

ALBERT ALLA

**BLACK
CHALK**



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ONE

I guess this is the story everyone's been waiting for. The badges who expected me to bow and confess. The friends who kept quiet and hoped I'd let something out. The twenty-year-old I met in the Mediterranean, who heard my name, stroked his chin, and demanded my story as if it belonged to him. And most of all, the inspector who probed and probed, until all he had left was a challenge.

I've never wanted cameras brandished in my face or tape recorders thrust at my throat. And I've done as much as I could to avoid it. Not only did I leave the country, but I've also been calling myself Nathan, for Nate Dillingham evoked too much blood.

Now eight years on, I'm back in Oxford. I'm sitting in an attic room that contains all the things I owned before I went off. A room my mother put together to help me dispel my doubts. There's even a poster of The Verve above my bed. And, of course, she's done what she set out to do: after years on the road, this red-brick house off the Banbury Road feels like home. She's thrust me back into the world I fled, as convinced today as she was then that stability is what I need.

My laptop is set up on the one item which wasn't mine, a creaky walnut desk which, if I remember right, was in the guest room of our Hornsbury home. The blue of my old chair has faded, but my back still rests comfortably on its cushions. There's a photo board to my right full of old family pictures. A childhood pruned of all my school friends.

In one picture, I stand between my father and my brother. We are in our cricket whites, standing in front of the pavilion. My sixteen-year-old frame hasn't had time to fill out yet. My torso leans away as if I'm trying to escape through the edge of the picture. I wear an awkward smile: my thick lips show a fraction of my teeth, while my eyes look seriously at the camera. In comparison, my little brother seems natural, holding a sullen pose on one arched leg, while my father stands straight and content, a cricket bat balancing between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. Seeing this picture reminds me of who took it: Jeffrey, on the day he clung on to a one-handed diving catch at gully, which he talked about for weeks afterwards. The same Jeffrey who should be pruned from my life. I shouldn't have to think about him and the others in this roundabout way. This is exactly why I'm sitting on this chair staring at a black cursor flashing against a white background.

I've made myself two cups of tea since I started this, and my legs are consorting with my mouth, itching for a third. I won't do it, not until I've started writing. From photographic reels to blurs and blanks, I should begin with the destruction itself.

* * *

The 10th of February 2000 was a rare bright day in a generally overcast winter. The sort of day that made me think that school was almost over. Along with the rest of my class, I was ambling along, convinced that there was always more time ahead, and that if all else failed, I could use the weeks leading up to the exams to cram everything I'd been taught over the last two years. I already had an offer and I felt confident I could get the marks. In eight months, if everything went well, I would start Physics and Philosophy eight miles away, in Oxford.

The first lesson of the day, history, was held in the red bricks of the main building. When it ended, Jeffrey and I headed for

our physics class, along an outdoor archway that stopped half-way down the hill, its arches supported by columns, and the columns adorned with eroded crests. As our school's only shot at the grandiose, it featured heavily on all its propaganda, and in much of the coverage that followed that day. Beth, whose lipstick matched the scarf around her neck, walked with us up to the point where the archway leaves the building – it was a detour in the cold for her, but she'd taken it every Thursday since the New Year. Ever since she'd dragged Jeffrey and a bottle of whisky into a night of platonic debauchery.

When she left us, I noticed his backpack for the first time. It was new: its body was bright red, its base was leather tainted burgundy. The same colours as that thing she wore around her head. I pointed at it and laughed. He smiled but he sounded sad:

'Tuesday, we spent the whole night in bed.'

'Alone, just the two of you?'

'I don't know what's going on. Didn't even kiss or anything.'

'Did you try?'

'She was like, she didn't want to. I even gave her a massage.'

We went quiet, for we'd arrived at the Kemp Annexe, a 1960s addition overlooking the sports ground.

For many months after that day, my conversation with Jeffrey was a safe memory. My thoughts would start with him looking longingly at Beth, and if I felt strong enough, I'd stop them at Jeffrey's new bag. In those happy instances, I would be left with a smile. But there were plenty of others when I felt weak, when the redness of his bag collapsed in a gallop, and I started thinking of the way Mr Johnson looked at us.

We were late and he stared at us. The last row was empty, the chairs still on the table as he insisted we keep them. He already had both hands in his pockets, his arms framing his pot belly, as he tsk-tsked and shook his head. We took our seats. Jeffrey nudged me under the table, and I struggled to keep a straight face.

‘Mr Dillingham, Mr Baker, welcome!’ Mr Johnson was still shaking his head. ‘I’m honoured that you managed to join us. But let’s give you your due: you’re not as late as Mr Knight and Mr Williams. I’ll give them another thirty seconds.’ He looked down and clicked his tongue in time with the second hand of his watch, before he raised his eyes to the class, a satisfied expression on his face. ‘Can’t say we didn’t wait for them. Let’s get going.’

We opened our books on page 212 – it had a picture of a teenager in bright green short shorts, a basketball inches from his fingers, black dashes arching between his hands and the basket – and started a problem set. Mr Johnson believed in teaching passively, asking us to try problems much like the ones we would encounter in our exams. While we sat and worked, he was at his desk marking copies, and when he had no copies to mark, he gazed through the window at the sports ground. There’s a form of respect in acknowledging that he was a little lazy, that he wanted to use his teaching time to do his evening work. But his methods were successful. Some, like Eric, had changed schools so that they could take physics at Hornsbury School.

A few minutes into the class, Jeffrey tapped me on the hand and pointed at Jayvanti who was sitting one table in front of us. Arching my neck, I couldn’t see very much. But then Jeffrey whispered her name, she turned around, and for a few seconds, while they traded answers, all I could see were four undone buttons and a braid tickling the top of her brown breasts. When she turned to face the front, Jeffrey nudged me under the table and we stifled a snigger. Then he wrote on my notebook:

‘Is it true Eric fancies her?’

‘Who wouldn’t?’ I wrote.

He put his pencil down and started whispering:

‘Can you imagine? Him with a girl!’ He nudged me again. ‘Oh, come on, tell me. I’m sure he told you!’

At that moment, Mr Johnson noticed students chatting and cleared his throat. He asked whether everyone had finished.

When no one answered, he considered us all one at a time, as if his next decision required deep thoughts, until his eyes settled on Anna.

‘Miss Walker, will you come to the board and show the rest of us how to solve the third problem?’

She was still sitting on the other side of the room from me, where she’d moved to after we split up. And just as she had done for the last month and a half, she looked at everyone but me while she made her way up the centre aisle.

As she stood up, a rattling sound came from the vestibule, the sound of thick metal sliding, links clanging against each other softened by a door or two. Anna turned her head towards the door and when no one said anything, she went up to the blackboard and started talking about the problem: acceleration and velocity in a frictionless world. Just as she started to differentiate a binomial, the door opened.

Eric walked in – a chain in his hand, a large blue sports bag slung over his shoulder – and shut the door, his back to us.

‘Mr Knight, you are late! But it doesn’t matter. It’s your future. Take a seat’ – Mr Johnson pointed – ‘and listen to Miss Walker tackle this problem.’

Eric paid no attention to Mr Johnson. Instead, he turned his attention towards the door, and we watched him, bemused, as he uncoiled his chain and looped it between the door handle and the frame of a nearby shelf, looping once, looping twice, as he bolted it with a padlock and checked the whole mechanism with a firm tug.

‘Mr Knight?’ Mr Johnson said. ‘Eric, what are you doing? Eric!’

Eric advanced towards a window opposite the door, the one with a green exit sign above it, checked it was locked, and turned towards us. He looked prophetic: his face starved, his usually floppy black hair stretched above his skull, and his ever-intense

eyes now bloodshot, wide open, taking in everyone. Even Mr Johnson went quiet as we waited.

Perhaps I am imagining this, but I have a vague memory of Eric's eyes boring into my face during that silence. And if I'm not inventing this, he lowered his chin once in my direction. Still, I can't be sure this happened, for all I have are those two faint images, a close-up on his eyes, a slow nod.

Some things, I remember as if they happened last week. Eric reaching into his bag and grabbing two objects. And for an instant, my eyes seeing nothing but the barrels' glistening metal, and the matte texture of the grip through the gaps between his fingers. Placing one in each hand, his voice: 'This won't last long.' He said it as if his future had already taken place, as if his design came from more than himself. 'And,' he added, 'don't worry, that includes me too.'

Writing this, I find myself squirming, making up reasons to leave my desk. It seems I've been telling myself the pain was gone, when I really meant the memories had grown more distant. I have to push past the image of Eric standing armed in front of us while we watched and waited. It lasted but a moment, and then the stillness shattered.

At first, it was Anna screaming and then desks flipping and falling onto the floor, chairs and bags flapping along. There was a rush of bodies towards the door which did not give, and two deep voices trying to break through the cacophony. The girls sitting at the table behind me stayed put and whispered to one another, as if they were discussing the best way to leave an awful play. But their whispers were hoarse: they were stifled shouts, a restraint on madness. And two voices kept on trying to break through. Mr Johnson, in the same voice he always used, proclaiming that we were not in America, that this was ridiculous. And another voice asking for calm. It wasn't Eric – he was observing from his corner of the room, waiting for us, it seemed.

It was Tom Davies standing up and moving towards Eric. When he was two metres away, Eric took aim. Tom stopped and raised his arms, his lips still forming soothing sounds – sounds which I wish I could recall. But sadly, they have left nothing but conflicting echoes. And yet, as I picture him now, I reconstruct his likeness and see him speak, and I hear him too, saying words that I conjure up from the traces he left behind.

Tom turned and addressed us, those who were listening. ‘Quiet, quiet,’ I hear him say, ‘we can work something out. There’s no need to do anything silly. We just need to talk it out.’

Tom was splendid, his voice coaxing us into hope, his gentle movements and his statements still carrying the authority he deserved. He loomed large in my mind then, an everyday example risking centre stage when it might mean death. He was facing the front wall, Eric to his left, the door to his right, and the rest of us strewn across the classroom.

‘Eric, there’s no need to do this. Think about it. Please.’ He tried to engage Eric’s eyes.

‘Sit down, Tom,’ Eric said, still aiming at Tom’s chest. ‘Don’t get in the way.’

Perhaps Tom thought Eric was listening, or perhaps he thought he’d appear less threatening sitting down. Whatever the reason, he obeyed him, taking down a chair from the last row and starting to talk again, his tones low and soothing: ‘Think of everyone here, think of your friends. You’ve spent two years here with us. And think of our families, think of—’

‘Shut up,’ Eric said with quiet strength. ‘If you say another word, I’ll shoot you.’

Tom looked stunned only for an instant. He recovered and looked at us, two rows from him, and started coordinating a sally with small movements of his head. I believe Eric saw it all but decided to ignore it. Instead he addressed Laura, and, almost kindly, asked her to put her phone away.

‘Thank you,’ he told her and turned to the three students working on the chain. His voice remained even, each sentence pronounced with the same rehearsed emphasis. ‘It won’t budge, and the vestibule’s locked too. Go back to your desks. I don’t want to get in between you and your deaths. If you want to write something, or if you want to pray, I can wait one minute.’

One minute. All of my blood seemed to have drained to my feet. I looked across at Anna and saw her looking at me. Her right hand was clutching the backrest of a chair, and her left was clawing at her right forearm. Her eyes were moist, and I wanted to bridge the distance. One minute. There never was that minute. Had Tom and Mr Johnson held off a little longer, the few who considered writing – I remember Edward Moss and Jayvanti Patel in front of me grabbing their pens – would have had time to set something down.

Instead Tom leaped, and there was the first of many hollow cracks, and there was no more splendour, no more calls for calm. And there was a jolt starting in my chest and spreading down my limbs, and I was fast as a blur. And Eric looked around, arms raised, or perhaps he was shooting from the hip, and there was no more pretence. And we were ducking, crawling, crying, and most of all shouting. And we tried the windows but the windows could only open so as to let in the smallest of draughts, except for the one window which opened all the way, but that was where Eric stood.

I tasted metal. I had blood in my mouth, but I wasn’t wounded. The thought crossed my mind that I might not feel a gunshot, that I would die too quickly to feel the bullet butcher my flesh, but that, in death, I could carry over something so trivial as the taste of blood in my mouth – the last input my brain would have been able to decipher. But I wasn’t dead: I just had blood in my mouth.

Anna was crouching next to me, holding my hand, struggling with the onset of a panic attack. For a brief moment, as I

squeezed her hand, a sudden sadness weighed on my shoulders. And it was gone with a grunt, one loud grunt at first, and then four more in decrescendo. Jeffrey was on the floor in pain. And Anna was crushing my hand, her breathing reduced to a rasping sound, air scraping into her lungs, her breasts jerking up and down ever faster. In the few seconds I spent stroking her arm and whispering so she would calm down, I was aware of a body I had loved, now fighting itself. I knew I ought to feel something, perhaps apprehension or dread. Ideally it would have been love and forgiveness but I would have taken simple lust. It didn't have to be beautiful. But I wanted it to be strong. Nothing came.

Jeffrey was no longer grunting. Eric wasn't by the window anymore, and pretty Jayvanti's curvy body straddled a fallen chair on the floor. I surveyed the scene. It was meticulous, yes: neat and precise. Even the chaos made sense. Don't listen to me, there was no honour in the chaos. One, two, three, crack. I'd survived. One, two, crack, crack, three, crack. Even now, I can't do the moment justice. Even now, I can't tell it right: the images are there, however smudged, but the words don't follow.

* * *

They were all still, except for Anna whom I could hear breathing, and Grace whose leg I could see twitching. How long had it been since Eric had come into the classroom? It felt like it had happened a long time ago and that it hadn't happened yet. But the classroom was quiet, except for the three of us breathing and bleeding. Grace made no sound, as quiet in agony as she had been in life. And I crawled back to Anna's side, who was silent now. I lay there wondering what to do about the bullet in my stomach.

If a part of me remembers the pain, another sees me disassociated, above the room, floating amongst ideas and images. My

hands were covering my stomach, my back resting against two school bags and part of an overturned table, my knees as close to my midriff as I could bring them, blood slowly seeping out. Help was coming, I knew. Help: the word came to life. I imagined a swarm of doctors resuscitating our limp bodies, lifting us onto comfortable stretchers, airlifting us to a new hospital, removing and discarding the traces of the day from our bodies, and discharging us a day later after a long night's sleep. I needed sleep. And then school would declare a week-long recovery, which I would spend reading and watching cricket.

The picture was too hopeful. Help would be two policemen coming to investigate a routine call, wondering what to do outside the chained door, and deciding to kick it in and assess what was inside before asking for reinforcements. They would come in, see the carnage and then, it was almost worth a laugh, I would die before the ambulance turned up.

* * *

Help arrived as help is meant to arrive. The spectacle trod on, and I was draining away in its midst, curiously overtaken by a profound wonder. Wonder at the eclectic scene around me, and wonder at the commotion gathering outside. At first, it was the lonely sound of a siren blaring far from all traffic – I imagined its cold blue light flashing past the grey leafless trees up to the cold blue sky. As if it realised its incongruity, it stopped, giving way to a murmur of muddled voices. To the sound of metal on metal: they were cutting through the outside door, and then they were hammering their way through. These were harsh sounds but they had to be. And then a teacher led them to the fire exit on the side of the building, hidden in between two thorny bushes. It wasn't much of an exit, just a low-lying window with a foldable stile. And then they were in. Shock gently etched onto their faces, giving way to an uneasy determination, the scowls and pursed

lips smoothing into a final flat mask. There were to be no smiles, no tears – just a job to do.

A woman was sitting by me.

‘Let me see,’ she asked. But I didn’t want to show her. I told her to go and see to the others, I was fine and they needed help. ‘Let me see,’ she said. I told her to take a look at Anna. I asked her whether anyone else was alive. She didn’t know. ‘Let me see,’ she said. I just had to lift my hand for a few instants.

I noticed sweat glistening on her forehead. She was a nice woman, I decided. ‘Are you cold?’ she asked. I was a little cold – she took off her jacket and laid it over me. She told me to stay in the position I was already in. I was doing just the right thing. ‘I’m a natural,’ I told her. She smiled and helped me get more comfortable. ‘Is this your blood?’ she asked. I explained to her that I didn’t know, but I thought a lot of it was Jeffrey’s, and a little was Anna’s. She wedged a toppled chair between my toes and another table. I hadn’t noticed how tense my legs were until I was able to relax them. She asked me what had happened. Such an innocent question, I thought; she didn’t need to look guilty. ‘Eric,’ I started and stopped. She seemed to understand.

I asked her why she was helping me when so many others were worse off. ‘I’m staying with you until we can take you to a hospital,’ she said. I told her she should take care of the others, I was fine. She gave me a tight-lipped smile and said the others were being taken care of. I looked around: there were about ten people in the room, all paramedics except for two people in plain clothes with a bolt cutter having a go at the chain. I recognised the groundsman and an old maths teacher. Their names stuck on the tip of my tongue. A man was by Anna’s side, back to back with the woman taking care of me. She told me her name was Liz. Just like my mother. They were about the same age. I couldn’t think of any more similarities.

I wanted to tell her something. But I couldn’t recall her name. Yes, of course. ‘Liz.’

'I'm here. I'm still here. You'll be on your way to hospital in no time. Don't worry.'

I told her I wasn't worried, but I had to tell her something. 'Yes, I'm listening, don't worry.' I explained I wasn't worried, but I wanted her to tell my parents how much I appreciated what they'd done for me, and that I didn't want a grave. I thought graves were too grim. If they needed a monument, couldn't they plant a tree? Liz was nodding along, saying I shouldn't worry – I wasn't worried – and that I would be able to tell them myself. I smiled at her and thanked her.

They put me on a stretcher, stuck a few cushions underneath my knees, and covered me with a blanket. Outside, rain was approaching. A hint of mist was drifting through Hornsbury School but the sun kept on shining. Colours were stronger and warmer for it. The incandescence of the ambulances on the grass, the reflections of policemen's jackets standing guard, the contrasts in the resurgent crowd. I looked for Anna and saw Grace in an ambulance shutting its doors. Liz was still by my side. 'Where's Anna?' I asked her. They slid my stretcher into the ambulance and she asked me who Anna was. She was already ahead, she then explained. I imagined Anna in an ambulance asking the same questions about me. She'd gone by helicopter, Liz added. Anna would like that, I thought. 'Where's Jeffrey?' I asked. She said he was being taken care of. I asked whether he was in an ambulance. 'Not yet,' she answered. I understood what she wasn't telling me.

I needed to stay awake, to fight off the great weariness dulling my pain.

And I wanted to ask where Tom was. And I wanted to know where Mr Johnson was. And Jayvanti Patel, and Laura Clarkson, and Satish Choudary, and Edward Moss, and Paul Cumnor, and Harry Williams. But Harry Williams hadn't come to class today. And Eric Knight. I had to complete the litany.

