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**Tension between artistic and  
commercial impulses in literary  
writers' engagement with plot**

**Luke Brown**

**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
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## **Abstract**

### **Tension between artistic and commercial impulses in literary writers' engagement with plot**

This thesis explores whether plot and story damage a literary writer's attempt to describe 'reality'. It is in two parts: a critical analysis followed by a complete novel.

The first third of the thesis is an essay which, after distinguishing between story and plot, responds to writer critics who see plot as damaging to a writer's attempt to describe 'the real'. This section looks at fiction by Jane Austen, Henry James, Jeffrey Eugenides, Julian Barnes, Tom McCarthy and Zadie Smith, against a critical background of James Wood, Roland Barthes, David Shields and others including Viktor Shklovsky and Iris Murdoch. It then examines my own novel which makes up the second part of the thesis and looks at whether my advocacy of plot has compromised my literary ambitions, and to what extent my advocacy of plot prioritises the commercial over the artistic. The discussion is set against the extra context of my eight years working as a commissioning editor of literary fiction. It is also set against the process of being edited by a publisher who brought to bear commercial imperatives as well as artistic ones on the redrafting process.

The second part of the thesis is the novel, *My Biggest Lie*, due for publication in April 2014.

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **Author's declaration**

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name \_\_\_\_\_

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## Fiction and Realism

The idea that it is the fiction writer's artistic duty to faithfully engage with 'reality' still animates contemporary criticisms of narrative realism.

In a widely reviewed polemic, *Reality Hunger* (2010), David Shields suggests fiction has lost its artistic power. He bases this on his commitment to realism, if not realist fiction: 'If literary terms were about artistic merit and not the rules of convenience, about achievement and not safety, the term *realism* would be an honorary one, conferred only on a work that actually builds unsentimental reality on the page, that matches the complexity of life with an equally rich arrangement in language. It would be assigned no matter the stylistic or linguistic method, no matter the form' (199-200).

One of the features of narrative realist fiction that prevents it being true to 'reality' is its commitment to telling a story. Shields' manifesto is a clever collage of (thought-provoking) quotes from other writers (the one above is taken from Ben Marcus) interspersed with his own (bombastic) declarations. Readers familiar with Robbe-Grillet's *For a New Novel* will recognise many of the sentences attacking story: 'to tell a story well is therefore to make what one writes resemble the prefabricated schemas people are used to, in other words, their ready-made idea of reality' (31, or, in Shields, 200). The extrapolation of this argument can be found in Gabriel Josipovici's *What Ever Happened to Modernism*, also published in 2010, that 'the [classic] novel, the unfettered product of the imagination, actively prevents us from having a realistic attitude to ourselves and the world, and therefore from achieving any sort of firmly grounded happiness' (78).

I am quoting from two books published first in 2010 to demonstrate that opposition to realism remains current, though of course these arguments share much in common with modernist rejection of realist methods and with semiotic deconstruction. Early Barthes – and it is important for my thesis to remember Barthes changed his view of the novel – sees realist narrative as an artificial code or series of codes designed to preserve the power structures of capitalist society from where it emerged:

there is no overlapping between the written facts, since he who tells the story has the power to do away with the opacity and the solitude of the existences

which made it up, since he can in all sentences bear witness to a communication and hierarchy of actions and since, to tell the truth, these very actions can be reduced to mere signs. (*Writing Degree Zero* 31)

In this argument realism is a form that represents a subjective and self-serving notion of ‘reality’ as the objective way of things. Barthes suggests it lacks self-awareness enough to criticise itself.

Such criticisms risk over-simplifying the methods of narrative realism, both as developed in the nineteenth century and as used by many writers today – including such as Jonathan Franzen, whom Shields couldn’t read, with a typical exaggeration expressed in a cliché, if his ‘life depended on it’ (199). He doesn’t say specifically why, but perhaps we can assume he thinks it as an example of realism that, in Barthes’ phrase, ‘copies what is already a copy’ (*S/Z* 55).

The argument between realists – with their familiar reader-pleasing pace of plot and ‘roundness’ of character – and experimental writers – who think readers should be pleased more by new forms and unfamiliar style – is frequently an argument about whose stance is more honest about its ambition to represent the ‘real’. This argument leads this thesis into the difficult discussion of what we mean by the ‘truth’ of art. I might say a plot is artistically ‘true’ if it faithfully engages with trying to capture ‘reality’ instead of smoothing out its complexity. The ever-present inverted commas suggest immediately the difficulty of pinning down a shared definition of these elusive and philosophically contested categories. Barthes, in the majority of his work, would deny there was such a thing as ‘reality’, or if there is, would argue that we cannot reach it because it is always constructed through linguistic and artificial codes. Writers are always striving towards representation rather than achieving it, but it is the existence of and the faithfulness of the attempt I am concerned with. I share James Wood’s admiration of Barthes but also his impatience with the extremity of this conclusion of Barthes’ from 1966:

The function of narrative is not to “represent”, it is to constitute a spectacle still very enigmatic for us but in any case not of a mimetic order . . . “What takes place” in the narrative is, from the referential (reality) point of view literally nothing; “what happens” is language alone, the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming. (*Image Music Text* 123-4)

The presence of artifice and convention within realism does not logically entail, says Wood, that it is ‘so artificial and conventional that it is incapable of referring to reality’ (*How Fiction Works* 177) – a conclusion Barthes himself reached towards the end of his life, referring to his own ‘epiphany’ when he discovered moments of ‘truth’ in Tolstoy and Proust, particularly appealing as he mourned his mother because it might ‘permit me to say those I love ... and not to say I love them’ (qtd. in Thirlwell 30).

And Barthes’ earlier argument it is not the one put forward either by the anti-realists of today I’ve referred to; they think there are better forms than realism to represent existence – the lyrical essay for Shields; modernism for Josipovici. It is ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ that I too want to use as a measure for criticising and defending plot in literary novels.

James Wood acknowledges the difficulty of talking about ‘truth’ but still wants to: ‘let us replace the always problematic word “realism” with the much more problematic word “truth”’ (*How Fiction Works* 180). This is not just conservatism, but an attempt to make a broader definition of what we classify as ‘real’, one which includes fiction about unlikely events that is nevertheless ‘true’ to life obliquely (he mentions Kafka, Beckett, Hamsun). In resisting the extremity of Barthes’ earlier conclusion, Wood is not declaring himself as a champion of plot. He is a critic keener to emphasise its ‘essential juvenility’ and the ‘mindlessness of suspense’ (*How Fiction Works* 114), and he is a stern critic of conventionality in fiction: ‘the point to make about convention is not that it is untruthful *per se*, but that it has a way of becoming, by repetition, steadily more and more conventional’ (178).

There is an interesting nuance he makes here: that conventions are not necessarily artificial, but that they nearly always become boring.

This explains why it might be necessary for writers, critics, reviewers, editors, academics – anyone, in short, whose business it is to repeatedly begin new ‘literary’ novels – to laugh occasionally at the conventions of literary realism, to notice them at their most tedious and groan.

So we sympathise when Wood asks:

Why, we say to ourselves, do people have to speak in quotation marks? Why do they speak in scenes of dialogue? Why so much ‘conflict’? Why do people



come in and out of rooms, or put down drinks, or play with their food while they are thinking of something? Why do they always have affairs? Why is there always an ageing Holocaust survivor somewhere in these books?  
(*How Fiction Works* 169)

Or when Ben Marcus yawns:

when characters are explained by their childhoods . . . when depictions of landscape are intermissions while the author catches his breath and gets another scene ready (52)

Or when Zadie Smith notices an epiphany in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, 'expressed like all epiphanies, in one long, breathless, run-on sentence' and asks:

is this how memory works? Do our childhoods often return to us in the form of coherent, lyrical reveries? Is this how time feels? Do the things of the world really come to us like this, embroidered in the verbal fancy of times past? Is this really realism? (*Changing My Mind* 81)

Some of this is, intentionally with Wood and Smith, comic hyperbole. 'Always' and 'all' feel truer than they are when one begins, say, their thirtieth literary novel first published in 2011. This boredom, this sense that these conventions are repeating and steadily becoming more conventional when we read literary fiction suggests why an anti-fiction manifesto such as *Reality Hunger* receives respectable praise despite being manifestly hysterical. The symptoms of disease may have been identified, but the cause has been declared prematurely, and I would like to investigate with some optimism whether there is an alternative cure to that of killing the patient.

### **Plot versus story**

To begin to investigate whether plot can be 'truthful' and capture 'reality' it is important to define what plot means. First it is useful to look at how plot has been defined differently to story. It is harder to separate the two concepts than others have proposed but for my purpose it is necessary. Narrative realism, skirmishing with

oppositional, modernist traditions, is attacked for its plots: narrative shape is a fence, a prison, constraining literary art's potential to faithfully represent reality. This line of argument risks conflating the most generic elements of story with the most expressively chosen of plots.

Robbe-Grillet uses the term story (*histoire*) rather than plot as one of his list of 'several obsolete notions'. His iconoclasm is contradictory if we conflate the meanings of story and plot: 'to tell a story has become strictly impossible' (33), and yet he concedes his own novels contain 'plot [*une trame*<sup>1</sup>], an "action" quite readily detectable, rich moreover in elements generally regarded as dramatic' (34). It may not seem obvious therefore that his novels don't tell a story. In *Jealousy* (1957), the signs of a wife's infidelity are observed by a husband, with events repeating and skipping and seen only partially. There is drama implied, there is event, but it is not given to the reader in a linear order, and the narrator's mood and emotional responses can only be inferred by the reader (this is his rejection of the obsolete notion of 'character'). The reader has to piece together the narrative from discontinuous fragments. We can only agree with Robbe-Grillet's assertion that story is obsolete in his novels if we make the distinction that story refers only to a simple linear narrative presented as such – Robbe-Grillet is not against narrative when he calls for a new novel. As he says about Proust, Faulkner and Beckett: 'it is not the anecdote that is lacking, it is only its character of certainty, its tranquillity, its innocence' (33 – and also to be found in *Reality Hunger*).

E. M. Forster's old distinction between a story and a plot is that of causality. 'The king died and then the queen died' is a story; 'The king died and then the queen died of grief' is a plot. 'If it is a story we say: "And then?" If it is in a plot we ask: "Why?" . . . A plot cannot be told to a gaping audience of cave-men or to a tyrannical sultan or to their modern descendant the movie-public' (59).

Forster's example suggests a plot is a series of narrated events that raise questions for the reader: a plot contains ambiguity and requires interpretation. A plot therefore requires an active response from the reader while a story requires only a passive response. Events in a plot raise questions about why they have happened; event withholds information and motivation as much as reveals it. Plot is, in this

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<sup>1</sup> I am quoting from the English translation but reading against the original French for the most important of my terms. Trame is not the traditional French word for plot (*un intrigue*), and is more accurately translated in English as 'a thread' or 'outline'.

analysis, inextricable from character: it is how we know character and how we *don't* know character; our lack of knowledge tends towards art as much as our possession of knowledge. This is a useful distinction, leading us towards a definition of plot as an incomplete arrangement of story, but Forster's value judgments drawn from this seem facile. What could be being described here is suspense, something 'the movie public' are no strangers to. Forster's idea of a plot seems to refer more to what a good plot might do rather than what plot always does differently to story: a difference in degree rather than in kind. The dividing line between narrating consecutive events and causal events is not so clearly drawn. Barthes suggested in *Writing Degree Zero*<sup>2</sup> that the impression in realist fiction of events proceeding causally from preceding events exploits 'an ambiguity between temporality and causality' to presuppose 'a world which is constructed, elaborated, self-sufficient, reduced to significant lines, and not one that has been sent sprawling before us, for us to take or leave' (30). Shields, forty-three years later, makes the same point in a bratty aperçu: 'Story seems to say that everything happens for a reason, and I want to say, *No, it doesn't*' (114).

According to these arguments, story, shaped and narrated by realist plotting, prevents fiction from a 'truthful' representation of 'reality'. By emphasising form, it misrepresents the way we experience and react to events.

I'd like to separate plot and story again and draw a distinction for the purpose of this study: story refers to the events narrated in the order of time they happened; plot refers to the order and way in which these events are told (or not told).

A plot may blur the distinction between cause and event, suggesting they proceed logically from each other, and by extension, that life is ordered, has a plan, a hierarchy (Barthes' criticism in *S/Z*: the readerly rather than writerly text).

Alternatively, a plot may emphasise and make plain the dividing line and try to more accurately reflect the chaos and contingency of existence.

Genette makes a similar distinction between story and plot using the slightly different terms of story and narrative: story is 'the signified or narrative content';

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<sup>2</sup> Discussing particularly the use of the *passé simple*, that resembles its English tense of the simple past but is not equivalent in that it is a written and literary form whereas it is the *passé chosen* that is spoken. It is one of the reasons the French are so French in their criticisms of realism: the artificiality of realism is made manifest to them in a special literary tense which is only ever read and never spoken, its divorce with reality apparent for all to see.

narrative is ‘the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative content’. A plot in this case is a discourse on a story, a plot may be essayistic (what Shields longs for: ‘a form of thinking, consciousness, wisdom-seeking’). I believe that this essayistic potential can be a feature of good plotting, and will illustrate this in my thesis with a discussion of the plot of *Portrait of a Lady*; the novel is a discourse on readers complacently consuming story that is enabled because of a very simple story and an exquisitely crafted plot.

(As a brief digression, it is important to disagree with Shields at a deeper level. It is not possible to claim that the great artistic achievements of fiction should all be essayistic: what of Chekhov, what of Carver? Shields’ dictums are personal preferences: he does not voice any of the obvious objections to them and defend himself with any rigour.)

Now we have arrived at a definition of plot as formally distinct from story. This is a similar distinction to that the Russian Formalists Victor Shklovsky and Tzvetan Todorov drew in which the *sjuzhet* (which can be translated as plot or discourse) rearranges the linear sequence of the *fabula* (story) (Herman, Jahn and Ryan 436). The way a story is told is far more important to Shklovsky than the events themselves: ‘the story is nothing more than the material for plot formation’ (*Theory of Prose* 170). ‘Plot becomes the defamiliarised story that gets distorted in the process of telling’ (*Energy of Delusion* 14).

If we use this distinction then even fiction of the lowest common denominator achieves greater complexity than Forster’s idea of story – the best example being the crime plot, which nearly always disrupts a linear story so that we find out the details of what happened first chronologically (the murder) last (the solving of the crime).

It is important to realise that plot can be as conventional and artificial as story. Now we have defined them differently it is logical that a novel could consist of a bad story redeemed by a good plot, a good story ruined by a bad plot. What this study aims to discover is the good plot, for when choices of shape and structure applied to story furthers literary achievement. The way a plot defamiliarises a story can be beautiful in its own right and I believe it can also consist with a faithful attempt to capture ‘reality’. Novels with plots can push the boundaries of fiction as much as novels without plots.

Whether pushing boundaries or not, a writer striving towards an accuracy of representation within realist conventions of plotting need not set a course against Robbe-Grillet's idea that representation in fiction can no longer be certain, tranquil, innocent. The plots of narrative realism as they develop to an artistic highpoint over the course of the nineteenth century (Eliot, Tolstoy, James) show an increasing lack of complacency and innocence, and a corresponding growth in the way their plots internally self-criticise and become essayistic, and I will turn to look at this soon.

If we compare the novel of the nineteenth century with today's commercially successful literary novels we can examine to what extent 'literary fiction' has become a realist genre, and how writers continue to resist its conventions or become damaged by them. What do today's literary realists do to an old form to adapt it to a world that has changed immeasurably and with it human consciousness? Are there certain literary models that are rewarded by the market over other models, and can they still be consistent with literary rather than commercial ambition? Do literary prizes, supposed to represent a corrective to purely commercial values, praise 'truthful' plotting above commercial artifice, or do they reinforce the commercial, as Shields is right to question: 'Is it possible that contemporary literary prizes are a bit like the federal bailout package, subsidizing work that is no longer remotely describing reality?' (199).

I want to look in more detail at nineteenth-century writers who were realists and formalists both, who showed an awareness of and anxiety about the way that plot tended towards falsifying the 'truth' of life. How did they formally deal with this challenge while still writing novels with plot and story? A lead title for 2011, *The Marriage Plot* by Jeffrey Eugenides, provides a perfect opportunity for looking again at the work of Jane Austen and Henry James and following their influence through to the present day.

### **‘Literarily speaking back in time’**

Eugenides has declared it his aim ‘to reconcile these two poles of literature, the experimentation of the modernists and the narrative drive and centrality of character of the nineteenth-century realists’ (*Paris Review* 130).

He has had a lucrative career. *The Marriage Plot* was auctioned by the Wylie Agency early in 2011 at a rumoured sum of around £700,000 for UK/Commonwealth rights. We can therefore see that, as literary novels go, this is one with unusually high commercial expectations, and look for the conventions of ‘commercial realism’ (Wood’s term; *How Fiction Works* 174) which it exemplifies.

While it does display such conventions – a romantic plot and heroine, for example – it is subversive in its use of them. The title of the novel alone suggests its interest in the way plot functions in novels, and by extension it looks at how we use plot to structure our lives and to create concepts such as ‘love’. *The Marriage Plot* sets itself up to examine how the marriage plot of nineteenth-century fiction can be adapted to a faithful depiction of campus life in 1980s America. The novel’s heroine Madeleine Hanna is as authentic and central a literary heroine as Isabel Archer or Emma Woodhouse, privileged, clever, pursued by amorous offers. But a literary heroine in the 1980s has far more freedom to define herself outside of marriage and so her reactions to romantic offers are necessarily less fraught. We are introduced to her in her final year as an undergraduate writing a dissertation on the marriage plot in the nineteenth-century novel. In her ancient supervisor’s opinion

the novel had reached its apogee with the marriage plot and had never recovered from its disappearance. In the days when success in life had depended on marriage, and marriage had depended on money, novelists had a subject to write about. The great epics sang of war, the novel of marriage. Sexual equality, good for women, had been bad for the novel. And divorce had undone it completely. What would it matter whom Emma married if she could file for separation later? How would Gilbert Osmond have been affected by the existence of a prenup? As far as Saunders was concerned, marriage didn’t mean much these days and neither did the novel. Where could you find the marriage plot these days? You couldn’t. You had to read historical fiction. You had to read non-Western novels involving traditional

societies. Afghani novels, Indian novels. You had to go, literarily speaking, back in time. (22)

Her supervisor's nostalgia for the marriage plot is linked here to the popularity of historical fiction and fiction set in extremely patriarchal societies. Such novels are frequently found on literary prize lists, and might suggest her supervisor's nostalgia is shared by many contemporary readers of literary fiction. These novels provide the reassurance of the familiar rather than the challenge of the new, even as ostensibly they are exploring the past or an unfamiliar country. To draw such a conclusion unilaterally would of course be a gross simplification, but we do frequently find British prize lists praised by their panels for their diversity whose novels feature almost no contemporary British working class characters.

It is not in this thesis's scope to examine whether one of the reason working class novels rarely feature on prize lists is because of their inadaptability to the marriage plot. I want rather to return to the features of the marriage plot, when it was to a large extent natural for writers to use. I will now look at how the two novels mentioned by Eugenides in the above extract – *Emma* by Jane Austen and *Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James – used plot with an awareness of how it may have hindered their ability to represent life truthfully. Both the novels are stories of a heroine confronted with choices of marriage but their approach differs significantly. James' more open-ended plot serves Eugenides more practically than Austen's formal closure, and this is admitted tacitly by Madeleine's thesis: 'it was here [with *Middlemarch* and *Portrait of a Lady*] that the marriage plot reached its greatest artistic expression' (23).

### **'The idiotic use of marriage as a finale' – *Emma* by Jane Austen**

*Emma* uses, for its plot structure, what E. M. Forster called, referring to novels in general, 'the idiotic use of marriage as a finale' (50). Forster doubts that novels can end satisfactorily: 'In the losing battle that the plot fights with the characters, it often takes a cowardly revenge. Nearly all novels are feeble at the end. This is because the plot requires to be wound up.' 'If it were not for death and marriage I do not know how the average novelist would conclude' (90).

*Emma*, as a comedy, follows the genre conventions inherited from the stage and wraps up neatly and happily. As an entertaining plot it is very effective in withholding enough information from the reader to create suspense and surprise them. The novel keeps presenting us with questions that keep our interest in the book. Has Emma ruined Harriet's life? Has Emma misread Elton? What will Frank Churchill be like? Will Frank propose to Emma? What will become of Jane Fairfax? Could Knightley love Jane? Could Frank love Harriet? Could Knightley love Harriet? Will Emma realise she loves Knightley? Will it be too late?

It is a plot handled with ingenious care to create suspense: there are always two love objects for every character; the reader is always being presented with suggestions of who might end up with whom, encouraged to form judgements about the 'right' pairings and hope they will come about in spite of complicating factors.

We see, however, that realism of character is sacrificed to the demands of plot when the novel requires winding up. As the novel draws to a close misunderstandings are cleared up and material hindrances are conveniently dissolved to allow for three couples to neatly get together. To accept this tidying up demands in this case that we accept such sudden good fortune and go along with a sentimental convention – that people fall in love in sudden epiphanies – and we can hear Austen struggling to convince us when Emma experiences her sudden satori:

She saw that there never had been a time when she did not consider Mr Knightley as infinitely the superior, or when his regard for her had not been infinitely the most dear. She saw, that in persuading herself, in fancying, in acting to the contrary, she had been entirely under a delusion, totally ignorant of her own heart – and, in short, that she had never really cared for Frank Churchill at all! (339)

The exclamation mark seems telling. You sense that Austen is embarrassed as she over-explains, switching to energetic avowal as the previously subtle, plausible and unreliable manifestation of Emma's consciousness weakens. Austen, in presenting the solution to an elegantly contrived puzzle, has sacrificed some of the novel's realism of psychology to a neat and happy ending. Despite the way it has been prepared for, with the reader gradually understanding more than Emma does



about the way she feels about Knightley, the way she herself is seen to realise she is in love is romantic and sentimental.

Austen's brilliant plotting therefore provides a difficult model for writers striving for greater realism. (It provides a perfect model to this day, however, for commercial writers of romantic comedies.) With Austen, we are not long into the history of the novel, and the stage conventions are not yet conventional in this new form. Returning to Wood's earlier nuance: in this case the conventions of the ending are untruthful, but they've yet to become boring. The plot uses them with brilliant skill and originality.

By the time Ben Marcus expresses despair with 'happy endings, easy revelations and bittersweet moments of self-understanding' we have reason to suspect literary novelists who use these conventions simply are using them complacently.

### **'Kept Alive By Suspense' – *Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James**

James' plot in *Portrait of a Lady* has a similarly slender range of dramatic incident to *Emma* – but he doesn't attempt to pose the same number of questions to the reader about what will happen. For the first 350 pages it is more easily reduced to one – 'who will Isabel Archer marry?'

James' novels, as compared to Austen or Eliot or Dickens, contain far fewer events. Like *Emma*, *Portrait of a Lady* could be uncharitably described as the story of a self-absorbed woman from society's upper-echelons negotiating marriage offers. Although Isabel Archer travels the world, the novel does not make use of local colour for interest: most scenes take place indoors, or if they don't, might as well have.

Mary McCarthy neatly points out the extent of this, 'When you think of James in the light of his predecessors, you are suddenly conscious of what is not there: battles, riots, tempests, sunrises, the sewers of Paris, crime, hunger, the plague, the scaffold, the clergy, but also minute particulars such as you find in Jane Austen – poor Miss Bates's twice-baked apples, Mr Collins's 'Collins', the comedy of the infinitely small' (3-5).

James acknowledges this himself in his preface to *Portrait of a Lady*: ‘I’m often accused of not having “story” enough. I seem to myself to have as much as I need – to show my people, to exhibit their relations with each other; for that is all my measure. . . I would rather, I think, have too little architecture than too much – when there’s danger of its interfering with my measure of the truth.’ (*Art of the Novel* 43)

James decides that too much contrived story will act against his attempt to represent characters realistically. But that does not mean he abandons plotting, or rejects the use of suspense. Rather, he finds a way to incorporate these engaging elements into a fiction that remains intensely aware of how fictional structures shape and distort ‘reality’. James is not only displaying a literary concern about the novel’s ability to accurately represent life but also a concern about how conventions of story lead people to misapprehend the truth of their situation in life.<sup>3</sup>

James incorporates marriage into a tragic rather than comic plot structure. The deleterious effect of complacently consumed fiction on Isabel Archer’s decision-making is signalled frequently. Mrs Touchett first finds Isabel reading on her own; Isabel has had more experience of reading about life than of life itself at this point. ‘The unpleasant had even been too absent from her knowledge, for she had gathered from her acquaintance with literature that it was often a source of interest and even of instruction’ (33). Isabel ‘hated to be thought bookish’: she wants to be a heroine from literature rather than a reader of literature, and her encounter with the Touchetts gives her this opportunity. She rejects two suitors for romantic reasons that seem artificially conceived: ‘The reason that I wouldn’t tell you – I’ll tell you after all. It’s that I can’t escape my fate’ (131). ‘I can’t escape unhappiness,’ said Isabel. ‘In marrying you I shall be trying to’ (132). And this theme is further flagged up and reinforced by other characters in the novel: ‘Like the heroine of an immoral novel,’ said Miss Stackpole, ‘you’re drifting to some great mistake’ (166).

There is an anxious self-awareness, a modernist sensibility, to how James goes about representing character. He highlights and makes visible his use of novelistic conventions at the same time as he tries to avoid the way they would simplify and act against his artistic ambition. James Wood points this out well when discussing the opening of the novel, when three men sit around discussing a woman who then conveniently makes her entrance:

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<sup>3</sup> Austen shares this concern, most explicitly in *Northanger Abbey*.

Were James being “workshopped” in a creative writing course, he would be censured for this speedy awkwardness; he should surely put a chapter of naturalistic filler between the men at tea and the arrival, make it look a bit less novelistic and convenient. But James’ point is that these men – and by extension we the readers – are waiting for the arrival of a *heroine*; and, sure enough, here is the author stepping up to provide her . . .

James then proceeds, over the next forty or fifty pages, to hand us an enormous plate of commentary about Isabel, most of it contradictory . . .

James is really suggesting that he has not yet formed his character, that she is still relatively shapeless, an American emptiness, and that the *novel* will form her, for good and ill . . . And what, James asks, will be the plot that poor Isabel will have written for her? And how much will she herself write it, and how much will it be written for her by others? And in the end, will we really know what Isabel was like, or will we have merely painted a portrait of a lady?

(*How Fiction Works* 96-98)

James’ anxiety in *Portrait of a Lady* about fiction’s ability to represent is detectable in the ambiguity of the title. A portrait fixes but Isabel is unformed and embodies contradictory impulses; we can’t always guess at what she will do. James’ portrayal of Isabel corresponds to Walter Benjamin’s definition of novelistic anxiety in ‘The Storyteller’: ‘to write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life’ (87). James prosecutes the incommensurable features of Isabel’s character with a courtroom manner, inviting the reader to make decisions, suggesting they will have to work to know Isabel and may never be sure whether they really do. He is doing something entirely different than the realist writer Barthes describes with ‘the power to do away with the opacity and the solitude of the existences which made it up’ (*Writing Degree Zero* 31).

Isabel, ‘with all her love of knowledge’ has ‘a natural shrinking from raising curtains and looking into unlighted corners. The love of knowledge coexisted in her mind with the finest capacity for ignorance’ (199). This is a description of how one complacently reads or writes a novel, this is how one applies a ready-made story to another’s or one’s own life to avoid accepting what Frank Kermode describes as ‘the

divergence of comfortable story and the non-narrative contingencies of modern reality' (128).

James' refusal to present a coherent story of Isabel's character is achieved despite, and even because of, the way that James' plot quickens in the final half of the novel, after she has made a disastrous choice of marriage to Gilbert Osmond. When the plot would be winding up if settled by marriage, it is only beginning to gain pace.<sup>4</sup>

The way this transition is managed is worth looking at in detail, because it shows how Henry James masterfully introduces more suspense to his story in a way that adds to the artistic complexity of his portrayal of Isabel. In this case plot does not simplify character and instead James' use of suspense dramatises the uncertainty of our knowledge of character.

Look at the way the linear story is manipulated by plot: up to the point when Isabel takes leave of Gilbert Osmond after his declaration of love to her (page 318 in my novel of 592 pages) the story has lasted slightly over six months; now one year passes in two sentences. James is pleased to acknowledge his manipulations: 'It is not, however, during this interval that we are closely concerned with her; our attention is engaged again on a certain day in the late spring-time, shortly after her return to Palazzo Crescentini and a year from the date of the incidents just narrated' (318).

All of Isabel's proposals have been directly dramatised but her reunion with Osmond after a year's absence takes up only a sentence: 'A few days after her arrival Gilbert Osmond descended from Florence and remained three weeks, during which the fact of her being with his old friend Madame Merle, in whose house she had gone to lodge, made it virtually inevitable that he should see her every day' (325). As we are now removed from Isabel's thoughts the reader's expectations are frustrated in a way they have not been before in the novel. The suspense increases correspondingly.

The next chapter reunites us with Isabel's thoughts as we switch to her reunion with Caspar Goodwood, the first suitor to propose to her and whom she promised to answer in two years time. The author intrudes and acknowledges again the manipulations of the story: 'Whether his sense of maturity had kept pace [with

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<sup>4</sup> James himself acknowledged in his notebooks there was an imbalance in the level of incident in the structure of the book: 'if the last five parts of the story appear crowded, this will be a rather good defect in consideration of the perhaps too great diffuseness of the earlier portion.' (*Notebooks* 15)

Isabel's] we shall perhaps presently ascertain' (326). That 'perhaps' is very characteristic of James' style of essaying opinions and descriptions, inviting the reader to judge, highlighting the complexity of the writer's artistic claim to truthful representation of character. The 'perhaps' is both disingenuous and in earnest: James knows he *can* answer the readers' questions, but he can't promise to without interfering with his artistic 'measure of the truth'.

We learn only in passing that Isabel has rejected Goodwood's proposal: she has written to Caspar Goodwood with some 'news'. Four pages in, Caspar asks simply, 'Does she [Mrs Touchett] know Mr Osmond?' and then finally, 'Is it a marriage your friends won't like?' (328).

James has adopted a new strategy of plotting for the second half of this novel, allowing Isabel's acceptance of Gilbert Osmond's marriage proposal to take place completely off-stage. This is in direct contrast to the directly dramatised proposals that have gone before.

With James' strategy, we get the sense not only that the reader but that Isabel too is absent from the decision. Isabel's character remains elusive, despite the omniscient narrator's willingness hitherto to spend long paragraphs and pages describing what is going through her mind. Nor can she explain herself to Caspar Goodwood. 'Do you think I could explain if I would?' (332). 'Falling in love' is not the sudden fact Austen uneasily makes it: it is unknowable and inexplicable. James does not try to directly convince us of it. He is masterful in knowing when to abdicate, when to do so is artistic rather than cowardly. In doing so, James attempts a more realistic portrayal of how elusive motive can be, and suggests a fiction that makes easy claim to a character's motives lacks artistic complexity.

James's skilful manipulations delay our expectations, ratchet up the suspense, and correspond to the accurate sense we have that Isabel is herself only dimly aware of why she is making the decisions she is making. The lack of information and analysis in a book that thinks nothing of six- or seven-page-long paragraphs of exegesis is a striking change: and to the reader it is ominous. Isabel is accepting a fictional conception of reality too easily, as James refuses to offer the reader fictional conventions of character.

In the next chapter we see Isabel unable to explain her decision to Mrs Touchett. And in the following we have Ralph's realisation that his conception of

how Isabel's character will affect her 'destiny' has been as fictionally conceived as it has been to her.

I had treated myself to a charming vision of your future,' Ralph observed . . .  
'I had amused myself with planning out a high destiny for you. There was to be nothing of this sort in it. You were not to come down so easily or so soon.  
(344).

This complacency mirrors the complacency of the reader who expects plots to work out in a certain way. Life is not put in order as in the end of a Jane Austen novel; Ralph realises: 'She was wrong, but she believed; she was deluded, but she was dismally consistent. It was wonderfully characteristic of her that, having invented a fine theory about Gilbert Osmond, she loved him not for what he really possessed, but for his very poverty dressed out as honours' (348).

Ralph still believes Isabel is behaving 'characteristically,' even as he realises he has made a big mistake about her character. Contradictions must be lived with. James' characters do not achieve the self-knowledge that Austen allows Emma at the end of the novel, when the contradictions of her character are resolved in a burst of illumination.

James is engaging with the nature of fiction, in how the wrong sorts of habit misguide the imagination – and how this kind of bad faith extends outside of art into real life. Isabel and Ralph have subsumed their knowledge of character beneath the service of a plot. The good reader, when they think about this, examines to what extent they have done so in their own life.

And yet the plot of *Portrait of a Lady* continues to quicken. We are given another surprising ellipsis in which three years go past, almost unannounced to the reader who has to do some maths on hearing it's now the autumn of 1876. We are introduced to another marriage plot: Mr Rosier is very much in love with Gilbert Osmond's daughter Pansy and is sounding out Madame Merle for advice. The talk is, conventionally, necessarily, of money as well as love. Chilling details emerge about Isabel, raising questions about what has happened to her since her marriage.

'Does she take the opposite line from him?' asks Rosier.  
'In everything. They think quite differently.' (360)

Again, James removes the reader's access to Isabel in order to pique their interest. The plot makes us see her through Rosier's point of view and so we must share his lack of knowledge about her inner life. The suspense builds through more ominous details: Rosier's love for Pansy is shown to be returned but Gilbert is portrayed as cold and indifferent towards his daughter's feelings, the 'sterile dilettante' (345) Ralph accused him of being earlier. Isabel, while still beautiful, has 'lost something of that quick eagerness to which her husband had privately taken exception.' 'She struck our young man as the picture of a gracious lady.' (367)

The ambiguous meaning of the title becomes even clearer at this point: Osmond's wish is to possess a portrait of a lady, a lifeless and measurable object, a tasteful piece of 'art' – as opposed to the surprising, unknowable and so truer-to-life portrait of Isabel that James is painting. The novel is in many ways an essay on character, on how willing and able we are to imagine the existence of others. Osmond is as disappointed Isabel doesn't conform to his story as she is oppressed by his insistence she will.

James continues to build suspense by revealing small details of Isabel's unhappiness in passing. All this continues to be managed through authorial or Rosier's point of view. What is Osmond doing to her? How has her strength of will been defeated? Will she continue to suffer or will she fight back?

Henry James acknowledges this obliquely through Ralph Touchett who is repeatedly placed in the position of the reader with respect to Isabel Archer: 'The reader already knows more about him than Isabel was ever to know, and the reader may therefore be given the key to the mystery. What kept Ralph alive was simply the fact that he had not yet seen enough of the person in the world in whom he was most interested: he was not yet satisfied' (395). We notice James breaks frame to reveal himself as the author, the situation as artifice, at the same time as he attempts to make it as truthful as he can. Ralph is in the position of the reader, persevering, in sickness, beyond the end of the conventional marriage story. And then the next page makes it explicit: Ralph has been 'kept alive by suspense' (396).

This is a delightful subversion. What is remarkable in this novel is how James employs more and more storytelling 'architecture' at the same time as he breaks conventions of novelistic omniscience: there is an audaciously managed tension between freedom and form that gives the novel its artistic power. The novel's

ambition to be 'true' does not lead it to abandon narrative but confers a shape on the story that is consistent with our lack of full access to Isabel's character and motives, that is aware of how we continually try to know character and motive despite this.

In doing so, James finds a way to avoid Forster's pessimism about the ends of novels: it is not death or marriage which closes the novel. Nor does he conform with Benjamin's mordant suggestion in 'The Storyteller' that 'what draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about' (100). Instead we have a near redemption, a play with the type of happy ending that James' plot has always teased the reader with. Isabel disobeys Gilbert's demand not to visit Ralph's deathbed and is confronted there by the chance of a new life with Caspar Goodwood. (This is almost the exact device we will see Eugenides use in *The Marriage Plot* before, like James, he chooses a more complicated ending.)

Goodwood implores Isabel to take a realistic look at her situation, break convention and leave Osmond (at the same time offering a type of happy ending to the reader). 'It would be an insult to you to assume that you care for the look of the thing, for what people will say, for the bottomless idiocy of the world. We've nothing to do with all that; we're quite out of it; we look at things the way they are' (590). We feel the force of the appeal to Isabel, mediated by James' uncertainty: 'I know not whether she believed everything he said; but she believed just then that to let him take her in his arms would be the next best thing to her dying' (590). He kisses her and she feels 'each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence, justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession' (590). She is being seized by someone else's plot for her, and we feel its powerful draw. But this is the last we learn of Isabel. She runs away and when Caspar tries to find her two days later at Henrietta Stackpole's, he is told she has already left to return to Osmond. The novel ends with Henrietta telling Caspar, 'Look here, Mr Goodwood . . . just you wait!'

This is an ambiguous ending but it is very hard to read it as a happy one. This did not stop some critics from doing so, and so James was led to make revisions to a later edition to make the ending more clearly unhappy. R. H. Hutton in the *Spectator* (Bayley 20-21) interpreted Henrietta Stackpole's cry as optimistic, as being privy to Isabel's decided intention to now leave Gilbert Osmond. This critical misunderstanding neatly illustrates James' theme: that we can be trained by conventions to imagine false endings. Twenty-seven years later James added this line



not present in the first: 'She stood there shining at him with that cheap comfort, and it added, on the spot, thirty years to his life' (592). James, revising for the New York edition in 1908 (the now standard edition), further stressed the theme of complacent fiction's false faith, its 'cheap comfort'. One awful interpretation here is that Goodwood waits for Isabel on false pretences for thirty years.

This is, I think, a revision that weakens rather than strengthens the 'truth' of the ending. James lets a bad reading 'correct' an ambiguity not present in a good reading. It could be seen to simplify Caspar Goodwood and sentimentalise his future in a way James has strictly avoided doing with Isabel Archer. But perhaps this is unfair: characteristically, the phrasing is ambiguous and could mean Goodwood is metaphorically aged by his loss: a proleptic understanding of the world is forbidden to us in this case as it is to James. The harshest interpretation, forgivable, is that James sacrifices the 'truth' of Caspar's future to preserve the 'truth' of Isabel's, a 'truth' he has invested much more time into presenting.

I think we can see that James' method of narrating a story is consistent with a modernist suspicion of plot, such as Josipovici describes:

In our modern age, an age without access to the transcendental and therefore an age without any sure guide, an age of geniuses but not apostles, only those who do not understand what has happened will imagine that they can give their lives (and their works) a shape and therefore a meaning, the shape and meaning conferred by an ending. (68)

James' ending satisfies aesthetically, structurally, at the same time as it refuses to close and conclude. This is not a complete break with convention: it is, after all, Ralph's death that has conveniently reunited Isabel with her original suitors. There is novelistic contrivance at work to create pattern and shape – there is, for instance, a 'goodbye' to every main character we have been introduced to – and why should this be inconsistent with art? James is an artist who acknowledges the importance of fictional shape to our lives. Isabel, like Emma, assumes more control in the events around her than she has. To interrogate how human lives are shaped by fictions James lets us assume more knowledge about Isabel than we will come to possess – and at the same time he shows how to quicken a novel and entertain through suspense without complacently ascribing a false shape to the human condition.

Suspense, after all, is not artificial: a first date is suspenseful, receiving an examination mark is suspenseful, watching a football match is suspenseful. ‘Reality’ is full of curiosity as to what will happen next.

James suggests that suspense need not always be resolved and in doing so can become a tool for thinking. We are left to wonder what misery Isabel’s decision to return to Gilbert Osmond has consigned her to. There is a strong possibility that her fictional conception of Gilbert Osmond’s character has ruined her life. But while we’re guided in a direction, we don’t know for certain. Wouldn’t Shields admit that we are engaged in ‘a form of thinking, consciousness, wisdom-seeking’? There is an aesthetic shape to the novel that has not sacrificed character or plausibility to plot. We’re forced to examine Isabel’s motives and our own: how much we’ve ‘known’ her. She surprises us still on the last page and so the contrivances of plot which have brought us to this point don’t feel preposterous or false.

***‘Books are about other books’***

But *Portrait of a Lady* was written over a hundred years ago. Can such a novel provide a model for Eugenides’ modern marriage plot without leading to pastiche? Where must he break with the form? Does he de-conventionalise the form enough to defend his novel from criticisms from the anti-plot squad, or are his ambitions necessarily glib or academic?

Any anxiety the author may feel about fiction’s ability to describe reality is initially well-disguised beneath the fluency of his sentences. We are in the mode of classic narrative realism, third-person, the narrator invisible and tied to the consciousness of his characters – though there are slips and its first line is a direct address made to the reader from the author: ‘To start with, look at all the books’ (3). We are not very far in style from reading the type of novel that its heroine guiltily enjoys:

After getting out of Semiotics 211, Madeleine fled to the Rockefeller Library, down to B Level, where the stacks exuded a vivifying smell of mould, and grabbed something – anything, *The House of Mirth*, *Daniel Deronda* – to restore herself to sanity. How wonderful it was when one sentence followed logically

from the sentence before! What exquisite guilt she felt, wickedly enjoying narrative. Madeleine felt safe with a nineteenth-century novel. There were going to be people in it. Something was going to happen to them in a place resembling the world. (47)

How 'real' is the world that Madeleine recognises in these classic works of narrative realism and how much is it a world simplified by conventions of narrative fiction? There are clear parallels between Madeleine and Isabel Archer. Henry James is mentioned on the first and last page of *The Marriage Plot* and both Madeleine and Isabel are naïve, passive readers at the start of their narratives. Madeleine 'wanted a book to take her to places she couldn't get to herself. She thought a writer should work harder writing a book than she did reading it' (42). Yet she is not a distinguished student in the way her two 'suitors' are. Her desire to escape a subject that has begun to feel obsolete to her, her desire to experience *life, truth*, leads her to sign up for a course in fashionable semiotic theory. Here, she is encouraged to deconstruct her complacent narrative of 'reality' but she finds this very difficult, above all because she doesn't recognise her perception of reality as false.

Madeleine's comfortable background has given her little chance to develop imaginative empathy with different types of people: 'being fortunate had dulled her of her powers of observation' (62). Iris Murdoch provides a useful definition of love (which Wood refers to in *The Broken Estate*), one which if we accept might suggest where Madeleine's love problems derive: 'Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality' (215).

Madeleine's journey in search of reality begins with deconstructing the codes of realism in Semiotics 211. The earnestness with which her fellow students attempt this is satirised amusingly. Should we interpret this unkindly as Eugenides wanting to have his cake and eat it, to superficially protect his old-fashioned realism by having it voice its understanding of the subtleties of the semiotic theories that want to destroy it? Is there is a conversation between the two or do they blithely bypass each other on the corridor to different classes? Is it an engagement made in bad faith?

Eugenides certainly shows he is aware of the criticisms of realist character Robbe-Grillet and others expounded. Here's Robbe-Grillet:

A character must have a proper name, two if possible: a surname and a given name. He must have parents, a heredity. He must have a profession. If he has possessions as well, so much the better. Finally, he must possess a 'character', a face which reflects it, a past which has moulded that face and that character. His character dictates his actions, makes him react to each event in a determined fashion. His character permits the reader to judge him. It is thanks to his character that he will one day bequeath his name to a human type, which was waiting, it would seem, for the consecration of this baptism. (*New Novel* 27)

And here's Eugenides:

The boy without eyebrows spoke up first. 'Um, let's see. I'm finding it hard to introduce myself, actually, because the whole idea of social introductions is so problematized. Like if I tell you that my name is Thurston Meems and that I grew up in Stamford, Connecticut, will you know who I am? O.K. My name's Thurston and I'm from Stamford, Connecticut. I'm taking this course because I read *Of Grammatology* last summer and it blew my mind.' When it was the turn of the boy next to Madeleine, he said in a quiet voice that he was a double major (biology and philosophy) and had never taken a semiotics course before, that his parents had named him Leonard, that it had always seemed pretty handy to have a name, especially when you were being called to dinner, and that if anyone wanted to call him Leonard he would answer to it. (25)

This is fun. Eugenides points to the harmlessness and utility of a basic convention (naming characters), and opposes his realist and modernist urges, voicing them through different 'round' characters. He creates practical challenges to ideological positions and in doing so nuances his understanding of both realism and semiotics, avoiding using conventions complacently and theorising abstractly.

Character develops in *The Marriage Plot* in the conventional way it does in many realist novels, through the passing of time, through story and plot. This is made thematic by the setting, university, at a time when for many undergraduates their character and opinions are dramatically visible works-in-progress.

There are three main characters in *The Marriage Plot*, Madeleine Hanna and the two 'suitors', Leonard Bankhead and Mitchell Grammaticus. These male misfits are granted a less complacent view of life than Madeleine, who 'had a feeling that most semiotic theorists had been unpopular as children, often bullied or overlooked, and so had directed their lingering rage onto literature' (42). This is funny but also shows how she unconsciously accepts the way a dominant style can reflect dominant structures of power. The privileged member of society blinds herself to what life is like for the disadvantaged; such problems don't exist for healthy individuals. Madeleine, in the absence of any economic impediments, becomes drawn in a fictitious sense to suffering, as an Isabel Archer or a Dorothea Brooke, as a romantically conceived road to knowledge and adventure: 'Mitchell was the kind of smart, sane, parent-pleasing boy she should fall in love with and marry. That she would never fall in love with Mitchell and marry him, precisely because of this eligibility, was yet another indication . . . of just how screwed up she was' (15-16).

