

## 1.

This morning I kissed my father for the first time. He would have been furious if he'd known. The undertakers had recovered much of the symmetry of his face. He looked younger, more handsome than he had for months, years. I sensed heads bow behind me as I bent over him and touched his forehead with my lips. I expected to shrink from the contact with his inert flesh, but, if anything, I felt a great weight press me against him. I rested my lips there to give a lifetime of restrained feeling a chance to pass between us, then stepped back to join my mother, Dad's older brother Tom, who had by some miracle outlived him, as he had outdone him at every turn of their lives, and their younger sister Beth. My mother looked shrivelled and dry after a spring and summer spent weeping. She had become a small, anxious, elderly woman; for some reason, I had never expected to see that.

The only other time I came close to a kiss with my father was at the end of a momentous summer when the courses of all our lives changed and we headed out on unforeseen tangents from what we had imagined our trajectories to be. When it seemed that we had been brought to the lowest possible point and yet were still on our feet, still, as he would have said, 'throwing punches', there was a moment, in the darkness of his study, with just the desk lamp on, when I had thought to take his head in my hands and kiss him. I lost my nerve. Instead I bowed my head, thinking he might kiss my forehead, but instead I received a blow, a playful slap, across the head, and a grin caught in the corner of my eye. 'It'll be all the sweeter when we pay the bastards back,' he said.

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That summer, and, in my case, the year that preceded it, were such vivid periods of our lives, rather the way the war years were always painted in bold colours by our grandparents. My mother and I have returned again and again to that summer to tell stories at his bedside during these terrible months of convalescence, therapy, false hope and relapse after each of his strokes.

That summer - the open, rolling farmland of northern France; low horizons interrupted by inexplicable outcrops; cyclists in berets propped on one leg as they turned to watch the train pass; silos, milk herds motionless in emerald-coloured fields, minutely speckled with the presence of chalk beneath, the cattle black and white with shins the colour of cow-shit, gaping as they chewed; dogs in farm lanes staring without interest at the whooshing train; graffitied agro-chemical plant at the edges of medieval villages, each with its ancient manor house with chickens in the yard; a broadly furrowed field, curving up a hillside like a head of braided hair, beaded with seagulls, a line of red farm vehicles parked at its base - all this constructed out of

blurred frames of stillness and expectation flashing past the hurtling train, mesmerising me, after a week of travel back across Africa and Europe.

I had spent most of the past couple of days suspended in an exhausted half-sleep. Each time I let my eyes close, I was back in that tent, full of the peculiar odours of threat and fear; the African heat like a sweating hand over my face, the whites of eyes, the teeth, the harsh consonant sound of argument conducted without quarter; the gnawing feeling that I should not be there; tiny adjustments of my body, shrinking back into the gap between Joseph and Joyce; a single voice, raised in a different tone to anything that had been spoken before, followed by silence.

I awoke for a few moments in the strange night-light of the tunnel, full of reflected faces, before my head lolled back against the window.

There must have been 60 people in the tent, a large, permanent, timber-based structure with a canvas roof; a white woman, a professor from an international agency, eight or nine men from the game reserve, wardens, some with rifles at their feet, and various others present because of their tribal status, plus a dozen or so hangers-on, including Arthur, who was there perhaps to provide some pseudo-legal propriety, and a throng of Herders, formally dressed - bare chests and skirts, holding their staffs with hands at head height, sitting in strict hierarchy. And the three of us at the back of the tent, accidental witnesses, filled with oscillating curiosity and alarm.

After the professor had finished her report, the dialogue went back and forth in pedestrian English for a few minutes before reverting to the hybrid language that the tribes present used to communicate with each other. Unable to understand the words, I strained to hear every gust and flurry of the linguistic music as it played out in the constrained arena of the chieftain's tent. I flattered myself - even then, in that tremulous state of unbidden witness to some raw and barely licit ceremony - that I could detect the varying strength and temper of each contribution. The pronouncements and interruptions grew increasingly terse, staffs striking the ground, pale fingernails tapping rifle stocks, speakers occasionally making as if to rise to their feet before being restrained. In the corner of my eye I saw Joseph glance across me towards Joyce. It was a look that signalled alarm, offered the possibility of withdrawal, sought confirmation that it was safe to stay. But Joyce was staring straight ahead, wide-eyed, teeth bared in grim fascination.

The arguments went back and forth for perhaps an hour, belligerent and conciliatory tones and gestures turning ever more unequivocal, until Taabo, the game park commissioner, said, in English: "We will do to you what you would do to us, if our situations were reversed. What could be fairer than that?"