I looked around myself and wondered where I was, wondered why I wasn't in school. My answers were exotic, my logic capricious, my impressions oneiric. Odd yet normal, twisted yet clear. It had to be a dream, I told myself. But my lacerated stomach wouldn't let me escape. I tried anyway, sprinkling my wishes with realism. It was morning and I was on my way to school, another day except that physics had been cancelled.

The ambulance slowed suddenly. Something rattled, a soft sound of metal on metal, and the spell broke. It started to come to me, a swirl of sensations sweeping all in their way, gathering speed, shimmering outside a familiar building, materialising in anticipation, and entering brashly into an unwary classroom – I stopped the thought. There was no need to go any further, I knew it all so well.

'That's right, we're almost there. You only need to hold on a little longer. You're very brave, you know. We're in Marston already, yes, it's not far.' She was holding my arm. It seemed like she was whispering in my ear, keeping me from wasting into nothingness with her murmurs.

* * *

My memories of A&E are incoherent. Like a childhood condensed, I remember things I didn't do and events I wasn't at. Liz had left me, or I had left her. And perhaps necessity unlocked an awareness that let me see my mother drive towards the hospital, or perhaps the vivid details that come to my mind are nothing but the product of a pronounced delirium. Yet there she is, coming out of a lecture and hearing of the shooting. Immediately deciding to drive to the John Radcliffe Hospital instead of my school.

Meanwhile, my flesh was in a large rectangular room on a table that paraded as a bed, surrounded by a team of doctors in garbs. I see them all wearing the same loose sober greens,

asexual and indistinguishable. As I was wheeled in, I noticed two teams waiting and one already at work. Grace being brought in ahead of me; I had time to see her unit set up before the curtains were drawn shut. Her team seemed military: a stout man – his silhouette rises out of the fog – delivering curt orders, everyone following them, his soldiers either moving purposefully or standing at attention.

They ignored the shout-fest coming from the team on the other side of the room, but I couldn't. There, looking past two blurry greens, I glimpsed a foreign face: pale and drawn. It was her hair, ash darkened by damp, which I recognised.

A doctor gave me something for the pain: this will make you feel like you've had five pints, I heard. My carcass stopped mattering as its suffering washed away. What was left of my attention, the spirals which had survived the doctors' concoctions, listened to the enumeration of expletives coming from my left. And then I heard her staunch the profane. Was she speaking? My limbs weren't responding, surgeons were at me, I couldn't get closer and decipher her groans. I started to empathise with her pain, but too soon they were barking over her, and I was left to myself. Alive. Alone.

Loneliness was sweeping me towards a hollow, defeated and drained, when I saw my mother by my side. It's the last memory I have of that decisive day, the last memory before I gave in to the inevitable slide. She had followed someone through the electronically locked doors, bravado carrying her past hospital protocol. She stood and looked at me a full minute before anyone saw her. When asked to leave, she approached me. Her fingers covered mine. She squeezed them until she knew I could feel her.

Two

The memories of my early convalescence are of ash and soot. My eyelids too heavy to respond, I was at the mercy of a slow current. My consciousness dragged me through greys and blacks. Through the ash, I glimpsed a small house with no door. I tried to get closer but we were floating in the same river. For all I knew, the house could have been a pile of granite and burned wood. It left me behind when the soot settled.

Respite came when sleepless dreams congealed into dreamless sleep. There were voices around me and then they were gone. I did not have the will to understand them. All my strength veiled the blunt pain that spread through me with every throb.

The soot was more violent than the ash. It took me to a great windswept plain. I was surrounded by an ocean of yellowed grass. And the clouds promised blood. I turned and turned, afraid to look up, searching for shelter, a trench, a furrow.

Dreams went but the pain persisted.

As the slumber thinned, voices became people. There were nurses talking over me, and there were nurses talking over others. A new strand brought me relief: its warm lilt, its limpid diction, its calm command, and the courtesy it elicited. My mother was asking the nurses about me. I could hear her breathing by my side, murmuring, paper rustling. I could feel her hand on my forehead, the familiar calluses, her fingertips lingering at my brow before rearranging my hair.

* * *

My first complete memory happened on the 12th of February, two days after I was rushed through A&E. I am told that my eyelids flickered and that my tongue gibbered before then. I put my body's twitches to the fever I was fighting, an infection I picked up somewhere between the classroom and surgery, which was draining me quicker than a punctured stomach.

It was the sound of both voices at the same time that pierced through the stupor. And her confessional tones, almost submissive, made the moment stand out.

'Someone needs to be here,' she was saying.

'What about James? He needs you too.'

'Now that you're back, can't you take care of him?'

'He needs his mother.'

Her words briefly unravelled into inaudible whispers, before her voice reasserted itself: '... Nate gets better, I'll spend more time at home.'

They were right by my bed, speaking in hushed tones. I had the sense of listening in to a private conversation, the sort they would have in their room, the door closed, before coming out to present my brother and me with a common front.

'I sat next to Grace's mother at the meeting this morning,' my mother was confessing. 'I didn't know what to say... But she understood. It's not what she said, she hardly speaks English.' She paused. 'Henry, she's so dignified! I wanted to hug her... But I didn't dare, it's not like we know each other. Still, moments like these bring people together.'

They stayed silent for a minute. I wanted to stretch my hand and touch them, but my fingers wouldn't heed my orders.

'Have you seen Eric's parents?' my father said.

'Do you think I should?'

'Well, they were good friends.'

‘Nate’s friends with everybody... But I’ve been thinking about it. His mother must be suffering more than any of us.’

‘No, you’re right.’ My father’s tones became more assertive. ‘You don’t have to go see anyone. The police will do all that, and you heard that Hill fellow, they’ll let us know what they find. We just have to wait for their findings.’

My mother’s voice weakened. ‘But does he really understand? He’s got no idea. He can’t, he doesn’t know what it means to be sitting here.’

My father had come back from overseas, Kenya, I think, where he’d been volunteering for one of his company’s pro bono projects. To have them both! I basked in the thought. But the matter of the conversation gnawed through the glow.

I groaned, my eyes half open, light streaming in. They were both up on their feet. My mother stroking my cheek, my father’s arm around her. I looked towards them and tried to smile.

‘Is he?’ my mother said looking towards my father. She cupped my forehead with her hand.

He went around the bed and laid his hand on my left wrist. ‘Nate?’ he asked.

‘He feels cooler. They said he’d hear first.’

I wanted to say I could but my lips wouldn’t part fully. I focused on my left hand, on the warmth of my father’s skin, and straightened my index finger, a tendon cording out all the way to my elbow.

‘Nate,’ my father said, ‘you’re safe. We’re here with you.’

I could hear my mother crying. ‘Darling,’ she said, fighting with her face. She looked to my father: ‘Oh, I’m glad we’re both here for this.’ Checking a sob, she turned towards me again, studied my face, and smiled timidly: ‘Nate, darling, your stomach, and then that fever... We love you so much, you know.’

I looked at the tears running down her face and felt helpless.

‘We’re very lucky...’ She was wearing one of my father’s old cardigans, the same green one she would take on road trips. ‘And look here,’ she moved aside and pointed at the window, ‘isn’t that a lovely view? You can even see Grandma’s old house from here. We used to go there once a month when you were little. Do you remember? She lived very close to here. I’ll show it to you when you get stronger.’ She leaned towards me and kissed me on the cheek.

She stopped talking and stood rooted by me. My father’s face was tanned for February. I tried to speak and nothing came out. I felt her hair brushing my lips.

‘What about the others?’ I whispered. Whispering was all I could manage.

She didn’t answer straight away.

‘What did he say?’ my father asked.

‘He asked about the others. Your brother was here yesterday, but he’s scared of hospitals you know. He’s staying with Stan today. I know you want to see him.’

She stopped as if there were nothing else to add.

‘What about the others?’ I whispered again.

She leaned back and breathed deeply. Looking at my father, she said: ‘He wants to know about the others. Nate, the most important thing is that you’re safe here with us. The doctors say you’ll be alright, you just need time to build your strength.’

I tried to speak again, but she didn’t lean forward to hear what I had to say. She exchanged a look with my father.

‘Darling, Nate. The others...’ When it seemed like she wouldn’t say any more, my father said:

‘They told us to let him rest.’

For a moment, I thought my mother would agree with ‘they’, the control-men, but she shook her head several times. ‘No, no, that’s not how we raised them. Nate, it’s not good news...’ One hand on my cheek, another stroking the fingers of my

right hand, she looked for the right words. I could feel it coming from the coldness of her fingers.

‘It’s tragic, Nate, it’s so sad, I don’t know how to put it. All I know is that you’re here, and that’s a gift, and we should be thankful for it.’ She looked up towards the ceiling, tears illuminating her eyes.

I looked for the right word. It didn’t come. ‘Everyone?’ I said.

She hesitated. ‘No one outside your physics class.’

‘And Anna?’ I asked.

‘What did he say?’ asked my father.

‘He asked about Anna.’

‘Ah, yes.’

‘Anna’s very weak. And even if she makes it, she won’t be the same.’

My father spoke: ‘You’ll get better in no time, Nate.’

I closed my eyes and searched for the house again, willing the current back into motion.

* * *

This morning, I went looking for my old drawing case. My mother thought I’d find it in the storage room under the stairs. The room was full of boxes, crates, and paintings that this new house has no space for. I didn’t find it – I may well come across it tomorrow if I rummage through the back section of the room.

My search stopped when I came across a dusty blue chest. It was just as I had left it all those years ago, the rusty padlock testifying that it had stayed closed over the years. I felt relieved. Her son gone for eight years, silent for seven, I would have understood my mother breaking the lock and looking inside. Knowing her curiosity, I’m surprised she left the chest alone. Perhaps she always expected me to come back, or perhaps she preferred ignorance in this one regard. Whatever its source,

I appreciate her restraint – I don't think I would be able to face her over dinner tonight if she were armed with my hospital thoughts.

I couldn't remember where I'd hidden the key, so I fetched a large screwdriver from the kitchen and wedged it in the padlock and pushed. I could hear movements within its mechanism but it held together. There was a bigger toolkit in the garage: I found a handheld metal saw. I sharpened the blade and took it to the padlock. Once I managed to nick the shackle, the saw tore through the lock and the chest pried open.

The boy who locked the chest would have been too shy to tackle a reticent padlock. He would have scratched his head and moved on to something else. Or he would have asked someone else for help. Menial jobs, fluctuating finances, and wading through mud must have done their bit.

I've spent the best part of the day sprawled over my bed, immersed in my hospital diaries. In between tentative sketches, I found a medley of spare thoughts and painstaking descriptions. Nine words on Anna, followed by a sketch of my foot, and three pages on the nurses' interactions. A paragraph on Jeffrey, another sketch of my foot, a still life, six words (no verb) on Eric, a page and a half on Inspector Hill's mannerisms.

I'm starting to think that my psychiatrist was right, that I was fleeing it all. And yet, such things affect us differently. My reactions were just as right as those of snarling mothers and pontificating principals.

* * *

My parents moved to Hornsbury when I was four. A year before I was born, my father had left London and, teaming up with two colleagues, started a management consultancy. As luck had it, my mother was made a fellow of her college just as his business was becoming viable. Tired of their small Jericho flat,

they decided to move out of the city and into the country. The way she tells the story, it sounds like it was my father who wanted to raise his children the way he was raised. But when I asked him about it, he explained in his careful, measured voice that he'd had a slight preference towards staying in Oxford, while my mother had had a strong preference for a garden: hence, as couples ought to do, they'd looked for a house in the country, and found what they were looking for in Hornsbury.

Now that I've heard stories of others' childhoods, I realise how good mine was: I had a spacious garden, and up until my brother was old enough to play with me, a father who happily taught me how to juggle a football, catch a cricket ball, swing a racket. During the winter season, my mother drove me to football games, and my father took me along to his squash tournaments. In the summer, I followed him around the county's cricket fields, at first cheering his every run, and then playing alongside him.

I still remember the day I first came on the field. I was eight, and it was only as a substitute fielder, but to me that didn't take anything away from the moment: I was all of a sudden in the middle of everything. Every time a bowler ambled to the crease, I expected the ball to come my way. I walked in as I'd seen internationals do on television: my hands on my knees, a smile betraying my otherwise focused face. Thinking about it now, I realise they'd put me at short forty-five, where the ball would never come fast, especially given the pace of our attack. I still see Garry, the wicketkeeper, crouching over his large belly, and turning to me every third ball to check that I hadn't moved, and happy I'd stayed where he wanted me, giving me one of his cavernous smiles before smacking his gloves together, and telling the bowler to bowl full and straight. And Garry calling to my father, telling him to warm up, and my excitement at the prospect – even then, my father didn't bowl much. And I still remember my father's off-cutter – it was in either his first or

second over – and the burly batsman’s wild swish, the ball looping ever so high (to my eight-year-old eyes) in my direction, Garry’s call of ‘Catch it, mate!’, the fear that gripped me, my legs suddenly unsteady, and the ball arching down towards me. The sting of leather hitting my palms, the ball rebounding, and my desperate lunge to grasp it before it hit the floor. I’d made the simplest of catches look difficult, but that didn’t matter. It seemed that the whole team was as happy as I was – they were shaking my hand just as they did when adults took a good catch. Even my father offered his hand, gripping mine harder than any of the others, so that I had to massage my palm when no one was looking. I fell asleep reliving the moment for weeks afterwards.

Perhaps I am looking back on my life through rose-tinted glasses, for school also seemed to have gone well. My mother tells me I was a sweet child, content to stay silent when left alone, but ready to break out of my reverie with a wide smile whenever someone talked to me. I found the first few days of school difficult, but I never locked myself in the toilets at home the way my brother did, and I don’t remember any problems with the other students until the third grade, when Andrew joined our class.

To the teacher, he was a bright, jovial child with a penchant for practical jokes. To me, he was a selfish brat who wanted to be the centre of everyone’s attention. When he walked in one day and, taking on a deep voice, pretended to be the principal, I didn’t laugh the way my teacher did. I’m not sure why, but I decided that what he was doing was wrong, and that he needed to be punished. With Jeffrey, I chased him across our primary school’s courtyard, caught him, pinned him down and spat in his face. It was a fitting lesson, I thought.

My mother had other ideas: never have I seen her so angry as she listened to my teacher over the phone. She hung up, walked over to where I was sitting, and slapped me. The pain shocked me; the shame had me in tears. She pointed at my

room, and in a tone that expected no argument, told me to go and wait for her.

During the hour it took her before she came and spoke to me, I stayed glued to my bed and cried into my pillow. Whenever I tried to stoke my anger, to tell myself that I'd done nothing wrong and she was very mean to slap me, I remembered the paleness of her face and started crying again, feeling as though I deserved the shame. I'd almost exhausted my tears when she knocked on the door. She walked in with a solemn expression and sat next to me. Wanting to avoid her, I once again dug my head into my pillow. The smell of my tears on the cloth had me sobbing once again. I told myself that was a good thing, for it would make her feel guilty. But she didn't seem aware of my pain as she spoke.

'Do you know that Andrew lost his dad last year?' she asked me. Her voice that evening, as she carefully explained what it meant, and her tender gestures – stroking my hair, or holding my hand, which to me implied that I was as much a victim as Andrew – left a lasting impression. For many years, whenever I didn't like someone, I recalled a shadow of the Andrew episode and repressed my feelings. After my mother's intervention, I sought Andrew out, invited him to my house, and set out to make him my friend. I remember thinking hard about what present to get him for his birthday, and settling on the very one I wanted most: a gold and black football that had been used at the previous European Championships.

Andrew left Hornsbury the following year, but he was an exception. Most of the people who started primary school in my year stayed in the same track I was following, so that by the time I was in sixth form, I'd known many of my friends for over ten years.

Jeffrey was foremost amongst them. We'd first met as pre-schoolers on the cricket field, haggling about which of our fathers was the better player. When the cricket season threw us together,

we seemed to spend every weekend with one another. He even came to Sicily with us one summer, the year after I went to the French Alps with his family. The winters saw us drift away from each other, as I had squash and football, and he played rugby, but even if I didn't see him outside school for a month, I always felt like I could call him and be at his house the next day, kicking a ball against the yellow-bricked wall at the back of his garden.

Jeffrey never disliked Eric as some of the others did, but he never understood why I was friends with him either. One day soon after Eric arrived at our school, as Paul Cumnor was relating an anecdote about him – the startled look he'd had when a teacher addressed him, his stumbling answer – Jeffrey turned to me and, in his usual tone, told the others that I'd been to Eric's the previous weekend.

'What's he like?' he asked me. 'What do you like about him anyway?'

At that instant in time, Eric's social standing was in the balance. He hadn't come across as likeable. Had he been awkward, we would have happily cast him aside, but his case seemed more complicated. Only a week earlier, at lunch break, I'd been chatting with Jeffrey, Tom and the usual crew, when I saw Eric pace around the building, his head down, his floppy black hair covering his eyes. The second time he walked by, I tried calling him over to our group, but he walked on as though he hadn't heard me, his eyes fixed on the pavement. Tom noticed and made a joke, but no one followed his lead.

Opinions were still divided. One camp condemned him – Paul and Tom Davies were in that camp. If he hadn't made it yet, he wasn't worth the effort. And another, to which it seemed most people subscribed, Jeffrey among them, still hadn't formed an opinion. Eric had just arrived and, despite his oddness, hadn't done anything that deserved to be condemned yet.

And in that moment, as Paul and Tom Davies smirked, hoping I'd give them some ammunition, as Jeffrey looked at me,

sincerely wanting to know what I thought, all I could do was shrug and smile.

‘I don’t know. He seems alright to me,’ I said.

Paul looked at Tom and sniggered. And I laughed along, genuinely happy to share in the joke.

* * *

The day after I first woke up, when the house and soot felt most distant, my mother grabbed my hand and talked to me. Her fingers squeezing mine comforted me more than her worried smile and the kindness in her moist eyes. She asked me how I was. Finding my voice strengthened, I told her the fever was gone. It had left me with an intense tiredness, deep enough that my lacerated stomach kept quiet.

‘That’s good, Nate. Good.’ She let go of my hand and leaned back far enough that I could no longer make out her familiar perfume.

‘Think happy thoughts. Are you seeing yourself on the cricket field?’

‘No, but you’re right,’ I smiled. ‘I should.’

‘Yes, think about playing cricket with your brother and your father...’ Her voice trailed off as she edged a little further away. ‘Did you manage to fix your bat?’ she asked, her voice almost steady.

‘I think so. It took a few goes but it looked good in the end...’ The roundness of her eyes and the cock of her eyebrow made me feel as though I were lying.

‘Oh... I hope you didn’t spend too much time working on it. Dad can buy you a new one if you need.’

‘No, it’s alright. It only took a few minutes, but it didn’t work the first time, that’s all.’

‘Good,’ she said, nodding while her eyes looked at my feet.

I extended my hand palm up hoping she would take it again, but she couldn't have noticed for she turned around and made her way back to her chair.

