

The Last
Photograph

SIMON ASTAIRE



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By the same author

FICTION

Private Privilege
And You Are...?
Mr Coles

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for Edgar and Lesley

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*When you are sorrowful, look again in your heart,
and you shall see that in truth you are weeping
for that which has been your delight.*

Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931): *The Prophet*

I

I'd assumed the end was the end. Not an end that led to a beginning, nor an affirmation of the fact that none of us truly arrive.

∴

The alarm rang at seven o'clock. That is to say, it would have rung had I not woken up some eight minutes earlier and pressed the little tit on the top of the clock, thereby averting the sound of the bell that, because of my age, would've been as startling as a wartime siren. During those eight minutes, however, my greatest joy was peace of mind and nothing was more valuable. I drifted off into a deep doze, in which I dreamed I hadn't pressed the alarm at all. Only when I thought I heard a faint *click* like that of a safety catch being released or the trigger of an unloaded gun being pulled, did I remember that I'd pressed the alarm clock button – and only when I opened my eyes did I remember another, rather significant, fact: which was, that I did not possess an alarm clock at all.

The supposed event had been the horseplay of my mind. There was no safety catch, no trigger. My mind had begun to act without boundaries; to control it, I was getting into the habit of ordering it to do things.

Like, *Wake up now!* and *Time to brush your teeth.*

As long as I can remember, I've been a deep sleeper. No sleeping pills for me. If sleepers are divided between those who open their eyes at a letter being slid under a door and those who can sleep through a declaration of war; between those who can only rest comfortably in their own bed, and those who can put their heads back and fall asleep anywhere – well, I belong to the latter group.

I drank one cup of coffee, washed, shaved and dressed almost mechanically. I thought about having breakfast but decided to wait until after I'd visited the bank, by which time an early morning appetite would have been born of a short walk and the fresh air. I picked up yesterday's paper from the kitchen table, held it in one hand and carried my new khaki canvas bag, with its Union Jack patch, in the other. I locked the front door, put the keys in the bag, checked my watch, exclaimed, 'My God, is that the time?' and set about the day.

The weather was sultry. A vagrant, nervously fanning himself with a newspaper, created the only hint of breeze. He was sitting, or rather he was lying propped up against the main entrance of the building. His feet were splayed out at right angles. Colonel Weldon, the chairman of our building's residents' committee, was taking aim

at the poor soul. He was about to kick him into the gutter with his big right foot, when he was interrupted mid-air by my breezy voice.

‘Good morning, Colonel!’

‘Ah! Good morning, Hammond. I think it’s going to be another bloody hot day.’

‘Already is, Colonel,’ I replied.

‘It’s like the damn tropics! Did you know the body rots so much quicker out there? It reminds me of this journalist who went missing after a quick bevvie in the local bar ... You know, when they found him he was already embalmed, with local cotton wool up his arse!’

Colonel Weldon was unshaven. He didn’t have a beard, so much as he had elongated facial hair known in some circles as grippers. When I’d first arrived at the building, he’d marched over to shake my hand. His handshake was firm enough to make it clear he was in command, but brief enough to show he was not the least bit intimidated by me or anyone else he encountered.

He asked a few non-sequitur questions and then paused. The silence was meant to be menacing, so I shuffled uneasily but then I grew irritated. Last year he had asked whether I would be interested in joining the residents’ committee. I’d thought about it for around a second and then politely refused.

Since then I’ve had little to do with him.

‘Well, Colonel,’ I interrupted. ‘I really should be going, I’ve an appointment at the bank.’

It was a white lie. All I had to do was withdraw some funds from the ATM machine. The money was owed to my inefficient plumber, Colin, who called late the previous evening to say he’d pop by the shop just after eleven o’clock to pick up the cash for my new boiler, which was temperamental (aren’t they all?).

‘You’d better follow me,’ I whispered to the vagrant, sparing him a hefty bruise in the groin.

He peered at me inquisitively, then stood up with probably the same ease as he’d sat down. He licked his lips and, judging by the general state of his health (especially the glazed eyes and deep notches in his pockmarked skin), was in need of a good meal.

‘Come on. Keep up!’ I urged.

His face creased and his nose twitched as if he could smell bread being baked somewhere. He then tagged along, swaying from side to side. When we were out of view of the Colonel, I turned.

‘Here, treat yourself to some breakfast and have a shave.’

I handed over twenty pounds.

He seemed flattered and puzzled. ‘You must be rich,’ he laughed.

‘I’m not.’

‘Well, you act as if you are,’ he said, grinning to reveal a mouthful of chaotic teeth. ‘I’ve always known that’s one of life’s secrets: to act rich, even if you’re not.’

He hawked loudly and spat on the ground. His spit was not white, I can tell you that. As I walked away, I noticed him checking the twenty-pound note in the morning sunlight.

At the bank, several lines had formed in front of the cash machines. There were usually three in operation but that day it was reduced to one. I joined what I thought was the principal line and got immediately accused of cutting in.

‘Get to the back!’ shouted a moaner who seemed to be the one most guilty of the offence himself. The heat wasn’t helping matters. A bank official came out to try to calm things down, but his appearance and tone made everybody shove more rigorously.

In the struggle, I was barged over.

Now, there is one advantage in being seen as a little older: when you fall to the ground, the instinct of others is to help you. I was somewhat dazed, to such an extent that a stray cat passing by seemed to bark *ruff!* at me.

‘Are you all right?’ asked the bank official, looking worried.

‘Fine. I’m just fine,’ I said, perhaps too hastily. The crowd sighed with relief and quickly reformed the line. I was helped to my feet by a man with silver hair, a silver face but tanned all over. I half expected him to be wearing silver pants with a silver buckle and silver boots, but I was to be disappointed.

‘An old boy like you should be more careful,’ he said, walking the tightrope between courtesy and familiarity.

‘Hey, enough of the old boy! I’m only sixty-eight.’

‘Sixty-eight? What the heck have you been doing to yourself?’

He let out a chuckle, offering me his arm like a carer does an elderly relative. In his left hand, he held my canvas bag.

‘They call this a man-bag these days,’ he said.

‘Do they?’

When I’d regained my balance, he placed the bag onto my forearm. I rubbed the dirt off my hands. As I did so, I thought of how small and weak they seemed.

Mr Khan, the bank manager, now took over.

‘You’d better follow me,’ he said.

Compared to the hubbub outside, the bank was quiet. Like a morgue. I was sliding across the polished floor as Mr Khan guided me to a sea-green leather chair in the far corner, beneath a portrait of the Duke of Wellington. The scene was not particularly attractive.

I felt as if I was bouncing off one wall, spread-eagling my way to another, and then back again. I laughed at the ridiculousness of it all. Was it the laughter of fear? Finally, and I believe only by chance, I found myself collapsing into the chair.

‘Ah that’s better,’ I said.

‘Look at the state of you,’ Mr Khan said.

‘What did you say?’

‘I said, what can I do for you?’

‘I need five hundred pounds in cash.’

Mr Khan nodded, took a deep breath and said, ‘In fifties okay, Mr Hammond?’

‘Yes, fifties would be fine.’

Mr Khan had been my bank manager for five years. He was a rather insipid man who, when I once asked him why people thought bank managers were as unpopular as estate agents, gave the dullest of answers. He was the type who would not move from

his fence, preferring to sit with his legs dangling over whichever side he thought the more appropriate or more interesting at the time. On the rare occasions he decided to step down off that fence, he did something stupid and therefore soon climbed back to his already warmed position.

He should've been more careful. If you sit too hard on the fence of life, you're liable to split yourself down the middle.

'Five hundred pounds, Mr Hammond.'

I thanked him and put the brown envelope deep into my bag.

'Anything else, Mr Hammond?'

'Not for now, but I may come in next week.'

'Unfortunately I won't be here then, sir. It's my annual holiday.'

'Anywhere nice?' I asked.

'Yes,' he replied matter-of-factly, as if it was nobody's business, especially mine. 'I'm going to a currency conference in Istanbul.'

How odd, I thought. Isn't that what they call a busman's holiday?

'Have a marvellous time,' I said.

As I walked out, I saw the line of people waiting for the ATM hadn't diminished.

'I'd try inside if I were you,' I told them. "Ask for a Mr Khan.'

The people looked at each other and then rushed forward, barging past me, swinging open the doors and nearly crushing my hand.

'Mind out!' I shouted. But no one took a blind bit of notice.

∴

An organic restaurant had recently opened in the neighbourhood. Probably because I ran the bookshop next door, the owner Hannah had made a courteous opening day visit and had invited me in for a free smoothie.

'It's the speciality of the house,' she said. 'I'd go for the one called berry nice. It's my favourite by far.'

I liked Hannah, who was what I'd call nicely upholstered and searingly attractive to a man of my age. She was always welcoming and, when I took out my money, she would say with her omnipresent smile, 'there's no need for you to pay.' In return I would drop off a nice, long novel to get into.

One evening I bumped into her when I was in my local pub.

'Hello. I'm not bothering you, am I?' she asked.

'Why would you be bothering me?'

Funny, being older doesn't stop that immediate male reaction of wanting to charm someone, thinking you might have a chance of making an impression; for a moment, I flattered myself that she was thrilled to spend time with me.

'Are you alone?' I asked.

'I'm meeting someone but I'm a little early,' Hannah replied.

'Come and sit down while you wait.'

She thanked me and I went up to the bar to order her a gin and tonic. When I returned, there was a long pause until I broke the silence.

'Who are you meeting?'

Another pause.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘That was very forward of me.’

It was none of my business. I usually hate that over-familiar banter from others.

‘I’m meeting my sister,’ she said, smiling for no other reason than it was natural for her.

Wow, you are lovely, I thought.

‘Are you the older one?’ I asked.

‘Yes, by quite a bit. I’m a sort of mother to her.’

I had no real idea what she meant, but I nodded as if I did. I examined her with great care, almost pecking at her. She probably thought I was either very interested, myopic, or both.

‘When we lost both our parents at a young age, I brought her up.’

‘That must have been difficult.’

Hannah forced a smile in a way that showed the memory still lingered and hurt. I recognised that look.

‘It was the night before my seventeenth birthday,’ she went on. ‘There we were, discussing where we were going to lunch the following day and a few hours later, I was identifying their bodies.’

She spoke calmly, in a matter-of-fact manner.

‘They were driving home from a dinner party,’ she continued, ‘when my father misjudged a corner. It was one of those country roads with no lights, dark, a wood on either side ...’

‘Hannah!’

Her name hung over the table. It was her sister. As she walked towards us, Hannah whispered to me.

‘Sorry. I don’t usually go there.’

‘You have nothing to be sorry about,’ I said, leaning forward and quickly squeezing her hand, pulling my own back sharply before her sister could see.

Her sister didn’t look younger. They looked more like twins. I immediately made an excuse and said I must be going, but Hannah insisted she bought me a drink.

‘Thank you,’ I replied.

Hannah’s sister was distracted. She kept shifting a phone, her purse and a pen around the table. She clearly wanted to be alone with Hannah.

I hurried my drink along. I learned they’d both gone to a private school in Kent and hated it.

‘Where in Kent?’ I asked.

‘Broadstairs,’ the sister said.

