sense of terrible, damning betrayal, brushing me off, a stiff upper lip, and a natural

lack of all concern. My mother was interested only in preserving her social status, any adult conversations touching on her own behaviour swiftly developing into a relentless doubling down of “Benjamin! Look...”, and “I think you’re misinterpreting me”, and “I think you’re imagining me behaving badly,” and “think of all the good things I do for you.” Gross moral indignation is taken on her part, and a very argumentative tone, defending her purity and goodness, telling me how rude I was, and am, and invariably suggesting to me that my complaints about her treatment of me were jeopardising her health. If one briefly alludes to her character over the phone, she will not drop berating me for the remark, often sabotaging the rest of the conversation, or forcing me to hang up in terrible stress. I’ve never once heard either of them volunteer of their own free will to say sorry to me. My Dad can occasionally capitulate, as if put out, in deadpan emotionlessness, or snappy anger, to shut me up, a sharp, empty “fine! I’m sorry, I’ve said it, can we move on now?” where one knows he does not feel remorse in the slightest and is merely exasperated. My Mum cannot even approach this level.

I spent my time reading in the school library, at first children's books like *The Secret of NIMH* by Robert C. O'Brien, *Watership Down* by Richard Adams, or *Why the Whales Came* by Michael Morpungo, and *The Deptford Mice* series by Robin Jarvis, moving on to poets such as Banjo Patterson, Seamus Heaney, T. S. Eliot and Wilfred Owen, and history books and artist portfolios by the likes of Mike Wilks and Jacek Yerka, very much enjoying the classical Flemish resonances of the latter's intricate, brooding surrealist paintings, or taking long walks or runs out into the surrounding countryside, sitting down in the long grass by the river and writing little nature sonnets in Romantic poetry in my personal notepad based on what I observed, or gathering extended memories from a weekend trip to our country park, of which I have one remaining example:

Hylands

I am lost in a fairground of slim shoots
 Where rutting nettles strut before
 Their campion blouses on a shore
 Of manicured grass stuffed with sycamore roots
 Whose leaves are spreading parasols
 With butterflies hovering over lush walls

Of irises fluttering like flags on poles
As a woodpecker patters far over the knoll
By mist dappled beeches in beauty unfurled
Until the sinking sun melts the edges of the world.

All under the primordial lion's stare
Perched on his pedestal in verdant air
With lichen beard and beaten sandstone shield
Tired defender of bracken and birch-wooded fields
So planted crescents of saxifrage smile soft and bright
Waving valiant at the waning light.

Fierce fronds cavort around the foxglove glade
Dipped in glad sunbeams falling into shade
A shiver of sly iambs runs through my chest
Notebook clinging to a pallid hand
The joy of nature eagerly impressed
So much I'm tasked to understand.

Geranium atolls on a vast green main
Grand tides of daisies rolling away
A silence of sounds in an unbroken chain
To the sleeping yew trunks where the leaping squirrels play
All dreaming icons weathered to bark clad bone
These branching castles splendid as polished stone.

Thick jet crows resound from their hedge's lairs
Where star-sharp thistles prickle the air
At the old flint lodge swept up on time's deep strands
The torch flames of conifers glitter on falling sands
Brightening the fading roses of the pleasure garden's loot
Their petals trickle to the ferns like crystal parachutes.

Storm clouds stain the deep cinereal sky
The frog pond gnats flit off with strict goodbyes
Their waltz dispersed into a rippled frown

Sage mottled limbs stroke under lily crowns
As far off on the highway traffic booms
Their headlights guiding down the winter rain
I wish that I could say all was the same
But summer's heart has given way to gloom.

School was that uniform gloom, and a prolonged painful experience. I got on with all but one of the teachers, and focused on my academic work, having no real choice otherwise, given the hell of everything else, but still found the work quite enjoyable. It was never enough to make up for my horror around the other pupils though. I sometimes wonder if my grades could have been higher were I not always so set-upon and scared and low, distracted, hurt, and worried. Accustomed to this treatment, and having had no other, better, experience to compare it to, I carried on in quiet, emptied melancholia, longing impotently for friendship, and company, and warmth, and for their incessant jibes, and put-downs, and humiliations to cease, and not to be ignored in between, but I realise now as an adult that, as far as my schooling is concerned, I lingered in a state of severe depression throughout those years, often hopeless, in long lightless stretches over months and up the

decade, a grey routine, wishing sometimes that I would die, falling asleep and not waking up.

I was pleased when I won an academic scholarship which cut my school fees significantly, and then admission to the highest sets, with steady good marks and class prizes, but my GCSE results of seven A grades, a B (due to the Chemistry component of Science), and a C (in Music), disappointed me, and with three A grades in English, Philosophy and Latin and one C in Physics at AS-level (A* grades were introduced at A-level only from 2010), moving to two A grades and a B at A2 (the B in Latin), I felt I could have done much better, and had no confidence in my academic abilities. I still don't really.

* * *

My first bully-friend (for I had no 'friends' who did not bully me) was named Simon, a small child, shorter than me by a head's reach and brown-haired with English features, from a large horse-rearing family out in the countryside beyond Braintree, and we sat together at age eight in our Maths and History classes. Simon was forever leaning over to me,

telling me, rather than asking “why are you such an idiot?” “Why are you so useless?” for no reason at all, and statements to that effect. In between we could talk about other things, such as the work in question, or about our respective toys, or social observations, but he would routinely fall back on this hectoring of me, leading me to cry quietly, or to remain despondent in class. Sometimes I found it hard to concentrate, as he would kick me under the table, and, on more than one occasion, pulled my chair back so when I went to sit down, I fell on the floor, sometimes to class laughter. Often, I’d hear the statement, decided firmly and then revoked each week (or in the same day) “you’re not my friend anymore as you’re not cool enough”, always causing my spirits to sink, but I would accept this, no one else really willing to talk to me for more than the briefest exchanges. He only softened up when once, he himself came into class crying, and I went to comfort him, a pet in his family home having died. Then, a few days later, it was back to the put-downs and the reprimands, with the tone of an old, scolding woman more than a small child. These uncertain messages kept me on edge, always hoping that he would be in a good

mood when I saw him, and that the personal criticisms would not come that day. For this reason, I became a people pleaser, forgetting myself and my own interests, desperate only that Simon, my only company, would not abandon me, having known silence well enough already. As the first years progressed, I lost touch with Simon, as he was placed in different classes, and I specialised into the higher sets and distracted myself with extra-curricular activities. I think he left the school before the senior portion commenced.

The teacher I did not get on with (through no decision of my own) was named Mr Searle. A medium-short, stocky, sports player build, with tight black hair, a bulbous nose and a broad moustache, Mr Searle hardly ever smiled, and transmitted an ever-present aura of stern seriousness. He taught me for my first two years of Mathematics at Felsted and he disliked me from our very first lesson together. We were studying basic algebra, and he had set us a set of assignments to complete by the end of the lesson. I had never seriously engaged with the subject up until then, and found it fun, and satisfying, if tricky in places, learning new heuristics and patterns to follow,

and shy as always, hoping I did not stand out, or get any questions wrong. The air was quiet in the classroom, under Mr Searle's glowering instruction, having explained the concepts to us, and then let us get going, a preliminary evaluation, the first test of many. Distracted by earlier bullying in class and out in the corridor, and by Simon kicking me constantly under my chair as I wrote, I tried my hardest still to write my answers, putting each pair of solutions in horizontally in pencil across the squares of my workbook, two per line, until I had two columns stretching down the page. I was satisfied that I had done the best I could. It was only when it came to marking for the next class that I realised just how intolerant Mr Searle was. It turned out he had asked for the first homework to be written as discrete vertical answers, as is standard, and, unable to take in his words due to the pain in my shins, my general melancholia, and Simon's whispering, my mistake of presentation sent him into a fury. "What's this?!" he announced, in raised voice, as if gritting his teeth. "I see we have someone who can't pay attention! Did you not hear me at the start? I said vertical answers you stupid boy!" I was taken aback. There was silence in

the class, my classmates awed to shock by his outburst, and yet not at all sympathetic. I saw bodies crane on their chairs to stare at me. “Not good enough, Power!” he continued, “I see we’re going to have some problems with you!” A very superficial genuine mistake of presentation for a pre-adolescent child who had provided 97% correct answers, I was distraught then, my face fallen. “Why did you do this?!” he thundered, and, totally ashamed and overcome, I was unable to answer. I just sat there, fumbling for words, as he scowled, his face creased up in hatred, and threw my book back across the room at me. “Next time, pay attention!” he shouted.

This sole incident was enough to send him over the edge for the remaining years though. From then on, he singled me out in class, always making remarks about my lack of concentration, even as the peer bullying, and his own frequent admonitions drove me off the subject and distracted me further. My high results of that first class were rarely if ever again replicated, and I began to struggle to keep up, always receiving an average of 60-65% correct marks – and sometimes even lower – as opposed to flawless homework. He too began

to refer to me as “the pansy” (or just, “him”, knowingly, with a jerk of his thumb) and to joke to the other students about how wet I was as a person. That teacher's dismissive hatred interfered significantly with my study of Mathematics at school. It ruined my confidence in the subject and had a domino effect into other disciplines.

I find that very frustrating these days. I enjoyed the subject (and continue to, currently home-studying differential equations, multivariable vector calculus, and complex numbers in my own time as an adult, with a much higher correct answers average), but his pettiness and constant hostility prevented me from relaxing into the work. I gathered very early on that he had taken this dislike to me, and his scoffing disdain singling me out before the rest of the class in an attitude of “and what do we all think this silly, disruptive person has done wrong now?” as I continued to get more and more wrong answers drained my enthusiasm. I went out of my way to avoid him in the corridors to escape a random suspicious accusation and a vicious telling off and was glad that he didn't usually coach the rugby team I eagerly played on, having found a game

more suited to me than football, playing first as a wing, then a fullback, then migrating into various scrum positions, where I excelled at tackling (with a lot of sudden anger to work off). I fared a little better in Physics, later, with a far more approachable teacher, though was still hampered by the loss of foundational maths.

At home, my father, disappointed by my increasingly poor maths results, insisted then one day on doing all my homework for me when I was at the lower Prep school, even though I could do it perfectly well in other subjects, and sometimes better, and sometimes got in trouble with teachers for cheating as obvious stylistic differences were spotted, particularly the maths teacher, who would explode when he discovered the ruse. I begged my father to give me a chance to do my own homework, but he insisted. Later into the school, I would get up early in the morning, before Dad, and copy my own answers out subtly, exhausted, adjusting and completely re-envisioning the pages he had sat with me and written out the night before so I could, for once, put my own voice in, discarding his work for my own true answers, feeling slightly guilty

the while. My father, a mathematics high honours graduate from 1960s Queens University, Belfast, was (and is) brilliant at his subject, and a veritable human calculator to boot, able to fluidly explain concepts from pure mathematics off the cuff, or to expound on Riemann's zeta function and non-Euclidean geometry for half hours at a time, was still not so adept at English literature, poetic study, or creative writing, where I excelled, and his mind was unsuited to the Latin, Greek, History, and Philosophy I later specialised in, so I was glad, however enervated it left me, that I could fill in my own answers in these disciplines. I did not like being forced into the role of a cheat and valued intellectual honesty. Thankfully, I held together enough to usually do well in other tests outside of maths, at least once the maths teacher changed in the third year and I could again relax. I was pleased later to win the school Latin prize for a few years in a row, for exams taken in class, where I could not be subject to Dad's overconcerned interference. In my free time by then, Dad had hired a Maths tutor for me named John who would sit with me at weekends to practice my sums. Always a patient teacher, I fared much better under him

for our six months of 2-hour sessions, even if back in the classroom I was still particularly anxious and inept, especially when it came to the end of year maths exams.

A sad, lonely, and yet optimistic child (and how could I be otherwise? The alternative would be despair), doing the best I could to impotently fit in in a school that did not care for my existence at all, my next unfortunate attempt to make friends was with an entirely different character from Simon's passive-aggressive bad temperedness.

* * *

Aged eleven, I had been preparing for a school ski trip to Les Menuires, an alpine ski resort in the Belleville valley of Southeastern France, south of the town of Moûtiers. My first time skiing, I knew I needed to practice in advance, so looked for a local dry slope to train on, to learn to how to slide, and turn, and snowplow, and from there to move into skiing parallel. Much time was spent acquiring the correct clothing, and my cousin Declan gave me a pair of his old Rossignol skis and helped me adjust the bindings to my new boots, as

well as giving verbal tips. Tariq, a boy in my class, was also going on the ski trip, and he heard that I was attending Brentwood Park Ski and Snowboard Centre and told me he wanted to come along. And so we got chatting, and continued to laugh and joke around before and after ski sessions, although he quickly tired of skiing after the original trip, deciding it “not cool enough” and “a hobby for old people”, and, picking up on the derogatory words of an older snowboarder at Brentwood Park which impressed on him very much, as any gratuitous use of novel swear words did, he delighted in referring to skiers from then on as “pricks on sticks”, deciding instead that he would become a snowboarder, having been wowed by the ultra-cool dude image of the sport. Perhaps he fell over too much on skis also, as he was chubby in face and frame, and slightly overweight at the time.

Tariq, older than me by almost a year, was the son of Amin and Sophie, a rich Pakistani doctor and his English wife living in a huge Tudor country farmhouse in extensive grounds outside Great Leighs, with work sheds, and chicken coops with free ranging hens rummaging all over the grounds, and a

selection of other outbuildings including an annex house that Tariq had partially moved into, despite his age, all set in a spacious front field lawn with a burgeoning vegetable garden behind and to the left of the house, the entire luxury property disguised behind tall oak trees at the boundaries. The inside décor of the sprawling, timber-framed Tudor house was styled by Sophie to a Pakistani theme, the plaster between the slanting timber of the walls painted a vibrant orange, with intricate, handcrafted Islamic cabinets in colourful painted wood, golden yellow, turquoise and scarlet silk cushions with mirrored glass stitched to them, Ottoman benches, gilt frames with traditional Mughal designs, and ornamental Persian rugs, with a plethora of hanging lights, incense burners, Mirhab icons, polished metal decorative panels, and sepia elephant carvings, and curious photographs taken in Lahore. There was luxury cushions and expensive sofas everywhere, filling the many small, opulent rooms of the expansive millionaire property. Their two BMW 7 Series vehicles and the sports car that Amin drove had personalized numberplates, one for Sophie, and one chosen for Tariq's name, 5TA,

clipped onto the car that Sophie drove herself. Born Margaret, she had changed her name to Sophie in reference to the Arabic name Safiyyah, meaning 'virtuous', as held by the wife of the Prophet Muhammed, in deference to her Muslim husband's request upon them getting married, a name he much preferred.

Tariq himself always came across as extremely confident. A cheeky character, nicknamed Taz at school after the *Looney Tunes* Tasmanian Devil character, a reference he did his best to live up in reputation, he was not academic in the slightest, but was popular with all the other boys, his laddish English peers, perhaps on account of his family's great wealth, and thus on account of this his early access to every latest trend, expensive electronic gizmo, and consumerist fad popular with the easily impressed schoolchildren. His family bought him a portable Minidisc player and a selection of blank Minidiscs on pre-order from before they came on the market, even though Tariq didn't really listen to music. Aside from this, he nurtured a maverick personality, adjusting his public-school accent to sound more like an East London voice, in self-conscious Mockney and adopting Essex urban

slang terms and mannerisms. He appealed to the girls, good at sports, and played in a higher rugby team than me, and he hung around the clique of 'the cool set' throughout his time at the school, and so, through him I came to know them, and to mix in circles I would otherwise have been utterly excluded from on principle from the get-go.

One morning, I came into school myself with a new idiosyncratic game to show off, called *POGS*, with a stack of cardboard milk-cap discs with colourful cartoon designs on one side and a plastic slammer. The aim of the game was for each player to stack their discs face-up and throw their slammer at their opponent's stack, bouncing them into the air. Any that landed heads were kept by the player and any on the undecorated cardboard side were placed back in their stack. Then the next player took over. I'd purchased them with a child's magazine and was more interested at the time in the collectable limited edition picture designs than I was the game. Bustling over to me in the schoolyard that morning to see what I had, Tariq's smile faded. Without saying a word, he punched me hard on my right arm, causing me to drop my tokens. He

didn't pick them up, so it suggested he just wanted to show his displeasure rather than to steal them from me. After all, it turned out he himself had been bought the same magazine the day before, and acquired the *POGS*, and one presumes, had wanted to be the first one to show off this new toy to the year group. Without apologising, he stormed off, leaving me sad, shaken, and sore. His punch had been very hard, and it left me reeling. I bent down, and picked up my *POGS*, then put them back into my pocket, having lost the will then to display them that day. A few minutes later, I came across Tariq on the other side of the yard, in a game with his other friend, happily flinging down the slammer like nothing had happened, a crowd of schoolchildren around him looking at his new tokens with curiosity, all asking to examine them. I should have taken this event as a warning sign not to hang around him, given his volatile temper. It wasn't pure rage in him, but he was dominant, and didn't like to not be the centre of attention and was quick to 'put me in my place' if he felt his authority and charisma threatened. I never told my mother about the incident. After all, a year before, others from the boys, friends of

Simon, had been whacking me, and when I informed my mother, in tears, pleading with her that something be done, she merely said “oh that’s terrible, I must have a word with your teacher” and never did, and continued to socialise with the mothers of those physically bullying me, just as she had always done.

Tariq hit me a few more times over the years of our friendship, and it escalated in ferocity. Once, with his neighbour Paul, from a Romany gypsy family living just outside his estate, he played a ‘Cowboys and Indians’ game between the three of us where they grabbed me and tied me to Tariq’s bedpost with sheeting, me the Indian, and proceeded to take turns whacking at me hard with a skipping rope, whipping me around the face and upper body until I cried. At which point Paul, slightly more amenable than Tariq went to me, noticing that it had gone too far and said, “we were only playing, you shouldn’t be upset” and went to untie me, although Tariq, always the more enthusiastic, brushed him aside, and continued to direct the heavy wooden handles of the skipping rope down onto my captured skin. Paul was giggling at the time, but Tariq remained unsmiling, unhappy somehow,

despite the ‘game’, content more it seemed then with the sadism than with any approximation of childhood mirth. It went on until he got bored, and they left the room, me still tied up until they returned later. I was left crying, feeling trapped (as indeed I was), and hurt, but more so trapped in a friendship I did not want, and which was increasingly wounding me physically and psychologically. But there was no one else, and my mother’s ties were now strong with Sophie, them regularly leaving us together to head out and have afternoon tea, or for my mother to be taken on an extended tour of the gardens.

I also remember standing in his bedroom one day, when he was waiting to go out. We had been playing with his computer, and I was finishing up, shutting down properly, something he never bothered with. Impatiently, he ran up the stairs, and I said, “I’ll only be a minute...”, and stood up, leaning by his desk, at which point he squared up to me angrily, and after a split second, punched me in my stomach, winding me and sending me backwards onto his bed. I started to cry then and fled to my mother downstairs in the kitchen by the front door, who, instead of

comforting me, made her apologies jokingly to Sophie, for me “causing a scene”, saying to her and not me “it’s ok, their rough and tumble must have just got out of hand.” For her part Sophie did not ask Tariq to apologise for his behaviour, and instead they stood there embracing in the doorway, as she laughed, him suddenly all soft again, polite and beaming, her cherished only son, stating simply to her “he was taking too long!” and waving at my mother, “hello Mary!” I was in hysterics as my mother, no longer able to chat with Sophie and discuss relevant gossip, dutifully pulled me out of their house, humiliated by her, and by all of them, pleading for justice, and receiving none.