* * *

The world around me seemed to gather definition. Or perhaps I was now staying awake long enough to appreciate it, to expect its contours every time I broke through the lethargy.

I was in a large room with yellow walls and no doors. Badges roamed along a corridor to my right. And a window spanned the entire length of the room to my left. When I crooked my neck, I could take in the whole of south-east Oxford. I could lose myself in Headington's parks, and if I squinted hard enough, I could imagine my grandmother's old house, the one she had before she moved to Cambridge, my grandfather died, and my mother found her a nursing home. It stood off a main road at the end of a hazy cul-de-sac. I remembered the Sundays we spent there well: in the winters, I would only breathe through my mouth, because there was something wrong with the sofas and it wasn't just their flower print – no, if I breathed through my nose, their musky dampness would settle in my stomach and start breeding mould. Our summer visits were much safer: then, I could spend hours hiding with my cousins in the labyrinthine hedge that ran along the garden walls.

To the right of my grandmother's house, I could watch the traffic crawling on Cowley Road, and further right still, I could glimpse far-off Iffley and its lock. But I hardly ever looked. I preferred observing the people around me. When my mother was not sitting on a chair near me, when she wasn't watching over me, reading through academic papers, jotting down her esteemed thoughts, I was left with three other silent patients, perennially waiting for something: nurses, meals, examinations, or the omnipotent team of doctors.

I was luckier than most: my mother was with me throughout the entire visiting hours. She'd been spoken to – your son needs rest, he needs sleep, he needs calm. She'd nodded her head and made up her own mind. Her lab, her students, her colleagues, she told me, could go on without her, and plus, she pointed at her papers, she could work by my side too. A professor of experimental psychology. When I was little, I'd imagined patients reclining on a leather *chaise longue* while she fitted a flashing helmet on their skulls and jotted down the value of each dial. Even when she started taking me to her lab after school, on the first floor of a building that looked like an overgrown concrete bunker, I kept on believing there was something vaguely sinister about her work. It took me years to dispel that idea. Whenever I'd ask her about her work, she'd either give me an answer that was too broad or one that was too detailed – so that all I remembered was that she, and her lab, ran experiments on memory, biases, encoding.

Once, as she sat by my hospital bed, I put down one of the books she'd brought me, Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, and I asked her what she was reading. She put her papers aside, stretched her arms out and, leaning towards me, asked me whether I really wanted to know. I hesitated but only for an instant: I hadn't seen her so engaged for some time. She read out the title of the article she'd been reading: 'Homocysteine and Cognitive Performance...' She stopped halfway through the subtitle. 'You don't know what homocysteine is, do you?' I could pretend to know what cognitive performance meant, but homocysteine was beyond me. 'It's an amino acid.' She waited for a sign. 'You don't know what that is, do you?'

The same day, after I'd lost her to her pile of papers, I asked her why she sat with her head resting against the window, when she could sit against the wall and enjoy the view over the town. I pointed at a spot right next to my bed, and I turned the cover of *The Idiot* towards her. We would discuss this book like we'd

discussed most of the books I'd plucked from our collection at home – the rows of classic and modern novels that had left the upstairs bookshelves and littered my floor until they'd earned fresh creases. She would ask me what I thought, what I felt, and, talking to her, I'd work this book out like I'd pieced together the others.

She waved at the door:

'I like to be able to see who's coming in and out,' she said.

It was a sensible reason in theory, but in practice she rarely looked up from her reading stack.

'It'd be easier to talk if you were sitting here,' I said.

She smiled, moved to a chair by my bed, and plunged right back into her papers.

'Have you read this?' I asked her.

She took a few seconds to look up.

'A long time ago,' she said, and she looked down again, squinting.

From the way she was reading her papers, I realised that her usual prompts – How far along are you? Are you enjoying it? – wouldn't come. I lowered my voice until I felt sure that no one else would hear me. My words were travelling in a space that belonged to no one else but us:

'Everyone loves him, but I'm not sure why.'

She looked up sharply.

'In the book, I mean,' I said, lowering my voice further, so that she had to lean forward to catch my words. 'They all pretend that he's a fool, but they all love him. Don't you remember?'

'No, I don't.' She leaned back on her chair, glanced at the window, and plunged back into her papers, squinting hard this time.

The lines of my book went blurry, and the house shone through the ash. I heard her chair squeal. Standing up, she squinted and pointed at the window.

‘Natural light’s better for my eyes.’ She moved her things to her old chair, and I didn’t mention it again.

There were many hours when she was away and my body wouldn’t slip past slumber. My eyes ajar, I spent time looking at my three companions. There were curtains to divide the room into four but they were only ever drawn when nurses needed to undress patients. The rest of the time we were together because there was nothing to separate us.

The man in front of me fascinated me – my diaries include three long entries on his actions. From the safety of my cot, I spied on him in his bed, on his feet, in his chair. But spying isn’t the word I’m looking for. I wasn’t impinging on his privacy and no one wanted to know what I saw. It would be more accurate to say that I watched him like one watches a street performer. Except that his was the only act. While the two women to my right were staying still for days on end, this man was taking control of his space. He was younger than they were, in his late sixties I would guess, still infused with the energy to rise out of his bed.

The old man was a starrer. He would lie down and stare. And then he would move to his chair and stare. And he would stand up and stare – sometimes out of the window down at the city. I could see something of Mr Johnson in him. He would rest the back of his hand on his lower back and gaze out of the window quietly, just like Mr Johnson liked to do. But whereas Mr Johnson would look at the field for a few minutes and then turn back to us, the old man could stare for five minutes, ten minutes, half an hour, without registering an emotion. And then he’d sit and stare. He stared at nothing in particular – his eyes were open and they needed to rest on something. I can only presume that he didn’t need stark reminders to recall episodes of his life, that our mundane ward was enough inspiration. But he was certainly aware of what was going on around him. He knew I was looking at him – once, just as I was starting to think

he'd lost contact with those around him, he looked into my curious eyes, batted his eyelid, and looked away. I felt an initial pang of shame, but that was misinterpreting the look he'd given me. There had been no judgement there, just acknowledgement.

* * *

Eight years later, I can finally acknowledge it. While I was in hospital, my relationship with my mother changed in ways I still don't fully understand. When I was lying in bed, and she was sitting by the window, I preferred to leave my raw emotions undefined. Every time pain made me wince, every time a memory had me slack-eyed, she was by my side, ready to adjust a pillow, squeeze my hand. But whenever my words circled around Eric and my physics class, I felt her grip loosen, her eyes shift, as if my allusions were making her uneasy, and I tried changing my train of thoughts until I had her comforting smile back.

Now that I see her every day around the house, aged and mollified, I yearn for a time before the shooting. I would like to see her in her long green dress sitting on her grandmother's old velvet armchair, shuffling through her papers, gold-plated pen in hand, pursing her lips and frowning in concentration, a soft 'no' or 'yes, that's true' humming past her lips, her hair draping down to her chin before gathering on the nape of her neck in an unruly ponytail. I would like her to look up at James or me, and to see her eyes swim for half a second as she'd decide whether to give us instructions. I would like her to call me to her side so that she could explain what my big-brother role entailed, to hear her say that James looked up to me, only for me to turn around and see him plucking away at his guitar, oblivious to anything around him.

Before it all happened, she was very certain of her role, and she wasn't afraid of pushing hard to get to her ends, since she also saw them as my ends. I remember my mother walking into

my room every night for two weeks in a row and asking me how my work was going, knowing full well that I hadn't done anything since I'd discovered Tolkien.

'It's going well, don't worry,' I told her without putting down my book.

'You're reading too much. You've got your exams at the end of the year. You should be working every night. That's the only way you're going to do well.'

I ignored her, and she ignored my non-response. I don't think she was ever worried – she knew I was a good student – but she felt it was her duty to come and prod me. I could understand that. Even if I sometimes snapped back an answer, I was on the whole rather fond of her nagging. It'd been the first chink I'd pinpointed in her character, its discovery suddenly making her seem vulnerable, so that whenever she repeated something for the fourth time, I'd be caught between telling her off, and smiling at her.

After a cricket match one summer evening, Jeffrey came back to stay at my place. We were out in the garden re-enacting one crucial moment of the match, just as my mother called me to set the table.

Jeffrey was explaining why it wasn't his fault that he'd got out and left me stranded just short of my half-century, and I was trying to show him there were perfectly sensible ways of playing thigh-high full tosses. As I was tossing tennis balls at his legs, he was telling me why what I was throwing him had nothing in common with what he'd faced.

'Nate!' her voice cut across our play louder than before.

Jeffrey patted back a tennis ball, and said: 'My mum's even worse sometimes.'

Already a little frustrated with him, I took him up on that statement and grabbed a hard ball.

'Here, that's what you faced,' I said, and hurled the ball at his legs. He managed to absorb some of the ball's momentum

with his bat, deflecting it onto the inside of his groin. When he folded in pain, I laughed hard so as not to feel embarrassed. He grimaced back, but by the end of the evening, I'd convinced him it had been a good joke, and that he'd deserved it for getting out when he shouldn't. He was too happy a person not to believe me. Still, after that day, he never made a disparaging comment about my mother again.

* * *

This morning, I opened my first hospital diary, the one with most of the sketches, and looked at an early entry. 'Eric: private mother moment after shed.' Short as it is, it's enough to make me remember how I felt then.

It also helps me challenge the revisionist approach I took to my convalescence. A psychiatrist and two psychologists were always going to be too strong for me. Believing their scheme fitted my condition, I wrote over my early convalescence, accepting their jargon, fitting it over my experiences, wrapping my reality. But their picture was always too simple. And now, years gone since they had me in their grasp, I prefer my thoughts complex.

Certainly, these thoughts show me that I was never in denial over the whole episode. Rather, mere days after the incident, I was already reaching for reason, pondering over the master of all questions, why, and all its guises. My thoughts were focused on Eric's interaction with his mother, on a moment that had left me puzzled as it happened.

It was in the spring of 1999. I was sitting down in Eric's living room when his mother walked in with her husband. He was polite but didn't linger, while she came towards us as if to start a conversation. Eric rose from his armchair and walked out into the garden, leaving me stranded behind. Rather awkwardly, I stood up and spoke with his mother about the weather, about

school. When it became clear Eric wasn't coming back, I left her and found him in his shed, absorbed by woodwork.

'Why did you leave?' I asked him.

'I abhor him,' he said. 'Fuck her.' Abhor and fuck; they still stand out today as they did then. 'Of course, you've got no problems with them.'

I said nothing. He wasn't the only one of my friends fighting his mother. But that very afternoon, I had to rethink their relationship. His stepfather was out, and I was meant to be down in the shed clamping two pieces of wood together. I'd come up to ask Eric a question, and I was standing outside the kitchen window, peering in, afraid to walk in on them. I could see their shapes swaying back and forth, embracing each other almost violently, both his arms holding her head tight against his chest. When he eventually released her, I counted to thirty and opened the door. He was peeling vegetables, she was kneading dough. I looked at the space between them. But all I had was her gentle smile and his defiant look.

* * *

On the fourth day, my mother walked in late, after lunch had been served and cleared, and stopped by the foot of my bed as if she could go no further. I'd raised the top half of my bed so that I could better lose myself in my ward's dynamics. The first thing I noticed was that her eyes were bloated red. The rest of her appearance, the scarf hanging dishevelled from her neck, the coat drooping over her arm, had my fingers clutching hard at the sheets.

For what can't have been more than twenty seconds, she looked at me through a veil of welled-in tears. I could never handle my mother crying. I wanted to get up and throw my arm around her, but she was too far and I was too weak. It must have been my growing anguish that finally made her act.

‘Anna...’ she said before a sob took over. The tears breaking through, she crossed the space between us and took my hand, almost crushing my fingers.

It took her a minute to calm down, by which time I’d already guessed that Anna had died. I listened to my mother through a loud dullness. Shock was weighing on all my limbs.

Thinking of this moment now brings me a shadow of the pain it did then. I can still feel its contours, the shock bursting in to stay, its tentacles climbing down my arteries and up my veins, but it no longer has the power to stop my breath as it did then. Now I can think of the context surrounding my mother’s revelation, and I can think of her early tentativeness. She seemed to hesitate in breaking news that belonged more to me than to her, and then, on seeing me struggle, she seemed to revert to her maternal role. Perhaps I’m imagining this, but now that I’m thinking of my mother, my thoughts keep on turning back to this moment, as if it was then that our relationship started changing.

‘... She had both her sisters there...’

Through sobs and tears, my mother’s story came together. I was feeling too slow to say anything. The only thoughts that came up had me wanting to tell her it wasn’t true, but I’d held Anna’s hand as she bled. However much I wanted to, I couldn’t believe that lie.

My mother was adding more and more fragments to fill in my silence. She had been to see Anna many times since we were admitted to hospital. She hadn’t told me about it because Anna had been in such a bad way. This morning, as chance had it, Anna had her whole family around her when my mother dropped in on her room. Sensing the end, my mother had tried to leave quietly, but Anna addressed her directly.

‘... Her mother pulled me into their circle...’

She painted an idyllic scene: drifting in and out of consciousness, Anna had emerged minutes before the end, said what she had to say, closed her eyes, exhaled, and moved to another

world. She almost made it seem like a natural death: Anna ageing peacefully and passing away surrounded by her loved ones. Something about the picture, its artifice and its charm, repulsed me. I didn't want any beauty in death. I tried to jerk my hand away, but her fingers were holding on strong. She immediately loosened her grip, as if she'd been unaware of her hand, and I felt shame. To make up for it, I mustered my strength and gripped tighter on my end.

'... She asked her parents to take care of her cat...'

Her voice was losing its shape as if she were hoping I would say something. Part of me wanted to stay quiet for fear it would all come up, but another part wanted to answer the call and cry, grunt, shout. When I spoke, it was in a whisper:

'We could take her cat if they don't want it. It used to snuggle up to me, and I'm sure Sloppy will like the company.'

It was a silly thing to say, and I knew that as I was saying it, but I thought about the long white fur that came off its back whenever I petted it, the way it floated gently down to the floor, and I wanted to have it purring against my leg now – warmth seeping from its slow stretches, a ball of germs in a sanitised world.

'We'll put a basket with a few cushions by the phone,' I said. 'That way it'll be able to see the whole of the living room.'

I talked more about how it would fit into our home, and how our dog wouldn't mind it. While I talked, my mother's tears dried up, and her eyes, trailing over my face, went out of focus. For a few seconds, the distant eyes, the tension around her mouth, made her look as though she was grappling with a great decision. Her expression made me think of the time I told her Jeffrey's family had invited me skiing and she decided she could put together the money to send me. And yet, it seemed far more than that. Her drying tears heightened her expression to something that made me go quiet. It continued for a few instants after I fell silent, before her gaze came back to me and found my eyes. Nodding, her long face tightened.

‘Anna had something she wanted me to tell you.’

My legs tensed.

‘Are you listening?’ She yanked at my arm until I looked directly into her reddened eyes. ‘She told me to tell you that it’s okay, you tried.’ My mother sighed, letting go of my arm. ‘You know she would have liked to tell you herself. It’s okay, you tried. Will you remember?’

‘I’ll remember.’

She rose, wiped something off her brow, and turned towards the window.

‘We can’t forget it. It’s what she wanted you to feel,’ she said.

In the ensuing silence, I tried to change the conversation and asked my mother where my father was. Her answer washed over me: part of my mind made sense of what she answered, while the rest left my ward and its tedious reality. Tiredness took over from sadness. It made sense, it all made sense. I felt old, omniscient, omnipotent. The world was clay waiting to be shaped and undone. And yet I had no desire to test my newfound powers. I wanted nothing. The world was as it was and I was content with it.

In that half-awake state, I started thinking about the sheets against my skin, and they were soft and comfortable, just as I wished them. I heard my mother moving away from me, and out of the ward, and I told myself that this was exactly as it should be. I smiled inside at the thought of how right everything was. Yes, I told myself, even what my mother just told me made sense. I had to struggle to remember what that was.

When it came back to my mind, it threatened to throw me out of my pleasant, knowing state. Anna was on the operating table, her hair darkened by damp, her pink skin gone grey. Behind Anna’s drained cheeks, I could glimpse a host of other faces, basking in horror. Tensing up, I forced my mind back to my earlier image: the world was made of clay and her death was right. Yes, there was nothing sad about it. She was floating

forever in the peaceful glow that I was merely touching. And the other faces weren't horrible but blissful. Ha, I laughed, there's such a thin line between beauty and horror.

From that thought came a burst of resolve: I was on the brink of something special, which I shouldn't forget, but which I couldn't remember either. I understood how dangerous the sort of thoughts I'd almost had were. My resolve was to Not, I told myself. I would not think such thoughts, and already they were out of my grasp, so that I didn't know exactly what I should not think. It didn't matter: I'd been so close that that one moment of truth could never leave me. Picturing the word 'Don't', I set it aflame and let its burning shape engrave itself in my mind.

* * *

Later that day, my mother brought me the ingredients of a forgotten pastime. An A4 drawing pad, four graphite pencils, four charcoal pencils, a soft black pencil, a blending stump, a vinyl eraser, and a sharpener. She'd assembled the different items inside a wooden case which she'd lined with a fleur-de-lys fabric. I brushed the paper, feeling its grain on the tip of my fingers.

I sat up, took the soft black pencil and drew three lines. My eyes following the swell of the curves, I reached for an object, an idea, leaving my hand to its own bidding. I revelled in the freedom of an uncorked imagination, the privacy of the page, the simplicity of pencil on paper.

I'd spent hours, days, even years drawing as a child. The walls of our house had been covered with my pictures, with the ones I'd copied and the ones I'd composed. My matchbox houses and green pastures had gone on the fridge door. As my drawings improved, they spread from the kitchen into other rooms. My parents would make a ceremony of the moment they hung them. At first, I spent a long time on each, but soon I started craving the pomp and attention, and I started to speed through

the page. I still remember the day my mother told me a picture wasn't good enough to go on the wall. I ran outside, cried, and swore off drawing. But two days later I was back at it, working on a single drawing until I thought it perfect. The satisfaction! Seeing my mother come back from a shop with it framed! When it became clear that my brother wouldn't follow in my footsteps, my parents invoked equity and took most of my work down. I still kept at it, at least until puberty drove me to new distractions.

There were still three of my more elaborate pieces hanging in the kitchen. One was of our home bathed in a halcyon light. Another was after a picture of Hornsbury's Market Street. And the third was of my mother reading in an armchair. They were clichéd, simple, lifeless. That never stopped my mother from showing them off to my friends. How many times I cringed when she did that! I'd wait for my friends to leave, and then I would run her through my embarrassment, I would highlight the drawings' flaws, but my entreaties had no effect. Friends on their first visit still had to endure her beaming eulogies.

Four years after putting down my last sketch, two years after giving away my old kit, I sat in a hospital bed, pencil in hand, looking at the old man in front of me. He was sitting on a chair to the right of his bed, wearing a white and blue hospital robe, his brown legs naked, white slippers hanging off his feet, his head drooping towards the nurses' station.