‘I know it well,’ I replied.

‘You do?’ She sounded very surprised.

‘Yes, my son went to a school nearby.’

But instead of asking which one, the sister said, ‘Terrible place Broadstairs. Full of gloom.’

‘Really? I think it’s rather beautiful.’

‘Bad memories,’ she said, and then Hannah interrupted the conversation like a mother does when you’re talking too much.

I used the moment to get up and say my goodbyes.

‘We should do this again sometime,’ Hannah said.

‘I would love that,’ I replied and then turned to her sister. ‘You should be proud of Hannah. Her restaurant has changed the whole feeling of the street, for the better.’

‘I am very proud of her,’ she replied without hesitation.

∴

I’d made a habit of stopping off at Hannah’s restaurant at the start of each new day. It had become something of a treat. I always chose the corner table that stared out of the window onto the street. I tried to be there without being there; like someone walking across snow without leaving any footprints.

‘How are you today, Tom?’ asked Hannah.

‘I’m very well. It’s good to see you’re so busy,’ I answered, and was about to comment on how lovely she looked, when I was interrupted by tut-tutting coming from a woman on the next table.

She was staring at two students who were sharing a cigarette.

‘I don’t know why they still smoke,” she said. ‘And at this time of the morning! They must know they are killing themselves?’

The woman’s face was full of suspicion, like someone who’d been told she’d won something but reckoned a load of other people had been told exactly the same thing.

‘Maybe they smoke to relieve themselves from the drudgery of life and to soothe the ache of change,’ I said.

The woman hesitated, looking at me for several quizzical seconds.

‘Rubbish!’ she spat. ‘What do you know about the young?’

‘Very little I suppose,’ I answered her.

She huffed at this, then burst into a speech like someone on Speaker’s Corner.

‘Freedom to kill yourself is,’ she began, ‘some would claim, an integral ingredient of true democracy. But let’s at least be obliged to commit the act in specially designated areas, if only so as not to spread the smoke, sickness and self-disgust ...’

The woman had seen the opportunity to remark on all the comings and goings of the area, and add a lame joke about the deluge of rubbish that had grown due to a recent strike. In the past I might have listened and felt honour-bound to join in, or to at least smile.

But not these days, I thought.

Just as my breakfast was arriving I got up, left some cash on the table and walked next door to open the bookshop, my stomach still empty.

∴

I was without the help of Charles, my assistant, who had left the day before for his annual summer break. Charles, who I regularly advised to relax and not try to solve the major issues of the world.

‘Concentrate and specialise on what you reckon you can do best,’ I would say to him.

Charles had been working for me for about six years. I had grown to like him enormously. In fact, I depended on him. Our relationship had gradually changed, though. He now ordered the stock, advised when the shop window should be updated, and when to organise book signings by authors. I wasn't sure as to when, exactly, our roles had switched. I'd been thinking how or when this happens; how difficult it is to define these pinpoints of time.

Have you ever tried going to sleep by attempting to remember the last second you were awake? Or maybe it's more like, if one person chases another person in a circle, and that other person is running an iota faster, there comes a time when the chaser is the chased. Yes that's more like it, that's how it is: when the pursuer is being pursued.

Maybe that defines most of my relationships in these last years.

My instinct to take full control of my life was slowly diminishing, and it seemed a little early for that. When I spoke to my pharmacist about it, he advised me to eat royal jelly because, he said, it helps the power of concentration.

'That's your problem. You're not concentrating like you used to.'

He was right. My concentration had begun to wane. I was making a conscious effort to recognise the fact and not succumb to its threat. I was always a good listener but recently words had started to sound mixed up. My mind had sped so out of control that I took someone's last word to be his or her first and believed it to sound like an order, which I was repeatedly on the verge of obeying.

On the bright side, I was aware that confusion was shadowing me, and I was determined to stem the tide.

'You're going on a cruise, eh, Charles? What, on one of those amusement-saturated ships?' I asked, not quite believing him when he told me where he was going to spend his weeks off.

'Yes, isn't that exciting?'

'Ah no! They've had their day, haven't they?'

'I believe not. I'm going with a pile of books and will enjoy reading them as we pass through Norwegian fjords. I don't need anything else. As someone once said, a book is still the greatest one-to-one encounter between two human beings.'

'Who said that?'

'I think I just did.'

'That's a fine quote. We should send it in to *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*. Anyway I thought you told me you get seasick?'

'I do. But only in a dinghy – not a big ship like the one I'll be on.'

'There are no rules when it comes to seasickness on board a moving vessel. You chunderers will no doubt be down in your cabins suffering your individual horrors as you count the seconds that make up the minutes that make up the hours.'

Charles shrugged his shoulders and I sighed.

'Oh, one last thing – and I once gave this advice to my son. If you're feeling sick, eat. Eat, eat. Come what may, and come up what may.'

'Huh!' he scoffed. 'That sort of advice is usually given by those who have never suffered anything as normal as nausea, and can stuff their mouths through a force nine gale, then brag about it.'

I dropped my bag next to my desk, straightened my jacket, opened the top drawer and reached for the small pot of royal jelly. Scooping a small amount onto a teaspoon, I swallowed it down with water.

‘Hello,’ said a voice.

I looked up. I hadn’t even noticed that anyone had walked in. Because of the heat, I’d left the door open and the usual chime of warning hadn’t sounded.

It turned out to be Mr and Mrs Right.

Yes, Mr and Mrs Right they were. And Mr and Mrs Right they are. Mr Right, who scampered about the neighbourhood as if late for something, and entered places as if he was looking for someone, but in fact really just sniffed for anyone who’d listen to his latest complaints and suspicions, with Mrs Right shuffling along in the background.

‘No Charles today?’ he asked me.

‘No,’ I replied. ‘He’s off on a cruise.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, really!’

‘Ah, well maybe you can help me. Do you have that biography of the Apple boss? What’s his name again? You know, the one that died of cancer. Or was it a heart attack? Anyway, I hear it’s rather good.’

I answered with a fixed smile. ‘Sold out I’m afraid. I’m expecting a new batch later this morning.’

‘Such a genius! I mean where would our lives be without him?’ said Mrs Right, and she guffawed with such tooth-white force that I wondered if they were pulling my leg.

‘I will put one aside as soon as they arrive.’

Mr Right eyed me with an ice-cube stare. ‘Don’t bother. I’ll try the other shop by the station. They’ll definitely have it.’

‘Oh yes, bound to. You should have tried them first.’

I knew he loathed me. Why? I wasn’t sure. As he always said abrupt things to my face, I wondered what he was capable of saying behind my back. Or does it not work like that?

If people talk to one another openly, are they less likely to gossip in secret? I still haven’t found the answer to that one. It’s when someone starts talking badly about another that I’m at once suspicious they could do the same about me.

There goes my mind again. Press the stop button.

I thought life would get easier, especially in my head, but I was wrong. The same things exist. All that changes is, they’re magnified.

‘Why are there so few geniuses these days?’ Mr Right asked.

‘Much depends on your definition of genius, my darling husband,’ chipped in Mrs Right.

‘Bugger the definition! I can count today’s geniuses on one hand,’ moaned Mr Right.

Don’t be so despondent, Mr Right, I wanted to say.

Who hasn’t heard greatness in the back rows of the orchestra? Haven’t we all read letters that match the best literature, or seen magnificent works of art produced

by basement dwellers, witnessed actions as kindly as those of saints, or found someone who was funnier at a dinner party than a paid comedian?

The genius is wonderful, but only representative.

I said nothing, though, and let Mrs Right fill the pause.

‘We are going next door to the organic restaurant,’ she said. ‘We just love it there, mixing with the younger people.’

She ever so slightly stressed the word *younger* as if she was hinting at some moral disapprobation, but I recognised my own mind games were in full flow. Maybe it was the heat, or the sense that everything was beginning to drown me.

‘Do you ever go there?’ she asked.

‘Well it is next door, so it would be difficult to avoid,’ I answered. ‘But yes, I do. And it’s very good. You should try the berry nice smoothie, it’s absolutely delicious.’

I smiled.

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As the Rights departed, two women walked in. They were an odd pair, and their presence seemed an intrusion. It really is amazing, how some people just annoy the hell out of you. Worryingly for me, it was beginning to happen more and more. The two women started to examine the wide table stacked with the latest publications.

‘Let me know if I can help?’ I asked, looking up from my desk.

There was silence. They seemed not to have understood. They did not speak the same language as me.

‘Let me know if I – can – help - you?’ I asked, taking my time over those words.

The younger one, perhaps the daughter, walked over to my desk and peered over my shoulder at the open book I’d been reading. She was straining her eyes like a commuter at someone else’s newspaper.

I held the novel up.

‘A nice ordinary book taken from a nice ordinary shop,’ I said.

The woman stood still, looked at me as if I was mad and made a signal to the older one. She put one hand in front of her face so that her thumb touched the nose, with fingers spread out, and wiggled.

I was sure the action had the same meaning, wherever she came from, as it does here: to express contempt – and, figuratively, show a lack of respect for someone.

Charming!

The elder’s hair was long and parted in the middle. The colour was so black, it was blue. She looked at me, pressing her lips together with what I hoped, but could not guarantee, was a smile.

‘You give me advice?’ she asked.

‘I will try.’

‘I have pain in stomach.’

‘A bad stomach?’ I replied, a little confused.

Why would she be telling me the state of her health?

I started a game of charades, circling my stomach with my right hand. There was a brief pause and I saw the woman about to take her chance, presumably expert at exploiting these moments, by pointing to the top shelves.

The top shelves were crammed with a collection of rare first editions.

‘I’d go to the pharmacy first if I were you,’ I said. ‘Medicine is far better than first editions when it comes to this sort of problem.’

I sensed my voice was unconvincing. Perhaps it was the firm shake of her head.

‘Or try next door,’ I suggested. ‘The mint with dandelion tea is good for a bad stomach.’

The woman again looked confused. Who could blame her? She didn’t speak much English and the way I was jumping from one suggestion to another wasn’t exactly reassuring. She nodded at her friend, who was standing to my side. She had something of a squint, the sort that has you wondering which of the two eyes is the one looking at you.

‘You cannot breathe enough before death,’ I thought I heard her mutter.

Whaaat?

Did she say what I thought she did?

She yawned and stretched. I looked back at the other one, who was at the point of opening *The Rachel Papers*.

‘I think you’d like that one.’

The younger one let out a sneeze and I saw particles fall into the open book. I would have usually offered a conciliatory ‘Bless you!’ but instead, I snapped at her.

‘Coughs and sneezes spread diseases!’

The tone of my voice shocked her into dropping Martin Amis on the floor.

I let out a deep sigh and eased myself out of my chair.

She bent down, picked up the book and snapped it closed. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said, and shoved it into my hands. She then frisked her pockets and looked to her left, right and over my shoulder, acting as if suddenly remembering she’d left something at home.

‘Let’s go,’ she said, signalling to her friend.

The two of them left the shop.

‘Next time perhaps, when your health is better, you’ll buy something?’ I called after them.

I realised they hadn’t heard me. They were already scurrying down the street.

I went back to my chair with voices complaining behind me. I didn’t like those women. They’d made me feel uneasy.