In spite of the satirical content demonstrating the author's awareness of the conventions he's using, on the level of the sentence we are still very much within realism. Eugenides is so confident in this mode, introducing various briskly drawn and memorable 'flat' characters to contrast with his 'round' ones: Semiotics 211's fraudulent course leader Zipperstein, for instance, 'with a guru's dome and beard' (20), enigmatically silent throughout seminars apart from when making gnomic remarks such as, 'I hope you read the *Semiotext(e)* for this week. Apropos of Lyotard and in homage to Gertrude Stein, let me suggest the following: the thing about desire is that there is no there there' (48). Another predictable character, this time breathed into life and abandoned within six pages, is Madeleine's shortlived 'actor' boyfriend Dabney Carlisle, more a male model than an actor, who, even when he surprises her with his perceptive (and justifiable) bitterness about the way she sees him, does so within the conventions of the shorthand with which she (and Eugenides) understands him: 'Dabney was far more fluent than she'd expected. He was capable of portraying a range of emotions, too, anger, disgust, wounded pride, and of simulating others, including affection, passion and love. He had a great career in the soaps ahead of him' (38).

This type of flat character *is* realistic, truthful, not for embodying the complex consciousness of another, but in showing the gulf between this complexity and the simple narratives we use to describe others to ourselves. In my novel the

character Hans is made minor by both my narrator's desire to keep him at this emotional distance and by his narrative convenience for me for a short portion of the novel when my narrator has no one else to talk to. One of the strengths of narrative art might be, as Murdoch suggests, that it can encourage a greater imaginative sympathy with others. Eugenides lets us inhabit his three main characters with complexity, but flat characters are useful in this instance to show Madeleine's imaginative limitation.

This type of 'flat' character is also entertaining, and it would be absurd to claim Eugenides' purpose in creating comic minor characters is only to highlight Madeleine's (and our own) solipsism. Trade publishing is predominantly an entertainment industry, after all. But the attempt to know someone independently of imposing our own narratives on them (that it may be impossible but not an excuse for fatalism) is a clear theme in this work of narrative realism; a signal of its artistic ambition. When Mitchell sees his parents at his graduation he is 'choked with feeling for these two human beings who, like figures from myth, had possessed the ability throughout his life to blend into the background, to turn into stone and wood, only to come alive again, at key moments like this, to witness his hero's journey' (117). Eugenides suggests even one's own parents can be grist to the mill, narrative conveniences, 'flat' characters to facilitate the main narrative sweep of the hero.

And at the same time Eugenides prosecutes the moral (liberal humanist) argument that though we may understand others through the convenience of the narratives we have invented, it is an inconvenient duty to overcome this and understand they think and feel outside of our perceptions.

Leonard Bankhead is a character who embodies this dialectic. He is a Biology/Philosophy major: he studies the bodies of human beings at the same time as learning they are linguistic constructions. This comes across in another argument he has in Semiotics 211 with Thurston, the avid deconstructionist:

'I mean, wasn't anybody put off by Handke's so-called remorselessness? Didn't this book strike anyone as a tad cold?'  
 'Better cold than sentimental,' Thurston said.  
 'Do you think? Why?'

‘Because we’ve read the sentimental, filial account of a cherished dead parent before. We’ve read it a million times. It doesn’t have any power anymore.’

‘I’m doing a little thought experiment here,’ Leonard said. ‘Say my mother killed herself. And say I wrote a book about it. Why would I want to do something like that?’ He closed his eyes and leaned his head back. ‘First, I’d do it to cope with my grief. Second, maybe to paint a portrait of my mother. To keep her alive in memory.’

‘And you think your reaction is universal,’ Thurston said. ‘That because you’d respond to the death of a parent in a certain way, that obligates Handke to do the same.’

‘I’m saying that if your mother kills herself it’s not a literary trope.’

Thurston was nodding his head in a way that somehow didn’t suggest agreement. ‘Yeah, O.K.,’ he said. ‘Handke’s real mother killed herself. She died in a *real* world and Handke felt *real* grief or whatever. But that’s not what this book’s about. Books aren’t about “real life.” Books are about other books. (28)

Just like early Barthes, Thurston believes the function of narrative is not to represent: ‘books aren’t about real life’ is a good encapsulation of Barthes’ early writing on the subject. *The Marriage Plot* explicitly references Barthes: his *Lover’s Discourse* features throughout as romantic Madeleine’s entry-point into appreciating semiotic theory. There are implied references to Barthes too and it is not coincidental that in the extract above it is the discussion of a death (a mother’s death) that is used to contrast the idea of literature’s ability to achieve an artistic ‘truth’ against its inability to produce anything other than signs, codes, power, ‘other books’.

The death of Barthes’ mother triggered a late turning point in his thought. Eugenides has discussed in the *Guardian* with Adam Thirlwell this turning point of Barthes’, and in *Paris Review* he recommended Thirlwell’s essay in *New Republic* about Barthes’ late reassessment of fiction’s potential for artistic truth. It was after the death of Barthes’ mother (whom he had lived with all his adult life) that he declared his aim to find a new writing practice, to act as if he was preparing himself to begin a novel, *Vita Nova*. After years of claiming fiction and realist fiction in particular was a series of artificial codes separating us from the truth, he decided that there were ‘Moments of Truth’ one could find in novels. The two examples he gives

in his posthumously published lecture course *The Preparation of the Novel* are the death of the grandmother in *In Search of Lost Time* and the death of Bolkonsky in *War and Peace*. Now Barthes saw the novel's potential to be 'a vast, extended canvas painted with illusions, fallacies, made-up things, the "false" if we want to call it that: a brilliant, colourful canvas, a veil of Maya punctuated by, scattered with, Moments of Truth that are its absolute justification'; 'It's not that the novel would start out from *falsehood* but rather from the point at which truth and falsehood would mingle without warning' (*Preparation for the Novel* 108).

Proust suggested to Barthes that a novel could be 'a means to vanquish Death: not his own, but the death of loved ones; a way of bearing witness for them, of perpetuating them by drawing them out of non-Memory', it would 'permit me to say those I love . . . and not to say that I love them' (qtd. in Thirlwell 30).

In *The Marriage Plot*'s discussion of a mother's death, Leonard provides the voice mediating between Madeleine's conservatism and Thurston's iconoclasm. It is a voice that, however simply articulated, shares the interest of the author and of late Barthes in the power of fictional plot to represent life, and it suggests Handke's *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, by trying so hard to avoid the conventional, fails to describe a truthful response to a mother's death. It is a criticism of anti-realism for failing to see that fictional narrative can, within its conventions, at its highest points, evade artificial constructions of reality.

'Books aren't about "real life". Books are about other books.' *The Marriage Plot*, whatever it is, *is* a book about other books, but this is shown to be in no way inconsistent with being about people too, in attempting to accurately represent the way 'real' people might respond to 'real' circumstances.

Leonard is important to the way Eugenides nuances his own novel and simultaneously acknowledges and resists a conception of reality as being formed by artificial fictions. Leonard has bipolar disorder, a problem never encountered in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century marriage plot, and something Madeleine doesn't find out until she is already infatuated with him. His incurable condition is a contradiction to a plot where a character with a unified self has the agency to progress through a journey, making decisions and learning along the way. If Leonard takes his medication, he becomes fat, mentally lethargic and impotent – a different character to the one Madeleine fell in love with; and, if he doesn't, he's at the mercy of dangerous manias



and brutal depressions. (Realist stability of character is being destabilised within realist conventions.)

One of the features of Leonard's manias is his believing anything is possible, that only the best outcomes will ensue. This is a variation of the happy ending and faith in this convention drives Leonard to propose to Madeleine and leads her to accept him. The faith is emphatically based on a fiction: Leonard is manic and 'has just figured out the solution to all his problems, romantic, financial and strategic' (293). Secretly, he has not been taking his medication and so its side-effects appear to be improving. Madeleine wants to reject the reality of his condition to create an optimistic narrative of their future together.

This contemporary plot strand allows Eugenides to raise the question whether a faith in a happy ending need be idiotic, whether shaping narratives really must, repeating Josipovici's words, 'prevent us from having a realistic attitude to ourselves and ... achieving any sort of firmly grounded happiness' (78). With God dead and endings unguaranteed, what is left but to try certain narratives out? (This is the humanism Sartre could reconcile with existentialism: acting without hope, but acting nevertheless.)

Is it naive of Madeleine to let her hope for a happy ending override the reality of Leonard's illness? Couldn't this be a commendable, moral optimism in attempting something that promises to be very hard? Or is it selfish in this very heroism, in allowing her the role of heroine while retreating from the reality of what Leonard is experiencing?

That this marriage plot and style of narrative realism can pose these incommensurable questions proves to me its continued artistic potential. I am not being asked to simplify my understanding to the codes of a romantic plot, and yet an engagement with a romantic plot is why I feel invested in what will happen to the characters Eugenides has encouraged me to care about. The contradictory claims on me enrich my understanding and point to my lack of understanding of the love plot, of what it consists of and of why it appeals to me in the way it does. A novel can continue to explore the way we shape reality within its own shaped representation of reality.

Barthes himself made this hypothetical journey of faith as he began his preparation 'as if' he was going to write a novel. Approaching his intention in the form of a

teaching course allowed him to explore his new hope in the novel's power with his ambivalence about the form.

I am using the concept of faith here to refer to a novelist's belief in his old and evolving form's potential for representative accuracy. But actual religious faith and scepticism are themselves thematic in *The Marriage Plot*, and these contradictions are embraced with complexity by the plot strand concerning Mitchell Grammaticus's religious interests.

Mitchell has, with his interest in religious mysticism, been metaphorically enacting a dialectical enquiry into narrative shape versus 'reality'. His mentor has taught him that 'if you couldn't answer the objections of a Schopenhauer, then you had to join him in pessimism. But this was by no means the only option . . . unquestioning nihilism was no more intellectually sound than unquestioning faith (95).

Mitchell, whose belief in his destiny to end up with Madeleine has the quality of religious faith, is thinking hard about how he has arrived at the 'truth' of this belief – at the same time as he is spending a month at her parents' house, taking long walks and visiting the local Quakers Meeting House. He has done his best to reject his belief in a happy ending but his 'chronic credulity' keeps 'flaring up' (394). And, eventually, he achieves what he has always wanted and sleeps with her:

As he removed Madeleine's clothing, layer by layer, he was confronted by the physical reality of things he had long imagined. An uncomfortable tension existed between the two, with the result that after a while neither felt entirely real. Was this really Madeleine's breast he was taking into his mouth, or was it something he had dreamed, or was he dreaming now. Why, if she was finally there before him in the flesh, did she seem to be so orderless, and vaguely alien? (404)

The dramatic moment when they first have sex feels lifeless, forced: it is the ending of a contrived and 'false' fiction, and Eugenides has Mitchell and us feel it as a disappointment.

Meditating in the Meeting House the next morning, Mitchell, instead of being filled with faith is filled with clarity. Like *Portrait of a Lady*, the novel ends with the rejection of a false happy ending:

From the books you read for your thesis, and for your article – the Austen and the James and everything – was there any novel where the heroine gets married to the wrong guy and then realizes it, and then the other suitor shows up, some guy who's always been in love with her, and then they get together, but finally the second suitor realizes that the last thing the woman needs is to get married again, that she's got more important things to do with her life? And so finally the guy doesn't propose at all, even though he still loves her? Is there any book that ends like that?

'No,' Madeleine said. 'I don't think there's one like that.'

'But do you think that would be good? As an ending?'

...

And Madeleine kept squinting, as though Mitchell was already far away, until finally, smiling gratefully, she answered, 'Yes'. (406)

These are the last words in the book. Like the ending of *Portrait of a Lady*, which it is so clearly influenced by (one might see it as a criticism of the conventionality of Caspar Goodwood's continued love for Isabel) it is more liberating and ultimately consoling than a false happy ending. This is too easy a faith, Eugenides suggests, while still suggesting that faith, in whatever form, is potentially possible.

The update of the marriage plot to the contemporary world is not without its problems. Our knowledge, our narratives, about what happens to relationships between Western people in their early twenties make it harder for this plot to carry the tragic weight that *Portrait of a Lady* carries. The weight is in some way supplied by another implacable condition: the fact and severity of Leonard's mental illness. These sections are the strongest in the book and carry more weight than the novel's ending.

*The Marriage Plot*, with a clever reference to the closing conventions of novels, ends in way that is ultimately too neat. In presenting us with the key to a puzzle, there is a lingering sense of being manipulated that acts against the reader being as profoundly moved as with James.

But first and foremost, the novel is an achievement. It recognises the need for criticisms along Shields' line. But the answer to the problem, as Eugenides artistically explores it, needs not be to forbid the form and movement of plot.

## Julian Barnes wins the Booker Prize

British and of an older generation, Barnes is a very different writer to Eugenides, but is nevertheless a literary writer with high sales expectations. Before Barnes won the Man Booker Prize in 2011 with *The Sense of an Ending*, he had reached its shortlist three times before with *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), *England, England* (1998) and *Arthur and George* (2005).

Published in the same year as *The Marriage Plot*, *The Sense of an Ending* has a title that suggests a similar concern with how we use plot to structure our lives. Barnes also shares a title with Frank Kermode's work of literary criticism and both novels are concerned with how we 'make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle' (Kermode 17). With this nod to Kermode, Barnes' novel neatly states its relevance to my exploration of how novels with literary ambition both use and evade the contrivances of plot.

It is possible to make the argument that *The Sense of an Ending* is a novel that scrupulously examines fictional endings to show an awareness of their conventionality and artifice and that, in doing so, creates a work of art to interrogate their effect on our lives.

The reader is never in doubt it is possible to make such an argument because Barnes makes it so clearly and frequently himself:

This was another of our fears: that Life wouldn't turn out to be like Literature. Look at our parents – were they the stuff of Literature? At best, they might aspire to the condition of onlookers and bystanders, part of a social backdrop against which real, true, important things could happen. Like what? The things Literature was all about: love, sex, morality, friendship, happiness, suffering, betrayal, adultery, good and evil, heroes and villains, guilt and innocence, ambition, power, justice, revolution, war, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, the individual against society, success and failure, murder, suicide, death, God . . . Real literature was about psychological, emotional and social truth as demonstrated by the actions and reflections of its protagonists; the novel was about character developed over time. That's what Phil Dixon had told us anyway. (15)

This extract suggests many people feel a gulf between ‘reality’ and literature, a yearning for life to achieve the significance and dramatic centrality it has for a hero in a plot. Like Mitchell in *The Marriage Plot*, Barnes’ narrator acknowledges the way we turn even our own parents into minor characters as we struggle to make a significant story of ourselves. ‘Character developed over time’ very much is the theme of his novel, character as narrated to itself by a reliably unreliable narrator who is surprised when documentation (the reappearance of an angry letter he wrote to a friend who subsequently committed suicide) suggests his narrative has been kinder to himself than may be justified.

Barnes, a clever writer, is not subtle in this novel. He never leaves his theme for more than a few pages before returning to signpost it in glow-in-the-dark paint. It is unfortunate, therefore, that these bald statements about memory’s unreliability don’t surprise us with their insight:

‘Was this their exact exchange? Almost certainly not. Still, it is my best memory of their exchange.’ (19)

‘Again I must stress that this is my reading now of what happened then. Or rather, my memory now of my reading then of what was happening at the time.’ (41)

‘as the witnesses to your life diminish, there is less corroboration, and therefore less certainty, as to what you are or have been. Even if you have assiduously kept records – in words, sound, pictures – you may find out that you have attended to the wrong kind of record-keeping.’ (59)

‘What we called realism turned out to be a way of avoiding things rather than facing them.’ (93)

Barnes demarks his schema clearly, like a thorough essayist making sure his reader is following his point. It is not an attractive habit in fiction, acting against the writing’s ability to embody ambiguity and enter more difficult, exploratory terrain. It is, as Kermode says, the habit of the critic rather than the poet, ‘the lesser feat of making sense of the ways we try to make sense of our lives’ (3). But Barnes doesn’t do this very well either. Wood is accurate in characterising Barnes’ writing as ‘not prose of discovery, but of the idea of discovery,’ as someone who ‘fakes the motions of

argument' (*Broken Estate* 265). Barnes seems to know exactly what he thinks, and he wants you to think it too. Using the word 'realism' instead of, say, 'pragmatism' is unlikely to be an accident – with self-protective irony he is trying to insulate his own anxious realism from charges of artifice.

But what Barnes calls realism really is a way of avoiding things rather than facing them, no matter the sleights of hand. One of the most popular plot conventions in literary fiction is the narrative moving forward to a revelation about the past that explains the present, surprising our understanding of character, and one way of doing this is through the return of repressed memory. *The Sense of an Ending* relies very much on this literary convention. The novel works against itself, acknowledging the convention as contrived and simultaneously trying to explain it as truthful to experience.

It is a revealing example of novelistic bad faith. It is useful for Barnes' plot to have his narrator remember his past in a new way, but Barnes, aware how useful it is, won't leave the reader to make up their mind if they are happy to go along with the narrator's assertion that 'the brain will throw you scraps from time to time, even disengage those familiar memory-loops'. Barnes seems aware this may seem too convenient and that, as a writer of Booker-listed literary fiction, he may be criticised for this. The way he pre-empts this criticism is cunning, because he does it in the voice of his narrator, so that the wheedling can be disguised as in character rather than authorial:

Though if you were to put me in a court of law, I doubt I'd stand up to cross-examination very well. 'And yet you claim this memory was suppressed for forty years?' 'Yes.' 'And only surfaced just recently?' 'Yes.' 'And are you able to account for why it surfaced?' 'Not really.' 'Then let me put it to you, Mr Webster, that this supposed incident is an entire figment of your imagination, constructed to justify some romantic attachment which you appear to have been nurturing towards my client, a presumption which, the courts should know, my client finds utterly repugnant.' 'Yes, perhaps. But –' 'But what Mr Webster?' 'But we don't love many people in this life. One, two, three? And sometimes we don't recognise the fact until it's too late. Except that it isn't necessarily too late. Did you read that story about late-flowering love in an old people's home in Barnstaple?' 'Oh please, Mr

Webster, spare us your sentimental lubrications. This is a court of law, which deals with fact. What exactly are the facts in the case?’ (119-120)

We’re no longer supposed to question the contrivances of the plot but whether the narrator is contriving his memories to justify his narrative of his past and the course of action he wishes to take in the present. Barnes wants us to distrust the narrator – within the parameters he sets out – while at the same time he convinces us about the profundity and mimetic realism of the plot with its convention of memories flooding back to surprise a narrator and unveil a mystery.

We have one of the best examples I have seen of the reliable unreliable narrator. How could it be possible for the reader, having picked their way through so much scaffolding, to share with the narrator his surprise at being surprised by the past?

The best part of the novel, the narrator rereading a letter he wrote forty years ago, while not surprising in structure is surprising in power. The narrator has admitted earlier in the novel that when he wrote to his friend (and by proxy his ex-girlfriend) he ‘told him pretty much what I thought of their joint scruples’ (42) but this doesn’t prepare us for the letter’s viciously successful intent to wound and the accuracy with which the narrator foretold all the awful things that would happen to his friend and ex-girlfriend. The reader is free of the narrator manipulating his responses for two pages, and feels the relief of it. Immediately afterwards Barnes’ tendency to ‘smooth his world into summation’ (*Broken Estate* 264) begins again as the narrator helpfully points out what we would have been very unobservant to have missed: ‘Now I had some all too unwelcome corroboration of what I was, or had been’ (98). The contrast between his youthful, energetic spite and his mundane maturity is marked by the writing deadening again. One can argue that this is fidelity to Barnes’ voicing of his ostensibly unfeeling narrator, hidden from himself even as he navigates us through a tour of his mind, like one of his old teachers pointing to a blackboard with a ruler. ‘Next I thought of her.’ ‘Then I thought of Adrian.’ ‘And finally I remembered . . .’ (98)

This mathematical ordering is fidelity to character only if one has a very ungenerous and unambitious imaginative insight into what people are like. Well, one could argue this is Barnes’ theme, his Englishness. I’d prefer to return to Iris Murdoch’s moral definition of love as the ‘extremely difficult realisation that

something other than oneself is real', and to judge the novel as displaying a lack of difficulty engagement even as Barnes predicts and preempts the criticism that he has not brought his characters to life by suggesting this is an example of truthful representation of both his character's solipsism and his English reserve.

It is not just the narrator's character that is closed off from us. The narrator's childhood hero, the friend who killed himself, is only brought to life through an aphorism: 'History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation' (17). The rest of the time the exceptional man as represented in this book is unexceptional – or at least the experience of experiencing the exceptional man through the eyes of a dull and jealous man is unexceptional. The text is hermetically sealed. One can always justify the lack of ambition by claiming verisimilitude of character. I can't help feeling a disappointment that is connected to truth – isn't there more joy in our experience of love or friendship, isn't there more attention to the details? Wouldn't the narrator have noticed more? Wouldn't he have been more alive to him, and so to us?

It is convenient to claim that he would not because it diminishes the author's failure at the same time as it reinforces his character's failure and the novel's didactic consistency. But on an artistic level, and a moral level as Murdoch describes it, this is a decision to do something less ambitious than great literature attempts. It is safe, and in a year when the judging panel rewarded 'readability' and was chaired by a former MI5 head whose thrillers are ghostwritten, one could be disappointed but not surprised when this efficiently plotted and mock-profound novel won the Booker Prize. Contrivances of plot should be justified by ambition in other areas. But this novel's defensiveness seems to me the reverse of ambition. It is accomplished and depressing. Wood sums up his essay on Barnes by suggesting 'a literature that discovers, that dares to know less, is always on the verge of what is not sayable, rather than at the end of what has just been said' (*Broken Estate* 272). Julian Barnes' sense of an ending is neat and supports Wood's claim that nothing in his world 'escapes summation, not least those moments which he tells us are escaping summation' (264).

When we hold *The Sense of an Ending* up to compare against *The Marriage Plot*, we see that Barnes lacks Eugenides ambition in representing the inner life of characters, of exploring, to quote Murdoch again, 'the tragic freedom implied by love . . . that we all have an indefinitely extended capacity to imagine the being of



others. Tragic because there is no prefabricated harmony, and others are, to an extent we never cease discovering, different from ourselves' (52). Eugenides borrows the tragic marriage plot from Henry James and Tolstoy, the plot of failed imagination – and shows the ways it works and doesn't work in a society where a marriage based on failed imagination cannot be as absolutely damaging. In showing that we fail to apprehend each other's difference, Eugenides also attempts to show how we might not fail by imagining his three very different point-of-view characters. His third-person narrative is formally much more suited to multi-perspective than Barnes' first person, of course. But even within his first person, Barnes characterisation seems half-hearted. Eugenides book explores an imaginative leap of faith from his three characters' different disciplines of faith – literary form, religion and science. He explores the necessity of creating form, its damages and consolations. *The Marriage Plot*, risking greater earnestness, knows it knows less than *The Sense of an Ending*, and so it can begin to say something more difficult and less conventional.

## Two directions for the novel

I have quoted James Wood *passim* in this thesis but should now begin to consider whether his championing of a quiet and minimally plotted ‘truthfulness’ is inconsistent with my advocacy of the artistry of plot and story. This returns me to Zadie Smith and her influential essay ‘Two Directions for the Novel’, first published (as ‘Two Paths for the Novel’) in *New York Review of Books* (2008). Smith and Wood have a history of responding to each other in print.<sup>5</sup> Wood started things, criticising Smith alongside Rushdie, DeLillo and Wallace in his own influential essay, ‘Hysterical Realism’. Specifically he criticised ‘hysterical realists’ for contrivances of plot, for writing fiction in which ‘the conventions of realism are not being abolished but on the contrary, exhausted, overworked ... Storytelling has become a kind of grammar in these novels; it is how they structure and drive themselves on’ (*Irresponsible Self* 168). ‘By and large, these are not stories that could never happen (as, say, a thriller or a magic realist novel often contains things that could never happen); rather, they clothe people who could never actually endure the stories that happen to them’ (169).

We are back with Forster’s idea that plot takes a cowardly revenge upon character. In these overly energetic fictions, excess of story prevents them from representing truthful psychology of character. It is on Wood’s commitment to truthful and complicated exploration of character and consciousness that he seems to base much of his critical judgement. His residual faith suggests itself in his appreciation of fiction that is so focused on deep apprehension of consciousness – James’ ‘measure of the truth’ – that it aspires towards prayerful meditation, the reading of which is improving, teleological. Story is too distracting, too meretricious a pleasure, and removes the ability of the reader to ‘not-quite’ believe in it, for ‘fiction moves *in the shadow of doubt*, knows itself to be a true lie, knows that at any moment it might fail to make its case’ (*Broken Estate* xiv). Wood is right about the artifice of plot and story a great deal of the time, but may be too quick to generalise

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<sup>5</sup> Wood has reviewed three of her books, seeing her debut as displaying some of the weak characteristics of ‘hysterical realism’. In his essay ‘Tell Me How It Feels’ (2001) he criticises Smith’s early formulation that the novel should tell the reader ‘how the world works’ while suggesting that she and other ‘hysterical realists’ should pay less attention to showing how clever they are and more to showing ‘how someone felt about something’. Smith responded in ‘This is How It Feels to Me’, defending ‘clever writing’: ‘It will take sympathy - a natural instinct, a sentimental reflex - but it will also take empathy, which I still contend is largely a matter for the intellect.’

and form rules from bad examples. From the same impulse he overlooks the complicated suspense of the plots of some of his favourite novels, *Portrait of a Lady* serving as a good example here. It is excess of story he appears to object to rather than skill of plotting, though he risks conflating the two.

Smith's essay is an extended review of two novels to illustrate her 'two directions for the novel'; she claims that 'one is the strong refusal of the other' (71). The first, *Netherland* by Joseph O'Neill, is her perfect example of superbly executed 'lyrical realism', ultimately depressing because of how conventionally it uses the tropes of mainstream 'literary' writing. Wood had already reviewed *Netherland* in the *New Yorker* and made a typical defence of slow plotting: 'one can forgive a lot of stasis when the verbal rewards, page after page, are so very high.' Smith has not picked *Netherland* by accident; one senses the attempt to step out from under his shadow and disagree with him. Wood loved *Netherland* for 'an ideological intricacy, a deep human<sup>6</sup> wisdom, and prose grand enough to dare the comparison [to *The Great Gatsby* and *A House for Mr Biswas*]' (It is in many ways a modern rewrite of *The Great Gatsby*.) He praised 'the attentive, rich prose about New York in crisis that, refreshingly, is not also prose in crisis: it's not overwrought or solipsistic or puerile or sentimental, or otherwise straining to be noticed.' It is easy to see why Wood likes the plot: it is quiet, reflective, plausible (more restrained than *The Great Gatsby*) with any excess provided through the character of Chuck Ramkisoorn and his wildly optimistic immigrant's dream of opening a huge cricket stadium in New York.

Zadie Smith mostly draws the same conclusion as to the poetic exactness and beauty of O'Neill's sentences, but for her its fluency – 'the high lyrical treatment' (79) – masks rather than resists a crisis. Professing an alignment in this essay with McCarthy and his INS (International Necronautical Society), she manages to taunt Wood<sup>7</sup> and state a McCarthyite opposition to a liberal humanist conception of the novel: 'Out of a familiar love, *like a lapsed High Anglican* [my italics; her James Wood], *Netherland* hangs on to the rituals and garments of transcendence, though it well knows they are empty' (81).

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<sup>6</sup> 'Human' is unfortunate ammunition for the McCarthyites mockery of liberal humanists; one thinks of Roth's undergraduate ingénue in *My Life as a Man* with repeated 'redundants' red-penned in the margins of his impassioned essays about 'human character, human possibility, human error, human anguish, human tragedy' (17).

<sup>7</sup> The taunt did not escape Wood: he responded by updating his essay on *Netherland* to include a response to Zadie Smith's essay when he collected it in *The Fun Stuff* (2013).

What Smith refers to here as the rituals and garments of transcendence are ‘realism’s metaphysical tendencies . . . the transcendent importance of form, the incantatory power of language to reveal truth, the essential fullness and continuity of the self’ (73). It is unclear in what way the ‘transcendent importance of form’ is particular to lyrical realism for it could be argued that McCarthy’s structures, despite being designed to illustrate ‘failed transcendence’, are more strictly conceived and theorised than the minimally plotted realism that O’Neill writes and Wood approves of. McCarthy contrasts form with matter and has declared his aim to ‘let matter matter by making form as formless as possible’ (Critchley and McCarthy 7) but his novels have clear forms that I will go on to discuss. Smith is on firmer ground when she implicitly challenges Wood’s claim that O’Neill avoids solipsism. ‘The founding, consoling myth of lyrical realism – the self is a bottomless pool,’ (74) is for her one of the biggest perils of this type of narrative. *Netherland* ‘wants to offer us the authentic story of a self. But is this really what a self feels like? Do selves always seek their good, in the end? Are they never perverse? Do they always want meaning? Do they sometimes not want its opposite? And is this how memory works? Do our childhoods often return to us in the form of coherent, lyrical reveries? Is this how time feels? Do the things of the world really come to us like this, embroidered in the verbal fancy of times past? Is this really realism?’ (81).

Smith is concerned that a plot constructed around a human seeking meaning in life – the transcendent ambitions of Dorothea Brooke, Isabel Archer, Anna Karenina – may itself be a contrived, fictitious and oversimplified representation of how it feels to be alive. She is right that Tom McCarthy rejects the idea that the novel’s natural form is to follow a continuous self in search of progression towards greater awareness. But it is another thing to argue that his methods make his depiction of ‘reality’ realer than that of the realists and we should examine how accurate it would be to make such a claim. His fiction may run counter to the liberal humanist tradition he says he despises, but it still uses plot in what can be quite a traditional way.

### Tom McCarthy – ‘Liberal humanists are the enemy’

Tom McCarthy lends himself easily to the academic critique. One could spend a long time diligently pulling apart the tissue of literary and philosophical references and quotations<sup>8</sup> in *C* (2010); showing how his main character Serge Carrafax neatly illustrates points in Tom McCarthy’s manifestos as general secretary of the INS (International Necronautical Society); tracing back McCarthy’s ideas through his continental points of reference, Blanchot, Bataille, Derrida, Wittgenstein, Robbe-Grillet and more; and making parallels between his work and the other members of the INS such as the philosopher Simon Critchley. McCarthy appears keen to help such a thesis writer by articulating his methods in interviews and INS statements, and by using similar phrasing in his novels to suggest the parallels he intends.

Patient analysts can follow these threads. What I would like to do more specifically is look at the extent to which McCarthy’s stories and plots are different from those in classic realism, how much he succeeds in replacing form with ‘matter’. His comments about the artifice of a plot involving a continuous self’s ‘transcendence’ – something that becomes less obviously artificial if one uses the less grand ‘progression’ or ‘development’ – means we must look at character together with plot as we examine how McCarthy offers a contrasting depiction of the self to the ‘bottomless pool’ Smith suggests is exemplified in Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland*. I want to focus on *C* (2010) and *Remainder* (2005), both of which make satirical attacks on realism. To what extent do these novels suggest an alternative to the realist tradition and how much, against his stated wishes, do they successfully reinforce the tradition’s validity?

The obvious continuity between *C* and *Remainder* is that they both remove the psychological depth from their main character and, in so doing, the idea that a plot consists of a character/characters acting with agency and maturing over the course of a ‘journey’ (whether physical or psychological).<sup>9</sup> James’ development of the interior

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<sup>8</sup> There are quite obvious allusions to *David Copperfield*, *The Magic Mountain*, Freud’s ‘The Wolf Man’, *The Waste Land* and many other texts.

<sup>9</sup> *Men In Space* (2007), the novel McCarthy published between these two, does something quite different, occupying the points of view of many different characters who pivot around a stolen painting and its copies. This novel refuses to make one character central but invests in the traditional concept of character, differentiating points of view, and, dare I say it, encouraging the reader to

voice is abandoned in these two novels and replaced by central characters who are defined by their flatness. McCarthy's originality, or safer to say his difference from the commercial mainstream, is to make this flatness central in his novels, defiantly to deny us imaginative entry into his characters and to try to interest us in his narratives in a different way. He explicitly rejects the humanism of Murdoch – he is not interested in knowing characters deeply because even knowing oneself is a bourgeois fallacy: 'Liberals. Liberal humanists. That would be the enemy, in all positions . . . What dominates mainstream media culture and literary culture is psychologising: the kind of discourse where the self is never put into question. There is a self who exists prior to anything who goes around emoting, experiencing and developing. This is what I hate' (*Dossier*).

I want to look at how this iconoclasm shows itself within his novels and at how successful they are at dispensing structurally with this oversimplified idea of realist fiction's 'self who goes around emoting, experiencing and developing'.

McCarthy is a writer who helps a certain type of reader by frequently explaining the theoretical framework behind his fiction, written in opposition to most literary fiction, which he sees as middlebrow and humanist. Here, in a review of Toussaint for *London Review of Books*, he makes a claim for the kind of novels he admires: 'We don't want plot, depth or content: we want angles, arcs and intervals; we want pattern. Structure is content, geometry is everything' (26-28).

Turning to McCarthy's novels, how do we make sense of this statement? We see that, ostensibly, both *C* and *Remainder* do work through pattern. *Remainder* follows a narrator who, after suffering head trauma and receiving millions in compensation, is driven to 'reenact' events. He begins with 're-enacting' a life in an imaginary apartment building, with the same woman taking her bin bag out every time he walks past her door, the same piano player always practising downstairs, the same smell of liver always frying from another apartment nearby, and the same cats always visible on a roof from his window. We don't know where he got this vision from – but we feel it is an idealised image from a book or a film, or more precisely a fetishisation of the type of realist detail used to confer 'the real' on the fictional, of the type Smith criticises O'Neill for in 'Two Directions . . .', the cliché that 'the random detail confers the authenticity of the Real' (*Changing My Mind* 80). 'The

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identify emotionally with various characters and their transcendent ambitions (even if these ambitions are all thwarted and misguided). It is his least known and, to my mind, his strongest novel.

real' here is literally artifice, contrived and static. We sense the influence of thinkers such as Barthes: 'Thus realism (badly named, at any rate often badly interpreted) consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy of the real' (*S/Z* 55). And we begin to see that McCarthy's newness consists of taking the old to the point of absurdity. But does satirising realism in this way actually create the alternative to realism Smith hopes for in her essay?

The narrator's re-enactments become increasingly ambitious, until he goes from re-enacting the shooting of a black man in Brixton to 're-enacting' a bank robbery. During this time we see only glimpses of the narrator's life before the accident. He has friends, presented realistically, with naturalistic dialogue. But we don't hear about a job, a family, previous ambitions – he is a convenient blank slate, an anti-character.

Nevertheless, McCarthy's plot works here through a traditional progression. Whether he wants plot or not, this novel has one, and McCarthy has admitted himself *Remainder* has 'a very classical arc' (*White Review*) without explaining how this differs from plot and story. The re-enactments progress steadily, becoming more transgressive until – with a predictable twist – they transgress completely and become reality, the re-enactment of a bank robbery becoming an actual bank robbery which is followed by the hi-jacking of a plane. The novel ends with a repetitive loop: the narrator forcing the pilot at gunpoint to turn back in the direction to land, then to turn back again in the opposite direction. But structurally this is not a radical, geometrical ending to a novel; it is in the established tradition of narratives that finish in *media res*, the outcome of which we are uncertain – the ending on a cliffhanger – from *Portrait of a Lady* to *The Italian Job* to *NW* by Zadie Smith to my own novel, *My Biggest Lie*. The loop one supposes McCarthy considers radical is not achieved at the level of structure, only content. This geometry described at the level of content can be seen in all his novels and may deceive some critics into perceiving a more radical geometry at work in structure. For instance, though *Men In Space* cleverly pivots its many characters around a stolen icon painting that is both plot device and conceptual metaphor, such linking devices have been used before to unite novels with a large range of characters – the baseball in DeLillo's *Underworld*, for instance. McCarthy acknowledges the role of the writer is not to create original works: 'Art is a repetitive mechanism that functions through theft, forgery, copying and embedding' (Critchley and McCarthy 18). But the iconoclastic stance he adopts

in interviews does suggest he thinks his 'inauthenticity' more 'authentic' than the writing of his realist contemporaries, and makes it worth pointing out the ways in which he resembles them. (*C* is a more ambitious attempt to challenge structural convention than *Remainder* and I will come to this soon.)

More interesting is how McCarthy keeps a reader's attention and entertains without pandering to his idea of a 'liberal humanist' depiction of character, without a plot based on the progression of someone whose emotions we are privy to as they change in response to a succession of events. Whether we can attribute a complete lack of depth to the narrator in *Remainder* is arguable – in some respects he does 'grow', becoming more ambitious in his re-enactments, more traumatized, more transgressive. And his 'journey', the earnest cliché of narrative progression, though formally one of loops and repetitions is very much a logical progression of increasingly excessive re-enactments that lead to the absurd ending I suspect many readers will predict.

While we must doubt how radical an approach to the novel *Remainder* is, we can say it successfully presents us with an unusual type of narrator and holds our interest despite lacking the 'roundness' we expect from character in conventional realism. The way in which McCarthy's characters in *Remainder* and *C* do tend to repeat rather than progress can be usefully understood by returning to the definitions of story and plot established earlier. We are closer to Forster's definition of a story – this happened then this happened than this happened – than a plot. The novel works hard to deny causality in its attempt to reject the continuity of a self.

How does McCarthy keep a reader's interest without satisfying this sense of progression? Some would say he doesn't; *C* and *Remainder* do not entertain through complicated plot, through emotional depth of character, as a novel by Franzen or Smith entertains. McCarthy offers different pleasures: deadpan comedy, intellectual intertextuality, brilliant detail, even descriptive lyricism, though the pleasures his narratives seem to offer himself may not necessarily be those enjoyed most by his readers. As Amanda Claybaugh points out, he is often 'best, surprisingly enough, when most realist' (173).

*C*'s plot follows its central character Serge Carrafax from birth to death, 1898–1922, through the classic structure of the bildungsroman and the founding and central years of modernity. Claybaugh points out the surprise of the way *C* opens: 'the novel at its most lyrically realist, unfolding in the most conventional genres'



(176). Yes, to a point, but we are also in a flat present-tense, and we remain here, almost always seeing the world through the eyes of a freshly minted Serge, denied the continuity of a past-tense.<sup>10</sup> McCarthy immediately begins to encode the beginning of his historical *bildungsroman* with signs of its subversion.

Events happen to Serge in this novel, but they are drawn together in a different way than in the classic realist novel. Serge's sister commits suicide; at the funeral he sees 'a female mourner gazing at him, tearful, pitiful eyes trying to tell him that she understands his grief. He looks away. She can't; he doesn't feel any. He knows he's meant to – but it's not there, and that's that' (82). In case we don't get the message, the metaphor, we are reminded three pages later of Serge's flatness: 'It's that depth thing again: the technique Serge could never master in his drawing lessons' (85). Throughout the novel we are reminded of Serge's lack of depth. It is what makes him such a good bomber during World War 1. The view of the world from above as 'landscape falls away, flattens, voids itself of depth' is 'just right' (124). Carrefax becomes a heroin and cocaine addict after the war, a habit begun during the war – or in one of the novel's many repetitions – in the womb during his mother's drug-addicted pregnancy, but the novel will not allow a connection between his addiction and the trauma of the war. A concerned tutor says, 'You've lived through war and all it's horror, and –' 'But I liked the war,' Serge tells him (214).

It would be overly pious to criticise McCarthy here for a sacrilegious imagination failure in choosing not to write the emotive realist account of wartime that has sold so many books for writers like Sebastian Faulks and Pat Barker. Necronauts reject the tragic treatment of death: 'whereas the tragic hero strides into death in order to confer transcendent meaning on their life, the comic one dies badly, incompletely' (Critchley and McCarthy 13). It's refreshing to see someone approach war material in an unconventional way. Nevertheless, the constant stating of McCarthy's theoretical concern – the self has no depth – has its limits as fictional technique. When the pleasure of surprise at the strangeness of Serge's reactions is over, the constant stating of his quirks and their interdependence on McCarthy's theorising of the self becomes wearisome.

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<sup>10</sup> *Men in Space* is also written in the present tense. The past-tense, with its ability to 'transcend' the moment described and look back at a life from greater distance, might be avoided for precisely this reason, as something that encourages the illusion of the continuous self. *Remainder*'s past-tense narrative is perhaps allowed as it deals with a character with no memory.

The most achieved sections of the novel are when the theoretical concerns slip into the background. So much of the entertainment derived from reading this novel is from the classic techniques of the historical novel, through persuading readers by diligently selected detail that they are gaining some access to an experience, whether being a bomber in World War 1, or scoring cocaine and heroin in postwar London. In *C*, McCarthy is a master of the surprising detail that connects the past with the present, the detail which suggests the ways we share with Serge the experience of being modern, of how this is where we begin. It is where McCarthy's declared aims most match his achievement, where he lets 'matter matter'. Serge becomes 'an emblem of the writer: someone who receives, first and foremost, and re-transmits, but he's not the origin of the message. He's the transcriber, the filter' (*White Review*). A character is simply a tool to describe matter. To set a character's trajectory through a novel one may as well impose one's own arbitrary connecting lines – words beginning with C – as follow as artificial a model as the realist novel provides.

In 'Two Directions for the Novel' Zadie Smith talks about the obstacle to writing about McCarthy's *Remainder*: 'when we write about lyrical realism our great tool is the quote, so richly patterned. But *Remainder* is not filled with pretty quotes; it works by accumulation and repetition, closing in on its subject in ever-decreasing revolutions, like a trauma victim circling the blank horror of the traumatic event' (*Changing My Mind* 83). I don't agree with Smith's endorsement of the originality of *Remainder*'s plot structure, but she is right to notice that the prose in that novel does not seek to impress with lyrical effects. One, however, finds plenty of lyrical sections in *C*. McCarthy is most lyrical when describing warfare:

At one point a howitzer shell appears right beside them, travelling in the same direction – one of their own, surfacing above the smoke-bank like a porpoise swimming alongside a ship, slowly rotating in the air to show its underbelly as it hovers at its peak before beginning its descent. It's so close that its wind-stream gently lifts and lowers the machine, making it bob . . . In the instant before their paths diverge, it seems to Serge that the shell and the plane are interchangeable – and that the shell and he are interchangeable, just like the radians and secants on his clock-code chart, the smoke-and-vapour-marked points and trajectories around him, the angles of his holding pattern's

quadrant and the Popham strips' abrupt cloth lines. Within the reaches of this space become pure geometry, the shell's a pencil drawing a perfect arc across a sheet of graph paper; he's the clamp that holds the pencil to the compass, moving as one with the lead; he *is* the lead, smearing across the paper's surface to become geometry himself . . . (142-143)

The lyricism here is subversive in intent. We notice (very typical with McCarthy) a literary echo in the metaphor of compasses with John Donne's famous use in 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning', used then to suggest how the connection of two people's love can transcend separation. McCarthy's use stresses materiality and positions Serge as an inert object within the geometrical metaphor, a maker of marks, a death machine. And this overt reference to his theoretical concerns has McCarthy, typically, pressing rather hard on the pencil himself.

The lyricism and metaphors intensify when describing not the ugliness but the 'beauty' of war: earlier a direct bomb hit was seen by Serge as 'a dense, black chrysanthemum' (142). On a technical level, McCarthy seems to know war well: the descriptions of aerial warfare are exhilarating and plausible. There is a sense of terrific research and knowledge behind every page of *C*. The novel frequently thrills with its erudition of detail and reference. There is little point in criticising his flat narrator for being flat – it is his declared artistic technique. He does not seek, like Barnes in *The Sense of an Ending*, to explain a lack of imaginative insight into character by making this in character for the narrator, while at the same time aiming to please a reader with the emotional resonance of a 'round' character.

There is artistic point to McCarthy's descriptions of war in this way, a satirising of war as a 'literary' topic, of an individual's progression through experience and pain to a greater knowledge of the human condition, of transcendent concepts such as 'love' 'honour' 'courage'. *C* refuses all these. Serge is in the air because he likes it there, it is where he finds the pure geometry he – like his creator – craves. And he does not develop, he extrapolates – he has the trajectory of a line graph, time plotted against technology.

The problem is that McCarthy spends too much time describing what he would like to be his new geometrical method rather than embodying it in his fiction. The plot structure is of discreet episodes of Serge's life, from birth to a young death. There are connections between each episode at the level of content: material

connections, whether through the recurrence of smells (cordite), drugs (cocaine, codeine), technology (coded transmissions); and also linguistically through the repetition of words beginning with c, and through puns (insects/incest). These arbitrary links connect the novel as much as Serge's buried motivations. I sense the influence of Barthes again, and his distinction in *S/Z* between the writable and the readable text. The readable stresses 'the compatible nature of circumstances by attaching narrated events together with a kind of logical "paste"' (156). McCarthy is trying to provide a different kind of paste than that which might stick together the 'readable' text, the novel which progresses by ordered event and ordered reaction to it. By choosing to structure *C* against a linguistic web that is both arbitrary and carefully chosen McCarthy proposes an alternative of what to construct a plot on if we abandon psychological progression of a character in response to events. This latter is for him 'almost a kind of self-help stuff. You can change your life, and I want to say, no you can't. Even if we live in a godless universe, there are paths set, there are trajectories, like bumper cars just pulling those trajectories, colliding' (*interviewmagazine.com*). Liberal humanism is McCarthy's enemy for seeming to endow us with more power than we have; its literary novels reinforce this error, they maintain the status quo by providing false comfort and leading people away from, to repeat Josipovici, 'any firmly grounded happiness'.