I felt Joyce's grip on my arm. It was the first time we had touched. It sent a jolt through me; for a second it was we two who were at the centre of the world, and almost everything that

might mean anything was to be found in the interpretation of that gesture and my reaction to it. We fairly swirled around each other. I looked at her, without any idea what would happen next. She was still staring ahead, her eyes fixed on the spectacle in the middle of the tent, her jaw even more firmly clenched, the wrinkles around her knuckles pale from gripping my arm.

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I woke up. My phone was ringing. I couldn't find it; couldn't remember having switched it on. It started ringing again. It was in an obscure internal pocket of my backpack. I felt pins and needles in the elbow that had been wedged against the window.

It was Cornelia. For most of the initial formalities all I could think was how odd that the first person to call me on my return should be Cornelia; a cousin, not even a proper cousin, at that. She was the daughter from his first marriage of an older man that a daughter of one of my mother's nieces had gone off with to Canada, years before I was born. Glenda had come back in the year I moved up to senior school, without her man, but with Cornelia and a daughter of her own. At school, Cornelia had been a clever, pimply and rather sharp-featured girl whom the rest of us had accepted as part of our clan, but had otherwise ignored. She was a couple of years ahead of me, but we had gone to the same university, where we had avoided each other for several months, until she appeared at my door unexpectedly one evening, and started inviting me out every week or two with her final-year friends, which I gave the appearance of going along with only reluctantly, but secretly enjoyed.

She finished her degree at the end of my first year, and went off to do a PhD in some sub-division of child psychology. Occasionally, during the vacations, she would invite me for a night out in London. There were awkward surface layers to Cornelia. She often gave the impression of trying too hard, of putting on a show of being jolly and earnest, but there was someone underneath that for me was still only suspected and as yet undiscovered, someone of whom I was very fond.

The greetings and banal enquiries ran dry. It struck me how little I knew about what was going on in her life. I had no pressing questions to ask; nothing I was dying to get an update on. It was almost a year since I'd last seen her. I had no idea what or how she was doing. It seemed even stranger that she had called within 30 minutes of my re-entering the country. She said she would meet me off the train at Waterloo. Was this leading up to any terrible news she had been deputed to deliver?

'No!' she said, sounding hurt and girlish. 'It'll just be nice to see you.'

I called home. I expected my next conversation with my father to be an interrogation into the circumstances - and especially the cost - of my returning home a couple of months early, so it was a relief when my mother picked up the phone.

'Oh, my darling!' She talked as though half-singing, when she wasn't in one of her depressed times. 'You'll be home for dinner, won't you? I've been to the butchers and got your dad's favourite cut. We'll have a proper feast. Your Auntie Beth and Uncle Ken are coming over, too. Everyone can't wait to see you. Their gardener's been arrested for mooning at schoolgirls – old George, would you believe it? Ken's a bit sensitive about it – be careful what you say. And I'm sure Tim and Cath from next door will stop by. She's convinced you're going to have brought some Abyssinian princess home – she's daft as a brush. But you must be so tanned – has your hair gone blond like it used to when you were little? Oh, do hurry home. Your Dad was in a car accident – Hh! No one got hurt or anything like that – but he took a bit of a turn after it. He was quite shaken up by it all for a couple of weeks. Took a bit of looking after, I can tell you. But he's on the mend now – normal service resumed- never mind. Ha! And he was talking to Glenda about getting you a job working with her Cornelia in a day-care centre, to bring a bit of money in, you know. So you won't have to worry about that. Call me again when you're 20 minutes away and I'll put the kettle on.'

The whole conversation seemed eerily like one we'd had 12 months ago when I'd called on the way home from university. The exact order of people and events had been shuffled around, and the African minutiae had replaced those related to university life, but otherwise, the conversation was just another swirl in the pattern of the wallpaper of my life at home.

Cornelia was hardly recognisable. Gone were the cord jeans with the frayed bottoms, and the long, loosely-gathered gypsy hair, always escaping from behind her ears, and the faded, over-stuffed canvas bag on its shoulder strap. Here was a Cornelia in eyeliner and lip-gloss, in a dark trouser-suit and heels. 'Sleek', was the word that flashed in my mind upon seeing her, leaning against an advertising hoarding with what turned out to be two caramel macchiatos, a concentration of liquid gratification beyond anything I had experienced in almost a year.

There was a new kind of polish even in the way she leant in to offer me her cheek. I was reminded of that physical reaction I had felt at university of being with someone much more grown up – almost another generation.

'I'm on my internship.' She shrugged apologetically. 'I'm management, don't you know?' She struck a pose.