Why waste your time even talking to people like that?

I was about to reply to myself when I noticed a pile of papers had slipped from my desk. I debated whether or not to bend and pick them up. My lower back had made that simple decision complicated.

How many of us have procrastinated for so long that, by the time we take action, the original reason for that action has evaporated? And we’re left standing there, denying vociferously that the action was one we ever intended to take in the first place.

Nevertheless, stooping down, I started to tidy up. Was it my imagination that told my nostrils there was a sour smell when I returned my desk, or told my eyes something was wrong, as if someone had been tampering with my things? I believe that can happen with burglars, when they leave a place in an over-the-top tidy

condition, with a load of cushion-pumping and ashtray-emptying likely to be noticeable by the owner and no one else.

Talking of burglars ...

Where's my bag?

'I've been robbed!' I cried.

As if right on cue, Colin, my plumber, nonchalantly walked in, shirt tugging at his puffed-up stomach. He was taking a drag from his hand-rolled cigarette and talking incessantly into his mobile phone. After he finished his call, and without drawing breath, he complained.

'How can I keep a family of seven on my wage, with the price of everything going up? Each government worse than the last!'

'Excuse me!' I interrupted.

'Anything wrong?' Colin asked.

'I've been robbed.'

'What?'

'They stole my bag!'

I rushed to the door and looked left, right, left. There was no sign of the two women. I made a half-hearted dash down the street but they were gone.

When I returned to the shop, Colin was puffing away.

'Thanks for your help,' I panted.

'Should I call the police?'

'Yes, why don't you?'

Colin flipped open his mobile phone and started to dial as if he'd called the police many times before. As he did, a thousand thoughts stampeded through my mind.

I was sure something important was in my bag. But what?

'They'll be here in a few minutes.'

'Good,' I said, before thinking out loud, 'I've only been robbed once before.' I looked into Colin's eyes. 'Actually, make that two times.'

He started to roll another cigarette.

'Roll me one!' I ordered.

'I didn't think you smoked.'

'Well I do now.'

We puffed away outside on the street. Colin broke our silence.

'Excuse me, Mr Hammond. This might not be the best time to ask, but was my money in your bag?'

'Money? You mean that exorbitant fee you're charging for the boiler?'

'Er, yes.'

'Yes, all gone!' I replied. 'Every last pound.'

'Oh dear. That's not good,' I heard him mutter.

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I knew he was a plain-clothes policeman as soon as I saw him walking towards the shop. If he'd been wearing a raincoat, he might have turned up the lapels in the manner of a screen detective.

He knocked twice on the frame of the open door.

‘Come in!’ I said with exaggerated composure.

He took a step inside and a sudden breath of air blew in with him.

‘Mr Hammond? DC David Brown from Chelsea CID. Has there been a robbery?’

My feigned coolness evaporated. ‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘I mean, no thank you. I mean yes, there has.’

He gave a reassuring smile and looked around the shop like a cricket batsman inspecting the field.

‘Let me get some details on what happened,’ he said, taking out his pen and notebook.

I was about to reply, as coherently as possible, when the nearby town hall clock struck noon. On most days it could give me a bit of a start, but on this occasion it made me literally jump. Maybe one day I’ll remember in time – although waiting for an alarm can be as disquieting as the alarm itself.

The policeman saw my fear and with a voice that was a mix of headmaster, airport announcer and fairground stallholder said, ‘Take your time now.’

‘I’d like to say how much I appreciate you getting here so quickly.’

‘All part of the job, sir.’

I spoke slowly as a single voice throbbed in my head recalling the sequence of events that had just taken place.

‘Can you tell me exactly what was taken?’

I answered like a schoolboy reciting his tables. ‘A canvas bag with a Union Jack design on it, containing five hundred pounds cash in fifties, a novel by Nathanael West, a small notebook with some jottings ... Shit! It had my house keys ... and ... and ... Oh, God! A photograph!’

‘A photograph?’ the policeman queried.

‘Yes. A black-and-white one.’

‘A black-and-white photograph, you say?’

I nodded.

‘Five hundred pounds. Did you say all in fifty-pound notes?’

Again I nodded.

He let out a deep sigh and asked further questions about the thieves, then more questions I thought I’d already given answers to. He asked them at a pace not dissimilar to the speed at which a boxer fires jabs at his opponent. The only problem was, I thought we were on the same side.

‘What’s the likelihood of finding the photograph?’ I asked, between breaths. Now, nothing else mattered. I coughed to clear my dry throat as if simply asking the question had tightened it.

‘To be frank, sir – and if a man isn’t frank, what can he be? – but these thieves will only be interested in the cash. They’re not interested in anything else. Around here, they usually throw the bag and all the other stuff into the Thames,’ he replied.

His answer winded me. I could hardly find the air to breathe.

The policeman sucked in his waist and tucked his notebook away into his jacket. He made no recognition that I was in pain.

That casual remark of his, about it being unlikely anything would be found, felt like broken glass piercing me. Before leaving, he bemoaned the passing of the good

old days when people could be trusted and front doors could be left unlocked. His eyes were those of an old dog, the twinkle diminished years ago.

‘I’d better be going. No time to lose as they say.’

I collapsed into my chair and another conversation started in my head.

Look what age does: you lose your closest friends and replace them with imaginary ones.

‘Excuse me, sir, one more question ...’

The policeman had made a quick return.

‘... Just before I start my enquiries, what was the photograph of?’

II

Five days before Christmas.

I can’t claim to be one of those who pull back the curtains and shout with joy at another day but, once awake, I am fully awake. A sign of a good night or a troubled conscience? I haven’t forgotten anything from that day in December 1988, not even lying with my head propped up by two pillows, in a sort of meditation, thinking that in the New Year I might finally break free from working in the City of London and change career.

Ah, that would be something! How does that quote go?

Fear knocked at the door. Faith opened. And there was no one there.

The hot water wasn’t working. A December morning and no hot water, no problem – especially after suffering the indignity of those early morning showers at boarding school, where one had to suffer the chill ‘without murmur, without sound.’

I put my head under the cold water and had a quick shave with an extra dollop of soap. Shaving is better with hot water, and I almost cut myself with my razor on the rim of my nostril – always a bad place to draw blood, adding at least ten minutes to your journey into the office.

I slapped on my more expensive lemon-smelling aftershave, which I tended to reserve for special occasions or thoughts. I wiped away a smidgen of foam from behind one ear and walked downstairs to the kitchen to have my daily fix of caffeine.

The silence was golden – or should I say plain yellow, because just as I was thinking how peaceful everything was, the morning post dropped through the letterbox.

The coffee tasted good, so much so that I treated myself to another cup, firmly against my normal rules. But it was Christmas week, after all. I was in no rush. The stock markets had slowed and the days were full of partying rather than buying or selling shares. I would take the morning easy, let myself into the rhythm of the day, smell the coffee.

I picked up the post and was carrying it to the kitchen table when a brown envelope suddenly fell away from the others, apparently of its own accord or perhaps pushed by a poltergeist. When we bought the house, a neighbour had suggested a ghost would share our lives. My wife Kate and I laughed it off. We were more charmed by the prospect of living with a piece of history.

‘I bet it’s Anne Boleyn,’ Kate had said, and we laughed at the absurdity of it all. Or perhaps we were laughing because we were gloriously happy about moving into our first home.

The envelope made a slapping sound as it landed on the kitchen tiles. I bent down and picked it up. On the back a red-inked stamp bore the words *Horizon Travel*.

Ah, what a relief! My son’s airline ticket had arrived, just in the nick of time. I was treating him to a business class return to New York for his Christmas present. He’d fallen madly in love with a girl on the other side of the Atlantic. He’d said he felt guilty about leaving me at Christmas, nervously questioning whether I would be okay. Of course I’d be okay, I told him. And how was I to argue, anyway? I could hardly complain that he was newly experiencing the joy of a true love and discovering the real purpose of life – maybe even preparing to start a new life.

The plane was due to leave Heathrow the following evening at six. I understood the rule to be no ticket, no travel – but I may have been wrong. Anyway, the mini-drama of talking to the travel agent and their promise that ‘it was sent a week ago’ were now over.

Luke could travel safely and without concern.

I was about to open the envelope there and then, but for some reason decided I would keep it for later when I had dealt with the more mundane post. I set it on the edge of the table, much as someone might place the best morsel on the side of the plate to keep it for the very end of the meal.

Around a third of the post proved to be Christmas cards, from people I hadn’t heard from or spoken to in years. The majority of items were special offers for summer holidays, most of which were soon torn to shreds and strewn across the table like discarded betting slips. One I did keep, mainly because of its accidental humour: a leaflet advertising a summer cruise. *Book early to avoid disappointment* was the headline, followed by a list of countries it would visit, ending with a peculiar warning about being careful not to fall overboard. Pessimistic or what?

Do not try to swim, the last paragraph warned. Lie on your back. Save energy. You should be able to do this for twenty-four hours. The ship will eventually turn to find you.

Perhaps this was a lesson about life: don’t flap, have faith, you’re always in with a chance of rescue. How reassuring! And, just below the paragraph, was the request for a deposit.

I sat up with a jolt. The phone had rung. Back then I still had one of those lovely old handsets with a proper bell.

‘Hello.’

‘Yes?’

‘Hello?’

I paused.

‘Daddy, it’s Luke!’

I laughed and said, ‘I know it’s you, silly. I was just expecting someone else.’

Now it was his turn to laugh. ‘Anyone I should know?’

‘Not really. I’ll tell you later.’

We’d been invited to a charity do later that evening. Something about keeping the little zoo in the local park open. When I say zoo, I don’t mean lions and tigers, more

like donkeys and peacocks. Even so, close to Christmas it was a sell-out. I presumed that some of the locals found it hard to turn down the invitation. One positive thing about giving to something near you, something you could quite possibly see every day, is it cancels out that time-worn excuse of refusing to give to charity because 'there's no guarantee it'll get to where it's supposed to'.

'Don't forget it's black tie tonight,' I said.

'Let's take a taxi. I want us to get really drunk tonight. Get into the Christmas spirit so to speak,' Luke said.

'That sounds fun but make sure you don't mix your drinks.'

'Dad, please!' Luke replied, in a certain tone he'd used for as long as I could remember.

'Oh, before I forget, your airline ticket has arrived. The panic is over ... I'll bring them over later.'

I reached for the envelope while talking and started to pull out the airline ticket.

'No, you look after them. You're still taking me to the airport tomorrow, aren't you?'

Of course I was. I tucked the ticket back in its envelope and shoved it briskly under the cruise leaflet, like a secret agent disturbed while photographing an enemy report.

'You try to stop me. I'm taking the whole day off work tomorrow.'

'Great.'

'Oh, here's a thing. You don't want to take your girlfriend on a cruise, do you? I just received this rather bizarre leaflet advertising a summer cruise with a footnote advising how to survive if you accidentally fall overboard.'

I read through each point as if I were standing in a pulpit.

'It sounds as useful as when you told me what to do when chased by a bull.'

'But you were going to Spain,' I replied.