Immobile. My subject.

I started with the head, with the curly white hair, short and barely receding. I moved to the neck and shoulders. The shoulders were key: they stooped but their strength was obvious. Dejected yet able. Atrophy settling in. Pencil in hand, I could understand the man in an instant. I ignored his loose torso and worked on the arms, smudging his right forearm around his tattoo, darkening sinews and bulges. His hands came together into a single fist. My touch lightened as I moved towards his legs. I didn't need his feet to ground him. He was a picture of stability.



My brother looked back towards my mother. He stopped at the foot of my bed, his smile mirroring mine. A hand on his shoulder, words in his ear, she guided him closer.

‘I like to see the two of you spending time together. In times like this, all we’ve got is family.’ She looked at her watch: ‘James, I have to make a few phone calls.’

We watched her leave and turned to each other. I reached for the controls of my bed and raised my torso so our eyes could be level. He seemed changed beyond the week we’d spent apart. He reminded me of the last time we’d come to blows, when I was twelve and he was eight. In Avoriaz, on the Thursday of a week-long ski trip, after three days of lessons, when I’d petitioned my parents to let me go and ski alone, on the slopes of course, and she’d told me that I could as long as I took my brother. I tried to negotiate a compromise – he wants to spend time with the two of you, not with me – but she didn’t budge. James couldn’t do a parallel turn, but he thought himself as good a skier as me. Whatever I went down, he could go down. Shutting his mouth, an obstinate look in his eyes, he pointed his skis right down the slope, and off he went, always trying to beat me to the bottom.

‘Did you see that lady?’ I told him. ‘You made her fall. Look. Look!’ I grabbed him by the shoulder and forced him to look a hundred yards up the slope. Dazed from her fall, one ski ten yards back, she slipped back on the other every time she tried to get up. ‘Be careful!’ I slapped him on the shoulder.

He pushed me back.

‘It wasn’t me,’ he said, and he jumped down the slope, his thin skis trembling under him.

I rushed after him, howling as I overtook him. If he was going to be that way, I’d show him.

'We're not going up this chair this time. We're going up the big one. Are you scared?' I said.

He shook his head and followed me up to the top of the expert zone. There, looking at the first drop, he seemed a little hesitant.

'So easy,' I said and I went first. My instructor had taken my group down moguls for the first time this year. After the first fifty yards, my legs were burning but I'd managed not to fall. I looked up. James was stopped halfway down the slope, looking longingly at the safety of the chair.

'Come on!' I shouted. 'Hurry up.'

Hesitantly, he launched himself across the slope, rising and dropping with every bump, somehow keeping his balance, until he got too close to the trees and he realised that he'd eat bark if he didn't stop. Instinctively, he pointed his skis uphill until he came to a halt. There, facing the wrong way, he started to slip backwards, down the hill, gathering speed, until the top of a mogul flipped him the way he should have been, and he was rising and dropping with every bump, again somehow keeping his balance, towards the other line of trees.

He turned once more, this time the right way, and then he skied past me, bolder and faster. Thirty yards later, he was flying over a mogul, and his skis had come off, and his head was full of snow. He'd learned his lesson, I thought, and I went down to help. Juggling his skis in my arms, one of my poles slipped out of my hands before I reached him. It slid down until it hit him, face down in the snow.

'That'll teach you to be careful,' I said.

'Shut up,' he said, his head rising from the snow.

'Can't you be nice for once? I'm bringing you your skis. You could say thank you.'

He stood up, yanked the skis from my hands, and glared at me.

'Well, come on,' I said, 'put your skis on and give me my pole.'

'No,' he said.

'What! I just brought you your skis. The least you could do is give me back my pole.'

He turned away, hiding his face, and I knew it from experience: despite the day I'd spent nannying him, despite me picking up his skis for him, he'd decided that he had a right to be angry with me. My thoughts swam, and I shuffled up to push him down:

'Give me my pole!'

He staggered up and pushed me.

'I hate you.'

Pushing me, the little weasel! I couldn't believe it. I shoved and pushed until he was sprawled in the snow, lesson learned, and I had my pole back, and I left him alone with the moguls. When I reached the bottom of the black run, where it met the green slope ambling down to base, I pictured my mother, and I told myself I'd better wait for my brother. There, I plotted my revenge, looked at my watch, thought he'd hiked back up and chaired it down, that he'd broken something, until half an hour had passed, and he emerged over a crest, getting closer one slow mogul at a time.

When he came to the bottom of the run, he looked different. Up to that day, we'd fought often, twice a day it felt like sometimes, but we'd always made peace half an hour after he wanted to kill me. This time though, he kept his lips in a hard line for a whole day, and he looked distant for days afterwards. My mother sided with him as she always did – because he was younger, I was meant to be responsible, she said. But more than her reaction, it was his distance that stayed with me for years afterwards, that resurfaced and cooled me down whenever we were on the verge of a fight.

And it was this distance that I thought about when he stood by my hospital bed. He looked changed; it was in the way he held himself. But a week was too little time for change. The

mere idea of it was ludicrous. If anyone had undergone change, it was meant to be me. I could hear experts say it: what I'd gone through, it was only natural. And yet, after days spent within myself, I could tell them that I was the same person I'd been a week before.

I decided to trust my first impression: he looked different. I was finding him awkward, almost shifty. I asked him about cricket training.

'We've got a new coach. He's making me change my grip.'

'Your grip was fine,' I said. 'What's he showing you? The Vs?' I parted my thumbs and index fingers into a V and held out both hands with the Vs aligned.

'Yeah.'

'They always want people to do that, but Atherton holds his bat the way you do, and didn't that serve him well? And you scored runs last season. He should just accept your way works.'

'He reckons it's better against the swinging ball.'

'Pff, don't worry about that. If the ball's swinging, you need to be able to play late and straight. And that's the key for all batting, swing, spin, all of it. If you can do that already, don't go changing your grip.'

He nodded and looked down.

'How's your bowling coming along?' I asked him.

'Good.'

'Is he changing anything there?'

'He's making me work on my left arm. Use it more.'

'That's good,' I said. 'I'm sure he's a good coach.' I paused. 'And how's school?'

'Fine.'

'Just fine?'

'Well... Yeah, I guess.'

'Okay. What are the other kids saying?'

'They... Nothing. Everyone's just, you know?'

‘Yeah,’ I said, because yeah was what I had to say. ‘And home?’

‘Fine,’ he said, and he looked up, searching my face. ‘Mum’s being annoying.’ He gazed at me for a second before he started to speak very quickly: ‘Dad says it’s because she’s stressed, but she annoys him too. I know, I heard them fight.’ He stopped and studied me again.

‘What about?’ I asked.

‘You. Dad says Mum is spending too much time talking to everyone, and Mum says she has to, for you she says, but Dad thinks she should let the police do their job, and Mum says she doesn’t want them to get it wrong.’ He paused. ‘And Dad’s not happy,’ he finished, looking satisfied.

I nodded for a few moments while I pictured the scene. Then, as I started to grimace, I changed the topic:

‘Mum says Dad’s taking care of you. What’s he cooking? Eggs and beans on toast?’

James smiled.

* * *

My relationship with Anna ended strangely. I broke it off because it had come to that. Even though I still wanted to be with her, I had to bow to the inevitable.

It was a summer romance, strung through parties and gatherings, at first when we were drunk and high, strings weaving away from the public eye, with stolen moments in smaller outings, and then with just us two, alone and together. I approached her full of confidence. A month earlier, I’d had sex for the first time, at a friend of a friend’s party in Oxford, and ever since, I’d eyed every woman with a newfound understanding: years of *Playboy*, pictures downloaded over dial-up, it suddenly made so much sense. When Anna started talking to me, my thoughts went beyond the mirage of my cock in her

pussy. I wanted to put my nose in her navel, to count how many fingers I could put around her thigh.

She was coming out of an eight-month relationship with a nineteen-year-old boy – an aspiring plumber who was at a technical college on the outskirts of Oxford. After each of our first two booze-fuelled make-out sessions, I tried calling her, emailing her, all in vain. By the time of the party on Old Road, when thirty of us invaded the park that straddled the top of the hill, I'd had enough. Jeffrey agreed – she was acting like a spoiled brat. To avoid her, I shifted from one group to another until long after the sun had set, and we were all drifting into drunkenness.

'So,' she said, standing above me, 'how are you today?' She pushed my bag aside and sat next to me. Her arm accidentally touched my thigh, and I asked myself why I hadn't sought her out earlier. It brushed my thigh again, and it stayed there, and I felt happy.

Late one night, we looked back on our beginnings, and decided we'd started being a couple after our second drunken full night. Unlike the night up Old Road, we'd spent the morning together, as couples ought to do. It was as sensible a guess of a starting date as we could come up with.

Part of me, the romantic part, wanted her to say the relationship had started earlier, in our GCSE history class, when I'd spent all my spare time turning back and talking to her. But when I mentioned those months, she told me she'd been in love with Jeffrey then, much like half the girls of my class. She said it like she was sharing an old joke: all the girls had been in love with him then, and now they all wondered why.

Over a year later, we were safely out of Jeffrey's shadow and together. And we went on bike rides, and we watched movies, and she came to mine, and I went to hers. I liked to think of her, to call her, to talk about her – in all, love made me rather content. And yet, it was never an intense relationship. It never felt like it had to be. When school resumed, we spent most of

our time with each other in and around class, perhaps meeting out of school once a week. I didn't own a mobile phone at the time; there were no late night calls, no texting flurries.

It was emails that brought it down. I'd gone to Cornwall with my family for the first week of the holidays, to visit my father's parents, as we'd done for many years. There was no internet there, and my grandfather had no intention to install it, even a dial-up modem. For six days then, I read novels into the afternoons, went for short walks in the countryside, and came back to Grandma's mulled wine.

Back in Hornsbury, I didn't feel the need to check my emails until the second morning after my return. When I opened my inbox, I found five emails from Anna. I started with the most recent one, in which she asked me to ignore her earlier emails, hoped I'd had a great time with my grandparents, and told me not to break up with her. Puzzled, I went back through the earlier messages. I don't think I ever read the third and fourth in their entirety. It was too much, the outpour. She was asking me to stay with her, and she was repeating it, and I was reading it again and again, and I was no longer paying attention, and I was thinking of us broken up. I closed the browser, left my desk and went for a walk. And I went to bed with my sword and sorcerer book, finishing it the next morning. Then I watched a movie, called Jeffrey and talked about nothing in particular. It was the next day I called her: our conversation didn't flow. We met in a park – I had no plan in mind, but when I saw her, it was there, in her already wide eyes, in the head she didn't dare raise, in the way she flinched when I asked her how she was. With a misplaced sort of sympathy, I understood that, to her, the relationship was already dead. Much like I'd accepted her hand on my thigh, I accepted her expression then.

'It's a pity,' I told her, and she seemed relieved. Everything we said after that took the break-up as a given, and I felt like we'd done the right thing.

It didn't have to make sense.

My days split between video games and a series of novels, the holidays dragged on. When school resumed, I was expecting a return to normal, if not in our intimacy, at least in our preceding friendship. Instead, she ignored me in the halls. She organised gatherings with my friends without inviting me. She went as far as to install her friend Laura in my old physics seat. When I challenged her over it, she looked away, pointing me towards Laura. Telling me I could take her seat, Laura's mannerisms mimicked Anna's in their disdain.

I don't want to judge her for it. I don't want to judge myself. We were both young. But whereas I can now separate the break-up from her subsequent behaviour, I then saw the one as vindicating the other: her coldness was ridding me of any lingering doubt.

It took bullets to break the barrier we'd erected. Bullets flying over me, past me, around me, while she hyperventilated and bled.

* * *

My mother put down her papers, got up from her chair and stood tall next to me, her shape darkened by the light coming from the window. I shut my notebook, keeping my writings and drawings to myself.

'I went to see Eric's mother this morning.'

The weight she put into those words made me want to stop her then and there, but I took a closer look at the stillness of her eyes and the line of her lips, and realised it was already too late.

'I know you like her, the poor woman. So I wanted to see her, and tell you what's happening outside this place. Hospitals, they can...'

'I know,' I said to fill in her pause. I didn't need to look around me to understand her: I knew my hospital corner all too well.

Feeling she hadn't finished, I ignored my misgivings and prompted her on: 'How was Eric's mother?'

My mother's smooth face hardened for an instant. She held her hand up as if to tell me to be patient.

'I went to see her after our morning meetings. That's a support group we started right away, but we can't invite her along. Some parents are blaming her, and that's easy to understand. Still, I thought she'd appreciate a friendly face. Do you understand?'

She looked at me expectantly, as Eric's mother and her pained smile came into my mind. I turned away.

'It's not her fault,' I said. I could see my mother raising her hand again from the corner of my eyes, but the words out of my mouth triggered more. 'It could have been any of the other mothers. The ones who are crying now, they could be the ones feeling guilty.'

'Don't say that!'

'It's true!' My voice rose, and the old man turned to look at us. He didn't matter; what I was talking about was more important. 'Why blame her? It could have been anyone, imagine if it was you—'

'Don't say that!' she hissed. A deep line spread down her forehead, her cheeks creased, and wrinkles quivered around her mouth. 'I don't want to hear anything like that.'

Her sudden intensity cut my thoughts short. When I got over the shock, I looked at her and chose to keep quiet: I could see the anger draining from her face with every word she uttered.

'But you're right,' she continued, 'we should forgive her. Not all families are as strong as ours. And she's lost a son too...' On that thought, her voice found the softness I craved. 'I knocked on her door this morning. No one came to open it, so I went around the back and found her sitting on the terrace, out in the cold. She wasn't even wearing a coat. She didn't recognise me at first; she shouted at me to go away. I think she gets a lot of media people, more than we do. She eventually let me in, but

that's after I told her who I was three times.' My mother shook her head and stopped for a second. 'She remembered you; she said, "Nate, the cricket player", and that's all she had to say about you.'

She looked calmed: her lips had dropped open, and her brow was now smooth.

'Maybe she needs to be alone,' I whispered.

'Sometimes we feel like that even though that's not what we need. We're lucky, Nate, because, whatever we do, we have each other. I know you don't want to think about it, but I have to tell you that there are a lot of people out there,' she waved her arm at the window, 'who won't leave us alone, and who don't care at all how we feel.' She dropped her arms by her side. 'You're getting better slowly, and those people want answers. Don't you think we should be ready for them?'

She stopped on that question, waiting for me to take her up on her challenge, before she went back to her chair. But if I looked deep in thought, it was because I was starting to realise that there were topics my mother considered out of bounds, and I needed to grasp where those boundaries lay.

After my mother left and the caterers gathered our dinner trays, I thought of Eric's mother. I couldn't remember her name, and yet she was always kind to me. She was away working for the most part. When at home, she left Eric to himself. But she always did all she could to make me at ease when I saw her. A week before the 10th of February, I'd brought my bat to Eric, to see whether he could help me repair it. It was an old bat, a bat I'd used in the middle many times, over many seasons. Its weight and its pickup were too familiar to give up. With it, I could dig out yorkers, read shooters, attack googlies.

Eric had carved a chunk out of the toe, replaced it with part of another bat, sanded down the result, and was applying glue when I heard his mother calling us. I knew she'd never walk down to the shed. As I expected, Eric didn't react, his whole

attention turned to applying glue. I took it upon myself to walk out of the shed, up the hill, and ask her what I could do for her.

‘I made you boys orange juice,’ she said, pouring me a glass.

The fresh pressed juice tasted sweeter than the bottled juice I usually drank. I told her it reminded me of half-time orange slices during the football season.

‘I like it when you come over,’ she said, holding on to the jug.

Feeling she wanted to talk, I sat down.

‘It’s nice here,’ I said.

‘You like it?’ she asked, doubts in her voice. She always had doubts in her voice. Of all the mothers I knew, she struck me as the most resigned. Everything that happened to her seemed to be another piece of evidence against fate. It was the way things were, she would say, with a sigh and a shake of her head. Like the three times she couldn’t take me home, all in the same month, and she told me, each time in the same voice, that that sort of thing only happened to her. Just when she needed a car, her husband was late, and the other car wasn’t working.

‘I can make you something to eat if you want,’ she said on all three occasions, putting her keys down and looking through her cupboard. ‘Pasta?’

But Eric was never hungry, so I waited until my mother came to pick me up. For Eric’s mother – I know her name wasn’t Mrs Knight – the only thing she could do was suffer gracefully until her husband came home.

‘I like the field,’ I said the time she made us orange juice.

‘It’s a field because Eric won’t mow it. I keep on telling him to do it, it’s his job, but he doesn’t listen, no. He just stays in his shed and ignores me...’ She trailed off and I felt uncomfortable. ‘But I’m glad that you’re his friend. It’s good for him.’

I wanted to grab the jug and bring it down, but she held on to its handle.

‘How do you think he is?’ she said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Is he doing well at school? Is he happy? I know he’s not happy here, but a few more months and he’ll have his own place. So, what do you think?’

I waited for a second, hoping she’d add something and I wouldn’t have to answer her, but she looked at me expectantly.

‘He’s fine,’ I said. ‘Maybe a bit stressed, but he’s fine. Why do you ask?’

‘He doesn’t tell me these things anymore. It’s always the same. He used to when he was little but then he grew up and now he doesn’t tell me anything anymore,’ she sighed, letting go of the juice.

I brought it back down and drank most of it, Eric being too busy with the bat.

* * *

My ward waited for the doctors. Patients drifted through the days and into the nights together. Teams of nurses watched over our beds and left at the end of their shifts. On the stroke of mealtime, caterers wheeled meals in and wheeled trays out. Janitors pushed their buckets around the halls, and sopped their solutions on our floors. At the appointed hour, rule-abiding visitors stormed in and snuck out. And my mother outlasted them all.

Doctors swept through in the mornings. In packs, they discussed our bodies. Orders passed from old to young, from young to nurses, from nurses to patients. And we obeyed everyone: doctors, young and old, nurses, caterers, janitors.

And once more, we were left waiting.

The nurses fascinated me. I watched them, listened to them, and jotted down thought after thought. At first, I was amazed by their professionalism. They were dancers gliding through a routine. When, every quarter of an hour for a whole morning,

the old lady to my left called her nurse to ask her the same question (where is Henry?), I was a little awed to see her nurse, a red-haired woman with a Polish accent, respond to each call with the same mixture of competence and care. It was in the way they never needed to run; they knew exactly how to do their job.

Then I noted that my quiet little ward didn't have a single male nurse, and I asked myself whether that changed their reaction to doctors. There were many female doctors walking around the hospital, but most of the doctors who came to our ward were men, and all of them were given an odd sort of impunity. When they weren't there, the space firmly belonged to the nurses. But as soon as a man in slacks and a shirt appeared, a badge hanging from his neck, the place changed; even a student carrying his books under his arm could sidestep around three nurses, walk behind their station and consult a wad of confidential papers.