Never seeming too happy in her marriage, Tariq’s mother thought the world of him, and seemed from a young age to treat him like the man of the house. He dressed much older than his years and was awarded a dignity and a prestige that never seemed appropriate for a boy of his age, not granted to any of his school peers, whom she treated like children. Aside from this, even up to his early teenage years, I’d walked past their bathroom a few times when visiting and noticed that he would call to her when he was on the toilet, and she would

dutifully file in and wipe his bottom for him. I always considered this very strange and wondered what odd family dynamic was at play. In general, Sophie was a socialite, well used to a glamorous world of galas and regular golf club meetings, but in the house she idolized Tariq alone, appearing at times somewhere between his nursemaid and his personal slave. In the rare chances I observed their family disputes, her in tears, with Amin raging and calling her “Pig! Dirty pig!”, she would rush to Tariq’s side, much as he did not step out of his way to defend her and stared on bemusedly, shrugging it off, a little smile playing on his face, sometimes lambasting her himself, for not buying the right food or for not cooking the dinner correctly to his tastes, or indeed for not buying him what he wanted sharply enough.

For all the rest of the school holiday, I did not play around Tariq’s house, but, come a new school year, I again, stupidly, began to hang around with him. We were still going to winter sports practice, this time at Tamworth SnowDome, where I continued to ski, competent now, and alternated with my personal snowblades, and he snowboarded, making sure as always that he possessed the

latest designer snowboarding ware, with expensive Oakley goggles and 686 jackets, and a top of the range board, popping out the side of the building afterwards to light up a cigarette, adopting his familiar posture, forcing himself to smoke it, pretending he enjoyed the fumes, scanning back and forth conspicuously in case a parent discovered him. Later, still a preadolescent child, he encouraged his mother simply to let him smoke openly at home, to which she agreed. He did not seem to have a habit, so much as smoking to show off, having found the ultimately gimmick so far to present his cool as ever nature to his envious peers, just as when he made a big thing of visiting the Essex Young Farmers festivals each year, despite not being in any way interested in farming or connected with the land, and getting just a little bit tipsy on a looted beer or two provided by his rural friends. Naturally, I was appalled.

It was Tariq too who first introduced me to the existence of pornography, still at eleven, coming round my house one day where I was playing a PC computer game of my own, a colourful, complicated real-time strategy titled *War Wind*. I thought he would like to see me

play, but all he said to me that day was, “here, shut that down, I want to show you something instead.” “What is it?” I asked. “Don’t worry” he replied, “it’s just something, you need to see it” and with that he encouraged me to end my game, and to type the characters of a link into my computer, the internet only available to me that year. So far, with my father teaching me, I’d used it to set up a website of my drawings in HTML. This was something different. Soon (loading times were long in 1996), JPG pictures of naked white brunettes appeared on the screen, adult models bending over, with huge breasts, displaying their bottoms with parted cheeks, and leaving nothing to the imagination. “Oh dear” I said, horrified, “I don’t think I should be looking at this, it’s immoral.” I knew my parents wouldn’t be impressed, and that it went against what I had been taught at church. “Nonsense, here, keep it open, keep it open!” Tariq replied commandingly, his eyes gleaming, his hand moving to his private parts to rub them over his clothes, and for another ten minutes he forced me to move my mouse up and down the page, while he looked, encouraging more than anything that I looked too though, as if him

simply browsing alone was not enough, aware that I was embarrassed, relishing it, and relishing the dirty images on display. I felt more like he was gaining sexually from me reluctantly watching than from the images themselves. I wasn't sure how long he had known about the existence of such sites, certainly a disquieting novelty to me. In the end I gathered some confidence, and shut the page down anyway, him putting his free hand over my mouse hand, and trying to stop me, but me succeeding regardless. He looked very disappointed then, and angry, and stormed from the room. "You're a total wimp" is all he said.

As that year progressed, Tariq's sexual appetite did also. It was hard to notice at first, but I gathered that he spent long hours staring at the images of women, and masturbating. Occasionally, when in my company, he would point down, and make a big fuss over his bulging erection, showing off to me in a bizarre way. I was always disgusted, and went into a fluster, the doctrines of my firm Catholic upbringing coming to the fore, and a worry about dirty behaviour and sinful acts. I tried to brush it aside though, so as not to show him I

was too upset, as, by this point, I had come to rely on Tariq's friendship, and idolise him to some degree, an older, legitimately 'cool' friend who would set me in better stead with the other pupils, and perhaps prevent any further bullying and ostracism. By this age, loneliness had overtly manifested, and I did not like spending time by myself, finding the experience decidedly uncomfortable, locked in thoughts of worthlessness, wondering why I was excluded, knowing I always had been, considering that it was me at fault, and that there was nothing of worth or interest in my personality, aware my shyness and awkward, geeky manner put people off me. My bully friend's weird predilections came to the fore one day though.

Tariq had come round our house for a sleepover one weekend. After a day spent computer gaming, and examining our respective collections of *Games Workshop* miniatures, mine a painted lead army of fantasy goat-beasts replete with multiple idiosyncratic conversions and on display bases, and his a monster trunk full of futuristic tanks, mostly unpainted, or spray painted a thick white undercoat, my parents loaned us their

bedroom so we could sleep in the same room, as my bedroom only had space for one, and there was no room to the right hand side of my bed. We got off to sleep easily, and the night went uneventfully but when I woke in the morning, myself in my blue patterned sleeping bag on the right-side floor by my parents' bedroom door, Tariq having claimed the main bed at bedtime and me not wanting to share a bed with another boy, I heard his voice. He was giggling to himself. There were rustling motions. "Morning... What are you doing?" I asked groggily. And at that moment Tariq leapt across the double bed laughing and rolled his arm down over my face. I couldn't see what he had in his hand, but it stank. A second later, to my absolute disgust and shock, it registered. He poked the free toy plastic bubble lid from the Onken Frufoo yoghurt he had eaten the night before under my nose and between my lips, smearing it around my open mouth. It was covered in his faeces, stuck on down one side in a thick, dark blobby trail. It looked like he had been inserting the lid up his rear. For how long of the night or the morning, I wasn't sure.

Given this rude awakening, I shouted out and put my arms up to push him away off me,

my face grimacing in horror, and crunched up and out of the sleeping bag, running into the bathroom to wash my mouth out, retching continuously. The smell was dire, and it clung to my nostrils. All I heard in the background, over my spasms, was Tariq laughing, but I didn't find his immature joke funny. At the time, I interpreted it in this fashion, just a very puerile physical jest on his part. And so I did not tell my parents, who were sleeping downstairs, and did what I always did, and grumbled to myself, fraught as always, and brushed it off. Following that wake up, nothing more was made of the incident for the rest of the day, and Tariq never mentioned it again. I'm not sure how he disposed of the faeces-smearred toy. Perhaps he took it with him. It never occurred to me then that were homoerotic overtones to his behaviour. I observed him looking at so many pornographic women, and knew of him masturbating furiously, and chatting to me at school, boasting about his first experience of oral sex, and about how good it was, and about meeting a seventeen year old girl who was now his girlfriend, him having developed young, with a full onset of facial hair and his former

plumpness turned into a short, strong, stocky body, wearing Lynx deodorant, his well-practiced aura of machismo enough to carry him along, always so cock-sure, asking me (though he knew the answer) if I was a virgin, and then mocking me a little, saying “you should hurry up, you’re lagging behind” and, “I tell you, there’s nothing like it” and, “oh Benny boy, why are you such a loser?” using strings of X-rated words to describe embarrassing scenes I knew were obscene and depraved, him so far virginal also, and me only twelve and a half years old, still closer to having taken my First Communion at Our Lady Immaculate church than to an adult world. It only occurred to me much later, when I knew of such terms, that there was something homosexual about him then, and ravenously perverted, much as it did not seem to last into his adult years. Still, this was not an isolated incident.

Tariq’s sense of humour was invariably vulgar, and always physical pranks at my expense, or gleeful schadenfreude if I was to mess up on something, such as falling when skiing, giving him ample room to leap in with corrections amidst all the laughter and calls of “clumsy!” I remember once standing in his

mother's kitchen staring down into an incubator she had set up for a brood of newly hatched chicks, which she kept in henhouses along the rear of the garden to raise for their eggs, and to run everywhere around the property, scavenging and on the whole untended to. Their enclosure was lit by bright yellow lamps, and there was muck everywhere, fuzz, bits of eggshell, blood and mucus, and a lot of faeces, with an atrocious smell. Tariq laughed, that tittering contempt, and put his hands into the pen. Picking up a big handful of this dropping-filled gunk in his bare hands, he smeared it over my hair and face. The visceral and the bodily was somehow always something of amusement and fascination to him.

Most upsetting of all to me were two events in my personal life occurring later that year and into the next. On the first, I was myself staying around Tariq's parents' house for a sleepover. After a day of yet more relentless computer gaming, and running around the garden with BB guns (he shot me with his Crosman Classic as I arrived on the property, stepping out of my mother's car to feel a sharp, fierce stinging on my right shoulder, perhaps a suitable introduction for

what occurred later in the day), we went to bed late on, me sleeping in his bed for once, in another sloping, sumptuously decorated upstairs room, with private en suite bathroom facilities, and him on the floor to one side in his sleeping bag. I had stripped down to my Y-fronts and got under the covers. Soon, tired from the physical exertions of the day, I was asleep.

I was awoken from sleep in the early morning by a rough shaking of the bed. My body too was shaking, as if pressured, rocking back and forth under the duvet. There was a thick weight to my lower back, and my upper thighs and chest were clamped down, more weight over my arms in a tight embrace. Half asleep, and very groggy, I opened my eyes in concern and looked down. Tariq was suddenly on the bed behind me, under the covers, his arms around me, locked in a bear hug. He was making little sharp breathing noises, thrusting back and forth with quite some rhythmic force, and me held painfully tight, his manhood raised, pressing into my lower back and along the groove of my buttocks. I could feel him moist against my upper legs. He had not been able to penetrate me, mercifully, I don't think,

but my rear was sore, as if he had had a go, my cuts stinging. I screamed out then and pushed as hard as I could with my arms to free myself, but he kept his eyes shut, a calm, beatific expression on his face, like a saint in repose, and was slow to respond, evidently lost very deep in whatever he was thinking about. I struggled again, as quick as I could, pushing my arms out to each side to break his lock, and squirming away down the bed, out of the iron grasp of his thighs and calves. He was awake now. "Huh? What is it?" he said, feigning greater sleep. "You were humping me!" I announced to him, dazed, hurt, confused, and angry, "what were you doing?!" "Oh" replied Tariq, "Oh, I was just asleep there. I didn't know what I was doing!" A smug, sarcastic smile has formed on his lips, thin and cruel, and his eyes flashed. "But you were on me, and you were doing something!!" I shouted at him, livid and embarrassed.

Oddly, I was not terribly put out at the time. It was not that I had appreciated what he was doing in the slightest, only that I was so low on confidence, and so resigned to poor treatment, that I felt no willpower to resist properly. A stronger person would have

punched him in the face, and continued with that, but I was so timid, and so naïve and innocent that that all I could say, when he refused to budge on the matter, and refused to explain himself was “ok, well you shouldn’t sleep so deeply. Can I go and get a drink from downstairs?”

It was only a day or so after this weird incident where I began to reflect on it properly, up in my bedroom at home, alone, crying into a pillow. I did not want to have to go into school, knowing what had occurred, wondering if the other students would somehow inexplicably know, but beyond that having to stand near him in the playground, and see him chatting to all his friends, the centre of attention, the coolest boy in school, and the girls flocking around him to chat coyly about dates and to flirt, and to know what they would think of me if I said anything about it, with anything that tarnished his reputation, something they could never believe me on, and would turn on me for even more, the “weirdo”, the outcast, and Tariq defending himself among them, and laughing that I was making it all up for attention, or to be malevolent. I still get that terrifying feeling twenty-seven years later,

writing this book. I realised in my own words that I had been bodily attacked, and that he had tried to have sex with my sleeping form, using my skin like an inert tool for his satisfaction. But I did not yet tell my parents. The rapacious occurrence was not really physically painful as much as psychologically unsettling. I pushed it to the back of my mind. I was under pressure at school with exams to see if I could get into the highest set sixth form year as opposed to being sorted into the fifth form and taking the tests and challenges that would establish if I was eligible for my scholarship, and there was too much on my mind all round. Events that pass meaninglessly at the time, in a bluster of new days and conflicting ideas, often resonate later. It took many years to assimilate at all that my erstwhile friend had been more of a circling enemy, and never having had a good friend in my life, or any support or backup at school or really at home, I was a passive wreck, and a glutton for punishment. But there was worse to come.

As he reached thirteen, Tariq continued in his hypersexualized precocious manner. He was always talking to me about smutty topics,

relishing his very puerile sense of humour, an immature schoolboy approach to adult matters that did not sit well with me, much as I weathered him, used to his nature. I longed for a good friend I could chat to about my poetry, or my literature, or art, or about nature, but it was never the case. In general, lifelong, any conversations I have had with regular ‘friendly’ acquaintances – those I’ve called friends in my mind, back when I had more hope in that failing idea being directly obtainable in the modern world – are always dictated by the other person, pushing me off highbrow cultural topics, or academic ideas, or meaningfulness, and back into the realms of crass entertainment, or hobbyist escapism, or small-talk, as, routinely, I am gawped at, or told that they don’t know what I mean or what I’m talking about, or “can we talk about something easy now?” or “can’t we keep it light-hearted?” or the classic put-down, “stop using big words.” Thus I am forced into silence, or just pinned at length as they tell me about their latest favourite movies, or *Games Workshop* models, or popular music, or their day at work – or just their salary, or their “boring”/“too much”/“too long” projects/workload/hours, or

their boss – or from their drinking on the weekend, or something on Facebook or Instagram, a film celebrity or BBC icon, something garish or noise-emitting on their phones, a bit of media news, or anything insubstantial and banal, like a one way show-and-tell. I did not have a shared frame of reference, knowing from experience that they had no background knowledge on anything I want to say, and no curiosity, or inclination to inform themselves on it. It's not just that I should listen to their ignorance and childishness, it's that I was simply 'not allowed' by them to talk on anything substantial, anything "deep and heavy", as I'd heard so many people say. I no longer know how to approach them in conversation, and did not really know as a child either. Thus, I did what I always did, and capitulated, feigning interest in others' banality, or superficial vulgarity, or mindlessness.

I was again around Tariq's house, in his parents' bedroom. Sophie had gone out for the day with my mother, leaving us alone in the house. My companion was busy telling me about one of his latest proposed conquests, asking me did I know what rude terms meant,

like “rimjob” and “anal” and “kink”. I gather he garnered these expressions from his forays into internet pornography, but at the time the veracity of his accounts rang true with me. I decided I probably should come out of my shell. After all, I had never had a girlfriend, or even kissed a girl (or spoken to any of them at school in a romantic way, if at all). I plucked up my courage and said to him, “ok, yes, I see you’ve had a lot of fun recently. What can you teach me about sex? Do you have any tips?”

Tariq didn’t give me a proper response but something in his demeanour changed then. His eyes glazed over again, and that blissful smile returned. “Okay, I’ll tell you about it” he said, “but first, you need to do this.” He moved across the room until he was standing square in front of me. I was frozen, attentive, the hair on my neck risen slightly, wondering what new idea he had in store. But I trusted him, despite knowing of his sense of humour, as I called it. His voice deepened, taking on an alien quality I had not heard in him before. He reached briskly to his cargo shorts, and undid the button, pulling them down to the floor along with his pants, exposing himself naked in front of me, with his hairy brown body open to the

world. My first thought was one of disgust, seeing his tiny acorn penis, in a mound of bristly hair. But I was frozen, scared now slightly, not knowing what he was going to do. He leaned forward then, his cherub smile locked in place, and forcefully yanked down my own trousers and underpants.

The air of the bedroom was cold, and I could smell his natural body odour. I recoiled in shock, but then there he was looming over me. I didn't have time to decide even what to think, as he leaned forward, motioning his thigh up against my leg, and, taking me in his hands like a picture frame, he began to rub himself up and down over my genitals, cold and clammy to my skin, grunting like a boar. He had not gained an erection, but it was enough. Something dribbled a little from him, and his eyes looked wild.

When he had finished, a matter of mere seconds, he withdrew from me, and, still poised parallel to me, said, in a cold, stern voice, "now you have to touch me!" "No!" I said, with some shock still, and then, softer, mournful "I don't want to. Please, I don't want to..." "but you have to" he replied, "touch me now, it's your turn!" And he scowled at me then,

as I looked into his fat, panting face, his eyes dark and menacing, looking like he would hit me if I did not (and his lingering punches were hard and very painful), and I stepped forward a little, my pulse up, trembling, and horrified, trapped in the cold feral breeze of the room, feeling no way out. He stood before me like a statue, commanding, grim, glowering across at me, with my shaking knees weakened a little, and bent to his height, and I leaned up, feeling terror and psychic pain, and I touched him, moving my own genitals against his, in total disgust, like a robot or a slave, doing my duty to him, ugly inside. He pulled on my arm, dragging my right hand towards his groin, and the tip of my index finger brushed against the end of his penis, a soft, devilish feeling, but I jerked back in horror and shame, tears welling in my eyes, my lip trembling. Almost mercifully – and there was never mercy there – his mental satisfaction was gained quickly, and I myself spent no more than ten seconds rubbing against him before he said, suddenly, in that dominating tone, like a decadent Mughal emperor on a field of war, “stop! That’s enough!” I withdrew then, mournful and wretched in face, like his beaten serf, and went to pull up

my pants and trousers. There was silence in the chill of the room. An awful black glaring silence, listening to me, embracing the echoes of my gross discomfort and embarrassment. He didn't look at all put out, as if nothing had just happened, and turned from me, and pulled up his own pants. Then, purposefully, he marched across the room, swinging his arms in that same carefree manner, and pushed past, and headed out the door to go downstairs and eat a sandwich Sophie had prepared for him. I stayed in the bedroom a little longer, feeling so very little in stature, gazing down at the pale carpeted floor, then the dark wood of the king size bed, then into the en suite at the end, and then out over the front lawn, through the thick leaded cottage windows, at a bright, translucent sky, and crows in the branches, and the crisp, harrowed fields stretching to the cold white distance. I felt as close to nothing then as I could have been.

Softly, sadly, I shrugged, my form hunched over, soiled and abused, and lifted myself out of the room on weary feet, following him downstairs. My mother had arrived by then, with Sophie. They were laughing

together in the first sitting room, my mother showing keen interest in Sophie's collection of antique Bonsai trees. My mother piped up as I entered, "did you have a good time when we were out boys?" On hearing this, Tariq replied enthusiastically, "Yes, Mary!" and nodded, and my mother seemed contented. "Oh good" she said. "We had a great time ourselves. Sophie showed me the grounds of Audrey End and then we toured the house and had cream tea and scones, and had lots of time to converse, and now we're back" and then added "and how about you Benjamin? Have you had a nice day?" and, no longer there, not knowing myself or what to say, I nodded a little, and put on a small, forced smile. "Good" she exclaimed, "that's nice to know." "I'm sure you're very tired now" my mother continued, "we'll have to head home soon", and sure enough, as I filed silently out of the property behind her, her thanking Sophie profusely for another marvellous day, and for all they discussed, my eyelids began to fall slightly. Not in physical tiredness, but in a great, wrenching, all-encompassing enervation, and the tears never falling, pushed back into my head, and just a blankness, as blank as the washed-out sun in that late

afternoon sky, and mist gathering in the sharp air, unable likewise to think, and my shortening spirit dimmed, like a snuffed-out wick. Soon after, my mother met with my father and they agreed between the pair of them to pay £3000 pounds to Sophie so my mother could purchase her used grey 7 Series BMW E32 as she was upgrading it to a E38, the paintwork in a deep, unavoidable red, and all luxury features. The car was not really on my mind though. The children at school knew it had been purchased from Tariq's family, and still referred to it as such, remarking "Ben's mum's now driving Tariq's car", and laughed more, guffawing at the poor family, and poking fun out of us.

As the years went on, I drifted from Tariq, who continued to be always a popular student, with sports teachers, and with all the pupils, and I was in different classes and different subject choices, and with new people, none of whom I could really relate to, and thus no one to share what had happened to me with. Tariq never mentioned it himself, and I am unsure what or how he thought about the occurrences, or if they even played in his mind at all. I drifted back to being the child in corner, at the

back of the school hall or by myself on the coach, always unspeaking, and my sense of fun gone. Books were no longer even a pleasure. I just did my work, studied as hard I could, tried to force myself to laugh and to horse around when I felt it was easiest to, and ceased to exist.