'I was spending a week at the Marbella Club! What did you say again? Oh yes!' Luke began to imitate my voice. 'If being chased by a bull one should lie down in the middle of the field and pretend one is dead or, if that doesn't work, divert their short-sighted attention by throwing something in one direction and then run like hell in the other. Jesus, if that's not a contradiction I don't know what is.'

I tried to interrupt but there was no stopping him.

'What about the time I visited Kenya and you advised me, if I were bitten by a snake, not to panic as this increases the beat of one's heart and therefore the speed at which the venom is pumped round the body? Also, not to forget to kill the snake and take it to the hospital, so the doctors know which serum to give you ... I mean, really, Dad!'

'I was only trying to be helpful.'

'I know,' he said lovingly. And I felt the warmth glide down the phone.

I finished the call with, 'I've got to be going. I'll see you tonight: seven o'clock sharp!'

∴

It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child. As I walked towards the tube station, I thought of those pertinent words by Picasso. Let's try to erase the cluttered; I knew I needed change. I had to start to get things done, to get a move on. Much of what happened in those days was like a cloud that, like the moment itself, soon changes, passes and is never to be repeated.

As I breathed in the cold morning air, I decided in the coming months I'd quit my job and do what I really needed to do.

'What lies ahead?' I spoke out loud.

'No one knows. Just remember problems are always less difficult than you dread them to be,' a stranger said, clearly overhearing me.

I looked at this wire-haired man who stopped, took out a pipe and a pouch from his blazer pocket and, pressing some tobacco down into the bowl with a thumb, extricated a match from a matchbox, lit the match and then the tobacco all with one hand, turned, smiled at me like an old sailor in one of those frozen fish advertisements and wished me a cheerful farewell.

I paid for my ticket and waited for the train. By the size of the crowd I could tell the wait had already been too long. How I wanted my liberty: to skim, to survive, to arrive. To create that chance so that everywhere is somewhere to reach. To be happy knowing that the only thing of which we can be sure is the next heartbeat.

The only real question we can ask ourselves is just how many times will we breathe this breath, step this spot, and write this word? That's what I was thinking that December Tuesday, standing on the roofless platform shadowed by the early morning grey sky.

∴

The previous evening had been my office Christmas party and my secretary had got tipsy, or should I say plastered. Miss Varley had crossed that invisible line into vagueness and vitriol. I noticed Mr Lloyd, one of the traders, was trying to take full advantage of the situation, hoping to get a favour that on a sober day would have been impossible.

Everything is possible if you strike at the right moment.

At one point, Miss Varley swayed uneasily over and said, 'I'm not a whore, you know.'

What was she talking about? I never thought she was. Although I admit I did have a secret fantasy about having an office affair with her, I'd resisted, the old adage being to never shit on your own doorstep.

'Poor creature,' I thought I heard someone say.

Others nodded their agreement.

Another said, 'Those who can't face life should be forced to pull themselves together or seek help.'

'Or at least stay clear of the rest of us,' said someone else.

'Why don't you stay clear of us, then?' another added aggressively.

'Why, you ...!'

A row, fight, even a battle, threatened to break out. It doesn't take much to get some people wound up.

When I turned away from the potential scrap, Miss Varley was pouring more wine into Mr Lloyd's glass. He paused, smelled it and was about to take a sip, as if at the altar rail, when she grabbed the glass and refused to hand it back.

She glanced over to check I was watching.

Mr Lloyd frowned but said simply, 'Don't worry. Let's use another one!'

He picked up a clean glass from the table and held it in Miss Varley's direction to be filled. She hesitated, let out a sozzled laugh and eventually poured out a little of the wine, shrugging her shoulders as if to suggest what will be, will be.

All was calm for a moment but in the time it took me to move to the other side of the room, the wine had been spilled onto Mr Lloyd's suit and Miss Varley had collapsed to the floor. Mr Lloyd moved as if to help her. She brushed him away, as if to say that he was already too late and, in any case, as he had no true intention of helping her, he should not make a belated pretence.

She dusted down her long grey dress and shuffled off in my direction. As she headed towards me, I couldn't help but hear her whimpering. The noise passed through many stages until reaching a crescendo: tittering, giggling, gurgling, gargling, laughing, and guffawing – until, at the top of her voice, she started to cheer.

It was time to come to Miss Varley's rescue. As my father had once told me, 'when people have drunk too much, just place a blanket over them and let them sleep.'

He was right. Is there anything quite so nice as having a blanket put over you when you're tired and inebriated?

'Miss Varley, I think you need to get home, don't you? Let's call you a taxi.'

'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. You're the last person in the world I would want to embarrass.'

And, quite uncontrollably, she started to weep.

I ordered the taxi driver to take her straight home. 'Make sure she's safe,' I said, handing him the fare.

As the taxi began to move away, she wound down the window and shouted out into the cold night, 'Why don't you ever call me?'

∴

I walked into the office as Miss Varley was calmly pulling out a sheet of paper from the typewriter. It was a short, well-written resignation letter, which she laid on her desk.

Picking it up, I asked her to follow me into my office.

'Sit down, Miss Varley.'

I looked at her rather beautiful face made even more so because of her vulnerability. Embarrassed, she shuffled and played with the hem of her navy blue dress.

Her eyes said, 'I am very sorry and feel foolish.'

She started to cry.

'Hey, stop that,' I said, handing her a clean handkerchief from my pocket, with which she dabbed her blue eyes. 'Let's move on. There are a lot worse things than

getting drunk at the office party. Ask the insane, the terminally ill, or the battered wife trying to control their drink!’

Her face dropped.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘That was a silly thing to say. What I really mean is, the show must go on. Mustn’t it? Well ... Technically speaking, it doesn’t have to, I suppose, but we can be almost certain it will, in some shape or form, so we might as well say that it must, preferably in the shape or form we most want it ... Is that clear? No? Yes? Good! Now go wipe your eyes. And stop worrying.’

She looked unsure.

‘Valerie, I said don’t worry,’ I reiterated. ‘Everything will be all right.’

She stood up, almost gave a curtsey and left my office.

∴

I glanced at the company’s annual report and took notes of one or two, maybe three or four, even fourteen, forty, relevant sentences for my department. I did it in a matter-of-fact, dispassionate manner. I then dropped the thin, green file onto a junior’s desk. I asked him to arrange for copies to be distributed by hand or post, or even faxed to clients around the globe.

‘Make sure you give it a read over the Christmas break, it will give you a good overview on the company,’ I said, in a paternal tone, to the gawky young man who wore glasses the size of plates.

He’d no doubt try to read the damn thing but be very unlikely to get beyond page two. He might attempt to browse through the rest when he had nothing better to do, but almost certainly wouldn’t be able to take it all in. The report is dull. Was dull. Would be forever dull. I bet most of the copies around the world would find their way into shredders, wastepaper baskets, and rubbish bins.

∴

The phone was ringing when I returned to my office.

‘Hello!’

It was Luke, asking if I wanted to join him for lunch.

‘I am sorry, I can’t get away.’

‘No problem. I’m meeting some friends. I was just wondering if you were around.’

‘Okay. See you tonight.’

It was a conversation no more than the length of those sentences, slowly diminishing into the ether: short, missing the exact moment of its significance but it was a conversation, is a conversation, that has stayed in my mind for years.

As I put the telephone down, Miss Varley walked in. Her eyes were now clear.

‘Can I get you anything?’

‘I don’t think so. I’m just going out to buy Luke a sweater. It gets cold in New York this time of the year; knowing him, he won’t have packed enough warm clothes.’

‘You’re a good father you know, and he’s a lovely boy. I’ll never forget you telling me what he said to you when he heard the news of his mother’s death.’

I shook my head. For one instant there was true silence: that near-true nothing sought after by audio purists, poets and meditators.

‘Sorry, have I overstepped the mark again?’

I shook my head again.

It was eleven years ago. I couldn’t remember telling Miss Varley about that day but I suppose I must have.

∴

The soul has no age and, as I was once told, the age of a human being shouldn’t necessarily be calculated from the moment of birth but from the time at which the human starts to live honestly.

For Luke, that time started in the womb.

∴

When I was a student at Oxford, I lived opposite a musician who would practice from dusk to dawn. At night, I would listen from my bed to the vintage tones of her grand piano. Sometimes she’d leave her window open and I’d hear more clearly the mad merry dance. Or was it a war between the hammers and wires?

For nearly a term, I didn’t meet my neighbour. My housemate had told me how beautiful she was and that she’d taken up teaching the piano to pay her rent.

‘I want to learn how to play piano with her,’ he enthused. ‘Some deliciously corny repeatable tunes, like *Night and Day*.’

So, he took up classes in the flat opposite. Or so I thought. When I asked him how it was going, he said in a huff that it wasn’t. His piano teacher didn’t date her students – especially those who asked her out during their first lesson.

Although I remember laughing and probably thinking that was my type of girl, I didn’t give it another thought because I was dating an Irish girl who occupied my spare time both physically and mentally. But then came the day I watched this beautiful creature cycling down our road.

My eyes followed her to the house opposite. I immediately knew who she must be. The very next day, I took up the piano.

My teacher’s name was Kate. Kate Lowther.

I married Kate six months after we first met. I proposed to her in the middle of one of my classes and my housemate was my best man.

This isn’t Kate’s story but, when I talk of Luke, I feel her presence.

So much of Kate was similar to Luke. All corny but true. He had his mother’s green eyes, her hair the colour of Peruvian brown. How their smiles would linger long after the laughter. Most of all, they shared that sensitivity, which touched everyone they encountered.

All of us are made up from aspects of family. What do they say? If you don’t know where you came from, you won’t know where you’re going. Better to say, let’s try to commemorate them – for how many of us know the names, let alone the life stories or characters of even our great-grandparents?

Although Kate had been sick for some time – two years to be exact – there was no indication she would die that Monday morning.

‘Sick people take hostages,’ she said, whispering the pitiful words. Soon after, she closed her eyes and never regained consciousness.

I escaped the house as soon as I could. I yearned to be my son’s side.

‘I’ll keep the news to myself,’ the headmaster of his prep school blithely said. ‘We do think it works better coming from a family member.’

It was a two-hour car journey to Kent. Over the river, across South London, red lights greeted me on every block. I stared out, hands tight on the wheel, rehearsing what I was going to say to Luke. I planned to look straight into his eyes and not for one moment turn away, even if the pain of seeing the sorrow etched on his face became unbearable.

I gripped the driving wheel as if to gather my strength.

‘Come on!’

As I drove through the suburbs, the first bleak thoughts of grief spluttered and eventually gushed over me. How suddenly life can truly change. Yet I didn’t weep on the journey, even though I knew nothing would ever be the same again. My mouth was dry, my eyes felt parched and I was thirsty, but I kept on driving. I was incapable of concentrating on a single thought long enough to make decisions, let alone read road signs. At times, I didn’t know where I was, fumbling for music on the radio and, in the process, missing my turn, needing to double back to get onto the right road again.

I groaned, moaned and bemoaned at regular intervals.

‘If only ... only only ... only only only ...’

I indulged in the blame game: perhaps I could have done more, found a better doctor, taken her to America where they had better clinics, taken Luke out of school to spend more days with his mother?