McCarthy's new definition of a plot here is entirely different to the one Forster proposed. With McCarthy's plot, this happened then this happened and we map the material traces between events with a system of our choosing, by focusing on nouns beginning with the letter C, for instance. This obviously contrived and artificial system is proposed to highlight the invisibly contrived and artificial system that McCarthy suggests is the realist plot.

But it is difficult to envisage as a model for future novels. It might be entertaining once, but even in this case it is arguably tedious for long stretches. Seeing the world through the eyes of Serge prevents the novel from engaging with what it might be like to imagine the consciousness of other people, the drama of interaction between different people apprehending and mostly failing to apprehend each other, and this is too great and peculiar a strength of fiction to forbid. McCarthy would disagree: this is the liberal humanist tradition he explicitly rejects. But we can maintain that making a difficult attempt to know a character in time need not equate to complacent caricature, and I hope Zadie Smith's recent novel demonstrates this.

The declaration that people don't change is as metaphysical and unsubstantiated as the declaration that they do. Where the idea of characters progressing is at its most dangerous is when it becomes a formula for fiction, a prescript handed down from editors and agents talking to writing classes. In this context, McCarthy's value as an antithesis becomes clear. McCarthy would presumably argue that the mostly inaccessible self of Serge makes his fiction far truer to experience than fiction that presents us with the accessible, emoting characters of conventional realism. But inevitably, these simplifications do realism a disservice; the middlebrow is used as an emblem and realism's highest and anxious achievements are forgotten. McCarthy cannot achieve his effects without creating characters that are illustrations for his preconceived (and alternative rather than truly dialectical) theoretical ideas. His novels are reverse-engineered. Bored of realism, he creates novels that thrill intermittently but which – taking *C* as an example – feel static for long stretches because they are repeating theoretical ideas that become commonplace and derivative when too much is expected from them. Wood has written that realism 'schools its truants' (*Broken Estate* xi) and it is significant to notice that *C* and *Remainder* work primarily in satirical opposition to realism. In their abandonment of character, he removes one of fiction's greatest strengths, and needs to fill it with something else.

Despite the many successes of his fiction, there are severe drawbacks to replacing plot and character with illustrations of critical theory. There is the feeling, reading Tom McCarthy, that the writer knew what he felt before he wrote the book, and there is a danger that one could conclude that the novel is an imperfect way of expressing an idea that one of his heroes has already expressed in critical writing. The idea of the novel as an act of discovery, as a way of embodying unresolved contradiction, finding a difficult way to express a feeling beyond the reach of everyday language – this may be a liberal humanist fallacy. But for a writer who is not ready to let go of these ambitions McCarthy remains unconvincing as a model for the future of the novel.

### **Why narrative at all?**

Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) can be read as a response to her anxiety about realism expressed in 'Two Directions for the Novel'. But *NW* is in mostly a refusal of

McCarthy's method; she attempts to redeem realism rather than move beyond it. While *C* and *Remainder* are proud of the way, following the *nouveau roman*, that they repudiate a realist notion of character, *NW* puts realist conventions into dialogue with Anglo-Irish modernist fiction and American postmodernism and suggests a future for the novel in which character remains paramount and is explored through progression and plot (in the complicated and daring way I would argue that the best realist novels have always done). In Smith's own words, she is less afraid to seem stupid than McCarthy:

The novelist has to cultivate stupidity, simplicity, awkwardness, to be something that talks about things that seem beneath contempt, like love – such a tedious, lame subject. “Another book about love?” But that's what novelists are engaged in. The business of everyday life, of things that seem beneath contempt. (*Harpers*)

With the modernists such an undisguised influence, one might think of Woolf's sympathy for Mrs Ramsey in *To the Lighthouse*, ‘whose simplicity fathomed what clever people falsified’ (31). But Smith is conflicted by any desire she has for simplicity. Her writing in *NW* also signals its philosophical reference points and the influence, as usual, of Barthes, and we hear her anxiety here at approaching ‘love’ in a way less rigorous than in a book such as *A Lover's Discourse*. Like McCarthy, she signals her theoretical concerns without much subtlety at times. With Smith this feels more forgivable, because it does not feel like the theory plays such a prominent role in forming the plot and characters, and though it does inform Smith's thinking about ‘how time feels’ and ‘the continuity of the self’ the vision is imparted in the novel without need for these direct references.

The mixed reception her novel attracted when it first appeared drew attention to some of these flaws, to Smith's tendency to over-explain or draw attention to her philosophical themes without subtlety. It is easy to agree with Leo Robson that ‘Smith's shortcomings as a writer mostly consist in her efforts to compensate for shortcomings she doesn't have’.

These shortcomings are in the end insignificant (they are almost all a matter of crossing something out without the need to replace it with something else) because her achievement in *NW* is exhilarating. Her strengths are the strengths of a realist;

she excels in capturing place and character, in the diverse speech rhythms and vocabulary of Londoners. She takes inspiration from the Joyce of *Ulysses* (the early and accessible Bloom sections) and overlaps visual description with un-separated dialogue with fragmented sentences of interior thought with environmental noise – all of which elides the inner and outer and suggests how much of her characters' selves are made up from factors outside of coherent thought. It's a suppler stream of consciousness that begins *NW* than we might see, say, in *Ulysses*' last section; here the narrative stays in third-person, free-indirect, capable of longshot and close-up, inner and outer, with the outer still carrying inflections of Leah's inner without everything having to be registered directly through her eyes. This can be seen from the first page, in a section describing (very obliquely) the results of Leah's pregnancy test:

The fat sun stalls by the phone masts. Anti-climb paint turns sulphurous on school gates and lamp posts. In Willesden people go barefoot, the streets turn European, there is a mania for eating outside. She keeps to the shade.

Redheaded. On the radio: I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me. A good line – write it out on the back of a magazine. In a hammock, in the garden of a basement flat. Fenced in, on all sides.

Four gardens along, in the estate, a grim girl on the third floor screams Anglo-Saxon at nobody. Juliet balcony, projecting for miles. It ain't like that. Nah it aint' like that. Don't you start. Fag in hand. Fleshy, lobster-red.

I am the sole

I am the sole author

Pencil leaves no mark on magazine pages. Somewhere she has read that the gloss gives you cancer. Everyone knows it shouldn't be this hot. Shrivelled blossom and bitter little apples. Birds singing the wrong tunes in the wrong trees too early in the year. Don't you bloody start! Look up: the girl's burnt paunch rests on the railing. Here's what Michel likes to say: not everyone can be invited to the party. Not this century. Cruel opinion – she doesn't share it. In marriage not everything is shared. Yellow sun high in the sky. Blue cross on a white stick, clear, definitive. What to do? Michel is at work. He is still at work.

I am

the sole

Ash drifts into the garden, then comes the butt, then the box. Louder than the birds and the trains and the traffic. Sole sign of sanity: a tiny device tucked in her ear. I told im stop takin liberties. Where's my cheque? And she's in my face chattin breeze. Fuckin liberty.

I am the sole. The sole. The sole. (3)

In a place where people live on top of each other, where so much competes with thought, this might be what a self consists of, a jumble of impressions, Eliot's 'heap of broken images', brought together by the longing for a false centre, for the type of self-authorship Leah's individualist magazine slogan offers (notice the pun: the sole author/the soul author). The presence of so much life and technology seems to preclude the possibility of individual selfhood and community too; the calm omniscience of classic realism that switches between different characters' thoughts is inappropriate to capture the way people relate to themselves and to each other in this corner of contemporary London. I think the formal challenge Smith has set herself in this novel is how to take the moral strength of a novel like *Middlemarch* – which resists solipsism through imaginatively occupying the different and often incompatible thought processes of several people in a place – and to apply a similar imaginative empathy to describe from different perspectives an urban and technological present that might represent the most extremely individualist moment ever seen in society. It seems obvious that the technique used to attempt an accurate representation of a provincial town in the nineteenth century must adapt to describe a densely populated and multiethnic area of twenty-first century London where the idea of 'community' is much less simple. At the same time we should not simplify what nineteenth-century realism achieved or forget how aware of convention George Eliot frequently showed herself to be in *Middlemarch*. Eliot is a writer very aware of the limits of imaginative empathy:

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity (194).



Leah is the character in *NW* most willing to risk this roar, and her section is the most cacophonous in the book. I have not picked the famous Eliot quote myself; it is from Smith's essay on *Middlemarch* in *Changing My Mind*. Eliot asked, 'Why always Dorothea?' and Smith takes that up: 'Why always Dorothea, why heroes, why the centrality of a certain character in a narrative, why narrative at all?' (39).

*NW* is not always Leah. There are five sections in the novel, all in which Smith's realism is in dialogue with modernist or postmodernist styles. The different style in every section reflects the way the character tries to be the 'sole author' of their story and the switching of style seems to me to be Smith's tactic to test the possibility of the realist novel in contemporary London, a fiercely individualist place in which the shared assumptions in a novel of community such as *Middlemarch* are scarcely imaginable. 'The George Eliot of today – so alive to every shade of human feeling, so serious about our interdependence on one another – she won't be like the George Eliot of yesterday' (*Changing My Mind* 40). A different style – styles – is needed to convey a city where people mostly fail to connect with each other, both with neighbours and, as the friendship of Leah and Natalie shows, with intimates. This idea is repeated in various discourses throughout the novel and becomes (explicitly) at times a dramatisation of the problem of phenomenology: how can we be sure we're experiencing the same phenomenon? How can and why should we stop acting as though we are the only people alive? A single style, Smith suggests, is not neutral, and risks being the imposition of power: the statement of one's own existence and little more; a failure of imagination.

Of the five sections to the narrative three are substantial and two very short. I have been writing about the first section so far, entitled 'Visitation', written from the perspective of Leah, who secretly aborts an unwanted pregnancy (craved for by her husband). It begins with the 'visitation' to her home of a young drug addict who tricks her out of thirty pounds and who Leah then becomes obsessed with. I have mentioned the influence of Joyce; it begins with some of the staccato effects from the more immediately enjoyable sections of *Ulysses*, such as Bloom's introduction. Whereas *Ulysses* demands more and more erudition from the reader as Bloom's day continues, Leah's section in *NW* remains easy to read and understand (though this hasn't stopped fans of Smith's previous and more stylistically familiar novels from posting Amazon reviews declaring, 'the writing style is so difficult it makes it not

worth the effort' (qtd. in Wood, 'Books of the Year'). Smith bustles with invention in this first section, some of it trivial – a page about a tree laid out in the shape of a tree – some of it successful in its juxtaposition of the language of the novel and the internet – one chapter transcribes Google directions before the next describes the same journey in terms of sense impressions. Ultimately this invention is a stretching and updating of realist convention rather than a breaking with it. The reader continues to meet superbly drawn minor characters and listen to their spoken narratives and 'philosophy' through Leah's ears, broken by Leah's distracted thoughts. There are wonderful sections in which she listens to her boss, her colleagues, her husband, her mother, all with their own distinctive languages which are themselves a unique collage of languages that are anything but distinctive: clichés, jargon, HR-ese.

What Smith assimilates from the influence of Joyce and Woolf helps her in this first section to show a self struggling to shape itself against a barrage of noise competing to define it, whether from friends, family, colleagues, or from magazine slogans, societal expectations, personal desire. The codes Leah uses to understand her life are frequently incompatible, and Smith derives a style suited to representing a self stretched in various directions to the point of breaking.

The next sections, for the novel's other two main point-of-view characters, Felix and Natalie, describe characters who at first seem more contained and knowable, characters who are more actively engaged in telling themselves a story that orders the world as they wish to see it. This might suggest that realism is best suited to describe characters who themselves are strenuously denying 'reality'.

The second section 'Guest' returns to a conventionally presented realist style: third-person past-tense, full sentences, and with dialogue laid out in inverted commas. (If a modernist influence persists here it is in the modernist's favourite time-frame of a single day.) There is a clearer demarcation between Felix's inner world and what is happening around him. Ostensibly, we have a more rational, controlled and knowable self: a character with more agency. Though the style is more traditional, the writing doesn't suffer and suits the optimistic and slightly triumphalist nature of Felix's thoughts. Felix, who was a drug addict for years, is 'nine months, two weeks, three days' clean (94), 32 years old, and looking forward to living happily-ever-after with a new girlfriend. The girlfriend speaks in self-help terminology and encourages him to cleanse 'negative sources of energy' from his life (wrongly seeing this as his

imprisoned brother rather than his manipulative father) and to make ‘a list of the things he wanted from the universe’ (88). Continuity of self is shown here as something Felix both runs from as well as to – he wants to believe in a narrative of transcendence, of progression beyond his damaging past – and we hear him telling his ex-girlfriend, who he’s come to say a self-serving goodbye to (‘closing the door’ further on the previous ‘him’), ‘I could spend my whole life dwelling on some of the shit that’s happened to me. I done that. Now it’s time for the next level’ (136).

Annie, the ex in question, is a brilliantly drawn, sardonic upper class Sohoite, with nothing much left but her addictions and intimidating poshness, and she refuses to endorse Felix’s language of transcendence:

‘Yes, yes, I’ve grasped the metaphor . . . Life’s not a video game, Felix – there aren’t a certain number of points that send you to the next level. There isn’t actually any next level. The bad news is that everybody dies at the end.’

The few clouds in the sky were shunting towards Trafalgar. Felix looked up at them with what he hoped was a spiritual look upon his face. ‘Well, that’s your opinion, innit. Everyone’s entitled to their opinion.’

‘Mine, Nietzsche’s, Sartre’s, a lot of people. Felix, darling, I appreciate you coming here for this “serious talk” and sharing your thoughts about God, but I’m quite bored of talking now and personally I’d really like to know: are we going to fuck today or not?’ (136-7)

The answer, despite Felix’s willed-for new self, is yes, they are. *NW* is aware that the narrative of a self’s progression is an artifice adopted not just by the plots of novels and the life-maps of self-help books. It satisfies the way people want, and need, to misapprehend the shape of their own lives. When Felix and Annie are bitterly attacking each other afterwards, she asks him, ‘what is this pathological need of yours to be the good guy?’ (140). With her privileged background she can’t imagine why someone would choose to live under an illusion, but the reader has become aware progressively of the desperation of Felix’s past. To avoid being crushed by it he has invented a story for himself in which he has been a victim of ‘negative energies’ and overcome them. He is running from guilt as well as sadness.

‘I never been nothing but nice to you,’ (141) claims Felix, and we do not feel this as implausible. But immediately it is suggested how partial his side of the story might be, how fictitious: ‘How funny,’ she said. ‘But of course, that’s how it must seem to you’ (142).

The argument Smith has proposed against lyrical realism is that it offers us too complacently ‘the authentic story of a self’ and she uses something like this realist mode to look at the character in *NW* who at a conscious level most believes and trusts in the story with which he has outfitted himself. Her use of a conventional realist style is less satirical than subtle: we are a long way away from the way in which McCarthy plays with and sends up conventional realism in *C*. This isn’t realism outfitted to show its limits; Smith is too good at it for that. Instead we get a psychologically acute portrait of a character trying to tell a coherent new story for himself to replace a history of very damaging stories: bullying, self-indulgent misogynist father; mother who deserted him and his siblings; succession of failed careers; past as a drug dealer; brother in prison; past as an addict. For a character such as Felix a narrative of transcendence is a tool for survival.

This focus on the way characters make plots to make sense of their life continues with the next section, though the style changes again. Natalie’s section ‘Host’ is set out as an orderly progression of vignettes, all 184 of them numbered and with their own title. Joyce Carol Oates suggested in *New York Review of Books* that this it is modelled on the Aeolus section of *Ulysses*, but this is not accurate – all it shares is the headed titles, which in *Ulysses* suggest newspaper headlines and intersperse a continuous narrative scene. Smith’s narrative works instead by ellipsis – we are told a life in short headed instances and left to imagine what happens between the gaps. Smith has pointed to the influence of Barthes’ autobiography on this section (*Asylum*) and it’s revealing that Smith names the theorist rather than the novelist, when what it perhaps resembles more is Evan S. Connell’s fashionably re-popularised novel *Mrs Bridge* (1959), in which the whole life of a Kansas City housewife is constructed around a series of ellipses between epigrammatic chronological short chapters. In Connell’s novel this device is used to tell the story of a woman who never makes decisions for herself; to describe an anxious, passive woman whose fragile self has been built from a series of quiet shocks that disturb but don’t overhaul her mostly

unthinking acceptance of the cultural restrictions and prejudices of white suburbia in 1930s Kansas.

In *NW* this tactic of telling a life story is applied to a very different type of woman, active in most of the ways Mrs Bridge is passive, and from the other side of the tracks. Natalie, initially called Keisha, sets out from the start of her life to define it entirely for herself. Her section 'Host' is oppositional in title to Felix's section 'Guest', and suggests initially that Natalie has transcended her origins (similar in terms of class and race to Felix's) to become a barrister: 'No longer an accidental guest at the table – as she had always understood herself to be – but a host, with other hosts, continuing a tradition' (190). The section follows Natalie as she tells to herself the story of her life to fit in with this change in circumstances.

What transfers from *Mrs Bridge* and *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* to *NW* is the distancing effect of the short third person sections that are given extra meaning by their title. Straight away there is a fastidiousness to the writing not present in *NW*'s other sections: 'There had been an event. To speak of it required the pluperfect' (151). A distance between the narrator and the life narrated makes itself felt, and at this stage the reader might think of a traditional omniscient narrator, as might be used by, say, E. M. Forster, one of Smith's previous declared influences and very much felt in her novel *On Beauty*. But this distance is shown progressively to be the distance Natalie feels from her own character, from her own self. She is her own narrator, scrupulously so, and because of this she fears that she has no referent, no self beyond her anxious narration of it.

Smith stresses the writtenness of Natalie's story that from the outset. After acknowledging the grammar of writing, the section opens with Natalie's mother recounting the story of how Natalie saved her best friend Leah from drowning when she was four while her mother was preoccupied with her two other children. 'However, the foreshadowing could be considered suspicious. Her own celebrated will and foresight so firmly established, and Cheryl already wild and unreliable. Also, Jayden could not have been born at the time of the event' (151). If the stories we tell about ourselves to others aren't plausible, then the stories we construct our own self from may be capable of dissolving too.

Natalie is a character whose personality is a projection created for others. It feels entirely artificial to her: 'a breach now appeared: between what she believed she knew of herself, *essentially*, and her essence as others seemed to understand it.

She began to exist for other people' (156). A short later chapter is simply titled 'Drag':

Daughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican drag. Each required a different wardrobe. But when considering these various attitudes she struggled to think what would be the most authentic, or perhaps the least inauthentic. (245)

Accordingly, Smith puts Natalie's personality together in fragments. These seem orderly at first: the numbered chronology fitting Natalie's well-ordered ambitions and diligent progression towards them. But as the narrative continues it becomes harder to draw the connecting line between these different points – they are in many ways little islands, highlighting incompatible aspects of Natalie's personality. The name change from Keisha to Natalie happens completely offstage, and we learn about it in a wryly named chapter – 'Proper names' – in which she corrects Leah who's introducing her to some of her friends. Natalie's awareness of the agency and artifice with which she defines her self does not prevent her from playing the part of the finished product. The refrain from the first page of the novel in Leah's section, 'I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me' is picked up again, entitling a section. This authorship does not come without anxiety. When Leah, after visiting Natalie at university, says to her, 'You're the only person I can be all of myself with,' Natalie begins to cry, 'not really at the sentiment, but rather out of a fearful knowledge that if reversed the statement would be rendered practically meaningless, Ms Blake having no self to be, not with Leah, or anyone' (182-183).

Natalie, as her narrative progresses, perhaps represents the closest figure to the writer. I don't mean this in a biographical sense: while there are similarities between Natalie and Smith's background, those similarities are there too with Leah's. As a writer who is mixed-race and shares aspects of the history of both of these characters' lives, Smith may invest in both as versions of herself, but the critic who makes assumptions here is still committing the biographical fallacy. I am more interested in how creating an intensely 'written' character provides opportunity for Smith to question her novelist's role as 'the sole author', the author of souls, of characters; by what right can she stand above the solipsism she afflicts her characters with? There are passages in Natalie's sections that seem clearly to me about Smith's

thinking about her own responsibility as a novelist and that explore to what extent Smith is trapped within her own solipsism.

Walking down Kilburn High Street Natalie Blake had a strong desire to slip into the lives of other people. It was hard to see how this desire could be practicably satisfied or what, if anything, it really meant. 'Slip into' is an imprecise thought. Follow the Somali home? Sit with the old Russian lady at the bus stop outside Poundland? . . . A local tip: the bus stop outside Kilburn's Poundland is the site of many of the more engaging conversations to be heard in the city of London. You're welcome.

Listening was not enough. Natalie Blake wanted to know people. To be intimately involved with them.

Meanwhile:

Everyone in both Natalie's workplace and Frank's was intimately involved with the life of a group of African-Americans, mostly male, who slung twenty-dollar vials of crack in the scrub between a concatenation of terribly designed tower blocks in a depressed and forgotten city with one of the highest murder rates in the United States. . . .

Meanwhile:

Natalie Blake checked her listing. Replied to her replies. (245-6)

This section is titled 'Box sets'. Its meaning extends beyond the literal (DVD packaging) and suggests separation. The activities of eavesdropping at a bus stop and watching crime drama about poor Americans (*The Wire*) both suggest affluent Brits' interest in the lives of other people and simultaneous desire to keep distant from them. Natalie is firmly caught between these two urges, but wants to transgress and become 'intimately involved'. I think the double meaning here is significant too. There is the obvious sexual connotation, Natalie's 'listing'. This is the failed attempt to transcend her solipsism: her sexual encounters take place under a separate name and are desperate precisely because of the degree of separation and failed intimacy they involve. Smith's novel is critical of the way the internet allows these shallow connections, and yet we see at the same time her anxiety about the arrogance of assuming she can 'slip into the lives of others'. The assumptions that lie behind such an attempt appal a writer such as Tom McCarthy with their complacency, and Smith

shows a similar uneasiness. How can such an act be anything but voyeuristic and artificial? With what intelligence can we find a reason to make such an act of faith? But Smith is the agnostic to McCarthy's atheist; the novel asks the question, what harm do we do to ourselves if we don't?

Smith is conflicted by wanting to use and reject conventions, by her humanism and her philosophical rigour, but this anxiety does not in the end prevent her from attempting to represent the emotional lives of others in her fiction. *NW* succeeds in many ways because of these conflicting impulses.

Practically, she should find justification for 'slipping into the lives of others' because one of her primary strengths is creating lifelike characters. Her 'eavesdropping at the bus-stop' shows an ear for dialogue as good as any British novelist's. Not just a gift for mimicry, but for selection and concision. The reader can learn so much about a character in a single line of dialogue, such as this one, from Leah's boss: 'no offence, but for the women in our community, in the Afro-Caribbean community, no offence, but when we see one of our lot with someone like you it's a real issue. It's just a real issue you should be aware of. No offence' (29). Accurate speech rhythm conveys the resentment Leah's boss feels towards Leah – there is class and race resentment here, personal jealousy too – and we are made aware too of the institutionalised language with which she speaks, her 'passive aggression' (three separate 'no offence's) and superior place in the work hierarchy. The reader is quickly shown a history of how these two women relate to each other, of what is allowed to be said, and of what is hidden and only occasionally revealed.

The amount of dialogue in this book is proportionally quite high, perhaps reflecting Smith's desire to achieve verisimilitude by following the material traces of 'real life', the verifiable, McCarthy's 'matter', whenever she can, instead of containing characters' interior lives in the type of ordered thought and epiphanies that so dispirited her in *Netherland*. It is one of the ways in which Smith shows herself to be a scrupulous realist. But she moves beyond the material traces too, and attempts to 'know' her characters in the deep way that classic realism allows.

Describing characters in such depth for the contemporary novelist is to some extent an act of faith, a hope that we can 'know' other people and gain something from the attempt, no matter if it is always destined to be incompletely realised or unverifiable. James Wood, writing of Virginia Woolf described this 'contradictory belief, that truth can be looked for but cannot be looked at, and that art is the greatest



way of giving form to this contradiction' (*Broken Estate* 105). It is his refusal to 'look for' that he condemns the conclusions in William Gass's *Fiction and the Figures of Life*: 'to deny character with such extremity is essentially to deny the novel' (*How Fiction Works* 82). Earlier I referred to Wood's desire to 'replace the always problematic word "realism" with the much more problematic word "truth"' (*How Fiction Works* 180). To be 'truthful' a writer might need to be scrupulous to avoid complacency at the same time as they dare to make unverifiable assumptions about their ability to imagine other lives.

'Truth', for Wood, runs counter to contrivance of plot. And Smith's plot is certainly some way quieter than her debut novel set in the same area of London, though it is still contrived for pace and revelation, for exploring her themes with shape as well as content. At the level of content Smith satisfies her desire for 'truth' in this novel through realist detail, through capturing what is newest about the way her characters speak to each other. Some of this is formal: she reproduces an instant messenger conversation between Leah and Natalie, complete with typos ('bye noe'), time lag and ironic 'street talk' their university educations have distanced them from ('you know what I'm chatting about') (212).

But there is also an underlying shape and plan to the way her main three narratives connect. This allows her to explore the potential the self has to have been different, for it to have been formed by contingency and chance as much as by decision. She juxtaposes her very different characters' stories against each other and invites the reader to judge why they are different and how they might have been similar. There aren't any easy answers. The readers must decide for themselves.

In this case, the artistic purpose coexists with the desire to compel attention with suspense. When Natalie's sexual assignments are discovered and she runs from her house (intending, the reader is slowly shown, to kill herself) she bumps into her childhood friend and neighbour Nathan Bogle, now a homeless drug addict and pimp, who has just been involved in the murder of Felix of the second section of the novel. The two narrative strands meeting each other invigorate the pace of the plot – Nathan has been seen only from the outside so far, whetting the anticipation of the reader. Getting to know him better, if only through extended dialogue, satisfies and continues to whet this anticipation. By not telling us how he has travelled from being a small boy on an estate to a drug-addicted pimp wanted for murder, Smith has been continually building up suspense about him.

For the next section 'Crossing' the narrative becomes almost entirely carried by dialogue, none of which is separated by the traditional inverted commas or the Joycean dashes of earlier. After the heavily ironised, summarising tone of the previous section, we are presented with something much more hardboiled and removed from Natalie's thoughts.

As when James denies the reader access to Isabel Archer, this is very suspenseful. Everything must be inferred from the descriptions of Natalie's actions, the physical things she notices and from their conversation as Natalie heads towards a bridge and Nathan tries to avoid the police. Shocked at how her carefully authored public self has been destroyed, 'She was nothing more or less than the phenomenon of walking. She had no name, no biography, no characteristics. They had all fled into paradox' (264). Her temporary blank character is filled by her past, by whom she could have been, symbolised by Nathan Bogle and their journey together through the estate they grew up in, and by her temporary lack of money and shoes (she has run out of the house in shock wearing slippers and without a purse). Nathan knows her by her first name Keisha and she is referred to as Keisha throughout this section, the lack of speech marks furthering the impression that it is the novel itself reclaiming her, 'Long time, Keisha' (265).

As their journey continues we see that her personality has not emptied out in a significant way. She still exemplifies a solipsistic vision of the world and does not want to imagine things could have been different for her: 'I don't believe in luck' (275). Instead she hides in nostalgia, telling Nathan about her memories of him: a sweet kid, good at football, whom Leah had loved – a story that seems hopelessly irrelevant and unimaginative to him and triggers an angry outburst:

I don't remember. I've burnt that whole business out of my brain. Different life. No use to me. I don't live in them towers no more, I'm on the streets now, different attitude. Survival. That's it. Survival. That's all there is. Talking 'bout "we went to the same school". And what? What do you know about my life? When you been walking in my shoes? What do you know about living the way I live, coming up the way I came up? Sit on your bench judging me. Arksing me about "who are dem girls"? . . . What do you know about me? Nothing. Who are you, to chat to me? Nobody. No one. (276)

With the novel highlighting Nathan and Natalie's inability to truly imagine the life of the other, it inevitably implies that we should try to connect. Smith's novel will attempt this, even if its characters won't. Nathan occupies a ghostly role, showing Natalie her illusions:

But I ain't in your dream, Keisha. You're in mine. . . You can't dream my dreams. What you eat don't make me shit. You get me? That's my dream – you can't get in there.

Jesus Christ, you sound like the Magic Negro. (279)

It's funny when Natalie cuts him off, but it's also the novel showing how she won't really accept the existence of others outside of her own perception (and authorship) of them.

The novel's fifth and final section 'Visitation' has the same title as the first, and like the first calls to mind the Visitation in Luke's book of the New Testament. We see the limits of Natalie's perception in a more damning way when the novel flirts with giving her an epiphany suggestive of some kind of redemption for her and Leah: 'Normally all of her energies would be in defence – she was trained in it – but as she spoke her mind travelled to what felt like open ground, where she was able to almost imagine something like her friend's pain and, in imagining it, recreate some version of it in herself' (290).

She has a simultaneous insight that, 'Freedom was absolute and everywhere, constantly moving location. You couldn't hope to find it only in the old, familiar places. Nor could you force other people to take off their clothes and give it to you like a gift. Clarity!' (291).

The reader may take issue with that 'Clarity!' for Smith's wording is ambiguous. The reader must imagine himself into Natalie's mind and make their own interpretation. I take it to mean that Natalie understands Leah's fear of a child taking away her freedom and shares it, even if the story she tells herself won't let her contemplate it 'longer than a moment'. Smith is at her best and her worst with the continuation after that 'Clarity!':

Clarity! And when I realized Mindy-Lou could actually speak to me through my mind, well, then I really had a moment, like in a storybook or film, and I knew I would always be watched over and loved by everybody I met forever the end. OK, said Natalie, and lifted up Naomi and manoeuvred the buggy to the doors. It was nice chatting to you. We get off here (291).

This is her best. The section began at the bus stop in Kilburn, the perfect place for the voyeur of other peoples' lives. Natalie's epiphany is immediately interrupted by a woman speaking to her on the bus of her own deranged epiphany (Mindy-Lou is a dog). There is a lovely realism to the way thought and environment compete for Natalie's attention. There is also a nudge in that 'moment' that Smith knows about the 'difference between a moment and an instant' (223) – a reference to the Kierkegaardian leap of faith which has been prefigured by Leah having explained the concept to Natalie during Leah's philosophy degree. This is perhaps Smith's anxious worst. The reader is being given clues so that they know Smith has done her reading (and so shouldn't be criticised for philosophical naivety). They are clues too to something Smith may be too embarrassed to say outright: that she has realised the importance of making a leap of faith in her fiction, that to some extent she too must, 'like a lapsed High Anglican . . . hang on to the rituals and garments of transcendence, though [she] well knows they are empty' (*Changing My Mind* 81). Her conception of the novel is ultimately much closer to Wood's than McCarthy's.

But it is no coincidence that Natalie's epiphany about the possibility of connecting with others is juxtaposed with the testimony of a woman who claims she can speak to dogs. The novel ends with the failure of Natalie's epiphany, when she sits down with Leah and tries to give her advice that relies on received wisdom rather than her vision of the 'truth': 'With what was left of clarity she offered her friend a selection of aphorisms, axioms and proverbs the truth content of which she could only assume from their common circulation, the way one puts faith in the value of paper money. Honesty is always the best policy. Love conquers all. Each to her own' (291).

The passage might be stronger without those last three sentences, without Smith's tendency to clarify what might resound better if the reader was left alone to imagine it. Natalie resorts to clichés of language, protections against thought and

analysis. Leah, rightly unimpressed, turns to her and bitterly says: 'Mother and child. Look at you. You look like the fucking Madonna' (292).

Natalie has another epiphany here, one of the weaker parts of the novel. 'A child. Children. Not babies, not something to be merely managed any longer. Beautiful, unknowable, and not her arms or legs or any other extension of her. . . It was knowledge as a sublime sort of gift, and it was Leah who had inadvertently given it to her' (292). This sudden awareness of the existence of other people rather does feel like cliché of thought and language, two pages from the end of the novel and the narrative in a hurry to intensify the progression of its characters to the culmination of their journey. But to Smith's credit she immediately undercuts Natalie's epiphany by reinserting her character's instinctive defensiveness and closing down her imagination:

She wanted to give her friend something of equal value in return. And if candour were a thing in the world that a person could hold and retain, if it were an object, maybe Natalie Blake would have seen that the perfect gift at this moment was an honest account of her own difficulties and ambivalences, clearly stated, without disguise, embellishment or prettification. But Natalie's instinct for self-defence, for self-preservation, was simply too strong.

'I'm not going to apologize for my choices,' she said. (292)

It's a bleak end to the novel, Leah unconsolated, Natalie mired in her solipsism – 'one of the things you learn in a courtroom: people generally get what they deserve' (293). The irony is that Natalie is congratulating herself even as she is likely about to lose her husband. She is still hiding from the truth of her situation. She deflects attention from unwelcome 'clarity' by telling Leah about Nathan and together they report him to the police, Natalie placing the call as 'Keisha Blake, disguising her voice with her voice' (294).

What strikes the reader in the final four pages is how traditional the narrative technique has become. By the end a narrator has arrived who talks over its characters in the didactic Forster-influenced style of Smith's previous novels. Is it that Smith needed to try all the other different styles to earn the right to revert to this one? Is everything that has gone before part of a formal attempt to avoid the assumptions of

complacent realist style, to imagine herself outside of it and so avoid its clichés on returning?

In order to sum up, Smith breaks the close tagging of the narrative to the characters' consciousness and moves away from their point of view. Is this plot simplifying character at the end of the novel? It seems more a case of Smith showing her frustration with keeping to the point of view of her characters; the last insight is hers and asserts the writer's right to imagine aspects of the lives of people in ways that might be better than the way they themselves can. This is dangerously close to being Natalie's problem throughout the second half of the novel, but the diligence of Smith's preparation suggests this is not Smith's complacency. At the same time, Smith allows herself a line that universalises human behaviour in classic nineteenth-century realist style, a 'reference code' as Barthes would have it, 'She was in breach of that feminine law that states no weakness may be shown by a woman to another woman without a sacrifice of equal value being made in return' (291). These two slips, intentional or not, close down the meaning of the text, are part of what Barthes saw as readable rather than writable. They show the difficulty of ending a novel in a way in which form doesn't damage contingency. Smith reaches for realist convention at this point, and while she doesn't use its extremes – this is certainly not happily-ever-after – she is at greater pains to spell out her meaning to her reader and provide some kind of formal summation. She can just about get away with it – the mixture of styles, and the diversity of the methods with which she has achieved our knowledge of character, make slips harder to spot or easier to justify formally.

Despite these two brief summarising sentences, her characters' destinies are left open-ended, their motivation ambiguous. Character survives the late incursion of an old fashioned narrator without damage. Nor has character damaged plot; Smith's deep focus has not affected the novel's ability to tell several stories that are both intriguing and plausible. Admittedly, amid this sophistication of plot is narrative vulgarity of the type that Beckett or Bernhard would presumably scorn – a murder, sexual intrigue, secrets uncovered. But such narrative vulgarity is not without precedent in the real world, and perhaps has greater precedent in the council estates Zadie Smith describes with affection and without sensationalism. She avoids the frequent failures of imagination shown by other writers taking a tour of the lower classes. We shouldn't be scared of recognising the moral strength here of documentary realism; Smith writes about poor people with a naturalness that

shouldn't be unusual but mostly seems to be for published British writers. At the same time the writing doesn't avoid economic reality and determinism or overplay it (Natalie being a not uncommon exception to the general rule) or fail to imagine how it affects thought patterns. John Lanchester's panoramic London novel *Capital* (2012) came out in the same year and adopted a modern version of an old-fashioned style – Thackeray and Dickens – which couldn't do justice to a city with a much more diverse range of cultures. The characters are paper thin and aren't meant to be. Smith has put much more thought into her choice of models.

Though there is a murder in *NW*, and other exciting story elements, the plotting feels subtle. I was not surprised to see James Wood praise *NW* in an end of year round-up in the *New Yorker* and describe it as Smith's best novel. His criticisms of *White Teeth*'s manic plotting – 'an excess of storytelling has become the contemporary way of shrouding, in majesty, a lack' (*Irresponsible Self* 171) – do not apply to *NW*'s overlapping plots that connect in places and in others barely touch each other. The main stories are quiet and plausible. Woman hides abortion. Childhood friends grow apart. Men and women from different backgrounds marry. Drug addict attempts to reform. The more sensational elements of the story – man stabbed to death in a mugging – are in a proportion that feels believable. Would the novel be a greater work of art if it had followed its modernist reference points more closely, if it had surrendered narrative for a more intense focus on consciousness, such as in *To the Lighthouse* or *Ulysses*? I don't think so. The focus is intense and finds a balance and accommodation with the novel's love of story and plot. The art of Smith's selection, of choosing her characters, their backgrounds, their connections, and imagining them fully, is the art of a novelist engaging with choosing the right story and the right way to plot it in order to achieve her artistic vision. We cannot understand the world of *NW* and its characters without this expressively chosen plot.

## Conclusion

I want to conclude by examining my own motivation as a writer in the light of the writers I have so far discussed. What is the relationship between my aims and those of this thesis which shines light on the artistic properties of plot? What kind of realism am I arguing for? Are my artistic intentions compromised by my advocacy of plot? Does my appreciation of plot prioritise commercial over artistic ends?

It's probably not irrelevant – particularly when considering the last of these questions – that for ten years I worked as a publisher of literary fiction, with eight of those years spent as a commissioning editor. I worked for Tindal Street, an independent small press rather than a conglomerate, but like the editors in larger houses my job was to publish books within a defined budget that would sell as many copies as possible. Our sales successes were all with works of realism rather than with experimental writing.

More fundamentally, sales successes all resulted from the books being listed for one of the three major UK literary prizes for fiction: the Man Booker, the Costa and the (then) Orange. I'll focus briefly on the Man Booker, the biggest and ostensibly the most literary of these, which 'promotes the finest in fiction by rewarding the very best book of the year'.<sup>11</sup> It is frequently debated whether in searching for the 'best book of the year' the judges genuinely do seek the title with the most artistic merit. It often seems that this search is within a definition of 'literary fiction' that excludes the most adventurous and complicated novels, whether experimental or realist. The judging panel changes every year and a trend for a more populist list reached its nadir in 2011 with judges who declared they were looking for 'readability' and novels that 'zip along'. The subsequent two judging panels appear to have been picked to address the uproar caused by such philistinism and restore the prize's reputation (2012 and 2013).

I refer to this to highlight that for a writer there is no reason to trust that prize decisions will be based on artistic merit. Prizes are 'posh bingo', Julian Barnes famously declared (*London Review of Books*), and nothing better illustrates this to me than *The Sense of an Ending* winning the Booker in 2011 when *NW* failed to be longlisted in 2012.

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<sup>11</sup> This non-committal wording is taken from the 2013 prize's website. 23 July 2013  
<<http://www.themanbookerprize.com/man-booker-prize-2013>>



But despite the random element, a type of novel often makes its way in such a list. It might be a story of personal ordeal set against a cataclysmic event in a former British colony. Or history as narrated by the hitherto voiceless. Perhaps something set against a war, ideally World War One or Two. There are great novels that fit these descriptions but many bad ones too. Successful templates are emulated. Novels written in vernacular are seldom seen, and when one won it (*How Late It Was How Late* by James Kelman) it was seen by many as against the spirit of the prize (judge Rabbi Julia Neuberger resigned from the panel, calling the novel 'a disgrace'). The normal selection of books from middle class writers across the Commonwealth promulgates an ethnic diversity that is almost non-existent at a level of class. The books offer themselves up perfectly to discussion on Radio 4.

There are plenty of exceptions, but they still exist at the level of exceptions. If we conclude that prizes such as the Man Booker have over the last ten years regularly rewarded formal conservatism and 'readability' (pace of plotting), and we take into account that reaching a prize list is the most effective way for publishers to sell large numbers of 'literary' novels, then it is easy to see why the publishing industry's acquisitions policy might be conservative when taken as a whole.

One consequence of the decline of the UK's specialist chain bookshops is that crossover literary fiction that publishers think might appeal to casual book buyers in supermarkets and W H Smith takes on increased importance. If literary novels are hard to sell, sometimes they can be disguised as something else, or the commercially tricky notion of the 'literary' can be eroded by literary imprints publishing novels that have as much in common with genre as with literary fiction. Commissioning editors and literary agents frequently conflate story and plot in a way that encourages literary critics to think badly of plot. A commissioning editor for a prestigious literary list can declare that they are looking for: 'great storytelling', 'a bold and interesting premise', 'extraordinary stories' (Main). Of these three wishes the first privileges pace of plot while the second and third privilege sensationalism of story. It is not hard to see why James Wood speaks openly against plot if he is conflating it with sensationalist story in this sense.

How might my awareness of commercial trends have affected my own novel, which forms the larger portion of this thesis? *My Biggest Lie* is the third novel I have completed and submitted to publishers through my agent, and it will become my

debut novel when it is published in April 2014 by Canongate. My first two novels were widely rejected.

I mention this – and will presently expand on this history – to acknowledge a long engagement (eight years) with trying to get published that is nearly as long as my engagement with trying to write well. I freely admit that I write with the intention of being published; but I also intend to write fiction that I would want to read myself, in which plot does not destroy character or become predictable and conventional. I want people to buy my books and I want my plot and pacing to be artfully conceived, and for them to coexist to some extent with James’ ‘measure of the truth’.

In assessing whether or not I have achieved this in my novel, I will ask: are my literary and populist impulses contradictory? If they initially seem so, I will try to find ways in which they might not be. Does my advocacy of plot necessarily lead me to favour one intention over another when I invent my novel’s story and decide how to plot it?

The same agent – Peter Straus of Rogers, Coleridge & White – has submitted all of my novels to editors, including the two that didn’t find a publisher. He took me on as a client in August 2003 at the end of my first year working in publishing, after calling the office to enquire if our Booker-shortlisted author Clare Morrall<sup>12</sup> had an agent yet. She had just signed with one, so he asked me about another of our authors. She had an agent too. But I didn’t, and I had just finished the first draft of a novel. He read three chapters, asked to see the rest and I redrafted the manuscript in line with some general suggestions of his before he sent it out.

My first novel was tentatively called *The Red Shopping Centre*, though I changed it several times: *Bad Things Are Gonna Happen*; *Blue Steel*; *New Steel*. I never found a good title. I billed it to my agent as ‘Bret Easton Ellis on minimum wage’: it featured a cast of young shop-workers, hairdressers and call-centre-drones fucking and betraying each other, gleefully discussing the rumour that the building they all worked in was going to blow up on Saturday. It was slick and shallow, a cartoony satire directed at lifestyle aspirations. One of my characters was only ever referred to as ‘the boy with the best haircut in Birmingham’. Everyone was taking

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<sup>12</sup> We found her novel *Astonishing Splashes of Colour* on the slushpile after she had been rejected by over twenty larger publishers and every agent she tried.

ecstasy tablets imprinted with airplanes crashing into buildings. Breathless characters read style mags and spoke of cataclysm. Someone knew someone who had done a favour to a Muslim and been warned not to go to the red shopping centre on Saturday. A hopeful girl with a new nose was destroyed by my horrible men. Then I grew uneasy about portraying all of my characters so negatively. To address this I complicated the third-person with jolting slips into first-person to give the reader clues that this was how one character saw them in his imagination: a self-serving vision to justify his plans to blow up the building as an insurance scam. The introduction of this character Brian Lucas (Lucas Brian, Luke Brown) was an attempt by me to disown the cruelty of the novel's satire even as I revelled in the fun of writing it.

My favourite rejection to this novel was from an editor at Sceptre: 'a bit self-consciously cool and lacking in substance . . . like watching too many episodes of *Footballer's Wives* in rapid succession I started to feel a bit queasy'. She had complimentary things to say too: 'one thoughtful rejection at least,' said my agent in the email he forwarded.

I was in the phase of my publishing career when I spent considerable time rejecting novels and very little time offering for them – this is normal for an editor, but particularly so for an editorial assistant, who reads the least promising submissions. As I wrote so many rejection letters, I thought I was thick-skinned, and I remember receiving sanguinely the ten or so rejections from the publishers we sent my novel to. I knew the novel suffered from style over substance; I'd flattened characters and made them more stupid or more outrageous than was natural so I didn't have to imagine them more thoroughly. With the next novel I decided to try to imagine my characters better.

Nearly five years later, at the end of 2008, I had finished a second novel. It had taken me longer than the first for a number of reasons. I was working full time as a commissioning editor now, rather than part-time as an assistant, and I had had my first professional success as a publisher with a novel, like my own, set in a Birmingham shopping centre: *What Was Lost* by Catherine O'Flynn. It was listed for most of the UK prizes and won two, selling close to 100,000 copies in our edition and being published separately in twenty-five other territories.