Unusually, and perhaps tellingly, when, aghast, I did inform my mother some years later that historically Tariq had “touched” me a few times, and that I didn’t like it (never going into any real detail with her, for it did not come easily to me) she seemed surprised, but not completely shocked. There was limited real emotion to her tone, one of polite consternation, another “oh, really?” to me, followed by “but then again, he’s always been a very forward boy.” She admitted to me that once she was cooking in our kitchen during a visit by him and had felt him deliberately rub up against her from behind also, “jostling me quite hard” in my Mum’s words, and “being silly”, adding “he’s his mother’s little man, grown up too soon.” She added no further comment. There was always that preadolescent minimalization, refining the horrid details for complacent speech, in as few words as possible, and simple language, the

pedagogic toddler talk, perhaps gathered from her time as a children's health visitor and a social worker. She said she would speak to Dad about my worries, if I liked. But he never mentioned it if he did know, and nothing was ever done.

* * *

Always a devout child, and worried for my sense of decency as much as unhappy with my body following my operations, I never engaged much with acts of autoeroticism, even as this practice became more common in those around me, with them utilizing the adult services of the internet, as Tariq had been doing. Although later, as my sexual feelings developed, I fell to this practice now and again, as is common with adolescent boys, for many years I was completely asexual, even frowning upon 'dirty' activities, and looking on with some horror as boys in the boarding house hooked up with girlfriends and then recounted their activities to an enraptured audience. The sole instance in the house when I did attempt to browse pornography online as a young teenager ended very badly for me. I remember

being fully clothed, not really knowing what to do with myself, so settling on merely gathering enjoyment with my eyes. My parents had gone out for the day, as best I knew, and so I headed upstairs to the spare bedroom where the PC was now set up, and, gathering that the coast was clear, typed in a web address that Tariq had provided me a year before. After hunting for a short while, photographs of a couple appeared on screen in front of my anxious face, a blonde-haired man and a woman, in black and white, standing there naked next to each other, in various erotic poses. The tone in the images was one of adult art more than a strictly pornographic nature, though they were on the boundary. Unsure what to feel, let alone do, I spent about 10 minutes just staring at the 'softcore' images, scrolling up and down the page, feeling the slightest stirrings of lust in myself. More than anything, I found the bodies I was examining beautiful, standing there pale and toned, in perfect individual symmetry. It had moved something in me, much as the woman's naked skin was also enticing, the man swooping towards her with his muscles gleaming, his handsome face locked to her appreciative gaze. And then I heard heavy

footfalls on the landing outside. Looking up from the screen in horror, I saw that Dad was standing there just outside the doorway, with the laundry basket open beside him, piling in used towels. I shot up in shock, and my motion alerted him to my presence. His eyes locked with mine, and he noticed my great uneasiness. “Benjamin, what are you doing?” my father said to me, moving from his towel arranging to enter the room proper. In fear, I leapt out of my chair. “Dad, please don’t come in!” I called, and hearing this, he ignored me, a look of great concern crossing his face. He started to push forward into the room regardless, saying “What is it? What are you looking at?” again and again to me, and in fearful embarrassment, I could not answer him. I stood up at this point, in desperation, placing myself in his way, determined that he did not see my screen, and, confronted with the lurid images, tell me off, as I knew he would. I felt the press of his body against me as I held him for a second, locked in struggle, but he was bigger and far stronger than me, and with insistence pushed me back against the wall and burst fully into the bedroom. Within seconds, to my total horror, he was staring at the screen. His face fell

immediately, and a dark, angry look came over his face. “Benjamin, this is pornography!” All I could do then was look at the floor, silently, mortified, and deeply ashamed for having been caught out (and I think he knew from his first question), and I said nothing, bar a quiet “I’m sorry, I won’t bring this up again.” Still scowling, my father looked at me for a long moment, but, seeing that I was still clothed, and had not been ‘abusing myself’ he softened all of a sudden. All he said to me then was “just so you know, this is the button you press if you want to minimize the window” and with that turned and walked out, until I heard his footfalls going back down the stairs. I was left in that awful silence, caught red handed, and thoroughly upset at myself. But I was upset at him too. Despite his hectoring, it had been clear to him from the outset what I had been doing, so why did he insist on entering the room to show me up? Why even to the point of physical violence, where he had had to bodily push me out of the way? What did he possibly think I had been looking at? Or was what I looked at bad enough? I was unsure. But I gained a fear from that day onwards of what he would do if even again I was to engage in adult

internet activities, and so, rather than merely minimizing a window (what would be the point? - he knew that trick already), I took to browsing other things, mainly computer gaming websites and online comics, and otherwise stayed clear of the trashier side of the internet, perhaps to my credit in the long run, though unfortunately, as an adult, I undid whatever puritanical hang-up his scorn had implanted in me.

* * *

In 1999 my mother was diagnosed with lung cancer. She had been suffering from a chest infection, and though the usual treatments of antibiotics had been administered, her condition did not improve. Having been admitted to the local hospital, the chest consultant requested her to have a tube with a camera on it passed up her nose and down her throat with an instrument attached to take samples from her bronchus, where was discovered a neuroendocrine tumour, its tendrils reaching down across her left lung. Teetotal, health conscious, and a non-smoker her entire life, the doctors could never verify

why her cancer developed. However, she suggests to me now that her lungs were already weakened from childhood by her exposure to her father's heavy smoking, and that of her other male relations, much as she begged them not to smoke around her. She was in a lot of pain, and very ill, short of breath and immobile, obliged often to visit St Bartholomew's Hospital in London, and placed on a waiting list in preparation for a lung removal operation, losing one whole lobe of the two lobes present on the left. I was often afraid then that she would die, or die during the operation, and was devastated, living in sad worry, desperate that she would be helped in time and recover. When I visited her with Dad immediately after her surgery a torturous row of huge red stitches ran up the icy pale flesh from her waist to just under her left armpit and she was weak, and in awful pain, a ghastly sight that horrified me, remembering the photographs in my marine life books of the appalling wounds inflicted by a Great White Shark on the Australian SCUBA diver Rodney Fox in 1963, one of the world's worst non-fatal shark attacks.

This was of no consequence to my bullies though. By that age I was living in between

lessons in a dormitory, the pupils separated into independent 'houses' that competed with one another in sport and in singing competitions and kept up an on the whole good-natured historical rivalry. I attended as a day boarder, there from eight in the morning until after 'prep' (on site homework) at seven p.m. often staying even later to attend extracurricular orchestral practice and drama lessons, and would, after supper, retire to the dorm room to sit in my wooden cubicle and prepare my work for the next day, or, ideally, in advance for later in the week, ready for silence to be called by a senior pupil and the hour long study session to commence. It was seen by all as a perfect time to mess about and was on the whole unsupervised. Naturally, free from adult condemnation or reprimand, they continued to mock her to my face, telling me that "it would be funny if she died", and reminding me as if in sincerity and in the vulgar slang of the day that she was "still fit though" and thus "shaggable." The worst culprits for this were named Chris, and Tim. Their horrible words left me shaken to me core, and weary, damaged, appalled that they would be so weak and so feral as to in effect pass above me to insult my

own mother long distance, a sadly all too common line of child-on-child abuse that I have always considered extremely below the belt. Her illness and the long, fraught two-year recovery time pushed me over the edge though. Over many months of passively experiencing the double-pronged mockery, day in day out, I broke, and, in desperate tears (and for the first time in my life) became angry at them, livid, standing up for myself, and defending her in her dire predicament.

One evening in the dorm, as I was preparing my books to go home, Tim, a fat, ginger-haired boy I had shared my schooling with since my pre-prep years came over to me, leaning on my cubicle desk, defacing it with a felt tip pen. As he did so he laughed within my earshot to the others behind him, “Ben’s mum... woah she’s ugly! What a stupid Paddy, *hello there!*” he announced, mimicking Mrs Doyle, the neurotic, hyperactive parish housekeeper from the Channel 4 comedy series *Father Ted*. “Hello there! Hello there! I’m Ben’s mum, I’m a fat, ugly Irish c**t!” My mother was still in her acute phase of healing in real life at this point, having just left the London hospital following her two-week

window, and in recuperation in Chelmsford's Broomfield. It was not the worst insult I had heard from one of them over the cruel months, but it was enough. Something I had never felt before welled up in me, a piercing column of dark flame, and red-hot rage, filling my consciousness. I slammed up out of my desk and stared at him with pure hatred, not saying a word. Never before had I tackled a bully, but I knew my body was stronger, and I was now well over six feet tall, and besides, I was angry. Without a second passing I reached out, grabbing him by the throat with my right hand and squeezing, and picked him up a little by the neck, pinning him to the wall of the cubicle. My fingers squeezed tight around his windpipe, feeling the warm flesh in my hand, that physical connection, and his stiff surprise, and all the pounding intensity of full-on contact aggression. Then, pushing him to one side, him yelping, his eyes wide in shock, spluttering and choking, I glanced over at the first-floor window, motioning that I was going to throw him out of it. "What the hell did you say!" I shouted at him, gritting my teeth, snarling in inchoate rage, "you're the f**king c**t!!" and his struggling face writhed in panic, in total

surprise and fear. Only then did I let go and heard him say, immediately, and in fluster “I’m sorry Ben! I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry!” and I had no more trouble with him on the matter after that.

By now my anger had faded, still more melancholic by nature than aggressive enough to be able to defend myself adequately in the long run, a painful consequence of the years of torment and sorrow before. I felt awful that I had felt compelled to use swear words, especially words of that calibre, and, despite the circumstances of the incident, I remember taking what I had said to Confession with my at Our Lady Immaculate, and what I had done, re-wording it to the priest a little to downplay Tim’s words, and the context of our fight, embarrassed and torn, feeling myself morally culpable, despite being in defence of my mother. Often at Confession, if I had not done anything wrong that week, even innocent after straining my head for little things, I would make something up, just in case, so as not to present an image of being too arrogant or ‘up myself’. I do not think my gentle, unassuming religious personality did me any favours in the long run.

Now, knowing of this incident, instead of directly confronting me with their mockery and put-downs, the other boys simply ignored me. They were never really my friends, and I knew then that I was never well liked, not even by the quieter, less popular pupils who could tolerate my company. I had shown them something in me that they had never seen before, and, perhaps unfairly, they distrusted me for it, and considered me above all “really weird”, if not “a psychopath”, words of ignorance and judgement which have always hurt me. I never again had personal necessity to physically engage a pupil at that school with my newfound rage, but I was no better in confidence despite my defensive act, too used still to my long years of passively suffering violent attack prior to that, and a sad, shy boy. Time paced on, slowly, and I moved on in my emptied, silent spaces, always lonely, watching happiness from the sidelines, already missing a world I had never been privy to. I just did my work when I could and slipped away, looking to the sky and the woods and the fields, and pacing out alone down the bleak countryside tracks to the side of the river a mile off, to lie by the soft banks of the water and cry, returning

in the twilight, with no expression on my face.

* * *

In the year 2000 I learned how to SCUBA dive. The summer before I had taken a sailing holiday to Salcombe with a boy named Alistair, a friend of the family from before school. I found, for once, that I got on very well with him, a docile country character from a large rural farmhouse out at the hamlet of Chignall Smealy on the North-West outskirts of Chelmsford. He was attending the same school, but had always been in different sets and classes, and, given that he was in a different boarding house also, I never saw him in term time. That was the holiday on which I broke my coccyx. Otherwise, it went well, with us sailing toppers and wayfarers in the wide Cornish estuary, windsurfing, and power boating, swimming, and then mountain biking down the steep hill tracks to each side of the bay. It was perhaps the best point of my life, the happiest year. In between, I would take daylong cycling breaks with Ali, his father strapping our mountain bikes to his car and dropping us in the morning in an undisclosed part of Essex with our water and our maps,

leaving us to find our way home, over many miles of winding lanes and country tracks, in the blazing summer sunshine. This time around, I wanted something different, albeit still in the category of adventure holidays.

Unfortunately, Alistair was not free that summer, going instead with his family to a property they owned on the Scilly Isles. I was left in need of companionship. Disgracefully, the only person I could find in the end who was at all interested in accompanying me was Tariq. I had not seen him in some years. I was reticent then, but knew it was easier to learn the diving course with another boy as a paired buddy, perhaps even mandatory for safety reasons, and reluctantly settled on him in the end, considering that the experience itself was of more importance to me than the woes of my personal life, my previous troubles with him firmly suppressed in my head by then, in a slightly more relaxed school atmosphere where I was really enjoying my studies, doing better at the first preliminary A-Level work than I had been able to achieve throughout my fraught GCSE years, my exams recently passed, but with not a single A*, a harrowing disappointment to me.

And so it was that my father, too old and unfit to dive himself, and with perforated eardrums rendering water sports a danger to him, accompanied us on a package holiday to Sharm El Sheikh, on the South Sinai coast of the Red Sea, for instruction at Camel Dive Club in Naama bay, specializing in earning a British Sub-Aqua Club (BSAC) certificate, the first textbook course in the science of diving and the usage of the complicated equipment, followed by practical SCUBA training in a deep pool, and, following the initial exams which we both passed (Tariq by the skin of his teeth), out onto a boat on the open water, for a final challenge of surface swimming, and then, eventually, under the waves, filling in my log book each time with detailed notes and evaluations on each dive, and on what I had spotted and interacted with.

A beautiful (if increasingly touristic) desert location constructed some miles up the coast from the real town of Sharm El Maya, itself a forgotten, dilapidated backwater, usurped by the SCUBA crowd, I remember my dives with joy. Observing an oceanic whitetip shark in the open water, swimming by lionfish in the dark, and acclimatizing myself to the

large, ominous schools of barracuda, and the fascinating groupers and parrotfish, peering at the head of a moray eel protruding from the reef, or examining the tiny, brightly coloured sea slug on my dive slate, I was further awed when a manta ray appeared out of the blue, gliding massive over my head.

Indeed, I even found that my regular fear of the dark, generally manifesting only when I am indoors, did not affect me when beneath the waves, with a great pleasure for night-diving, passing beside moon-glazed fire coral as it brushed at the bursting fish in flutters of sediment, away beyond the edges of the group, lost altogether once with the dying out of a malfunctioning torch, and, world-sloughed, drifting with the knocks and echoes of the deep, in quieted acceptance, until my kicking fin bent up against an unexpected resistance in the currents, a wobble in inner space that felt very much mutual, and I decided to turn back, ascending slowly by trial and error, and the following of natural signs, moonlight and faint bioluminescence, back to the familiar contours and rocky underwater outcrops that indicated the gathering shallows of the shore. Far out, but not enough to abort or panic, I will never

know what big aquatic species wheeled away from me in the full-black, but I was glad 'it' forgave my alien clumsiness. I did not like getting nitrogen narcosis once. I did not like an equalizing nosebleed deep underwater that spread out and filled half my mask, obliging me to repeatedly take it off to deal with the situation. The bite of a mother triggerfish from below was unexpected one time. Fire coral is painful when it stings. Otherwise, it was a pleasure. Even Tariq, historically a nightmare to me, was no burden on the trip, kept under tight supervision from the rest of the group, and spending the hours we did not dive trekking out into the desert, watching the sun in the mountains, and riding on camels out to a Bedouin encampment outside town in the evening heat, to sit cross legged on the dirt and drink small cups of sweet, dynamite strong mint tea. I returned refreshed, and somehow relieved.

The year after, I considered another trip. This time, for variation, and in some disappointment at Sharm places being unavailable and fully booked regardless, we chose Eilat, on the southernmost tip of Israel beneath the Negev Desert, a site on the coast

of the Gulf of Aqaba in the north of the Red Sea, my task this time being to complete my Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) license, a far more intensive set of diving exercises in which I was, mercifully enough, successful. I pleaded with Alastair to accompany us also, as by then he was my sole friend in out of school hours, but in the end I merely returned to the Middle East with Tariq, and with my father, the former somewhat reluctant himself this time, wondering how it would look for him to be seen spending too much time in my invariably “uncool” company, and barely knowing me anymore, a strained aloof silence between us, him with his own tight clique of laddish sporting friends.

I did not enjoy Israel as I had enjoyed Sharm El Sheikh, finding the locals curt, rude and dismissive of us, and indeed somewhat paranoiac. Indeed, Tariq almost did not make it through at all, detained at the airport by Israeli officials questioning the reason for his trip, marching him into a side room for two hours of interrogation, suspicious of his race, given their political climate of hostility, but in the end finding no evidence of malevolence or hidden purposes. Given my own appearance

and nationality, I had less bother, although they recognised me as an outsider easily, and the hotel staff were not approachable with us. I found the town itself to be trashy and garish, litter and stacked rubble everywhere between the blocky, hastily constructed tenement buildings and malls and arcades, and the overpopulated marinas and boating yards, a concrete city of noise and heat and consumerism, the heaving beaches packed with garish cocktail bars and rows of identical parasols stretching into the distance, somewhere between a car park and a glitzy market, and yet somehow antiquated, like a 1970s shopping centre.

As for the diving itself, I found the water cooler, and less enticing this time around, and the reef itself quieter and less abundant. Once, walking with my backpack and cylinder down to the shore, I cut the sole of my foot very badly on a sharp piece of broken glass littered on the rough gravel of the beach, and was obliged to sit out the morning's diving until I could acquire some rubber trainers, diving the day after in a pair of improvised socks beneath my fins, in much discomfort. To make matters worse, one day, just over two weeks into the

holiday I caught the flu and spent the next five days laying in a hotel room bed with my muscles weak and throbbing, coughing relentlessly, my throat in pain, psychologically hurt that my trip was, in effect, wasted, Tariq going out each day alone with my Dad to dive, having found a new buddy from our dive group to tag to. Later, he would meet these acquaintances for after-dive drinks, and at one point to sit on the beach with them and get stoned. Too young to drink myself, I had accompanied him to one of the busy, unappealing tourist bars a few days before my illness, but, as I suspected, the barmaid would not serve me due to my youthful appearance, and I was asked to leave. Tariq, much older looking than his age, was allowed to continue drinking, downing colourful cocktail after cocktail, chatting drunkenly to an Australian backpacker, me heading back to the hotel by myself where my father was already asleep. Getting drunk or drinking at all before diving is a very bad idea, and is directly dangerous, increasing the risk of narcosis and heat loss on top of impairing judgement in what is, beyond doubt, a dangerous environment in the first place.

By the fifth day of my illness, I could leave my bed, even though diving was not a wise idea. I instead went to the beach with my father and Tariq, to paddle in the water, or just lie on the sand with an orange juice. I was bitterly disappointed. I knew I would have to wait another year now for the same experience, and nothing of the trip had really pleased me. I lay back morosely, still sniffing a little, my eyes watering slightly. Dad was talking to Tariq, them laughing together about something, but I found it hard to pay attention, engrossed by my own disappointment. Eventually, I moved over to the pair of them, and tried half-heartedly to join in. Dad, on the whole, always got on very well with Tariq, the two talking to each other like a pair of adults, my father known from childhood to be more open, patient, and approachable with other people's children than with his own, often giving favours and buying them gifts he would not consider for me, or going out of his way to be helpful, an emphasis on being fair to all. As my mother yet again explained to me later "that's just Dad's way. He believes in being polite and respectful with strangers and putting them first, over his own family. We were taught that

by the priest when we were children.”

Tariq made a remark, though I didn't catch the previous lines. I assume Dad had been lecturing him on some academic science topic, the way he would tell me at length about Einstein, Newton, or Heisenberg, a point perhaps wasted on Tariq, who took no interest in intellectual matters, and tended to snub scholarly individuals, feeling them to be “nerds” not worth his valuable time. “But Billy, there are a lot of stupid people too. Not everyone's smart. I think these people had too much free time. They're not that bright.” Normally, if I made a comment like that (not that I would have dared ever to go so far, or indeed considered such at all independently) my father would have exploded at me in shocked irritation and sprung to correct me and my ignorance in indignancy. This time though he was merely silent for a second, before nodding a little. “Hmm... yes I suppose you're right”, he said, an awkward silence falling a little on the conversation.