The grotesque guilt at first flickered and flashed in my mind like fireflies, or camera bulbs flashing in a night-time stadium: lights going on and off, signifying people being born and dying around the globe. And then it began to dazzle me, like a sunset shining through a break in darkened clouds, finally blinding me like searchlights shining straight into my eyes.

Whatever I knew about guilt – that it was, in fact, a purposeless pastime that sucked the blood out of the soul, and sent you deeper into a trough of self-concern – I still couldn’t stop myself.

I reached the Kent coast. I opened the car window to breathe in the English sea air. I could hear the sound of gulls returning to shore after a long-distance hunt into the wilds of the North Sea. They tend to follow the ships, gliding above, aloof until, suddenly, they plunge *en masse* with a squawk and screech towards the remnants of meals, chucked overboard.

Seagulls, I’ve been told, are the souls of dead sailors.

And what, pray, happens to the souls of the rest of us?

Then, quickly, my mood changed. I began to feel the start of that delicious tingling in the head that usually comes from the perfect blend of peace of mind, a slight current of air and an unexpected small act of kindness on the part of someone else.

It was beautiful, and I believed my late wife had sent her love to help me through those last, late miles until I reached the school.

When I arrived, the school grounds were deserted. There were no nets on the goal posts and the swimming pool was covered. There was an eerie sense of solitude as I made my way to the headmaster's office.

'Come in,' the headmaster said, in a tone that gave me the impression it had been rehearsed for ages, in order to make his voice more refined than it really was.

'How do you do,' he said in a self-satisfied, hearty fashion.

'Good trip down?'

Oh yes, headmaster, thank you.

'I'll get him for you,' he said, picking up his phone.

'Let him finish his lesson first. I don't want him dragged out of class in front of all his friends. I think that would be unkind, don't you?'

The headmaster paused and said, 'Quite so, quite so.'

And we sat facing each other in one of the quietest silences I had ever heard. I mean, quieter than any examination hall or library, early morning bus, changing room of a losing (or worse, relegated) team, place of worship or listening submarine.

'Won't be long now,' the headmaster said.

I nodded. Time was moving slowly and that was my excuse for a plethora of examples of silence: here I was, waiting for my son to tell him his mother had died, and I was making a list.

The headmaster coughed loudly out of nowhere. To clear a dry throat like the one I had, or warn me that the bell was about to ring? Indeed, it did, loudly – very loudly – followed by a cacophony of trampling feet and high-pitched voices.

I jumped out of my skin.

'I'll go and get him and will leave you two alone.'

I sat there without reply, gormlessly staring into space. While I waited those long, long minutes, I spoke out loud a prayer for the dead.

Everyone loved her.

She was part of the sun.

*Now she is spared the cruelties and crimes of this mortal life,
and can return to the sun to which she belongs.*

Everyone loved her.

*For us that sun is a little duller today,
though it will brighten on the morrow.*

I shivered. I heard the sound of a voice. Was that Luke's? I shivered again. No. So I looked down. I looked again. I strained my eyes. I tried to do the right thing. I made a wish.

Oh, I wish I didn't have to be saying what I'm about to say. That life was different.

I wait, I am waiting, will wait, will be waiting, waited, have waited, have been waiting, had waited, had been waiting, will have waited, will have been waiting ...

And then *whoosh!* – the door opened and my son was standing there, eleven years old in school uniform, there in front of me, looking straight into my eyes.

‘Your mother died this morning.’

I said five words. I just said them.

‘Your mother died this morning.’

I held out my arms and I hugged my son. My beautiful, beautiful son.

Here I am, here I was, here I am.

I heard my son’s cry. No hate, no blame. This is our story and we must deal with it together. At least we have each other.

‘Go and pack, Luke. I’m going to take you home.’

‘And I won’t be coming back here, will I, Daddy?’

‘You won’t?’

‘No! We have to look after each other now,’ so said my eleven- year-old son, and he said it with a kind of urgency that told me he believed we should try to spend every day together.

When he left the room, I finally broke down.

∴

I had not seen her. I was sure I had not seen her. It was obviously a trick of my imagination.

I felt her presence around the house.

Like so many people in mourning, Luke seemed to be trying to make amends. Somehow he felt guilty, blamed himself for her death. Why, I will never know. I could pretend to be a leading psychiatrist and try to explain, have an answer for Luke’s innermost feelings during that first year following on from Kate’s death, but I can’t.

All I do know is, the house was consumed by silence. Rarely did Luke lift his eyes to meet mine. If only I could’ve found the words to say in those few months, to tell him it was no one’s fault, that life is given and taken away, inexplicably. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t even look after myself, and felt ashamed that I wasn’t being the father I had hoped to be.

I quickly found a place for him at a prep school in North London.

‘How very lucky,’ friends would say, ‘it is so difficult to get in there.’

It wasn’t luck at all. I knew the chairman of the governors, who had dated Kate as a teenager.

‘I kissed her all night,’ he curiously admitted during our phone call.

Aren’t people strange?

‘How lovely,’ I replied.

Luke found comfort in ordinary things, like playing a game of football on a Saturday afternoon: ordinary days, ordinarily passing, full of their ordinary, fine things and ordinary woes – life’s ups, downs and levelling off.

‘Are you okay?’ I’d ask.

‘I’m okay,’ he’d reply.

And I’d leave it there. Too scared to ask follow-up questions, many of which I’d rehearse at four o’clock on most mornings. It was about the same time when Luke crept into my bedroom one Sunday.

‘Are you awake, Dad?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ I whispered.

‘You know what next Friday is?’

I grabbed his hand. I knew.

‘It’s a year since Mum died. Can we go to her grave and say hello to her?’

‘Of course. Of course we can.’

Luke leaned down and gave me a deep hug. It was my first hug in many months. I understood in that moment that maybe, and I repeat maybe, he just didn’t want to get too close since his mother died. The pain of losing one parent is too devastating to risk the thought of losing another. Keep your distance, it’ll help. I could’ve been wrong but something told me it was true when I felt his warm breath close to my neck.

The night before our visit to the cemetery, after Luke had gone to bed, I opened a bottle of wine to keep me company. Company? Wine was my best friend in those days. Wine helped me to wash away the hours I knew I’d have been sharing with Kate if she’d still been alive. I drank to soak up the pain. Does that make sense?

The morning of Kate’s anniversary, my head was throbbing. The extra bottle of wine might’ve been excessive. I looked in the mirror and thought I might be sick at any moment. I sat on the edge of the bath, waiting for the room to return to stability. I thought for a moment that today, of all days, I wished I had a clear head – no whirlwind of the eyes, no throb, no dryness of the tongue.

I picked myself up, literally placing my hands under my bottom. I walked into the kitchen to exorcise the previous night’s intake. I saw one bottle of wine with still enough left in it for a morning slurp. I poured it into a fresh glass and regretted it instantly because I would have to clean it, before our housekeeper Lidia arrived and caught my sneaky retreat into drink.

I think Lidia was starting to suspect my late-night habit had become more than just a habit. The previous week I was sure I heard a *tut-tut* as we passed each other on the stairs.

I wanted to say, ‘Don’t judge me, Lidia,’ but in truth she was right.

I needed to change.

I stood at my son’s bedroom door looking at him. He was asleep, still in a deep dream. I saw one leg shake intermittently, the summer morning still grey, the knot on brow tied tightly.

The night before surged from both ends of my spectrum of sense: one minute near to tears of joy, the next closer to tears of anguish.

I went to switch on the kettle but instead I opened the cupboard next to the cooker, pulling out a bottle of brandy. I poured, the neck of the bottle rattling against the glass. I drank the wine in one swig, like swallowing medicine as a child. Nothing changed; the separation was evident, refused to shift.

Looking for a cigarette I hoped would help, I found a crumpled packet of Marlboros had fallen onto the floor below the kitchen table. I lit one up and inhaled a deep drag. The brandy had begun to numb me, the unearthly hour of the morning becoming more bearable as a consequence. I stood and paced over to the kettle, relieved to find it was full of water. I hated having to fill it up. I pressed the red switch and waited for the water to boil. The intensity of the day was so unmistakable, my damn head still throbbing.

Won’t anything work?

I popped an aspirin into a glass of water and hoped it would do some good. As I swallowed, the sun came up, shining directly into my eyes and giving me a lithium shot.

It was going to be a warm day. I decided to shave before I woke Luke up. Best he slept a little longer. Twelve years old and he could still sleep, whatever the day promised.

I needed to be strong. Strong for both of us. I had to be the father I knew I could, would, be.

I felt the coarseness of my beard growth. I didn't want to be unshaven. Seeing someone unshaved always gave me a sense of mourning. I squeezed too much foam onto my face. I wiped half of it off and started, in a meditative state, to shape the remainder into a thick white beard.

So this is how I'll look in the coming years.

I examined my eyes in the mirror. And what eyes!

My hair wet from the splash of water, I shaved carefully and precisely. I cut against the edges, which usually drew blood, but not that day. I leaned over the sink and splashed warm water over my face.

It was the perfect shave. That was something.

I slapped aftershave over my chin and neck. It was the same aftershave Kate gave me for my birthday, two years before. It sunk into my face and just as I was letting out a deep sigh, I heard Lidia arrive with a slam of the front door.

I hurried to Luke's room. He was lying in the exact same position as earlier but snoring a little louder.

'Luke, darling. It's time to get up.'

He let out the widest of yawns and immediately smiled as if he was looking forward to sharing the day.

'Are you okay?' I asked.

'Yes I'm fine,' he answered with another yawn.

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We hailed a taxi outside the tube station. It had been a bad summer for taxis, no rain but a storm of inflation.

'Where to, guv?'

'Highgate. The cemetery.'

The drive was interspersed with chat about how badly our football team played last season.

'Better next year, what do you think, guv?'

'Yes, better next year,' I replied not thinking, not interested.

But Luke was having none of it. He was keen to pursue the conversation and test the driver's football knowledge.

As we pulled up to the cemetery, the two of them were laughing over a player's laziness in running back to defend for his team.

'They should sell him!' Luke said, and the cab driver guffawed in agreement.

We had found the perfect ride to distract us from the coming hour.

As we walked towards the plot, I started to weep far more than I had on the day of the funeral, when we had been surrounded by anguish and cries of pain. The suffering from the clustered grouping had been overwhelming. My only consolation had been ordinary hugs from relative strangers, whispering their ‘I am terribly sorry’ words of comfort.

‘Your mother had the most beautiful smile,’ I suddenly said.

Luke said nothing but smiled just like his mother used to.

I recited some words. The same words I said to myself when I waited to break the news to Luke.

Everyone loved her. She was part of the sun ...

We didn’t stay long. We didn’t want to stare at a tombstone that read *Kate Hammond, Beloved Wife and Mother*. The simplicity of the epitaph made the whole damn waste, the tragedy of life, seemingly fit. It didn’t need a description of personality: generous, warm, kind, a mother so passionate for life and always so ... happy.

And then Luke said something I found strange.

‘I never saw her cry,’ he said.

‘Didn’t she cry when we dropped you off at prep school?’

And he shook his head.

But she did, I remembered.

Kate had looked down at Luke with a gravity that made her face so very beautiful. She’d taken a deep breath and her tearful eyes had creased.