The more I watched them, the less I noticed their work. I was certain of it: they were all avoiding Pauline, the cropped-haired, perpetually burned nurse, who talked loud enough that, deep in my corner, her voice still broke through the background whirl. They had a way of gathering in groups when she wasn't there and splitting as soon as she came back, of sniggering, whispering and laughing that reminded me of Anna and Laura, of Jordan and Rebecca, and of all the other social queens I'd come across. Pauline, on her side, threw herself into her work. She was consciously conscientious, always commenting on how good her work was, how sloppy others' was.

From my bed, I tried to come to Pauline's defence. One morning, when they were short a nurse and she was covering my bed, I called her over and told her I felt hot.

'Hot, darling, of course you are. Look at how tight those blankets are! Who did that to you? You need to breathe. Here, let me get this right for you.' She busied herself, shuffling my bedding, all the while telling me how much better it was

going to be. 'Some people don't realise, but these blankets are heavy. You have to ask yourself what they're thinking.' She shook her head and tsk-tsked. 'How's it now?'

'Much better,' I lied.

She put her hands on her hips:

'Of course it is.'

At the end of her shift, she was still mumbling sheets and blankets and her colleagues looked annoyed. My notebook on my lap, I gave each nurse a line and I followed their movements until I had a pattern in front of my eyes. Then, holding the paper at arm's length, I searched the page. There was an eye and a nose here, an arm punching a wall there.

* * *

Two weeks after I turned fifteen, I told my mother I was going to get a tattoo.

'Don't you need my permission for that?' she asked.

'Normally, but Tom knows a tattoo parlour where they don't ask for your age.'

'Is Tom getting one too?'

'Paul, Tom, and me.'

'And what sort are they getting?'

'Tom's getting a Maori design. And Paul's getting the same thing.'

'What are you getting?'

'An eagle. Here.' I tapped my shoulder. 'I saw one I liked in the shop, but then I changed it. It's better, I think. Do you want to see?'

She studied my face. Then she turned away and I saw tears coming.

'Nate, you don't have to get one because Tom and Paul are getting one.'

'I'm not! I want to get one for myself.'

I watched her crying, and I felt like crying too, but the tears wouldn't come.

'What am I going to tell your father?' she said.

'I can talk to him.'

She grabbed my hand:

'Think about it first. Tattoos, they don't go anywhere. You grow old, they grow old. Do you want the same tattoo when you're sixteen, when you're thirty, when you're sixty? And you want to go to some tattoo parlour where they don't check how old you are... How good are they going to be? What if they make a mess of it?'

That night, I did as I promised her I would do: I thought about it. Every time I looked at my design (an eagle's neck, head, and beak in as few strokes as I could manage), I yearned to have it on my shoulder. But then I remembered my mother's words, and I told myself that she was right – it would wrinkle with age. By the morning, I couldn't remember why I'd wanted one in the first place.

'So you don't want one anymore?' she said.

'No. I'm only fifteen. Who knows what I'll like by the time I'm eighteen?'

'Yes, exactly what I was thinking,' she said quickly, but then she started again, a questioning, almost disappointed touch in her voice. 'Are you sure now? You told me you were sure you wanted one last night.'

'Oh, you know, that's just Tom and Paul.'

'Right, yes. You're right, of course, tattoos look silly anyway.' She glanced at me. When I nodded, she added: 'You could get your ear pierced if you want.'

* * *

I wasn't a week in hospital by the time my mother made me watch television. She came to me, found an articulated arm tucked under the bed, and rotated it until a screen appeared in front of our eyes. Plugging in some earphones, she gave me the right, took the left, and turned the television on. It was all happening before I had time to say anything.

'Daytime television,' she said switching through the few channels available. 'You might have to start watching *Neighbours*, or cooking shows even.'

I thought of protesting but from the tense resolve in her face, I knew what she would say – this is very important, Nate, please do what I tell you, don't argue now – at first with the same artificial ease, but as I pled my case, her words, her face would only harden up before they would budge. There was only one reasonable option: I turned away.

We didn't have a television at home. We'd never had one. As a child, I'd loved to visit friends' places and sit in front of the flashing colours and brash songs. Very young, I felt left out and clamoured for our own, of course. My mother still laughs at some of the scenes I made then: the tears I shed squirming on the floor but only when my mother could see me. But I wasn't very good at brooding. And soon I was rather proud of our lack of television. Friends would give me incredulous looks and I'd have offhand answers at the ready. Finding other things to do was easy enough: I read a lot, I drew, I played squash, tennis, cricket, football, I spent time with my brother and my friends.

'There's a special starting at 3 p.m. we should watch.' My pulse quickened. 'Is there anything you want to see beforehand?'

I said nothing. Reading the dial of her dangling watch, I saw I had ten minutes to stave it off. A lot could happen in ten minutes – yes, the doctor would come and check on me. The television was showing an old American crime series, the dusty cars of my childhood shiny new on the screen, an old man inspecting a dead body, his face wrinkled in concentration.

There was no doctor in sight; I decided to feign sleep and closed my eyes, letting my head sink into the pillow, hoping that my mother would leave. There was the sound of a car driving off, police sirens blared through, men shouted, a minute of theme music drew the show to its end. I turned my head away from my mother and caught my breath, as if my nose were a little blocked, and the earphone tugged at my ear before falling off onto my pillow. I couldn't make out voices anymore but I could still hear music.

I recognised the beat-raising tempo, the uplifting violins, the repetition and build-up. The news was on, and my heart was beating hard.

I heard her voice: 'Nate.' At first it was quiet, but then it was more insistent: 'Nate!' She knew I could hear her. 'They had the same special yesterday. Don't worry, it's done tastefully. I know it's not nice, but you need to watch it.'

I opened my eyes.

'Here, put this on.' She handed me the earphone. 'I didn't like it the first time either. Don't worry, it'll be alright.'

It was the note of hope in her voice which made me take the earphone. As if I could hear all her care and love in that note. She too feared for me, just like I did – of course, she was right, I decided; of course, she knew best. And it's that same hope I ponder over now, as far from understanding it today as I was then. How I wish that my mother would have asked for my story outright instead of forcing me to watch it on television! I can only presume that the days she watched me with my eyes half open, staring at the ceiling, were to her a proof of my distance. Or that the hospital psychiatrist told her I wouldn't open up to him, and that she assumed I'd behave the same way with her. But perhaps she was right to do as she did; perhaps I would have backed away had she extended an ear, in just the same way I yearned for the hand she wasn't willing to share.

All I know for certain is that I was caught in my desire for time and more time. I wanted to eat, draw, and close my eyes. The days to pass and the hospital to fade away. I wanted to stay in bed and go to school. Shut my eyes and hit my brother's leg-cutter over his head. I wanted time to stretch and protect me. I wanted the pendulum to swing into ash.

Instead, I got a newsreader's voice in my ear. Around me, the old ladies were fast asleep, the old man was looking out of the window, and two nurses were talking to each other. I could see no way out.

And it started.

A sandy-blond woman announced the start of an in-depth segment on the Hornsbury School Shooting. The words jumped off her tongue and rolled off the screen. Hornsbury School Shooting. I knew that the words ought to have some meaning, that they should trigger something: ideas, emotions, sounds and smells. But perhaps because not enough time had lapsed, or perhaps because the name of my school already carried so much meaning for me, I dismissed the construction as preposterous. I wanted to scoff at the newsreader, to scorn her lazy journalism.

The newsreader ignored me and a man appeared on the screen, a suit standing in front of my school, right between the bus stop and the bike racks. His creamy skin and pastel tie obscured the red-brick façade, the doors I'd entered hundreds of times, the steps on which I'd eaten two years of lunches. He finished his introduction and a clip took over with its own voice-over. It panned across a horde of police cars, some with their lights still flashing, television crews dragging black cables across the lawn, and a hastily erected police line, half enforced by officers, half by reticent onlookers unwilling to get closer. Past the line, there were ambulances and working uniforms. The camera zoomed in on the entrance to the annexe: the back of a paramedic was coming out, his hands holding a stretcher carrying a covered lump. The camera zoomed out, seeking

civilians, and found three teachers looking at the bodies coming out of the annexe, their faces limp with shock. And a crying man, his bald head red and bent.

Over it all, a man spoke:

‘...since Dunblane...’

The reference to other massacres stood out but I wasn’t really listening. His even and correct voice was punctuating the remoteness of the coverage. I’d come out on one of those stretchers and I didn’t remember seeing any cameras. The crowd had been smaller. The images had to have been taken when I was already on my way to the JR. I was witnessing events I hadn’t been a part of, I told myself. Events that didn’t concern me.

The feeling was reassuring. The film cut indoors, to a classroom I’d never been taught in, one of the large rooms on the ground floor of the main building. A man gave a news conference. He wore a dark suit and a sober tie. His large square glasses climbed up towards his forehead, which creased up and down as he answered a swarm of journalists. Someone asked a tough question. He turned towards him, twitched his thick eyebrows, and reached for his glasses with his right hand. For a second, he stood in front of the cameras, in front of the flashes, silent and tweaking the frame of his glasses. Then he took them off, and twirled them between thumb and forefinger in time with his answer. Det Ch Insp Andrew Hill, the caption read alongside a time stamp: 18/02/2000.

The film cut his answer short and moved back outside, to the frosty grass and bare trees of our sports ground. The camera shot was still: in the distance, the Kemp Annexe loomed over the ground, framed by grey branches and dark bushes, two levels tall from this angle. The groundsman’s workshop occupied the ground floor, its metal shutters drawn down, red and blue patterns painted by a long-gone class. The top floor still counted three windows, one for each classroom, and another for a mysterious cupboard I’d never seen anyone use. There was

no one on the field – I could imagine the groundsman barking at anyone daring to set foot on his turf.

The picture looked right. When every shot before had been glaringly foreign, this one looked just as it should. On the right of the shot, I could glimpse freshly painted football posts. I wouldn't have been surprised if the camera had turned around to show two football teams passing balls around in their warm-ups.

I felt a surge of memories coming up, my eyes drawn to one of the windows, images flashing through my mind. Bangs, wafts. Tom's soothing gestures. The taste of metal in my mouth. The sound of a chair falling behind me. Eric's puzzled look. The memories rushed in; I tried to cut them short, remembering the shape of the command I'd burned into my mind: 'Don't'. The grass, the trees, the workshop, I'd played many a football game out there. Better, I imagined the sun shining on the field, Jeffrey running in, and me standing at gully, the very same scene behind the wary batsman, an edge flying my way, a successful dive, teammates surrounding me.

I could breathe again. My thoughts temporarily tamed, I diverted them to the journalist's concluding statement, to his open-ended remarks.

'Let's talk about some of these questions,' the newsreader said from her studio, half the screen devoted to her correspondent, the man in the suit in front of bricks, doors and steps. 'It's been nine days. Why don't we have a better understanding of what happened inside the Kemp Annexe?'

'Sarah, we simply don't have enough witnesses,' his voice flowed, clear and concise. 'Two students saw Eric Knight walk through the grounds with a blue sports bag, the same bag in which police found close to fifty unused bullets, and a teacher saw him enter the Kemp Annexe. The only survivor, Nate Dillingham, is in hospital, stable, but still too feverish to speak to the police. And we know that forensic evidence was compromised when paramedics came to the survivors' rescue.'

‘That’s all well and good,’ said the newsreader, ‘but what about the police? Surely, they can tell us more.’

My lower lip hanging loose, the words trickled into my mind.

‘Sarah, the least we can say is that the police are being tight-lipped. Inspector Hill, who is in charge, is holding press conferences every day, but he’s not telling us anything we didn’t already know a week ago. We understand that he wants to speak with Nate Dillingham before he releases any new information.’ He looked down at something off-screen. ‘We are learning more about Eric Knight, the presumed shooter. His peers describe him as a loner prone to violent outbursts. He didn’t take well to his mother’s recent divorce. And he was sanctioned for instigating two fights last year. But no one saw this coming.’

‘Yes,’ the newsreader said. ‘The least we can say is that Hornsbury is a community in shock.’

A new clip started on the screen. It started with pictures of Market Street, of the Rose and Crown, of green hills and Cotswold cottages. A door slammed shut on a journalist.

I was about to remove my earphone but something rigid in my mother’s stance stopped me. Her hardness felt brittle all of a sudden. It was all in that hopeful quiver. Disappoint her then, when we were so close to her goal, and I’d be dealing her a wounding blow. So I listened to strangers dissecting my life, talking about an incident they knew nothing about and people they hardly understood.

The clip moved to the front of Eric’s home, a sixties house a mile out of Hornsbury. To an aerial view of the house and gardens, zooming in to the shed at the bottom of the hill. And then we were looking at Harry Williams, at Harry’s petulant mouth, Harry’s spanky hair, Harry’s tidy eyes. Harry who’d missed class for an orthodontist appointment. He was relaying a conversation he claimed to have had with Eric. Harry spoke with obvious relish, spitting the words to the camera.

‘He said, “Just watch, they’ve had it coming”. He was well angry, so I thought it means nothing. He’ll calm down. But no, he said it. “I’m going to get them all, they f—.”’

Harry held his ‘f’ for half a second.

‘Sorry, I don’t mean to swear on TV, but that’s what he said. “I’m going to get them all, they eff-ing deserve it.” He was really angry. But, you know, he was angry all the time.’

‘When did this happen?’ the journalist asked.

‘Two weeks ago, during lunch.’ His answer was quick, as if he’d rehearsed it.

‘And did you think of reporting it?’

Harry stumbled: ‘Well, no, you know, I thought he was just angry. I didn’t think he’d do anything about it. Didn’t think he was that crazy. Always knew he was crazy, everyone did. But I thought he was just weird crazy, not killing people crazy.’

And as the clip cut away to the shot of two guns, the journalist sympathised with Harry, with what ‘no student could have seen coming’.

I couldn’t focus anymore. The thought of Harry washed away all reason. If he’d been in the room, I’d have got up and punched him – I would have tried. He deserved that and more, the bastard. Trying to be famous, what right did he have! He hadn’t even been there when Eric walked in starved and mad. What would he have done? Nothing. He would have crawled towards a corner and died there, drowning in a pool of blood and piss.

I yanked the earphone out of my ear and looked for the remote. It was in my mother’s hand.

‘Turn it off.’

‘It’s almost over,’ she said.

‘Turn it off!’ I reached through the cloud for one more word: ‘Please.’

She turned it off. 'It was almost over,' she said. I was striving to control myself. 'They'll probably show it again tomorrow,' she said.

The thought of Harry on screen one more time did it. I couldn't keep it in any longer.

'I can't believe he told them that,' I said. The words slowed. I was sputtering: 'He's lying. He's doing it on purpose, just so he can be on TV—'

My mother grabbed my arm. 'Nate, take it easy, don't get angry! He's only telling them what he remembers—'

'No, he's not, he's lying. I was there when Eric got angry and he didn't say anything like that. He was angry, yes, he was, but he didn't tell us he was going to go and shoot everybody, or whatever lie Harry came up with so he could be on TV!'

I felt my mother's arm around my shoulder, her soft voice hushing me, her hand pulling me towards her.

'Just because Eric wouldn't be his friend, that's why he's got to go and tell lies! He's a... ' I caught myself, more aware of my mother's presence. 'He's a turd, that's what he is. I was there and Eric didn't say anything like that. He was just ranting, that's all... He just felt it that day... It got to him sometimes, you know.' I rested my forehead on my mother's shoulder and stared at a fold in the bed sheets.

My mind had gone blank and I felt drained. Her hushes stroking my ears, she held me for a minute without saying anything.

'Don't worry,' she said. 'Don't worry about other people. Harry, he's got to deal with it too. Some people, they rewrite the past, that's how they grieve. It's normal. Don't worry about him.'

She was crying, I thought. I couldn't be sure. She smelled like she was crying.

'Thank you, Nate, you were very brave.'

In hindsight, I realise I overreacted. My mother was right: Harry's lies were only natural. I can't recall Eric's outburst precisely. All I can say was that it was during our lunch break, in an outdoor hallway on the backside of the main buildings. I can still picture the rusty lockers, and the thick layers of white paint on the steel columns. If I'm still sure that Harry lied, it's because I wouldn't have got so angry otherwise.

I needed three hours of sleep to recover from my adrenaline rush. I woke up to find my mother reading on a chair by the window. Next to her were an apple and a small piece of bread.

'Did I miss dinner?'

She looked up and assessed me for a few seconds before answering. 'They just came back for the trays. But it's alright, I hid these just in case you were hungry.'

The sight of the pale apple and pasty piece of bread had my lips curling into a grimace.

'They had palak paneer tonight,' I said. 'You know I like that. Couldn't you have kept some for me?'

'You know they won't let me,' she said, as if she hadn't already disregarded half of their rules. A picture of Harry spitting saliva into a microphone came into my head, and all of a sudden I knew that I had to have cream, cheese and spinach on my tongue, or I'd stay welded to my bed and shiver until there were three more tubes pumping liquids into my body.

'Mum,' I spoke each word very clearly, 'I want some palak paneer.'

'Nate, it's health and safety. You know how they are.'

Her gentle words only made me more frustrated.

'Mum! It's not hard, you go after them, and you ask them for a dish that wasn't opened. There's got to be plenty of them.'

'They won't do it. They're not allowed to.'

'Then go to the cafeteria and buy some.' She took a deep breath, and I knew it: she thought that all she had to do was

wait a bit and I'd start being reasonable. I raised my voice: 'Mum! I'm stuck in hospital, I've got a hole in my stomach, and all I'm asking for is some palak paneer. Just get me some!'

She stood up hesitantly, her right hand trailing over her bag.

'They probably don't have any, but I'll ask.'

'Mum!' I shouted. The burst startled her, and for the first time, she looked at me like she was ready to listen. I continued in a calmer voice: 'If they don't have any, there are plenty of Indian restaurants close by. I promise I won't move.'

Her long face took a moment to settle; then she smiled and squeezed my arm.

'Yes, of course I'll find you some. I'll be back soon.' She paused. 'Don't talk to any strangers.'

When she walked away, I closed my eyes and drifted towards sleep with a strangely satisfied smile – for half an hour, while the sensation lasted, I felt that the day hadn't gone so badly after all.

She was back with a paper bag in hand. Heat radiated from the dish's aluminium cover and I felt weaker, happier. Needing the warmth, I burned my tongue with the creamy spinach. With that taste in my mouth, I'd be alright in no time.

'Tell me, Nate,' my mother said, two fingers holding her head tilted back, 'what sort of things had Eric been saying lately?'

I stopped eating and looked at her. It was the first direct question she'd asked me about Eric, and yet she behaved as if she'd asked me whether I needed more blankets. The triviality of it all rubbed off on me, and I relaxed into an answer.

'You mean, regarding the...?' I thought of the way they put it on television, but I couldn't bring myself to say it.

'If he said anything about that, yes. But anything you found strange, really.'