'And how are you, my big game hunter? Bags full of tusks and rhino horn?' She nodded at my huge, over-stuffed backpack and duffle-bag. Between us we wrestled them down to the river and stood against the railings drinking our coffee.

'So, you've come home early. Missing us all too much?'

I had returned two months sooner than originally intended. All the reasons swirled and eddied, as they had done for several weeks. They remained stubbornly unwilling to settle into any coherent story. Just as in the river, any number of wavelets and currents caught the light

from moment to moment, but overall the story remained opaque; an irresolvable multitude of forces and personalities.

'I'm doing six months in a local authority. It's not a custodial sentence.' She laughed her rather alarming, braying laugh. 'I'm sort of in charge of child-protection issues. I say "sort of" as no one's really in charge of anything. And I don't think an intern is supposed to be in charge of child protection, but they haven't been able to find anybody qualified for ages. So, in practice, my boss is a vacancy. Which is why I'm able to go AWOL for a few hours to come and welcome our returning hero.'

It seemed important to her to explain all this. It reminded me of the 'old' Cornelia, always trying a bit too hard, talking a bit too much. On the other hand, there was a new smoothness to her, and what came across as a genuine enthusiasm about seeing me, which couldn't help but lift my spirits.

'Watch out for your dad,' she said. 'He's very stressed out. He's got some big expansion going on in the business. You'd think that would be good news, but it's got him seriously stressed. And he got hit by another car a few weeks ago and it seemed to shake him up something awful. He's happy you're home safe – but you may struggle to spot it.' She broke into laughter again.

She seemed so happy I wondered whether she was in love. I imagined that being in love would bring about a period of this kind of general happiness. I felt my stomach tighten as though I'd opened a carton of turned milk to momentarily imagine her naked in the grip of some unknown man. I quickly moved on to other thoughts.

I couldn't work out what had actually happened to my father. Had he been a pedestrian when he was hit, or was it a collision between his car and another? Cornelia didn't really know any details, which was unusual. She had an uncanny knack for picking up facts that completely passed me by. But he had been in his car when it was hit; she knew that much, and that he hadn't been hurt – physically, at least.

I wondered how I would find my mother.

'Oh, you'll be quite the returning hero. Her first and only, back from the Dark Continent and all that. The heaving maternal bosom awaits you. I got the feeling she was rather taken aback by how your dad reacted to that car accident. He seemed to go all docile on her for a while. I saw them together a couple of times. It was like he wasn't pulling on the other end of the rope and in order not to fall over, she had to stop pulling too. Your Aunt Beth said something similar about them. As though they'd both got the same flu bug.'

I must have looked alarmed.

'Oh, don't worry.' She brushed my arm with her knuckles. 'Your mum's voice has got back into normal gear, anyway.'

I laughed a rueful laugh and she laughed at the face I made.

'I've got a couple of forms for you to fill in – in case you want to work in one of the day-care centres. They've extended the hours and they're operating through the summer months. Trying to make sure Early Years kids get a head start, or keep up, or don't fall too far behind – I forget which, exactly – and of course, they haven't got the staff, so they're looking for cover. So, if you're thinking of working, you know, just fill in the forms and send them in. Tell me if you do send them in and I'll try and help them along.'

She had always been a long-featured girl, who had once been teased with the nickname 'Eeyore'. She had dark eyes and dark brown hair with a gingery halo when the light caught it. She sometimes looked uncannily like The Lady of Shallot, or perhaps how I imagined the Lady of Shallot, not being quite sure whether I had ever seen a definitive portrait. But now she gave me a wide-open smile. Her eyes seemed to be filled with a wish to make me happy.

As a young boy, before Cornelia knew me, I had been a fairly outgoing, open-faced sort of child. I don't remember anything dreadful happening, and most of my memories are of summer days with long evenings spent playing football or in the woods – games of hide-and-seek or capture-the-flag, wanting nothing more from life than to behave well and to be well-liked in return. Once, I remember being hit by a teacher who caught me urinating against the back wall of the sports field – I lived for months in fear of this being revealed to my parents but, perhaps because he had hit me, Mr McNaughton didn't take it any further. And once I remember my father completely losing it with me and striking me so hard on the side of the head that for a second it seemed to disconnect every nerve ending, every synapse, every sense organ in my body – I mean just for a fraction of a second – because I had been too lazy to go round to visit one of my friends who was sick and hadn't been able to go to school. I remember these two isolated incidents, and mostly I remember the terrible shame I felt in retrospect at having put myself in a position to be judged so low. I remember the looks on their faces – Mr McNaughton and my dad – and I shrink even now from the appalling power that even a little boy – a boy who only wants to be good – possesses to bring such transforming fury into the face of such men.