‘It won’t be long, darling, before you’re back with us in London,’ she said. I want you to promise that you’ll be brave. Promise me now ...’

And she had knelt, and I know he must have smelled her skin.

Her skin, with the scent of freshly sliced apples.

As we walked away from the cemetery up the hill, our silence was broken by the scream of an ambulance speeding by, followed by another and another. Three altogether.

Oh dear, I thought.

At the same time, Luke turned to me. ‘I’ve never seen that before,’ he said. ‘Two, perhaps. But three? That can’t be good.’

I felt his hand grab my sleeve, reaching for reassurance. As I felt my shirt being tugged, I thought, *I’ll always keep you safe, my son*. I should have said it out loud – but, like so many things when you reflect back on your life, I didn’t.

‘Shall we go in?’ he asked, as we walked past a rural-looking pub with tables outside.

I answered with a smile and led him in through a small oak door.

A man was propped against the bar, gazing down into his near-empty glass. ‘It can’t be that bad,’ I wanted to say. We gave each other a nod: a ‘so you come to the pub early as well’ sort of greeting.

The pub was surprisingly full. It must have been just past midday. An old lady sat at a small table, drinking her gin and tonic deliberately and when she caught the eye of the man propping up the bar, she lifted her nose as if trying to avoid a bad smell.

One alcoholic judging another.

‘A Coca-Cola ...’ I asked and then paused before saying, ‘One for me as well, please.’

No more drinking. No more excuses. I had to look after Luke and not spend my time wallowing in self-pity.

‘Father and son?’ the pub landlord asked with the smirk of an over-friendly cop.

‘Yes,’ Luke replied proudly.

We walked outside with our drinks and packets of salt and vinegar crisps. We sat at a table next to a young family celebrating a birthday. The father had received a camera from his wife, and was very happy. It was a Leica – well, at least that’s what it said on the box – and he handled it gently. He asked an old man shuffling from table to table whether he would mind shooting a family snap. The man had been begging, so this was his chance to earn some cash.

Snap!

He was duly paid, earning his fifty pence with a minimal amount of work.

The weather was handing out a soporific mood, with many of those gathered at the pub looking half-asleep, with their mouths slightly open. Luke let out another of his yawns and covered his mouth with his right hand.

‘Sorry,’ he said.

‘Your mother would have liked it here.’

‘What do you think she’d be drinking?’ Luke asked.

‘Probably a glass of white wine.’

‘Would you go and buy her one?’

I paused and said, ‘Of course I will.’

And so I went in and bought my late wife a glass of wine, putting it down in front of an empty seat.

Luke frowned. ‘There’s so much I don’t know about her,’ he said. ‘It’s funny how, until you lose someone, you don’t think about it, do you?’

‘Ask me,’ I said. ‘Ask me anything you want.’

Life is one long ‘if only.’ But it wasn’t on that warm afternoon. I answered everything he wanted to know: from when Kate and I had first kissed (Bardwell Road, Oxford) to who chose the name Luke (she did), to what her favourite colour was (blue).

Luke spoke more softly than I’d ever heard him before, leaning forward to tell me how he felt those first few months after she died, how he thought of when she smiled, how he heard her voice calling out, ‘Dinner’s ready!’

And he let out a laugh as he remembered how his mum always got cross that I was late to the table for dinner.

‘Don’t all wives do that?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve never been married but when I am, I’ll let you know.’

I was happy to hear his humour again. I’d spent so long imagining his dark thoughts when I caught him sometimes looking out onto the street, quite still and silent, his head reflected in windows: a thousand angles, telling a thousand stories.

Have we got a cure for dying?

Can anyone truly be trained in God?

Is Luke’s mother watching us from that crow’s nest in the sky?

From that afternoon on, we spoke openly with each other. Even the early teenage years you'd imagine would be difficult, they weren't. They sped by without drama. Luke passed his common entrance exam to a London day school. There was never any debate as to whether he'd be going back to boarding. No, we spent time together and, although he encouraged me to go out and meet someone, I never took any of my dates seriously. My attention was focused on bringing up my son. I didn't have room for anyone else.

I was about to ask whether Luke wanted another Coke, when a woman at another table fell off her chair. We turned to see her pushing herself up off the ground with one of her arms.

'Time to go,' I suggested.

As we walked away from Highgate, the rain started to fall, with such strength we both thought Kate had ordered it for our entertainment. A loving couple holding hands skipped between the puddles that were quickly forming, now and again having to let go as they jumped in different directions. A man waiting for a bus with his shirt collar pulled up visibly paled in front of my eyes, like a schoolboy smoking his first illicit cigarette. I was just thinking someone should help him when he darted to a nearby house for cover.

Luke stood still, looking up into the rain. I watched as it lashed against his face, now past the point of showing concern that we were both getting drenched. I noticed his hands as he ran them across his face, his cut fingernails a little dirty from the soil of his mother's grave.

The rain on his face made it difficult for me to tell if he was crying. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion until, just as I thought the magnificence of the storm would last for a month, the rain stopped and the sun reappeared like a magic trick. I watched it buffet and bash one large and dark cloud, pressing it to move away towards Kenwood house.

Luke looked into my eyes. 'Shall we get home?'

'Yes, let's go home,' I replied.

We walked past the Hampstead Ponds holding each other's hands, drying off in the now warm afternoon sunshine.

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Bishopsgate was packed with Christmas shoppers. I needed to get the hell out of there, needed to get away from the crowd.

I headed into the first men's store. I was in luck. The finest cashmere from the Highlands of Scotland. The shop assistant was talking to a small man with a nasal voice, who was clearly pretending to be lost only in order to hold a conversation with someone ... or anyone.

'Can we hurry this up?' I said rather too loudly.

They looked round and continued to talk.

I was impatient that morning, as if I knew I should be elsewhere. 'Calm down,' I said to myself. 'Look in a mirror and give yourself a wink,' which is exactly what I did and miraculously for a moment it did indeed calm me.

'I'm looking for a sweater.'

‘V neck or crew?’

‘I’m not sure. It’s for my son who’s off to New York. I think crew – no V – no, crew. What about a polo neck?’

Decisions. Indecision. Actions. Inaction. In the end, we settled on a navy blue polo neck.

‘That should keep your son warm,’ said the assistant. ‘New York can be bitterly cold at this time of the year. I know, I used to live there.’

‘No need to wrap it, just put it in the bag,’ I said.

‘Would you like the receipt?’

‘No, thank you.’

I picked the bag up and walked out.

The supposedly best restaurant in the City was busy – and I mean, very busy. Marco, the maître d, stood guard at the swing doors. He was begging those outside not to move inside until those inside had moved outside, and those inside he was pressing to hurry up and move outside. But those moving outside were having substantial difficulty in making their way through.

I saw the bar area, rocking with laughter. The noise was nearly overwhelming but I was hungry, Marco was always accommodating, and it was evident that to get a table, a certain amount of favouritism was involved. He beckoned me with his eyes and, before anyone had noticed, I was already at my table and ordering lunch.

Marco was asking everyone to calm down, assuring them there was no point in shoving.

‘The food is not going to run away!’ he joked.

‘Well, where is my bloody food, then?’ the man on the next table demanded. He was red in the face. So red, in fact, it was clear this was only the latest in a long line of blood-pressure-raising problems.

He looked sad and angry but I may have been wrong.

‘Excuse me, sir,’ a waiter said. And, with a smile that was as forced as it was wide, he offered me a wicker basket in which lay a bottle of wine, with its head and neck protruding from a white napkin.

It was as if he were introducing me to a baby, wrapped up warm in its cradle.

‘A Christmas gift from Marco.’

I looked at the bottle. At Marco. Back at the bottle.

‘Thank you, Marco!’ I mouthed. ‘Uncork it, please.’

‘A fine wine, sir!’

The waiter started to pour, his moustache twitching.

I smiled to myself, probably my first smile of the day. The uneasiness began to fade. I picked myself up, dusted myself down, and decided to start the day all over again. I sipped my wine and enjoyed it – so much so, I kicked the white tablecloth that reached down towards the floor. I moved instinctively to check for my shopping bag, which I’d set at my side under the table.

‘Where’s my bag?’ I blurted out.

I felt a shudder up my spine. It had been stolen.

Wait a moment – who was that heading for the swing doors?

‘Hey, you! Stop!’

The man was on the street before I barged my way outside.

There he was, bouncing up and down, weaving in and out of the crowd.

I chased him, yelling '*Stop that man!*' and eventually catching the thief, just, by grabbing the tail of his shirt. He struggled free of me only by ripping his shirt, in a way not unlike an armadillo, which sheds its tail when caught.

A silence rippled across the shoppers and a face looked down at me with an expression I can only describe as pregnant.

The woman put a hand on my shoulder and said, 'I think this must be yours.'

It was my shopping bag. With the polo neck sweater safe inside.

'Thank you! In fact, it's really for my son,' I said, calmly dusting myself down.

The chase had lifted my spirits.

As I sat back down in the restaurant, the man with the red face leaned forward, an elbow on the table, his head cupped in one hand and his glass in the other.

'I want to know if I guessed correctly,' he asked drunkenly. 'You let him go, didn't you?'

'Yes. I suppose I did,' I replied.

'Why?'

'I don't know. Perhaps because he was too strong for me. Or maybe because it's Christmas.'

'Huh! Damn Christmas. Those bastards should be locked up. Castrated!'

I didn't wait for the waiter. Instead, I dropped some money on the table that would more than cover the food.

I left the restaurant somehow knowing I would never return.

∴

The temperature had suddenly dropped. With a darkening grey sky, I wasn't sure if it was about to rain or snow.

'Taxi!' I yelled.

Too bored to go back to the office and too cold to get the Tube, I looked at my watch and calculated I still had enough time to meet Luke and his friends for a drink. I should, of course, have done that in the first place, but it was no good: the routine of going to the office and eating lunch nearby was ingrained into my daily ritual.

Maybe it was sloth, looking for the easiest option, instead of doing what I really wanted to do. I think I reasoned I'd be seeing him later anyway. Besides, Luke was with his friends. They didn't want me there.

On reflection, they seemed lame excuses. I felt as if I'd been hypnotised by my own habits.

Outside the pub, the taxi driver asked for his fare.

'No, please wait,' I ordered.

He let out a groan. At times it can be very difficult to wait. Waiting is, perhaps, the hardest thing any human being ever has to do, with listening coming a close second. I avoided saying this to the driver, though.

Anyway, I thought, Your meter is ticking, Mr Cabby.

As I pushed open the door, I was greeted by dazzle and glare. Packed with locals, the pub brayed, neighed, gabbled, bleated, mewled, moaned and groaned. It was like a famous hangout for overacting thespians.

Where was Luke in all of this?

I stood under a flight of stairs that led to the small upstairs theatre. I tiptoed, clutching a balustrade so that I could stay upright as the room tilted, full of laughter. I couldn't see Luke and decided to get out.

It was then I realised I couldn't move. I tried putting one foot in front of the other, but the crush made it impossible. I couldn't budge.

'Excuse me, make way.'

The more I pushed forward, the more I was pushed back.

I began to feel desperate, but suddenly I sprang forward. I literally stumbled onto the street but, unlike others, it wasn't a movement caused by alcohol.