I first heard of this book in the same month my agent took me on as a client. I was on holiday in Barcelona where Catherine O'Flynn was living. We were friends

from having worked together in my first non-literary publishing job, and we confessed to each other that we had both written novels. She had been rejected as a client by fifteen different literary agents and I gave her some advice on how to avoid being thrown on the ‘slush pile’ and dealt with by an intern or junior member of staff, a rejection specialist such as myself. And when I read the novel and thought it excellent, I recommended her directly to my agent. He liked the novel but couldn’t ‘represent two Birmingham shopping centre novels’, so he passed the better one to a junior colleague who took her on. A year later, Catherine’s novel had been rejected by five publishers larger than our small press. There was a consensus in their enthusiastically positive responses which said that they liked the novel but ‘just didn’t know how to market it’. The novel is a mixture of genres: detective story, satire, literary realism, comedy, tragedy; and a variety of voices as it shifts suddenly, a third of the way through, from the perspective of a ten-year-old girl to those of the adult shop-workers. In response to rejections Catherine and her agent discussed the possibility of ‘upping the body count’ – i.e. playing more obviously to the crime genre – or writing it all in the child’s voice – i.e. becoming a Young Adult novel. Catherine believed in her novel as it stood, a structurally adventurous literary novel, and so did my colleagues and I. Because of its rejections, Tindal Street Press was able to buy rights for a small advance, scheduling the book for the start of 2007.

Its success brought the failures of my superficially similar novel into sharp focus – that it was too cruel in places, did not imagine the lives of its characters well, and had a plot less satisfying in terms of suspense and thematic structure. It is hard to know whether I felt these were artistic failures or commercial failures. Because I worked in publishing, because I wanted to be published, at the time I may have conflated the two. But I believe that this is an instance of the commercial and the artistic being in tune.

The way that *What Was Lost* was published to good sales and artistic recognition in prize lists raises important questions because of how often it was rejected and the nature of these rejections. ‘We love the book,’ (we think it is an artistic success) but, ‘we don’t know how to market it’ (we don’t have confidence that it can be a commercial success). If this is not a euphemism for ‘we hate it’ – and it can be – it nonetheless reinforces the idea that the literary, still seen as the escape from genre, the home for ‘fine writing’, is being codified by editors and agents as a commercial genre with conventions to uphold. And, as my example suggests,

codified counter to the originality and ‘literary merit’ that prizelists might reward and readers buy in large numbers.

My second unpublished novel, *Almost an Island*, was more traditional than my first, a coming-of-age tale told from a predominantly unified third-person point-of-view, that of a seventeen year old boy with dreams of escaping a seaside town by means of his band. The plot was driven in a way by a crime-genre engine: seventeen-year-olds Lee, Sam and Lauren, obsessed by rock n roll mythology, hang around with unpleasant Blackpool drug-dealers until Lee thinks he witnesses Lauren being raped and runs away with a bag of heroin. Over a week in which he will get his A-Level results and Sam and Lee’s band will play an important gig (in front of a record company executive, apparently eager to sign them) Lee is pursued by an angry heroin-dealer, falls out with his best friend (also his occasional lover) Sam, and tries to persuade Lauren to leave Sam for him.

It is clear that it had sensational elements of story, but the setting and characters were much more realistic, naturalistic even.

My agent thought it a better novel than my first but immediately worried that it might not sell. It was the end of 2008 and the global financial crisis had made an immediate impact on editorial acquisitions.

His instincts were right. Here are some lines of rejection from the twenty or so I received:

‘just lacks a truly distinctive voice or a stunning original twist’

‘It is well done, as you say, but I am not convinced there’s a big market’

‘I don’t think it’s covering new enough ground, so doing what it sets out to do in a very accomplished way isn’t enough’

‘I felt this probably wasn’t quite radically different enough to be right for \_\_\_\_\_’

‘wasn’t quite unique enough’

Editors profess to be looking for artistic originality, even if on occasions, as with Catherine O’Flynn’s book, they might use that very originality as an excuse not to publish. And lack of originality in terms of form would be a justifiable charge against my traditional, realist, coming-of-age novel.

In my third novel, *My Biggest Lie*, which forms the next part of this thesis, I consciously tried to combine the more exciting, sensational elements of the first with

the deeper focus on character of the second. How it came to be published and how the shape of the novel was changed by this is germane to my study of the way artistic and commercial imperatives affect the plotting of what we call literary fiction. I will quote directly from emails about the novel and reconstruct conversations from memory. My agent wrote on first reading that it was, ‘Easily the best thing you have done. The book gets better and better as it builds. I like the ending and the monstrosity of James Cockburn. I do think the beginning can be built up with speed a bit – slightly too many monologues and drug taking. I do not really like books about publishing and taking drugs but this is more than that’ (Straus).

This first feedback expressed two reservations that my eventual editor would repeat: about books set in the world of publishing (and drugs); and about pacing, that it should be increased in the first half of the novel.

I had two offers to publish: from 4<sup>th</sup> Estate, whose editor Mark Richards was keen to reduce the artifice of the plot to focus more on the voice and charm of the narrator; and another from Francis Bickmore, an editor at Canongate. I accepted Canongate. Had I gone with 4<sup>th</sup> Estate, I would have chosen a slightly more literary list than Canongate’s, and a decision to aim more for prizes than for mass market appeal. 4<sup>th</sup> Estate suggested (without insisting) that I remove the character Amy Casares, who exists in the novel primarily for reasons of plot: a contrived coincidence to help my character on his quest to find out more about Craig Bennett. But she also exists so that my narrator can imagine his own lost love in the life of the man who occupies his thoughts, to show the flaw in his stated aim to imagine him back to life in writing. It would have been difficult to remove her from the novel.

Canongate were proposing more radical plot restructuring – beginning my novel later in the story, and finding a way to incorporate the earlier material throughout the novel as flashbacks. They also wanted to remove the extracts of a book within the book. My agent advised me to go for Canongate – because he thought they had more commercial ambition – only if I agreed with the plot restructuring they were proposing, and with their vision of the novel as more of a ‘love story’. If I wasn’t comfortable with that, I should go with 4<sup>th</sup> Estate.

It was a tricky choice because my natural impulse was somewhere between: I didn’t want to sacrifice the complexity of plot, as this was the architecture on which I had built my novel, and I didn’t trust it to keep its momentum without it or to resound with the themes I intended. But neither did I want to contrive further and

destroy its literary realism. Money made the choice easier: Canongate offered twice as much. But their vision of the novel as a ‘love story’ overlapped with my own vision: both to write something affecting about loss, and to write something enquiring about ‘what we talk about when we talk about love’. I realised listening to their advice that I had not done enough with this central strand of the plot and was keen to return to it in what I hoped was good faith – neither as a satire of sentimental love, or its reverse, a conventional love story.

My original plotting decisions were then challenged and changed in the course of listening to and arguing with my editor. When first submitted to publishers the novel’s plot roughly followed the linearity of its story and began at the same point, with my narrator being dumped by his girlfriend and sent to meet Craig Bennett on the opening day of the London Book Fair. In the interests of style and suspense this was briefly prefigured by two dramatic opening sentences that are no longer there: ‘Before I went to Buenos Aires to think about my sins, I spent one last month with the woman I love. My friend the Booker Prize-winning novelist was dead, and everyone, including myself, blamed me.’ After that, the reader was given the events in a more or less chronological order.

Disrupting this linear alignment of story and plot was not initially suggested for reasons of suspense. We would scare readers off by setting the novel so clearly from the start in the world of publishing, my editor suggested; such unpleasantness should be saved for later, once the reader felt sympathy for my character. (The blurb for the proof copy does not mention publishing once.) My plot should be adjusted to tell the story in a way that does not initially focus on the publishing industry.

I was never fully convinced by this argument. I thought publishers might be overly sensitive to fiction set in the publishing industry but it wouldn’t in itself deter book buyers. Novels set in, say, the music industry (*Kill Your Friends* by John Niven) or the film industry (*The Last Tycoon* by F. Scott Fitzgerald) have among their selling points the information they give the reader about a world. It’s easier for editors to appreciate this information as strength if they don’t already possess the information. This sort of thinking could also explain my editor’s desire to situate my character in Buenos Aires earlier, to provide the reader immediately with a more exotic setting than the inside of Earls Court. But he explained his reasoning in a different way:

The opening chapter of Lee and Sarah's relationship should hit the ground running. We need to be straight into a formative moment, when all is about to change. As opposed to the current sense, inherited from the last draft, that we join approximately a month before Lee heads to Argentina, where there's hope and not hope all at once. I don't want to make it too reductive but if we're not sure if the relationship means anything, if it's over or not, then it's hard for this to be a driver for the rest of the story.

If we begin with a heartbreaking goodbye, this leads in a satisfactory way to the return of the ending. Like he's coming back to the same place – Sarah – but with a refreshed state of mind. (Bickmore 6 Aug.)

In this line of argument, I should change the beginning to improve the initial pace of the plotting, and to provide a more satisfying overall structure based around the neatness of an opening flight of escape and exile and a closing flight of return. Similarly, if the plot begins with a focus on the relationship, a thematic structure is set up that can be satisfied by the novel ending on the relationship. In the new version my narrator flies off to Buenos Aires on page 20 of the novel rather than on page 54 of the draft I first submitted to publishers. And the first chapter before he flies to Buenos Aires is all focused on his goodbye to his girlfriend.

A clearer focus on the narrator's girlfriend also puts a greater emphasis on the familiar structure of the love story. I should not be blind to the possibility that these changes, to focus more quickly on adventure and a love story, arise from commercial rather than artistic priorities, but in this case I believe they coincided. My editor's criticisms suggested to me that I had been lazy in imagining the narrator's girlfriend, in enacting her on the page: 'We are told that Sarah is crucial and important but we don't know whether to believe Liam or not. We don't see things from her point of view nor does she really appear much at all except in ghost form' (Bickmore 6 Aug.). This was a failure of imagination I wanted to address.

A love story sounds like the most conventional and codified narrative possible – antithetical to the 'truth' – yet I had always intended the novel to focus on the love of my narrator for his girlfriend, and for the complexity of the novel to consist in what he meant by that love and how dishonest his conception of 'love' was. The part of my editor's criticism that I hope is never decisively answered is 'whether to believe Liam or not' – he remains, I hope, an unreliable unreliable



narrator. If I had to defend my fiction against Shields' dictum that the best writing is essayistic, I would say that I was looking to essay the 'truth' of the familiar structure of the 'love story' – though these decisions are mostly taken unconsciously, and the best critics, the best readers, would not want the majority of fiction to be structured like an essay.

Of the many possible interpretations of what Liam's 'biggest lie' might be, a perfectly valid one is that it is his love for Sarah. The narrator – always manipulatively like a good liar – leads the reader away from this decision, aiming also to lead Sarah from her decision, and I expect a section of readers to be convinced by him, to be led by the pleasures of the familiar structure of the love story and to root for Liam in his quest to win Sarah back. A section of myself is convinced by him, but only a section. 'Good intentions?' he says early in the novel: 'I'd had them before' (7). The novel's realism, or the extent to which it is in some sense 'writerly', in Barthes' sense, resides in the untrustworthiness of a potential happy ending.

But have I avoided sentiment, or just found a clever excuse to justify sentimentality? My narrator is both sentimental and self-aware. His awareness of his sentimentality doesn't prevent his sentimentality, doesn't stop him elevating whatever it is he feels about his girlfriend into a love he wants to believe is a force for good, even as the reader may doubt it is. I decided that to write realistically about love involves some level of sentiment. I left the ending open so the reader has space in which to imagine a 'happy ending' or not, and I hope in doing so the reader will also imagine how happy a 'happy ending' in this case might be. The commercial strength of the book may be that the plot is familiar enough for this last question to go unphrased and the happy ending to be taken as implicit. In this case the reader's trust that the narrator has progressed and transcended his earlier self would be in large part structural, conventional. If so, then this is presumably a literary failing.

What of originality of structure? One might think that flirting with the 'love story' limits this potential. But novels normally consist of more than one strand, and my storyline about forgery allows for some unconventional plotting. In the original version submitted to publishers, there were several extracts from the novel *My Biggest Lie* by Craig Bennett interspersed with the main narrative. The majority of these would be read before the reader knew about the forgery plot, which is first revealed explicitly on page 216 of 265. I intended these sections to read as disguised

confessions from Liam, that in writing about Craig Bennett and Amy Casares he was always actually writing about himself and Sarah. Liam would only admit certain truths by expressing them as fiction. Perceptive readers would suspect the false authorship of these sections and begin to read carefully for proof to confirm their suspicions. There would be a pleasure of suspense connected with the originality of structure.

My editor thought this was overcomplicated, that readers wouldn't make the connections. They would be confused and frustrated by the intermissions between the main narrative, which would damage pace of plotting and upset their familiarity with the structure:

the book within a book was a meta step too far. To be honest I skimmed [those sections] and I worry most other readers will too. Can you reframe the content in a way that doesn't require us reading them directly?  
(Bickmore 12 Nov.)

The competing priorities here are particularly interesting and highlight the complexity of suspense and how there are different forms of it. My editor complained that the sections in question withheld too much information, that the suspense involved was too disconcerting to a reader. Suspense in this case was contradictory to pace of plot because it wasn't clear exactly which answer to which question of the reader's was being deferred. It is a suspense that requires patience and the willingness of the reader to make connections that aren't spelled out literally. This suggests why James Wood's judgement on 'the mindlessness of suspense' (*How Fiction Works* 14) is too simple and risks conflating pace of plot with artful structure building. Barthes understood this: "'suspense' grips you in the 'mind', not the 'guts'" (*Image Music Text* 119).

I compromised in my negotiations with my editor, particularly because he had another reason for suggesting I remove the extracts from the pretend novel: they weren't as stylishly written as the sections clearly by Liam. He was right about this. It is a tricky thing to emulate the prose of a plausible Booker Prize winning novelist, even if subsequently this novel is found to have been a fraud. However, I fought hard to keep one of the extracts in the novel: a section between Craig and Amy which can

be read as a transposed account of what happens when Sarah meets Liam later on the night he surprises her in Sao Paulo. I wrote:

I've removed all but one of the extracts, and rewritten the extract I've left in. I want to argue strongly that we should keep this in. It's the scene between Craig and Amy, placed just before Lee's return to Buenos Aires from Sao Paulo. The idea is that this is Lee's refraction of what happened when he met Sarah in the bar in Sao Paulo. It requires a bit of work from the reader, but nothing they're not up to. There's suspense in the first half of the next chapter because Lee won't reveal what happened in Sao Paulo, and I think this short extract, placed where it is, adds to it. I hope that, chapters later, when the reader hears about the forged book, this small puzzle will feel rewarding. (6 Jan)

Withholding information about my character in this section seems to me an example of how the contrivance of suspense needn't be an absolute contrivance against 'truth'. Delayed information is a tactic that in this case can help register the delayed effects of trauma, repression, deferred understanding on a person. I've discussed earlier in this thesis the masterful way James denies us access to Isabel Archer for the period after she makes the terrible decision to marry Gilbert Osmond and swims towards the realisation of what she has done, and I referred to this in the editorial discussions when my editor's assistant tried to persuade me to tell the reader more about what my narrator was thinking before he jumped on the plane to surprise Sarah:

The sudden end is an intentional sharp shock. The idea is that he's decided he's going to fly there long before the dinner is over. I've made the last line slightly more decisive to reinforce this. I'd rather keep his exact thoughts a mystery here. Perhaps my favourite bit of any novel is when Isabel marries Gilbert Osmond in *Portrait of a Lady* and you're denied access to her feelings for about a hundred pages after having been immersed in them up to that point. It's incredibly suspenseful. (12 May)

There have been frequent references from my publishers and me in this section to ‘the reader’, and he or she was a figure I invoked regularly when I edited other writers. Offering advice in consideration of this ‘reader’ makes it sound like there is only one of them and, while in today’s market it sometimes seems a reasonable prediction, it is more useful to see disagreement about what ‘the reader’ needs as a dispute about the type of reader the writer and the publisher want to attract. The serious writer wants the rarely seen intelligent adventurous reader, capable of intense concentration and found perusing the shelves of the London Review Bookshop, while the venal publisher wants the common spotted beach reader, found in airport branches of W H Smiths or downloading 99p Kindle books while the adverts are on during *Coronation Street*. But I hope the compromises I have made when devising and subsequently changing my plot suggests that a commercial/literary dichotomy is an oversimplification, without needing to address the snobbery of adopting such a view. Each plot decision allows gains to be made on one level of engagement and entails losses on another, and in the experience I have outlined I have seen that literary priorities clash with populist priorities just as often as they do with other literary priorities.

Plot surprises, conventional or not, don’t necessarily contradict ‘truthful’ representation of life: if death is a conventional surprise in a novel then sudden death experienced outside of literature is not made less real by its conventionality. Death refutes the textuality of the world, its abstraction. It was death (of his mother; of characters in Tolstoy and Proust) that improved Barthes’ opinion of the novel and convinced him of its capacity to impart moments of truth in its representation of reality. There are some facts that never lose their power, which the novel cannot avoid for long if it wants to narrate a story that acknowledges life’s finitude.

Just before his own shocking death, Barthes had come round to a vision of the novel as ‘the point at which truth and falsehood mingle without warning: the true (striking, absolute) and the false (colourful, brilliant, of the order of Desire and the Imagination)’ (*Preparation* 108). When he imagined the difficulty of writing a novel he imagined the difficulty of the writer resigning himself to lie (‘it can be very difficult, lying’), ‘to telling the second-order and perverse lie that consists of mingling truth and falsehood’. The difficulty would be ‘a *moral* resistance’ (109).

Barthes reluctantly acknowledges the necessity of a level of artifice in fiction to enable its moments of representative truth. Certainly the more colourful elements

of my story make a compromise that consists of mingling some falsehood with the true. Readers are forced to suspend their disbelief at the moment they realise James Cockburn intends to publish Liam's novel as though it was Bennett's own. The narrative has worked hard through dramatisation of character to make the reader believe this is something Cockburn would do, but it is still an outlandish and logistically tricky thing to make happen, and a stiller, quieter, more 'truthful' (less commercial?) book might not have introduced this kind of fireworks. Yet, thematically, it is perfect for my purposes, that the liar who claims he is reformed finds himself perpetrating the most public and dangerous falsehood of his life. I make compromises in favour of sensationalism of story and surprise of plot that are at those moments a choice made for colour and vibrancy instead of 'truth'. But they are also compromises that add to a formal thematic structure, and such structures are also aesthetic and tend towards art. Although my argument in favour of plot has been that it can be truthful, sometimes we can commend plot even when it seems outlandish. Plot making use of a sensational story can contribute to a structure with a more oblique imitative accuracy, one that chooses to sacrifice some realism in favour of thematic unity.

Shklovsky defined plot as 'the analysis of a certain theme and its narration in a style that has been found the most effective' (*Energy of Delusion* 110). I believe it is this artistic and analytic definition of plot – finding the structure that best imitates or explores the writer's vision or concerns – that is the objective. When editors most require sensationalism of story and pace of plotting from writers, it is important that we are accurate with our terms and acknowledge both the subtleties and simplicities of plot and suspense. There is nothing good or bad about plot in itself: it is how it is used artistically that should concern the critic. Or equally, how it is refused. This is not an argument against experiment. I hope this thesis highlights the lack of nuance shown by both complacent realism and iconoclastic experimentalism. Instead of abandoning plot we need better plots and experimental writers should remember to push these boundaries as well as those of the sentence.

I'd like to disagree one last time with Forster's idea that plot necessarily takes a revenge upon character. A modern plot, unresolved, untrustworthy, need not sacrifice shape to psychology of character, need not limit a vital realism. Plot in literary fiction is a limit only when it becomes a template that novels are expected to follow, and when the literary publishing industry and prize-giving bodies reinforce

this expectation. This is when we agree with Robbe-Grillet that ‘what is *literary* (the word has become pejorative) functions like a grid or screen with bits of different coloured glass that fracture our field of vision into tiny assimilable facets’ (*New Novel* 18). I sympathise with this line of argument as it develops, with McCarthy and Smith’s frustration with a middlebrow literary consensus, with plots in which characters progress to greater awareness by way of lyrical revelations and epiphanies. Why must this be the shape of a novel? Equally, when it is done with self-awareness, why mustn’t it? A plot, if it attempts to represent experience, may be educational, chaotic, manipulative, transparent – most adjectives one can think of. There is so much flexibility even within realism that to forbid any of its conventions is to underestimate the skill and artistic originality with which they can still be used.

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*My Biggest Lie*

Luke Brown

*Writing long books is a laborious and impoverishing act  
of foolishness . . . A better procedure is to pretend that  
those books already exist*

Jorge Luis Borges

*I've tried to be as honest as possible about everything*

Diego Maradona

There was a time not long ago when I thought that lying was the most natural thing in the world. I was young and I had a good haircut and a girlfriend I loved. I had a best friend who was also my boss and he was friends with the most interesting people in London. I assume they were interesting. Looking back, I can't remember much of what anyone said. But I remember laughing. I remember everything being the funniest thing that had ever happened. I worked hard and stayed out late. We drew a high line between fuel and poison. I wore suits I couldn't afford in the hope that this was the way that one day I would be able to afford them. I always got the round in, and I always asked the barmaid her name. I never spoke to anyone about Sarah because if I did I'd have to tell everyone how much I adored her. I didn't want to overcomplicate the portrait. I'd made an experiment with my character, and it seemed to be working. It was fun. It was addictive. And I forgot, temporarily, what was true and what was false. Or it was simply that I preferred the false.

It was then that I was found out.

Part One: My Love

## Chapter 1

On the last day of what I kept telling myself was a happy month, I woke up alone.

I could hear children laughing outside on the estate. The block of flats Sarah and I lived in was built around a grass square and from our bedroom window I watched a boy with an Afro kick a football to a dog who was as big to him as a horse was to me. The dog scrambled over the ball and executed a perfect Cruyff turn, accelerating away to leap up at a young girl on a pink scooter.

Ben, you big tit, you've knocked Tasha over. Eric, next door, leaning out of his kitchen window. I had lived here for eighteen months with Sarah and I loved the place. Sarah was giving the keys back to the landlord tomorrow and I was flying to Buenos Aires in the afternoon. The flights we booked were non-refundable and still valid. Even now, eight hours before take-off, I hoped I could persuade Sarah to relent and come with me.

Sarah. I found her downstairs at the kitchen table, her head in her hands, looking from a slant at the same view I'd seen from our bedroom. It was Saturday, a spring morning, a day obscene with promise. Sarah turned from the window and looked at me.

I can see her face now, project it onto the white piece of paper I'm staring at. The wisdom is that I screw that face up in a ball and throw it in the bin. The wisdom is that I accept I made such a mess of things that she will never let me make things right. The wisdom is to draw a moustache on her and persuade myself it was all her fault, that I was mistaken about my love for her. Oh, the wisdom. The blunt realism. How do people live that way?

I took a deep breath and once again tried to make my case to her.

There is something you may have heard about me, the reason why some of my old colleagues won't speak to me any more. That wasn't why Sarah was leaving me – indeed, she left me on the morning before the night the other catastrophe happened, and she came back two days later because of it. That was the best bit about falling apart: it persuaded her to come back to hold me together. There wasn't anyone else who could have, and Sarah still cared enough to want me in one piece. The only other person I wanted to speak to was my former boss and closest male friend, James Cockburn, but he was in hospital with two broken legs and a dead mobile number.



Under the terms of the settlement I had signed I was not supposed to contact him or any of my former colleagues. That was mostly fine. I had surrendered my own phone to the police as evidence and I used this as another excuse not to confront my shame through other people's eyes.

Sarah came back and, to begin with, something incredible happened: we fell completely in love again. Now our time was finite, we decided to make it last for ever. We saw in each other's faces what we used to talk about when we talked about love, we pinned down the word to describe this purity of feeling and intent. It was not a lie invented by poets, and if it was, who cared, it was the best lie they ever told. Love: at this late hour, you could still fall in.

For the rest of the month we drank and went to galleries, we took ecstasy and danced, we went to bed after ambitious dinners and expensive wines and lay on the sofa under a duvet with hangovers and high-quality HBO drama on DVD. But it was a paradise only made possible by its expiry date. This last month with Sarah had begun with us giving a month's notice on the flat and with Sarah deciding she was not coming to Argentina on the holiday we had booked to visit her oldest friend Lizzie. I didn't want to go without her but she made clear that was irrelevant. My boarding the plane was the condition of her staying with me until I did. We talked about Buenos Aires as the ideal place to write the novel I had always talked about: cheap, literary, atmospheric (we presumed). And haunted too, by a man I had watched die. You know of course who I am talking about. I had known the famous novelist for only ten hours but I would not let myself forget him or pretend it was not my fault he was dead. Ten hours, whatever others might say, is long enough to come to love a man. In Buenos Aires, where he had written his first novel, I hoped I could wrap myself in his experience and write mine. It was the only plot I could come up with, an escape and a penance rolled into one, and Sarah called my bluff and decided it was the answer to her problems too. My going alone would give her time to think things through without me. She might join me later; we would 'have to see'. We closed our eyes because we did not want to see what scared us, though it could still see us.

Four weeks we had, twenty-eight mornings when I woke with her next to me again. It was like plunging into water from a great height and swimming to the surface to gasp for air. To be alive and know how nearly we weren't.

I wanted to remember this feeling when I was gone from her, so I would never be complacent again – but I didn't kid myself there weren't equal and more alluring devotions in store for me. Good intentions? I'd had those before.

'Liam, please,' Sarah said, forcing a smile and cutting me off. 'It's our last morning together for a while. Let's just have some breakfast.'

I wasn't hungry but at least the ritual of making breakfast was something I could do for her. I moved towards the fridge. On the top of it was a delicately curved pot painted with intricate patterns by an ex-boyfriend of Sarah's from Brazil. Sarah worked in the art world, curating small shows and finishing a PhD, and our flat doubled as a gallery displaying the works of Sarah's previous boyfriends and current suitors. She referred to the current suitors, with less suspicion than me, as 'friends'.

'Why don't I make breakfast for once?' Sarah said, jumping up.

'It's all right,' I said, picking up a box of eggs.

'I want to do it. I'd been planning to. It will be nice. A farewell breakfast.'

'Farewell?'

'I mean, bon voyage.'

'I think you mean fuck off.'

Her eyes narrowed at me.

'Sorry, I'm joking.' I put my hands up in surrender and sat down at the table.

'One fuck-off breakfast and a cup of tea, please.'

Behind her on the wall was a colourful mural. There was a lot going on: helicopters, skeletons, marijuana leaves, bare breasts, men with moustaches, manacles, rifles, horses, stars-and-stripes on fire. I would be in a different continent tomorrow, one where my dead friend had written his first novel and fallen in love.

'How much space do you think you have to joke right now?' Sarah asked me. 'Because it's not as much as you think.'

The famous novelist I watched die has a name, one which to this day deters me from entering bookshops. It will be obvious that I am talking about Craig Bennett, though when I tell my story for the first time he is always the famous novelist. It adds ironic distance to the story that was not there, is not there, but is essential to the way I semi-survive these days. He haunts me you see, that lovely, corrupt man. In newspaper articles; in marketing emails from Amazon; A0-sized, six feet high on train platforms.

I do well making light of it. He survives in his words, say the idiot fans, the ones you hear on Radio 4 saying, of course, Buenos Aires was the biggest *character* in his debut. Don't get me started on that type of idiocy. He survives in his words. For me he continues to die. I made sure of that.

The end of my night with Craig was horror, pure and simple. And it was my fault.

While Sarah made an omelette and I kept quiet I saw there was an opened envelope on the table, stamped Universidade de Sao Paulo. Sarah had been interviewed two weeks earlier on Skype for a job teaching a course there over the summer (their winter, hotter than our summer).

She put down our plates of food and saw what I was looking at. 'I got the job,' she said.

'Congratulations. That's really great. I really mean that. When do you start?'

'I haven't worked out yet if I'll take it.'

'That's really really great – what, really? You won't take it?'

'My deadline for my PhD's this year and . . . '

'Really?'

'Stop saying *really*. You don't know what *really* means. Anyway, I probably should take it. It's only for six weeks and I could use their library for some stuff it's hard to get over here.'

'When does it start?'

'Oh, er, not for a couple of months.'

'We wouldn't be that far away then, would we?' I suggested.

'Quite a distance.'

'Same continent, though.'

'Sort of from here to Moscow.'

'Just round the corner. I could pop over for a weekend.'

'Flights would be expensive. I don't think we should get ahead of ourselves.'

She was wearing pyjama bottoms and a vest top and I leaned down and put my head against her neck, smelling her hair, cheap shampoo and carpet static, feeling the warmth of her skin, the shape of the line from her cheek to her shoulder. She was unique in a way I could never truthfully express. The idea of chemistry we rationalise in conversation is chaotic in sensation. I was infatuated. It was the sound of her voice

on the telephone, the absence of her body in the clothes hanging up in the wardrobe, spread out upon the floor. The way she walked down the street when she didn't know I was looking at her. It was true. She made me want to skip. I had made her believe that my love for her was perfect and never contradicted by other impulses. Isn't this the lie that is expected of us? Isn't this the lie we believe in ourselves? And for me, it could never for any other woman have been closer to the truth.

'Sarah,' I said, 'please, you have to believe me.'

It took two weeks from Craig Bennett's death for the funeral to be rearranged, but in the meeting in which I had agreed to resign in exchange for six months' salary, my CEO Belinda Wardour made it a condition of the deal that I would not come to the funeral.

The distraction of Bennett's editor having mysteriously fallen from a window the night before delayed journalists from seizing on my involvement. James Cockburn, the flamboyant publishing director for fiction at Eliot, Quinn, was a minor media celebrity in his own right, and the rumours suggested his broken legs were a result of Bennett having pushed him. The hypotheses were irresistible.

None of the few people who knew about my role in Bennett's death spoke out. I was to disappear. So, 'resigning to focus on my writing', I received my pay-off with a contract that prohibited me from speaking to the media or publishing anything about Craig Bennett. Belinda, in the *Bookseller's* 'Moves' section, delivered the quote-de-grâce: 'It's disappointing to have Liam leave so soon after he arrived, but he's decided his career is not in publishing and we wish him all the best.'

It looked then like we had got away with it.

Cockburn was still in hospital. The man who gave me my job, my mentor, role model. (He's a whole other chapter, a bloody novella.) He sent his own quote for the papers from his bed.

*I deeply grieve the loss of our friend Craig Bennett. He was one of the most charming, generous men we will ever know, and the fact that hundreds of thousands if not millions of us feel like we did know him is a testimony to his extraordinary writing. I can't accept that I will never read a new book by him again, although many of his millions of readers who have not yet read his frank, acerbic and incredibly moving memoir Juice will be able to when it is published in mass market*

*paperback in June this year. A fearsomely honest, original writer, we may never see his like again.*

*Rumours in the press make it important to clarify something: when I last saw him, the night before he died, before I drunkenly defenestrated myself at a party, we were the best of friends. It is rare in what has become sometimes a sterile publishing industry that writers' lives are as fascinating as Craig's, or their personalities as dramatic or exaggerated, and so we shouldn't be surprised that such a born storyteller should spawn some shaggy-dog tales about his final hours. If Craig can see us now – I won't say he's exactly laughing – he'd be too annoyed about not being alive, but I know –*

I couldn't read any more of it, and avoided the papers for the rest of the month. It wasn't the only subject I was avoiding; it became much harder for Sarah and I to pretend we were happy as our last month together wore on. Our smiles stuck as we tried to think of something to say to each other that wasn't the thing we needed and refused to speak of. But as my flight approached, the panic overwhelmed me and I began to break the terms of our truce.

Sarah had finished eating and was staring out of the window again, watching the children play. Yes, we had imagined that too. She turned and looked at me.

'Please stop, Liam. I've listened. We did this at the time. We've done it since. There's nothing you can say to make things better. Perhaps being apart will work, I don't know. Just please, for now, stop talking.'

The worst thing about those words was how calm and placatory she was when she said them. Everything was not going to be all right, but she stood and came towards me and we kissed like love was simple, and then, for what I hope was not the last time, she led me upstairs back to bed.

If I never get Sarah back, if I ever stop trying to, I wonder how long it will take me before I am unable to recall the exact detail of her face, the sound of her voice, the way she moves. It would be romantic to say that she will never leave me, that I will see her looking back at me whenever I close my eyes. Oh, don't worry: I have said *this* to her.

Sarah is beautiful, though she's not so pretty you would fall in love with her from a photo. She's not the type of girl to practise how to come across best in 2D, and this was one of the things I liked least about her, her carelessness, her lack of artifice; it was not natural. Perhaps this is what love consists of: simultaneous repulsion and attraction to a feature of the beloved. I loved and hated that she was different to me, and because I didn't realise this I spent my time trying to correct the things I liked least about her that were in fact the things I liked the most.

There are physical similarities between us. Her eyes are brown, mine blue, though we have the same brown hair, hers falling in curls to her shoulders, her superb shoulders, two of the only things that can distract me from her legs. It is not that her legs are the type you see on the front of tights-packets or on teenage models in Sunday supplements, they're not as long as these, less exercised or less starved, no less the better for it, the legs I wrote poetry and cooked dinner for and lay between, the legs I watched to the detriment of road safety when we rode bikes together. They were *her* legs. I don't care if they make me objectify her: she was here! She was once here! So close I could touch her.

I had been best friends with Sarah for many years before we got together, though from the very first day I met her it had been an ambitious friendship. I had wanted her, and I had always wished she would split up with whichever boyfriend she had at the time. If it was not an innocent friendship I began with Sarah, when I sat next to her and listened to her voice rise and fall, when I laughed involuntarily at her stories and character assessments, when I plotted our adventures together, our happy ending, then there was nothing corrupt in it either. It was never the right time for us: I was not as forceful then as I have been since, and she either had an unsuitable boyfriend or I had an unsuitable girlfriend and we were never in the same place long enough to make the unsuitability incontestable. Sarah couldn't hold a job then (and perhaps now) for more than a year before she was bored and off somewhere – Korea, Brazil, India – to do another job and learn another language from another exotic boyfriend. These were years in which I could forget her except as a wistfulness, the warm promise of a distant reunion; make me happy, but not yet. I began to enjoy myself.

It was in the gap between one of Sarah's disappearances that I finally confessed how I felt to her. I had been single for a year, but she had a boyfriend back in Brazil, an artisan potter (they were always people with extraordinary occupations),

and in her laidback way she assumed they'd stay together without being able to articulate how. In the meantime she had moved to Edinburgh for a job at the National Museum of Scotland, and invited me up to stay for a long weekend. It began on Thursday in a pub near her flat in Leith, one you reached by walking down a narrow street lined with prostitutes. We played a game – I can't remember who started it – categorising all our mutual friends by whether or not we wanted to sleep with them. I was delighted at how many people she didn't want to sleep with. Perhaps I lied a bit to suggest my tastes were less catholic than they are. And then we could no longer avoid it.

Yes, she admitted, with almost entirely disguised shyness, she would.

Yes, I admitted, rapturously, I would, I would, I would.

The next day we climbed to the top of Arthur's Seat and stood braced against each other as the wind tried to tear us off. On the way down her feet slipped and I caught her under the arms. She turned and looked at me incredulously, as if she hadn't noticed I had been with her until that moment. I had to say something but I couldn't.

She never had the right clothes for the country she was living in. That day she was wearing a summer dress with shiny black tights and flimsy canvas shoes – a thick blanket of a woollen overcoat on the top donated by one of her new colleagues after she had arrived to work two days in a row in a soggy denim jacket. The cold rain began to hammer down as we reached the bottom and she was soon sodden. We took refuge in a pub. She had stolen a lipstick that morning from Superdrug and came back with cherry-pink lips and soaking hair. Her lips were so bright they seemed to belong to another dimension. She was wonderfully disorganised in the way she assembled herself and I expect she will always be like this. I hope so.

I couldn't take my eyes from her. Something was going to happen, something was so obviously going to happen that I felt on the verge of being sick in case it didn't. In the end it was the word itself, unspoken for so long, that brought us together. That evening she had taken us to an ecstasy dealer's tenement flat and later, in a basement dive bar, dancing to house music, I had put my hands on her shoulders and said it: 'I love you.' It was the kind of thing you said on an E, but not in *that* tone. We knew what it meant. Its inevitability stunned her. She took a step backwards and smiled a smile that was without guilt, despite the boyfriend she would have to get rid of in the next month, and we kissed our first kiss.

We lay on her bed when we got home and she swam into a sharp new focus. She tied her hair back and I realised I had never seen her ears. They seemed enormous. She was suddenly a completely different person; her voice sounded more clipped than I remembered and I could imagine her playing hockey; she was a middle-class girl from the home counties, with a mother, a father, a brother and a sister; she owned and wore pyjamas; she thought her knees looked funny, her gorgeous knees pressed up against my jeans. It was fascinating to see her awkward, wondering if I should stay; she wanted me to, but she was a nice girl, a nice girl who shoplifted, and we decided we should take it slow.

I already had everything I thought I could ever need from her. She liked me, and I was lost.

Before I got up to go back to the sofa, I said something clichéd and untrue. 'From the start, it was always meant to be you and me.'

We lay there looking at each other, our bodies at right angles, our faces side-on, curious.

'I didn't know you felt like that,' she said.

'Really?'

'No, I knew!' She laughed and we looked at each other some more.

'You're not making any move to kiss me,' she said.

'I'm keeping still. I'm scared I might startle you.'

'Just approach slowly. No sudden movements.'

I stayed where I was and carried on looking.

Her prominent ears. Her funny knees. Her hungry smile.

My life together with Sarah finally ended with a long Tube ride to Heathrow that afternoon. We hugged each other through a pole in the packed carriage. We couldn't get the right angle to kiss. She still wouldn't meet my eyes. The day before I had borrowed a shopping trolley from a supermarket to haul boxes of my books to the nearest charity shop. I didn't even approve of giving books to charity – the publishing industry seemed in need of enough charity itself. But what was I supposed to do, bin them? I didn't have such a strong stomach. The ones I couldn't bear to give away I had placed, three boxes full, with my aunt. My friends had enough trouble finding space for their own books in their tiny London flats. Sarah's parents were



coming round the next day to collect her stuff and she was going to live with them for a couple of weeks while she decided what to do.

We arrived at Heathrow and as we queued on the concourse to check in Sarah told me once again how much fun I was going to have. I put my hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. For once, she looked back at me. ‘Please, Sarah, I don’t want to go without you.’

‘I’m moving home tomorrow,’ she said, looking away. ‘I’m twenty-nine and I’m moving home. I’ve got you to thank for that. If you don’t get on this plane, what are you going to do? Where will you go? My parents certainly don’t want to see you.’

We didn’t talk about her confession to her mother that I had lied to her, or about her father’s reluctant proposition then to beat me up. Her father and I had always enjoyed talking to each other. I wanted to ring him up and offer to help him kick the crap out of me.

‘Sarah, I love you. We’re supposed to be together.’

‘It’s just words, Liam. You’re just words. And not even very original ones. I can’t believe in them any more.’

‘I’m not a liar, I told you the –’

‘If you begin that again I promise that I will scream.’

‘Oh, please. We’re not simple people. We don’t have to obey a soap-opera’s sense of justice.’

‘I will scream and I will walk away and any slender chance we have of staying together will be gone.’

I was crying by now. Unless I specifically tell you otherwise, assume I’m always crying.

‘And stop *pronouncing* those tears.’

‘Is it that slender?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ she said.

I turned back after I had my ticket and passport checked on my way to the departure gate. She was still there watching me. We reflected each other across five years. There aren’t many looks in a lifetime like the one she gave me. You couldn’t survive more than a few. She waved. I waved. She mouthed three words to me. ‘I love you.’ Or, ‘Bye bye, Liam.’ I could not be sure and mouthed three words back

and she turned and walked away. She turned back once, she turned back twice and I waited for her to turn back again but that was all. Bye bye, Sarah.

## Chapter 2

I had never been on a flight like the one I took to Buenos Aires. There was a stop-over in Madrid for eight hours and I used these to leave the airport, go to a bar in the city, drink ten small but powerful beers and compose a frantic letter to Sarah that during the time I was writing it convinced me I could make everything all right again. I posted the letter, got on the wrong Metro line back to the airport and nearly missed the plane. When I made it just in time I was drunk, but I was not alone. For the duration of the twelve-hour flight it seemed that nearly every passenger remained standing with a beer in their hand, wandering between other groups of upright and talkative Argentines. It was like a giant pub in the sky. I can't remember if we sat down even for take-off; it wouldn't surprise me if we hadn't, or if there had been barbecues sizzling in the aisles. The first half of the trip was a blur. I woke up, four hours in, sprawled across three seats, and immediately had to be sick. No one seemed surprised as I ran to the toilet with my hand over my mouth. Afterwards, I lay back down and hugged myself, crying freely but quietly, until an air hostess from the 1970s shook me and encouraged me into an upright position. We were about to land.

The taxi driver didn't understand my painstakingly prepared phrase-book instructions. I was asking for the Avenida de Mayo, which I pronounced like –ayonnaise.

*'Que? Que?'*

*'De Mayo!'*

*'Que? Que?'*

I pulled my piece of paper out and showed it to him. He read it and slapped me on the shoulder, spraying spit across the windscreen: *'Avenida de Mazcho!'* And then he was off.

It was a bright sunny morning I did not belong in. The driver carried on a conversation with the radio as we sped through wide cracked roads lined with grand municipal buildings. It looked like Paris then Madrid then Milan; I couldn't keep track but I felt like I had been here before. I began to cheer up but when I arrived at my hostel at 7 a.m. they had no idea who I was and explained to me, thankfully in English, that they were full up. That was that, then. I had done my best. I asked them to order me a taxi to the airport because I was going back to England. On hearing this, they rang around and found me a place at a sister hostel and so, another taxi ride later,

I arrived at the Tango backpackers hostel in Palermo. I'm not sure how the driver knew it was the right one because I learned later that every hostel in Buenos Aires is called the Tango backpackers hostel. In the foyer was a small young man behind a reception desk. He looked up eagerly as I came through the door then looked disappointed, a look I thought was caused by my not being a woman. I felt sad for him too. Behind him was a wide bar, with fridges full of enormous bottles of lager labelled in the national blue and white. There was a music playing I had never heard before: chilled-out ambient beats and accordion solos. Electronic tango. At the time I found it quite beautiful, but I had been travelling for thirty hours and was delirious with strange emotions. I was to learn that no music but electronic tango played in the bar, for twenty-four hours, every single day of the week.

There was one private room left, a small white box just off the building's roof terrace. It had a single bed, a clothes rail and a window almost completely obscured by an air-conditioning unit which didn't work – a perfect monk's cell for me to begin my penance.

I had half of my redundancy money left and had applied for an Arts Council writing grant. If that came through, I could live like this for months. I would redeem myself through hard work, honesty and self-control. Honestly.

For the first few days I kept myself to myself and didn't explore far from the hostel. Without Sarah, I was in a state of shock, left to face head-on the reality of having lost my job and way of life. I suffered moments of vertiginous panic, but I can't claim I spent all my time realising hard truths. It was confusing. The hard truths seemed to have nothing to do with my being here in this airy hostel lounge, sitting at a table listening to endless accordion over crisp backbeats and earnest conversations between Americans. Not that all the voices were American, nor even the loudest. There were Scandinavians, Israelis, Aussies, English, Europeans, all sorts. There were even some Latins, though they were mostly staff. Over those first few days I divided all the guests into two categories: the Kids and the Broken. Well, I had nothing in common with the Kids, with their tattoos and gym-muscles, their slender limbs and colourful clothes. They talked about mountains and beaches and marijuana. They were gap-year students, recently-graduated and other idiots. I begrudged them their innocence, especially when they started to philosophise, which they did with a forthrightness that was difficult to ignore. But my greatest disdain was reserved for the inevitable moment when one of the Broken would take them seriously and offer

his own opinion on the happy peasants of India. It was a point of faith for many of the Broken that there was nothing separating them from the Kids. The poor broken men (they were nearly all men). I refused to accept I was one of them in spite of the evidence. It helped that they were mostly slightly older than me, men in their mid- to late thirties, fleeing lucrative careers in IT, accounting or management consultancy: lonely, dog-eyed men in checked shirts and baleful smiles looking all day for good news from Apple laptops, the very latest models, peering over the top for anyone to talk to. Looking at them, I realised that I had left a job and a life that I had loved. And so after two days of shock I could no longer bear to be around them.

I was staying in Palermo Viejo, an aggressively cool neighbourhood full of hipster boutiques, leafy streets and bar-lined squares where the late autumn sun dappled onto outside tables . . . all of that gloss. It would have been a wonderful place to be with Sarah. If she had been speaking to me. She had made me promise not to call her for the first two weeks and while there was still a chance she would forgive me I was determined to do whatever she told me. The nearest square to my hostel was Plaza Cortázar and I took this at first as a good omen, a perfect place to sit and read and write, to plant myself in the city's literary soil and try to grow something. Unfortunately the right books I'd packed were completely the wrong books: translations of the Argentine masterworks I had naively assumed would help me feel at home on arrival. Borges' gnomic, deeply un-reassuring stories made me want to weep every time I attempted them; there were times when I could not even get to the end of a story's title. Cortázar's supposedly read-in-any-order novel *Hopscotch* made me feel scared I did not know my way back to my bedroom, even when I was in my bedroom. I was too fragile and unplotted for either of them. I craved English realism to anchor me, but the books on the hostel's shelves had been left by children and hippies and the only readable novel I could find was *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens, an enormous over-corrective to the Argentine canon and the worst book in the world to read while watching the sensuality of Buenos Aires streetlife pass by. Fog, soot, grotesque characters and a saintly narrator. I recognised none of this around me. The guidebook mentioned an English-language bookshop, but when I went to find it one day it had moved. Borges loves this about Buenos Aires, his imaginary city, the image of which he says is always anachronistic. I gleefully hated him and resigned myself to *Bleak House*.