She had obviously been saying something important while these memories were going through my mind – and now she stood akimbo, waiting for a response. The best I could come up with was to beam at her, kiss her on both cheeks, and thank her for being there to meet me, as though it was the most natural conclusion to whatever she'd been saying. It seemed to do the job; we headed off towards the tube glowing with goodwill to all mankind.

She helped carry the bags over the bridge to the underground station. 'I've got to get back to work now,' she said as we stood at the ticket barriers, both a little unsure how to bring the conversation to an end.

'Oh!' she exclaimed, 'Don't forget the forms.'

She drew several sheets of paper out of her shoulder-bag and squeezed them into the side-pocket of one of my bulging cases. That sufficed to break the thread, and with a wave I bundled myself through the turnstiles.

'Give my love to your parents!'

She blew me a kiss and walked off, in that way she had of walking on the balls of her feet, like a dancer exiting the stage. I wondered whether I should have asked when we would see each other again. After all, she had risked a few hours off work to come and welcome me at the station. We would see each other soon enough no doubt. I could call when I got above ground again, though I knew I wouldn't.

Bickering, all-too-familiar bickering, started up in my mind the moment I was left to myself with nothing to do but stare out at the serried rows of suburbs. Cornelia had arrived in England, just as I reached puberty, still as open-faced as I had been at six, and as ready to expect good things from the world around me. But, along with the blocking-up of my pores, and the dropping of my testicles, a family of hobgoblins, four chattering homunculi, appeared out of nowhere, displaced perhaps from my now occupied scrotum, into some gland, unknown to medicine, but hyperactive nonetheless in secreting powerful intoxicants into my limbic system. This was the Will Watkins she had always known; and what was there to like about him?

My greatest adversary is Trasher, my fool, who keeps in check all tendencies towards self-aggrandisement and related delusions. *What are you going to tell him?* he had been asking me since the flight to Paris left the ground. He is my great underminer and, as such, someone towards whom I am in a perpetual oscillation between submission and fleeting periods of mutiny. I am healthier if I can silence him, but he has a way of insinuating himself back to sit in his position of power at my ear, next to the throne of my sense of self. *What are you going to tell him?*

*You haven't got your story sorted out yet, have you?* The Monitor is a cautious voice – the voice of my mother, perhaps. He pauses for thought, checks the facts, challenges sloppy thinking. He is a counter-weight to Trasher in his most scathing or demonising invectives. But he just as often backs him up – when he's right.

*He's going to want to know. Which of your many vulnerable chins are you going to lead with?* Trasher kept asking.

Fixer is a lone voice; the advocate for action. I know I am anxious about being too much of a thinker and not a doer – this is, I suppose, the message my dad had drummed into me for the past dozen years or so. *He isn't going to know, is he? Whatever you tell him. Just keep it simple.* Fixer can be immensely useful – very often it's Fixer who pushes me out of my vacillations into some course of action or another. But, he doesn't get a lot of support from the others who, I guess, see action in the external world as diminishing their power.

*Oh yeah, Trasher spat out. Spent a year in stupefied infatuation with a young girl who was too perfectly flawless to ever lay a hand on, and because of whom I wandered into some inter-tribal dispute in which I managed to be perceived by the people I was living among to be fomenting support for the other side, in the meantime upsetting the headmaster and governors of the school by teaching unsuitable material and being asked to leave abruptly and prematurely, in large part for my own protection – oh yes, having succeeded in teaching the required syllabus in record time and being much loved by pupils, parents and colleagues alike and therefore being no longer required... That sort of thing?*

Fixer snapped back: *Don't be stupid.*

*What do you mean, 'don't be stupid'? 'Keep it simple' is the most stupid thing you could do. Everything is connected.*

The Monitor seemed to come in on Fixer's side: *You need to sort out some kind of coherent story.*

Soother tries hard to be my friend. It can be pathetic, counter-productive certainly, the way he tries so hard to be my 'booster'. Deep down, I know I'm not so bad. I know I'm intelligent and not that hard to get on with. *They'll be so happy to see you.* Soother never sounds that convincing – I've always found it rather unnerving, getting on for forty years of it.

Trasher was straight onto him: *Oh God! Don't you start. Let me guess: 'Everybody loves you'.*

*Well, everybody does love you. You can tell your mum everything. She'll help sort out your dad.*

Fixer chipped in: *Yeah, maybe you could just tell them everything.*

For a moment I thought: Yeah, I could just tell them everything.