'Over here! Over here! Over here!' repeated the taxi driver, like a parrot.

'Take me home,' I said, closing my eyes. 'That was a nightmare.'

I took as deep a breath as I could.

'Where's home, sir?'

'The next turning after the square.'

The driver put the taxi into gear, opened the partition window wider and then spoke of something completely unrelated to our shared time together.

'You know guv, I remember an acquaintance of mine went as photographer on an expedition to climb some of the highest mountains in the world. He found that, not being a full-time mountaineer – and therefore not being used to thin air, thick snow, perpendicular rock and all that – the only way for him to survive was to scream an oath each time he took a step forward. That's how he dealt with the danger, if you understand me?'

The cab pulled up at my house. I took out the fare and gave him a generous tip. 'Thanks for that, guv. You know, if you hadn't asked me to wait, I doubt I'd have remembered that story about my friend. Have a happy Christmas.'

∴

Luke was highly embarrassed about something or other. I looked at him, he looked at me. We were each having as much difficulty as the other in keeping a straight face.

The charity dinner was reaching its conclusion and a game of bingo had been organised as the entertainment. Luke had been seated next to a fat lady wearing a bile green dress with faded gold brocade at the shoulders and cleavage. It was a tight fit all round, especially at the appropriately aristocratic bosom.

So who was complaining? Luke was, a little, because the lady had clearly taken a shine to him.

'Can we go?' he mouthed.

I grinned and mouthed back, 'What, now?'

'Yes!'

'No!'

'Play up! Play up! Play the game!' the bingo caller announced. 'Eyes down!'

Off we went, even those of us who were averse to numbers.

I noticed some bingophiles had more than one card on the go. In fact, several participants tackled the game with strange gusto, rolling up their sleeves. Luke joined in and mockingly took off his jacket. He signalled me to follow.

‘Go on, Dad.’

Oh, how simple and beautiful life can be, sharing a joke with your child, no matter how trivial. I remember what I thought, at that moment, in that minute.

He’ll charm the girls forever. He’s got the smile of an angel and irresistible charm.

The first number to be called was, ‘Two little ducks – twenty- two.’

Odd, isn’t it, how we, or at least I, can remember such silly details while forgetting so much else? My birthday is 22nd July. What a coincidence!

‘Lucky for some – number seven.’

As the numbers were called out, I was resistant to the whole process at the beginning. But then I found myself becoming more than interested: I was immersing myself in the game.

Help! I wanted to win!

I found myself with only one number left to get. Luke and I could share our silly story about my bingo triumph for years. I could even hear Luke telling his friends, ‘Dad won the damn thing!’

One player leant over to another and, on hearing a number called out, said, ‘Hey! You’ve got that one on your card!’

‘Mind your own business,’ came the reply. ‘Play your own game.’

Almost there. Come on...

Come on!

Someone must yell soon, surely?

I was astonished by how long a game of bingo could take.

Home is wherever you are, you know. The answer is always at home, assuming you’ve learned to make your home where you are – oh, and also know how to feel at home when at home.

If you have God in your room, you have Heaven on earth....

God, as I do understand you.

Forgive me my trespasses ...

‘All the sixes, clickety click – sixty-six!’

A voice shattered the silence and my internal conversation with God, with all the force of an alarm clock.

‘BINGO!’

I recognised the voice. Was it my son? I turned.

Yes. It was Luke’s.

He grinned the widest ever grin. ‘BINGO!’

‘You win some, you lose some,’ the fat lady said, trying to console herself.

The organiser of the event called out for Luke Hammond and presented him with his prize. A small trophy, the size of an eggcup.

‘Pose with your father,’ he suggested.

Luke beckoned me over. ‘Come on, Dad. I don’t think we have one photograph of us together.’

My son was right. With all the many photographs I’d taken down the years, there were none of just the two of us.

Luke put his arm around my shoulder. We stared ahead into the lens.

FLASH! went the camera.

'I shoot only in black and white,' said the photographer, in a deep and aristocratic voice.

(We learned he was apparently a distant relative to the Queen).

'It gives a timeless quality,' he added, taking out an expensive-looking silver pen from his inside pocket and writing down my name and address. 'I'll send you a print as soon as it's developed. Just after Christmas, I imagine. It's a busy time ...'

He made to pass his pen to me.

'No, I think that's yours,' I said, handing it back.

He let out a loud chuckle. 'I always seem to be doing that. Must be my age. I'm fifty, would you believe?'

Before he left to take more photographs, he gave me his business card, having first added his personal number and signature with a near-illegible flourish. It was the type of signature produced by those in positions of authority who presume recognition of their identity precedes them without any need to write it down, or should that be without anyone having to read?

∴

As the two of us stepped out onto the street from the party, it was beginning to rain and each drop of water felt like a table tennis ball hit by an opponent who started with gentle rallies but became more heated. Soon there were a thousand participants not using balls and bats at all, but scalpels and machetes and machine guns and cats and babies.

And everyone was winning and everyone losing.

Existence itself had come to the decision that, if it was going to end, it was going to end with a bang.

'Let the rains bedraggle me out of recognition!' Luke cried out, getting drenched. 'Long live this storm!'

Quite suddenly, without warning, he grabbed my arms and gave me a tight hug under the pouring rain.

Hold me, my son!

The world paused and I looked deep into his eyes. I should, at that moment, have said 'I love you' – but instead, I muttered something irrelevant, like, 'Did you know that in wartime, a storm meant there'd be no bombing that night?'

It's funny how we waste words and dismiss the opportunity to say things we really want to say.

I looked up at a sky brightened from below by street lamps. The drink was having its effect on me, with a phalanx of jack-booted clouds goose-stepping towards us, splinters of red shrieking as they were stampeded off into the middle of the city.

What was that about? I thought to myself.

I shook my head to regain my senses.

'Dad, let's go to your club to celebrate my victory and toast our Christmas!'

'Remind me, are you old enough?'

Luke smiled and said, 'Old enough to get drunk with my father!'

We both laughed then. Not like father and son. More like best friends.

∴

The club was usually a rather dour place smelling like a musty old room, never used. Tonight, though, it was a scene of unexpected, almost riotous, joviality. There was scope for gin and flirtation. The barstools offered confidence and chat.

‘The usual?’ the barman asked, with the tone of an excited schoolboy on the last night of term.

‘Fire away,’ said I, displaying the cleft in the middle of my chin.

‘Fire!’ shouted the barman, pouring a single malt bang into the middle of the glass.

‘And the same for my son.’

‘Is he old enough?’

The barman studied Luke’s crestfallen reaction.

‘I’m sorry, Master Hammond. I was only kidding!’

‘I wouldn’t worry,’ I said to the barman, ‘I played the same joke on him, only a few minutes ago.’

It was debatable whether he should joke like that, given his multiple capacities as barman, controller of a discrete door at the back of the bar and confidant privy to the details of members’ lives. But, he was certainly not a bad man. I could trust him to help any friend in need. He passed over the drinks and eyed me with a cocktail of bonhomie and bluster, with a dash of tiredness.

We looked around to decide where we were going to sit. We headed for the furthest alcove. Alcoves were usually occupied by the solitary and the seducers. The solitary would slink away with their resentments, while the seducers conjured casuistry. But not that night. The room was bursting with happiness – a sense of bliss I’ve not encountered since.

How wonderful. For me, for Luke, for the two of us.

‘Time for a quickie?’ shouted a man who looked remarkably like Sherlock Holmes, his voice fired over people’s heads towards a beautiful woman dressed as a jet-set gypsy. ‘Come on! It is Christmas after all!’

The woman had a spotted crimson scarf, held in place by maroon braiding over her head, with two enormous earrings dangling in her soup. She waved a ‘no thank you’ at the man.

Luke found this very funny. He roared with laughter.

‘Dad, don’t look now,’ he began, ‘but there’s a gorilla standing right behind you.’

Sure enough, there was. On closer inspection, I could make out a parade of members and friends in fancy dress.

‘And just behind you, Luke,’ I replied, ‘there’s someone dressed as a sea snake.’

Luke turned. ‘It’s a mermaid, Dad!’

‘Oh. Are you sure?’

‘Sorry to bother you,’ interrupted a gentleman dressed as Charlie Chaplin. ‘Do you mind if I have a word with your son?’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Excuse me, young man, would you mind judging our fancy dress competition? Our so-called celebrity has failed to show up and we’re in a bit of a pickle. Can you

step in? It would be a privilege to have someone from the younger generation to act as judge and present the prizes.'

How could he refuse?

'There will be four prizes, announced in reverse order.'

Luke squeezed my hand and joined Charlie Chaplin on the plinth. He spent a moment judging and then nodded, as if to say he'd made his mind up. There was a drumroll from the live band, which had been set up in the corner like an afterthought.

It felt like anyone dressed inappropriately was going to be guillotined.

I fiddled with my bow tie to reassure myself.

Luke started to speak into the microphone but no sooner had he said, 'What an honour ...' than it began to squeal like a pig on its way to the slaughterhouse.

Charlie Chaplin took it from Luke's hand and blew down it as if he knew a secret magic trick.

'That's better,' he said, handing it back.

The microphone was now miraculously tuned.

In fourth place was the Gorilla. Luke handed him an envelope and said, 'very well done' like a pro who'd done it many times before. The gorilla accepted his prize (two free drinks from the bar) with a bow that expanded, like an accelerated film of a flower opening, into a monster curtsy. He then grabbed the microphone from Luke.

'I am very proud,' the man said. 'Better than fifth, eh? And mucho better than naught!'

As he walked back to his table, he received what could be euphemistically called moderate applause. He was given hearty handshakes from a flying fish, two queens and a quean.

Some people, I noticed, didn't applaud at all. Maybe they were the sort of people that just didn't applaud anyone or anything?

The third prize (three free drinks) went to the Mermaid (or flying fish, or whatever it was). She shimmered through the crowd, picked up her prize, was greeted by a rainfall of applause and quickly glittered back the way she'd come, a smile on her seraphic, if not fishy, face.

Second was James Bond.

Where is he?

My God, they were looking at me, as was my son! I was in a competition I didn't even know I'd entered.

I smiled graciously – or should I say embarrassingly – and, as I picked up my envelope prize (four free drinks), I detected a few 'Who's that?' and 'Fix!' catcalls, accompanied by a smattering of applause.

'You'll be accused of nepotism,' I whispered into Luke's ear.

Then there was a gasp, followed by a hush.

And the winner is...

Another drum roll dragging out the climax...

The winner is ...

Of course it was ...

The jet-set gypsy!

The club broke into tumultuous clapping, the sort you hear on TV quiz shows, when you know an applause board has been held up in front of the audience. The

woman picked up her envelope (ten free drinks) and gave Luke a big kiss on his cheek. He blushed. Turning, the woman moved forward and gave a deep curtsey, mouthing thanks that were spoiled by the Gorilla choosing that moment to collapse onto a table. The heat inside his heavy, hairy costume must have been too much.

Luke grabbed hold of his head and wrenched it off.

‘I was suffocating!’ growled the Gorilla. ‘Young man, you saved my life! The heat was unbearable!’

‘Breathe deeply, Gorilla. Relax!’ I heard Luke counsel.