Then, as if trying to make up for that moment, he gave a little laugh, and said, gesturing at me with his finger “yes, there are some rather stupid people out there. Look at

this one for example. Not the sharpest tool in the box exactly is he, ha ha?” to which Tariq, his eyes lighting up, proud at the agreement and validation of his comment, began to laugh also “ha ha! You’re right Billy. Ha!” as both began to crack up, looking at me side by side, me standing there across from them in broken hearted horror, as if Dad had his new son now, and I was a loser, and a waster, and nothing. Tears formed on my cheeks. My academic results were far higher than Tariq’s, who had failed most of his subjects, and I knew – or thought until then – from my own experience that I was always the studious one. “Dad!” I shouted, “how can you say that?!” and he just looked at me then, saying nothing, that huge grin on his face, another bully, just one more person on the hateful list of abusive people who had destroyed me. A painful rage welled up in me, undone on the beach, and exposed, and I shouted again, my tone wounded and breaking, “F**k you Dad! F**k you!” It was the first time in my life that I had sworn at an adult, as someone who rarely if ever used bad words in the first place. I erupted in tears. Memories of Tariq’s abuse from six years before flooded back into my mind, though I did not raise it

directly. I just continued to cry, doing my best to hold back the agony, ashamed – terribly ashamed – as Tariq sneered, seeing my weakness, my pansy character before him, distasteful of me and my familiar wetness, a victor in a one-sided campaign. Dad wasn't fazed. "Benjamin!" he said quite sharply, "keep your voice down, we're in public" and my head fell then, crestfallen, appalled, his words knifing into me, knowing he was right, and I couldn't really do any more. Heads around had started to turn and watch, as I glanced in full embarrassment down the beach.

My shoulders were shaking. Tariq seemed bemused, utterly without empathy, embarrassed himself by my show of emotion. "What's got into you?" he said, accompanied by my father's words "yes Benjamin, don't cause a scene. Come on now, it was just a joke. Let's move on, shall we? We need to go back to the hotel soon. You're too old to be crying" and forcefully shepherded the conversation away, the two of them continuing to talk on the way back, ignoring me and leaving me be, powering off in front, as I walked in silence, listening to them laugh about something, looking at the littered paving slabs and the

dust, all enthusiasm evaporated. I did not dive for the final few days, nor did I go out to the beach or the bars, and just sat in the hotel room, looking at the fish I had illustrated in my dive logs, or lying in bed staring at the wall. I was glad when it was over. At the airport on the way back I forced out a polite goodbye to Tariq, never seeing him again in my remaining school years, and headed home with Dad, broken somehow, and irrevocably so, feeling very, very stupid.

* * *

A little way through the school year 2001 my mind finally gave way. I had lasted as long as I could, I think, my entire life not really one of much pleasure, just brief bursts of love in an otherwise barren tableaux of shaming and shame. My pride in myself had never been able to develop, my confidence never given a chance to bloom, held back by cruel hands and eyes, sharp mouths, and the dispassion and dismissal of arrogant, narcissistic parents. But I did not think like that. All I could see, all of a sudden, and obsessively so, was my own fault, and my own failings. My fundamental

inadequacy clear to me, and the only conscience that recognised an 'I' at all anymore exacerbated to a punishing inquisitor, sceptical of my own abilities, suspicious of my every action, and with no pity for mistakes or petty misdemeanours.

So it was that, quietly, unannounced, and – perhaps unexpectedly and unbelievably – with no external prompting or copycat inspiration, purely of my own isolated volition, that I took the thin, technical craft knife, sharp as a scalpel, from my *Games Workshop* hobby kits, and began to scrape at myself, in the evenings late on after school, always careful to layer my toilet tissues first and to clean myself thoroughly so no one would know, a long superficial slit at a time, across my inner thighs, or my chest, or down to my private area, and my feet, and then back onto my right arm above the cuff of my school shirt, padding the tissues until the blood had ceased to trickle, tears in distant eyes, open and unblinking, and the softest mists inside. Gone. I wasn't playing sport that year and was not required to undress for any school gym or athletics field, so always I could pass unseen. Plasters were a luxury, and I preferred it to hurt. For I was nothing, a bad

nothing. In the head the me that was Benjamin became an “it”, sensing myself in the third person, dehumanizing myself, and no longer in recognition of the need to protect my body, wishing more than anything to whittle it away, this stuff, a piecemeal unravelling into oblivion, knife cut by knife cut, expressing how little and worthless I was in a more suitable presentation, red and inconsequential, and so what for the sensation? I was just meat. For all the terrible things I was and had done (which I liked to search for at length, with some imagination, writing down in my textbooks to assist, in case I ‘got off the hook’ and forgot). It was not that I was compelled, nor impulsive, but slowly, methodically, and on a regular basis, I knew what had to be done, as if a dark duty, the best I could do by moral choice to make up to the world, taking all this stupid, idiotic flesh and damaging it beyond repair. Did I not keep to this, I assured myself it would be worse for me later. A frigid discipline, I was a sadist to my own trembling form. No one else was involved in this disgraceful, unrepented error, so no one else needed to know.

Still, it was impossible after a while to hide. A boy at school in my senior dorm, I

forget which one (perhaps Josh, my roommate) spotted that my shirt was sticking to me one day and that I seemed stiff, and laboured in breath, as if disguising discomfort, and uncovered the fact that I had been, as the popular idiom goes 'cutting myself'. The clear fluids leaking from the infected wounds on my arm worried him terribly, and he encouraged me in horror and distaste to tell one of my parents, or he would have to tell someone.

So I told them, discussing the matter with my mother in the car one day, as best I could, downplaying the extent of my wounds and for how long I had been pursuing this action. I told her I was sad though, very sad. I didn't really want to show her at all, but the expression on her face, a gasp of total horror when she saw my skin underneath rendered it too late to brush her aside, or claim that the situation was not serious, much as I wished I could have kept my act up with more subtlety, and simply continued to fade unopposed, pulled apart into darkness. I'm not sure what she said to my father, and he did not discuss the matter with me in person, his workload heavier in those years, often away for longer at weekends, and distant in the house, drained

and tired by a massive joint effort with NASA to contribute to the Mars probes, a final project with his Nortel workmates before his retirement, and based now in Maidstone, Kent, an even longer drive away, the latter company running into financial difficulties internally, and much stress in the office.

I was informed by my mother the day after that an appointment had been made for me with the local GP, to examine my body, and have a word with me. I felt dead as I filed into the familiar Writtle surgery. Nothing was clear to me anymore. In my own words I simply stated to the doctor “I’ve been hurting my body. And crying a lot too.” And then proceeded again to try and minimise, putting on a false smile, and attempting to tell a joke, repeating to him “it’s not that bad” and “I don’t know why I’m upset, must just be tiredness”, desperate not to have to speak any longer. Doctor Bailey, a long-term friend of the family, who had treated me since I was an infant did not seem so easily pacified though. That same day a referral was made to psychiatric practice on Broomfield Road, at the Child and Adolescent Service building (now Community Health Services), just down the road from the King

Edward IV Grammar School and not far from the nursery I had briefly attended many years before. I was to meet with the doctor there, as soon as possible, so how to best help me could be decided. Politely, I thanked the doctor and his assistant for seeing me, and for patching up my many wounds and providing antibiotics, and left again, unsure all of a sudden, finding myself in too deep, and wishing more than anything that they would just forget about me.

I was obliged to take a morning off school to attend my introduction interview. By now, Josh has passed on his discovery to the other boys in the boarding house, and around the school at large, and rumours were starting. Uncomfortable faces glanced at me in the corridor, and looked away as I gazed back, and voices muttered between knowing looks. Nothing was said in my company. In Physics class a boy named Daniel piped up behind my back, making a joke to the teacher about 'Mad Ben', much as I was defended in absentia by a female pupil, Natalie, her somehow taking pity on me, considering his jibe unfair. My life circumstances prevented me keeping in contact with Natalie, but I was always honoured that she stood up for me, and for my

feelings, an unexpected sensation in my life, much as the rest of the class laughed.

The meeting with the psychiatrist was brief and uneventful. He sat in a chair opposite mine on the upstairs floor, the room otherwise empty and forgettable, and asked me what had been going on. “I don’t know” I said, “I’m just very sad, that’s all” He nodded. “And how long have you been doing this for?” pointing with a wave of his hand at my arm, covered that day in a black shirt, part of a gothic fashion attempt I had been increasingly adopting since about the age of 16, interested in artistic and DIY fashions and a fan then of an acerbic and experimental underground electronic music known as Industrial, some way between electroacoustic minimalism, musique concrete, percussive tribal drumming, and primitive punk, usually instrumental, or with Dadaist spoken words from a shadowy vocalist, the themes discussed mystical, surreal, or transgressive, and some very dark concepts. My father simply referred (perhaps correctly) to my newfound musical tastes and to my alternative fashion pretensions as “grotesque”, looking on in appalled distaste.

I had discovered the musical art projects

Nurse With Wound, Coil, and Test Dept. in a record store in Boston whilst touring America with the school, as part of my drama group, delivering the stage adaptation of *Animal Farm* to a series of upmarket New England public schools, and the miserable, moribund, (very loud) sound had immediately appealed to me, already introduced to 20th Century experimental Classical the year before by my iconoclastic young music teacher, listening also to the oscillating *Shaker Loops* of John Adams, and indeed the tape loop phasing patterns of Steve Reich, as with John Cage's prepared pianos, and the avantgarde 12-tone serialism of Alban Berg. I regret the long years I wasted on such sounds, wishing perhaps that I had drawn the line with the amateur performance of Arvo Pärt's *Fratres* I delivered as part of my string quartet earlier in that year. Especially, I regret wasting my time with the nihilistic modern vulgarity of Industrial music. A moodiness had enveloped me though, and it suited my mood. Before that point, I had taken my musical pleasure in listening to Beethoven, Liszt, Brahms, and Bach and to the music of the English, Irish, and Scottish country dances I attended with my mother in Writtle village

hall, or the traditional folk songs I played under the tutorage of my violin instructor, Maggie.

“Oh, I haven’t been cutting myself long” I told him, “just for a while”, leaving my answer vague, unsure as to what he might do, and if I would get in trouble for answering him. “OK” he said, making another note. “the GP tells me it’s superficial. It’s a common enough problem these days. Some people just get the urge to draw a bit of attention to themselves. It’s something that can be worked on. Anyway, go on...”

The psychiatrist let me talk for a while, perhaps a half hour, telling him about my gothic interest, and about the poems I was studying and writing myself, and about feeling lonely, and my Dad not being there for me so much, and then about not getting on with the other pupils at school. Every so often he would pause and take down a brief note, though I couldn’t see what he was writing. I said to him “I don’t like the Winter weather either. It’s so dark and cheerless, and it rains all the time. I wish it was Spring again. I was happier in Spring.” “Is that right?” he said, looking up at me suddenly from his notepad. His face did not

have much expression, and I couldn't tell what he was thinking. I was petering out, not sure what else to say. Presently, the interview ended. "I'll tell you what's going to happen" the doctor said, "I think you need some medication to make you better. It sounds like you're suffering from what might be Depression, with a Seasonally Affective Disorder component. I'm going to write a note to your GP, and he'll provide you with some tablets which will help you. The medication is called Citalopram. It's a recent development and is very effective for your symptoms. Take one 10mg tablet a day, with a glass of water, as soon as you wake up, and we'll continue to monitor your progress every few months." He finished speaking and motioned for me to rise.

Not knowing what else to say, I thanked the doctor and headed out the door to my mother's car outside, to pop home quickly and change into my school clothes so as not to miss afternoon lessons. Later that day my mother went down to the pharmacy on Writtle Green and handed in my prescription, and soon enough the carton was in my hands. I felt a little happier, knowing something had been done, and shrugged regardless. It was a busy

school year, and my AS-levels demanded a lot of my attention. If the tablets could help me, all for the better. At least, I thought to myself, they can't do any harm. From then on, dutifully, my father would hand me a small tablet every morning, and I would swallow it straight down with water, this tiny white pill, slightly sweet on my tongue.

I am afraid to say my brief optimism in those weeks did not last. Soon enough, my mood plummeted back into its soft, sad hole, and my scalpel was in my hands again. This time I did not tell my parents and tried my hardest to be more careful at school also, wearing a long-sleeved underlayer, and bandaging my arms with elasticated crepe bandages from my mother's medical cabinet. Though still relatively containable, the damage I was inflicting was increasing, as was the frequency. In between, I drifted in moody silence, occasionally breaking into vast floods of tears, up in my bedroom, soaking my pillow, or in the downstairs 'craft room' sat in the corner on a wooden kitchen chair, the dining room long turned over to my burgeoning library, my computer, and a table of fantasy lead figures with a painting desk to one side.

Contained, or so they thought, in my historical reading habits, or in my miniature painting, much time was still spent by myself, my parents “giving me some space”, although sometimes my Dad would come in and tell me to go to bed, his tone more irritable than usual, impatient with me in conversation, and his face grim, exhausted from his own gruelling work, and less inclined to talk about our usual spread of cultural interests, or indeed my feelings, curt and prescriptive, asking me simply, “have you self-harmed today?” and accepting my denial at face value, then stomping out. In the evening murmurs came from their bedroom. Occasionally, voices were raised, and my mother would appear on the stairs in tears.

The Christmas holidays were spent at my aunt’s house in Ireland, but the festival brought me no joy, and I slipped away from my parents and from my gathered relations, still laughing and swapping amusing family stories by the log fire in the luxury living room, to sit instead on the upstairs guest toilet, with the blade snapped out of a BIC safety razor and a pair of nail scissors. “He’s gone for a rest” my aunt suggested. Alternating these proxy

weapons I shaved slivers off my legs, leaving large skinned patches, a pain like burst blisters, and little pieces of surface skin falling to the tissues on the floor like wet latex, pressing the scissors down hard against my arm, pausing for a second, and then dragging them along the length of it, again and again in slow, methodical strikes, from my inner elbow to my wrist, dumb to the sharp burning scratch, and the familiar whispering shear of splitting skin, 'chu-, chu-, chu-', deep purple-red droplets of blood appearing all in a line, and then trickling hot around the curve of my forearm, a grim sight, my whole arm red and sticky, my fingers tacky to the touch, like when handling the residues of half dried clay or thick poster paint, the air warm and sour and metallic, an unmistakable smell, and then the chill as the blood cooled and clotted in matted, flaking layers, and the inevitable onset of nausea.

A useless, stupid form, I had no reason now to look for justifications, settled into my pattern. I was simply a sinner, a wretched waste, and each new lunge at myself, conducted with fierce, black hatred, and the coldest rage, cemented my necessity to continue. After all, I was evil now, and I had

disappointed my parents, and let down all around me, and betrayed the words of God. And the only cure for that weakness and that criminal lack of decency was to cut it better, however long it took, to redeem myself through pain, a pain I did not, at any point, enjoy, a terrible sensation wracking my pale, sensitive skin. I shouldn't be allowed to escape unpunished, I thought, clear and obvious to me; it was only right. I had upset them, and scared them, and hurt their feelings. My poor parents. What a monster I was. My head filled with rude swear words, names for myself "the c**t", "the bast*rd", "the f**king idiot". And so the blades went in, one by one then in tandem, clasped between fingers, in wincing gasps of agony and falling skin, and the days went on. "Please" I pleaded with myself, "mercy". "F**k you, you pathetic bast*rd" I answered myself silently, "you did this", "now shut up!"

When enough blood had soaked the tissues, and I had been gone for a while and was thus at risk of being discovered in suspicion, I cleaned my equipment, with patient reverence, gasping for breath until my breathing returned to normal and the light-headedness faded, and flushed the soiled

scraps of paper down the toilet, one flush at a time, spacing my flushes so as not to draw attention, leaving a fresh layer to wrap around my arms and legs tight, before pulling up my thick black jeans and replacing my shirt and my heavy leather jacket. Then a final quick sip of water, and a review of the floor in case I had left any droplets, and back downstairs. “Benjamin!” my father said in snappy annoyance “sit down here now and stop being so antisocial.” So I sat on the black leather upholstery of the sofa for a while, and tried to smile a little more, listening to my aunties tell their jokes, pretending I couldn’t feel the detestable sensation under my clothes, an ever-present sting, perched there, legs together, quiet and reserved, and riddled with hundreds of sharp little scratches, my burning surface partially skinned and my clothes slightly damp, distracted and cloudy in mind, just waiting to head upstairs again.

In my long considerations, it was hard to decide the most prudent course of action. I needed to get as much done as possible each time, but, really, I should last also. If I was removed too quickly, I would be taking the easy way out, and going too gentle on myself,

and I didn't deserve such mercies. A balance had to be struck. I decided from then on that I should pace myself, unless of course I did anything particularly heinous, in which case it would be prudent to react accordingly. Why was no one else punishing me? I didn't understand. Perhaps they had faith in me or were too kind. I pitied them then, they probably didn't know any better, but it was foolish to put any trust in me, a dangerous innocence. I knew they would never provide me what I deserved. Thus, it fell to me to correct this injustice, for no one else would. I had the time.

A cruel, icy dispassion, totally unforgiving, albeit self-directed, this disturbing attitude of subsumed psychological torture really is the way I thought then, and I remember so many times thinking these exact thoughts. I had set myself an unwinnable battle, with no quarter given. It is a shame my torn mind did not – could not – recognise that at the time though. Any small part that did register this difficulty, for no more than a split second at a time, every once in a while, simply did not want me to succeed regardless. In fact, it relished my downfall. Shame had become

guilt, and I was fused with self-hate, my rigged moral perfectionism inverting the reality of my historical situation, inculcated from such a young age with steady doses of mental poison that I was now at a critical threshold, as if in toxic shock.

In between these bouts of auto-sadism I was still cogent, and in full cognitive clarity, my intellectual faculties otherwise unaffected, and, provided they did not persist in making inquiries, or watch me like a hawk (which really did not become apparent to them until much later), I found other people simply did not notice anything was wrong. Though the pupils had heard of my first injuries from Josh, they had no idea of the scale, and I gather most considered it an isolated incident, a 'fad' that I would soon grow out of. When I returned from Ireland in the new year, binning two of my shirts before leaving, washing out the stains from my jacket lining in the sink, and packing my own suitcase, I was able to blend straight back into the school environment, continuing my lessons in the commencing term, with a little SSRI tablet a day, and nothing really to add to that, to all intents and purposes getting slightly better, or so everyone thought. Much

as it was well understood that “he’s got depression” and “he did this...” and “he’s ill now”, no one, curiously, had ever paused to ask me how I *felt*, or to inquire what actually was wrong.

Indeed, to some of the other boys my depression was something of a light-hearted curiosity, and something that they assumed went with the territory of my musical interests or my artistic nature, a macabre fad, perhaps put on for show. One day, near the end of the Spring term, not long before my AS exams, I was sat in the dorm study room with another boy named Gerald, whom I had a mild friendship with, having begged him to attend a *Games Workshop* convention with me some years before (I often had to try very hard to make others want to include me reluctantly in their company), although our relationship was at times fraught, him alternating between shunning me for the companionship of another boy, Kiran, who could be quite acerbic and insulting towards me, and especially towards my Irish connection, and then returning some months later to hang out on more amicable terms, where the two could not gang up to offend and exclude me. I was eating

a small tub of ice-cream that day and had my tablets with me in my pocket, left over from the morning, as I was now allowed by my Dad to handle my own medication. Gerald, asking in curiosity to examine the packet, started to make jokes about 'mental patients' and about a scene he had seen in a movie where a woman had tried to commit suicide by putting her pills into a dessert. He laughed again, saying it was "pretty cool", and then encouraged me to recreate that scene by mixing multiple tablets into my own tub, laughing, telling me it was just like his film, taking a picture on his little disposable camera. Five or six tablets, all mixed in. I knew nothing of the dangers of medication. I don't know why I went along with him. I suppose, in my melancholic confusion, I just wanted to please him, to back up his 'joke'. There was no nauseating chemical effect or overdose, thankfully, but it took me years to click that I had been humiliated. Gerald had caught me crying also, in the dorm, and in various quiet parts of the school, and soon after began to distance himself again, considering me "nuts" and "a bit of a head case", disapproving of my distress, and frustrated that I didn't just "snap out of it".