Though I had yet to start my novel, I was nevertheless writing something: daily emails to Sarah. I should have taken more care with these. I can't remember exactly what they said and I will never have the courage to look back at them in my Sent Items folder. But, hell, I know what they will have said, they will have said, don't leave me, don't leave me, don't leave me, and though I will have tried to be clever and present a compelling case for why it would have been better for her and not just me if she stayed, she would have seen straight through my manipulations to the real message: that I was selfish, that I was needy, that I was work. Whatever I was, I wasn't what I had suggested I was to begin with. And so it was that after a week I received a devastating response.

Before Sarah told me that it was over between us, for ever, completely, she told me how 'tired' she was of my 'silly romantic language' that didn't 'begin to redeem' my 'excuses and lies'. I was 'addicted' to trying to make people 'feel the way you want them to feel', 'like a politician rather than a boyfriend' who couldn't understand 'making someone happy is not pushing the right buttons in the right order' but being 'true and strong and open'. 'I don't know who you are'. It was over. 'I want you to have no hope.'

Amid the agony of accepting and refusing to accept what I had always known was going to happen, I suspect I quite liked the portrayal of me here, the compartmentalised, enigmatic multi-man. It is a sort of fun being a dickhead, that's why there are so many of us. It wasn't unique to me – did other people really reveal themselves truly to others? Were they better than me or did they just make a better job of pretending to be? I didn't believe it was only me who was so hungry, so weak.

What mattered actually was that Sarah thought there *were* truthful people around and that she was one of them, even if she was in a minority. There were better people than me for her to risk spending her life with.

I was desperate to go home, to make a dramatic gesture; I had to talk to her face to face, convince her she could believe in me.

I quickly saw how much worse this would make things. It was my constant presence in daily emails that had driven her to such a quick conclusion. She wouldn't want to see me; she would be disgusted at my additional cowardice, at my throwing away the chance to write the novel I had been talking about for so long. Perhaps if I gave her time to forget the vivid recent pain and remember the pleasure, my

devotion . . . if I stayed here and learned something, wrote something to show her who I was. It was my only chance.

It was then that I decided to write the love letter, the love letter to end all love letters. I would take notes for months, write it all by hand – the pornography of the Internet found its correlation in the email, instantaneous, generic, regretted. This time I would write slowly to Sarah, I would think and revise, I would find out how I felt about her and surprise us both with its truth.

This was my new faith.

But life was unbearable. I needed distraction, I needed a friend.

So I emailed Amy Casares. I had met Amy when I published her first novel, five years ago. She was half Argentine, half English, Argentine on her father's side, and had spent her late twenties in Buenos Aires producing a film at the same time as Bennett lived there (this was at the end of her brief first career working as the gorgeous daughter in the Oil of Ulay TV adverts). I had mentioned her to Bennett on the night I met him to see if he knew her, and he told me he had fallen in love with her and never forgotten her. I was not surprised about that, for I had been in love with her myself since we published her. She was ten years older than me and painfully beautiful. I didn't need to imagine her in her twenties or even thirties for I loved her as she was now, chastely, immaculately. The novel had done well, as these things go, but it had not made Amy a star, and Bennett had no idea it had been published until I told him.

It took some courage to email her. I knew that she would know some people out in Buenos Aires, but I did not know what she had been told about me, what she thought about Bennett's death. I didn't know whether she had gone to the funeral and, if she had, what stories people would have told her afterwards. Three days after I had sent the email, when I had had no reply from Amy, I decided she had made her decision about me. And so, despite my misgivings, I contacted Sarah's friend Lizzie on Facebook, the friend who had provided the initial reason for the trip. Lizzie sent me her number and I gave her a call that evening. She had a light, springy voice when she answered the phone, an accent that reminded me of Sarah's. 'So how is Sarah?' was almost the first thing she said. 'She's not here?'

'No, she's . . . she's got a lot of work on at the moment. I'm here for a while. She'll come later.'

'Are you missing her yet?'

‘Lots,’ I said truthfully, and we arranged to meet at her flat in Recoleta.

I walked to her apartment at nine that evening. The sky was a regal blue at that time and the city felt poised, waiting to do something. Young men and women walked past me with groceries, old ladies walked dogs, couples sat on walls and benches tonguing each other unashamedly – it was still early, there was much to do.

I found Lizzie’s apartment and rang the buzzer, and the most beautiful man I have ever seen answered the door. He was clearly Argentine, and I can only describe him, as I apprehended him then, like something from a brochure: his long dark glossy hair, honey-coloured skin, perfect brown pools for eyes where one could drop one’s soul and never hear a splash. He was smoking ‘a fragrant joint’.

‘You must be Liam,’ he said, reaching out a hand and leaning forward when I took it to kiss me on the cheek. I’d read in the guidebook that this was how they did hellos and, though I liked it, it surprised me. I didn’t know whether to return it, but he left his cheek there for me so I kissed him back. Behind him, the woman who must have been Lizzie was lying on her front, her feet raised up and casually wiggling behind her while she laughed on the phone and waved at me. His stubble scratched against mine as we separated and made me want to light a cigarette. Her legs made my initial. Behind her was an open balcony, with a view out to many more balconies, to the warm dark in which all the lights seemed to shine brighter than English streetlights, simply because they weren’t English streetlights. Lizzie, folded up, looked like she’d be tall when she straightened.

He was introducing himself. ‘My name is Arturo,’ he said. ‘You have just come to Buenos Aires?’

I nodded. It was calming to be in a real living room, without any calming electronic tango music playing. Arturo had a really good haircut. It shone. He shone. I asked him the question I already knew the answer to ‘How do you know Lizzie?’ and he just smiled and turned around to look at her. I remember the phone she was talking into was an old-fashioned one with a rotary dial. Her legs were tanned and the soles of her feet looked like they would always be dirty. Some men wouldn’t have liked that. But not me and Arturo. In fact, I just didn’t know who to look at.

He offered me his spliff and, still stunned, though I hated dope, I took it and inhaled. Twice. Again. And then we were grinning at each other and embracing, as if



enacting the second stage of the unusual hello we began before. ‘You want a beer,’ he told me.

While he was getting it, Lizzie hung up and tipped herself from the sofa like a slinky springing over a step. ‘Liam!’ In the same motion, she fell forward into me and hugged me doggily, pushing her chest into me, all coconut smelling, tall and limber, freckled brown skin still radiating the afternoon’s sun. ‘What fun.’ It was a hug I was in no hurry to leave but we pulled apart as Arturo came back into the room with my beer.

He handed it to me and studied me more carefully. This alone should have been reason for him to relax if he was assessing me as a threat. He looked hard at Lizzie before turning back to me. ‘But you are not here with your girlfriend, Liam.’

‘She’s had some work come up that was too good an opportunity to miss. She can’t leave right now. Hopefully – ’

‘Oh, yes, let’s talk about Sarah,’ interrupted Lizzie. ‘I want to hear all about what she’s been up to – how you met, what you do.’

And so, like the dutiful proud boyfriend I wanted to remain, I began to describe Sarah’s blossoming career as a curator, her invitations to New York and Sao Paulo, how she had nearly finished her PhD, about the offers she had to teach short courses that summer at universities around the world. After years of having no money and having to admit at parties to being a student, she was suddenly in possession of a glamorous success story. I knew what that felt like, how useful it was, how heady the opportunities, how excited and self-absorbed it had made me. She would survive it better. It was perfect poetic symmetry that I had fallen just as she had reached her peak. She could do whatever she liked with her success now.

‘And what do you do?’ asked Arturo. ‘Why are you here?’

‘That’s a good question,’ I admitted.

I had tried to think of something plausible on the walk over. But if you are hiding some details of a story, it is always best to reveal others truthfully.

And so I started to tell them about my shame.

## Chapter 3

I was sent to meet Craig Bennett on the opening Monday of the London Book Fair. I don't need to mention in which year. That morning Sarah had left me. After an entire night begging her not to I was almost grateful when she slammed the front door behind her, leaving me with one fewer of the bags of clothes she had thrown all over our bedroom.

In the shower I let myself collapse, sob and pray to my childhood God who only existed now during aeroplane take-offs and girlfriend emergencies. I turned all that off with the water and put on my best new suit. I had work to do.

Within minutes of leaving the house for Earls Court I became terrified of the conclusions Sarah would reach without my constant interruptions. I called her whenever I had a moment between meetings but she never answered. Each minute was madness. I started drinking at lunch, quickly working out which of my appointments wouldn't mind moving to the bar. I still have my tattered schedule for that day: apparently I met with fifteen different people. I can't remember who most of them are, let alone the books they talked to me about. There were many tall, wonderful-looking women from the Netherlands and Germany, from France and Italy. There always are. I must have nodded in the right places and delivered my lines correctly; somewhere in the middle of that afternoon Belinda materialised in a cloud of exquisite perfume to tell me what a good job I was doing, and could I meet Craig Bennett in a restaurant in Notting Hill and look after him for a couple of hours before delivering him safely to our party?

James Cockburn would have normally been the one to look after Bennett but he was in hospital with the broken legs he'd acquired when falling from the first-floor window of a flat in Soho. I would have been at the party and witnessed this for myself if I hadn't been pleading with Sarah not to leave me.

Cockburn's fall was the talk of the Fair that day. People flocked to our stand to find out what had happened. I heard six or seven different versions, including the most lurid: that Craig Bennett, gripping Cockburn's shirt, had leaned him out of the window, demanding his advance be increased, and when Cockburn only laughed, Bennett had shoved him, perhaps half in jest, straight out the window onto the street below. It was a good story, but I heard another that was far more in character for my

hedonistic mentor, that Cockburn decided to climb out the window and scale the narrow ledge around the edge of the building – why? – to surprise two actresses known for their roles in BBC costume drama who were sitting on an adjacent windowsill. This was just the kind of idea Cockburn would have found attractive, particularly as he had been drinking since the Sunday lunchtime kick-off of the QPR home game he'd taken some New York publishers and agents to.

There were other stories too.

Eighteen months earlier, when I had come to London to start my brilliant new job and move in with Sarah, I had done my best to correct my hedonism. I had been using my father's disappearance at sixteen for far too long to justify my excesses; I was no longer that damaged teenager. Sharing a flat with Sarah seemed to be the perfect point to give up the long boozy stimulant-filled weekends of the previous five years of our lives – and earlier too, when we had been best friends attached to the wrong people. Now we had our own living room in which to watch films and DVD box-sets on our own sofa. We could make love on a shaggy, purpose-bought shagging rug. The lies are so easy to believe in: I would read manuscripts and the canonical works of European literature; fresh coffee, jazz on the stereo, my drug dealers in Birmingham sending me promotional text messages I was too far away to take advantage of.

We moved into a flat in Hackney in an old council block. It didn't look much but I loved it. The sun came through our thin curtains and woke me up at five in the morning in the summer. I've never been much good at sleeping, never a member of what Nabokov calls 'the most moronic fraternity in the world'. (I had my own moronic fraternity united by the refusal of sleep, with Cockburn our founder and spiritual leader.) I would quietly watch Sarah sleeping until I got bored, and then sneak into the living room to read a manuscript for an hour or two before she woke up. I was good at my job then. Insomniacs make diligent readers as well as talented hedonists.

But Sarah liked the drugs too, and a couple of weeks into my well-intentioned abstinence, she began to wonder where they were. 'Have you not got – literally, not got *anything*? Oh. Oh . . . *good*.' It was my fault. I'd always had something squirrelled away; I'd created expectations. (That euphemism: we were *expected* to

drugs.) There was a point in every party when we realised how easy it would be to have *more* fun. How boring it would be not to.

We decided the sometime in the non-urgent future when Sarah got pregnant would be the new deadline for renouncing our lifestyle (or we'll regret it then, said Sarah) and we went back to normal. It was not hard to find new drug dealers. I asked a literary agent over lunch, and she pitched her entire list to me, central, south, west, east, north . . . I bought them all. And suddenly drugs were almost legal as mephedrone appeared, combining the effects of cocaine and MDMA and speed, great pillows of which were available over the Internet for almost nothing. Everyone was taking it. Everyone stupid was.

What I love (I am trying to say loved) about drugs is the way they engender the temporary suspension of disbelief, poetic faith, negative capability, whatever you want to call it. You can invent magical new characters for yourself when you're on them, and if you start to believe in them others will too. Perhaps an aspiring writer's instincts are riskier, more hospitable to the reader's desire for titillation, for secrets and extra-marital intrigue. Perhaps. This type of grand disingenuousness annoyed Sarah more than anything. So it should have. I just liked getting high. It isn't only writers who make themselves into characters: it's one of the commonest failings, one of the purest joys. And you don't have to be a liar to be a writer: that's a book festival cliché you hear from midlisters aspiring to midlife crises. Becoming a vainglorious prick has never been fundamental to creating literary art. No. I did that because it was fun, because I was morally exhausted and it was easy to pretend my behaviour was separate from my essence. But if the man careering around town in my clothes wasn't me, then why did I feel so bad, and so proud, about the way he talked to women?

It hadn't always been this bad or good. I'd arrived in London from a small press in Birmingham with a reputation for frugality, integrity and luck. Everyone loves a plucky indie. It made people at the conglomerates trying to poach our successful authors feel good about themselves to know we existed, that there was room for us. I was embraced at book parties. Have you met my mate Liam? People thought I was a nice guy. I *cared* about writers. Well, I always had a lot of compassion but outside of work it mostly overflowed in the wrong directions, to the people who least needed it. To the people who exhibited moral failings, by which I mean the people with the option to. The carnal people, the libertines, the charmers.

The lookers, the liars, the reckless. The success went to my head. That's the *point* of success. I was drawn to the promiscuous and the criminal, like my mentor and the other JC, and who knew London publishing would be such a fine place to find these two qualities? It was with my reputation in mind, and with Cockburn lying in an expensive private hospital – not his first trip to an expensive private medical facility paid for by the company – that they sent the ingénue out to look after Booker-winning Craig Bennett. We had never met but by coincidence we shared the same literary agent, Suzy Carling – I had written one bad novel no one wanted to publish but she had managed to place a story of mine in *Granta*, and this had blown a gale into my inflating ego. I must have seemed just the man for the job. My task was to talk books, flatter, reassure him that in spite of the rumours, we knew he and Cockburn were the best of friends. I was to order the drinks as slowly as possible and *on no account allow him to take me with him to score drugs of any kind*. His publicist Amanda Jones briefed me. He was due at a party at ten; all I had to do was get him there, and then she and Suzy and the rest of the cavalry would take over. If there were any problems I was to call. Belinda hoped we would hit it off in a purely professional way, that I would be an option to take over the editing of his books if, despite our assurances, Cockburn's mysterious fall proved fatal to their working relationship. There was a lot riding on it: his last novel had sold nearly half a million copies.

I understood why they trusted me: I was polite, I was unpretentious (unpretentious for publishing, very pretentious for elsewhere) and I got on with people. They couldn't have known about the damage I successfully concealed. When Craig Bennett is written about in the press, his name is usually prefaced by phrases such as 'combustible', 'iconoclastic', 'self-destructive', even 'Dionysian', which tells you more about journalists than about Bennett. (I once heard a literary editor describe James Cockburn as a real-life 'Dionysus', by which they meant he wore his shirt unbuttoned and took cocaine at parties.) Such tags were relative. Most novelists don't make good copy for the news pages. If Bennett wanted to turn up on stage in the middle of a seventy-two-hour bender and abuse crowd members for their 'intellectual cowardice' then I was all for it. If he wanted to grip Julian Barnes in a tight bear-hug whenever he saw him in a green room and repeatedly lick his face until prised away, then what of it? (Bennett was 'not welcome again' at the Hay, Edinburgh and Cheltenham festivals.) He was a little old for such behaviour, but so

are many people who behave this way. I am not in the first generation of men who refused to grow up. That evening I was expecting to meet someone completely normal. I wasn't at all worried about Bennett's reputation.

I arrived twenty minutes late at the glass-fronted French restaurant in Notting Hill. Or rather, I was on time, watching him through the window as he poured himself three consecutive glasses of wine. Sarah had finally answered her phone and was telling me it was over and to stop calling her so much. I pleaded with her to see sense and she objected to my definition of sense. Over the last twenty-four hours I had maintained a firm faith in the power of reason to defeat chaos. If I could just keep talking, if I could talk all day and all night, she would have to realise what I had done was not so bad, that it was not in fact *me* who had done it. I would have gone on for ever, listening to my voice grow more impassioned and articulate, wavering on the edge of real tears, if she had not begun to cry herself, something she hardly ever did, and in doing so remind me that she was something more than an obstacle to my will, an exercise in persuasion. She was Sarah and she was miserable. I would never have the right or the power to convince her otherwise.

I looked at my reflection in the restaurant window and listened to her cry. She was not a crier; I'd made her take on a role that wasn't hers. We criers are the moral infants of the world, the sensualists. We like the way it feels; though we don't admit it, we're yearning to be miserable. We want a fix. Behind my reflection Craig Bennett was looking at me curiously. I waved at him and something in the friendly childishness of my gesture stabbed me: how far away I was from that pleasant boy I'd taken for granted and forgot to stay in touch with. I wheeled around and after two minutes of desperate, abruptly-terminated pleas to Sarah, I wiped my eyes on the sleeve of my shirt and entered the restaurant.

'You look fucking awful,' he said, after I introduced myself and sat down. Some people may have thought the same of him. You will have seen the photos: the rich craggy drinker's face; its pink tributaries crawling through reddish stubble, sunken blue eyes, bleached of emotion by hot weather and late nights. A surly face. Well, that was the photos, or the photos the papers took, or the photos the papers used. He might have been trying to look surly but it didn't convince me, and I was glad to take his comment as friendly. I have a lot of friends who, if they don't have faces like his already, are working on getting them.

'Yes, I do,' I said, nodding.

‘And you’re twenty minutes late,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ I continued to nod gratefully, ‘yes I am.’ I reached out and poured myself the last glass of wine in the bottle, immediately raising it towards the waitress. ‘Another of these, please.’ I took a swig. ‘This is nice,’ I said. ‘I’m sorry for being so late – ’

And then I turned my face and just about swallowed another sob that threatened to spill over the table.

Craig Bennett continued to gaze at me curiously.

‘I am sorry,’ I said, pouring the rest of the glass down my throat. ‘I’m not normally so incontinent.’

‘What’s happened?’

‘Oh, I’ve just been dumped. Last night. She’s not going to have me back.’

‘I’m glad about that.’

‘Pardon?’

‘Don’t get me wrong. We’ll get into that. At least we *can* talk about that – if you’re not too boring about it. You may even be wrong. I mean, I thought for an awful moment that they’d sent someone whose mother had just died or something.’

‘We wouldn’t put *that* on you,’ I said, speaking as the company. ‘That’d be awful manners.’

‘A spurned boyfriend is far better than a grief-stricken son.’

‘Yes? You’re probably right. They wouldn’t have sent me if they knew how miserable I was.’

The waitress came over and showed me the bottle of wine. ‘Just pour it please,’ I said.

‘You’re doing all right,’ said Bennett, like a command.

‘Yes,’ I beamed, as the waitress filled our glasses. ‘A shaky start but I feel much better.’

‘Good man.’

‘My girlfriend would dispute that.’

‘Your ex-girlfriend.’

‘Oh, yes . . . ’ My irony wasn’t robust enough to joke about that yet.

‘How old are you anyway?’

‘I’m thirty.’

‘You lucky bastard. So then you better tell me what happened. Be warned: I don’t have infinite sympathy for young lucky bastards.’

I didn’t spend long telling him. It was mundane and predictable. I lied. I made out I was better than I was. And when it was obvious that I was worse than I’d pretended – to myself as well as her, with the poems, surprise gifts, underwear and holidays – I lied harder and was caught out in increments until I was worse than what I had concealed. When I finally told the truth, it was unrealistic.

‘What shall we eat?’ I asked.

‘I’m not really hungry. Why do you people always insist on meeting in restaurants? What’s wrong with pubs?’

‘We’d have to pay for our own meals then. But I’d have been very happy with a pub. I think I’ve given up food. I’ve thrown up everything I’ve tried to eat since Saturday.’

He looked at me steadily. ‘Ah, mate,’ he said, and he reached out and patted me on the arm. ‘So it is serious? You love her? It’s mundane but I know it fucking hurts. I’ve been there too.’

He was talking, I found out later, about Amy Casares, the half Argentine novelist I had published. It was no coincidence that she would appeal to us both. Regardless of this chance connection a friendship was growing, or more precisely he was trying to rescue me, as I have been rescued by strangers before and since. The most cynical and duplicitous of us are often the kindest. There was no way, I knew, I could persuade Sarah of this. Because, probably, it isn’t true. But that night Craig Bennett and I were convinced it was.

‘Exactly,’ he roared, pouring the last of the third bottle. (We had realised that we did like food, as long as it was food you could consume like drugs: we liked oysters – and had been necking them like tequila shots for the last half hour. We were elated.) ‘Liars understand what people want, what they don’t have. They have imagination! Empathy! They understand complication and contradiction!’

I was lapping it up. Instead of being a self-destructive liar I was now a self-destructive liar – in a good way. In the toilets, almost without thinking, I locked the cubicle door behind me and scraped out onto the cistern half of the remains of the coke that I had left in my wallet from the weekend.

As I walked back into the dining room I felt I had turned the corner into a happier life. I had meant to keep to myself what I had done, but he had been so kind



that before I knew it I had passed the wrap across to him and told him to finish it. I'm terrible at doing drugs on my own. They make me so generous-spirited. A flash of concern crossed his face, before he broke into a grin. 'So,' he said, 'it's like this.' Then he was gone, leaving me to take in my surroundings properly for the first time: the inch of wine left in each of our glasses, the tall stems drawing the eye upwards, to the high ceiling, the glass chandeliers, and outwards, to the beautiful French waitresses and waiters, young people, in their early twenties, undaunted, poorly paid and incorrupt. My hands were shaking and I thought I could feel everyone looking at me.

Is it really possible to fall in love over the space of a few hours, the way I fell in love with Craig Bennett? Easy to want to, to think you have – isn't that what love is, the opposite of loss? The strength of the feeling is the proof against it having occurred too soon. What I felt that night was that I had found someone to reverse what I had lost. Someone who was pure gain.

My father is ten years older than Bennett, though he looks younger, smoother, like the past has sheared off him in a wet shave. A kind man, his new friends tell me. He wasn't always that man: there was another man who made decisions which neither he, my sisters nor I knew at the time would so blunt our memory of the man and the father he had been before to us. We don't bring up the three years in which he disappeared, the years when we only knew he was alive because of phone calls he made every few months to our grandma. He wouldn't speak to his own father, divorced from grandma, or tell grandma where he was living, what country even – 'It doesn't sound like he's in England,' she'd say. (It's been years since he's sounded like he's on fucking earth, I would reply.) Something had snapped in him during his second, awful marriage, two years after he left us, and after 'an incident' with his new family, an incident we were never told or would ever willingly ask about, an incident that even he, in the height of his madness, recognised as madness, he had simply run, and when all his madness had burnt out he had returned to earth, complete again and a stranger to us. He may have been a stranger to himself too. He certainly wanted to be. In that first year back from the dead we saw him once or twice around the table with his new fiancée, Shelley, who ran a New Age shop in Milton Keynes and on each occasion gave us a gift of a scented candle. Shelley had departed, but we still met with Dad around a table once or twice a year. There was

often another woman there. Each time we faced again the absolute impossibility of asking him a serious question. He looked startled when we did, like he was about to run for the hills. We didn't want to risk that. I was sixteen when he disappeared, my sisters thirteen and eleven. I was the lucky one; it's normal up on the Blackpool coast to be drinking heavily by that age; my sisters were jolted into a more precocious start. It didn't do us any superficial harm. All of us are (or have been) well-paid professionals. At the time I didn't feel the lack of a guide; I could work out how a man behaved from my friends and reading the books I liked about the Rolling Stones and other swaggering outlaws. There are advantages to adopting such role models: a certain charm or roguishness, the sad, warping half-truth that girls (and boys) like you more when you treat them badly; that some people get away with murders while others get broken. Most of all there was the glorious opportunity to blame someone else, someone absent, for my own self-indulgence. I met Craig Bennett on the night my dad, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards had all let me down. I came to believe that he had knowledge to impart to me, knowledge that could save me: and I decided to love him.

## Chapter 4

Lizzie and Arturo had been letting me speak but now Arturo interrupted. ‘How do you mean, you loved him? Like a woman or a brother?’ It was not an aggressive question but slightly exasperated. I had been careful not to reveal all I had been thinking, particularly the details about Sarah, and perhaps he could tell I was hiding something. I had probably revealed more than I meant to.

‘I’ve never had a brother,’ I said to him. ‘I loved him like a friend. Or like a father.’

Perhaps I looked sad then because Lizzie reached over and put her hand on my shoulder. ‘What happened next?’ she asked.

Craig and I were in a cab, heading to Soho, up some stairs to be greeted by a golden-haired actor. He looked shocked then surrendered to an open-mouthed grin. ‘Craig – you came back! What a delight! What *chutzpah!*’

I hadn’t seen Bennett abashed before. He was staring past the actor at the two windows on the other side of the room.

He hadn’t explained where we were going in the taxi, just that he’d made a new friend who’d be able to sort us out before we went to the party where we were due. ‘Now we’ve started, we’ll need it or it will seem like a dreadful evening,’ he’d insisted, though he didn’t have too much insisting to do. ‘And he’s a good man: Fergus, an actor, a pleasant host.’

As Bennett fixated on the window I realised where we were. The cardboard crates full of empties confirmed it. We were all suddenly surprised at the situation. We probably needed more drugs. I had a sachet of mephedrone in my wallet, but it was a bit more engulfing and lasting than cocaine; not as socially acceptable. I bit my tongue and introduced myself to Fergus. ‘As you can see,’ he said, ‘the last party feels like it finished about three minutes ago.’ He pulled a mostly-full bottle of Prosecco from a cardboard box on the floor: ‘Sorry it’s not cold, fellas.’ He rinsed out three mugs – ‘God *knows* what became of all our glasses last night’ – and Bennett discreetly recovered himself and drew Fergus aside.

As they conferred, I wandered over to the window and looked down to the pavement below. I don’t know what I thought I might see: a cartoon James Cockburn-sized imprint, perhaps. On the other side of the road Eros Videos and Soho

Video Club seemed wildly anachronistic, as if they were funded by the council as tourist attractions. A thin ledge ran under the window and around the side of the building. Fergus was speaking into the phone now and Bennett came over to stand with me at the window. We both peered down. ‘Is this where . . . ?’ I asked. He didn’t answer. ‘Fifteen minutes,’ said Fergus, putting the phone down.

Some people, some writers, like to lyrically describe the reveries they’ve experienced on drugs. It’s an even more boring and shameful habit than taking them. Cocaine was done and did what was expected of it. In the course of consumption we acquired two actresses and four missed calls from Bennett’s publicist, two from our mutual agent and one, worryingly, from my CEO. We had moved to an upstairs members’ club round the corner where the barmaid had greeted Bennett enthusiastically. I’d still made no contact with James Cockburn, suspecting, correctly, that I had been sent on a mission to betray him. It was midnight. We were two hours late to the party, but the party would go on late, and so I told myself that the situation wasn’t irretrievable. Bennett was perfectly happy where he was and didn’t share my CEO’s sense of the importance of meeting export buyers, foreign editors and the producers of TV book clubs. The actresses’ names were Lucy and Charlotte and they were the costume drama stars who had been at the party the night before. They were the kind of intelligent bohemian young women that a Cockburn would go to dangerous lengths to impress. My work credit card was behind the bar and we were drinking champagne. Bennett had stumped up the cash for an eighth of good coke and no one was being shy about taking it.

Eventually, I got all five of us into a taxi. We would arrive with an hour left of the party. I texted Amanda to say we were on our way. The response was immediate: that would be very fucking wise of you.

Leaving the taxi, we faced the usual gastro-enormo-bar in Kensal Green. In large part because of James Cockburn’s copy-friendliness and connections with film directors, conceptual artists and indie rock stars, our publisher’s yearly party was officially *the* place to be at the book fair. Part of the fun was guessing which rock and rollers would turn up to be drunk under the table by the real hedonists. A voluble chunk of the international publishing industry would be in there.

A bouncer checked my name off and waved us all through. Inside, the cavernous first-room was decked out in what passes for classiness in posh pubs:

wine-dark walls interspersed with flock wallpaper, oak tables and Chesterfield sofas. It was heaving; I immediately lost Bennett and the actors as I pinballed between double- and triple-kisses. The crowd was perhaps seventy per cent female and around a third of the remaining men were gay: to a man of imagination this was publishing's great perk and peril. I grabbed a drink and fought my way outside onto the teeming smoking terrace. Here I found myself next to Olivia Klein, a literary reviewer I would rather have avoided. I had been trapped in a disconcerting conversation with her at a Christmas party. She had said the rudest things to me about the books I published, all the time smiling winningly and moving me closer against the wall. She was young, in her mid-twenties, one of those eerily tall Oxbridge girls with skin so pale as to be translucent. She would have grown up in the country, miles from her friends, with only her horse, her mother's neuroses and her father the doctor's well-stocked library of Russian novels for company. As a result of which, she was far cleverer than me.

'Now when are you going to publish something a bit more *avant-garde*?' she was asking. 'Where's the new Calvino? Where's the new Borges?'

'I'm trying to publish books that large numbers of people will *buy*,' I explained. 'It's my job.'

'So you're happy to be complicit in the dumbing down of our culture?'

'Where is this new Borges, anyway? He wasn't in Birmingham.'

'You probably wouldn't recognise them if you saw them,' she said dismissively.

'You don't have any recommendations? Nothing you've read recently in the original Catalan?'

'Don't be facetious.'

I tried to change the subject. 'I hear you've written a novel, Olivia.'

(I had chatted to some literary scouts that day. Literary scouts are book spies employed by foreign editors: they always know everything that everyone is reading.)

'Who's your agent again? I could ask them to send it to me.'

Her body tensed, so much that I prepared to jump out of the way. She breathed deeply. 'Your broken-legged buddy has already anatomised what he perceives as its failures to my agent. Not enough tits, or something like that.'

'Well, James does have quite an instinct for that kind of thing. Have you considered putting some more tits in?'

‘Oh, grow *up*. I’m looking forward to reviewing the next masterpiece you publish.’

She walked away then and I wondered if I might be able to damage her career before she did any damage to mine. I didn’t know that I had only a few hours left of my career and at the time I quite relished the fight. An enemy can be more fun than a friend, more enlivening, more intimate. I didn’t have as many as I would have liked. People liked me, or at least the people I liked liked me, or at least I thought they did. Then I thought of Sarah crying on the phone and realised things might be about to change.

‘Liam Wilson!’ My agent was walking towards me. Suzy Carling is only a few years older than me but seems at least two generations more advanced. She is striking in appearance and exhausting in conversation. She refuses to answer any questions or remarks that don’t interest her, regardless of how useful they are to me. Tonight she was glamorous in a sleek black dress and blue suede boots with frightening long heels. Behind her, I caught a glimpse of Bennett through a window, striding somewhere with Jay McNerney in tow. Suzy pulled a Gauloise out of her handbag and leaned over to me. I lit it for her and she straightened up.

‘How are you, Suzy?’

She blew smoke at me. ‘Yes. So, what is the news with James? I can’t get through to him. Have you spoken to him yet?’

‘No, I haven’t but I spoke to Belinda this afternoon and he’s – ’

‘Yes, yes. I’ve spoken to Belinda. I saw you come in with Craig – and by the way, Belinda sounded very exasperated you were so late – so of course you have heard the rumours going around about . . . ’

‘Whether he was pushed?’

‘Or *dangled*?’ She laughed. ‘I heard some girls earlier saying they were at the door when Craig nearly dropped James on their heads. They had to dive for cover, they said.’

‘Who were they?’

‘Oh, some publicity assistants. Of course it *wasn’t* true – and if it was, it still wouldn’t be. They looked rather scared when I butted in and asked for their full names and where it was they worked. So how’s Craig holding up?’

‘He’s fine. I think. Actually, he took me to the flat where it happened earlier.’

‘When you were *supposed* to be here.’

‘Must you keep mentioning that?’

‘And what did he say about it?’

‘Nothing. He was staring down from the window where it happened, looking down at the ground.’

‘Liam, you said he was staring down, that’s where the ground’s kept. Is that all you’ve got? What you need is an editor. Talking of which, aren’t you nearly finished with that novel you’ve been promising me? I rather think you should meet Helen over here.’

And with her marvellous, instinctive gift for a change of subject I was led around for the next twenty minutes, pitching my entirely fictional novel (in the worst way, in being unstated) to editors, many of whom were friends of mine. This was excruciating, for there are few things more undignified than an editor who writes.

I should explain that, in general, we hated writers. Awful people. Scavengers. Needy little vultures, picking around in creative writing classes, sending in expenses for dinners they had eaten on different dates and in different cities to the events they had not turned up for. Fine artists, the lot of them, experts in cover art. Parasites. Imperiously rude and/or sleazy to editorial assistants. Lazy readers of their own work. Hungry bastards. Reviewers of their friends. Reviewers of their rivals. Making young women cry. Making them sick. Making advances. Not earning advances. Making them pregnant. Making line graphs of Amazon rankings. Sending you these line graphs. Seeking plot and motive in them instead of their own flimsy storylines and characters. *Accidentally* cc’ing you into correspondence berating you to another needy little vulture. Being ‘glad, in some way, that this mistake happened’. Never more than a metre away from the booze table at a book party. Obsequious chairs of literary events until the sixth drink in the follow-up dinner. Quoters of Goethe and Schiller. Owners of *The Mammoth Book of German Aphorisms*. Twitterers. Shitheads. Carrion-pickers. Slobs. Sociopaths. Laptop-dogs. Wolfes. Woolfs. Carvers. Lushes. Lishs. Gougers. Hacks. Mice. Lice. Writers, they were the worst, the most awful, we pitied them but loathed them more; because if it wasn’t for them, the job really would be a pleasure.

My confreres listened to me with suppressed amusement. They had all seen me arrive with Craig Bennett and were polite enough to skip over my pitch completely and ask me the same set of questions when it was over.

‘So, is it true Cockburn was screaming for mercy?’

‘And the window wasn’t even open, I heard!’

‘Well, someone told me he was holding him by his shirt collars, just, y’know, to shake him up, and the fabric just ripped – he hadn’t actually meant to drop him.’

‘Yah. Apparently there’s a whole chapter missing they didn’t print and he’d only just noticed. A whole *chapter*. If that was me, someone would have definitely have gone through the window. Who can blame him?’

‘Someone said to me it was actually Nick Cave who pushed him.’

‘Really, because I’d heard it was Bret Easton Ellis.’

‘No, no, it was F. Scott Fitzgerald,’ I said, and fled to the bathroom, bumping straight into Bennett in the corridor heading the same way with his publicist in pursuit. Amanda glared hard at me as I pushed the door open and went in.

‘Thank God, I thought she was going to follow us in for a minute,’ he said.

‘Shall we?’ I asked.

‘Oh, yes,’ he said and we ducked in together to the free cubicle.

We had conspicuously avoided the subject so far (I had been advised not to bring it up) but I had been made giddy by the speculation outside, and I couldn’t resist asking him any longer. ‘So, go on then, what did happen with you and James?’

He paused and shot me a disappointed look. I’d said it gleefully.

‘From the tone of your voice, I think you’d like to believe I pushed him out. Imagine if I had done that – what an appalling thing to do. Is that what you think of me, Liam? You sound like you wish I was that man, like you wish I was indecent. Is that how little you think of James?’

He delivered this soliloquy turning between the cistern and me, gazing into my face then back and with economical movements setting out two large lines.

‘I’m sorry, I was being glib,’ I said. ‘I would much prefer you to be decent.’

He finished rolling up a note and pointed it towards the cistern. ‘And this – is this compatible with decency?’

I searched for a truism to excuse our behaviour but came up short. ‘No, it’s really not.’

He leaned over and snapped up his line. ‘Of course it isn’t, and if you’re going to behave in a certain manner it is important to name it correctly – or else how will you recognise and resist it one day?’

He passed me the note. He had still not told me what happened with him and Cockburn. ‘To decency,’ he said.



‘To decency,’ I repeated, and leaned over.

## Chapter 5

‘You like drugs?’ interrupted Arturo.

‘He *loves* drugs,’ said Lizzie quickly, and I wondered how she knew before I realised she was talking about Arturo.

‘I used to like drugs,’ I said. ‘But I don’t take them any more.’

‘Why no?’ asked Arturo.

That was the easiest and hardest question in the world to answer. Because drugs made me so hungry and irresponsible. Because that was the best thing about them.

Bennett and I exited the toilets together to a welcoming party comprising Amanda, Belinda and Suzy. They scrutinised us and in the surge of enthusiasm the coke had inspired it felt like being caught doing something heroically wrong at school. Bennett roared with approval at the sight of them while I tried to keep a straight face. I’d examined myself in the mirror and given my face a good rub to eliminate any stray traces of powder, but under the test of those three meticulous and knowing gazes I felt transparent. When I looked over at Bennett I could see a smudge of white on the tip of his nose.

‘*Craig*,’ said Belinda. ‘I’m so glad you’re getting looked after so well by Liam. Now, could I impose on you for just a few more minutes? There’s a very *attractive* and also quite *important* supermarket buyer whom I’m sure you’d love to meet.’

‘I can’t promise I’ll fall in love with her,’ said Bennett.

‘I promise you won’t want to marry her,’ I said, and all three women turned to look at me as though I had made a racist joke: this despite Belinda having last described the woman in question to me as ‘that half-price *desperada cunt*’.

I had been becoming someone else for quite a while, or someones, but that was the day when it became clear to me that I had chosen a role that did not become me, that was pushing the people around me into roles that did not become them. I liked these women. They were clever and sophisticated and knew far more than me about almost everything. I had wanted to be their colleague, learn from them, assist them. But as I lost my equilibrium we lost our common ground and could see each

other only as cut-outs: the brash, know-nothing fool; the cold, unfeeling bitches from hell. By acting as one of these I had forced them to act as the other.

Bennett read their animosity correctly and tried to come to my rescue.

‘Thanks for setting me up with Liam, by the way. He’s been a good companion.’

But he was already being walked away by Belinda and Suzy, leaving me alone with Amanda. ‘You realise, I presume, that we have not taken that as a ringing endorsement?’ She made to walk away and then turned round again. ‘What has gone on? All that earnest bullshit when you joined – commitment to editorial development, championing voices from outside the mainstream, blah, blah, blah. We all thought you were boring. We thought you were safe hands. He’s got a huge rim of coke under his nose, and you’re obviously fucked too. Jesus, you’re not the only ones,’ she said, looking around her. ‘But earlier I told you quite clearly that he had a heart condition. Can I strongly suggest you do everything you can to try to remedy this situation?’ She shook her head in disgust and walked away.

That was a shock. Had I been told about a heart condition? Not by her, I was sure. But then she had spoken a lot of words to me that afternoon when she arrived at my table to brief me; had they all contained meaning? If so, she should have said. My head had been full of Sarah and now I felt awful. Bennett still had the coke. I would have to get it off him and lose it. Or *say* I’d lost it. I’m very much my mother’s boy; I may be susceptible to guilt but I abhor waste. I thought Amanda was probably exaggerating or lying to cover herself, but I decided I had best be safe. I stepped off the corridor into the room where the dance floor had got going. It was entirely made up of young women. I recognised a couple who’d started with us recently; I had no idea who the others were. The women looked so lovely there, dancing with each other, un-protective and slightly embarrassed, like they were at a children’s birthday party. And then we began to arrive, the men. The DJ was the publisher of Sweden’s most hip literary imprint: he had put on ‘1999’ by Prince and was celebrating by jumping up and down behind the decks with his hands in the air. I looked around for Craig and got sadder about Sarah. And the older people arrived on the dance floor, the publishing legends, the members-club raconteurs, the eccentrics and the elegant, the sharks and the chic and the scouts and the Indians and the auctioneers and the earnest-faced editors-who-really-edit, the recently-fired and recently-promoted, the recently dry and the recently high, the rehabbed, reformed, retweeted. It didn’t usually feel this febrile and poignant to me; perhaps it was the

lyrics about ignoring the impending apocalypse. The way the book industry was about to change, we might all be out of a job in five years. But my friends were facing the prospect with courage and so I stopped feeling so sad for a second before I realised who I was missing from the centre of the floor: James Cockburn.

Cockburn and I had become friends at various ceremonies and private-members clubs during the two years when the books I published from Birmingham were winning prizes. A hedonist easily recognises another hedonist, often in the queue for a toilet cubicle, and as we were both from the North, lads in a feminine industry, we became friends quickly. At book fairs he'd introduce me to the funniest and drunkest of the foreign editors and agents. I don't believe European women are actually more beautiful than British, but at the time their accented English and the fact I hadn't met any before made them seem so. As men we were outnumbered and popular, despite the limitations of our looks and characters. I won't pretend I didn't enjoy it, that it didn't give me an impression of my attractiveness and charm I could never have believed in as a teenager; but I was in the first glorious wave of love with Sarah and never did more than flirt. James was more used to it than me, more adapted: he felt entitled to his luck and whatever else he wanted. He had made a myth and come to rely on it for his place in this world. He had to keep creating stories for people to tell about him at book fairs; he was the notorious James Cockburn, outlaw publisher. I knew he loved this role, but I also saw how it trapped him. He was frequently in trouble with Belinda because of it, but it was also this persona that allowed him to do his job the way he did it. He was the ideal editor for a writer like Craig Bennett and they were the very worst influences on each other.

What was certain was that there was no room for two James Cockburns in our office, and that Belinda wouldn't hesitate to sack me for similar behaviour. For both our sakes, I needed to separate that coke from Bennett – but now he was trapped between Belinda and the producer of a TV book club. As I moved closer he saw me and shouted over, 'Liam! Cocktails! Three mojitos!'

'Oh, I don't like rum,' said the TV producer.

'And, of course, whatever the ladies want.'

Belinda looked hard at me. I betrayed Bennett rather than her, coming back with only one mojito and some wine for the women. Belinda was gesticulating to the TV book producer as I handed them their bowls of white, and it gave me the chance to talk under my breath to Bennett. 'Do you mind if I do a line while you're engaged

with these?’ I asked. I wasn’t going to mention what Amanda had told me, but I had to correct the mistake I’d made when I’d offered him a line at dinner. I’d have an accident and drop the lot in the toilet.

‘Of course I do,’ he said. ‘I’ll come with. Belinda! We’re just going for a fag,’ he called to her, ushering me away with a hand on the small of my back. He propelled me down the corridor towards the smoking balcony. I caught a glance of Belinda’s face as I was pulled in a swift right angle into the toilet.

Again, I was bundled into a cubicle, and there, finally, I had to confront him. ‘Look, I’m sorry, Craig, I can’t allow you to do that. Amanda’s told me about your heart condition.’

He looked over his shoulder at me from where he had placed his wallet on the top of the cistern.

‘I feel awful for setting us off on this path tonight, but I can at least get us off it,’ I went on.

He shook his head at me and went on doing what he was doing, opening the wrap and shaking coke out onto the surface.

‘Seriously, please give it here,’ I said. ‘I can’t be responsible for something else awful. And I really like you too.’

‘I do not have a fucking heart condition,’ he said, not looking my way. ‘Unless maybe heartlessness.’

‘Come on, that’s not you. You’ve got too much heart. Let’s look after it.’

‘What do you fucking know about it?’ he said, rounding on me. ‘It’s not what they say in articles about me, is it? I’m “wantonly cruel,” “animated by spite and distrust”.’

‘Journalists, mate. I don’t recognise that picture, and no one could from your books.’

‘And I don’t recognise whatever picture Amanda gave you. Look at me: I’m too young to have a heart attack.’

I *was* looking at him. He was red-faced and dry-lipped, licking around his teeth.

‘They’d say anything!’ he carried on. ‘They do anything to make you do what they tell you to!’

‘But let’s not now, hey? We’ll save it up for later.’ I heard my voice as though it was someone else’s. I had the forced tone of an HR assistant who’d just come back from ‘persuasiveness’ training. I knew I’d got it wrong.

Craig held me by the shoulders. ‘I like you,’ he said, ‘because you were honest with me. You didn’t flatter me. You told me about yourself and let me talk to you. Simple qualities, found in many places, but not always here. But I am free to do what I want to do, and you are not responsible for my actions. We hardly know each other. We don’t know each other at all. I absolve you of any responsibility. I will not listen to you. There is nothing wrong with my heart and I intend to do a line of cocaine right now. You may join me if you like.’