Charlie Chaplin interrupted by offering the judge a drink on the house. The Gorilla growled and offered him a bottle of champagne. Added to my second-place prize, we could end up drinking until the early hours for no extra cost.

Luke marched over. ‘What are you having, Dad?’

‘A glass of wine.’

Luke’s face fell. ‘Come on, Dad, we only live once!’

He was right.

‘Hey,’ I called after him, changing my mind. ‘Get me something different. Something strong and warming.’

‘That’s more like it,’ he said, wringing his hands like the owner of a curry house when a customer asks for something really hot, but the owner knows it will blow their taste buds away.

I looked at Luke. His elbow was resting on the bar, his chin on his hand as if he were thinking. The barman dragged a bottle out from behind, wiped off the dust, and carefully poured out some of its contents. After he’d poured two glasses, I overheard him say, ‘There you are. This should make you or break you.’

I thought of Kate. How proud she would have been of our son. What a gorgeous boy he’d turned out to be. I remembered when Kate was diagnosed with cancer. I’d been worried about Luke: how exposed he was about to be, to the brutality of life. We decided to be honest and tell him that his mother was going in for treatment. We sat him down and told him Mummy wasn’t well and would have to take strong medicine.

‘It’s going to make my hair fall out,’ Kate said, running her long fingers through her son’s hair.

Silence followed silence and my heart screamed for a distraction. This wasn’t right. It was a mistake to even discuss it. We should have waited instead, for his questions. But then Luke put his hands around his mother’s waist and rested his cheek on her chest.

‘Don’t worry, Mummy,’ he said. ‘Hair grows back much better after the medicine. Only the other day, I overheard you wishing you had thicker hair.’

The memory made me melancholic. I sat silent and forlorn, like a bomber pilot after a raid from which more than half his comrades failed to return.

Sherlock Holmes was making a rather loud burping noise in the background that thankfully disturbed me. He caught my glare. I quickly turned away. I didn’t want to set off down the road of silent interrogation.

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‘Here we go!’ Luke said. ‘I’ve been advised you need to drink it in one.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Absolutely!’

The muscles on his face tightened. I drank it in one.

Shoot! Wham! Bang!

After three seconds, steam gushed out of my ears, my nose spun like a top, my taste buds were blown away. The back of my head flew off but by then the alcohol had deadened my mouth and was threatening to announce itself to my brain, then to indelibly imprint itself upon my liver.

Luke gulped his down without any pain, not even a grimace.

‘Another?’ he asked.

‘I think you’d better get me ... The bottle,’ I gasped.

‘Are you sure? That could be rather dangerous.’

‘I can take it!’ I said, trying to prove myself to my son through drink. ‘Just watch me. You wait here.’

So I got up and negotiated my way towards the bar.

‘A bottle of whatever you just poured for me and my son.’

The barman looked at me with an expression that suggested there was little doubt in his mind as to where I was heading.

‘I’ll bring the bottle over, sir. It will be safer that way.’

‘No, I can do it.’

But the barman insisted on carrying the bottle himself.

‘Not eating tonight, Mr Hammond?’ he asked, setting the bottle and two glasses down on our table.

‘We already have,’ said Luke.

‘That’s good. Best not to have this on an empty stomach.’

Luke poured and kept the bottle on his side of the table. ‘I’ll take care of this,’ he said.

It hadn’t taken long for Luke to take charge. In many parts of our lives, as he grew older, he took control. I loved him for it. I never wanted to appear weak, though. I always wanted to demonstrate to him that, yes, I had the necessary strength with which to confront all adverse situations and adversaries, cope with all calamities.

I sat. Chin up. Back straight. Looked at the glass and – ugh! Drank it in one! A drink I had never seen or tasted before, or since that night. I squinted at the bottle but couldn’t begin to decipher the hieroglyphics on the label. It was definitely strong stuff. The floor tilted further and further and further away, like a huge and slow-rocking chair at a funfair.

‘Dad, you dropped these.’

Luke handed me some banknotes that had fallen to the floor.

God, how drunk was I? I coughed one of those long, phlegmy spasms one tends to hear coming from the room next door in thin-walled, cheap hotels. From my son’s expression, I was reminded that he hadn’t seen his father in this state before.

Luke took a deep breath.

‘I feel as if I’m at the top of a white-knuckle ride,’ he said. ‘As if I’m hanging from a roller coaster that’s broken down in mid-air. I’m holding on for my life!’

‘It’s funny, I think I’m at the funfair, too.’

Luke picked up the bottle by its neck and somehow it slipped from his hand, crashing to the floor.

We looked at each and burst into laughter.

And we laughed and laughed.

The barman came over promptly and didn't make as much fuss as I'd expected. He swept the mess up and away, as if he knew the mishap was bound to mis-happen. He returned to the bar and came back, placing another bottle down in front of us, not quite the same but a close relative.

The drink paralysed us. We didn't have the strength to send it away. We stared at each other until Luke let out a loud hiccup.

'Drink backwards out of your glass,' I advised him.

'Not with that I won't,' Luke said, nodding at the bottle.

'Well, what you need is a good fright,' I said, lurching forward at him. But it did nothing. He hiccupped again.

'Try holding your breath as if you're underwater.'

He did, for a moment. But then we both started to laugh again. We were enjoying ourselves with something we could accept we were powerless over.

Alcohol. Father. Son. People. Places. Things.

'Did you know there are two thousand conversations like this one taking place on this earth right now?' Luke said.

'And there are some two thousand storms like the one outside, taking place right now around the globe,' I replied.

'And lightning strikes a hundred times a second.'

'And, for that matter, there are some two thousand squabbles.'

'I doubt it.'

'I hope not,' I said, and then remembered. 'You know, Luke ... I saw an extraordinary effect in the sky this evening. It was as if we were in the middle of nature's abattoir.'

Luke must have misheard because he said something quite odd.

'Yes, and almost a quarter of a million people once died in a few days because those in charge believed artillery could destroy barbed wire.'

We went on until the early hours of the morning, the two of us intending to put the world to rights, until the barman called time and we caught a taxi. Luke was dropped home first. His final words of the night came as he slipped away to the other side of awareness.

'Who wants to be told anything, or saved from anything, right now?'

'Good night, Luke,' I told him. 'My darling son.'

The light of the moon followed him to his front door, key in hand, mumbling to himself. He turned to me before closing the door, with the most beautiful smile.

'Sleep well,' I mouthed.

'Sleep well, Daddy.'

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I woke with a start, wondering where I was. The silence of sleep had been shattered by the telephone ringing and by a pneumatic drill from the street, which shook the entire house.

I leaned over and picked up the phone.

‘Dad,’ a voice croaked.

‘Are you feeling as rough as I am?’

‘No, I feel good,’ replied Luke.

‘Really, how is that possible?’

Age, I thought.

‘You won’t forget to pick me up at three? I need to be at the airport by four.’

‘Don’t worry, everything is under control,’ I said.

As I did, I looked at my bedroom, which was totally out of control.

‘You mustn’t let me drink, Luke,’ I said. ‘It isn’t good for your old man.’

‘But we had fun, didn’t we? Don’t forget I’m the bingo champion of something or other.’

‘I won’t forget. I plan to have that photograph of you, holding the cup, framed. I intend to give it pride of place in the house.’

Luke let out a laugh. ‘You always wanted me to be a champion, didn’t you?’

And he put down the receiver not waiting to hear my reply.

I’d decided before our night out not to go into work the day after. I was due some holiday, so I was taking two weeks off, including Christmas and New Year.

I was going to visit my sister in Cornwall the following morning. I planned to leave early to avoid the dull motorways and take the more interesting back roads that showed England at its best. I always enjoyed going down there. Nothing was ever too much trouble for my sister.

The year before, when I was down there with Luke, she’d looked after me without a single complaint, when I badly twisted my ankle and was confined to bed for a week. It had happened in the middle of the night, when I’d needed another blanket. At first, it wasn’t cold enough for discomfort to direct me out of bed and triumph over sloth. But soon the temperature dropped even lower, so I climbed out of bed.

When something hurts enough, we do something about it.

I walked out of my room and across the landing. As expected, I found an extra blanket at the bottom of the airing cupboard. I shook it, in order to get rid of any creepy-crawlies I imagined might’ve sneaked in.

(Another hangover, not from drink but from a year I spent in South America, full of scorpions, spiders, snakes and ‘what the hell is that?’)

Somehow I shook the blanket so hard, it got trapped under my foot and I slipped, like an ice skater, flat on my arse. In the process I badly twisted my ankle and woke up the entire house. For the rest of our stay, I was confined to bed.

It was not the best Christmas.

By rushing to work every morning, I tended to miss the chaos I left behind for poor Lidia, my loyal Portuguese maid. I’d never been able to tidy. I sometimes justified this character defect by repeating a quote that it showed, *I am living a full life, my energies being spent on more important matters.*

Still, I felt a little shamefaced when I heard the front door opening. I hastily pulled the sheets tight, shook a couple of cushions, congregated objects in the bathroom. But it was no help. The place looked as if a bull had crashed through it, or as if it had been pulled apart by thugs in search of jewellery.

Oh well. It was, in all honesty, nothing new.

Luke, who in his teens should have been at the peak of his own messiness, was always picking things up after me. When his fussing irritated, I would blurt out the old adage that boring people have tidy kitchens. As a student, my behaviour pattern was basically: expect a visitor, tidy the room, wait, give up hope, wait, wait, regain hope, wait, wait, wait, give up again until, by the time the visitor arrived, the place was a shambles from stuff having been thrown about, kicked at, torn up.

We can't forecast who or what is going to turn up or not turn up in our lives. We can't always arrange things to our complete satisfaction, either. However organised we might think we are, we can become unmanageable again at the click of one frustrated finger or with the swipe of an angry hand.

Lidia brought up my coffee.

'Good morning, sir. Did we sleep well?'

'I slept like hell, thank you. I'm a little fragile today,' I said. 'Just put the coffee on the dressing table.'

She threatened to open the curtains.

'Leave those!'

She looked put out. 'I see sir had a late night.'

'Late but fun. Luke and I had a Christmas drink together.'

I wasn't sure if she was listening. She'd picked up my dinner jacket, which had been hanging haphazardly, having been flung onto a chair in the early hours.

'I'll send this to the cleaners,' she said, and left the room.

I showered, dressed and slapped aftershave on my face as futile cover for the fact that I hadn't shaved. I looked in the mirror. What a sight. A hopeless case! The tossing and turning had aged me overnight. I'd had the most unsettling and inconsistent sleep, like a man under interrogation kept from sleeping properly by his torturers. I could have gone right back to bed at that moment. Was there anything in the world as disagreeable as being so tired you found it difficult to stay awake? But I had to get going. I had to pick the car up from the garage.

Knowing the track record of most garages, there would be a wait involved.

By the time I'd finished dressing and was ready, the time was well past eleven o'clock on that December morning. As I made my way downstairs, I stopped in my tracks.

Lidia was on bended knees, fingers linked together.

I coughed artificially as a warning.

'What are you doing?' I asked, knowing.

'I'm praying, sir.'

'Why, for Heaven's sake?'

'Because prayers work,' she said phlegmatically.