* * *

By the summer of 2001 my overt depression had not lifted. In the house Dad was increasingly bad-tempered. As with Gerald he could not understand why I would not pull together, seeing as I had been awarded my tablets by the psychiatrist, which I would still take daily. More and more, I would be tearful and morose, and more and more he would become snappy with me, or overbearing, criticising my choice of fashion, or that I had not changed my clothes often enough, and excessively reminding me to do my homework, even as I struggled to get homework finished in good time, and often left it until the last moment (though in English and Philosophy I was still top of the class and received steady A-grade marks).

In Philosophy I would learn about Socrates' moral and ethical dialogues and the theory of virtue and knowledge in the pursuit of eudaimonia (happiness), the epistemology of Plato and his theory of Forms, and Aristotle's teleological causes and his works on the soul, followed by the writings of Thomas Aquinas and his arguments for the existence of

God, moving on into John Locke's evaluation of the self, David Hume's empiricism and the theory of compatibilism the takes causal determinism as fully compatible with human free will, the metaphysical idealism of Bishop Berkeley and the mind-body dualism of René Descartes, the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, and then Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative and his distinguishing between phenomena and noumena, and Arthur Schopenhauer's transcendental idealism and the arguments on morality, finishing with Richard Swinburne's substance dualism and Christian apologetics, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz' theory of the best of all possible worlds, addressing theodicy, the problem of the existence of evil.

My mind was filled with complicated philosophical ideas, dwelling on ethics and on good and evil, and ways to define and delineate the world around me, and indeed myself. My study of English literature complemented this intensity with an evaluation of the Romantic poets, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, Blake and Keats, with an emphasis on contemplations of nature, imagination, and the sublime, and an often-melancholic display of open emotion

weaved through beautiful natural world similes and metaphors for the changing seasons and for life and death. Later, I would study the poetry of Thomas Hardy and other poets writing on the First World War, the mystical symbolism of William Butler Yeats' later work and the modernist desolation and despair of T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, and, particularly, Philip Larkin, in detail, dwelling on his often-ironic depictions of everyday life, a sad fatalism at a changing world now unfamiliar to him, his colloquial lyricism displaying a great, mournful discontent at the loss of an England he once knew.

As the school year ended, I retreated back to my house, and to my bedroom, now moved downstairs into the craft room full time. I would barely leave my room, sat sadly in the corner, trying to read, or writing a poem of my own, inspired by the Romantic poets I had read at school, lonely, and without company. Often, I would self-harm, making less effort than I once did to shield myself from discovery, increasingly morose, and fatalistic, having given up on trying to hide how I felt, and forgoing the efforts I once made to bandage

myself, then only to ward off the attention of others, now simply letting the blood soak into my clothes, or wiping it onto my bathroom towel.

It was a cold, wet summer for that time of year, and I had no cause to be outside, barely communicating, bar once in a brief phone call from Ali to the blocky blue mobile phone I now carried, sitting in silence most days on my painting desk. My father had become bossy with me, and impatient, frustrated by tears, and somehow embarrassed by me and my lack of enthusiasm, and, as my mother said to me later, “he doesn’t understand illness.” As for the nature of my self-harming itself, I took less caution now, and would press deeper with my craft scalpel, running furrows into myself where once there had been scratches, re-opening sealing wounds, and often approaching the same spot again and again until the skin was split wide, in agony, damaged beyond all repair. As an adult now my body is wrecked, almost all of my body at one time or other attacked by me, criss-crossed with multiple pink and white lines of rubbery scar tissue, from some appalling wounds, and insensate, courtesy of the depth and regularity

of my injuries, and the long loss of nerves, some taking many years to partially grow back. These days, feeling obliged to for other's sake as much as to ward off inconvenient questions, knowing the gist of them far in advance, I wear long sleeved shirts exclusively, and often have recourse to pull my sleeves down further just to mask, the many black ink tattoos I added in foolishness as an adult to try and mask the extent of the injured skin (tattoos do not settle well on scar tissue) themselves a garish mutilation, fading into a maze of jaded lines and mounds and other patches of traumatised tissue. I will never look the same again.

And so it was, finally, in terrible sadness ('depression' is an ugly, barren word) that, feeling the pain of loneliness had reached its nadir, and seeing no future for myself, despite my first year grades, and holding no past life of any quality or wholesomeness, that I took the pair of taxidermized Tiger Shark jaws that I had bought as a souvenir on my last diving trip, and, snapping the crescent-shaped maxilla in half with a pair of hobby pliers, took the piece of cartilage, filled with rows of razor-sharp serrated teeth, curved into squat 's' shapes, and pressed them to my throat, on the inner right

hand side of my neck above the jugular vein and carotid artery, and began to saw, slicing into my sensitive tissue until the blood trickled in gleaming rows down my shoulder and onto my chest, in swift, precise repetitions, not to wound myself away this time, but quick and resolute in my desire for oblivion. My parents were in the house, but I could not care, and knew I could act quickly if I wanted (or so I thought). But, as the wounds began to open, and sting, and as more blood emerged, I began to panic, the biological tool slicked in my hand, and hard to manoeuvre, and the wound grisly, little thick pieces of skin coated in my neck hair clogging against the teeth of the instrument, some snapping off at the tips from my angle of attack, and falling to be lost on the floor. I called out, in a loud moan of pain, and collapsed into my chair, nauseous, and dim in my head, and my mother, hearing suddenly a great noise from next door, rushed into the room, and gasped in abject horror.

“Benjamin!!! Oh God, Oh God, what have you done?!” and then to my father “Billy! Quick! He’s cut his neck and he’s bleeding badly! Get him in the car, quickly! We need to take him to the surgery!” and my father, impatient as

always, but genuine shocked too, moved into the room, and announced sharply, “sh*t! f**king hell!” (I had never heard him swear before), seeming very angry, but also concerned, as he picked me up, my mother rushing to apply gauze from her medicine cabinet to my neck and to stop the bleeding, as my head lolled limp to the side, my mouth dribbling slightly and my tongue poking out, and eyes closed, in despair at the world as much as in fading consciousness, the tool dropped from my hand now, and sitting on the floor red and gleaming, in a pile of bloody droplets.

I was sped down to the surgery in my father’s Favorit, and I do not remember the journey, nor being there, but when next I felt clear again, I was at home, the same evening, and my neck was bandaged, the blood scrubbed from what was now in these years a laminate wood-look floor. All I felt was stiffness, from bruising, and a sharp, stinging scratch every time I moved my head from the thick bandages coating the surgical sutures and steri-strips all across my inner neck. I cannot remember what my parents said, or what I replied with, but my mother sat with me

that evening, in my room, and, later, before bed, a priest was called to visit me, Father Brian O' Shea, who sat and chatted with me a while, asking what was on my mind (to which I could not really reply) and saying prayers together, giving me a blessing before leaving, his face and manner kind but concerned.

It was not long before my psychiatrist was made aware, and I was soon called to a meeting with him with my mother by my side. "It's a shame, but it's clear what we're doing isn't quite enough so far" he said, his tone distant and clinical, and not particularly sympathetic, as if dealing with the return of a defective piece of machinery and not an innocent teenager in some emotional distress, "Benjamin will need a more intensive service. Now, I've contacted The Linden Centre but currently they don't take on adolescents. I recommend Brookside Child and Adolescent Inpatient Unit to you. It's a residential unit based in Goodmayes, in East London. I don't know it personally, but the recommendations say their care is very effective. I've made some phone calls with the staff there, and you should drop Benjamin down this weekend, if possible. He may have to be there for over a month."

My mother, not knowing any different, and perhaps keen to have me out of the house for a little while (a tacit suspicion on my part), agreed, thanking the doctor, and busying us out of the room, and for my part I remained silent, unsure now of what to say, finding the doctor useless and unempathetic to talk to (it took me over twenty years of interactions to fully understand that psychiatrists are not therapeutic listeners, and one should not expect from them what one would hope to receive from a compassionate psychologist), and fearful now, knowing I was to be taken somewhere completely new, where I would be away from my parents and my schooling, terrified that I would be in trouble for missing my lessons, having never skipped even a whole day before in my life, sad that I would not get to complete what I was studying, and prepare properly for my A2 exams, and that my hopes of university would be jeopardized on account of it. When I got home, I cried even more, in abject misery and worry, but I had no choice. The doctor had decided for me, and my mother (and later father) were in agreement. “It’ll be ok”, they said to me, “It’ll only be for a couple of weeks, and then, before you know it, you’ll

be all better, just like the doctor says.”

* * *

Summer was just ending when I checked in to the large red brick building on Barley Lane, passing through the double doors of the atrium and into an expansive, high-beamed hall, with a wooden table and sofa chairs sat down the outer edge, and wide windows all about, overlooking the front field and the tiny, enclosed patient’s garden behind, across the hall, passages leading off to the dining room on the rear right, the school facilities down a corridor in front opposite the entry doors, the ward bedrooms themselves to the rear left, diagonally in front of the hall. Fourteen or so cubicle bedrooms leading down a corridor past the nurses’ office and the meds room on the corner, and a secure area to the far inner left of the hall, with more bedrooms, perpendicular to the patients’ rooms.

When I entered, the place was empty, and I was informed the other patients had been taken on a summer excursion. Only one girl remained, considered too ill to leave the building. She was out in the little crop garden, smoking a cigarette. A young face, with

reddish-brown hair tied back in a ponytail, and freckles. She watched me through the glass, curious, and not intimidating, as my parents helped me carry my belongings to the check in area by the corner station. Just a few shirts, trousers, and underwear, toothpaste and soap (which was collected by the ward skeleton staff) and a couple of books, namely *Human, All Too Human*, by Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ethics* by Baruch Spinoza, Arthur Schopenhauer's *Essays and Aphorisms*, a well thumbed through Penguin edition of *The Fight and Other Writings* by William Hazlitt, *Sophie's World* by Jostein Gaarder – a recommend reading hangover from my Philosophy course – and a couple of light reading HP Lovecraft omnibus anthologies published by HarperVoyager, including *At The Mountains of Madness* and *Dagon*, their grisly covers illustrated in overt pulp horror style, and a trashy purchase on my part. My father had also provided me with a copy of *The Noonday Demon* by Andrew Solomon. A quick reader, I was still aware that this was probably too many books for my relatively short stay, but wanted to be safe rather than sorry, knowing there would probably not be too much to do, and

sensing that I would need quite some distraction, genuinely interested otherwise, and curious at the titles, particular the then-difficult work by Nietzsche. Finally, I had brought along a couple of soft toys, namely the Gizmo teddy I had slept with since childhood, a large plush sting ray acquired in an US aquarium on my drama trip with the school, and a heavy brick doorstop, set in the form of a small black and white cat, 'Door Cat' as I came to call him affectionately.

All these possessions were picked up by the staff as soon as I entered, bar Gizmo, whom I was allowed to hold onto for comfort, and I was shepherded into the secure section of the ward, to a little barren room with only a bed for furnishing, the bolted windows opening out over the wide field outside, but clouded slightly, making looking out the window impractical. The nurse taking care of me introduced himself as Mark, a small, thin man, with tight black hair, a round face, and blue eyes, haggard a little, and slightly frog-like in aspect, his cheeks red from a shaving rash, wearing a short, dark blue overcoat over his beige work pullover, and a lanyard round his neck with a name label. "Since you've just

arrived here Benjamin, for your safety you need to sleep here in the acute section for a few days. When we know you're settled, you can come out onto the ward, and we'll provide you with a proper bedroom. Then I'll give you a tour of the building, so you know where everything is. We have a lot of facilities here."

My mother was crying slightly at this point, but my father stood silently, nodding, polite and submissive, deferring to the superior wisdom of the staff. Mark went on, "he needs to be kept here for the first few weeks, then you'll be able to visit him at weekends, and perhaps, if things go well, you can take him home for leave also. We believe here in allowing parents regular input, so you'll get a chance to play a part in his care, which is very important. Ok, we have to take him in now, if you'd like to say your goodbyes. Don't worry, he's in good hands." And with that I moved to hug my mother, distraught, missing her already, and to hug my father, his stiff arms still cold from the drive, but close to me, and appreciatively comforting, and with that, tearful myself, I turned, Gizmo clutched tight to me, and headed into the little side room behind the locked inner doors, and sat down

on the bed, and stared into space, with a plastic cup of orange juice on the hard-bolted end table attached to the bed, feeling a great, wide emptiness overcome me, but also a tiny conflicting spark, as if hope was finally there again, wavering at the edges of my thought, unrequested, and as of yet impossible to acquiesce to.

When the heavy door to the room was shut and bolted, and the viewing slit slid tight across and sealed, and when I could no longer hear voices in the corridor outside, I looked down on the covers at Gizmo beside me. An hour or so had passed, but I was not wearing a watch, although the garden light was dimmer outside through the clouded glass. Carefully, and tentatively, trying to make as little noise as possible, I reached around to the back of my toy, by now rough from many washes, and undid the small Velcro purse, quietly, still scanning the door, my heartbeat contained in my throat. Originally, Gizmo had come with two smaller mogwai bodies, stuffed inside his outer form in a stitched pocket, a reference to the 1984 horror comedy film in which the cute little creatures multiply when placed in contact with water. These long gone over the years, lost

somewhere in my bedroom at home, when I reached inside him the pocket was empty, save for my familiar craft scalpel, hidden by me before we left the house. I knew, somehow, that it would be of use to me over my stay, my mind after all still locked in its nihilistic sadness, a mere change of building having done nothing to assuage my dire temperament, my self-harming having become a steady habit by now, and a reflex I could not break. Toying gingerly with the sharp little knife in my left hand, I slid it open in the air, and stared a little at the blade, by now slightly oxidised, thin brown stains etched into the blunted metal, and the sliding mechanism partially jammed with long-clotted blood, but still functional. For a second I considered another bout of self-punishment. Then, sensing I shouldn't, for the moment at least, me having done nothing observably wrong that day bar remaining alive at all, I re-sheathed the sliding blade, and placed the tool back inside my comfort toy, pushing it right to the back and sealing the Velcro. Then I lay down on bed, the orange juice left undrunk (for there were other ways to punish myself, just in case) and cuddled Gizmo, and tried my hardest to sleep.

A few days passed in this manner. Periodically, the viewing window would be drawn back, and fresh food from the kitchens would be passed on a tray through the door for me, with plastic cutlery, along with my Citalopram and a cup of water or orange juice (which eventually I decided I should at least attempt to consume so as not to be ungracious), and one voice or another would ask how I was, to which I always replied, "I'm ok, thank you", feeling it the polite answer. Aside from this, there was nothing to do, and I was to all accounts and purposes alone, and so I slept, fearing the white walls and the emptiness, and thinking not much at all, bar missing my parents and my home, and my studies, and tearful, knowing my life had ground to a halt, and nothing would be the same again. As night came, for once, I found I could not pray, and felt guilty for it, hoping God understood, and knowing regardless that I would have to make it up to him later, probably with something painful. Aghast, I realised that I had simply forgotten my religious duties, but everything else then was cloudy, and I was unable to focus too clearly. I was glad when soon enough (an agonising 'soon'), the door opened again one

morning, and I was led out along the corridor to the bedrooms. Perhaps three days had passed.

In my first full week at Brookside, I was introduced to the main buildings and their function. Aside from the bedroom, there were four quiet rooms placed along the corridor, heaped with cushions and with colourful bubble lamps, which could be accessed at any time on request. The first part of the bedroom segment was handed over to the males, and the lower corridor to the females, although both could mingle, provided they did not go in each other's rooms. At the end of the bedroom corridor the passage veered left, to one single female bedroom down the end, with the ward toilets and bathrooms in a block to the right, with full installed baths, which was a pleasant surprise for me, as someone who had always taken baths rather than showers. Beyond the acute ward partition was another set of double doors, leading to the sports hall, where a makeshift gym had been set up, aside indoor badminton courts, cones and hula hoops, and a punch bag, where an instructor would teach boxing to the boys. Past that was the rear sports field, accessible via a key, where, upon

supervised request, one could sprint about, or alternatively walk around the outer grounds, as I began to do early on, keeping inside the high fencing, but otherwise unopposed, free to explore in the fresh air.

A portable TV and a ghetto blaster had been laid out in the main hall, and, if one had CDs (I later brought in albums of my own), music could be played in the daytime. Smoking was tacitly allowed within the building, provided it was kept to the inner courtyard garden, or, at times to the soft beanbag sofa chairs pushed against the entrance wall. Alcohol, drugs and sharp objects were strictly banned from the ward, for patients' safety, but rooms would not be searched unduly, and a verbal agreement was considered enough. Usually, after first meds, lessons would be given daily by the supply teachers in the classrooms block, followed by lunch, and then free mingling time until dinner, after which medication would again be called, and then patients were free to mingle for another hour or so until lights out, when we were obliged to head back to our bedrooms, mine by now furnished with the books I had brought in with me, and with a couple of drawing pens and

pencils, and a pad of plain and lined paper so I could draw if I wanted. I had decided in addition a start writing a diary. My room itself was about the same size as the acute room I had been placed into, stretching to about 3m in length and 2m wide, but was more welcoming in its decorations, with a softer bed, and with curtains on the barred window this time, a hard wood shelving unit to the right of my bed with alcoves for my clothes and a shelf I could slide out to store my art materials on, plus a sink in the corner.

When Mark had finished showing me about, I was left to my own devices. Shyly, feeling I shouldn't isolate myself, I headed out into the inner garden, rows of planted cabbages stretching across the soil to my left, and a thin concrete track in front, sheltered from the rain, with a bench on one side and an ashtray, the path leading across to a little pond, with red and white spotted goldfish swimming about, and a couple of garden gnomes cheerfully watching from the corners. A pleasant little space. The girl I had seen when I first arrived was sat there again, smoking her rolled cigarette. I was not a smoker myself, until then looking down rather dimly on the

habit, having encountered others back at school, usually boys from the ‘cool set’, who would puff away, in my mind more for the attention than for any genuine enjoyment. Still, I approached, coughing slightly as I entered her vicinity, sitting quietly on the bench beside her, saying nothing.

Then she broke the silence, her voice a thick urban Essex accent, not at all like the public-school voices I was then accustomed to from my life in the countryside, but unexpectedly friendly, a warmth to her tone, less hostile by far than what I was familiar with in others (indeed, I was not used to my school peers speaking to me at all with anything but contempt). “Hello! My name’s Helen. I like your boots! You look really cool! What’s your name then?” I was wearing a pair of New Rock biker boots at the time, stretching up almost to my knees, in black leather with flame patterns over the steel toecaps. Taken aback a little at her friendly openness, I responded bashfully, in a quiet voice, “Hello Helen, my name’s Ben. I’ve just arrived here.” “Well, pleasure to meet you, Ben. Cor! You’re very tall, aren’t you? I’ve been here two weeks. It’s sh*t here, just to warn you. Everyone else is away on a trip, so it’s

gonna be quiet for a while. There's not much to do but smoke and hang out. D'you wanna fag, I can roll you one if you like?"