Although his words were robust, they no longer sounded true. It was a performance without point, playing the version of himself he’d tried to disown to me earlier. I think I could have spoken to the man behind the face, if I had really wanted to. In fact, I’m sure I could. And it is this that makes it unforgivable that I accepted the line he offered and charged out of the toilets, past Belinda’s stare and onto the dance floor, where I twirled around and poured my drink on the feet of a pretty editorial assistant, whose number I found later in my BlackBerry, ‘girl with wet feet’. I would like to say I deleted it and that I haven’t thought about calling it since. I would like to say much about myself that I cannot. There is something wrong with my heart too.

## Chapter 6

Lizzie sniggered. I had been hamming it up a bit. Arturo looked at her with an appalled expression.

‘Lizzie, there is something wrong with his *heart*!’

‘I’m sorry, Liam,’ Lizzie said. ‘I’m sorry to hear about your heart.’

We looked at each other then, and I smiled back. I couldn’t help myself. I really liked the woman. She had a forgiving smile: I know you are ridiculous, but I like the way in which you are ridiculous.

‘I didn’t mean that literally,’ I said to Arturo, ‘I was exaggerating too.’ And in an instant his wide, innocent eyes narrowed and a sly grin cut through the concern he had affected. ‘I know, Liam,’ he said, and laughed, and I realised I had made two friends.

The party in Kensal Green came to a sudden end at two, far too early for my liking and the other guests with ‘stamina’. As we queued for taxis, we gravitated towards each other, all asking the same thing: ‘Where now?’ There was a gang of about twelve of us, editors and agents, buyers for book chains. The assistants and the marketing and publicity people would have to go to work in the office tomorrow, and while it was possible to work at a book fair after only two hours’ sleep and enough booze that you were still drunk at lunch – was in fact something to boast of in your half-hourly meetings – your wild eyes and slurred speech would be more noticable in the office. Fergus the actor was still here with his two friends. We waited for Bennett to appear. When he did, he was surrounded in a triangle by Amanda, Belinda and Suzy, as though he was being escorted back to prison after a day in the dock. Suzy caught my eye and immediately strode over to me. ‘Liam: are you in the middle of arranging an after-party?’

‘I think some people are – ’

‘You need to stop it right now, or pretend to Bennett it’s not taking place.’

‘But he’s been to this party before. He’s not really going to believe it’s all over now.’

‘Well, Cockburn’s not here this time, is he? And can’t you just *help*, Liam? He’s supposed to be on speaking at the Fair at midday tomorrow, chairing an event

on the Argentina programme. If he carries on he won't have gone to sleep by then. He should not be doing this any more.'

Nor should I. She was right; it was time for my empty bed and Sarah's strewn clothes on the floor, to start to tidy up the mess I had made of my life.

'Sorry. I'll go and tell everyone to pretend the after-party's off. Come and help though. They all love him, they won't want to let him go. I need you to help me threaten them.'

'With pleasure.'

But it was too late. Fergus and the actresses had found a cab and as Suzy and I made our pact, one of them opened the door and called out to Bennett: 'One space left, Craig, get in!' Before anyone could stop him Craig had darted towards it. 'Craig, come back!' we all shouted. The door closed behind him and the taxi accelerated away.

'Oh, fuck,' Suzy said.

Belinda and Amanda appeared either side of me.

'I blame you for this,' said Belinda.

'I was trying to help Suzy get him home,' I protested.

'He was,' said Suzy. 'You can still blame him, though.'

'Do you know where he's going?' said Amanda.

'I can find him,' I said.

'Find him,' said Belinda. 'Stay with him. Has your phone got power?'

'It has,' I said.

'If you fail to answer your phone to Amanda or me, your day will begin tomorrow with me taking a long long look at your contract of employment – do you understand? I have never been so angry in my life. Just get him to his reading tomorrow, or get Amanda to him tomorrow morning in time to get him to the reading. Just take control of the situation, for fuck's sake. Sober up, stay awake and go and find him.'

I found him the first place we looked. I was in a cab with three of an endangered species, Irish booksellers, one of whom had been at the party the night before and knew exactly what had happened between Cockburn and Bennett. 'He was fucking Cockburn's wife,' he told me. 'It's sure. I heard them arguing over her just before it happened.'



‘I know his wife,’ I said. ‘I’m pretty sure one maniac’s enough for her. There’s no way she was fucking Bennett.’

‘Ah, you say that, but humans, you know – they’re always surprising you.’

We pulled up at the scene of the crime and looked up. A man was smoking out the window, contemplating the ground beneath him. As we got out of the car he finished his cigarette, waved and bounced the glowing tip on the concrete.

‘Nice escape,’ I called up.

‘Is that what I’ve done?’ Bennett called back. ‘You better come in then.’

Three more cabs showed up: Fergus was a friendly host. Half of the guests had been at the party the night before and immediately began to whisper the story of Cockburn’s fall to the half who had not, inclining their heads towards the famous window. I was busy talking to Bennett about our mutual friend Amy Casares, hoping he wouldn’t notice, and he was animatedly telling me about the adventures they had had in Buenos Aires. All of a sudden, he seemed very sad. ‘Can we get out of this room?’ he asked. ‘I know they’re talking about me.’

We found a bedroom and Bennett shut the door behind him. We sat down on the bed. ‘It’s good to talk to a friend of Amy,’ he said. ‘Amy was always the one for me. When she moved to Madrid, I should have followed her. She would have let me, I’m convinced she would have. You can never know you were wrong if you never tried. That’s what we want most sometimes, to know we were wrong. I’ll never know. I had my set-up in Buenos Aires, I knew what I was doing there. I had attachments. But when she left, they were different, the attachments. They weren’t fun any more. I can see you’re being brave about your girlfriend. And you should be brave. But I wish I had been courageous earlier so I didn’t have to pretend to be now. That’s what being brave is: pretending to be brave. That’s what it’s for. What I’m trying to ask you is, do you love her?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘And have you thought about what that means?’

‘I’ve thought about it. I haven’t reached an answer.’

‘Do you want *me* to tell you what it means?’

‘I think I had better work out that for myself.’

‘There may still be some hope for you. Is there any chance you can win her back? Do you deserve her?’

‘There’s a chance. I hope so. I hope there’s a chance.’

‘Then my advice is – should you give advice if it hasn’t worked out for you? Nevertheless, I will. I am a romantic, Liam, as I see you are. People will tell you there are many more fish in the sea. And yes, there are. There will be more women if you want them, or men, some of them younger and physically more attractive than the one you love. You will always desire them. Accept that. You will always have opportunities. It is the most popular deviancy among young women: their attraction to old men. I don’t see the world changing in this way. It’s the imbalance of the species. I’ve benefited from it myself. Benefited? I’ve been kept young by it. When what I’ve wanted is to grow old. You see, the only way to grow old is to grow old with someone. Because the people who’ve grown old don’t recognise you unless you’ve grown old too, and you don’t get old hanging around with young women. But you’re not *really* young either. Tantamount though it may be to declaring my idiocy, I am a romantic and I believe in love. If there is something unique in you that recognises something unique in her, then that can never be repeated. You can never love in the same way, only less or only more. And for me it’s only ever been less. I made the mistake of fatalism. There is a finite amount of falling in love available to you. Don’t spread it too thinly. You cannot love a hundred more girls. I understand: you’re curious. You want to know all of them, all of their secrets and joys and sufferings, their unique characteristics, but you will not have the energy. You will not even have the memory. Win her back if you can, and if you can’t, don’t fuck around for too long with too many. Or you’ll end up alone, and what’s worse, you won’t really care. I thought I was more alive when I was lying, preying. But it kills you, Liam, it makes you dead inside. It kills you. You are most alive when you love.’

We were interrupted at the close of Bennett’s speech by the Irish booksellers staggering through the door, looking for somewhere to take cocaine. ‘You’ll join us for a line, won’t you, Craig?’ they asked. He looked at me sadly. ‘Do you see what I mean?’ he said. ‘Please don’t,’ I said. ‘Don’t what?’ he said, shaping his face to inflame to an insult like a Glaswegian on holiday in Blackpool. I decided it would only provoke him into taking more if I made an issue of discouraging him. ‘I’m going to look for a drink,’ I told him. ‘A rum and coke, please,’ he said. ‘With just a very tiny bit of coke?’ I asked. ‘Just a tiny bit,’ he sighed, in a calmer voice.

More people had arrived in the lounge since I had left and I became caught up saying hello to friends and strangers. I found myself repeating the speech Craig had just delivered to me. After a while I began to feel guilty that I was making fun of him,

that people thought I was being ironic. I was not laughing at him. I was laughing in delight because of him, because he existed. I went to find him. Bennett and the booksellers had been joined on the bed by the two actresses. A steady stream of people moved in and out to hear Bennett hold forth on various topics: the nature of love, the derangement of the senses, advances in vineyard machinery, the Australian literary scene, the importance of courage and its illusionary nature, where to buy cocaine in Palermo Viejo, house prices in the Gower Peninsula, etc., etc. I had lost him to the crowd. I couldn't get near him.

I told myself not to panic and rejoined the gathering in the living room. Time passed in a flurry of quick conversation. When I looked at my phone, it was *late*, 4.30 a.m. The party was thinning out. I went to use the toilet and bumped into Bennett at the door.

'Come in here with me,' he said. 'I need a sensible fucking conversation.' I went back in and sat on the bath. He pulled the toilet cover down and sat on that. 'I don't even need the toilet. I just wanted a fucking breather. Don't these people on cocaine talk?'

I couldn't help laughing at this.

'Hey, fuck *you*. There is less hypocrisy in that statement than you assume. At least I have given what I say some thought in advance. That's the way to take cocaine – you need to have prepared some interesting conversation earlier. They have not. And they keep trying to nudge me onto the subject of Cockburn without just asking me straight out what happened.'

There was an awkward silence. 'So, what did happen?' I asked.

'They're half right, some of them out there, you know? I was arguing with James about his wife. It was because we were arguing he ran off and tried to show off. But we weren't arguing about her for the reasons I've heard. I do love her but I'm not *in love* with her. I think she's wonderful. Do you know her?'

I had met Ella a few times. She's a quiet, satirical woman, a psychologist Cockburn has been with since they met at university, and I like her for the economy with which she ridicules James whenever he switches into his performance role. Just a word or a look to put his feet back on the ground. She's from Manchester and has kept her accent, and it has enormous power as a corrective to his bullshit. I've neutralised my Northern accent, softening it while keeping my flat vowel-sounds. James picks and chooses his depending on his mood. When he plays James, laddish,

down-to-earth football fan, who happens to be able to recite lines of poetry by Ezra Pound, he comes on like a Renaissance Liam Gallagher. But in his publishing speeches, he elongates his vowels, becoming almost mid-Atlantic (apart from the rare occasions when he introduces a Northern writer, when he comes over like the manager of a cocky indie band from Salford). The difference between James and Ella disappeared when they were together: they played up to it and acquiesced to each other, they were a holiday from themselves. Ella was pregnant with their first child.

‘Yes, I love Ella too,’ I said.

‘And you know he was talking about leaving her?’

‘He’s not, is he? Who else would take him?’

‘Talking about it anyway. Who knows how serious that man is about anything? But if he was prepared to talk about it, I was prepared to take him seriously.’

‘But who for?’

‘For a woman not nearly as interesting a human being, not nearly as good for him. Whose very appeal is only that she’s not nearly as good for him. He wants to destroy his life, his happiness, so he feels more alive. Ah, fuck it, why did I think I had the right to get involved? In the end, this is how we measure our happiness, by how much dramatic unhappiness we have to narrate, by how much interesting misery we have inflicted on others. This is how we make our mark. Not by love but through cruelty. Isn’t that what tempted you to cheat on your girlfriend? To say, I inflicted pain. I abandoned conventional morality. People *noticed* me. Yes, people thought you were a vain tosser. Just like me. Like our awful role models. What more drugs do we have, Liam? We need more drugs. Let’s lift our spirits. What’s that stuff you were telling me about earlier that you had, the stuff the kids are buying off the Internet these days? I’m so pleased about that, that someone’s worked out a use for the Internet that isn’t wanking. Let me have a look at that stuff.’

‘I don’t think that’s a good idea.’

‘To look? Oh, *come* on, don’t patronise me. I’m not your granddad. Don’t you owe me some trust? There’s nothing wrong with me. They’re just trying to make you feel bad.’

I was tired of arguing. I pulled the packet out and handed it to him. He held it to his nose and took a cautious sniff. ‘That’s *quite* disgusting,’ he said. It was. The powder smelled of gone-off eggs. ‘Do some,’ he said. I took a dab, hoping that

would be enough for him. Someone was knocking on the door of the toilet. Another gang had arrived via a deviation to the Groucho. They'd brought two famous conceptual artists with them, friends of Cockburn's. They looked past me as I opened the door. 'Craig! How are you?' they called and pushed past, squeezing me out of the door.

The mephedrone whooshed up in me straight away and I found myself in a corner of the kitchen with Lucy, one of the actresses, talking quickly about something and inviting her out to dinner. I offered her some mephedrone but couldn't find my packet when she accepted. She had some coke anyway and we did a line of that. Her boyfriend meant she couldn't come out for dinner with me. That was fine: I felt deranged, entirely separate from myself. I was doing my best to break the connection altogether, because when I remembered . . . We talked and talked and time went by. I was searching through my pockets, looking for the mephedrone, when I saw Bennett walk in the room, clutching and kneading the top of his left arm. He walked over to the kitchen sink and pulled the cold tap on full, looking around for a glass.

I bounded over and hugged him. 'Here,' I said, handing him a pint glass from a cupboard. 'Are you all right?'

He filled the glass up and drank it down. He turned to me. His face was bright red, scared. 'No, I'm not. Quietly, please, will you ring me an ambulance?'

He was sucking for air, holding his shoulder and wincing. I knew immediately it wasn't a joke, could see how scared, and yes, embarrassed he was. He was trying to deceive himself that he was simply making a shameful exit from a party. The rest of the guests were looking over at us. I put my arm round him and rang 999 with the other.

Before they arrived he was on the kitchen floor, groaning. He had pulled my bag of mephedrone out of his pocket before collapsing. Fergus threw the rest of the guests out, even the actresses, and we could hear their voices rising up from the spot outside where James Cockburn had landed the night before. It was twenty past five. The paramedics would be getting used to this address, and the police too. Bennett could barely speak and neither the actor or I knew what to do. I felt for his pulse: it was there, jumping. 'I'll stay with Craig, you just make sure you're covered if the police come round – clean any drugs up,' I told him and bent down over Bennett and held his hand. 'Don't speak,' I said, from concern, but also because I could not

imagine what I would say to him. ‘You’re going to be all right. You’re going to be fine.’ I remembered aspirins were good for heart attacks in some way. ‘Have you got any aspirin?’ I shouted through. ‘Shit, yes,’ he called back through, and came back with a tub. ‘Can you swallow?’ I asked Bennett. He nodded. ‘No, fuck that – will you crush it up?’ I asked the actor. ‘It’ll work quicker. Do a couple.’ It felt completely counter-intuitive, watching Fergus place a note over two aspirin and rake a credit card sharply over them, chopping the powder down finely as I had done so many times with ecstasy pills. I asked for some on the credit card and leaned over Bennett. ‘Can you snort? It’s aspirin – I think it will help, it thins the blood.’ I held the card against his nostrils and he rasped a breath in, blowing the powder over his chest, perhaps inhaling very small quantities. I mixed the rest up with a small amount of water and fed it to him. Then I tried once more with the card to see if he could inhale some, and that’s how the paramedics found us as they rushed in, a middle-aged writer, on his back, mid heart attack, being encouraged to snort powder from a credit card. It must have looked like attempted murder.

Bennett lived on his own and so, in the absence of family to call, I phoned Suzy. I had never in my life been so rightfully attacked. She ordered me to ring Belinda to explain, and in a daze I tried to, but she didn’t answer. They would only let one of us go in the ambulance, and Fergus, who had known Craig for a couple of years, went instead of me. I stood on my own in a street in Soho. It was not light yet, but the sky was taking on a vibrant blue, something burning behind it. I had a day of meetings at the Fair beginning at ten. The police would have to be in touch, I realised, but no one had told me to wait for them here. The paramedics had taken my name and address, and we’d told them about the drugs Bennett had been taking. I’d given them the bag of mephedrone too. I wanted more than anything in the world to ring Sarah, who was staying at her friend’s in Camden. But I flagged a cab down instead and headed to our empty bed. Here I picked up one of her jumpers and fell asleep hugging it. It smelled of the wax she rubbed on her hair when she got out of the shower to control her curls. It smelled of Sarah.

It must have only have been an hour or two later when I was woken by a knock on the door. Two police officers, a man and a woman, looked at me with distaste. On the other side of London, the Fair was about to resume. We were a long way away from there. I invited them in, but they didn’t want to. My good manners had no currency here. I had to come to the station with them. ‘How’s Craig?’ I asked.

I knew the answer already from the fact of their presence, from the look on their faces, but I did not know I knew it then.

## Chapter 7

When I finished the story, there was a silence. Understandably, they were deciding whether I had made most of it up. I was not as truthful then as I am now and I had left a few unfavourable details out.

‘I think I hear about him dying,’ said Arturo.

‘He’s quite popular here in translation,’ said Lizzie. ‘He used to live here, didn’t he? The ending of the story, that’s not really what happened, is it? Is that a joke?’

‘I wish.’

‘God,’ said Lizzie. ‘No wonder you’ve decided to get away.’

‘It is not good to die of drugs,’ snapped Arturo. It was a comment of such obviousness it might have been uttered by a TV football pundit, if not for its brittle anger, as if Arturo had been personally inconvenienced by this dead man with the wrong idea.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I’ll understand if you’d rather I left now. It’s a bit much.’

‘Oh, shut up and don’t be silly,’ said Lizzie. ‘It sounds like he was going to do what he did whether or not you gave him the drugs. You didn’t make him take them.’

‘Whether or not that’s true . . . I’ve lost my job and I’m hiding here in disgrace. So, I’m here on holiday, basically. It might be a long holiday.’

‘How long?’ said Arturo.

‘Oh, for ever, I guess. Until I run out of money or get bored. It could be as long as a year.’

‘On holiday for a year?’

‘I know, it sounds awful. I don’t even like being on holiday.’ I laughed, and Arturo blew a puff of smoke into the room and laughed with me.

‘You can do my job for me if you like. You can drive a motorbike?’

‘Ride a motorbike,’ Lizzie corrected.

‘I can’t drive or ride one, or a car.’

‘Sarah said you were a writer?’ she asked, prompted, I presume, by this statement of uselessness. Many writers and editors did not know how to operate a car.

Arturo shrugged. ‘I *ride* a motorbike, make deliveries.’

‘I’m not a writer. I’ve had one story published, that’s all.’



‘You must have written it then,’ said Lizzie.

‘Or driven it,’ suggested Arturo with a grin. ‘It is not hard to *ride* a motorbike. I could teach you.’

I had never liked those writers who sonorously pronounced, ‘I am a *writer*,’ as if pretentiousness was qualification instead of side-effect, but in the end I confessed that I *was* writing a novel: it was slightly less embarrassing than continuing to admit that I had no idea of what I was doing there. Easier too than trying to explain the obscure penance I hoped to enact here for Bennett’s death.

‘It’s so good that you and Sarah can trust each other to be apart,’ said Lizzie enthusiastically, looking at Arturo.

Arturo shot me a wounded look as if I had conspired against him. It was a look familiar to me from watching international football. ‘Do you not miss her?’ he asked.

‘I’m used to it. She goes away for months at a time for her research.’

‘Arturo’s sad that I’m going to visit a friend in Rio next week without him,’ Lizzie chipped in. ‘You’ll have to keep each other company.’

‘Does she not miss you?’ Arturo persisted.

‘I hope she does,’ I said. ‘I miss her lots.’

After his initial suspicion, Arturo seemed to have hopes I could become a comrade in the struggle against inattentive girlfriends.

‘Lizze, look! This is what he looks like without his girlfriend!’

‘Oh, Liam, that’s sweet,’ she said, coming forward and throwing her arms round me again. I could see Arturo’s face over her shoulder. ‘You look so sad. It’s a sacrifice, isn’t it, to allow each other freedom? It’s so *generous*.’

Arturo shook his head in silent disgust and pulled out a packet of crayon-green marijuana from his pocket to roll a spliff.

‘What is your novel about, Liam?’ he asked viciously.

I’d planned for a while to write a novel set at the peripheries of the Rolling Stones and the art world in 1960s London. I’d spent years reading tall tales about these characters as a teenager and thought I could put them to good use. Suzy had already tried to sell a coming-of-age novel I had written in my early twenties set where I grew up in Blackpool. My alter ego’s life was far more rebellious than mine. He took drugs as a teenager in the amounts that I had only graduated to in my late twenties. Suzy had liked the novel but no one else was interested.

I tried halfheartedly to explain my new idea to Arturo and Lizzie, but even just talking about it was an act of impoverishing foolishness. I should have known from my once-promising career that if you ever try to explain the plot of a novel without gusto it always sounds like a very boring novel. It's like making a tackle: you have to throw your whole weight into it.

'Why do you write about this?' asked Arturo. It had stopped being an aggressive question. He was curious. I started to tell him about what an interesting time it was historically – the end of empire, the breaking down of the class system, the last throes of the Establishment seeking to crush rebellion – but I was answering a different question to the one he asked: Why do *you* write about this?

'I don't really know,' I concluded. 'I think I've always had a weakness for bad role models.'

'The Rolling Stones are very popular here,' Lizzie said kindly.

Arturo – who, with his full, feminine lips, looked like a prettier evolution of Mick Jagger, like one of the fabulous Jagger daughters – asked, 'When will you find out why you are writing this?'

'Soon, I hope,' I said before finally managing to change the subject and ask them about themselves.

They had met each other six months ago. Arturo's band were playing in the bar next to Lizzie's college and they had stared at each other throughout the set with the unabashed confidence of the beautiful at the beautiful. When they came offstage he had headed straight in her direction and asked her for her name, standing in front of her and letting his eyes do the work for him. His languid confidence annoyed her, suggesting he knew exactly how the evening would proceed from then on, and so instead of answering she had leaned forward, put a hand through the back of his glossy dark hair and yanked him in for a kiss. When she had finished his eyes had changed and his smile had grown from a playful smirk into a broad grin. He looked delighted, surprised, and she liked that, that he was happy to have lost his cool. She wasn't the type of girl to fall for poseurs, no matter how handsome they were.

I got a simpler, more proprietorial version of this story from Arturo while Lizzie started to cook. She had gone to see his band, she had stared at him, she had run towards him and kissed him. 'She surprised me,' he said laughing, 'she came out of nowhere!'

There was still something adversarial in the air when he spoke about Lizzie. 'Tell me about your band,' I said.

When he spoke I tried to avoid his eyes: as he relaxed they became so mouth-wateringly appealing I felt as guilty as if I was staring directly between a woman's legs on the Tube. Out of a sense of propriety I found myself looking away to notice the way his thighs filled his skinny jeans, the calve-like curve of his biceps as they appeared beneath his T-shirt's short sleeves, and then I gave up and surrendered to his gaze. When he finished I realised I had not listened to a word he said.

'We are playing on Tuesday,' he said.

'You should go! Keep him company while I'm away,' Lizzie said.

'We'll get wasted afterwards,' he said. 'I will have some cocaine and ecstasy.'

'I'm sorry, I really meant what I said. I don't do drugs any more.'

He studied me again and smiled. I realised that he was a perceptive man.

I spent that weekend thinking about Lizzie and Arturo on his mini motorbike, riding along the highway in the pampas, her tanned thighs squeezing his waist. To distract myself, I began to look for an apartment of my own. Lizzie had recommended starting on Craig's List and here I was immediately drawn to the section 'chica busca chico'. I thought it might teach me how to flirt in Spargentinean but all the adverts were in English, locals looking for foreigners, tourists, sugar daddies, a bit of fun, pampering, dinners. Less tentative posts offered the elite companionship of educated, discreet models. The 'chico busca chica' was far worse, American men offering to spend money on women who were sweet, didn't play games, were a surrogate mother, weren't materialistic or argumentative. The negotiations depressed the hell out of me. They were the opposite of love.

Lizzie had recommended a price region I should be paying for a flat but it took me hours of wading through tourist sites charging much more – feeling increasingly desperate as the electronic tango music in the lounge swelled like the theme from *Countdown* – before I found the places the locals used. After three or four excruciating phone calls with estate agents who couldn't understand my diffident Spanish, I began to understand they were all asking about a *garantia* and talking about two-year contracts rather than the six months I wanted. I decided I

would be better off waiting for Lizzie and Arturo to get back and holding out for longer in the hostel.

I was, I admit, reluctantly, beginning to see some appeal in living in the hostel. Something had changed in me since meeting Lizzie and Arturo: I had begun to lust again. The shock of leaving Sarah, of losing Sarah, had temporarily overridden desire for anyone else. And now I realised how much better this had been, for as I began to look at the women, the *girls*, in the hostel and imagine myself with them I began to imagine other men with Sarah. Thoughts of what she could be doing with the artists and curators and students who had always surrounded her, thoughts of what she *liked* to do, appalled and delighted me. But any delight I felt was not worth the horror. Any delight *was* the horror.

It had been years since I had been jealous like this. I had quickly forgotten how fraught the first months had been, the constant worry that she would go back to the boyfriend she had left in Brazil. She still spoke to him and he wrote her long emails about his plans to move to Europe. It took months before she told me she loved me, and during this time I developed further my persona, the man who didn't mind as much as I did, the man who looked at other girls and flirted and would spring into action if she ended things suddenly.

As months and years went past and I came to know she loved me, and, by extension, so did the world, I became a complacent, un-jealous boyfriend. I had even said to her, jokily, seductively, towards the end, that she could sleep with other men as long as she told me. This became one of our favourite fantasises. The idea of her fucking another never filled me with the terror it seems to imbue in most men. I think I really believed this. A fantasy is not very powerful unless it is also a real possibility. There were times I watched her kiss another man on the dance floor in a club or at a festival, times when she watched me kiss another woman. Delicious, shocking and unsustainable: we would spring straight back to each other, delighted at our daring, relieved at our restraint.

I had of course brought this up in the arguments in which I made everything worse. 'We had an understanding! I would have forgiven you! I wouldn't have cared!' This she chose to interpret as I sign I had never understood, had never cared for her, was incapable of caring for anyone. And, stupidly, unjustifiably, I exploded at this illogic. But it is *not* as simple as this, is it? This monogamous pact has not become the only definition of love, this selfish, fearful possession?

They make iPhone apps now for lovers so we can track each other's position as we go about our day. It's hard to imagine as a Christmas present but I bet they're given. We abolish infidelity by making cheating administratively awkward. The opposite of love. Or the true test. Cheating gets *hard*. Casanovas drop out in droves. The ones still going for it, now *that's* sexy.

And in my rage, because I thought we were better than this, I had oversimplified Sarah's point. You can't apply logic to fix betrayal. She had her own logic: I had lied, not just to cover my back but to mislead her in the extent of my devotion to her. It was not about my freely chosen moral system, it was about my refusal to admit to it, to wanting to have it both ways. I wanted to have my cake and have other cakes want me. She could have handled a revolutionary but not a petty criminal, not a con-artist, not an expenses cheat. It was just as bad as if I had fucked the girl I shared a bed with, the couple of girls I'd kissed on dance floors and never told her about. The only reason I didn't was to leave me a loophole with which to lie to myself and to her.

I hated that she was right, picturing her with the conceptual artists she hung around with in London. Oh, I hated them. Their idealistic politics, Chomsky paperbacks, lack of jobs. Their activism, their outrage. Where did it come from? Hadn't I once been like them?

Once, I had thought so. Now, I was in no state to judge anyone. I was becoming bitter. It had been years since I'd suffered the causes of bitterness. Lack of imagination, money, love: that's what soured people. I had had love and money but forgotten how to imagine; now that love had gone and money was on its way I had nothing left but to try and reawaken my imagination. I decided to start by thinking kinder thoughts about the sad-eyed men in the hostel bar who looked like they'd gatecrashed an international conference of children's TV presenters.

And with my change of heart, I quickly found people to talk to in the hostel. The TV never stopped showing football matches, wonderfully violent football matches, and I watched them with my notebook firmly shut besides a steady stream of litre bottles of Quilmes and harsher-than-normal Marlboro Lights.

'That's not normal, is it?' I asked the guy next to me, as a game erupted into a full-pitch brawl and a referee was knocked out by a flying kick from a Mexican right-back.

‘From what I’ve seen over the last two days, it’s not *abnormal*,’ he said. He had the polite, efficient English of a North European.

‘If you were prone to stereotyping you might make conclusions about the Latin temperament from watching this.’

He smiled and pinged my lager bottle. ‘Or about the English temperament from watching you.’

This was Hans. He was German. We embarked on a conversation about Bayern Munich and their powerful midfielder, Bastian Schweinsteiger, which some Geordie lads began to take interest in too. I asked Hans if it was true that ‘Schweinsteiger’ translated literally into ‘Pig Fucker’.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘you are absolutely right in this matter. It is a rural name.’

The tragedy of life was not only tragic, or it wasn’t yet; to smoke and drink and discuss football in all its exhaustive, erudite pointlessness was a convincing simulacrum of content.

I got smashed and somehow ended the evening on the roof terrace with Hans, talking to gregarious tattooed Danish teenagers, three girls and two boys, who asked me where they might be able to score some cocaine. The thought of it made me woozy, disgusted that it was so exciting. ‘Sorry, I don’t do coke,’ I said. Hans made the mistake of accepting large pulls on the joint they were passing round and wobbled away looking green. Then I made the same mistake. I stood up and tried to walk casually to the side of the building where I leaned over to look at the street below, thick with traffic and people on the pavement. It was not a place to be sick honourably, if such a thing is possible. My room was just across, so I let myself in, mumbling something at the Danes, and collapsed on the bed where, too late, I remembered there was no toilet or sink in my room. The girl I had been talking to, the single one, knocked on my door and called through to ask if I was all right. I lay on the floor next to the duty-free carrier bag I had vomited into and kept quiet until she went away. On Sunday morning, as I walked through the lounge with the same knotted carrier bag in my hand, I kept my head down. This kind of company was not good for me.

I spent the day in a corner of the roof terrace, dark glasses on, reading *Bleak House*. The digressions and never ending parade of unlikely new characters were unsuited to my restless mind, but thank God the book was so long, nine hundred pages typeset in tiny print. I was dreading finishing it and having to resort to the least

worst thing remaining on the hostel's bookshelves. It was genuinely possible that I was going to read a whole novel by Paulo Coelho. I might even have to read two. Of the same novel. There were eight. At one point the nice Danish girl I had been chatting up came up to sunbathe, waved at me, but sat at the other end of the terrace. I lay there looking at her, pretending to read, and when I had just about worked up the courage to go over and apologise for my sudden disappearance, two French boys appeared and bookended her. One of them was carrying a copy of *The Alchemist*, perhaps now making that nine copies in the building. I watched them all laugh for ten minutes and dreamed of Sarah before I decided to go for a walk.

The sun shone through the jacaranda trees and onto the fruit stands and café terraces, reflecting off the window displays of bespoke T-shirts. On nearly every street was an independent bookshop adjacent to a lingerie store. Whenever I saw a woman reading I felt a stab in my heart at the thought of the baroque quality of the underwear she must be wearing. It was Paradise, but I was locked out of it by language or, as it felt like at the time, by sin. I stopped for a coffee and a cheese and ham toastie. I was beginning to get the hang of ordering my coffee at least. '*Café con leche, por favor,*' uttered in an English accent, would receive an incredulous, '*Que?*' The trick was to utter it with the cadence of Bob Dylan berating a journalist backstage in his amphetamine-fuelled mid-Sixties heyday. Either that, or in the accent of an enraged Mafioso extorting protection money at gunpoint. This was how everyone spoke out here. It was taking some getting used to.

After I had threatened to smash the waiter's skull in with my tone of voice, and he had called my mother a whore with his, I settled down to pretend to read *Bleak House* while the beautiful creatures from another world walked past.

When the loneliness became too great, I bought a phone card and called my mum, my sisters. It was lovely to hear their voices, but they weren't the people I needed to talk to. I was still too cowardly to tell them about Sarah, that I was a cheat, an idiot, that I was suffering. I still believed I might be able to sort things out without disturbing them. It was Sarah's voice I was missing. Even on her long trips away, I had spoken or written to her every day, kept a running account of all the interesting events and dialogue that became significant only in the telling of them to her. She was the shape in which sensation made sense. Now I was dispersing.

The last man I expected to need in a crisis was my father, but I was thinking about him more and more. He knew what it was to run away, to have done something

shameful. I had not gone to him for advice since I was a teenager. I thought he might be grateful to be asked, might be grateful even to be listened to. But whenever I tried him, I got his answering machine.

‘Dad, it’s Liam. I’ve run away to Buenos Aires. Honestly. Send me an email. Tell me when I can call you. Answer the phone.’

I tried a few more times but had no answer. I was alone.

I was cheered up when I stopped at an Internet café on the way back to the hostel and found that Amy Casares had replied to my email.

Dear Liam

How are you, my darling? But I know how you are: Craig’s dead, poor Craig! And you blame yourself. Well, don’t do too much of that, Liam, no more than’s necessary. Craig was always perfectly capable of killing himself without assistance; but he did like to have people around to talk to when he was doing it.

You wrote about him beautifully to me, about the bit of him he showed people. His generosity, his childishness, his charm. He was a noble soul, a gentleman, but he was a mess too.

If it helps you for me to answer the questions about him and how he lived in Buenos Aires when I knew him there, then I’m happy to help.

But – and this is going to sound blunt and dismissive, but I’m risking it – you barely knew him and there’s no reason why it shouldn’t stay that way.

So I won’t answer unless you ask me again.

Enjoy the city. It’s a beautiful place.

Dangerous too. Don’t get lost.

And don’t let your guilt about Sarah get put onto Craig. It’s Sarah you should think about. You were so happy when I last saw you both, just before you moved to London to be with her and start your new job. Don’t you belong back there? Are you sure there’s nothing left to fight for? Can’t you go to her and sing your song?

I’m very angry at you for fucking things up with her. That is your fault. Craig is not.

Now, listen, you’ll be just fine.

Love from Amy



So, that was me, off the hook and free to get on with my life. Good old Amy. If I could have believed her. But I couldn't. Bennett died because I was too weak to challenge him. Sarah dumped me because I was too vain to resist being tempted by a beautiful woman, because I was both too cowardly to go through with it and too cowardly to come clean about it.

I wrote back to ask Amy to tell me more about how she had lived here with Bennett. I was no use on my own. He had walked these same streets when he was my age. I would try to invoke him and carry him with me.

## Chapter 8

It was the day of Arturo's gig. Lizzy had flown to Brazil that morning and Arturo had emailed a few days earlier: Liam, *Black Kittens play on Wednesday – will you come?* I didn't need reminding or persuading: it was to be my first proper night out for weeks. I had a strong thirst, and not only for liquids. I was lonely and every day became worse at speaking Spanish and I was bored of pretending there weren't pills and powders that might solve these problems. That they'd created these problems didn't mean they couldn't also alleviate them.

The Black Kittens were a three-piece. Arturo, the tallest and most desirable member, was on bass and backing vocals, sharing the front of the stage with Hernán, short, stocky with a cropped haircut, playing a Les Paul copy and singing lead in a high falsetto. Behind them, on the drums, was Aleman, the German, who was very Argentine and legendary, Arturo told me, for his habit of bribing bouncers at swingers' clubs to let him in as a single man. He ran a bar and sold a bit of weed and coke, a useful man to know.

In a fit of restlessness, I had arrived at the venue two hours early, just in time to see Aleman's van pull up. I received three different man-kisses in welcome, and helped carry in the amps and equipment. We did a lot of smiling at each other, Aleman, Hernán and I, more articulate and less stressful than our attempts to use each other's languages. And Arturo translated when he could be bothered (and perhaps changed much to wind me up). He played the role of a pretty bimbo very much to his own advantage; I was beginning to suspect there was a sharp humour and cunning behind his ingenuousness.

Having to translate for me was ruining their dynamic so I told them to carry on with things while I tried to write my novel in the corner – but not before I'd placed an order with him for a hundred pesos' worth of cocaine, a small amount of sterling that made a shockingly large amount of cocaine five times the strength of what we had back home.

I found this out just before the gig started. It was 10 p.m., the venue was half full, and some very attractive women were embracing members of the band. Arturo had pulled me into the toilets and handed me a small white pebble wrapped in a snipped-off corner from a carrier bag. He swiftly unwrapped a separate pebble of his own and delivered two key scoops to each of his nostrils. That was how he always

did it, without any of the careful ceremony and portioning favoured by the English. He loaded it up again and held it out to my own nose. I sniffed it up.

And then he was on stage, pogoing with a big grin as Las Gatitas Negres began their English-sounding indie-rock. Arturo hit thumping bass lines over Aleman's crashing symbals and Hernán sang Kurt Cobain-style vocals over them in a mixture of English and Spargentine. The coke arrived and immediately made me bilingual. '*Que tal?*' I said to the girl next to me. She smiled and said lots of things very quickly. '*Lo siento, no hablo Castellano – hablas Inglés?*' I said. 'Oh, yes, you speak lovely English,' I said. 'No, I can't hear you either,' I said, and then we stopped speaking, not before, I thought, a certain rapport had been established.

Between songs I shouted fluent Spanish at the girl next to me, which made her giggle and answer in English. Her name was Ana-Maria. She was a fashion student and worked in a clothes shop on the Avenida del Libertador. She spoke good English, enough to understand me when I spoke clearly and slowly, and so chatting her up proceeded with much less pace than it might in England when I had a package of cocaine in my wallet. But that was nice. I was too frantic at the best of times. At one point, I swear I am telling the truth, she said to me, 'I like your style.'

I wonder if I have sufficiently emphasised what a vain man I am, like any sensible man should be who isn't blessed with the good looks of a Brad Pitt or the absence of a libido. Women have eyes too, even if they're not as foolishly, sensually imbalanced as us. There's no sense in squandering our slight advantage by not being able to dress ourselves. Knowing how to dress themselves is one of the reasons why women are indubitably, objectively, more attractive than men, whatever one's sexual preference. It's easy for me to say this, I know: my taste being mostly for the straightforward. The guys I liked, like Arturo, I liked because they were as pretty as girls. I liked that they weren't girls too, but if they hadn't been girlish I wouldn't have noticed the opportunity for transgression, wouldn't have lusted for it. Pretty boys were the exception that proved the rule. And I would accept any kind of attention. I was susceptible to flattery. I tried hard for it. I was still slim and fit from cycling and playing football. I spent money on suits, shirts, shoes. I aspired to be a tart and I was pleased she had noticed. I liked women who cared about these things, who thought surfaces were deep. You could run your fingers over a surface.

'Thank you,' I said. I was having a great time. Later, I asked her if she knew Arturo.

‘Oh, yes, I know Arturo,’ she said, smiling as if she had suddenly remembered something pleasant.

‘A man could get jealous seeing you pull that face for Arturo,’ I said, and I don’t think she quite understood or heard; but she looked past me to Arturo, who held his bass on stage in the position a discus-thrower holds himself before letting fly, frozen in the moment of taut energy before unravelling, staring at a point beyond his shoulder as though he had plans for someone waiting there.

‘Arturo, he is fun,’ she said. ‘Only fun.’

Then what contrast could I offer her? I tried to imagine the opposite of fun. Pain? Work? Love?

‘I’m only fun too,’ I admitted. ‘Just not as much fun.’

And then I leaned over and kissed her and she kissed back. Can you believe that women continue to do this? And it was an enjoyable kiss too, soft, nicely shaped, like a sip of the red wine she’d been drinking. When I looked back up at the stage Arturo was looking at me with an expression of theatrical surprise. It was only then I remembered I had a girlfriend.

He caught up with me at the bar and wrapped me in a damp hug. He was very happy. Now he stood back, raised his eyebrows and laughed. ‘You *are* enjoying your holiday.’ There was a new affection in his smile; he was less guarded. Perhaps it was only the elation of being on stage.

‘Oh, it’s not like that,’ I said.

‘How is it like?’

Now would have been the time to confess the truth. I’m good at spotting these moments in retrospect.

‘We have a sort of . . . open relationship,’ is what I managed to say.

He looked at me doubtfully. ‘You do not *mind* if other men *fuck* your girlfriend?’

‘Um . . .’

‘You do not mind if Sarah is being fucked by another man, by his big cock. It is hard for a *macho Argentino* to understand. But, OK, I believe you, you *Englishmen*, you like this, it is normal. Here we would not like that. Over there, you do. Where you are, it is fun, *tradicional*.’

‘Fuck off,’ I said, laughing.

He patted me on the back and looked at Ana-Maria. ‘Don’t worry. I don’t tell Lizzie.’ Then he winked. ‘And you don’t tell Lizzie.’ With that he turned and walked in the direction of a woman in a mini-skirt.

Events progressed quickly from then on. Ana-Maria and I kissed some more, I talked a lot between kisses and at some point she said, ‘I think you are on cocaine.’ I apologised and offered her some. She was polite enough to say yes and then the conversation became less one-sided. I learned she was from Cordoba, moved to Buenos Aires to study, got work occasionally pattern-cutting, which was well paid and good experience, but she had to work as an assistant in a shop as it was sporadic. She had learned English at school, and had worked as an intern for Stella McCartney for three months in New York, an experience that had nearly bankrupted her. She had split up with a boyfriend six months ago but was enjoying being single now. She said that with the fierce expression of people enjoying being single now. Me? I had that to look forward to. I hated being single and told her so. She thought I was funny, I apologised too much, I was nervous, I was sad, I was very English, I was sweet.

Soon we were in a taxi to a club. Arturo sat in the front and I was sandwiched between Ana-Maria and Arturo’s new friend Lucila on the backseat. I learned almost nothing about Lucila; she was talking quickly across me to Ana-Maria while Arturo delivered a rapid pep talk to the driver. I was happy not to scratch the surface, to sit in the epicentre of two beautiful portenoritas, contained like a quote between feminine legs. “Lucky.” “Amazed.” “Very high.” Since I had stepped from the plane, I had thought all these people belonged to a completely different world to mine. I kept quiet, hoping not to scare them off.

Hernán and others from the gig followed us in Aleman’s van, and we met in the queue for the club. Inside it was booming, loud house music; the club just beginning to fill up at one in the morning.

I went to the bar with Ana-Maria. ‘Who’s the girl Arturo’s with?’ I asked, looking round to see him lean down and whisper something to her. She grabbed his arm and stood on her tiptoes to whisper back into his ears, pushing her high heels another two inches off the ground.

‘Just one of those girls, you know, you bump into, in the clubs, in the bars.’

‘She’s a friend of Arturo’s?’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘They are friendly now.’ Arturo was leaning on his forearm against the wall they were standing by, the back of her head brushing his arm. Their faces were only inches apart, kissing distance.

As the barman brought us our drinks I noticed something strange. Hernán, standing away from us, where he had been talking with Aleman, was now staring directly at Arturo and Lucila. He had a very intense look on his face, and I watched it change from incredulous disgust to a quiet, determined rage.

It could have been my imagination.

‘Hernán, does he know Lucila?’

‘I don’t think so. Why are you so interested in Lucila?’

‘It’s Arturo I’m interested in.’

‘I think I will find someone who is interested in talking to me.’

‘Oh, God, not like that. Come here. Come *here*.’

It could have been a more excessive night. The cocaine was strong but we only mixed it with alcohol. At least I was in my own – *oh* . . .

At four in the morning, Ana-Maria announced I was leaving with her. We’d been dancing for the last hour with Arturo and Lucila. We were all really drunk and I knew the feel of everybody’s body pressed against mine in an embrace. Lucila looked from Arturo to me with a grin of immense confidence. When she left us for a moment she would spin around with a flourish and stride away. Arturo, acting his part, would pretend not to notice, but I caught him following her with his eyes on a couple of occasions.

Before we left I took Arturo to one side. ‘Arturo. Remember Lizzie? Lovely Lizzie? Be careful.’

‘I am careful. And Sarah’s lovely too, right? I’ve seen photos on Facebook.’

‘You don’t understand – it’s not the same situation.’

‘Pah – why not? Don’t you worry about me. Worry about yourself.’

He hugged me again then. I felt his heart going under his T-shirt. I didn’t know him well enough to know if he was going to do something stupid with Lucila. It was arrogant of me to warn him against something he may have been too good a person to consider. That’s what I decided. ‘Before you go,’ he said, ‘take this,’ and he pulled out a large green bud of skunk and pressed it into my hand. I tried to give it

him back but he wouldn't take it. So I thanked him, kissed him goodbye and left with Ana-Maria.

The sex itself was great. Just the idea of an Argentine fashion student was mind-blowingly exotic to a man who had never stopped being amazed by underwear from Topshop. And we were high. Drugs don't only improve our linguistic skills. People who don't take drugs don't realise how good at sex they make us too. It's one thing us addicts can console ourselves with: we are genuinely better lovers. Fuckers, anyway. We go on for ages. We have *no* inhibitions. We'll say *anything*.

It's the aftersex and the afterdrugs that drugs don't help with, when the revisionist history writes itself. Waking up with not one but two strangers. The words you hastily sketched your identity with last night exhausted and without them you feel . . . nothing. There is no you. Politeness remains, a diminished vocabulary, the lack of a subject, the urge to make a promise you won't keep. The transactional I won't tell if you won't tell. Last night you had said *everything* and now you have to find something extra before the small talk gets smaller and smaller and disappears altogether and you begin again or run away. And sooner or later, you *have to* run away. Or they do.