But then Monitor, accurate as ever, swung back towards Trasher's side of the argument: *That would be excruciatingly awful. I can feel the shame coursing through the lymph glands now.*

And so it went on through each familiar station... *Your mum'll be so happy to see you. You must let yourself give her a big hug, a big, happy welcome home,* said Soother.

I knew this was right, but felt weak in the face of Trasher's retort: *No you won't. You know you won't. You'll feel foolish and childish and you'll hold yourself back for fear of doing something regrettable. You know that's what you'll do. Because if you try to be all expansive and luvvy-duvvy you'll just end up with that stupid plastic grin on your face and probably squeeze her too hard and she'll just end up thinking there must be something wrong.*

As we pulled in to my stop, the Monitor, as usual, had the last word: *He's right, you know.*

As I approached home, I experienced a familiar feeling of fragmentation, like a river spreading into a delta before it reaches the sea. Spinning and swirling, swashing and surging,

feelings of re-assimilation and the need to maintain some kind of distance; rehearsing the beginnings of a hundred stories; anticipating the overwhelming, maternal embrace and the potentially prickly paternal fencing. I recalled the rank whiff of Joseph's breath in the closeness of the tent, like some green effluent seeping from a latrine; suffered a pale memory of the churning blood and feebleness in throat, chest, belly, legs that I felt at that time; saw again the professor – Helen McInerny, I think her name was, a Scot, from the University of Lausanne, I think, working for an agency whose initials I can no longer unscramble – in the airport, close to tears; remembered my trips to the river with Joyce and Joseph's father, Ben Tchudkumbe. I remembered lying on a clear night under huge stars that looked as though they might drip down onto us, in the grass outside his hut, with Joyce and Joseph, lines of Whitman's in my mind, as they so often are when I feel unsettled and drawn apart, when he lay at night on the open prairie and thought 'this globe enough, until there sprang out so noiseless around me myriads of other globes.'

At home I had half an hour alone with my mother, tears and hugs and a hundred questions with no time for answers. Then our neighbours arrived, Tim and Cath, who performed the duties of witness to my mother's joy with grace and enthusiasm, after about 15 minutes leaving mother and son to continue their reunion, literally stepping backwards out of the kitchen door, as though exiting some sacred presence. No sooner had they left than Beth and Ken arrived. Beth, my father's younger sister, was just as effusive, asking most of the same questions, giving almost as many hugs, setting my mother off crying again.

I knew my uncle Ken pretty well. As a boy, I had caddied for Ken and my father on their Saturday morning golf round. Not only had we had our own regular conversational themes, but I had listened in, initially sheepishly, increasingly as a recognised, if junior, participant in the conversation. My father would speak more openly about his business, his hopes and anxieties, and even about his son, than in any other context. This was where I heard someone speak directly and candidly to my father, as an equal, sometimes chastising him, often challenging, occasionally slapping him down with a sarcastic barb. Amid the hubbub of my mother and aunt, he had a confidential way of conducting a conversation, on a different wavelength, with no apparent interference between the two.

'Your father's a bit concerned about you coming back early, you know that, don't you? You need to talk to him about it.'

Sometimes by just pausing and looking at me in a certain way, he could ask: Do you want to talk to me about it?

I passed.

'Something about this accident a few weeks ago really cut him up. Do you know much about it?'

I didn't. I was keen to know more. My father's reaction seemed out of character. He was a man who took things in his stride.

Ken wasn't able to enlighten me. 'He hasn't told me much. Car hit him at a junction. Other driver claims he pulled out without looking – your Dad couldn't work out where the other chap had come from or how he didn't see him.'

Ken had spent his youth fighting insurgencies in every part of Southern Africa, largely as a cover, at least in his own retelling, for womanising across an equally broad spectrum. I would think he must have been 20 years older than Beth. He indulged her every whim while presenting to the world the image of a hard bastard not to be messed with. He had a huge chest, a great belly laugh, and was never without a big, sneering ridgeback dog that wanted nothing other than to be within his line of sight. He was universally admired because 'he didn't give a toss.'

I mentioned that I'd heard that his gardener, George, was in a bit of bother. He growled something about a stupid policeman and said, 'Come "Around the Houses" with your dad and me next Saturday. I'll tell you all about it. Hopefully it'll be history by then.' They had coined the phrase 'Around the Houses' as a sort of protest at the degree to which their golf course had been infiltrated by housing developments.