Unsure how to respond, as a non-smoker until that point, but not wishing to be rude, and somehow liking Helen, feeling safe in her company, I nodded softly, "um, ok then. I don't usually smoke but I'll give it a go. Thank you for talking to me. I was feeling a bit lonely here. I like your Slipknot T-shirt. Is it ok if I sit with you for a bit?" "By all means Ben. I've got nothing to do, and you seem like a cool person. I don't know any cool people, that's my problem. What's that on your arm?" and she motioned to the long lines of scars running up and down my right arm, from my shoulder to my wrist. "Oh" I said, suddenly embarrassed, not knowing how to respond, "er, I kind of get annoyed at myself sometimes, and I do things to myself when I'm in a bad mood. Sorry, I should have worn long sleeves today, I wasn't thinking properly." "Don't worry Ben, you're fine. I like you; you seem like a nice person. I do that myself" and on this she pulled back the shoulder area of her T-shirt, revealing a large sore patch of skin with numerous little red lines. "Ow" I said sympathetically, "that looks

very painful, I'm sorry to hear that that" to which Helen suddenly became distant, her warm, motherly smile wavering for a second before returning to her cheerful manner, "yeah, well that's okay. My life is sh*t anyway. I'll tell you about it some other time. Here's your fag by the way..." And then she passed the little roll-up to me, me unsure of quite what to do with it, but, for once, not feeling evil at myself, elated that for the first time in many years I had found a genuine friend who liked my company. I took the cigarette in my hand, thanking her, and placed it in my mouth, a naïve seventeen-year-old boy, and tried to breath in, sucking with my mouth as if on a straw. Within a second, as the sharp, warm acidic burn hit the inside of my mouth, I was coughing frenetically. "Oh dear" said Helen, with a little laugh. "Oh Ben, don't worry, you can always have a go later, there's a knack to it, you see?" and with that I sat by her for the rest of the day, periodically trying (and failing) to learn how to smoke properly with her kindly providing the attempts from her own tobacco supplies, and finding out a little more about her and her family in Romford, and about the unit, laughing for the first time in my life, and

staring down at the colourful fish swimming in the pond, somehow at peace. I felt I was in safe hands, more so than around any of the adults, her upbeat demeanour and streetwise attitude pacifying me, my first true friend, a buoyant fifteen-year-old girl, with her own horrible nightmares to recount, but always cheerful and uplifting, and a great blessing in those cold few weeks, and onwards, for I was to stay at Brookside for much longer than I or my parents had first anticipated, over a year in the end.

A month into my stay, the other patients (referred to as ‘young people’ by the staff) had returned, and I had made more friends. Jason, a soft, teddy bear like boy of about fourteen, in the bedroom next door to me down the corridor, diagnosed with schizophrenia, and often in a world of his own, drooling slightly, the strong medications he had been placed on slurring his speech and glazing his eyes until he was distant, barely able to speak, but affable nonetheless, groggily greeting me in the mornings with a “hiiii Bennnn...” and giggling to himself, coming to my bedroom door later in the day to chat and to peer inside, curious at my “thousands of books”, and wanting to come in, pushing and shoving with his clumsy,

chubby body, which I had to politely yet forcefully decline, knowing he wasn't allowed to by the rules of the ward.

Aside from him, Helen was always about, upbeat in public, and always laughing with me in the garden, together with Emily, a sixteen-year-old who was, ostensibly, in the unit for nymphomania but was a prolific self-harmer also, and Ami, quiet and intelligent, at seventeen also, there for bad OCD and for her crippling anorexia and bulimia, a walking skeleton with sunken eyes, nibbling from her single calorie oatcakes packet with suspicion, and heading to the bathrooms immediately afterwards to throw up the food, desperately upset at how "fat and ugly" she was, and very unhappy in general, feeling worthless. From a large Jewish family living in a luxury mansion in Loughton, Ami once confessed to me that she remembered as a four year old being down on her hands and knees clearing up her alcoholic mother's vomit, with no protection, picking up the lumps of undigested food in her little hands and placing them dutifully in a bin bag as her mother cried, lying there near comatose on the floor, her rich executive father falling to cocaine addiction (a confession

which meant nearly nothing to me, only vaguely aware of the existence of drugs at all, but remembering from 'Know the Score' leaflets handed out at school that they were the worst thing ever), and her childhood one of undiluted horror. A self-harmer also, albeit never to a dangerous degree like some of the others, and suicidal nonetheless, prone to attempting overdoses, she was later diagnosed with multiple-personality disorder (DID), and talked to me of sharing her head with innumerable other facets of personality, by now split into distinct characters with their own names and behavioural routines, who would both talk to her and later become her, one after another, as if she was not in control of her own thoughts, something I did not understand too clearly at the time, though I felt very sorry for her, and we would often chat on the sofas, sharing a love of alternative music, and a general world weary cynicism and fondness for gallows humour jokes.

There was also Sarah, a tiny, fragile girl from Walthamstow, sixteen-years-old, but looking much younger, occupying the room down the very end, and private, no one really knowing why she was there at first. Sarah's self-

injury ability was dire, and often it seemed lucky she was alive at all, given that she would not only cut herself with nails and screws and anything she could pick up in the grounds but burn patches of her skin off with a lighter flame, banging her head on the wall, and pulling out her hair, anorexic and with OCD symptoms also, and appalled at her stick thin body, her hands able to pull behind her ribs, but sensing a hideous fatness that no one else could see, and that she could not be talked out of, with photos or with a mirror. Still, despite all this inner pain, she was very sweet, and playful, in her room full of teddy bears, or drawing on her pad on the floor of the ward, magnificent fairy designs in glitter pen, humming softly, and, on account of her pleasant, loveable temperament, her cute, deadpan humour, and her artistic nature, she quickly became one of my best friends, like a younger sister I had never had, it being impossible due to her presentation and size not to pity her on sight, and wish to console her.

It was soon in fact that I first discovered through Sarah how little the staff cared for or even understood the patients in their care. Gang raped routinely by her English father and

by his professional social worker colleagues at private sex parties, her Jamaican mother aware but never stepping in defend her, or to report this to the authorities, she eventually confided in me many horrible anecdotes of her time at home, and, as each weekend rolled around, one saw her face fall, and her self-harming behaviour grow more desperate, pleading with the staff not to be sent home, her cries falling on deaf, patronizing ears as her father arrived, laughing and joking with the nurses, the latter awed by his aura of wit and charm and his official presentation, and Sarah silent then, following along behind him, her head down, filing out despondently for another weekend of absolute hell, right under the noses of the NHS, who could not bring themselves to believe her. In the end she swallowed broken glass from a smashed water jug in the kitchens, each of the three jagged shards washed down with a sip of domestic bleach from a container looted from the cleaning staff, a gross oversight on the part of the ward nurses, but never reported any further. Though placed in immediate intensive care on the ward, monitored day and night, and given purging treatment, to the point that she survived,

passing the glass in something of agony, it haunted me (as I am sure it haunted her) that they could not have simply believed her impassioned testimony in the first place, her shipped out soon afterwards to a different unit, and then to sheltered accommodation in Leytonstone, far in distance from her parents, but probably not any better in mind. Later, she would deny he had done anything to her at all, her fear of his retribution causing her to block out the trauma, and to repress herself, although the OCD and anorexic symptoms continued, as did her regular active suicidality.

Less than a month in Tiffany arrived on the ward, herself a suspicious transfer from her Swedish single mother living in central London, there for her uncontrollable sexual impulses more than for any overt discomfort, and I chatted to her also, at one point sharing my first kiss, though she quickly tired of me, her mind more adult than mine despite her sixteen years, and moving on instead to hang around with a few of the others boys arriving on the ward throughout my stay, my own predicament at that point somewhat fraught.

Alison arrived too, back from her summer excursion. A tall, homely fifteen-year-old girl,

with a sweet podgy face, I remember her singing in the main hall each day, and, though distrusting of me at first, she later warmed in conversation, friends primarily with Sarah, where the three of us would then sit together down the end of the ward and draw for hours, her cuddling a massive teddy bear, laughing, and poking fun at the staff. A year or so after Brookside, Alison jumped from the top floor of a tower block, under unusual circumstances, and was instantly killed. I regret more than anything that I did not know her better. I miss her to this day.

Then there was Jake, from Gidea Park on the outskirts of Romford, another terrible self-harmer and an alcoholic teenager, there for anger issues, and because he again would burn himself badly with lighters, a sharp-witted, laconic young man with a deep interest in heavy guitar music and in counter-cultural literature, stoic in character, and masculine, at sixteen, but hiding his own awful pain. I regret also that I never discovered more about his past life. We also got on very well, and indeed remained in contact once the ward time had ended, becoming by the end impromptu drinking buddies, as he invited me to many a

squat party or underground disco across the decrepit, inner city tenement blocks and backstreet warehouses of Romford, and Ilford, and into the East End proper. It is a shame we drifted apart later in the following year, falling out over Sarah, whom he was in relationship with at the time, me having caught Tiffany flirting with him and stupidly broken male trust by reporting to her, ever a big brother, and somehow a bitter one. I was informed he killed himself a few years later.

Finally, there was Rachel, a slim young fourteen-year-old from a Romany Gypsy family, unpopular with the other young people, and considered an attention-seeker and a “bitch”, but soft and damaged in real life, hanging around me for about a month and half, trying and failing to find some way to fit in with the others, opening up to me about having been raped by her brother, and crying on my arm, her sweet rose perfume and female deodorant memorable even now, somehow unsuitable for a young girl. Before the end of my stay Rachel died, having escaped from the ward to head down to a derelict building out of town, where she torched the property, before leaping onto the Northern Line, smashed to pieces by an

oncoming train. Many of my friends from this unit died. I try not to think about them so often these days, but at the time their deaths haunted me, myself unused, for all my philosophy books, to the true horror of real life. Even Helen, my best friend from the start, took her own life in late 2003. Their deaths shaped my future more than anything I myself had suffered. But all that was far in the future. For now, I had my friends, and I was, to some degree, content.

The year passed slowly for me at first on the ward, talking to my companions, and weathering the staff, by now used to the trials and dramas that made up the day to day running of an adolescent psychiatric unit. Indeed, it may actually have been easier for me somehow, and, though I saw misery all around me, day in day out, I myself had not yet had recourse to self-harm, though it is true I felt very low for my first month. Perhaps I felt an obligation not to, given that I was in an official care environment, or perhaps it was the happiness at being around new friends, for the first time ever, and sensing that I belonged, with people finally whom I could empathise with. I would listen to their harrowing stories

of deprivation and fear, and moved myself to console them, and to try, in ways I had never had the chance before, to bring comfort and a responsible listening ear, as much as a shoulder to cry on. But I did not mention my own worries (not that I could really discern them myself at that point, bar feeling tremendous guilt, and at the drop of a hat), not to the other patients, and not to the staff, not in any detail more than “I feel very sad and guilty” or “I miss my life”, trying even then to keep a stiff upper lip, and to appear as normal and healthy as possible, given the horror around me, feeling unworthy of their care, and determined not to take up time and attention best left to the more struggling occupants, the new world I was gradually being exposed to proving far darker and more horrific than I had ever realised, far from the idyllic countryside of my early years in a metropolitan wasteland of warehouses and chicken shops and boarded up laundrettes, the traffic steady outside day and night, and what felt like continuous rain and gloom. However, on the plus side, I had not self-harmed in a number of weeks, still not having found cause to utilize my hidden craft scalpel, or to torment myself in any other way, the tales

from the poor girls and boys around me awful enough. That changed one day.

I remember standing by the pool table in the main hall one evening, about five weeks into my stay at Brookside. Never a pool player before, I had soon learned from the other patients, and, though a novice at the game, was fast learning my skills, leaning across the table in a game with Ami, a seasoned professional compared with me (though I am not sure where she learned herself), down to the final balls in a tight match, hoping for my first victory. And there it was that one of the staff members, Melanie, a tall English woman with frizzy brown hair, wearing her familiar office worker trouser suit, came over to me, saying, “surprise Ben, you have some visitors” and, as I looked up from my game, my father and mother strolled through the unlocked atrium gates and onto the ward, closely followed by Alistair, and by Tariq.

I was in shock. I had no idea that they would be visiting me that day. A wave of emotion bubbled up in me, relief at seeing my parents, surely, but also a great horror, knowing suddenly why I was there, as if the fog was clearing, realising that the very bully – the

very abuser – who was, no doubt, responsible for my depression in the context of being in the unit at all had the gall, without permission, to come to visit me, and accompanied by my own parents no less, and on our very first meeting after more than five weeks apart! Crestfallen, I felt totally betrayed then. It is true, my parents were then unaware of the worst of Tariq's impulses towards me, but they knew he had, at least, bullied me, as I made it clear to them even when at school that I did not want to see him again after our summer in Israel. And yet here he was, a big smile on his face, powering into the unit to stand next to me at the pool table, Ali trailing behind, reticent to enter the main building, as if afraid. Jason was acting up to his inner voices that night, and loud giggles and shouts echoed from further down the patients' corridor. The sound of female screaming was heard in the distance, and Ali flinched, myself by then acclimatized to the noise and the hubbub, as nurses and healthcare workers ran to and fro, attempting to console the more wounded patients, organising quiet time chill out sessions and one-to-ones, and checking on those young people self-confined to their rooms, generally

the self-harmers, but most lingering in the staff office, behind thick glass, staring out into the main hall from a distance of several metres, or busying themselves with endless piles of paperwork, as if hoping not to be called on to interact.

My parents moved up beside me then, and waved hello, my mother rushing to give me a hug and to kiss me on the cheek, and Dad coming over to embrace my shoulder also, a newfound warmth to his touch, as if me being away might have invigorated him, but appreciated nonetheless, for I had missed him terribly. “Hello son” he said, “good to see you again and keeping well” to which my mother added, “and look who’s here to see you, your friends from school. They asked especially to come along!” and with that Tariq turned to Ali, and said, “looks like they’re all nuts here, it’s like *One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest!*” to which Ali replied, “I know, it’s not good is it?” before turning to me and saying, with a false levity, a smug smile playing on his face “so how long will you be here for? Everyone’s mad here. Perhaps you’ll be in good company, if you know what I mean.”

For my part, I was still dazed, and very

upset, sad that my parents would resort to allowing Tariq to visit me, in shock at him standing next to me at all. I barely spoke to any of my visitors that night, and sat instead away from the group, out in the garden, next to the smokers, trying my hardest to quell the sense of panic that was now rising in me. Before long, visiting hour was over, and my parents, sensing me withdrawn, figured perhaps that I was tired, and that they had come on the wrong night, and, again embracing me, made swift their goodbyes, and parted again for the evening, my father pressing a £20 note into my hand, calling to Alistair and to Tariq that it was time to leave, themselves busy staring at the other patients and laughing, Ali still in some apprehension, but Tariq bold as ever, walking up to Jason and trying to talk to him, bemused by the lack of responses, saying to Ali “you’re right. We need to get out of here now” and then, to me directly “see you around Ben. Hope you get sane again soon!” before disappearing out the door, waving goodbye to the staff and chatting deeply to Ali on the way out, although I did not know what they were saying. Seeing as it was a weekend, my parents had arranged to see me the evening after, and to bring down anything

I wanted. Perhaps my Dad would play me at pool also.

Later, as the night wore on, and right up until bedtime, I stayed alone sat out in the patients' garden, deep in thought, mute and unresponsive, staring expressionlessly down into the dark waters of the fishpond, thinking so very many things all at once. Ami came out to me late on for a final cigarette, and stood by me, leaning down and asking "are you ok, Ben? You're very quiet this evening... I hope you liked seeing your guests" and, very distantly, all I could say was, in a tiny, mumbling voice "Yes. Yes... It was fine." But I was not thinking that at all, hurt beyond belief, and hurt more still that I had to lie to my new friend about it, feeling that it wasn't my place to get her down by explaining the truth of things. Still distant, and troubled, I got up, and said a quick goodnight to Ami, herself heading off down the corridor to her room, and then went to bed myself. In the night, I lay on the sheets, raking my craft knife back and forth across my now freshly opened wounds, feeling cold hatred, but still – inexplicably – towards myself, as if somehow, for reasons I could not articulate, it was my own fault that I felt so low. In the morning,

early on, before being checked on, I went to my sink and washed the blood from my arms, before putting on my thickly woven, long-sleeved fishnet shirt for the day, with a leather trench coat on top of it, and hid the bloody knife again in my Gizmo toy, and headed out onto the ward, in familiar agony again, unbeknownst to all, quieter than usual, with much on my mind.

The morning passed uneventfully. Jason came to my room at one point, as he was accustomed to doing, standing in the doorway looking in, and jostling me, keen to see what was on my shelves, although he was not really a reader. A big smile on his heavily sedated, teddy bear face, his eyes struggling to stay open, and chewing slightly on his wristwatch, he motioned to my copy of *Sophie's World*, saying, "Bennn.... Bennn... can I read your book, please. I've got nothing to do here. I want to read your book..."

Tired that day, and wishing to be alone, in the end I gave the book to him, thinking it was an innocuous enough read, being a gentle introduction to the history of Western philosophy wrapped up in the story of a young Norwegian girl and her struggles to

understand the reality she inhabits as it becomes increasingly fictional, she herself discovering that she is merely a character in someone else's novel. A charming alternate reality story suitable for young adults, I figured that Jason might enjoy the immersive, academic nature of the tale and the mind-bending twists and turns, and besides, I knew he was not much of a reader, so, in my naivety, I handed the book across, saying he could borrow it for as long as he liked. With another little giggle, Jason gladly received my copy from me and holding my hardback edition in one hand, letting the dustcover fall away between his fingers in absent minded fashion, as if toying with a frisbee, he headed off down the corridor.

About an hour had passed before the staff came to my door. It was Melanie, poking her head around. "Excuse me, Ben, can I have a word with you please?" I nodded, confused, and suddenly scared a little, not knowing what the matter was, but sensing that I had done something bad. "Did you lend a book to Jason earlier?" I nodded again. "Yes" I said "he came to my room and didn't want to leave, so I gave him one of my commercial philosophy books

to read. I thought he might like it. He said he was very bored.” “Well, you shouldn’t have done that” Melanie responded, her tone snappy, as if repressing a greater anger. “Jason’s a very sensitive boy, and he’s in tears now. He didn’t like the cover, and it scared it. It says, ‘who are you?’ on it in creepy letters, and it upset him very much. I’m confiscating the book for now. In future, don’t lend out anything else, ok?” and with that she let my door shut, before I could respond, and sharply headed out again back up the corridor to the nurses’ station.

I was left alone in the room, in startled shock, a shroud of anger suddenly filling my consciousness, and terrible, creeping guilt. I had done it now! I had upset another patient! All the rage and hate and sorrow flowed back into me in seconds, and again I despised myself, wishing I could have done different, rushing out of my room to the corridor, to see Jason standing there again, a few metres from me, staring into space, no longer crying, a faint comatose smile playing on his befuddled face, making burbling noises to himself, as if nothing had happened. But I knew then that something had indeed occurred. I had upset

him, and hurt his feelings, and really he was sad, and all of a sudden I was the monster, and the abuser, and, as more sickly guilt washed over me, silently, sombrely, in withering shame at my poor conduct, having let the staff down too, and, unused to being told off by anyone in authority, from school until now, a madness overcame me, and I sunk into that terrible sadness, returning to my room broken heartedly, and unable to leave it until after lunch.

Later that afternoon I asked for leave from the ward. Given that I had been there over five weeks now, with no hitches, and given that it was still the weekend, my request was granted, and, my pockets pat checked as was customary with anyone entering or leaving, I was allowed out through the alarm locked sets of doors to the side of the main hall, and away across to the front gate, to head down the road for a half hour each way and “visit the shop to buy sweets”. My parents had given me some pocket money the day before during their visit, and I would, no doubt, be visiting the Tesco supermarket down by the railway station, to acquire a fizzy drink, and some crisps and chocolate bars, as many of the other patients

on the ward would do, once they were allowed day leave. And so, I disappeared into the evening twilight, promising I would not be very long.

Less than an hour later, panting slightly, I arrived back on the ward. Again, my pockets were pat searched, and I was asked how my trip had been. In an upbeat voice, I replied “fine, yes, fine. It was good. I got what I wanted”, and I showed the staff member on duty the contents of my white Tesco’s bag, an older man in his early sixties by the name of Bill, displaying a couple of bags of Walkers, and a bottle of Lucozade. He seemed pleased for me, and said “good, good, well, you’ll enjoy that then!” and with that I slipped subtly away from the main group in the hall, and headed alone down to my room, saying I needed to take a rest, knowing my parents were arriving to visit me later that evening.