I looked down at my tray. A painting of a patch of earth on a mountain side: the spinach lightened by the cream, its strands flattened with my fork, the paneer floating white – they were

blades of grass pushed by the winds, fighting for sunlight on a rocky soil. My mind held a long blank. I started speaking, hoping memories would follow.

‘Well, there was that time with Harry, but... He didn’t like some of the others, you know. He kept on saying they were getting in the way. I don’t think anyone could have stopped him from doing anything, but that’s what he’d been saying in the last few weeks.’

I looked at her. She was nodding with a faraway smile. She stood up and came closer.

‘Just like I thought,’ she whispered.

‘Yeah, he was busy in the last few weeks. I didn’t see as much of him as usual, except for my bat. He showed me a thing or two, but that’s about it, you know.’ She was still nodding, her smile shifting to me.

‘Yes, that’s good, Nate. That’s—’

Her voice was as soft as my tiredness, and I felt I could share more.

‘Just a few things, like interesting stuff he was working on. I told you he was good at repairing and making things, didn’t I?’

‘Yes, you said that. That’s alright, you’ve answered my question already. Eat your dinner. You’ve done very well, of course, you’ve done well.’

Her hand circled up and down. I imitated her: my fork picked out a chunk of cheese, brought it to my mouth, and went back for more food.

‘That’s good. The more you eat, the quicker you’ll get better. It’s very easy to look back at everything that happened in the last few weeks, and knowing what you know now, to think that you could have done something to prevent it. That’s called hindsight bias. Don’t start thinking that way, Nate. You did everything right.’

Black Chalk

* * *

My diary includes three tightly spaced pages on a fleeting moment that happened the next morning. Before visiting hours, a young man walked into my ward and stopped by the nurses' station. A sling tucked his right wrist onto his left collar-bone. He turned his back to the desk and, resting on it, looked out towards the window. Two nurses walked around him to get behind the desk. His gaze moved from patient to patient until it came to me. He seemed to take me in longer than the others, and yet he barely acknowledged that I was aware of him. For my part, I stared at him and at his youth. Something else caught his attention and he ambled away down the corridor. I saw him stop once, at the edge of my world, before he moved on, out of my reach.

My diary entry seems bent on capturing every detail, from the clothes he wore, to his hairstyle, and his body language. I'd forgotten the moment, but reading about it, his blue sling and town clothes come back to mind. The entry's pages are out of order, further into the notebook than events that happened later. Perhaps I wrote about the young man days after he passed through, recalling the moment then as I am recalling it now. Or perhaps I just wrote my descriptions on the first blank page I found. Still, I wonder at the hour I must have spent on the entry. And much like the rest of my time in hospital, I doubt I can piece it back together seamlessly.

* * *

That afternoon, my mother arrived with a man in her tow. He waited by the nurses' station as she approached me. It took me a few seconds to recognise Andrew Hill, the policeman who'd answered questions on the news. He looked smaller in person than on screen. Faced with a deflated version, I found him short

and stout, when I could see that he was about as tall as me. For a moment, the impression put me at ease.

‘It’s alright,’ she whispered with a smile, ‘he won’t stay long.’

Even though my mother hadn’t warned me, his sudden appearance didn’t surprise me. That, together with the nervous expectation on my mother’s face, had me nodding.

She signalled him to my bedside. He came closer, holding his hands behind his back. His navy suit opened to show a white shirt, a gold buckle, and a blue tie. He led with his head down as if he were caught in thought. When he looked at me, his chin rose level, and his bushy eyebrows lifted his heavy glasses for a second. Then they came down and his face was settled.

It was that general expression of a man who knows and understands that made me want to close my eyes and will him away.

He made as if to speak, but my mother started before him.

‘Nate,’ she said, ‘Mr Hill would like to ask you a few questions. He knows you’re making an effort for him.’ She whispered the last part and turned to the inspector. ‘Nathaniel very much wants to help.’ She looked as if she was about to say more but she stopped herself. After a short pause, she added: ‘Don’t forget that he is just starting to deal with the whole situation.’ And with a hand gesture, she told the policeman to proceed.

He breathed in deeply as he gathered his words. When he opened his mouth, I expected his voice to boom across the room, but the slow sounds barely reached me.

‘Nate – can I call you Nate?’ he asked.

I nodded.

‘Thank you, Nate,’ he continued, a bluntness clotting his West Country accent. ‘My name is Andrew Hill. Call me Andrew. This is an informal chat. We’ll take your statement at a later stage... When the doctors declare you well enough to go through the process. Today I would like to ask you a few questions. Can you answer them for me?’

I expected him to continue but he seemed to wait for my response.

‘I can try.’

‘Good.’ He pulled out a notebook and was clearing his throat when my mother groaned. His eyes looked her way for an instant before going back to his notebook.

‘Mr Hill!’ she said. The urgency in her voice tore him away from his task. With a wave of her chin, she took him aside to the nurses’ station. Their conversation looked animated, but they were far enough that I couldn’t make out what they were saying. He came back with his notebook tucked in his pocket. Acknowledging my mother on the other side of the bed, he started again.

‘I know how difficult it must be for you at the moment—’ He caught himself, a finger reaching up to his right temple, stroking frame and skin. In that moment, I started hoping: perhaps I could say no, shut my mouth and stare him down. But I lay still, waiting for him to speak, my arms limp by my sides.

‘Do you know why I’m here, Nate?’

I held silent for an instant, hoping he’d answer his own question. I wanted to beat him at his own game, but he waited for me and I had to speak: ‘You’re in charge of the investigation.’

‘Yes, I am. Did your mother tell you this?’

‘I saw you on TV.’

‘On TV?’ He raised a hand to his glasses and pushed them down his nose. ‘Is there a TV in this room?’ he asked, looking around.

I pointed at the articulated arm on the side of my bed.

‘Of course,’ he said, pushing his glasses back up, dismissing the matter. ‘Do you know what it means to be in charge of the investigation?’

‘I...’ I held the single vowel for a long time, hoping that he would take over and get on with it. But he waited. ‘It means that you’ve got to find out what happened,’ I said.

His lips curved into the shadow of a smile.

‘Yes, I need to find out what happened. This is where I need your cooperation.’

As he finished his sentence, he reached for his notebook and a pen. He shuffled pages until he came across the right one. Then, his eyes jumping between his notebook and my face, ignoring my mother’s frown, he started the interview process.

Answers were easy at first. My mother had dropped me off at school; I’d bumped into Jeffrey before going to my history class; there, the teacher had handed essays back, which we’d discussed for half the lesson, before looking at new material. With every question, my answers lengthened. He nodded slowly as I spoke, taking note of every detail I gave him. When I told him I’d arrived a little late for physics, he raised his eyebrows in appreciation, the thick coarse hair climbing above his glasses’ frame.

To my right, my mother was grabbing the railing at the edge of my bed. She had the window to her back, and the shadows stressed her glare.

She addressed me at first: ‘You look exhausted,’ and, turning to the inspector, ‘He should be resting now.’

‘A few more questions, Mrs Dillingham. I’ll be quick.’

She was standing close to me but she was facing Hill, her shoulders square, her legs still, a hint of a forward lean to her posture so that she seemed ready to leap at him for me, but not to take my hand and smile.

He wanted to know whether I was the last student to come in. I told him of Eric and his chains, of the madness in his eyes and his aloofness. And when I paused, he hummed. ‘What happened next?’ My tongue loosened, I started answering before I had time to think. At first, everything I said seemed distant, as though it had happened to someone else. Three thin lines divided his forehead evenly, while his nods slowed.

‘Eric shot Tom and everyone backed away.’ He scribbled faster, keeping pace with my words. ‘He was saying sorry.’

‘To everyone?’

‘I don’t know. No, I don’t think so.’ He wrote two lines. ‘I don’t remember much.’

‘You’re doing fine.’

I spoke of the noise, I described Jeffrey falling, and Jayvanti and Anna, and I added more names, the ones I saw die. Name after name, the recollections slowed.

My voice trailing off, he asked me the question I’d been avoiding, the question I’m still avoiding. Looking back at what I wrote earlier, I can see that I included the moment, but how hidden have I put it! A series of cracks and no context. I’m battling the white page, writhing in front of my computer, but why? I was lauded for it eight years ago, and yet the shame still throws me into a pit.

‘How did Eric die?’

My muscles stiffened, and suddenly I no longer felt in control. I looked at my mother in panic, dry sobs springing up my throat. Her whole body shifted towards me, her hands holding the bed’s railing even harder, her fingers tantalisingly close.

‘Eric and you were friends?’ He carried on with the same calm expression.

I kept silent.

‘What was the extent of your relationship with Eric Knight?’ he asked.

‘Nate is friends with everyone!’ my mother said, loud enough that the whole ward looked at us. ‘Nate’s tired! Look at him, look at what you’ve done!’

But I was still absorbed by the inspector. He held his notebook at the ready, his pen resting on the paper. The thick rims of his glasses seemed to soar up, precariously resting on his brow, as if they were waiting for my answer to drop back down to the bridge of his nose.

‘It’s me. I shot him—’

My mother barked over the rest of my words. Mr Hill took off his glasses, and played with them as he stared at the bed's headboard. He tweaked them between his fingers as I'd seen him do on television.

'Yes, I thought so,' he said.

'Inspector!' She moved around to the other side of the bed. 'That's quite enough. You told me you'd be careful!' She grabbed him by the arm and snarled: 'Out, out!'

* * *

She lingered in the ward's corridor before coming back. 'Get some sleep,' she said. Her lips drifted open and the fingers of her right hand were slipping down her face. Suddenly, she pulled out her mobile phone, told me she'd be back later, and walked out.

The tears had retreated without ever bursting through. But they'd left me with a great sense of unresolved sadness. I wished I could have cried the sadness away or talked it out with her. Instead I was alone. The doctors had ordered nothing but rest for me that day, and I couldn't think up a ploy to attract the nurses' attention. One of the old ladies had a quiet visitor. Mother and son, I thought. It was the first time I'd seen him. He'd barely arrived that he'd opened his book. I looked at them for a few seconds, but their mutual silence seemed to hide even more sadness. I toyed with that sadness for a moment, hoping it would bring the tears up, but they were too far gone.

The other old lady was asleep, a wisp of white hair covering part of her forehead, the translucent skin glowing in the afternoon light. I looked towards the old man. He was in bed, sitting up, the sheets pulled down so they covered his legs from his thighs down. He was turned towards the old lady and her son – it had to be her son. The old man's face seemed like it had been creased by years of laughter. I stared at him resolutely, my chest facing him, my head pointing towards his bed, my eyes

fixed on the contours of his face. I wanted him to notice me, turn my way and respond to my smile. He would come over and we would speak. I knew he could walk, I'd seen him.

I waited for a minute, but he didn't move. I focused all my thoughts on him, broadcasting them silently across the room. I waited for five minutes, but he was a patient man. I grew calmer, the emotions in my chest weaker. I waited for half an hour. At one stage, he shifted his stare from the old lady's son to a janitor coming through the ward. Then the son left, and his eyes moved to the window, turning from one side of the room to the other. He passed over me without acknowledging my efforts.

'Nate?' I looked up. Two nurses, both men, were by my bedside. The sight of two young men in nurses' clothes puzzled me. Perhaps Hill had ordered me transferred to a prison hospital. Or perhaps they'd decided I was crazy, and they were going to take me to a psychiatric ward. Either way, they'd sent two men because they were afraid I was going to fight.

'Nate, we're going to move you to another ward. You're going to get a single room, lucky you.'

I looked around me trying to think of a way to prevent this. The old man was now looking at me, but it was too late. The nurse in charge of my bed was nowhere to be seen. I looked at the ward's entrance, but my mother wasn't showing up.

'Why? I didn't hear anything about this.'

The bulkier of the two answered me: 'Don't know. We just got told to move you.' Seeing my worried expression, he smiled gently. 'One floor down. Your own private room and the same view, lucky you.'

The thin nurse gathered my things and they started wheeling me out.

'Don't you have some idea?'

They shrugged.

They took me to a large empty corner room and set up my bed so that I wasn't quite in line with the door. I didn't have

the same view: there were windows on two walls, but from my position I could only see out of one, towards Headington. And I was too far from the window to look down at the town. I could see a few trees and houses, but they were hazy.

As they were leaving me, I asked the nurses to keep the door open. They left it so that I could only see a thin strip of the outside world; from my angle, it was a yard-long stretch of the corridor going around the corner of the building. It was a busy stretch: legs flashed through, clad in green, slacks, or town clothes. I never had time to see who was walking by. No one seemed to stop and talk as they had done in my old ward.

My mother found me an hour later. She bustled through the door and strode to my bed. She stopped to take in her surroundings, and with a satisfied look reached for a chair. Her hair was tied back, folded into a neat ponytail. I looked at her face, searching for a sign. When she faced me, it was with a decisive expression.

‘Hill wants you isolated,’ she said, launching into his reasons: he didn’t want me watching television, he didn’t want just anyone to speak to me. I lost interest in the subject as soon as I understood his reasons. I held silent, waiting for an opening, wanting to tell her more about Eric. But once she exhausted this first topic, she started on another without marking a pause.

* * *

Eric could spend days working away in his shed. All he needed was a good project.

The first time I visited his place, he showed me a tree-house he’d spent a year building when he was fourteen. When he’d first mentioned it, I’d imagined a couple of planks nailed to a tree. Instead, I saw something that would have fitted in Neverland.

We went down to a copse that separated his garden from the field it backed onto. He stopped in front of two ancient oaks,

and with a broad sweep of his arms, he invited me to look up. It took me a few seconds to make out the tree-house through the green spring leaves. When I did, it all came into focus: the porches, the terraces, the ropes, the steps, the walls, the ladders, the bridge. They webbed across the branches gently, using and adding to what the trees offered, as if they were embracing the canopy.

I followed him around a smooth trunk, where he unfurled a short ladder tucked in between two branches. We climbed to a platform covered with a PVC sheet, which he'd built first, he told me, and on which he'd stored his tools as he worked. Steps, some carved into existing branches, others nailed into the trunk, weaved past a lookout and a space he'd styled as his desk, and led to the sturdiest part of his refuge: a walled-up room five yards above the ground, large enough to hold a camping bed and a coffee table. Waving his hands around, he showed me the room's features: it had an impermeable roof, straw to insulate the floor, and windows he could seal with clear plastic when it rained. Another door opened on to a long and sturdy branch. Fastened to the room's outside wall, two ropes followed the branch at hand-height, before meeting a third rope, tying up into a frail bridge, and plunging across the void to the other tree. He'd spent two weeks making the bridge, he explained.

The taller tree was his sanctuary. My feet dangling from a platform, his long limbs stretched across a hammock, we looked out across the neighbour's field and smoked a cigarette in silence. It was the only place I ever saw him smoke.

It was in his shed that he'd conceived the tree-house. And it was in the shed that he'd worked on all his other projects. Some of his more ornamental ideas ended up on the shelves of his room. Lying on his bed, I could see a sample of his ingenuity: toy cars made out of aluminium cans, a bow and a quiver full of arrows, stones carved into paperweights, even a nativity set – he wasn't religious, but he found the concept challenging.

It was his determination that I admired. He'd decide something and he'd carry it through, like the shelves he'd fitted into his tree-house. They were going to be made from wood he'd recycled himself. Buying freshly cut planks was too easy. He wanted to work with existing forms, to make something new from what people had discarded. For two whole months, he scoured through pits, scrutinised rubbish piles outside houses, until he had a heap of material spilling out of his shed. He studied each item: the headboard, the splintered table, the Ikea bedside table. He played with them all, unscrewing, sawing, gluing, until he had enough sketches to fill a whole notebook, until he had a design. For months, I'd seen planks like limbs shifting puffs of sawdust in his shed. And then, one day, he took me straight to the little cabin up his tree. Against an outside wall, covered with a small awning, his bookshelf was finished: from the bottom to the top, it narrowed in width, in breadth, and its wood lightened until a short and thin plywood piece, coated in white paint, capped the whole assembly.

He'd said he'd do it and he'd done it. Unlike me. I could hold a hammer, I could tie a knot, but I'd never set up a pulley system thirty feet up a tree. It was his determination that drew me into his world.

And how sullied it had been on the news! While the grainy images were bouncing off the shed's tin roof, the newsmen dissected Eric's relationship with his stepfather, his behavioural record, his broken mother. In malignant detail, they talked of the replicas Eric had turned into live guns. And not once did they ask how a seventeen-year-old could have achieved so much.

* * *

My body was recovering. The pain had gone, its departure unnoticed. It was taking me longer to fall asleep. Hoping the house would slump into the soot, I was spending hours caught

outside a dream. My thoughts roamed unhindered by carnal impulses. They swirled into my past, rushing across vast plains, amassing at my defences. They started with the day just gone, scratching around one moment until it bled. Satisfied, they jumped further and landed on an image. Sometimes, the image yielded a rush of impressions. Sometimes, I fended it off, and my thoughts, undeterred, flowed on to another vision. But they were soon darting back, their question rephrased.

Was someone trying to get into my room? My mind jolted back to the sound of shuffling steps outside my door. I held my breath and listened, waiting for a hand on the door handle, for a muffled footstep across the lino floor. Nothing came. Two people moved down the corridor past my door, whispering to each other. I let air swell into my lungs, tension washing away as I breathed out.

No one was trying to get in. I smiled as my thoughts leaned into a safe topic. I was waiting for the soot to settle.

* * *

When my aunt came to visit, I found myself more engrossed with her toddler of a daughter than in what she had to say. For once, I wasn't the youngest person in the room. Nicole was the second of my father's sisters, and also the one who lived closest to us. For years, when I was little, our fridge had been adorned with her postcards: temples in Laos, the Sydney Opera House, Polynesian dancers, the Golden Gate Bridge – there seemed to be one coming every six months. On their back, a two-line description of what she was doing littered with exclamation marks. 'Just climbed Kilimanjaro! Next stop: K2!' came with a cloudy peak. 'I love Aussie men and I love surfing lessons!' she wrote on the back of a surfing kangaroo.

When she'd met an Englishman in Boston four years ago now, she plunged into a relationship with the same enthusiasm:

within months, she was married, pregnant, and ecstatic to be back home.

Green-eyed Tori was her second, and she was making sure that her mother didn't look at anyone but her:

'What's that?' she said.

'That's a window, dear. Now let Mummy speak.'

Tori gathered her teddy bear close, and pointed a plump finger in my direction.

'What's that?'

'Not what's that, but who's that. That's your cousin, dear. Where's your teddy bear? What was I saying, Nate?' She looked at me, but I shrugged the question towards my mother.

'Tori, Tori,' my mother was saying, her voice an octave higher than usual. 'Where's your teddy bear? Come and show Auntie Liz your teddy bear!'

Tori pouted, holding her teddy bear behind her back, as if to protect it from my mother's outstretched hands.