My father arrived just before dinner was served, pulling his tie down and unbuttoning his shirt. He appeared distracted, but his greeting was warm enough. For a moment I thought he was going to hug me, but he restricted himself to punching my arm. 'It's good to have you back, son. Your mother's pleased to have you home,' he said, nodding solemnly.

After dinner, I found him up in his study, with just the desk lamp on, working through a sheaf of spreadsheets. I asked him how he was feeling about his accident. I wondered whether he would offer much, or anything at all, but he relaxed back in his chair and pressed the fingertips of a hand to his temple.

'Never had one before. Complete shock. You know, you think you can drive with such confidence, and then whack! Something you didn't see hits you – and then you're thinking: how has that never happened before, and why won't it happen again tomorrow? I just do not know how I didn't see him. I just can't figure it out.'

He had so much on his mind, what with his business expansion and - who knows? - me having to come home early. Maybe he was a lot more distracted than he realised. It had happened on a shopping morning in the local town centre. He and my mum had already been out once and forgotten some items, so he had, in his own words, 'raced back' to buy what they had forgotten first time around. He described the junction, still sounding puzzled. I wanted to know whether he had been back to the scene. He had not. I suggested we go down together early the next morning and have a look. In any event, at some point he would need to give a detailed description to the insurers.

He woke me at 05:45, with a mug of mud-coloured tea, and steered me into his car. This was always the cheeriest part of his day, when he was undoubtedly one step ahead of the world at large. Being behind his desk at work before eight was a fixed point around which all other arrangements were made to fit. We had to get into town, have a look at the junction where the accident took place, get me home and still get into work before eight.

'So, here's the junction,' he said as we approached it. 'There were two cars ahead of me, and another two or three pulled up behind me. The car at the front either stalled or had some kind of problem. You could see the cars in front and behind thinking about pulling out into this outside lane, which was empty. Anyway, I saw that neither the car in front nor the one immediately behind me was going to pull out, so I pulled out to see what was going on up front. Then,' his voice grew suddenly more emphatic, 'out of nowhere, there was this enormous thwack! on the side of my car and this other car bounced off it and came to a stop further up this empty second lane.'

His description was not without traces of rehearsal, but mostly I was impressed with the stripped-down narrative he had given. In the intervening weeks he must have constructed dozens of rationalisations and explanations, but he was keeping the lid on that box for the time being.

'I must just have not looked. Or if I did see him, somehow it just did not compute.' He shook his head, as if shocked by this possibility. 'He was going so fast when he hit me. That was my first reaction. I jumped out of the car and said to him: "You were driving much too fast." I mean, we were coming right into a junction. And he just wagged his head and said: "You didn't even see me. You didn't even look." And that stopped me in my tracks. I thought: He's right. He must be right. How could I not have seen him? I must not have looked. Then the shock hit me. I remember it hitting my legs, as though I'd been tackled about the knees. I remember just wanting to get back in the car. Get away from there. I was shaking. Never happened to me before. Being right on the edge like that, of completely losing control of a situation.'

We parked in an empty side-road and walked back to the junction. I walked up and down to where a side road joined, less than 30 yards from the junction. It was a curious layout. Just before the junction, just where the accident had occurred, the road broadened to two lanes, narrowing to one lane immediately behind where my father's car had stopped. Alongside the single lane were, first, a turning lane for traffic coming in the opposite direction into a residential development, and then a cross-hatched stretch of road to stop cars driving across that turning lane. Then, immediately, the side road joined. So, given that there were at least a couple of stationary cars behind my father's on that morning, the vehicle that collided with his must have either come out from behind that queue or come in from the side road. But, in either case, it could only have got to where it had collided with my father's car by driving over the hatched

area and across the turning lane. Together we went back and forth trying to work out an alternative, but we couldn't find one. That was what must have happened.

When he dropped me off at home he pressed several forms into my hand: 'You couldn't just fill these out for the insurance company, could you?' I got the feeling they had been weighing down his pending tray for some time.

On the Tuesday my father returned home from work unexpectedly early, gobbled down his dinner and then, as though this were our regular Tuesday evening routine, put his arm around my shoulder and drove me down to the Pole Star for a pint.

'So, why the early return?'