Once I got to my room, I moved quickly, reaching into the hidden lining of my inner trench coat and finding the sealed pockets. From there, I extracted the pack of safety pins, the slim carton of household bleach, and the bottle of industrial strength drain cleaner, purchased from the hardware store not far

from Tesco's. Taking my craft scalpel in my hand, with a cold, sharp mind, I lunged ferociously at my right arm, cutting a pair of huge furrows down the middle of it, on the outer side, just below my elbow, the wounds of the previous night still stinging, opening up again, in slim bloody droplets. From there, the pain already unbearable, I fished out the safety pins, my hand swiftly coating in my own blood, and undid them, inserting them one after another into the centre of the cuts sliced into my forearm, sealing them shut, like macabre sutures, all the way up the fresh wounds. Nine safety pins all in all. Finally, I opened the drain cleaner pellets, pouring the dry mix into my wounds, to a terrible stinging, and, with black masking tape from my pocket, sealed them down, sticking the entire metallic mess together so that neither the drain cleaner pellets nor the safety pins could shift from the area I had lodged them against. Then, still in my black vision, I headed to the sink, running the taps for a few seconds, and letting the cold water spill out into the plughole, before steeling myself, and plunging my arm under the water for about ten seconds, holding it there.

As soon as my chemical coated skin touched the water, a sharp fizzing began, as the reaction took hold (for, as I knew, the high alkaline drain cleaner mixed with water as a catalyst in combination with my skin and the metal would set off a corrosive burning process, unable to be halted). I cried out, barely able to repress a scream, my eyes fogging over for a second at the pain, a burning ache more intense than I had ever experienced before. But I hated myself then, and it was if something else was motivating my movements, some dark part of me, off to the side, and without pity. Thoughts welled up in my mind of Tariq, standing over me in his parents' bedroom, rubbing himself on me, and of him so close, having only visited me the day before, and of my father standing by next to him doing nothing to protect me, and the two of them goading me, laughing in my face, their mockery filling my consciousness. And then I thought of poor Jason, crying unseen down the end of the ward, and the nursing staff running to comfort him, and running to tell me off, and how I had been so stupid, and so careless, and lent him a terrible book that had hurt his feelings, and how I could have known better,

but didn't, and was suddenly so stupid again, so idiotic and asinine, and so worthless and evil, having failed even to finish my schooling, and having hurt and betrayed all my friends, and not been good enough, not now, not ever. And with that I picked up the carton of bleach, and opened it, and, tilting my head backwards, tipped a mouthful of the strong liquid onto my tongue, and gargled, swallowing it down.

A second passed, And then the taste registered. My mouth filled with a chemical burning, my tongue numbed and yet stinging, a bitter, acrid sensation more than a flavour, as if from a fizzy lemon sweet, but painful too, and my throat hurting then, dry and tender, like from the acute phase of a sudden flu, and an almighty pain in my right arm, all across the surface, the wound sizzling, buried beneath the black masking tape. Pulling myself to my feet again after collapsing on the bed, I took more masking tape, and, slowing myself, my mind fading, wrapped it solidly around my right arm, until there was no skin to be seen. Then, feeling my own weakness, but unable to drink any more of the terrible bleach, tears in my eyes, I took a swig of my Lucozade, feeling no real relief, and pulled myself back into my

full-length leather coat, and lay back on my bed, hiding the remainder of the bottles in my drawer, adjusting as best I could to the appalling sensation.

Fifteen or so minutes passed. Perhaps I passed out, I am not sure. When I felt alive enough to move again, shrugging the coat around me, doing my very best to cover over the pain, so that no one would know, I wearily jerked myself to my feet, reeling slightly, and headed out again onto the ward.

My father was standing there by the pool table. He had only just arrived again. Weakly I called out to him, “hello Dad!” trying my hardest not to have to open my mouth, me having swallowed no more than a mouthful of bleach, but my throat still red raw, and my tongue corroded slightly, sore against my palette, an awful taste in my mouth. My right arm was hanging limply by my side, and the intense stinging now faded to a sharp, throbbing ache as I stumbled over to him, and gave him a hug, him cool again to the touch, wet slightly from the short walk through the car park in the rain. “Would you like a game of pool, son?” he said to me, and, in my abject misery, still not wishing to let him down, I

replied “yes, ok” and tried to smile, my face grimacing a little.

We had played for about five minutes before I collapsed to the floor. The last thing I remember as my consciousness faded a little was three of the night staff crowding around me, as I lay there yelping in agony, and examining my arm, still under the masking tape, and rushing to my room, returning with the bottles of drain cleaner and bleach. A staff member gently eased back a little of the tape, revealing a huge, blistered gash, the skin still fizzing, sinking down by the second as they stood over me, a look of absolute horror on their faces. “Quick!” someone yelled out, “get him to an ambulance!”, and, within minutes, I was hoisted to my feet, vomiting slightly in a thick white drool, with my head drooping, in silence, not screaming out anymore, and carried out to a waiting hospital car, and driven at breakneck pace to the neighbouring Goodmayes Hospital, in Bill’s own car, where immediately upon arrival a surgeon examined me.

As I lay on a gurney in the operating room, thick needles of morphine were plunged into my arm, six or seven times, all the way along

the length of the wound, and a constant saline bath was applied, the metal now melted, corroded into a stinking mess, still steaming slightly, with an awful smell, my gangrenous skin blackened to a dark greenish colour, like a coat of lichen or bracket fungus, the texture of soft, mouldy cheese, and the first off-white hints of a bone visible in the centre. For my part, I was awake again then, and somehow not as concerned as perhaps I should have been, talking to the surgeon as if nothing had occurred, even through the fading pain of my throat (as I hated myself and did not care what happened to me), so much so that I had to be swiftly sedated. He rushed about me, cleaning the hole, and trying with tweezers to extract as much of the fused metal as possible, by now indistinguishable from the skin itself, but my arm was still in a dire state, corroded blood vessels popping and poking out of the mire of mangled flesh like tiny split sausages, black, chemical blood trickling down the sides of the chasm onto the pale green hospital sheeting in steady streams.

Following an hour on the operating gurney, the surgeon's outlook was dim "I've done all I can" he said, "but we just haven't got

the facilities here to deal with this tonight. He needs to be operated on as soon as possible. Take him to Broomfield. I'll just arrange a vehicle. They have a department there that specialises in Trauma and Burns." Then he turned to me, and leaned down sadly, his mask hovering near my face, still wincing beyond the painkillers, and furrowed in pain, doing my best to hide it, "To tell you the truth now, I'm sorry to say, but I don't think we can save your arm. We'll probably have to amputate it. I'm just telling you now so you can prepare yourself a little. If we'd got here an hour or two earlier who knows, we might have been able to do different." All I could reply to him then with was, quietly as ever, "that's ok, don't worry. Thank you for helping me. It's ok though, I deserve it..."

And so I was carried throughout the night, arriving after midnight at Broomfield Hospital, on the outskirts of Chelmsford, the ambulance staff handing me over upon arrival to a surgical team who wheeled me into an antechamber almost immediately, and injected me with a nerve block into my inner armpit, a horrifyingly sharp scratch lasting for about five seconds, and an unforgettable sensation, and

then full darkness, as I flopped back on the portable bed out cold, and was wheeled into the operating chamber. It's true, I really didn't care then if I lost the arm. All I could really think about before the nerve block anaesthetized me to oblivion for the rest of the night was "poor Jason, I hope he's ok. What an awful bast*rd I am. I just hope he's ok. I hope they're all ok..."

* * *

I awoke the day after in a hospital bed, confused, and shaky, in a wide upstairs ward, bright white and open, the light cascading in, in straight clear lines, falling softly on the white and blue linen of my bedspread. It was a peaceful sight. Little beeps and hums sounded in the distance, and the opening of doors far away across the corridor to the right of my bed, and then the chatter of quiet voices. Sleepy, and semi-conscious, I shifted a little in bed, glancing down the sheets at my right-hand side. My arm was still there. I was wrapped in rough, bulky crème-coloured bandages, unable to bend the limb. A dull ache pulsed from my forearm, but otherwise I was unhurt,

feeling calmed somehow, foggy from the morphine. As I shifted further in bed, a tremendous stinging pain erupted from my right leg, all across my right thigh, and I groaned, sinking back into the bed. The ward was almost empty, just a couple of other beds by the broad South-facing window, unoccupied save for an elderly gentleman three beds along, sleeping in the morning sunshine. Instinctively reaching down with my other hand, I felt that my thigh was wrapped again in thick crepe bandage, and sore to the touch, the slightest movement bringing on a great, hot sting, sharp, and very uncomfortable. A young nurse came over to me, blonde haired and smiling. She had a clipboard in her hand with my medical notes. “Good morning, Benjamin, how are you?” to which I replied “I’m ok, thanks” by force of habit, not really having time to decide how I was, but not feeling too out of sorts regardless. She went on, “you’re in Broomfield Hospital, in the Trauma Ward. We took you in last night, do you remember?” (and I nodded, though I could barely remember), “you’re very lucky. The surgical team last night wanted to amputate your arm, but they decided to wait an hour and operate on it

instead. It was a very difficult operation, but they managed to clear out the wound. You were given a full-thickness autologous skin graft, which means they removed a layer of skin from your right leg and sutured it over the wound on your elbow, to replace the epidermis and the dermis missing in your accident. Ideally now, your blood vessels will start to grow back through the graft skin, and your arm will start to heal. Currently your graft is at a stage we call plasmatic imbibition, where the tissue underneath is still absorbing nutrients. In a few days, hopefully, your capillaries – you know, the littlest blood vessels – will start to form. The doctors had to cut little holes in the grafted skin to prevent fluid building up. It makes it more tactile also, so we could really get the area covered as it was a very extensive wound. We've placed a foam tube over your wound site to keep pressure on the area and are holding it down with bandages. I'm afraid your donor site's going to be very painful for quite a while. It's important to keep the area very clean each day as otherwise you might develop an infection. Unfortunately, it's going to take a couple of months for your wounds to heal, and you'll have to spend at least another three

weeks in bed while the doctors monitor you. Do you have any questions?” Her manner was official, but kind, and I felt safe. Save for my hypospadias operations, and a hernia I underwent as a baby, I had never been in hospital before. My mind was waking now, and I was more aware of the room around me, and my reason for being there. Concerned slightly, I asked her “um, I’m in Brookside at the moment, a children’s residential unit, will I be able to go back there afterwards? Do they know I’m staying here?” to which she replied “It’s ok, don’t worry, we’ve liaised with your psychiatric team, and they’ve kept your place open. You can return there in a few weeks, as I say. But for now, you need to rest, and we need to keep an eye on you daily to monitor your graft site and keep your donor site clean. There’s a chance the skin graft won’t take, which means we’ll have to repeat the operation. If you need anything, just call for me.”

And so I said, “thank you”, and the nurse departed from my bedside, and I lay back again, feeling a little faint, and with an awful pain in my right leg, and that dull, beating ache across my forearm. And I remained in the bed for another week or so, as my parents came to visit

me, my father grave, but my mother upbeat as ever, sitting with me in visiting hours, although I spent most of the time asleep. The incident was not mentioned. Every few days, my site would be checked on, and my leg inspected and cleaned with saline and fresh dressings, and it was agreed between the doctors that the graft skin was settling very well, although I knew it would be a long healing process. My wound itself still looked ugly, gaping and pink, with a thin, blobby white and red checkerboard layer covering a massive chasm cut into the tissues of my arm, and smelling of raw meat, always bleeding a little, but not in terrible pain, as all the nerves had been severed, and thus sensation was reduced. Only around the edges of the site, where stiff layers of sutures held down the graft did I feel a sharp, scratching sting. By the end of the first week my painkillers could be reduced. Another week and a half having passed I was ready to get out of bed. Comfortable, liking the food there, and the wide white light in the airy room, I was a little disappointed when all too soon, a further week along, I had to return to Brookside, my arm heavily bandaged, and limping, the donor site

high on my right thigh coated in thick bandages also, but delivering a stiff chafing tenderness when I moved, agony if touched on an exposed fragment, and otherwise a horrible, nagging itch, the dressings often sticking to the pale, pink, bleeding patch underneath where the replacement skin had been removed.

No one ever asked me about why I did what I did, or indeed commented on it much at all from a psychiatric angle. It was always “your accident” or clinical references to the injury and the procedure. For my part, I did not proffer any suggestions of my own, and thus it was never discussed, not by Broomfield or by Brookside, though the latter knew me better then, and knew that I was a danger to myself.

Shortly after I arrived back on the ward, to the happy greetings of Helen, and Ami, and Alison (Sarah had overdosed on store-bought paracetamol, and was in solitary care in the acute ward), I was called to meet with the site psychiatrist, and diagnosed additionally with Borderline Personality Disorder, a psychiatric label which clung to me insultingly for many years afterwards, and an easy stigma. I asked why I was given it, having heard for others before that this diagnosis was only awarded to

the most troublesome and disagreeable patients, and was told “we have no other way of categorizing your serious self-harm; patients with Major Depressive Disorder don’t usually injure themselves the way you have done.” Aside from this, my medication was not altered, though the dosage was increased to 60mg. And so, I settled back into life in the unit, nursing a sore arm, with many questions from the other patients, and yet nothing really that I could open up about, not sad that my arm was now a huge, bleeding crater of skin, the pockets of ribbed flesh between the reconnected tendons soft and pliable, resembling to my mind the inside of a stale Cornetto ice-cream cone, my mind prone then to irreverent comparisons, as I was, at best, indifferent to my own physical suffering.

* * *

Though I was not allowed out unescorted for many months after my first major incident, I was indeed encouraged home at weekends, provided I was in my parents’ company. My mother was, all of a sudden, very glad to see to see me, having evidently missed me very much now I was out of her sight, but my father was

more aloof. Although he still tried to put on a face in front of me, pretending he could laugh and joke, his manner was sterner, and he was still exhausted from his weekly work, still called in across the entire morning of some weekends, desperate to keep to hard project deadlines, even as the thought of retirement approached. In the end they did let him go, organising an office party for him, and presenting him with a cake and cards, encouraging him to take it easy from now on, glad perhaps to be free of him, and his bad tempered, pedantic sarcasm, despite the loss of their best worker. Finally free, after forty years of dedicated service in the industry, he could not acclimatize to life back in the house, and that sternness remained, short tempered, and quick to snap.

Not long after I started to come home at weekends, the arguments began. It was little things at first, him having been into my bedroom when I was away, to “tidy”, but instead ransacking my papers and my books and modelling supplies, removing anything he thought would be a danger to me, patronizing me, and treating me like a little boy, binning my journal pages before I had finished writing

them, moving my stuff without asking, going so far as to confiscate paper clips and cutlery, and often waking me from slumber, throwing the window open to the cold winter air, and telling me the place needed airing, even though he spent no real time in that room and I had professed to being cold, as he would, on the whole, retreat upstairs to lie down, or at most to sit in his familiar arm chair with the apples and the papers, chatting to my mother, but ignoring me if I came in, busy in his own reading. Once I said to him, “please don’t move my stuff Dad, I’m almost an adult, and I think I should be allowed to take care of it” and his only response was “an adult you say? What sort of idiot adult pours drain cleaner on their arm?”, his answer seeming to me below the belt and off topic, just another excuse for him to insult me, and his words stung. I was, by now, used to being made to feel very foolish, both academically, and as a person, and sometimes in public he would grab my hand as we were crossing the road, as if I had special needs, ignoring my livid protestations and dragging me across to the other side. It was now that I first started to present adult opinions, and his responses, invariably differing, always

condescending, thwarted my critical thinking, and left me feeling low and stripped of confidence, each new idea shot down, as if uttered by a lunatic, or at best, an ignorant child.

For example, by now I had done some reading, especially of *The Noonday Demon*, and had had some thoughts of my own on the matter, noticing that, though the author acknowledged side effects, he was still very much in favour of psychiatric medications, stating clearly that depression is a condition of the brain, with faulty genes stimulating a chemical imbalance in synaptic neurotransmitters, repairable primarily by the regular application of SSRI antidepressants (although he mentions many other alternative medicine treatments), a line of reasoning mirrored by all my unit staff and by the psychiatrists I had met with. Although capitulating at first, over the months I developed problems with this idea, noticing all the patients around me on their medications, and not seeing any great improvement in them, as the self-harm and suicide attempts continued unabated, their own moods often tearful or otherwise withdrawn and thoroughly

unhappy. Besides, I knew of their stories, and could see from their lives what seemed the obvious answer, as, tentatively, with my own. Surely it was the awful abuse and neglect they had suffered (and continued to suffer) that led to the great compound stress that broke their hearts and stimulated these worrying behavioural routines? Was that not the obvious factor? “See, you might think that” my Dad said, “but no, the science is clear. You see, there are such things in the brain as monoamine neurotransmitters. Little grouped rings of amino acids which control the regulation of emotions, for example, dopamine, and serotonin. In your case, you were born with the genes that put you at risk of producing too little serotonin, which in turn leads to your teenage depression, which is where your tablets come in. You take daily SSRIs, which stands for Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors. The medications in the tablets increase the amount of serotonin in your brain by limiting its reabsorption, thus keeping your mood stable. It’s important that you keep taking them, as the doctor says. They’ve studied this area and are professionals, and they know what’s best for you.”

I was unconvinced. “But Dad, how do they know any of this? Is there a test they can do to see if this is true? Sarah’s been taking her tablets for two years now, and she says she’s been abused, and she isn’t getting any better.”

“Well, it’s possible that environmental factors could make the condition worse I suppose. The neuroscience research is here though, and a lot of very intelligent people have spent a lot of time working it out. For example, there are people in research departments studying it even now, some very bright minds. What about you? You’re diagnosed with Depressive Disorder, and nothing’s ever happened to you.”

I was taken aback, hurt by his sudden words. “What? How can you say that, Dad?! I was very upset at school, and got bullied, especially by Tariq, and you’re not being very nice to me either. I know why I’m depressed, and it’s nothing to do with what you’re saying!” And then a thin, cruel smile came across my Dad’s face, smug and defensive, and he put his hands up in the air in as if surrendering, his eyes bulging wide in an impression of innocence “What? Me? Nonsense. Calm down now, stop getting upset. Look, I’m just telling

you the facts. These people know more than you do. And what's Tariq got to do with this? He's your friend. You went to school together, remember?"

And with that, knowing I had already told my mother some details of Tariq's treatment of me, so he could hardly claim to be unaware, I burst into tears, and fled from his company, running upstairs to the spare bedroom, and, taking a blowtorch lighter from my pocket, proceeded to burn my right hand until the skin crackled and burst, and formed huge, painful blisters. I felt wretched then, angry at him for his words, but angry at myself too, for being powerless before him, unable to convince him of what I was now certain of, and hurt, shocked and saddened by his incessant dismissals of me, even as he knew the truth, and was himself hurting me right in plain sight. He did not pursue me up the stairs, returning instead to his papers, considering me perhaps moody, and evidently in need of space, having once more lost my temper in front of him, somehow silly, and not to be taken seriously. In fact, he only discovered the wound on my hand when I returned later to go back to the ward, angry again, shouting at me "Benjamin, why did you

do that! Don't be so f**king silly! Don't you think you've caused enough problems!”, perhaps worried that the staff would come down on him for ‘letting me away’ with this, and marching straight up to the nurses’ office when I returned, telling them that I had become emotionally unstable in the house for no reason at all, and lying by omission, never telling them what we had discussed, unclear himself it seemed as to the reason for my “outburst”.

By then I was riddled with guilt (it is impossible to self-harm and not feel guilty), sad that I had upset my father, the thick plaque-like skin over the burn wounds a dark red, like Canadian bacon, and solid, the freshly forming scabs needing tending to, going silently to the medical room for a dressing, under the disappointed eyes of the staff, them too a little irritated at me as, for the first time, I came clean, and began to tell them, over and over again, “my Dad’s hurting me. He hurts my feelings all the time, and it’s like he doesn’t love me. He’s always been like this. I think he doesn’t care about my health. Please say something to him. Please stop him getting at me.” “Hush, Ben! Stay calm, please”, I was told.