'Yes, that's what I was saying.' My aunt jabbed her index finger at the ceiling. 'It's so typical of your father to take on more work just when you need him the most. Don't give me that look, Liz. I've known him for a lot longer than you.' Tori was sitting in my mother's arms, fiddling with my mother's collar. 'When he was young, he was just the same. When our mother got her first tumour, the benign one, Henry went and spent his days in the library—'

Spending time with my aunt was both frightening and refreshing. She could hammer her truth in just as easily as she could delight us all with a story. On this visit, she opted for her genial self. After telling me about her brother's faults – I always liked the perspective she gave me on my father – she started recounting her own hospital adventures, the gash on her head when she was seven, the burst appendix when she was eleven, and I laughed along to the beat of her stories.

'Who's ever dislocated a shoulder on Christmas Day? And going surfing too! Now that's my luck, isn't it? A hot surfer, washboard abs to go with the stubble, picks me up and I'm thinking that it's not so bad after all, but that's as good a Christmas present as I got that day. Fifteen minutes later, two seventy-year-olds, each with a moustache, and I'll tell you what: one of them wasn't a man – so there they are, slicing through my brand new swimsuit, and then wheeling me off to hospital – hold on, Tori, let Mummy speak – and I look around the emergency room: from this wall to that wall, people lying around waiting, holding a bit of ice on their head, knee, you name it; they like to play sports in Australia and they like to drink, not an easy mix. And for all these people, three poor doctors asking themselves why they didn't take Christmas off!'

* * *

Andrew Hill's people came to take my statement two days after his visit. They knocked on the door and pushed it open before I could invite them in. My mother had gone to another ward's corridor to make a phone call. Ever since the inspector's visit, she'd become more dependent on her phone. She'd started using it apologetically; she'd come back to my side and tell me how much she hated mobile phones; but now that ritual had shrunk to a shrug.

Hill had sent me two people, both alluringly young. The more junior of the two must have been in his early twenties. His droopy eyes appeared fixed on the floor for the whole interview. After a cursory nod, he pulled a tape recorder out of a satchel he carried slung across his shoulders, and went about setting it up.

His partner entranced me, and entrances me still. I can still picture her today in a fitted grey suit, its lines following the curve of her hips down and around her arse, before dropping in one clean line to her feet. She was arching her back and holding her

head tilted down as if she were looking up to me. I'm ashamed to put it down on paper, but the thought of her has kept on resurfacing over the years, even though I only ever met her twice. Now I can recognise in her allure the shape that some women reach around the age of thirty, but then I was caught unaware, and desire was stirring me into submission.

Her introductions almost made me hers. I was leaning back on my bed with a dumb smile and half-opened eyes, nodding to everything she said. It wasn't what she said: she was resorting to standard turns of phrase. But it was a quality in her voice which changed the meaning of her every word. A quietness. Quiet as a late-night whisper, her breath tickling my ear, one lazy finger stroking the hollow of her waist. It was halfway through her introduction, as lust was tightening its stranglehold, that my mother walked into the room.

'What are you doing here? I told your inspector you couldn't interview him without me.'

The woman's voice floated across the room, brushing my skin: 'We haven't started.'

'Well, you can't start until I give you permission. Do you have my permission?' She paused, daring a response. 'Give me a moment alone with my son.' She flicked her fingers towards the door. When they didn't move fast enough, she scowled: 'Now!'

She shut the door behind them and came to my side, her face transformed. Its vivacity gone, she looked aged.

'Are you ready?'

'I guess.'

'Remember one thing, Nate. Whatever you think you've done, shooting Eric saved lives. Think of the room next door. They were locked in too.'

'I guess.'

She held herself in silence, her eyes still locked with mine, her hand rising mechanically to her temple. Her eyes lost their

focus and she turned away. She seemed to stagger on her way to the door – I couldn't be sure.

They were meeker the second time they entered my room. The woman came in behind my mother and stopped a yard from my bed as if she were waiting to be shown where to stand. She turned back to the droopy-eyed man, who'd stopped at the door. Her glance seemed to embolden him: he crossed the doorsill and went back to his equipment. That in turn strengthened her position: she edged closer to me, to where she wanted to conduct the interview from. For a few seconds, she stood with her hands crossed over her stomach, one thumb massaging the other hand's knuckles. My attention slipped from her hands to the turn of her jacket, and, once again, I saw what had troubled me before my mother came into the room.

Then, with a sign from my mother, she started speaking. If it hadn't been for my mother's upright posture, the tension in her jaw, the stillness of her eyes, I would have been lost to the woman as a child to a lullaby. I would have been fooled into thinking that she listened because she cared, and that she cared about even the most minor of details. The warmth of an undivided ear, and in a woman like her!

But my mother was vigilant. She cut the woman early in her spiel.

'So you're doing cognitive interviews now. And do they work?'

The woman looked startled when she answered my mother.

'Yes, we are. DCI Hill insists on them.'

'A modern man in the police force, who would have thought? Well, you're doing a good enough job... Keep at it.'

It took a few seconds for the unease to leave the woman's face. My mother had achieved her purpose: the woman's questions now seemed like they were coming out of an instruction book.

She asked me to tell her my story, and when I stalled she asked me to tell her more. 'Tell me more...' It could have been a lover's command. Instead, it was a ploy. I told her the story

I've already put down. Haltingly. Mr Johnson and his problem set, Eric and his chains, Tom and his sally, Jeffrey and his grunts, Anna and her blood, paramedics and their stretchers, the swelling crowd and ambulances. Tell me more... She asked me how I felt. Despair and acceptance. Fear and adrenaline. Pain and shame. Awe and calm. Tell me more... She asked me to go through events backwards. Arriving in hospital. Liz by my side. Anna's chest whizzing. Shots, shots and more shots. I struggled. Tell me more... She asked me to go through events from another person's eyes. I asked who, they all died. Tell me more... I balked, she retreated.

And yes, I told her what I haven't yet told the white page. Standing up as bullets wailed around me. Walking towards Eric, hands outstretched, coaxing a gun out of his hands, for him and against him, making and breaking a promise. One, two, three.

I told her what I felt: the burn the barrel left on my fingertips, the gun's weight and easy balance, the shock through my hand as my bullet left its chamber, and the overriding pain as his bullet missed my head and plunged into my stomach.

I told it to her backwards: dropping the gun and staggering back, pain gone blind on the count of three, my escape on the count of two, the trust in his eyes on the count of one, the implicit promise, my fingers curling around the handle.

I couldn't tell the story from his eyes. He wouldn't have understood – to him, I was a brother. Such things are better left untold.

* * *

The nights were slow, I remained stuck in bed, and I was growing restless. I'd been going to the bathroom on my own for some time. Doctors had advised me to consult the physiotherapist before getting back on my feet. But as it was merely advice, I could ignore it: I started by walking around my room. It was

more of a slow shuffle than a purposeful walk, but it was a steady sort of movement. My legs were still faithful even if weariness piled down my spine. The ache in my stomach remained dull, but for certain movement that sharpened the pain, jolts radiating from the wound until my jaw clenched and my lips curled. I couldn't stretch my back or lean to the side, for example. But I could, a hand pushing along the IV stand still plugged into my arm, the other clutching my drawing pad and a pencil, keep my midriff steady and shuffle through my hospital wing.

My new ward looked much like my old one. The walls were painted green rather than yellow, but the patients looked just as wrinkled, and the nurses just as occupied. There was a gate at the end of the corridor, which opened silently onto the heavy grey doors of an elevator. I remembered the nurses who'd moved me: one floor, they'd said. The weight of the pad in my hand had me thinking of the old man upstairs. Pressing a few buttons, the elevator swallowed me in and spat me out. A nurse helped me through the door to my old ward: pulling was trickier than pushing.

When I came to the open room that used to be my own, I stood by the nurses' desk, as the young man and his blue sling had done, and looked at the great window. The ward looked ordered from afar, beds symmetrically arranged, the floor uncluttered. The city's lights broke through the distance, dimming points in the room's reflection. I was there too, in my pale hospital robe, spotty stubble darkening my chin, my back bent forward. The sight held me for a moment.

I recognised a nurse walking by.

'What happened to the old man who used to be in that bed?' I pointed.

She pursed her lips.

'The dark-skinned one,' I said.

'Oh yes, he's gone.'

'Dead?'

‘No, gone home.’

Relief mingled with disappointment. We had spent days facing each other. Days of boredom, introspection, and solitude. And somehow, despite our proximity, we’d erected a barrier we never dared break.

I took the elevator down to a cafeteria I’d seen signposted. People were scattered in clusters across the expanse of tables. Opening my sketchbook, I sat in between two groups. A greying man talking to a woman with a creased pink shirt. And an Asian family: two sons sleeping over beds made of chairs, an attentive daughter tucking her mother’s arm, a father typing away on his phone. I sat and sketched and then I had enough. I preferred walking.

As I weaved my way back, two floors below my own ward, I heard a patient grunt. The sound stopped me. A guttural burst breaking down into a howl. I peered into a room at the man’s pain, but my mind was going elsewhere. I was back inside the classroom and Jeffrey had fallen to the ground with a loud grunt. He was on the floor, leg twitching, a new grunt rising muted past his rasping breath.

My body was going rigid – I had to think of something else. Grunts and Jeffrey... My brain parsed through hundreds of mornings, afternoons and evenings I’d spent with him over the years, until, as the seconds passed and the classroom threatened its return, I remembered that Jeffrey used to grunt on the cricket field. Gentle men in floppy whites, glare reflecting off the wicket, freshly mowed grass, the images came together and the classroom was banished out of my mind.

Jeffrey used to roll his arm over and hope the ball would swing, seam and spit. He called himself a fast bowler – when I made fun of his speed, he told me he bowled a heavy ball.

‘Ask the three batsmen who couldn’t play me last week. I’m quicker than I look.’

They'd been swinging across the line with their eyes closed, and one of them had connected five times before finding a safe pair of hands on the boundary. But that hardly bothered Jeffrey.

When I told him he was slow in the nets, he'd rise to the banter and scoff back an answer. One day he'd say that he reserved his best for matches. On another, he'd tell me that I wasn't worth the effort. This isn't to say he fooled himself. He was well aware that he was on the slow side of medium. But he preferred to think of himself as a fast bowler. When I told him that he should take a closer look at Ashley Giles, he laughed dismissively. It would be Brett Lee and Shoab Akhtar for him.

If my advice had no effect, he was willing to listen to my father. For years, we'd seen him score a hundred every third match. His quietness at the crease, the restrained backlift, his backfoot punches, we'd spent years trying to emulate him. One day, my father took Jeffrey aside and said:

'Forget about speed. It's all in here.' He tapped his skull. 'Fool me and you'll get me out.'

Jeffrey took that to mean he should start grunting. He would start with three standard deliveries, respectable stuff on and around the off stump. On the fourth, we all expected it, he would sprint in, grunt, and bowl a slower one. The grunt would come early in his delivery stride, as if he was coiling so far that it was straining his back. He would land with a roar, release with a snarl, only for the ball to lob gently towards the batsman. Wary of losing their wicket, batsmen would generally pat the ball back, and smile at the laughing wicketkeeper.

Jeffrey's tactic worked once. A spiky-haired twelve-year-old blocked Jeffrey's first two deliveries, cut the third for four, and then tried the same shot on Jeffrey's slower ball, only to see the ball go over his slanted bat and dislodge a bail. Never one to miss a celebration, Jeffrey planted both feet on the ground and looked up to the sky, his arms outstretched. When he looked

down, we were all around him, cheering him on. Ignoring the rest of us, he found my father and embraced him.

The image of my father and Jeffrey, arm in arm, brought up an overpowering melancholy. Drained, I made my way back to my room. The next day I told my mother I wished my father would visit more often.

‘He wants to. He does. But he’s busy, you know how it is. And he’s got to take care of James.’

There was a sadness in her voice that stopped me from asking any more questions.

* * *

It was a day before Hill’s last visit that my mother seemed to break the distance that had grown between us. Despite my best efforts, I could ignore it no longer. She’d never made me feel so caught up in my own silence. Whenever she entered the room, I’d pull out a novel and bury myself behind its cover. Even when she sat quietly, I dared not interrupt her for a slight furrow across her brow.

But that day, her phone clutched in her hand, she walked into my room with a smile I hadn’t seen for many years. It was the same smile she’d had when her lab received a large grant. Or when she’d ensured her favourite doctoral student was offered a fellowship.

I was sitting on a chair, my forehead glued to the window, staring at the town below. Arching my neck, I immediately felt myself drawn towards her. She was pulling up a chair next to mine, her voice carrying the warmth of fresh gossip.

‘There’s a rumour going around,’ she said, lingering over the word ‘rumour’, ‘that they’re going to replace Andrew Hill.’ On that, she leaned back and stared up at the ceiling. ‘Ah!’

‘Why? What’s he done?’

Her smile grew to include me. She tapped her phone absentmindedly.

‘It’s what he hasn’t done that people worry about. Every morning, there’s fifty journalists waiting outside his door for a coherent story, and he can’t give it to them. He has twenty officers working late into the evenings and he can’t give it to them! That’s what he’s done. That’s what he hasn’t done.’

Her enthusiasm was overpowering my confusion. I grinned as I spoke.

‘But he knows what happened. I told him.’

‘Exactly.’ She kissed my head and got up. I turned around, waiting for her to say more. She was pacing, two fingers playing with her lower lip.

‘Nate, he’s just a policeman. He doesn’t get how it works.’

As she walked around, unaware of my presence, I felt like a fool. I’d let myself hope too much, but she’d only come in so she could boast over one of her schemes. I suppressed the feeling as soon as it happened, but it had already coated my mind with a sticky dirt.

As she left the room, I tried to forget the smile she’d had when she’d walked in, and told myself to focus on practicalities. My mother was not being herself, I decided. But there was a weight on the insides of my stomach, as though I were falling, that stopped me from taking that line of thought any further. The only idea that seemed to fit was that I should take matters into my own hands. Whenever it came up, I nodded to myself and, for an instant, forgot the feeling in my gut.

* * *

In many ways, Eric had been unlucky when he first arrived at Hornsbury School. He’d spent his first weeks balancing the changes occurring within his home with his desire to fit in and

make friends in a new school. There were days when he would be twitching around at his desk, hoping to start a conversation with his neighbours. I still remember him taking Jeffrey's seat next to me. Unhappy to see my friend relegated to the back, I spent the entire lesson ignoring Eric, just as he was trying to catch my eyes and smile. I feigned utter focus on my book, and when my attention wavered, I held my hand over my left eye so that our gazes wouldn't cross.

And there were days when he would trudge in, choose an empty table, and slump back, unaware of anyone around him. The strangeness of his behaviour could have worked for him. If Tom Davies or Anna, two popular students, had talked to him on one of his good days, they might have been inclined to feel for him on one of his bad days. Perhaps they would have gone and asked him how he was, and, touched, as he was still willing to be back then, he might have told them.

Instead, it became a bit of a sport to ignore him. Never something we openly discussed – we were friendly for the most part – but something jokes would refer to in passing:

'I was struggling to stay awake, and then Eric sat next to me.'

But it could have blown over with everyone like it did with me. On one of his gloomy days, he tapped me on the shoulder and asked whether he could borrow my book for a second.

'You don't have your own?'

'Not anymore.'

I moved to his desk so we could share. We said hello to each other in the mornings after that, and I was soon enjoying the conversations we had on his better days. With a little luck, and I'm not asking for much, the same could have happened between Eric and the rest of the class.

The first I saw of the incident, Paul Cumnor was pushing Eric back onto a railing. It happened very quickly: Paul's head stuck into Eric's face, his finger jabbing Eric's cheek, and then Eric's head striking Paul, Paul collapsing to the floor with a thud and a

‘Fuck!’; blood pouring from his nose, while Eric towered above him, a shallow cut across his forehead.

Eric told me the story later: he’d been staring in the distance, caught in his own thoughts, when he’d heard Paul calling to him. ‘Stop!’ Unsure what Paul was referring to, Eric assumed he was telling him to stop brooding over his problems. He smiled at Paul, and soon slipped back into his world. At the end of the lesson, Paul drove into him: ‘Don’t look at her!’

‘I could count the hairs on his chin,’ he told me. ‘I had to hit him.’

Fights often bring people closer: there’s something in fearing pain. But not this time: Eric was too absorbed in his own world. To those who didn’t know him, he was shifty because he was guilty. Perhaps because he’d overcome Paul, Eric never blamed him for being ostracised. To him, everything was Tom’s fault.

‘He’s fake. He’s always calculating. A smile here, a pretty speech there, and I’ll get through! You saw him yesterday. He never talks to me and then he asks me if I want to be his lab partner. He just wants my help! So why does he go laughing behind my back? Chatting up Jayvanti while I do all the work.’

Even though I always found Tom’s barbs innocuous, I would find myself agreeing with every word of Eric’s rants. And, as Eric well knew, I would bump into Tom the next day and find him just as likeable as before Eric’s outburst.

* * *

When my mother warned me that Hill would be coming back for a final interview, she added a note of hope:

‘It’s almost over.’

Those three words became a mantra that I started to expect whenever I saw her coming out of a fog of thoughts. Pacing around the room, she said them as she saw me looking at her.

After my father called, she said them as she explained that, once again, he had too much work to come and visit me. My dinner cooling on my lap, she said them as she bid me goodnight. At first I thought she was trying to reassure me and the words annoyed me, but then I realised that she was talking to herself.

They seemed stronger as she buttoned her jacket and went to open the door.

The woman who'd conducted the last interview entered the room first. She wore the same grey suit that she had the last time I saw her, its lines still embracing her figure. My eyes lingered on her waist as she closed the door. If I still felt my throat tighten, I also knew that she'd leave as soon as I told her what she was after.

'Gina, will you get Mrs Dillingham some tea?' The inspector's voice came from the door.

Gina – this is the first time I remember her name – walked to my mother's side and whispered milk and sugar. She laid a hand on my mother's elbow.

'I'll stay here,' my mother hissed. 'Go and get it yourself.'

Exchanging a glance with her inspector, Gina swayed towards the door and left the room. That was the last I saw of her.

Andrew Hill loomed. The black wisps crowning his haggard face; the dark eyebrows settled at the bottom of his imposing forehead; the thick square glasses framing his brown eyes. He moved into the centre of the room with a ponderous walk, his feet settling a shoulder's length apart, his legs still as a plinth.

The inspector stood at the foot of the bed, while my mother stood to my right. A full minute elapsed from the moment he entered the room to the moment he started speaking. He removed his glasses.

'Nate, you are an important witness. We need you to answer a few more questions. Can you do that for me?'

Feeling more comfortable with the process the third time around, I nodded confidently.

‘Good. Can you start by telling me about your friendship with Eric?’

As he mentioned ‘friendship with Eric’, I felt my mother tensing next to me. I composed my face, and gave her an assured nod.

‘We were friends, but I was friends with everybody.’