Finally, the question had to be faced. Soother was in quickly, and with unusual conviction: *Look, nothing terrible happened. You did what you were doing very well. The kids you were teaching benefited enormously. The headmaster loves you. There was a change of direction in what they wanted, and there wasn't much left for you to do.*

The Monitor was equally quick to correct that last statement: *There was nothing for you to do, except get out before you got into even bigger trouble. You got caught up in something much too big and dangerous for you and you were lucky somebody forced you to leave.*

Soother: *You weren't forced to leave. I think you would be unfair to yourself to leave anyone with that impression.*

Fixer was anxious: *You have to answer his question. If you wait any longer then he won't believe anything you tell him. Tell him you finished your syllabus faster than expected.*

We were all waiting for Trasher, and now he spoke: *You think he'll believe that? You think he'll believe that you called him from the middle of the Bush for some emergency money to change your flights home because you'd finished your syllabus early. How stupid is that? You got mixed up in something you couldn't handle and thank God your pal Mr Mewale bailed you out.*

Fixer was on the verge of panic: *You've got to answer him.*

Trying to make it sound simple, but with an undercurrent of technicality that I hoped would deter any further questions, I told him how I'd been helping prepare some of the older students for entrance and scholarship exams for university and how the timing and syllabus had been changing as we went along. He tapped his glass against the edge of the table.

'Will, have you got into trouble with a girl.... Y'know... Got her pregnant, or anything like that?'

*That* was it. I could assure him that nothing like that had happened.

'It's just that your mother... You know.' He paused. There was still something on his mind. He made another effort. 'And... Have you.... You haven't picked up anything? You know... You're not ill in any way we ought to know about?'

They must have been worrying themselves silly about AIDS or their new grandchild and its extended family turning up on their doorstep or who knows what else. My father was all smiles. 'Another pint?'

From the pub, he did not turn for home but drove us to the factory. 'We're working two shifts all the time, now, full on.'

He proudly led me around. It showed all the signs of rapid and unplanned expansion. Boxes everywhere. People sitting on upturned delivery crates. Work areas spilling into corridors and blocking off fire exits. It was a couple of years since my previous visit; the place was almost unrecognisable. I wondered whether he would let me do my Masters dissertation project there: something about employee psychology in an expanding workplace.

'The psychology in this workplace goes like this,' my father started down a route that he showed every intention of enjoying thoroughly, 'I try to explain what I want as clearly as I can. The employees have to figure out the bits that I am insufficiently clear about. Everyone then tries to do what they've understood I want. If they do – everyone's happy. Can you stretch that out to a dissertation, son?' He was loving it. 'You know the wonderful thing about capitalism, son? You can have a lovely home, happy family life, great car, super gadgets and machines,' he spread his arms as to demonstrate this bounty, 'foreign holidays and all the rest without having to be super-rich or super-clever. That's me.'

We had reached his office. The partitioning had been shifted so that it was only half the size it had been when I'd last seen it. 'My grandfather, my dad and I have had this business for the best part of 50 years. All the time I've run it, it's been on the verge of being a chore; a decent enough income for a hell of a lot of work and worry. And now, we've got our chance. Who knows how or why, but now people all over want our kit. Somehow they find out that the celebrity chef won't use anything but, or they see it on the television, or they find out that they use it at Claridges or wherever. I've had people come to one of the showrooms last week to buy thousands of pounds worth of pots and pans and ladles for some hip hop singer's new home in Weybridge. We've had people enquiring on behalf of members of the royal family. Unbelievable! This could be our chance to get up to the next level, son.' His eyes shone, and for the first time in years I could have hugged him.

I told him I'd found a cheaper flight home and hadn't needed to spend all the money he'd sent me. I still had £250 left.

'Keep £50 for this week. Don't spend it all at once. You need to get yourself some work. Hasn't Glenda's Cornelia found you something? From next week you should be paying your mother £50 each week you stay with us.'

This was not quite the direction in which I had foreseen the conversation heading. Suddenly I was £200 poorer and had been manoeuvred into a *fait accompli* about getting a job.

Until now, I had framed my enterprise as first, getting home, and second, being home for the summer. Every few moments I must have walked past that room in my mind called Paid Work, without ever acknowledging it, and certainly never having contemplated reaching for the door handle. And now I was standing in it.

He took me into Mike Charlton's office. Mike, his finance director, had known me since I was a baby. He ruffled my hair and pretended to clip me on the chin. I knew next to nothing about him. He was a small, wiry man, for whom things were always about to get worse. Most of what I had heard from and about him related to his battle to give up smoking, which had been going on for decades. You could always tell when he was 'off the ciggies' – he would not be able to stop fidgeting and his normally unemotional pessimism developed an anxious edge. He and my father chatted across me about my year abroad and my plans to go on and do my Masters.

'Going to be a teacher, are you?' Mike sort-of announced, and went on to explain why teaching was a terrible career, with no prospects, and children were getting worse all the time, and in fact the whole country was heading downhill. 'But then I suppose a man like you'll be head teacher or principal, or whatever, in no time, heh?'