This all came afterwards. We were excited as we found our way to her room in a shared apartment. It was a wonderful room, like one of Palermo's boutiques: a desk with a turntable on it next to a two-metre slant of records on the floor. One wardrobe, one chest of drawers. A saucer used for an ashtray. Two dressmaker's dummies, covered with cascading fabric, dresses in progress. Nothing on the walls but white paint. I was just part of the installation.

She was naked in seconds, completely unembarrassed. When I went down on her she held my head in a firm grip against her with her hands, rubbing against my face with wonderful selfishness until she came. Well, that was fun. Was that an Argentine thing? An English woman might think it bad manners. Not that I had any recent experience of English women besides Sarah. I thought sex was anyway too varied and personal a deviance to ascribe national characteristics; that was for TV sexperts and that awful American who wrote *Sex and the City* and had a grudge against English penises.

We fucked and I fell asleep and if someone had picked me up and carried me still sleeping back to my room, it would have been OK. But when I woke, she woke

too and there we were, staring at each other with naked surprise. *You*. There hadn't been much sleep, three or four hours, but the sun was pouring in through the windows and there wouldn't be any more now, not for me. She pressed her face into the pillow so I didn't have to. I hope she was thinking what I was thinking: *get out of here*. It's not to say we didn't like each other. But I think we both agreed that we didn't have to demonstrate we liked each other *now*, unprepared, defenceless and surprised as children. 'Are you all right?' I asked. I had had to bite my tongue not to ask Sarah this every ten minutes in our last month together. It was always less a question than a statement to the reverse.

'Mmph,' she said, turning over onto her side, facing away from me.

'I'll let you sleep,' I said. Then I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, the casual, natural gesture of the long-term boyfriend I still was. I froze the second after my lips brushed the softness of her skin. She was the wrong woman. *Sarah*.

I'm sorry.

I fell out of bed, pulled my clothes on, most of them – there was a missing sock not worth the seconds – and I ran away.

I got lost trying to find my way out of the apartment block. It was like the Library of Babel. At one point I had to lean against the wall and force myself to breathe slowly, my hand holding my heart as it tried to escape my chest. A spiral staircase sunk abysmally below me and soared upwards to great distances. After I'd calmed myself, I found my way out into the sunlight and flagged down a taxi. When we pulled up at the hostel, the driver tried to charge me a *cinquenta* for what couldn't have been more than a ten-peso trip. I gave him everything I had, twenty-three pesos, a stern look, and walked out the door followed by a stream of gleeful abuse, *la concha de tu madre!* He had to act outraged, even though he had in effect received more than a 100% tip. The fucking drama of the place.

*England. Sarah. Home.*

I let myself go to pieces for a few days then. I felt a swoon of exhilaration, of swooping hard and fast. After that, the monotony of being miserable took over. I cried with the regularity that I smoked cigarettes. My heart was blackened, blasphemous; I thought in the language of a Cormac McCarthy novel. One of the myths I'd been clinging to was that when I returned, chaste, to the UK, Sarah would



have forgiven me and we would go on as normal. But now I would have to tell her about Ana-Maria, a month after we split up. I'd lost the ability to lie to her; she knew what I looked like now when I did.

After a week I began to pick up. I stopped trying to write magic spells to make Sarah go back out with me and started again with the novel. I had known all along that I was a comic rather than tragic character. I had wept for a week because I had slept with an *Argentine fashion student*. I imagined my friends' reactions if I told them this, the incomprehension, the merciless piss-taking. Being cruel is one of the kindest things men are to each other. I normally preferred the company of women but I could never understand how they could bear so much sympathy from each other in the face of disaster. You had to keep thinking about the disaster then. The best thing, in my experience, if you had been dumped, was for a mate to make a joke about the woman in question being ecstatically fucked by a jazz musician. Because the thing is she *might* be, was what you were thinking: much better to make a cartoon rather than a documentary out of it.

I had decided one thing for certain: I was not going to risk sleeping with any more women if that's how it made me feel. I would just have to hope my libido took notice.

Though I was desperate to email Sarah, I forced myself not to. I continued to write to her by hand, in my notebook. I could not trust my feelings as they arrived. I would write her the best love letter I could, as true as Tolstoy, as romantic as Fitzgerald. The best love letter the world had ever seen, or I wouldn't send it. In the face of this awful hope, I pushed on.

## Chapter 9

It took Amy Casares two weeks to respond to my request for more information about her life with Craig Bennett in Buenos Aires. Her email, when it arrived, ended with a warning, and a tone of suppressed annoyance – who was I, after all, to claim anything other than fatal significance in the life of this man I knew so briefly?

Well, I could understand that, but she wasn't there. The man had tried to help me at a time when I had thrown away the happiest luck of my life. He made me feel briefly that I could survive the end of the world, or better still, that I might not have to. When he suggested I fight to keep hold of Sarah, with him by my side, to help me make my case, I believed I might be able to.

Perhaps it wasn't a coincidence my friends were mostly men much older than me. But was it paternal guidance or just a precedent for bad behaviour I wanted from them? James Cockburn seemed to have deserted me but would never anyway have enquired deeply into the wisdom of my behaviour, for fear that I would enquire into his own – and I had always thought I was grateful for this unspoken pact of ours. In the company of men who lunge to unburden themselves, I normally felt on permanent guard. What frustrates me. What I want. What isn't working. When did it become acceptable to be so bald in our demands? It was hard to see how the emotional life could be discussed in these terms; how it would not be deformed by precise language. Love, I had thought, should be spoken of on the slant. Or not at all. 'But that night Craig had given me permission to talk about it, to hope and have faith. I didn't feel strong enough to have hope without this permission, without him. I needed to make him live.'

Dear Liam

I met Craig in BA in the mid-90s – 95 I think. I'd been working as a producer's assistant on a few films, just eking a living with long months not working between jobs. A nice time, when I wasn't worrying about money. I'm not sure I ever worried that much. Something always came up when I needed it desperately. It was my first long period of time I'd spent there as an adult and it was so exciting to feel the Argentine part of me come alive again, although, with my accent, everyone still thought of me as the Inglesa.

People began to ask me, ‘Have you met the Englishman?’ I was intrigued at first: who was this Gatsby? Then, when the stories invariably involved three-day drinking and drugs sessions with his lawyer Alejandro and whoever would join in, I was less interested. I knew enough bloody drunks in London, enough wannabe Bukowskis and Hunter S. Thompsons. But there were rumours about the film he had written in Spanish and was trying to get made, rumours he was talented in spite of rather than because of the drinking. No one seemed to understand what his connection was to Argentina though he spoke perfect, dirty Spanish, knew all the *lunfardo*. And he wasn’t really English either, though his family was originally from Yorkshire. His accent when speaking English could veer from Aussie to Leeds to aristocrat. He was an impersonator, and I don’t think I ever discovered which of his roles was the main one, the real one I guess, and this is why I think I couldn’t be with him any more. The film he was making, he had written it, but I never saw him do anything else apart from talk about it. Still, he talked about it well, and people liked to listen to him talk, you know this, and once we’d been introduced we saw each other a lot at parties.

In fact, he did have a development grant for the film, one he was recklessly enjoying with his ‘colleague’ ‘lawyer’ ‘business partner’ – it changed daily – Alejandro, his best friend who he’d met at boarding school near Sydney when he was a teenager. When they met Alejandro had just moved to Australia with his parents from Buenos Aires, and Bennett had just been sent to school for the first time in three years after being taught by his father on his remote vineyard – they lived together just the two of them there, with his mother and his sister in Melbourne. It was a last-ditch effort to get him a standard education, to socialise him.

So there were three of us hanging out in Buenos Aires, all displaced early on, and used to making a life wherever we turned up.

They had a game they’d play when they introduced themselves to someone. Alejandro would start, ‘Let me introduce myself, I am Alejandro Miguel Marques Montenegro, and this is my dear friend and colleague Craig Bennett, the gifted filmmaker.’ ‘No, that is too much,’ Craig would come in, ‘I am merely the sidekick of this man here who of course you have heard tell of, Alejandro Miguel Marques Montenegro, the criminal rights lawyer, artist and Renaissance man currently assisting me, or rather directing me, in a small art movie I am about to begin to film.’ There’s something so sweet and charming about two men so clearly in love with

each other. At first, anyway. It became a bit contentious between Alejandro and me. Sad really, particularly now I hear Alejandro and Craig never made up before Craig died. That relationship was really a lot more important to him than ours was. He wouldn't admit it, though.

You can probably find Alejandro if you're determined. Try their favourite bar, L'Espada. It's still around. But try to forget and get on with your own life. There's not much I can tell you about him that I feel will help you. I hope you find what you're looking for, but are you sure you're looking in the right place?

Love, Amy

If I was going to snoop around a bar asking for a mysterious fantasist called Alejandro Miguel Marques Montenegro, there was nothing for it: I'd better learn to speak Spanish. It would provide a diversion from repeating Sarah's name in my head.

There is a popular theory, unproven by rigorous analysis: that it takes half the length of a relationship to adjust to its demise. Sarah and I had been together for four years so I only had two years of misery. I'd done a month already: a whole twenty-fourth of my time. Well, it wasn't that bad. But if I counted the year before we got together, a year in which I'd kissed her and been entirely obsessed with her, made promises and yearned across continents . . . I'd done somewhere between a twenty-fourth and a thirty-sixth of my time. They might let me out of my cell slightly earlier too, for good behaviour. Good behaviour? Unlikely. And this wasn't counting all the years I had loved her without telling her. So, if Sarah wasn't a special case, and I thought she probably was, I had somewhere between a hundred and a hundred and fifty weeks before I'd be able to have sex with a woman without crying. I certainly had time to learn Spanish.

I remembered Hans telling me he had been about to start a Spanish course and kept my eye out for him in the lounge. I was dangerously close to finishing *Bleak House* when he walked in and sat in front of the TV. As usual, there was a violent football match in progress.

'Hello, Hans,' I said, walking over and sitting next to him.

'Hello, Liam. How are you?' he asked.

'My girlfriend dumped me by email. So I slept with another woman last week. After that I went to my room and cried for five days.'

He looked at me askance. ‘I had thought you had not been around,’ he said casually. ‘The other girl, the one you had sex with, was she very ugly or very right-wing? I have never cried for five days, only four. I thought they didn’t make them *that* ugly, *that* right-wing.’

‘She was pretty,’ I said. ‘Much more than me.’

‘Poor girl.’

‘Yes, poor girl.’

‘I’m sorry you’re sad, Liam. But it sounds like this girl would be better off with someone better-looking, more charismatic, no?’

He said this with what, to me, was heartbreaking tenderness. I could have hugged him.

‘I would say you’re missing the point, Hans, but actually, you’re not.’

We started Spanish on Monday and I was immediately grateful for the purpose. Coming to Buenos Aires to learn Spanish made a far more positive narrative than I had managed to cobble together so far. The classes were in Lizzie’s language school and I looked around for her, wondering if she was back from her trip to see her friend in Brazil. I hadn’t contacted Arturo since our night out together and I was worried about what he might have told Lizzie about my adventure with Ana-Maria. There were a lot of potential misunderstandings and, more to the point, understandings that could arise.

It’s melodramatic to say you can taste lies. I’d lied frequently and joyfully throughout my life without feeling the awful anxiety I did now. It was danger I could taste, mechanic, chemical – but I’m not sure it was only this new sensitivity to exposure. It was acid, the taste of the slow digestion of the person I’d pretended to be while the other person grew inside me, eating me at the same time as I was emulating his voice, his turn of phrase, laughing at his jokes. The more lies I told, the more that man grew familiar. He was no longer eating me alive. I was eating him.

I ran into Lizzie in the corridor after my first lesson. Hans looked at me with increased respect as she embraced me. She didn’t seem surprised to see me and she didn’t appear angry either.

‘You’re back,’ I said.

‘Was I away? That seems like a long time ago. I heard you had fun with Arturo.’

‘Um . . .’

‘Um? An um is rather worrying where that man is concerned. Really, um? I hope I don’t need to be filing reports back to Sarah about you.’

‘Ha ha!’

She looked at me curiously.

‘I’m learning Spanish!’ I said.

‘I can see your textbook. Both of your textbooks.’ She said something Spanish to me, I think it was Spanish . . .

Hans, a continental, said something Spanish in return. They both laughed and shook hands. ‘Would you like to go for a coffee soon or something?’ I asked.

Lizzie had the next afternoon off work and was keen to check out the newest exhibition at the MALBA. I agreed to meet up with her after my class the next day and go with her.

After I had answered Hans’ questions about how it was I knew such an attractive resident of the city, I had nothing to do for the rest of the day. I had a brainwave and headed straight to the gallery.

It was a simple thing, but it reminded me I was actually here on a kind of holiday. Going to galleries is pretty much what I do on holidays. I’m not sure there’s much else you *can* do on holiday in a city: read plot-driven novels on café terraces, visit famous nightclubs, try to locate and not to get ripped off by drug dealers, get drunk on wine over decadent lunches . . . the list soon runs out for a man of my imagination.

I hadn’t been to a single gallery so far in my month in Buenos Aires, simply because they reminded me too much of Sarah. We had had a good system in art galleries: I’d go round quickly, looking at everything that struck me until I got moved by one thing. That’s all I wanted, to be moved by one more thing. One beautiful or startling work to hold in my head and pass on to someone else. I’d leave her to the meticulous analyses while I found the bar, bought a beer, wrote in my notebook and waited for her. I was never any happier than in those moments waiting to find out what I’d missed and what I had found.

If Sarah was gone for ever, I’d need more beautiful things, not fewer.

So I faced up to it, and instead of feeling sad, I felt the most at home since I'd arrived. The calming décor of the international contemporary art space. Every one of them done up like Brook's *Dream*, a blank canvas, an Ikea lounge, a photographer's studio. A place without background, a space to teleport into.

Art galleries are also the only places in the world where I like to get stoned; and I had been carrying Arturo's large bud of skunk around for the last week.

I shimmered into existence in front of the international doe-eyed brunette who sells the tickets on reception in every one of these institutions. Her fringe was perfect, as real as a photo in a magazine. She smiled the same smile she smiled at Sarah and me when we'd gone to the Hamburger Bahnhof on our holiday to Berlin a few months ago. It was a smile that recognised I was much reduced. *I know*, it said. *I saw. You idiot. But you are still welcome in here.*

'*Muchos gracias*,' I said when she handed me my change, and on a whim I asked, '*Como se llama?*' She smiled again but she didn't answer. No one knew her name. She was *Untitled. Sin Titulo*.

Moving on, I climbed the escalator to the first hall. Here I walked around some fluorescent sculptures and checked the cards, wrote names down in my notebook to Wikipedia later. 'Ah, León Ferrari!' I might say tomorrow. 'I really wanted to see his show in the New York MOMA last year with Mira Schendel.' I was relieved to see I wasn't the only one doing this: I saw a couple of other young men and women reading the cards too. One of them was even making a sketch.

I was back the next day with Lizzie and smiled with complicity at the woman who sold me my ticket again.

'Oh, I love Antonio Berni!' I said as we were greeted by a multicoloured alligator, a girl's legs in over-the-knee black socks hanging out of his jaws.

Lizzie peered at the tag.

'I always think it's a shame he didn't do more sculptures.'

'Yes,' she said.

She turned and looked at a large painting on the wall opposite.

'Xul Solar. I think that's another of his over there. I like this one best, though.'

'My God, Sarah's got you well-trained.'

‘Oh, it’s not Sarah. I’ve always liked art. Actually, what really makes me like art is getting stoned. You don’t fancy nipping out for a spliff, do you?’

‘Have you got one?’

‘Courtesy of your boyfriend.’

‘I should have guessed. Well, why not?’

We walked round the back of the building and I lit the joint I’d prepared earlier.

‘How is Arturo anyway?’ I asked at exactly the same moment Lizzie said, ‘How is Sarah anyway?’

She laughed. ‘Aren’t we boring? Surely we’ve got something more interesting to talk about than our other halves?’

‘We are boring. And think about that expression, “our other half”. Does that mean we’re half a person without them?’

‘I think I would be more of a person. I’d have a richer social life, that’s for certain. I’d be able to talk to other men in public.’

‘Rather than skulking behind the back of buildings.’

‘Oh, you don’t count.’

‘Thank you. I *am* a man, you know.’

‘No, of course you are. A whole man too, even without Sarah.’

‘No need to go that far. I’m happy to be half a man.’

‘*Really.*’

‘No, I am, really. I’m half the human being you are and Sarah’s twice the human being I am. It’s a rare instance of a clichéd phrase saying something particular and profound.’

We had been passing the joint back and forth.

Lizzie closed her eyes to think and giggled. ‘If Sarah’s twice the person you are, she should call you “my superfluous half” then.’

I really didn’t like that. I tried to giggle back.

‘Or do you become her other third?’

She giggled again. I was becoming stoned in a different way to her, feeling the weight of my predicament pressing down on me from overhead, screwing me into the ground. It’s incredible that I forget so often that this is what being stoned feels like to me. Contemporary art galleries are usually the exception because they



feel like the inside of spaceships, open space and no clutter, my life on earth far away. I passed her the joint back.

‘I’m going to need a beer or two to even me out.’

‘Don’t worry,’ she said. ‘You’ve still got two arms, two legs, a whole head of hair. So what do you have half of? A brain? A heart?’

‘We’re still on this? I have both of those, half a brain, half a heart. But thankfully, or regretfully, depending on your perspective, I do have a whole penis.’

‘Good to hear.’

‘I’m glad you’re pleased.’

‘I would feel sorry for Sarah otherwise.’

‘Probably don’t let that alone stop you.’

‘Oh, enough of the self-deprecation. We’re not in England now. It’s not as charming as you think it is.’

‘Fine. Lucky you hanging out with brilliant me. Now please put out that spliff and come and have a beer with me.’

We sat outside on the café terrace and ordered beers. Lizzie pulled out her pack of Marlboro Reds. People don’t much smoke full-strength Marlboros in England – the middle class are compromisers and the working class smoke cheaper stronger brands. But the Marlboro Red was the perfect cigarette for Argentines, colour-coded for the Malbec-and-red-meat candour of their desire.

She was telling me more about Arturo’s jealousy, the hourly emails while she had been away, the arguments if she proposed to meet a male colleague for a drink without him.

‘It’s hard working out if it’s the culture or if it’s him. He of course maintains it’s the culture. The *correct* culture, the way things should be.’

But perhaps it is *you*, I thought. I was having a hard time trying not to stare at her too intently. She was a talkative doer of a stoner to my wistful spectator. I was very much enjoying spectating her face, a long face, freckly with her reddish-blond hair held back in a loose ponytail, strands of which constantly escaped. She was always interfering with it, flicking the strands of hair away, fluttering her fingers around to emphasise points or resting her chin on her hands for the briefest moments of contemplation. She was not elegant or demure but how she was sexy. I wanted to see her eat a steak, I wanted to see the blood run down her chin, I wanted to feel her sink her teeth into my arm.

She grinned at the waiter as he brought drinks and flirted with him, rolling her Rs with relish.

‘I can sort of see why you might make men jealous, you know,’ I suggested.

‘Because I’m friendly?’

‘*Exactly*. You’re friendly.’

‘Aren’t you friendly to other women?’

‘I certainly am.’

‘Well, then, why can’t I be friendly to other men?’

‘I’m not saying you can’t. Of course you can. But not by comparing yourself to me. Who says my friendliness to women is proper?’

‘Isn’t it?’

‘I mean it to be. Or more likely, I want something out of it.’

‘Friends.’

‘Yeah. But every time? Every time I talk to a woman in a bar I’m only after a friend?’

‘Are we talking about you or me here?’

‘I’m just saying it’s easy to lie to yourself. I’ve spent my whole life trying to make people like me and I thought I’d got to be quite good at it. I love women. I feel at home with them. I love the conversation of women, the thoughts of women, the company of women. And I love the bodies of women, the touch of women. Being with Sarah hasn’t stopped me from wanting to make women like me. It’s addictive and vain. And sometimes it’s friendly. And sometimes . . . I don’t know.’

‘Liam?’

‘Yeah?’

‘That’s you, that’s not me.’

‘Well, maybe it’s a male thing.’

‘Desire and vanity are not male things. I’m not even sure if self-indulgence is either, despite what often seems like overwhelming evidence. You sound like you’re just being too hard on yourself.

‘That’s not what Sarah thinks.’

‘Liam, what have you done?’

I really wanted to tell her. I wondered if I could. ‘I . . . I don’t know. I used to agree with you. I thought you could do things that aren’t you, that are a lie in

themselves, an experiment in character. And if you tell someone about them you make them more true than if you didn't.'

'The thing is to not do them in the first place.'

'Of course.'

'But sometimes you do do them.'

'Regrettably.'

'Let's get some more beers,' she said, waving the waiter over. 'I haven't told this story to anyone. Can I trust you?'

'Of course,' I promised.

'You've heard the beginning of the story, when you asked how I met Arturo.'

'At his gig. You grabbed him to have your way with him.'

'I grabbed him but I didn't have my way with him, not that night.'

'Oh?'

'He was, he is, such a sexy kisser. I wanted to. But it's a risk with you idiots, putting out on the first night. Some of you get bored if there's nothing to chase, start assuming that if it was that easy it can't be worth it.'

'Not me. I'm always overwhelmingly grateful.'

'Always? Anyway, you're aware of the phenomenon. So I didn't go back with him. I took his number and he had work early so he left. I don't think I mentioned I was on a pill when I first kissed him. I didn't tell Arturo at the time actually. But I *was* on a pill, a really strong one, and regretting not going home with him, feeling really, really horny. I got talking to this guy Hernán and he took me off for a line in the toilets and then I was in such a *wild* mood . . . I mean, it's OK to fuck people you don't really like, isn't it? It's people you do really like who you can't just fuck.'

I kind of admired her logic. A few months earlier I would have found it profound and true. But my rule was simple now: don't fuck anyone, ever.

'Obviously it's important not to make the wrong impression,' I said.

'I knew you'd understand. Except, you've met Hernán – the singer in Arturo's band. *That* Hernán. I was so out of it and wrapped up in Arturo I didn't even notice the guy I was getting off with was his singer until six weeks later when I saw Arturo's band again, sober, and watched Hernán stare right at me from the centre of the stage for the whole performance. I hadn't returned any of his calls, and by this time Arturo and me are properly together, have had this wonderful month exploring

the city together. And Hernán has known all along who Arturo's new girlfriend is but doesn't seem to have said anything to him – I don't think he's told him, anyway, at least not directly. I think he likes having this secret over me, to insinuate at. If he has said something, it's worse, and it's Arturo and him who like having this hold on me. But I don't think it's that. Arturo's too confrontational to keep something like that to himself. I do my best not to go to the gigs now, to find excuses, but they keep playing more and more.'

I thought of the look on Hernán's face as he had watched Arturo flirt with the girl after his gig last week.

'Lizzie, you didn't do anything that bad – why don't you just tell him?'

'I think I missed my chance. It's so stupid, that embarrassment can grow something so small into such an enormous lie. I feel like I've got a bomb ticking under me. What do you think I should do?'

I didn't know. I was worried she was right, that there is a point beyond which telling the truth stands in your favour. I had been miles beyond this point when I had told the whole truth to Sarah about the half-night stand I'd had in Frankfurt, but who was to say Lizzie wasn't slightly beyond it now, with the same consequences? The people out there who never lied, they were so intolerant of we who did. Was it really their courage or just their lack of imagination?

I wanted to believe it was courage. I wanted to believe that could be me. I decided then that I would tell Lizzie about my split with Sarah. In a minute I decided I would tell her.

Lizzie had stubbed the joint out before it was finished and she lit it again before we went back into the exhibition. This time I enjoyed the high and winked at the girl on the desk as we went past. We slid through the galleries, talking less, caught up in our own impressions. I could almost pretend I had a girlfriend again. I moved up to Lizzie, who was staring at an enormous mural, and I opened my mouth to speak –

'Don't you dare tell me the name of the artist, where he's from, who his sister was or how he faced the challenge of the military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983. I'm enjoying looking at this.'

'Lizzie,' I said. 'I have a confession to make.'

'Yes,' she giggled, and I felt so happy at that moment I could not spoil it.

'Lizzie. I know nothing about Latin American art.'

‘Is this you being charming again?’ She pretended to yawn.

‘I came here yesterday and memorised all the texts on the placards. That’s why I recognise so much of the art and know about the artists. I looked them up on Wikipedia.’

That stopped her yawning. ‘Why would you do that?’

‘To impress you with my erudition.’

‘But that would make you a complete psycho – ’

“Beginning in 1957, coinciding with the space race, Forner’s attention turned to imagined scenes of interplanetary travel” – ’

‘Stop it! You *are* a psycho. So all that pointing and pondering before, that was all an act to impress me?’

‘It was.’

She screwed up her face in disgust and looked me up and down. Then she punched me in the arm and laughed.

‘That’s brilliant,’ she said admiringly.

## Chapter 10

Living begins to look possible when you have a true friend; the world lightens. I hugged Lizzie goodbye, though it was perhaps more of a don't-go hug. She extricated herself in the end, and we arranged to go for dinner with Arturo later in the week. In the meantime she offered to ask around to see if she could find me an apartment; she thought she knew a colleague at her college who was looking to sublet his place for three months while he went travelling. She talked me through other practical matters too: where to buy a cheap mobile phone, what I would need to get a library card if I wanted somewhere quiet to work.

The mobile was a good idea and I immediately went and bought one. My mum would be happier now I had a number she could call me on. It hadn't escaped me that there was a precedent for my sudden flight: my father's disappearance. I worried I was making the past present again, that time when he left her for the woman who would so briefly become his second wife. His disappearance shortly after that completed the derangement and since I was sixteen I had never slackened the pace of intoxication. I was making sure to call Mum every week from a payphone, to email regularly and keep in touch with my sisters. But it was hard to keep up a conversation because the one thing I needed to talk about was the one thing I was still too ashamed to admit. It wasn't that I minded admitting my faults but that I knew they'd understand and suffer any of my pain alongside me. I remembered looking at Mum the evening after Dad had gone, how the four of us multiplied by four every bit of sadness. I could still hear the echoes.

So I told them I had been suspended from the job, not sacked. I told them I was hoping Sarah would arrive soon. I changed the subject and made jokes. It must have worried them more than ever.

I had stopped trying to call Dad. I refused to chase him. But a couple of days after I had passed my new number on, one of my sisters must have had a rare conversation with him, for I was woken one morning at 5 a.m.

'Hello. Dad? Do you know it's five in the morning?'

'No, it's not, is it? It's midday!'

'You're ahead of me.'

'Definitely? I thought you were ahead of me.'

'Definitely.'

‘Oh.’ He sounded crestfallen.

‘But now you’re here, how are you?’ I said, trying to cheer him up.

‘How am *I*? *You’re* in Argentina!’

‘I am that.’

‘And you’ve been suspended from your job?’

‘You’re only just getting started.’

‘Wow!’

‘You sound exhilarated. It’s generally regarded as a bad thing.’

‘It’s just rather spectacular. What are you going to do?’

‘No fucking idea.’

‘What about Sarah?’

‘I cheated on Sarah, and now she’s dumped me. It’s a disaster. I didn’t even do it properly, I just flirted with doing it and couldn’t go through with it and then lied and got caught out. Not that it matters. She says it’s the lying that destroyed things, not the cheating. And she doesn’t really believe me about the not cheating anyway. I wouldn’t if I were her.’

‘Ah,’ he said. ‘Your sisters were concerned. They thought something might have happened. But you haven’t told *them* this.’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Embarrassed? Ashamed? I don’t want them to know how miserable I am.’

‘Oh, Liam.’

‘You’re not allowed to tell them how miserable I am, by the way. Let’s share that together, us *men*.’

‘You make men sound like a horrible word.’

‘*We* make men sound like a horrible word.’

It had been years since I’d attacked my dad. At first I hadn’t dared to, in case he disappeared again. And after that, it was hard to summon the energy. The anger had retreated somewhere inside me, seeped into cracks and corners. Forgiveness, in its first stages, is more passive than active.

‘You don’t sound like you like yourself much at the moment,’ Dad said, eventually.

‘I’m trying to be a better judge of character. Do you like yourself?’

He sighed. The long sigh I recognised from years ago whenever I asked if he had rang my sisters recently, if he had taken their calls, arranged to see them. The refusal-to-think sigh. The running-away sigh. The sigh that ended the call.

‘Don’t fucking hang up,’ I said.

The sigh again.

‘I’m listening, Liam,’ he said. ‘For what it’s worth, I’m sorry too. Tell me what happened.’

‘I don’t want you to be sympathetic. I don’t want you to make me feel better. I don’t want to feel bet – ’

‘Liam,’ he said. ‘Tell me.’

The morning after the best day of my life – it must have been years, but it felt like a day – I woke up in bed in another country with the wrong woman. I wished I didn’t remember how I got there but I did, meeting her that afternoon, staying out with her when the colleague I was sharing a flat with went home before me with the only keys. I had known full well that he would fall asleep drunk and not wake up. We’d ordered a bottle of champagne to her room in the Frankfurter Hof – just, I’d told myself, because I wanted someone to talk to; I had wanted someone to *talk* to. Cockburn, who had introduced me to her earlier, had seen his Frankfurt drug dealer Klaus earlier in the night and now neither Isabela, an Italian editor, or me were ready to sleep. We lay on her bed and talked for hours and when she leaned over and kissed me I felt a rush boom in my heart, tasted rust on my lips, and let it go on and on, until I could not forget about her, until the lust for death turned into the perfect recollection of Sarah’s face. When I said I had to go – I would sleep on a park bench if I had to – Isabela started to cry. I told her I was in love with someone. She told me it was always the same, we were always in love with someone. She didn’t know how we behaved the way we did when we were in love with someone. Nor did I. I put my arms around her and held her against my chest. I reassured myself that I had not gone too far. I tried to reassure myself. That was when she fell asleep. I lay there with the perfect awful weight of her head on my chest and then I was dreaming, falling, dreaming more than I should have.



## Chapter 11

The days were quiet then, Spanish in the morning, lunch with Hans, afternoons on the terrace writing in my notebook. The weather grew cooler. Every morning I scanned the shelves for a new arrival, a book I wanted to read, and went back disappointedly to sip from *Bleak House*. The narrator was unreasonably virtuous and made me feel the opposite. Every time I got excited about the story a new subplot and set of characters arrived to take it further away from me. The novel was brilliant, occasionally enjoyable, the last thing I needed and all I had. It was a cheap edition and its nine hundred pages were set so tightly I would occasionally lose focus and seem to stare at a blank book crawling with ants. But at least not having anything to read was forcing me to write. That was Chandler's two very simple rules for writing a novel: four hours a day when, one, you don't have to write and, two, you're not allowed to do anything else. Eventually you write a novel just to keep from being bored. But Chandler's study wasn't on the top of a hostel roof constantly renewed with multinational young women (in bikinis, when it was sunny). More fool him. Nevertheless, I was getting *some* work done.

On the second night I asked Hans if he'd like to accompany me to the bar in San Telmo, where I was going to try to track down Alejandro Miguel Marques Montenegro.

'Will Lizzie be coming?' he asked.

'I'm seeing Lizzie tomorrow. Her boyfriend is monopolising her tonight.'

'*Boyfriend*. Please tell me some good news about the boyfriend.'

'Although he's better-looking than Johnny Depp, he's substantially poorer.'

'Substantially poorer than me?'

'Mmm.'

'Please. Try again.'

'Although his eyes are hypnotically gorgeous, his job as a motorcycle courier exposes him to considerable personal danger in this city of terrible drivers and bloody accidents.'

'Now tell me how you have interfered with his brake cables and you will put me in a good mood.'

After I had reassured Hans of Arturo's imminent demise he agreed to come with me. We walked to an old-fashioned wooden bar with sleepy fans swirling

around the ceiling. We avoided the long counter and sat in the corner. It was nine in the evening, early for Buenos Aires, and there were only three or four others in the place.

An elderly bartender was polishing glasses, elegant in his white shirt and black bowtie. Hans went to demonstrate his Spanish-class proficiency and came back with two small glasses of greenish-brown liquid which he placed nonchalantly on the table.

‘What the fuck is this?’

‘Fernet. The national drink.’

‘I believe I asked for a beer.’

‘Look around you. This is the real Argentina. It’s not a place for a beer.’

‘They have beers. I can see them in the fridge. What are you talking about?’

‘Everyone I can see is drinking a beer.’

‘That’s not the point.’

‘I’ve drank this before,’ I said.

‘So have I,’ he said sorrowfully.

‘Don’t they normally have it with coke?’

‘This is the real Argentina,’ he repeated.

We sat there, sipping, wincing, looking around us. It was quiet. I lit a cigarette. I couldn’t see anyone who looked like my idea of an Alejandro.

Halfway through our Fernets I stood up and ordered us a bottle of wine. We finished it slowly. I liked being with Hans. Conversation was like playing tennis, with little breaks between rallies when we found out about each other. We always had the good grace to resume the game at the saddest moments of the conversation.

His sadness, like mine, like so many men’s, was over a woman, a woman he had lost through carelessness and becoming caught up in a job (the difference being that his had earned him lots of money and that I had liked mine). He had been an analyst for a stockbrokers in Frankfurt, working sixteen hours a day six days a week before he quit. I turned off when he began to talk passionately of the beauty of pure algebra. Other people had tried that on me, including one or two Hollywood movies. Hans was travelling for another four months before he would go home for his sister’s wedding, to the village near Hamburg where he had grown up. After that, he didn’t know what he would do. His travels around South America had not led to the

epiphany he hoped for. I wasn't surprised by that: I thought then that epiphanies were a narrative convention encouraged by teachers of creative writing degrees.

'You're shocked that changing location every couple of weeks, constantly getting drunk with strangers and doing no work at all isn't focusing your mind?' I asked.

'When you put it like that, fuck you.'

I was beginning to get quite drunk and armed with this courage I approached the barman and asked him if he knew Alejandro Montenegro. '*No lo conozco, conozco a muchos Alejandros, como es?*'

I was stuck here. I had no idea what he looked like.

I thanked him and excused myself and returned to our table with another bottle of wine. An hour or so later I noticed a new man had entered and sat at the bar. He was the right age, in his mid-forties. I had begun to imagine a Latin version of Bennett but in translation, if this was him, he became tall, broad-shouldered and handsome. I watched him drain a whisky and mash a cigarette out; he lit a new one as the bartender poured him another drink.

As I walked to the bar, resolved to ask him if he knew Alejandro, another man walked through the door of the bar, younger than me, slim with gelled dark hair and earrings.

'Alejandro!' he called to the man at the bar. This was exciting. The man called Alejandro stood up and they kissed each other. This was the usual way men greeted each other here. The casual way the man rested his hand against the other's waist and stroked it lightly was something else. It was a discreet gesture and I would have missed it if I had not been staring. They stood there, talking in a low voice for about a minute, and then they began to argue. The small man pushed Alejandro in the chest and Alejandro pushed him back. Next thing, the small man had taken a swing at Alejandro, which he blocked with one arm before pushing the small man back with his other arm. He spat something dismissively at the smaller man before pointedly turning and sitting at the bar with his back to him. The small man stood there, staring, and threw at Alejandro a volley of *cornudos*, *gils*, *hijos de puta*. Alejandro knocked back his drink and turned round slowly to watch him with immaculate disdain. With that, the smaller man turned on his heels and left.

The old man behind the bar had watched them sleepily. He reached out with a bottle and poured another measure into Alejandro's glass.

‘*Gracias. Perdon.*’

The barman just raised his hand. ‘*De nada.*’ He turned to me and I ordered another bottle of wine.

While he was opening it, I studied Alejandro’s profile. He was an attractive man, well-dressed in a fitted white shirt, his silvering hair cut stylishly and complemented by a close-trimmed beard. He turned and trained sad mahogany eyes on me. ‘*Que?*’

‘*Vos sos Alejandro Miguel Marques Montenegro?*’ I began tentatively.

He looked at me bluntly, uninterested and turned away.

‘*Amigo de Craig Bennett? Soy amigo de Craig Bennett.*’

‘I wouldn’t be surprised if I spoke better English than you,’ he said, looking back at me. ‘But I’m not friends with Craig Bennett and not only because he’s dead.’ He turned back to his reflection in the mirrors behind the bottles and in the awkward seconds of silence that followed I decided I should leave him alone. But then he spoke. ‘You’re too young to be his friend anyway.’

‘I’m no younger than your friend.’

‘I think you may have witnessed the end of that particular “friendship”. Are you one of those people who like to use the word “friend” euphemistically?’

‘Er – ’

‘People do, you see. “Why don’t you bring your *friend* for dinner, Alejandro?” Well, because he’s an uncivilised drama queen and he’s my lover, not my friend. Because I’m embarrassed I dredge such depths. But Craig Bennett, he was your *friend*, was he?’

‘Nearly. We only knew each other for one night.’

‘You *are* using the word euphemistically.’ He raised an eyebrow at me now, more interested, flirtatious.

‘Not like that,’ I said. ‘But I did sort of fall in love with him. Whatever that means. And then he died.’

The bartender served me my wine. Alejandro had finished his drink and I pointed to it and asked for ‘*uno mas*’.

Alejandro made a flat, humourless chuckle. ‘Your Spanish is cute.’

I paid the bartender and slid Alejandro’s whisky across.

‘You were his friend, though?’ I asked.

‘A long time ago.’

‘I was supposed to be looking after him. I work in publishing. I mean, I did work in publishing. My girlfriend left me on the day I met him. He took care of me.’

Alejandro exhaled and stared into his drink. He looked very sad.

‘And you didn’t take care of him?’

‘No. I didn’t do a good job of that.’

Alejandro pushed the whisky back to me and stood up sharply. ‘I am afraid I cannot drink with you. I do not want to discuss Craig Bennett. I do not know why you came looking for me but I do not have what you’re after.’

With that, he slapped two notes on the counter, turned his back and walked out.

## Chapter 12

I had arranged to meet Lizzie and Arturo the following evening for dinner in Arturo's favourite restaurant, a place owned by his cousin. I'd spent the morning in my Spanish class, before writing an email to Amy Casares to describe my meeting with Alejandro. In my letter I conceded defeat. I had met Bennett's friend and he hadn't wanted to know. Why should he care? I was still struggling to answer that question for myself. I was curious why Amy hadn't told me Alejandro was gay – from her emails I had constructed the impression of them as a talented heterosexual pulling partnership – but I didn't mention his encounter with the younger man, or his weary flirtatious camp. We should be sensitive not to send messages other people may have gone to lengths to avoid sending themselves. I have, I admit, a vested interest in recommending this scrupulousness.

Every day I looked for an email from Sarah. I had not sent her one for weeks now and wondered if curiosity would eventually make her write to me. That afternoon, as usual, there was nothing from her, and, as usual, before I logged off I navigated to her Facebook page to try to deduce what she was up to. She wasn't the type to post confessional statements, so I had been marking her progress through the increasing number of friends she was making, most of whom had Latin American names. Every time I saw her name followed by the information 'Is in a relationship with Liam Wilson' it brought home the reality of what I had lost.

Today I was 'no longer in a relationship with', news illustrated by a small broken-heart icon. I deleted it, felt sickened. My sisters might have seen that, my friends. A child's cartoon scrawled to announce a tragedy. Why not print T-shirts? What was 'in a relationship', anyway? Why did they make the wording so coy, so passive? Be brave if you're going to tell the world, operatic. Sing it like a tango. Liam loves Sarah. Sarah does not love Liam any more. Liam's heart broke. Liam is trying to mend it with alcohol, cocaine and indiscriminate lust. Liam is in trouble.

I deleted my broken heart and returned to the hostel, feverishly composing lines for my love letter. The letter, perhaps about fifty pages long now, was written in various styles. Chief among them was the lyrical nostalgic, manipulatively dredging my memory for our loveliest times together, a form I hoped was more Proustian than sentimental. (I did not re-read the love letter, only added to it.) The other mode competing for prominence was the angry jeremiad to lash the societal hypocrisy I

claimed had destroyed us. But when I sat down in a quiet corner of the roof terrace and began to add again to the letter I felt its overwhelming futility. I had my third cigarette and first and only very small cry of the day (I was beginning to feel like Clint Eastwood) and then I felt able to put the love letter away and pull out my other notebook. Four hours later, I felt more optimistic. Things were beginning to fall into place. I had three great characters – Craig, Amy and Alejandro – and I knew just little enough about them to simplify them into life without having to worry about accuracy. Amy blurred into Sarah. Craig blurred into me. A love triangle took shape.

When I had exhausted myself writing and settled down to relax, the thing I had been dreading all month happened. I finished *Bleak House*. Disconsolately, I trudged back down to the communal bookshelves and began to reassess what I might consider reading. There were the eight copies of *The Alchemist*. There were the five copies of *The Beach*. There were the four copies of *Tricks of the Mind* by Derren Brown; three of an instruction manual on how to exploit women with low self-confidence. *On the Road*. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. *The Dice Man*. I was thirty years old. And that's when I saw it: an English translation of *El Diego* by Diego Maradona. I flicked through and read a bit: it was the flipside of the native literary tradition with its formalist restraint, puzzles and experiments: this was operatic melodrama, the real Argentine sublime, with headings progressing from The Passion to The Resurrection to The Glory, The Struggle, The Vendetta, The Pain. I understood *this*. I was delighted and returned to the roof to read my new guide to Argentine life.

I arrived at the restaurant at half nine. I was more confident at the basic stuff now and asked for a table at the window for three, and a gin and tonic. Twenty minutes later, I was still on my own. I hadn't taken *El Diego* with me so I spent my time staring through the window, imagining what Craig Bennett thought, twelve years ago, waiting for Amy Casares.

A man in a suit with an enormous bunch of flowers hurried by, looking at his watch. Across the street the door to a block of flats opened and a uniformed maid stepped out, buttoning her coat.

The restaurant's tables were almost all occupied by couples, a lot of them young: the men in tight T-shirts, showing off their trim torsos and biceps; the women small and fragile with shampoo-advert shiny hair and mini-dresses, taking constant trips to the pavement for a Marlboro Light. I was feeling lonely.

At half past a moped pulled up, a long, limber woman gripping onto the driver, the nylon gloss of her legs slicked against his white jeans. Arturo pulled off his helmet and shook his hair loose. He grinned at no one and showed the white of his teeth. His face was full of the delight of driving his English girlfriend around, attracting glances, the star of his own movie. He hadn't looked over to the restaurant yet but I sensed he knew he was being watched. It is a common feeling (and failing): to suspect you are the only person in the world and that everyone else is performing for your benefit. I never felt it anywhere else as profoundly as I did in Buenos Aires. Everybody moved as if they knew I was watching them.

Now Lizzie took off her helmet and waved at me. Arturo, pretending he hadn't known all along I'd been there, turned and directed his smile at me.

I stood to greet them as they came in, hugging Lizzie hello and giving Arturo the handshake, kiss and stubble-rub that now felt so natural. Arturo, who made jeans and T-shirts look expensive, was smarter than I'd seen him, in a black shirt with three buttons undone. That's a hard look to pull off without coming across as a salsa-class Casanova. He managed it. I looked at the hollow where the low slope of his neck dipped into his shirt and wanted to press my fingers into it.

From over his shoulder, Lizzie winked at me. She was more dressed up than I'd seen her too, blending in with the rest of the *porteños* in a royal blue dress made of a sleek material that ruched around her waist. But below the dress and the dazzle of her legs she wore a pair of cheap-looking leather flats, one of the straps frayed and hanging on by a thin thread. They were the sort of shoes Sarah wore when I first met her and seeing them made me want to curl up and lay my head on them.

'Arturo!' a voice cried from the kitchen. A man in a chef's apron bounded over to embrace him, the cousin. I pursed my lips and winced at Lizzie: the theatre of pain a man might show his friend when a woman walked past who hurt him with desire. It was a popular look in Buenos Aires. She mimed her own look of shock and then we both started laughing.

'He does scrub up well, doesn't he?' she said.

When we had all sat down and Arturo had ordered a bottle of red, Lizzie attempted to explain to me what the different steak options on the menu referred to. Arturo quickly cut her off: 'This one is the best.' Lizzie began to explain the difference between that and another but he repeated it again sternly: 'This one, *bife de chorizo, al punto*,' to a wilful child demonstrating the correct solution to a maths



problem. Lizzie shook her head at him affectionately; giving him the benefit of the doubt in his cousin's restaurant. And Arturo was in a good mood, calling over to other tables where he knew people, putting his arm round Lizzie and resting his head on her neck, offering waiters good-natured insults whose tone I could understand if not the substance.

'What's made you so happy?' I asked.

'My beautiful girlfriend, this wine, the company of good people . . . '

I looked around me. 'Good people?'

'You are not so bad,' he told me, looking directly into my eyes as if he had been reading Derren Brown's *Tricks of the Mind*. (I had taken a furtive browse of this to see if there was a section on how to brainwash women into forgiving you.)

'Talking of good people, I got an email from Sarah this morning,' announced Lizzie.

Dread blotted through me. Oh, it wasn't *worth* it. I gripped the table and tried to say something.

'I wrote to her to tell her what a fun day out we had together, how nice I thought you were.'

'Did she correct you?' I managed to say.

'She just said she was glad I was looking after you. You didn't tell me she's in Brazil.'

'*She's in Brazil?*'

They both looked up.