“We’re arranging a meeting with the psychiatrist in the morning. Until then, the doctor has prescribed you some calming medication, which will help you to stay calm on the ward tonight. You can say all you want to in the meeting tomorrow.” And with that they left me for the evening to go to bed. I was far from calm. It was clear they were not sympathetic towards my words. Still, I looked forward to the meeting. Perhaps finally I would get to say my piece and explain my father’s negative impact on me.

When the meeting came, I was called from the ward and motioned into the conference room. My parents were already sat down when I entered, chatting to the psychiatrist and the attendant nursing panel. They stopped talking as I entered, and I do not know what they were discussing, but I was told then to sit down, and promptly the psychiatrist spoke to me, his voice level, introducing everyone in the room, and bidding a good day to my seated parents. Then he began, in a voice still formal, and somehow a little off-putting, “Thank you for attending your meeting. I hear you’ve been having some problems on your leave. Tell me Benjamin, what’s been bothering

you?” “Thank you for arranging this. Well, it’s my Dad, he’s been making my life really difficult at home. He keeps patronizing me and getting at me, like he doesn’t like me very much, and my Mum’s not stopping him...” “Stop right there” the doctor said, interrupting me, “so are you saying to me that you think your Dad is responsible for your self-injuring behaviour recently?” to which I replied, “um, yes, to a degree, I mean, it’s other stuff I’m sad about, but he’s not helping, and he keeps shouting at me and bossing me about, and he bins my stuff.” The doctor motioned with his hand, as if to quieten me, and turned to my father then, and asked, in a warm voice “is this true what he’s saying Mr. Power?” (referring to my Dad always by his formal title and surname) to which my Dad said “to be honest doctor, Benjamin’s been very unwell for some months now. He’s only just got out of hospital with his skin graft wound. His room’s a terrible mess, and it needs to be kept clear. All he does at home in sleep and obsessively write in his journal. All I’m doing is helping him tidy. He’s always been a child with a lot of imagination, and I think he’s imagining me being unpleasant to him. The both of us only have his best interests at heart...”

The doctor nodded, as if in agreement, which disappointed me very much, and turned to me before I could reply, and said “you see Benjamin. Listen to your father and mother. They know what’s best for you, and try not to be difficult at home, ok? Sometimes, when we get ill, we can think people are persecuting us, when they really aren’t, and it can feel very real at times.” To which, horrified, I responded with “but... but... I’m not lying to you, doctor. It’s true, he does bully me in the house. Please, Mum, Mum, say something!” The doctor appeared put out at this point, and a little flustered. Evidently, he had not been expecting my interruption. “Benjamin, keep your voice down please. Don’t get excited!” My mother spoke up at this point, in surprising solidarity “well, sometimes, you know what it’s like with two men in the house, they come to loggerheads with each other, and Benjamin’s Dad isn’t always the most patient with him...” to which my father gave the sharp retort, “Mary!” and the doctor himself, keen to get on with the meeting, brushed this new response aside, as if he hadn’t heard, and did not pause to write it down as he had done with my own responses. He went on, “Ok, let’s keep on the

point now, as it's easy to drift off topic. I think what we're going to do is re-evaluate Benjamin's diagnosis from now on. It seems Borderline Personality Disorder may not be the whole picture. Just as a preliminary hypothesis, I suggest a co-morbidity of Paranoid Personality Disorder. It's clear from what Benjamin's saying about his father that he's suffering from at least some paranoid symptoms." He turned to specifically address me. "What we're going to do now is keep you on your 60mg of Citalopram daily, but in addition to that we're starting you on a course of Olanzapine, it's one of the newer atypical antipsychotic mood stabilizers. We've had very good results from the clinical trials, and we think it'll help sort out your paranoid delusions. You take one tablet a day, at 10mg, just as a starting dose, and we'll see if we should increase it from there." "But why are you doing this?!" I called to the psychiatrist, "I'm telling you the truth!" Momentarily, he paused again, taken aback, then turned, as if personally insulted, and motioned to the nurse next to him, saying, "nurse, it seems Benjamin is becoming agitated, please could you ask him to leave the meeting room" and, before I could

say anything else to defend myself, or to contest the decision, and in front of both my parents, I was motioned again to my feet, and boldly escorted out of the room, back to my bedroom to “calm down”.

It was as if a rug had been pulled out from under me. How could my Dad lie like that, right in front of my face? Why couldn't he just acknowledge it, and be more patient around me? After all, my room was hardly untidy, and, if anything, he was just finding something to do since retiring, himself the obsessive one. And why did the doctor side with him when I told him Dad had been hurting my feelings, and side with him from the get-go really? Why wasn't I allowed to say my piece? And was I really paranoid? I didn't think so, pleased a little that at least my Mum had come to a partial defence of me, impotent though it was. And curse that doctor for not listening to me, the arrogant swine! I hated him. I hated all of the staff. And, more than anything, a deep humiliation settled over me, peaked and incensed, insulted to my core, their official language always so derogatory and frankly offensive, and incorrect, blaming me for his own conduct, as if I had made it all up in

fantasy!

But there was nothing I could do. I had seen it myself. For any of the young people who wouldn't take the tablets, the staff would call on backup, and three or four staff members would then drag the unfortunately patient down to the meds room kicking and screaming, and hold them down to the table, and inject them with their medication anyway. Wishing to avoid this unwelcome scenario, I had no choice but to accept my new mood stabiliser tablets every morning from then on, washing them down with a disposable cup of water, as if this feeble chemical pill, this injurious (for I began to gain weight almost as soon as the Olanzapine was commenced) insult, was in any way responsible for keeping my mind together, much as from that point onwards things took a much darker turn in my life anyway, myself already aware now of what was wrong, and, more importantly, what was not.

Later that night, I wrote a poem, feeling miserable, desperate still to claw back what I could, but sensing futility, as if I was only there for other people's sake, for their eyes, and harsh words, and for their pharmaceutical tests and moneymaking, and longing somehow to put

myself beyond their reach, to damage myself more than I ever had before until I wasn't there to be hurt any more, perhaps to gain some last withering control even as paradoxically I was run down and destroyed, and always that guilt there in the background, that I was not good enough, and would never be good enough, and that I could not bring my father eye to eye with me, and be validated... just to be taken seriously, and listened to, knowing I had never yet opened up to either of them properly about my childhood abuse, and feeling despondently, at this rate, that I would never be able to. I needed space to move – to breathe – but here I was, stuck in a tiny, sadness-inducing room, my only other option to return to the family house at weekends, a home that by now no longer felt like my own. There, my parents were as distant from me, busy in the running of the house, and in their own lives and social meetings, and, if ever I could escape the put downs and the arguments, always against my intelligence, or my character, or my sadness itself, I would be left to my own devices, to cry alone for hours on the darkened floor of the upstairs room, with no relief and no-one there to know, and eventually dissociate in cold,

empty despair, frozen in psychic pain far back inside the veils of what was presented as a meaningless lock of flesh, and without the ability to will my limbs into movement or to speak out for help, paralysed on the floor open-eyed and unblinking, and conscious of a deep-stretching valueless nothing, muffled in pale light and staring in echo against the moist pressing walls without shape that terminate experience. I tried, in shielded fashion, to capture a little of this in my poem, thinking on the strangeness of dissociation as I felt it (although then I was unaware of the official medical terminology), trying impotently to keep hold of a little of myself as it dissipated under the weight of others, resigned the while, and tense, knowing somehow that there was something worse just over the horizon.

Room

Little from little day, in rhythmic hate
My words go where I fear to tread and mate
With metal, all things chemically cold,
To show submission, stutter in the old
Creases, logically crass, out of shape
Leaving a wide, white shadow in their wake
My signature debris is somewhat late
The shy scratch of my needle nails have sold

Little from little day.

And so I fumble other heads, and stake
A claim for division, watch the rooms shake
Watch another world retching out its moulds
Cogitatis ergo sum is what I'm told,
A branded ego dies, but still, I take
Little from little day

* * *

A month and a half after my drain cleaner attack on my right arm, the foam padding was ready to come off, although the wound was still far from healed. Upon seeing my arm again properly for the first time, pink and raw, the holed graft skin thin atop that gaping cavity, and always bleeding a little as soon as the dressings were pulled back, I was both distraught, and also fascinated. I cannot recall when first the wound enticed me, the edges continually scabbing, in sticky, brown slurry, the colour of caramel, and leaking a stream of pus from the healing skin that would solidify on my arm each day until I had cleaned it away with saline pads (for I was now in control of my own recovery care and was not making much effort). All I remember is that, one day, Dad's

weekend arguing in the house having reached a climax, him having launched into me again as being “stupid”, and “a real idiot”, and “all your schoolfriends think the same”, and adding “at this rate you’ll never amount to anything”, that, feeling angry at myself for disappointing him long term, and with nihilism overcoming me, deeper than ever before, and perhaps at my own broken, mangled form, with nothing quite real anymore, or meaningful, and nothing true enough to bring joy – by now almost a swear word to me – I retreated in familiar tears to my own chambers, and there hovered for a second over my open skin graft wound, then, pressing my head down against the red muscle of my developing flesh, opened my mouth wide and clamped it to the injury, raking my teeth along the delicate healing skin, and bit the graft tissue from my arm, licking the tender pink coating as blood began to trickle out, like a beaten animal desperate in a spring trap, working slowly around the entirety of the graft site, removing the plugs of mucus and new skin, oblivious to the sudden sting of pain, my cheeks coated in blood and pulled meat, until all that remained was a fresh cavity.

A different pain, dulled and closer to

pressure than discomfort, methodically peeling back the layers of wholesome flesh with my teeth nibbling across the area in tiny bites, taking no more than half a centimetre squared at a time, and swallowing it down, destroying myself and the work that had been done. All I felt then in my head was “you are nothing but worthless meat anyway. Dad says as much. Why heal? Do you think you deserve that? After all you’ve done, to upset your own parents, did you think you’d get off easy? No, you’ll suffer, and soon more can be taken, and you’ll die, but it won’t be quick.” And this mantra I repeated again and again in my head, as I sat there that day, and tore into myself.

When I had finished excavating the muscle layers underneath the graft, down to the globby, orange and white fat, still in another world, and in dulled discomfort, the nerves not yet fully grown, and the area tender to the touch but not the raging pain one would expect otherwise, I moved off down my arm, testing further, and adding new, larger bites. Here the skin was not soft and jelly-like, and I found as I bit that there was indeed pain; a great howling pain, my skin bunched and rubbery between my teeth, and a terrible

pressure as I pressed my jaws down with all my might, dark bruising imprints from my canines and pre-molars erupting across the top of my arm, and the shearing *sound* as my incisors pulled and pulled until each new piece of skin finally clipped off, feeling the coldest indifference. My hate was not fierce, or passionate, and I had become as a machine, and one that could do myself serious damage. All caution thrown to the wind, for the rest of that day, and for the days afterwards, back on the ward (for still, we were not observed physically), I would continue to rage at myself, in frozen hatred and inner torment, learning soon the best ways I could ‘work’, nipping and severing, taking from myself, until my arm was a savaged horror site, my mouth slicked with crimson gore, washed away as soon as I felt I would be interrupted, and my arm stuffed back under layers of clothing, not bleeding heavily (as the pressure of the bites punctured the surface skin but did not penetrate deep enough to reach my larger veins) but in noticeable discomfort, perhaps what would have been agony, was I not so dulled in head as well. “After all that’s happened, what is there left?” I thought.

It was Jake who discovered my injuries for the first time, some days later, sitting next to me in the garden, as a thin trail of watery blood, which I thought I had then accounted for, appeared at the bottom of my sleeve. Lost in deep nihilism himself, he was not shocked so much as curious, and soon, though I was generally embarrassed to admit, he had got out of me that I had been “eating” myself. “You know what, that’s kind of cool in a sick way” was all he said, “what a way to self-harm” and added “but why are you doing this?”, still not mentioning anything to the staff. An irresponsible, tasteless first remark on his part, but one that I was too low to seriously quibble over, all I replied is “because I’m there, and I don’t want to be.” “They’ll find out” he said “I think they’re going to notice something like that”, his eyes wide as I went with him to my room and pulled back my sleeve, revealing a grisly tableaux of human wounds, my graft area huge and exposed, like I had been attacked by a wild animal, but a strange, eerie calmness to my voice, as if I was not at all put out. Tiny flakes of dried blood still coated the crease of my mouth on each side, which I had not been able to fully wash away.

Jake was right, it was not long until the staff discovered my arm in its state, for it was impossible to hide forever. I remember their looks of absolute horror, as if through a screen. Much as they washed and dressed me on site, not much could be done, and hurried calls were again made to the hospital, where I was returned soon after.

This period of my stay is the fuzziest in my mind, long weeks missing from my memory. All I can remember is that, once more, I was given a skin graft, taken from a separate site on my right leg. A painful procedure, this time I did not fully bite off the replacement tissue, feeling naturally too guilty to interfere comprehensively with the work of the specialist medical staff, but as far as I recall, when first I awoke in the hospital bed, I did lunge for myself, tearing the drip out of my arm with my teeth, in a dark world of misery, and scrabbling for the new bandages, and was held back on the bed by the frightened nurses, screaming and crying to myself, in total self-loathing, snapping at the air, and moaning like a mistreated rescue dog. An experienced surgeon evaluated my wounds to take numerous medical photos for the records, and,

seeing me again turn on myself, even as I was sat there restrained desperately in the bed, vomited on the floor, excusing himself from the scene in a panic.

From then on, and throughout my healing process (though my arm recovered in the end) I would again pick at the wound with my teeth, and it was touch and go as to whether the new graft would ever heal. Aside from this, I had long forgone my need for scalpels or lighters, and would instead utilize my teeth, each new time, and always on the same tortured skin of my right arm, finding new places to bite at, growling a little sometimes, as if no longer human, and savaging myself with merciless abandon, always infected, and shunning aftercare, the brutal wounds never given much chance to recover before I would go for them again, my whole body swollen and increasingly sickly, and a requirement for heavy doses of antibiotics. Now, over twenty years later, I look at my right arm occasionally, and remember these days, grimacing in distaste. The skin has, it is true, grown back, and sensation partially returned as best as it is going to, but my arm is blighted still, crippled aesthetically, and I am left with much cause to

regret the things I chose to do, much as back then I could not really help myself. With hinderances, the healing process took, in total, about 7 years.

* * *



My forearm wound, November 2024

* * *

In the last six months of Brookside, my mind was lost in bleak night, as the patients

began to drop away, the young people either discharged home, or shipped off to further treatment, or as became increasingly common, to my absolute horror and grief, dying by suicide not long after release, taken again by a world that did not give a damn about them. Indeed, as I wrote in my journal, by now transferred to an electronic Word document copy I would update at weekends “I am so very lonely...”, again, and again, all down the page. A vulgarity to the lack of imagination but making a point. Again, not long before, I had written a poem in my diary, a supremely pessimistic piece, stuffed with optical jargon on the behaviour of light waves, but subverted in the poem itself, sat at a distance, waiting for the end, pondering my spiritual decay and that of those around me, as good lives started to rust and spoil, and to fall away, and turning on the daylight’s clarity I had until then loved so dearly, as if the very act of vision itself was a painful chore to me, plunged into darkness, save for this awful present moment, forever stalled, right in from of my devastated pupils.

Terminus

Light never was the answer then or now
Not carved into the corpses of the clouds
Or crudely ripped out of a retching Sun.

A fresh star will not forge from seeping shades
Without integrity its furnace fades
And falls to empty stones as thunder drums.

Each shattered beam of discourse split to screams
The brutal spasms of a bankrupt dream
Coherence flawed and rasping lives undone.

A tarnished lens of lies hacked from denial
Each blunt reflection radiating bile
A howl of eyes submerged and overrun.

Abrasive waves beat blisters to the sky
The tattered time a torch will not revive
What waited by the boundary has begun.

I had settled back into my routine by then, grim and moribund, but, despite my personal agonies, was determined that I should not waste my time there irrevocably, feeling too much pressure still to succeed, laid on by my Dad mainly, much as I did not care for my own sad form in any other way. This thick pressure was on me to complete my A-Levels, and so, against all expectations, and throughout the year, I had work sent to me from my school, and, under the tutorage and observation of the

head teacher, Helen, was able by the end to sit my exams long distance, my natural intelligence dimmed by the strain of my environment, much as I am sure stress impacted on my final results, which, though not terrible by formal grading standards, still disappointed me, hoping for my grades to be much higher. I knew now that university was all of a sudden not off limits to me, much as it was a distant, unbelievable thought, and not one I invested any real hope in.

And so, one day, almost as soon as it had begun for me, my time at Brookside came to an end. The nurses bustled about me, in routine jubilation, fetching me a card and a large cake, and wishing me the best for my future, and, finally, with my belongs in my hand, my arm coated in its old, familiar bandages, but healing as best it could, my parents arrived to greet me, and I was passed back to them, my mother overjoyed that I was to be sent home, and my father next to her, smiling toothlessly, patting me on the back, as if to say “well done”. In my head it was cool, and distant, and I felt no real sense of happiness myself, or anything at all. I was torn, knowing I would leave the company of my first real friends, and the

dislocation that comes from a long hospital stay, and, despite the many months that had passed, feeling no better really, with no real, meaningful understanding of myself, despite my journals. A great cloud was over me, though, in familiar self-negation, I did my best to ensure it was not spotted by them. All I knew was that, in formal eyes, I had “made progress” and that, regardless, on the cusp of eighteen, I was now too old to remain there. In regular contact by then with Sarah, and Jake, and Ami, and making sure I had taken the telephone numbers of the rest, I sighed, and hefted my bag over my left shoulder, and a great expanse of nothing opening up before me, doubt creeping into my mind all of a sudden (for I had been provided no aftercare), and hesitant to leave, knowing I was powerless and the future was darker than it had been painted, but I blinded myself to this consternation, and headed out through the double doors of the atrium to the waiting car, with my parents on each side of me, grinning, as if I was a little boy again, being taken to the park. Again, I had no choice; my time was up. As I left, Bill leaned in at me and said “well done young man! Congratulations that you’re all better now.

Don't get in any trouble from now on, will you! And listen to your parents!" and I shuddered a little, smiling weakly, knowing the same was felt by all, but shouldering it, not knowing what else now I could say or do, and elated somehow, a little at least, to finally be free. Without turning my head to look back, I sighed again and followed my parents down to the car. "Thank you, Dad, for driving me back" I said to my father, as I buckled up on the front seat of his familiar Škoda Favorit, "I love you." And I heard him reply to me with his long familiar response "That's ok son. Good to have you home again..." and with that, I suppose we drove off.

But life isn't drama, like a Hollywood script. More often than not it's tragedy. When I was turfed out of Brookside in the Summer of 2002, I was in no way healed. And how could I have been? My past had never been discussed with me. Atop that, not long after I returned home, the rows began again, fiercer and more upsetting than I had ever experienced them, and, for the first time in my life, my father became physical with me, the only real touch I had ever experienced off of him. My mother, for all her love for me, did nothing to intercede

on my behalf, and I was left crying, often, in a poor state, raging at a world that could not offer me the care I required, and where 'love' had become another empty four-letter word. I am afraid to say that, in my broken condition, I devolved to new maladaptive coping strategies for the hurt at home, wishing to drown my sorrow, much as my self-harm continued unabated, unbelievably growing worse in scope and imagination, the vengeful biting behaviours by now given a specific name, "autophagia". And so it was that the fearful little boy inside the wounded young man left the house drunken one morning, naïve, and yet resolute, playing truant, and fled back into London, and, it could be said, never returned alive, much as within a matter of less than two months he was again in his own bed. Childhood was over, and something fundamental taken from me along with my innocence, it could never be returned. I'll leave these adult (in the fullest sense of the word) memories for my second book.

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Me, Aged 6