'He'll have to start at the bottom, learn his trade. The world's full enough of clever young people supervising jobs they don't know how to do,' my father answered. Someone stuck their head round Mike's door and called my dad out to take a phone call.

Mike gave me a significant look, and asked: 'Does your mother know the position your father's in?'

I had no idea what he could be talking about. My first thought was that he might be having an affair. I must have looked baffled.

'I'll be surprised if the company survives the summer. Your father needs to get to grips with things and start to prepare for the worst.'

I was speechless. Was this just Mike's normal manner, or his withdrawal symptoms speaking? He looked steadily into my eyes as I struggled to come up with something adult to say.

The door swung open, and Dad came back in. 'Bloody Americans,' he muttered. Something in the grim way he spoke and his need to share how he felt with us told me there was something real in what Mike had said. He nodded at me as if in confirmation as we said our goodbyes and left for home.

I got up late the following morning, and even so had my breakfast made for me. I sat reading and drinking tea, excused by a light drizzle from pressure to do anything else. Cath came over from next door at noon and ended up staying for lunch. She wanted to know what I was reading. It was one of Philip Roth's Zuckerman novels, I forget which. Cath surprised me, saying, 'Didn't he write a lot of pornography?' I suggested that it was more a case of being amongst the

first authors to write frankly on the male condition. She made a lewd face and started laughing, which made my mother blush and giggle.

My mother complained, 'He should have studied literature, you know. He was always so good at it. Could never get his head out of his books. His teachers all said he was a marvel. But his dad wouldn't have it. Said he must study something useful. Useful, useful, useful; that's John for you. And now we've ended up with this psychology lark. All that Freud business. It's a wonder they're allowed to use taxpayers' money teaching all that nonsense. They say everything's all about sex. How useful is that?'

I explained that it was not all about sex – or Freud for that matter. Each and every human organ has some auxiliary purpose unrelated to sex – even the brain.

That set Cath off again. 'So, come on, just between us girls.... You can tell us... What did you get up to amongst all those exotic Abyssinian women? She paused after 'exotic' to register that she was not saying 'black'. She had irritated me on my first night home with this line of insinuation. I wasn't anywhere near Abyssinia, I explained curtly, and I was there to teach the young women, not ravish them.

'Well,' she retorted, 'I suppose you have to be so careful out there,' pulling a face to make clear she was alluding to diseases too awful to be named out loud, as though this excused any lack of success on my part.

'Have you heard that Charlie and Robbie have split up?' asked my mother, effectively changing the subject and turning the tables somewhat on Cath. Charlotte was her daughter, and Robbie was a cousin of mine. I had gone out with Charlotte for a while. I wondered how her mum would have felt to be assured that I'd achieved nothing there, either. I'd been driven off in part by the unremitting communication from her parents that, while I might be good enough to live next door, they certainly expected that their daughter could and should do a lot better when it came to boyfriends, though I also heard from Robbie, later, a suggestion that she'd been looking for a rather more assertive approach to love-making than I had felt able to offer.

Robbie's parents had moved to Bristol to take up teaching jobs. He was a lecturer at a university and she taught in secondary school. Robbie had moved away to work for a computer firm in the Thames Valley. A year or so ago I had taken a trip down for a night out together at a club in Reading. It had been a shock. Robbie had always ridden through life with a very loose grip on the handlebars, and my own student digs were hardly exemplary. But the house he shared with his druggy, computer-geek friends was like some nefarious Dickensian den, or, perhaps more accurately, the set of a sci-fi horror movie: Invasion of the Pizza Boxes. I hadn't seen him since.

My mum prompted Cath to tell us more. 'I think she found him... Umm... A bit impulsive... Maybe a bit strong-willed, you know. I'm not saying violent or anything like that. "A bit too much",

Charlie said. I was really quite upset. I thought he was such a sweetheart. And so ruggedly good-looking, don't you think?' I wondered what she'd said about me after she'd seen me off.

'There's no malice in him,' my mother countered. 'She'll come to realise that that's not nothing in a man.' When I recalled her words that evening, I wondered whether my mother had revealed more of her world to me in that single phrase than she had done in the previous 20-odd years.

I was rather hurt that, given my apparent unsuitability, Cath seemed so enamoured with Robbie, so much less suitable, it seemed to me, in every respect. She seemed quite cut-up about them separating. 'Come by and see Charlie. She'd love to see you. And she needs a bit a cheering up.'

I tried to strike a tone that was sympathetic and non-committal. I couldn't really see what was in it for me.