The inspector’s face had sallow skin lumped below his eyes. I looked closer and saw the same loose skin sagging from the lines of his jaw. Afraid to notice more, I let my eyes wander away.

‘His mother mentioned you visiting. How often did you visit him?’

‘How often?’ The question brought up a string of visits all blending into one. ‘Every now and again.’

‘Well, let me rephrase the question. About how many times did you go to his house since, say, January?’

‘Ah...’ Summer visits crowded my mind. I was seeing his tree-house and our conversations high above ground. Narrowing my focus to the winter months, I tried to think of the cold, of damp January afternoons, hoping it would bring the right visits to mind.

‘...Let me count, Nate,’ my mother was saying, ‘since I had to drive you. There was that time before James’ football training, and that was it. Before that was in December. Once, inspector.’

I felt Hill’s eyes on me as my mother spoke.

‘Once, then?’ he asked.

‘Once,’ I said.

‘Alright. And do you remember seeing anything peculiar on that visit?’

My voice trailed off as my thoughts went back to Eric’s shed. My bat was gripped in the vice on his workbench. He was bending forward and applying glue, creases spreading down his forehead. The smell of glue harrowed up my nostrils, but he didn’t seem to mind it. I was glancing around, at the piles of

sawn-off wood, at a canvas thrown over a heap, at a large metal box and a saw atop it.

‘His shed was messier than usual. But not very messy either. Maybe there was something.’ I could feel my mother’s breath as she leaned closer. ‘Maybe there wasn’t. If I think about it long enough, I’m going to convince myself that there was.’

‘Nothing caught your attention?’

‘Nothing did then. But if I think about it long enough, I’ll be telling you that I saw his guns and his bullets.’

Hill’s hands rose to his head and stopped around his chin, wavering as he twirled his glasses.

‘Alright. One final question, Nate.’ Suddenly, he was looking directly into me. ‘Why do you think Eric didn’t shoot you like he shot everybody else?’

My mind reeled for a second. Through the white, I became aware of my hand cooped in my mother’s, and I thought of my previous responses. I was ready to answer the question, even if haltingly.

‘I guess...’ I was looking at the inspector, hoping to pick up cues from his body language. He remained solemn. ‘People either froze, or went for the door. I hid behind the teacher’s desk. Thicker wood, and all that. And then I looked up, and I guess Eric was looking at me so I thought I’d go to him. He didn’t want to die alone. That explains it, doesn’t it?’

His eyes stayed fixed on mine, his mouth resolutely closed. It was when he put his glasses back on that I sensed he’d heard enough.

* * *

A squadron of suits was closing in on me. They were hiding behind the only column in the great cafeteria. I ran towards a slanted door, but it slipped ever further from my grasp. A blonde nurse in white bared her sharpened teeth and shook

her head at me. When I asked her for help, she melted into the background. I could feel the men's moist breath on my neck. There was nowhere to run: I turned to face them.

It took me hours to fall back to sleep. The cold outside took its hold, my ward quietened, and the hospital crackled. With every thud, I imagined someone marching towards my door. With every crack, I imagined someone climbing up a window. Dawn came and went, and the hospital awakened. I let the bustle cradle me, nestling into its babble.

* * *

Beth was the only one of my remaining friends who visited me at the hospital. As we waited for my mother to bring us tea, she explained it all. Of course, she'd wanted to come earlier but one thing had led to another and she hadn't been able to. 'Don't worry,' I said. Of course, it was the same with John, with Josh, with Jeremy. And when she called my home, she heard I wasn't well enough to receive a visitor yet. It was only because she'd seen my mother at a service in the morning that she'd managed to arrange a visit.

Beth had never been a close friend. Our groups, originally separate, had merged after the summer of 1999. More from a lack of opportunity than of affinity, we'd never spent much time together. I knew her best from what Jeffrey had told me. For the three months leading to the shooting, it seemed like every time we had a quiet minute, he told me another story about Beth. Once, a few weeks before Anna and I broke up, I told Anna what was happening between them, and she took it upon herself to organise a double date.

'You invite Jeffrey, I'll take care of Beth,' she said.

She chose *The Sixth Sense* because it was meant to be scary.

'Dead people. She'll jump into his arms,' she smiled in anticipation.

But Beth went to the bathroom while we chose our seats, and by the time I saw her, she'd come down the wrong aisle. She sat next to Anna, as far away from Jeffrey as she could be. Thankfully, the movie was good enough that we had something to talk about afterwards. When we left the cinema, I tried to pull Anna to my side, but we had to squeeze through a crowd, and Beth ended up alongside Anna. Jeffrey shrugged at me, and I shrugged back. Still, Anna wasn't going to give up: she took us to the canal and pulled out a half-full bottle of vodka. Three shots later, I was kissing Anna, and Jeffrey was leaning close to Beth.

'It's going to happen,' Anna whispered in my ear. I looked at my friend and I thought the same.

The next day, Jeffrey and I were lounging in my room.

'No, mate,' he said, 'nothing. She left five minutes after you.'

'My guess is that she's a lesbian,' I said.

He chuckled louder than me. I made many other guesses – she's scared of you, she thinks you don't like her (Anna's theory), she doesn't fancy you – but whatever I said, he always brought it back to the same thought: 'No, it's more complicated than that. It's just...' he started and then, trying to work out what to say next, he trailed off, and then he smiled for he liked the way she made him suffer. He liked it even more when he felt that they were moving in the right direction – then he boasted about cricket, football, rugby, girls, about everything and anything that I could mention.

I was all smiles as Beth stood by my bed and explained her absence.

'Don't worry,' I echoed, as she told me of her older sister needing the car, of buses not coming back late enough, of the flat tyre on her bike. The apologies only stopped when my mother came back with our teas.

Beth fell silent. My mother left and we were alone and Beth stayed silent. Her stillness was contagious. It was louder than her

apologies. It was tightening my smile, and I needed to smile. I had to go for its source.

‘How is everyone doing?’ I asked.

She looked startled, and, for a moment, I thought I was going to get back to Jeffrey’s ebullient Beth. But then she smiled a sweet smile, an old smile.

‘Everyone’s fine,’ she said.

‘Fine?’ The word came out as a challenge, surprising me as much as her.

She flinched and her smile disappeared. I found myself liking her face better without it, as if the smile I’d yearned for a few seconds earlier had suddenly acquired a meaning I couldn’t bear.

‘You can imagine how it is,’ she said, yellowed merriness settling over her face once again. ‘Everyone was shocked. Completely shocked. But we’ve got to move on.’ She sized up the horror on my face, and added: ‘Of course, it’s not the same for everyone. I don’t think that!’

I gulped.

‘Are people moving on already?’ I asked.

‘No, I don’t mean it like that. I just meant that when it happened, no one knew what to do. And now people are a bit more normal.’ I stared into my cup. ‘It was John’s eighteenth on the 15th and he’d put together a big party. Well, he cancelled it of course. But he still wanted to do something, so we had a few drinks the other night, and it was nice to get together like we used to do. You’ll have to come and hang out with us when you get out.’

I forced a smile. ‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘It seems like everyone is moving on as you say. I’m not sure I can... just yet.’ She cleared her forehead of the curls bouncing their way down to her eyebrows, and I noticed how solemn she had become. ‘You said something about a service. I haven’t heard anything about that. What was it?’

She sighed. 'It was a funeral.'

'Have there been many... services?'

She nodded.

'Have you been to all of them?'

She looked up and studied my face for a few seconds.

'No, I haven't. There were too many.'

'Who was it this morning?'

'Jeffrey.' And as she said that, I realised there was no more colour in her cheeks. She was tugging hard at one of her curls, swirling what was left of her tea with the other hand. 'Look,' she said, a quiver in her voice, 'let's talk about something else. What's it like being in hospital?'

As the conversation moved to safer grounds, I found myself looking around my room, wanting to shatter a lamp, snap the IV stand, throw a chair through the window. But I lay quietly and talked small stuff.

* * *

'There he is.'

The deep voice broke through my reverie. A tall man followed my mother in, his entrance dispelling all of my thoughts. Despite the size of the man, his movements seemed contained and measured.

'You must be Nate. I'm George Hume.'

I took his extended hand, and let the warm flesh engulf mine. He was the first person to shake my hand properly for a long time. The ritual, a relic of my past, put me at ease.

'Your mother was kind enough to invite me in, Nate. When she told me that no one had been to visit you, I had to come and see how you were. So tell me, how are you?'

'Mister...' I paused, looking at his pin-striped suit, at the gold wristwatch and the engraved cufflinks.

‘Oh, I apologise, I forget how young you are... Hornsbury is part of my constituency, Nate. Now, when you turn eighteen, you will try to remember that, won’t you?’ he said with a sly smile. I almost laughed at his joke. ‘Call me George, Nate. You’ve done so much you could call the Prime Minister ‘Tony.’

This time I laughed, although I felt a little confused.

‘How long must we wait until you’re well enough to get back on your feet?’

‘I can walk already, Mister... George. The doctors say I should be heading home by the end of the week.’

‘That’s good news,’ he said, joining his hands up by his chin as if in prayer. ‘Can I ask you something, Nate?’

I nodded instantly. His hands ran down his lapels before they met behind his back.

‘There are many rumours going around, but one in particular has caught my attention. I feel hesitant to bring it up, but is it true that you shot Eric Knight?’

My eyes jolted towards my mother.

‘I’ve heard,’ the politician continued, ‘that you bravely disarmed him, and that you shot him when you had to, when he was going to make his way to the other room in the annexe—’

‘No,’ I interrupted him. That first word had come out forcefully, but I didn’t know what else to add. He gave me the chance to say more before he spoke on.

‘You’re reluctant to speak, and I can understand that. I was in the army for thirty years myself, and there were times when I was lauded for things I hated. That’s normal, do you understand?’

When I didn’t respond, he looked at my mother.

‘I shot him but it wasn’t like that,’ I said.

He became very serious as he answered me, speaking as though his every word mattered:

‘Nate, you’re clearly an intelligent young man, and you have a bright future ahead. But listen to me, sometimes you do what

you must, and you're left with a hollow feeling down your stomach. It won't do you any good. Steer well clear of that feeling!'

* * *

My last two days in hospital were spent largely alone. My mother came in twice on my penultimate afternoon, setting her things down as if she were going to stay, but then letting a message, an idea, whisk her away before her weight had had time to mould the foam of her chair. I barely looked up as she left the room.

By myself, I thought about Eric, despite all I had told the inspector. Particularly, I pondered over Eric's last month, thinking of the changes he must have gone through, and the symptoms I could have detected. There were incidents that happened at school. Raising his voice outside an exam hall, when he knew there were students inside taking their tests. And the moment Harry had so willingly recounted.

But my mind turned to the time we'd spent outside school. So much could happen at school that there could be a hundred explanations for every flicker or outburst. Ever analytical, Eric would have told me that such data points were noisy signals.

The times I'd seen him alone outside school were cleaner. There was the time his mother made us orange juice, and the uneasy silence that had pervaded the visit. The silence hadn't shocked me then. After all, we were teenagers, sweet one day and vile the next.

But now that I think of my subsequent visit, I can't help but think that his mood changed too much and too quickly. It was the following day. I had brought him another bat, an older piece which no one had used for years, but which was also made of Grade II English willow. The chunk he'd glued the previous day hadn't held because it was too coarse. I'd been the one to suggest using another bat, and I'd felt proud when he agreed.

When he finished clenching the newly-glued chunk to my bat, we put on our coats and headed down to the copse. He spoke as we walked, his voice calm and measured.

‘You like them, but you’re too easy on them. The system isn’t efficient. A bunch of idiots dictate terms to everyone else, and because we’re fragmented, we can’t fight back. Tell me how that makes any sense.’

He picked up a bunch of pebbles and, one by one, he aimed them at an empty nest high up a bare branch. It was a harmless gesture, a liberating gesture, but how easy it is to see it as some sort of omen. I too joined in: I bent down to gather ammunition, and fired it at the still nest.

* * *

Each memory came innocent and left tainted. And once tainted, memories grew persistent. Their stench remained and coloured other thoughts, so that, like an infection, I was soon left with nothing but tainted memories. Even fields of heather and gorse hugging the Cornish coastline took an ominous turn. I started thinking of the shadows in the recesses between cliff faces, of the waves crashing into rocks at the bottom of the drop, of the birds plunging down to the dark sea for their prey.

With memories came dread, spreading and thickening but never rising to the surface. It skirted the politician’s cufflinks, bounced off the police’s tape recorder, and amassed at the inspector’s eyebrows. I even grew afraid of the old black man who brought me my dinner on weekdays.

I don’t want to exaggerate. The dread never had me shivering in a corner, but it settled snugly into the background. For weeks, I woke up with a mass the size of an olive stone pulsating in my stomach. It was in the shower that I remembered where it came from, and it was in the shower that, months later, I realised it was gone.

* * *

My pencil point balanced on the half-empty page, I smelled the flowers before I saw them. Their fragrance drifted over the sterile floor and opened my eyes like one throws off a heavy blanket. Two nurses had entered my room, each carrying a bouquet in hand. The small dark-haired one was my current day nurse, while the red-haired nurse with a Polish accent had been in charge of my bed in my old ward.

‘We heard you were leaving today,’ said the dark-haired one, half a step closer than her companion, ‘so we all thought we should get you something.’

I had always interpreted her pale irresponsible features as a sign of distance. But I was now seeing them shaped into a genuine smile.

‘Flowers for a young boy...’ said the redhead. The way she tilted them, the words jarred less. ‘Maybe you can give them to your mother?’

‘Yes, she likes flowers...’ I said before realising I was being rude. ‘They look very nice! But... do you give them to everyone?’

‘No-no-no,’ said the dark-haired nurse. ‘Can you imagine?’ she laughed towards the red-haired nurse. ‘Thank God!’

She reached behind her for the red-haired nurse’s bouquet and laid both on a table by the window while she addressed me: ‘We’re not meant to talk to you about what happened. But now that that MP has gone and told everyone, we felt it’d be alright to come and thank you. What you did, it was very brave.’ She mouthed a silent ‘thank you’.

She started to fidget and her features tightened into a more familiar expression.

‘Okay, we’ve got to get back to work. Is there anything you need?’

When I shook my head, she made her way towards the door with her colleague.

‘Put them in water when you get home,’ the red-haired nurse said as she shut the door.

They were probably too far down the corridor to hear my words of thanks. My diary includes both a written description and a drawing of this scene. I’ve stayed faithful to the description here. The drawing fills the rest of the page my pencil had rested on. The flowers in the foreground come through well enough, but the nurses’ faces are flat. Just after they left, despite their kindness, despite the weeks they’d spent taking care of me, I could only recall two or three details and had to make up the rest.

* * *

I left my ward on one of those glorious crisp afternoons that make you forget winter’s gloom and wish for spring to hold off a little longer. I was getting half the experience from my window: the sun was shining to all and sundry, and the few clouds running through the sky never seemed to obstruct its rays. I wanted to be part of it, to feel the winter wind on my skin, and a tingle of blood rising up my cheeks. I wanted to spin around and smile at the beauty of the world.

My mother was leading me out through a labyrinth of doors, elevators and corridors, carrying a bag with all of my things in one hand, and both bouquets in the other, when we passed an empty room with a television turned on to a 24-hour news channel. Had I walked on, I would have only caught a couple of isolated images. But the newsreader’s steady cadence broke through, and my feet turned into the room of their own accord.

‘And a reminder of today’s top news. Police investigating the Hornsbury School Shooting have released the shooter’s diary’ – The screen showed a piece of paper, a cursor highlighting the words a voice was reading.

‘Nothing will be the same when I’m done with them.’

The cursor skipped down the page, and the voice read out another section:

‘People will wonder why. They’ll wonder for eternity. The ones who don’t get it are as guilty as the ones who will die today.’

From the corner of my eyes, I could see my mother’s hand reaching for my arm. The prospect made me shiver. She didn’t understand. I shoved her back.

‘Fuck off!’

Anger was shaking its way through my limbs, frothing at my lips, gathering around my eyes. And then it was gone. With a glare at my mother, I sat on a chair and hid my head between my arms. On the chair’s soft cushion, my spine buckled and my legs hung limp. The feeling spread. I was worth nothing.

I started crying, at first hiding the tears, but the sobs gathered, as if they’d been held back for weeks, and finally sensing an opening, they were all rushing forth together. On the one side of my mind, I heard Eric ranting, passion and hate coursing through his veins, holding him upright, warm and alive. On the other, there was nothing: a void, an absurd ending. I felt as though I belonged to that void; my life was an anomaly; there was no sense to my tears. But that didn’t console me – on the contrary, it made me sadder.

My shoulders shook up and down; spit was dripping down my chin; I could hardly breathe. Gasping for breath, I wailed through my tears. The noise bounced off the wall and came back to my ears. It was too much: needing to control myself, I forced deep breaths into my chest. The sadness mellowed every time I exhaled, and the tears dried.

As I write this, I realise those were the first tears I shed since Eric had burst into the classroom. For weeks I’d managed to restrain my memories and wall my shock in. I’m still convinced it was the right way to go. The politician was correct: sometimes it’s better to steer clear of a feeling. Had I spent days on end

wallowing in my own tragedy, I would have come out depressed. My way just meant the occasional outburst.

When I felt calm enough, I looked at my mother through my fingers. She was sitting down with her bent head softly bobbing up and down, her hair hiding her face, the bouquets across her lap, the bag by her feet. I stood up and laid a hand on her shoulder.

As I came out of the hospital, a photographer took a picture of me. It is a sympathetic portrait: I'm walking with my shoulders slumped and my eyes puffed, the skin under my eyes illuminated by a trail of tears. I'm wearing a jacket which seems too big for my reduced frame, and I'm holding a bouquet of flowers tight against my chest. My mother stands behind me, car keys dangling from her fingers.

This picture still comes first when I do an image search of 'Nate Dillingham.'

Several years later, well after I thought my scars healed, I sought the rest of Eric's note online. I came across a report on the massacre. It described the notebook police found: its cover lined with dust, a thin powder settled in between every page. They found it neatly stacked on top of papers Eric kept by his workbench. The note follows countless pages of long divisions, object sketches, and measurements. I read it three times; then I closed my browser and never looked at it again. All these years later, I still remember it in its entirety.

We've had enough. It's time for the underground to come to the surface. Once again, it's my turn to start everything. The plan is simple and direct, it won't fail. Finally people will see my work.

I've endured a lot in my years. The weakest of punches leaves me with a bruise that never fades. This will change today. Nothing will be the same when I'm done with them. I know I'm young to die, but I feel so old old old. I could be seventy.

Albert Alla

People will wonder why. They'll wonder for eternity. The ones who don't get it are as guilty as the ones who will die today.

Reading it, I imagined his voice trembling in anger, his fist clenching with every point he made, his rapid tones smoothing his logic. And to that, I had to add more, for I knew him better than most. A prolonged squint, his hand running over his face, his gaze jerking towards the door, and anguish dripping from every third word.