'She's in Brazil, of course she's in Brazil,' I continued calmly. 'I must have got the dates confused, you lose track of time out here.'

'It's a shame it's so soon after I'd just been or I might have gone to see her. Aren't you tempted?' she asked.

'I'm really tempted,' I admitted. 'How far again is it from here to . . . '

'Sao Paulo's what?' she asked Arturo.

'Four-, five-hour flight,' he said. 'Bus, maybe two days.'

'I guess she's very busy with the conference.'

'That's it,' I said. 'She will be. We have a sort of pact. I stay out of art events, she stays out of book events. That way we don't distract each other, feel responsible for the other's boredom.'

'But she could not arrange to come here afterwards?' Arturo asked.

‘Oh, the conference had already booked her flights, they’re not changeable I think.’

I must have looked very glum then. ‘You’ll see her soon,’ said Lizzie, reaching out and putting her hand on my arm. She changed the subject before Arturo could ask another bewildered question about my and Sarah’s lack of desire to see each other.

‘How are you finding the hostel?’ she asked. ‘You know I lived there for the first month when I arrived?’

‘Didn’t you find the company terrible?’ I asked.

‘No,’ she said, surprised. ‘I liked the people there. Obviously, you have to hope they’re different people to the ones still there now. But what’s the problem with them?’

‘Well, I have a nice friend Hans. But the young ones, they’re all so uncynical. It’s like nothing bad has ever happened to them. It’s impossible to talk to them.’

‘You’d like bad things to happen to them?’

‘Only for their own good.’

‘Oh, yes, *their* own good. You’re a terrible traveller, you know that, Liam?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re not really a traveller at all, are you? You just sit around, reading.’

‘That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.’

The food was delicious. I did my best to keep my mind on it and not on the growing fear that I was about to miss a chance to surprise Sarah and redeem myself. I wanted to leave the restaurant immediately and importune Google for her whereabouts.

But I didn’t. I suggested we should order another bottle of wine. Arturo was still on his first glass but put his hand up and made a gesture at the bottle I’d finished five minutes ago. A new one arrived in its place.

I had wondered if there would be some awkwardness between Arturo and me, the complicity with each other’s misbehaviour (if he had misbehaved) making us wary of each other. Our conversation often fell into an unnatural earnestness because of Arturo’s good but not perfect English and my concern to be understood. I spoke slowly, reduced my vocabulary and held my gaze to see if my meaning had been made clear. It was the way you might speak to a woman you were convincing of your love. Look into my eyes and believe me. Waiting to see if the lie would take. I’d lost

the ability to give this look to Sarah. Her face had twisted up in revulsion when I'd tried.

Once we'd finished the steaks Lizzie went to the toilets and we were left on our own for the first time.

'Thanks again for last week. That was a really good time,' I said.

He smirked. 'You should enjoy your holiday. You liked Ana-Maria?'

'Oh, *no*.'

He frowned.

'Sorry, I didn't mean *no*. Of course I liked Ana-Maria, she's great. I mean earlier, I wasn't saying it was a great night *because* of Ana-Maria, that's what I mean. It was just fun.'

He looked amused. 'Relax, *ché*. I saw her yesterday. Lizzie and I have dinner at hers.' He smiled. 'The look on your face. You really are frightened? Don't be. *Tranquilo*. I'm not stupid. I don't tell anything next to Lizzie. Or Ana-Maria. We have, what do you say . . . '

'Discretion?'

'Manners, I think you say.'

'In that case, you have wonderful manners. Thank you. But I don't like you having to lie for me. It was a mistake.'

'Not saying is not a lie. You are too English about this. Make it what you want it. It don't matter. And, Liam, I see you. Lizzie says Sarah is in Brazil, there is something you don't tell us. *Vale*. You say what you have to say. I think you like to lie.'

'That's not true. I hate to lie. It makes me feel sick.'

'Then don't. Try, anyway. I don't think is possible. Life is lies. *Viveza Criolla*. Is like your footballers. They do not go down, even when is foul in the area. The truth is a penalty but because your player is truthful he gets the lie. Is why you lose. You have to make the truth. Now: tell me the truth about what you did with my girlfriend on Tuesday. When you spend the whole day with my girlfriend. What do you tell her about me?'

It was interesting to watch the thought occurring in him that he might have reason to be annoyed with me, to see it develop from a whim to inflame his face as if I had just bragged of cuckolding him.

‘I didn’t tell her anything about you. What was there to tell? I saw you talking to a girl.’

He smiled at this and relaxed. ‘That’s right. That’s all I did. Talk to a girl.’

‘Lizzie and I didn’t talk about you at all,’ I said; he looked less pleased at this. ‘Not much, I mean – I told her how much I liked your band.’

He looked even less pleased. ‘She never comes to see my band. Perhaps you should say something then about Lucila, a hint, something to make her know there is danger if she is not with me?’

‘I don’t think it ever helps to make a woman think she can’t trust you,’ I said. ‘Not the women it’s nice to go out with. It’s best just to be honest.’

He waved his hand dismissively. ‘Do not lie if you are not good at it, if you are an Englishman, yes. Tell me, do you like Buenos Aires?’

I thought about the question. I supposed I did like it, despite the strangeness and crippling homesickness and heartbreak. I couldn’t blame all that on Buenos Aires.

‘I do, yes, I do like it here.’

He looked pleased. ‘I’m glad you like it. It is home. But there are many terrible problems.’ He told me about them. Lizzie was taking a long time in the toilet. ‘We are different to you English and the same too, but it is hard to know which bits are the same,’ he was saying. ‘I don’t understand Lizzie. I feel like you do, and I don’t like that you do.’

‘She’s just free-spirited. There’s nothing to understand. Just let her do what she wants, trust her, you’ll be fine, she’s great.’

‘And you trust Sarah?’

‘Are you still talking about Sarah?’ Lizzie said, suddenly sitting back down. ‘Arturo, give poor Liam a break. You see he misses her.’

‘Oh, yes, I see that,’ he said.

‘What are you doing on Sunday?’ Lizzie said brightly. ‘Arturo’s going to the football so I’m free.’

Arturo frowned. ‘Would you like to come with me, Liam? I find out today I have one more ticket.’

‘Liam doesn’t like football,’ she said.

‘I do like football,’ I said.

‘Really?’ she said. ‘But you read books. You don’t look like you like football.’

‘I’m currently reading the autobiography of Diego Maradona.’

‘I meant you read real books.’

‘*Lizzie*,’ said Arturo, shocked. ‘*El Diego* is *obra maestro*, a tragic story of glory and betrayal. Of course,’ he said, turning to me, ‘it is a shame he played for Boca.’

‘So it’s not Boca you’re going to see?’

It wasn’t. He was a *millionario*. I avoided making the obvious joke and asking why then did he deliver parcels on a moped every day? He was a sensitive man, I could see, behind the beauty and swagger. He perhaps wasn’t best suited to the machismo he felt the city required of him. And I knew, because I clung to football in this country like a life-raft, that by *millionario* he was identifying himself as a River Plate fan, the bitter enemies of Maradona’s old club. It hadn’t escaped me that he had only offered me a ticket when he heard Lizzie and I were planning to spend another day together without him. It wouldn’t have escaped Lizzie either.

‘You should go,’ she said to me. ‘If you do like football.’ The scepticism in her voice was not directed at me alone.

And at that moment, with Arturo staring malevolently at me, I hated football, but I said the opposite and Arturo and I made arrangements to meet at Aleman’s bar in walking distance of the stadium Monumental.

There was a scene when it came to paying the bill. I’d assumed we’d split it three ways but it was incredible to Arturo that he would not pay for Lizzie and as I was on the table that meant he would pay for me too.

‘But I drank most of the wine,’ I said. ‘You had one glass. At least let me pay for that.’

He wouldn’t. ‘You are my guest here. When I am in England, you will look after me.’

We’d spoken about the peso and the economic crash at the start of the century, the rising inflation today. The currency, while fine to live well in Buenos Aires, was never enough on his wages to afford international flights or the cost of existing in England. It was a sad offer, full of bravado and a proud hospitality. But Lizzie seemed bored with the display and I wondered then how much it was for my benefit.

That was Thursday. As soon as I got back to the hostel I went online to book a ticket and the next morning I caught a flight to Sao Paulo to find Sarah.

## Part Two: My Lie

## Chapter 13

An extract from *My Biggest Lie* by Craig Bennett, published October 2009 (Eliot, Quinn)

Amy was still filming. Craig chose a seat with his back to the bar's door; he didn't want to spend hours watching for Amy to appear in it.

After an hour, he had a sore neck and moved to the other side of the table to stare more easily at the door. He attempted and failed to read, to write, to drink slowly. All he had managed was to rehearse speeches.

He had tried a 'remember the good times?' speech. Sad, manipulative and true. They had been the best times.

He had tried an 'I will overwhelm you with the strength and eloquence of my emotions and convictions' speech.

He had tried an 'I have wronged you but less than you think' speech.

A 'let's go back in time' speech.

An 'I forgive you for wronging me' speech.

He had tried an 'if you had suffered what I have suffered' speech. A mitigating circumstances defence. A mendacious plot device in literary novels: the warping past.

An 'open your eyes and see' speech.

A 'he's a fat old bastard' speech.

A 'you need to respect yourself more' speech.

The 'I will make it easy for you to forget why you loved me' speech.

There was nothing he could say and then she came in.

By then, he had abandoned his attempts to look busy. When she stepped through the door she bumped straight into his gaze, his yearning, his hope. She hadn't had time to prepare her face for seeing him and, before she made herself cool, he watched her flinch and show the panic she was feeling. Her curls were falling out of the band she'd used to tie her hair back. That's what they did, what I expect they still do. He recognised the black dress she was wearing. Looking at her in it was feeling her against his skin. Her sandals, they were new. They were nice sandals. It had only been a month since she waved goodbye to him at Ezeiza airport but already he could spot the small things that had changed. She smiled at him the brilliance of



her smile. She changed her mind and made herself look serious. And that made him smile and made her struggle not to.

When he stood up to embrace her the beers he had drunk surprised him and tipped him into her arms.

‘Craig,’ she said, holding him there. ‘What the fuck are you doing here in Madrid, really?’

‘I’ve come to tell you I love you.’

‘That’s not the issue. I know you love me. This isn’t fucking Hollywood.’

‘I know, it’s independent Spanish cinema. But love, you are Hollywood.’

She tipped him back upright and set him on his feet. ‘That’s very sweet of you to say so, Craig. I presume you’re complimenting my looks rather than my vacuousness.’

‘It was a glib metaphor. You’re actually too beautiful for Hollywood.’

‘And you’re too cheesy, even for Spain. I need a drink. I need three drinks. How many have you had?’

‘Fewer than necessary. But give me a second and I’ll fix that.’

He brought her back two drinks: a brimming rum and coke and a bottle of beer. They had fallen in love being drunk and impulsive. They had remained in love when they were sober. He didn’t want to believe that events had changed this, that any decisions were necessary or unalterable.

She looked at the drinks he placed in front of her and narrowed her eyes at him to let him know she knew what he was up to.

‘How’s the filming going?’ he asked.

Her face lit up. ‘It’s the most fun I’ve ever had, I think.’

He tried to look as if he was as happy at hearing this news as he would have been if they were still together. But it was a stupid thing to feign, this ambivalence to what was most important to him. Love had never been about altruism. He wanted her triumphs for his own and he wanted his own for her.

‘I’m really happy, I really am,’ he said, reaching out and putting his hand on hers.

‘Thank you.’ She smiled a sad smile and pulled her hand away.

‘Nothing that’s changed is necessary,’ he said.

‘I’m sorry I haven’t said this earlier,’ he said.

‘We can go back to the way things were,’ he said.

He had said much more than this. She smiled sadly throughout all of it and by the end she had taken his hand back and was holding it.

‘We can’t go back,’ she said. ‘I prefer it like this.’

## Chapter 14

I flew back into Jorge Newbery on Saturday afternoon. The horror I had experienced in Sao Paulo had not happened to me yet; it was a cinema dream, a flicker in a dark place. As I stepped out of the airport, the sun was up, a cold breeze coming in from La Plata. I was an implausible character in this landscape but I blinked my eyes and didn't wake up. Too drained to defend myself from a taxi driver, I waited for a bus. My first trip to Brazil had lasted less than twenty-four hours. I was in no hurry to go back.

I found one comfort that day: when I stepped off the bus in Palermo I recognised it for what it was: *home*. So this was it, this was where I lived now.

It would be worth narrating if I *hadn't* made a mess of myself that Saturday night. As it was, when I headed to meet Arturo in Aleman's bar – Achtung! – on Sunday afternoon, I was shaking, the sun was glaring and I was thinking what a relief it would be to sit down at the side of the road and weep. I didn't do that; I trudged on, tripped over a cracked paving stone and scraped my hands on the pavement as I broke my fall. I was consumed by *bronca*. I kicked a brick wall and hurt my foot. A man passing shouted something too fast for me to understand but it sounded comradely. I'm with you, brother! Capitalist dogs! Kick down the walls!

I was in this furious mood when I arrived at the bar, forty-five minutes late, unreasonably so even here; but Arturo was unfazed, sipping a coke at the bar, chatting to Aleman. I suspected he'd just walked in. 'How are you?' he asked, glancing at his watch when I sat down next to him.

'Fucking awful. This fucking place,' I said, showing him my skinned hands. 'Fucking pavements.'

Arturo looked at Aleman and they laughed.

'I'm glad you both think it's fucking funny,' I said. '*Una cerveza muy grande por favor.*'

They laughed again. '*La bronca,*' said Aleman, nodding at me.

'Liam, *felicidades,*' said Arturo. 'You are now a *porteño.*'

'Fuck off,' I said.

He reached over and put his arm round me. 'Would you like for me to recommend to you the psychoanalyst of my aunt?' I shrugged him off. Aleman and he were delighted by my bad mood. I had become real to them.

I drank half of my beer down in a couple of gulps and felt a bit better. It was a proper bar, just a small wooden counter with glasses hanging upside down above it. There was an old-fashioned TV on a high shelf in the corner of the room, a pool table on the other side, Arturo, Aleman and me and an old guy reading the paper underneath the TV.

'How long before we leave for the game?' I asked.

Arturo looked away for a second. 'A change of plan. We watch it here.'

'Sorry?'

'We watch it here. But you tell Lizzie we went to the game.'

He explained that he had never had another ticket, just his own. He had tried to get another for me but it had been trickier than he expected, and in the end he decided it would be easiest to watch the game in Aleman's bar. We could not let Lizzie know that because it would confirm to her that he had lied to prevent us spending the day together on our own. 'It is not that I don't trust you, *ché*,' he said, 'or I don't trust her, but this is the right thing. You and me, watching the football on a Sunday afternoon, no? This is what we men do. *I take my girlfriend out, not you.*'

Arturo spoke so casually I could not take what he said as a threat. But I was annoyed. I would have much preferred to spend time with Lizzie than with the machos who were beginning to fill the bar. It was a day when I wanted to admit my weakness instead of laughing about it to show how strong I was. I like to think I would have told Lizzie the truth that day, and then we would not have fallen out so badly.

River Plate were playing Banfield, a Buenos Aires derby, but this was strictly a pub for the *millionarios*, the red and white flag of River now pinned across the window. The bar filled up as we got close to kick-off. Arturo was talking to everyone, introducing me, and I was *Lo siento, hablo solo un poquito Castellano*-ing away, smiling broadly and occasionally managing to understand and make myself understood. The more beer I drank, the less language mattered.

The game kicked off. Hernán arrived and sat next to us at the bar after kissing and embracing Arturo. All I got was a nod. Arturo and Hernán began to talk to each

other intensely in rapid tongue-rolling Spargie I could not hope to follow. Nevertheless, I strained to catch words, trying to work out if Lizzie had anything to worry about.

Whatever they were talking about stopped as River Plate went one-nil down and the bar erupted into a mixture of outrage and delight; a crowd delighted at being outraged. The goal was incredible. A Banfield player had rounded five players and the goalkeeper in an astonishing run. When he side-footed it towards the open goal a defender dived at full length and tipped it around the post with his fingers. I had never seen such an audacious foul, such a sublime affirmation of cheating. The defender was immediately sent off.

I remembered Arturo's theory about why the English don't win football matches and asked him, 'Was that a good foul? Do you approve?'

He thought for a moment. 'Only if he misses the penalty. No, is not a good foul so early in the game. Last minute, *viveza Criolla*; first half, fucking stupid.'

Banfield scored the penalty.

The bar swore loudly, beautifully.

Hernán and Arturo were disappearing to the toilet at regular intervals and soon we were all chatting away at full speed in a mixture of broken English and Spanish, each of us trying to provide the definitive analysis of the game we were barely watching. River Plate came back in the second half with a goal from a corner and it ended one-all. The *millionario* crowd complained bitterly and half of the bar left. We carried on drinking.

At one point, I returned to the bar from my own visit to the toilet to find Hernán leaning in to Arturo, his hand on his arm, speaking close to his ear. Both looked at me suspiciously as I sat back down.

'What are you talking about?' I asked.

'Lizzie,' said Arturo, and they both stared at me. 'Why she is angry at me.'

'*Olvidate!*' said Hernán.

'You will tell her we went to the game?' Arturo asked me.

'Yes,' I said wearily.

'You said on Thursday you will not lie any more,' he pressed.

'I was lying,' I said.

He seemed happier with that. Hernán continued to glare at me before he left to talk to a friend on the other side of the bar.

‘What’s he saying about Lizzie?’ I asked Arturo.

‘Nothing.’

‘Really?’

‘I should not say. You are her friend. He is saying that he thinks he sees her in clubs talking to other men, you know, more than talking.’

I laughed. ‘She’s not like that.’

‘It is not funny,’ scowled Arturo.

‘No, it’s not. She’s a friendly woman who talks to other human beings. So what? Don’t fuck it up, Arturo.’

‘Fuck you. How do I fuck it up?’

‘By listening to rubbish like this.’

‘You people. “Friendly.” You do not care about each other.’

‘Us people?’

‘Look at you: you leave your girlfriend on the other side of the world. Why? Why are you here when she is not?’

‘*Us people?* Do you want to know where I woke up yesterday morning?’

He shrugged.

‘I’m getting out of here. See you later, Arturo.’

‘Where, then?’

‘Fuck you, Arturo. Really, fuck *you*.’

He looked up at me and saw the expression on my face. His anger softened and he put his arm on my shoulder. ‘Liam, where?’

So I told him.

I saw her first. I found the lecture theatre and there was no one stopping to ask for my name so I walked straight through. I arrived just as she was giving her paper, watching her through a glass porthole in the door. She stood, shuffling her papers, bookish in her reading glasses, sexy in a black curator’s dress that I had bought her last Christmas. It was the most money I’d ever spent on an item of clothing. I’d imagined her wearing it in interviews or at the openings where she’d meet the people who would make her career and our life what it would become. The room held about fifty students, all looking intently at her. She had once come home to me. The dress had been a bit too tight when I bought it for her. Not too tight, but it couldn’t have got any tighter without it being too tight. Now there was give to it. She looked

different. She looked the same. The straight drops of the black dress skimmed her hips and I could feel the fabric and the curve of her between my fingers, in my throat, in my lungs. She pressed a button on the laptop; a line drawing covered in stamps was projected behind her, and she began with the words ‘In presenting my paper here I was interested why that . . . ’ And I, the idiot who had driven her away, not only by lying to her, wondered if I should improve her grammar later.

I watched her speak for the next half hour. I watched the way her lips moved, the way her nervous pauses disappeared quickly, the way she looked up to the back row as she made the room laugh with a joke, looking down at her feet shyly then back up, the way her eyes kept returning to one spot where her smile grew bigger. I didn’t want to follow her eyes to that spot. I found his name out later, from her Facebook page. He was the first to ask a question when she had finished. It was in English but I didn’t understand it; the speaker was Latin but there was nothing wrong with his English. I hadn’t listened properly to her words either, too enraptured by the fact that Sarah had spoken them, too terrified of the way she was looking at the asker of the question, an older man, perhaps forty-five, with tightly-cropped silver hair and a serious expression. He was not the Don Juan I had feared, a macho cocksman, a stereotype, a holiday Casanova. He looked intelligent, serious, slightly overweight, a man, and I feared him more because of it. He was real. He was different to me.

She didn’t see me until the questions had finished and she had left the front to sit back down. When she glanced up and saw my face in the window she staggered. The whole room was still watching her and the woman nearest to her called to ask if she was all right. Sarah composed herself, took a cold look to reassure herself that I was not a ghost, or perhaps to reassure herself that I *was* a ghost, then she shook her head and sat back down, next to the man I would learn later was named Fernando Salvatierra, the man who put his hand around her shoulder and pulled her into him. A supportive hug of congratulation, that’s what I told myself it looked like. I watched her whisper something in his ear before quickly writing something down and passing it to him. He looked up sharply and I side-stepped away from the window. I had a chance then, I realised, to turn and walk down the corridor, out of the building and away. But I didn’t. I sat down in the corridor instead with my copy of *Hopscotch*, pretending to enjoy it. I was here in the spirit of fun and affection, not desperation. I had to look like I believed this when she came out. I wanted her to think we could still be an adventure.

Fernando was out of the door before her. He strode down the corridor, looking directly at me. What did he see? A threat, I hope, a threat disguised as a pale Englishman, hiding behind a scruffy beard and a paperback.

‘Hello,’ he said, as he passed.

‘Hello,’ I said, turning around to watch him walk away, and then back to the throng of people leaving the room. At the back, catching my eyes and looking purposefully away, was Sarah, walking towards me. I stood up and put my book away. She made as if to walk past me and I thought for a moment she was going to manage it, but she turned back, telling the woman she was talking to that she’d be back in a few minutes. And then she looked at me.

‘Liam,’ she said.

‘Just someone who looks like him.’

‘Liam,’ she repeated as I stepped towards her. We hugged each other.

‘You were brilliant,’ I said.

‘Thank God I didn’t see you before I was brilliant. What are you doing here?’

‘Making a grand gesture. Do you remember? This is what I used to do.’

We were still hugging.

‘Your grand gestures are getting grander. And less effective. You’re going to have to let go of me soon, you know.’

‘Is it me holding onto you?’

‘Not only.’

She let go. I held on. Then I let go.

‘I’m really cross with you,’ she said. ‘You shouldn’t be here. I’ve got stuff to do here all weekend.’

‘You’re not pleased to see me at all.’

‘I’m dismayed to see you. I’m dismayed that part of me is pleased.’ Her smile went serious. ‘This is just a ten-minute coffee break. There’s stuff happening all night too. I’ve got no time to see you.’

‘That’s all right,’ I said.

She looked at my face and relented. ‘There’s a bar across the road. Wait there for me. I’ll be out about six, we can get an hour or two. This is fucking awful timing, Liam.’

‘I heard you were here.’

‘You stupid fool.’



We hugged again and then walked together down the corridor and some stairs to where she was taking her coffee break. Once the weekend was over, she was travelling to another city, Recife, for a month, to catalogue an eccentric artist's private archive. In just two months our lives resembled nothing like our lives.

When we went downstairs, Fernando was leaning against a wall, waiting for her. I knew for certain then. 'Er, this is Fernando,' she told me when he stepped towards me. 'This is Liam.' We nodded at each other, no handshake, no fucking kiss. 'I'll see you later,' she said, and I walked away from her as she walked into the canteen with him. As I opened the door to leave I turned around at the same time as she turned and looked at me. Our eyes met and an awful punch of hope hit me in the stomach.

Arturo had gone pale as I told him this story. He had his head in his hands. Hernán had come back and lost interest; now he was talking to Aleman.

'Liam?' Arturo asked, eventually. 'How are you alive?' He stood up and embraced me. I felt the strength of his arms, smelt the fruitiness of his shampoo, hugged back and held.

'Thanks, Arturo.'

'Will you break up now?'

'I . . . it's my fault. I don't want to break up with her.'

'Did you not hit him?'

'I did not hit him.'

'Strange.'

'It was only a suspicion at this time.'

'Still. A suspicion. Strange.'

'So, you don't actually suspect me of desiring Lizzie.'

'Why?'

'Or you would have hit me.'

'Ah. *Naturalmente*.'

'Why not me?'

'You're too . . . *nervous*, English. I am not jealous of you.'

'Thank you.'

'You sound upset.'

'You should be jealous of me.'

‘That’s funny.’

‘That’s not funny.’

‘No, it *is* funny.’

‘What about Ana-Maria, then?’

‘You get lucky.’

‘Fuck you.’

Hernán turned round. ‘What are you laughing about?’ he asked Arturo.

‘He thinks I am jealous of him.’

Hernán fixed Arturo with a *telenovela* star’s pregnant stare.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake,’ I said, and went out for a cigarette. When I came back they had begun to argue and I quickly lost track of what they were saying. I tapped Arturo on the shoulder, pointed at Hernán and said, ‘Ignore him.’ Hernán spat an insult in my face. I got off my stool and went outside for another cigarette. The sky was dark now; we’d been drinking for hours. My heart was jumping and I breathed deeply, slowly, trying to put myself back into real time. I hadn’t eaten all day, too sick with jealousy in the morning, too full now. If I kept this up, perhaps, like Bennett, my heart would just give up the fight. Was that what happened when you forgot what it was fighting for? When I collapsed would anyone rescue me? Sarah had rescued me once already after Bennett had died. I couldn’t keep expecting her to.

Back in the bar Hernán was at one side of the counter, talking to Aleman; Arturo was at the other, brooding.

‘Can I ask you something?’ I said to Arturo.

‘What?’

I looked up at Hernán. ‘In keeping with your philosophy, why haven’t you hit *him* yet?’

‘You think I should be jealous of him?’

‘He isn’t as good-looking as you, I admit. Or me. But doesn’t he always want you to think bad of Lizzie? How much is it him? I saw him after your concert, watching you talk to Lucila. He looked at you like he hated you.’

‘No. Hernán is my friend.’

‘OK. Well, Lizzie is your girlfriend.’

‘You don’t understand.’

‘Don’t start that again.’

He screwed up his face. ‘I need something.’

I rummaged in my pocket.

‘This is not what I meant,’ he said, and he walked away in the direction of Hernán.

I ordered another beer and listened to the sounds of the bar swarm into white noise. I shut my eyes and dropped my head and . . .

An outraged shout snapped me out of my trance. I looked up to see Arturo push Hernán. Hernán pushed him back and shouted something else, and in response Arturo swung and punched him in the face. Before Hernán could reply, Aleman had rushed from behind the bar, grabbed Arturo and bundled him out of the door. Hernán addressed the room, his hands outspread. There were only a few of us in the bar and soon his eyes rested again on me, on my own at the bar.

I got up, unsteadily, looked around to see if I was leaving anything behind. Hernán strode up to me and pushed me. He said something nasty about my mother that I could understand by now. He was ridiculous. I had an urge to lean over and kiss him on the cheek. I stood up and pushed past him to the door but he grabbed my shoulder and spun me around. I blocked his punch but it knocked me back and I tripped over my feet. I was scrambling back up when he kicked me in the side. *Ooh*, I heard. He backed off then, unsure if he’d gone too far. I stood up again and looked at him. He was smaller than me but tougher-looking. He came forward again and I blocked another of his punches with my arms. Next thing, we were rolling around on the floor together, grasping each other’s wrists. Aleman arrived and pulled Hernán off me. My glasses had fallen off somewhere and a kind old man handed them back to me, shaking his head. It is very hard to be a hard man who wears glasses. That was my excuse. Hernán was struggling to break free from Aleman. ‘*Vamos*,’ commanded Aleman, and even I understood that.

Outside, Arturo was preparing to do what was dramatically demanded: return to the bar to announce passionate threats to Hernán. I played my part and physically restrained him from this, while Hernán struggled with Aleman. Each struggling pair could see each other through the door and Hernán and Arturo shouted back and forth at each other. We were all performing brilliantly. Arturo wasn’t struggling very hard. A few metres down the road, a phone box, or what I had thought was a phone box, opened, and a policeman stepped out, looked towards the commotion and strode towards us.

*‘La policia,’* Arturo shouted through the door, and led me calmly round the corner before breaking into a sprint. I ran after him. This was perfect, such fun!

Now we were in Mundo Bizarro, my favourite bar, just round the corner from the hostel. We’d slowed to a walk after running around a couple of corners and then hailed a cab. I’d thought the running was a bit excessive, but Arturo knew his police better than me. We were in the extremely good mood that comes from having had a fight and successfully fled from a policeman. He was very pleased I had hit Hernán: *‘We are brothers now.’*

We sat at the bar, drinking Fernet-colas and taking trips to the bathroom. I waved at a couple of women I recognised from the youth hostel. They came over and we flirted with them, we were charming and funny and deranged and stupid. We were some of these things. I bought us all drinks, and when the women gave us chaste kisses on the cheeks and went home it was disappointing but OK, like something awful had been avoided. The relief quickly vanished as I realised I was going to have to go home with myself again soon.

Half an hour ago it had been nine, but now it was two in the morning. I was out on the street with my arm round Arturo. He was slurring something about brothers in my ear. He stumbled and we fell against a shop front, laughing. He grabbed onto my belt and pulled himself upright. Careful, I said, as we walked past one of the phone boxes the policemen sat in. I wasn’t sure where we were walking; I was just walking, with Arturo. When he disappeared into an alleyway and started peeing against the wall, I copied him. We finished and zipped up and then I came towards him.

He was surprised when I put my hands on his waist but not shocked. He smiled at me, a cocky smile. He didn’t pull away when I kissed him. He let me kiss him. I put my hand in his hair and kissed him more firmly. He put his hand in mine and kissed back. We kept going. He took my hand and placed it on his stomach, pushed it down into his jeans. And just as I felt his cock and wondered how I was going to get out of this, and whether I wanted to, he spun away, laughing, spinning through two more circles back into the street. His hand shot up suddenly and for a second I thought he was requesting permission to ask a question, that or making a Hitler salute – and then a taxi pulled up behind him. *‘Adios, Inglés,’* he called, opening the door and getting in.

But before the car drove away he wound down the window and stuck his head out. 'Remember,' he shouted. 'Tell Lizzie we were at the game.'

## Chapter 15

Despite the unalterable pain of every breath in this foul Sarah-less world, I still went to Spanish class and was beginning to improve. I ordered my morning cortado and lunchtime ravioli with a disciplinary flourish and could comment, idiotically, on the weather to incredulous waitresses. I would normally run into Lizzie in the corridors of the language school, but after three days I still hadn't seen her. On the fourth, I saw her appear at the end of a corridor. She glanced in my direction, held my stare for a second without expression and walked back into a classroom. It wasn't a look that encouraged me to wait for her to come out again.

Later that afternoon, she sent me an email. The hostel's communal living room was quiet that day and I read it on the computer there. Lizzie knew what had happened in Sao Paulo; Sarah had written to her the next day while I was out with Arturo.

*She hadn't wanted to tell me that you had split up because she realised you hadn't told us, but after you surprised her like that she felt she had to. I don't want to have a go at you, Liam. It's weird you didn't tell me you and Sarah had split up, but I can see you hoped you hadn't. You cheated on my oldest friend and she dumped you: it's not the best basis on which to begin a friendship. I think you came close to telling me back at the gallery that day, and it sounds like you half-told Arturo at the weekend. I can see you're a mess. But you being a mess doesn't entitle you to mess up my life. Arturo came back ranting about what you said about Hernán, about how he'd worked out what was going on, how you'd helped him see what was happening. I can't understand why you'd break my confidence like that. I trusted you. Why would you do that? Sarah's obviously better off without you and so are we. You've left me with a pile of shit to deal with, but I will deal with it, and Arturo and I will be fine. There's nothing for me to hide any more. Thanks for that. I suspect that's not the case with you. So long, Liam. I hear Mexico City's nice this time of year. Lizzie.*

Tangled together with the shame of being caught out in a lie was the usual relief. The slow doomy wait to be revealed as the person I like to think I'm not was now over. And just as I had feared, so too was my friendship with the person I liked more than anyone else I had met here.

I wrote back a quick reply, accepting her judgement of me. There was a moral certainty to the email I couldn't help thinking was sometimes dubious. Any moral certainty from our untested generation appeared that way to me, but that was probably my flaw and it wasn't the time to argue about that. I promised her I had never told Arturo her story about Hernán. I was sure I hadn't; I'm not one of those drunks who loses track of what they've said to people. I'm too well-practised at being drunk to do that. I regret what I say with awful clarity. So I told her that I had seen Hernán bad-mouthing her and tried to protect her. I apologised that this had gone wrong, thanked her for looking after me, and then I retreated to my room to absorb myself in my sentimentally noble sign-off and feeling sorry for myself.

Lizzie didn't reply and the next day I skipped Spanish. Hans came to find me afterwards. It was his last week in the hostel; he was flying back to Germany on Saturday.

'What have you done to that attractive teacher?' he asked me. 'I said hello to her in the corridor today and she looked like she wanted to spit at me.'

I took him to a bar and told him the story. When I'd finished I waited eagerly for his put-down, for the insensitivity that might transmute the situation into comedy. It didn't come. Instead he reached over to give me a hug and I struggled to resist the urge to push him away. When he left two days later I was glad. We'd taken our friendship into the emotional territory it had been designed as a holiday from, and as we 'celebrated' his last night, in Mundo Bizarro, we talked to everyone except each other.

The next week I started Spanish classes again. I needed something to concentrate on. Lizzie avoided me successfully and each time she did I grew more melancholy. I began to spend my afternoons in Alejandro's bar. I'd sit right up at the counter, drinking coffees for the first half of the afternoon and beer into the evening – adding new pages to Sarah's epic love letter but devoting more and more of my time to the other notebook, to piecing my novel together. I had to do something. I couldn't eat food any more. Sleep was a pornographic dream, starring Sarah, Sarah, Sarah. I don't think I had ever been more miserable, more furious. Writing the novel was a distraction from that, a discipline in self-awareness, in forgiveness and contrition.

Alejandro arrived most evenings at six and sat at the other end of the bar. He would give me a curious glance and then pretend to ignore me while he bantered

with the barman in his impregnable Spargie. For the first two evenings, we said nothing to each other at all. The young man I had seen him argue with before never appeared again and by the third evening Alejandro and I were smiling at each other. Our game had become quite amusing to ourselves. ‘*Uno mas cerveza para mi amigo aqui,*’ he ordered and the bartender placed a small beer in front of me. ‘*Por favor,*’ I asked the waiter, ‘*dices “gracias” de mi al Señor.*’ ‘*El pibe dice gracias,*’ the old bartender said solemnly to Alejandro after wincing at my Spanish. Alejandro turned to me and smiled and held his glass aloft. I mimicked him. ‘*Salud!*’ we said simultaneously, and I went back to writing about him in my book.

That evening, with a polite nod towards me, he had left the bar before I had chance to buy him a beer back. I was ready the next day when he walked in and nonchalantly ordered him one, barely glancing at him. He grassy-assed and carried on his daily chat with the bartender. He was wearing a good suit, dark blue with a very faint, almost imperceptible grey stripe woven within, matched with a paler blue shirt and a dark tie loosened to undo the neck by one button. I noticed it because I was writing it down in my book. Alejandro wore a full beard that might have looked scruffy without the balance of his impeccable tailoring. There was something in his smartness that was trying to rebel. That was one way to look good in a suit. I struggled to imagine him as a lawyer.

‘So, someone is writing the world another novel,’ he announced suddenly.

‘How do you know I’m writing a novel?’ I asked.

‘How do you know you are someone?’ he said. ‘But look at you. I struggle to imagine you’re doing something *useful*.’

I raised my beer to him. ‘Salud.’

‘What are you writing about?’ he asked.

‘I’m trying to distract myself from writing the longest love letter in the world to my ex-girlfriend by writing instead about Amy Casares and Craig Bennett.’

He went quiet then. ‘How is Amy?’ he said eventually. ‘You know her?’

‘She’s a friend. She writes me nice emails telling me I’m not worthless.’

‘Do you write emails to her telling her you *are* worthless?’

‘Oh, God, yes, I suppose I do,’ I admitted. ‘Poor Amy.’

‘Poor Amy . . .’ he repeated absently. ‘Which makes me think, is this going to be a good novel?’ he said, gesturing at my notebook.

‘It’s going to be better than the love letter. Perhaps you could help me?’



‘And how could I do that?’

‘You could tell me about your friendship with Craig, with Amy, about the good times you had.’

‘You want the good times?’

‘The good times.’

‘I could tell you about the good times, I suppose. On the condition you promise not to ask about the bad times.’

I promised. But Craig and Alejandro’s good times became samey after a while. Drugs, women, rebellion; the insulting of bores, the besting of the authorities; the stoical receipt of punishment, the avenging of slights . . . a chemical Don Quixote and Sancho Panza whose antics I could see stretching out for the same thousand pages.

‘So why would you stop being friends?’ I asked.

He looked at me and seemed more relieved than angry I had broken my promise, but he said, ‘I really don’t want to talk about this. If I give you a quick summary now, will you truly promise not to ask me any more questions?’

Again, I promised.

He sighed and signalled to the barman that he needed another drink.

‘This was Craig’s place. He had never been as happy as he was here. It wasn’t just that he felt free of his father. The atmosphere suited him, the chaos, the confusion, the bureaucracy. It was a stage for him to be exasperated on. Behaving nobly in the face of a culture that provoked all-consuming *bronca*, yes? It was the trick of his charm, his persona. And it suited him, because of that crazy upbringing alone on a vineyard with his father, it suited him to be a man apart from the culture, to always meet people from across a distance. So he didn’t follow Amy when she left for Europe and, in order to make this seem logical, he continued to take his pleasure in Buenos Aires. But she had gone, and the pleasures he took now made it likely she was gone for good. But if he had followed her . . . he’d have left me behind for one, and I was so much part of his pleasure back then. Some states of mind can only occur in a certain space, in certain company. When she went, I was pleased. She’d been in the way. We worked better one to one. But when she was there I was all the good things for Craig that she wasn’t; as soon as she was gone I was all the worst things, a mirror reflecting what he had lost. It took such a short time for him to realise this, for me to realise what I had become for him. If he had gone with Amy, I think the

reverse would have happened. He didn't want to have to choose and so when he did, he wanted what he hadn't chosen. And I do not want to think about what finally happened.'

He turned his face away in embarrassment.

'What? I asked.

He looked hard at me now. 'You are ruining our friendship,' he said quietly, but then he continued.

'We were fighting in my kitchen and I waved a knife at him. I can't remember what we were fighting about – maybe money or drugs, or a lie one had told the other, a deflection most probably from what we were really arguing about. We were close to being drug addicts. As close as you get. And I was waving this knife, getting into the whole performance of it. I would never have used it on him, on anyone, and of course Craig knew this. And, what, to teach me a lesson he did what he did? This is why I stopped talking to him. I held the knife out and waved it, and I think we both then realised how ridiculous this was. He grinned, and then he jumped straight into the knife, as if to teach me a lesson. I don't know, as if to prove the knife did not exist, that I was not holding it up towards him, that his imagination was greater than mine. I pulled it away but it hit an artery in his arm. We were both covered in his blood. After the hospital patched him up he flew to Spain to try to make up with Amy and I never saw him again. I nearly killed him.'

'I did kill him.'

'Oh, yes, so you claim.' He chuckled bitterly. 'He was the kind of man to leap onto a knife. If I had been there I would have warned you. I would have tried to warn you.'

They were the people I thought I loved, the bad role models, the fearless, the futureless, the ones who jumped onto knives. Emulating them was bad faith, pure style, and dishonestly against my basic inclination to hard work and kindness – though that was easy to forget in bursts of delighted excess.

It was harder to forget in my year of disasters, when my actions energised the persona I had tried on for size and began to efface the person who had been there before.

When I went back to the café the next day Alejandro didn't turn up, or the next. I felt guilty that I had deprived him of his routine and changed mine so he might think it safe to return.

I had been avoiding looking at my money after my expensive trip to Brazil and a few transactions with Aleman and El Coronel, which, while not particularly expensive in themselves, led to ruinous generosity in bars and impetuous dealings with taxi drivers. I was shocked to find out at the start of July that I had only enough money left to stay for another month. While I yearned for England, it was an England that no longer belonged to me – and I dreaded moving back to my mum's house in Blackpool. I imagined it as the beginning of the end of my life.

Thankfully a few days later I received notice that my application for a writing grant from the Arts Council had been successful. They were giving me nearly five thousand quid, enough to support six months more in Buenos Aires. It was the happiest thing that had happened to me since I had arrived, and despite everything I tried to call Sarah to tell her. It felt like a sign that I could be something else, someone she would like more than the bad memory of me. After the fourth call rang out without answer I rang my mum instead and told her the good news. It wasn't such good news to her. I had finally come clean about my circumstances and she thought, quite sensibly, that I should come home and get another job. I did my best to reassure her I was OK and promised I would be back for Christmas.

*Mexico City's nice this time of year.* I never saw Lizzie any more in the corridors of the language school. I thought of her all the time and wished I could share my good news with her, my good money with her, on a splendid night out to celebrate. She never replied to a second email when I tried again to present myself more positively; and so I had no choice but to leave her alone.

My Spanish course finished and without it my days lengthened and I grew more lonely. I began to work in the library, a short walk away. Being lonely, bad for myself, was good for the novel. I sat back and made Amy, Craig and Alejandro talk to each other. Craig said to Amy what I wanted to say to Sarah and Amy said to Craig what I wished she wouldn't. I was learning. I was hurting. I was writing, and I began to feel the thrill of approaching the end of a first draft.

As strong as the buzz of composition was, I craved company in the nights. I tried the bars but my confidence was shaken; I couldn't find it in me to talk to anyone.

The hostel contained more teenagers than ever before and I worried I would only be able to talk to gap-year students for so long before I was reduced to begging them to take me to bed and have mercy on me. I'm not sure I would have survived a refusal. Or an acceptance. After days of this, I logged on to the Internet, intending to book my return flight. I never got that far, though, because of a surprising email waiting for me. It was from James Cockburn, and he was arriving in Buenos Aires in two days' time.

## Chapter 16

It was an extraordinary act to take two flights and eighteen hours to pitch to an author, so it was the kind of thing James Cockburn did regularly to justify his mythic reputation. That's why people thought he did it. I knew these excursions were not always so rationally calculated and explainable.

The last time I had been out of England with Cockburn was nine months ago at the Frankfurt Book Fair. There, in a toilet cubicle, I had held him in one arm as he sobbed into my shoulder about the suicide of David Foster Wallace, while, with my free hand, a *zwanzig* and a credit card, I tried to break into prelapsarian form the rocks of crack we had erroneously bought as coke from a street prostitute. I had wondered if we shouldn't give up on the crack, but James was adamant: 'We're turning it back, we're making it harmless!' We were in Gleis 25, a twenty-four-hour dive bar by the Hauptbahnhof on the edge of Frankfurt's red-light district. It was a popular hang-out for a certain type of publisher at 5 a.m. and beyond. It had more than a hundred Prince songs on the jukebox. What did the regulars think when we showed up each year? Perhaps in the week preceding there is always a group of vacuum-cleaner sellers who would drink us under the table. I find that hard to believe and even if there were, they would lack our *élan*. There is a celebratory myth we tell to each other: that during the Fair all Frankfurt's prostitutes go on holiday (so incestuously adulterous are we, the visiting *bon vivants*). I was glad it was a myth: we needed the prostitutes to score drugs off.

I remember the moment that night that James disappeared with his friend Veronique, a French publishing director who would pop into the office every few months when she was in town, to show James her new shoes. I was chatting to a Swiss rights executive, Anneliese, when I saw him look over at me. I had met Anneliese and her wonderful fringe earlier that day in a meeting. She was intelligent and funny and spoke many languages: they are always intelligent and funny and speak many languages. She was explaining to me about the texture of Thomas Bernhard's prose in the original German. It's the kind of thing I ask women about when I've accidentally taken crack. There were more women in the room than men: there are always more women in the room than men. I was thinking it would be nice if Anneliese would make regular visits to *my* office to show me *her* shoes. They were turquoise, patent-leather, with three-and-a-half-inch heels. They were the type of

shoes I had thought profound beautiful women did not need to wear. I was not letting her ankles distract me from her remarks about the texture of Thomas Bernhard's prose in the original German. Or her calves, with their shop-front-dummy sheen of tan nylon. Matt-laminate. Sand meeting sea in the Caribbean. A perfect holiday read. Guilty pleasure. James smiled at me as he pulled his satchel over his shoulder. Just *buy* it. Take it off the table.

My mentor. My shadow. Myself.

It was an expensive cab ride to the airport but, a dutiful disciple, I went to meet Cockburn at the gate. His email announced he was arriving at eleven in the morning to ensure 'the new Bolaño' signed a contract with him. Who this new Bolaño was remained unclear.

It was not hard to pick Cockburn out from the crowd of arrivals. He was in a typical publisher's outfit: dark jeans, white shirt, three buttons undone, a skinny-fitting grey blazer and rapier-toed cowboy boots with Cuban heels, making his 6'3" into a frightening 6'5". His dark hair reached his shoulders and divided in a parting over his high forehead, sharp nose and moist lips. Cockburn was forty-three and looked like a *Top Gear* presenter: like a midlife crisis. I was relieved to see he was still wearing his wedding ring.

Despite the way James dressed, I looked up to him (literally, unless I wore his cowboy boots). It's easy to believe that the whole world has heard of James Cockburn, but of course he's a niche celebrity. Cockburn is 'the coolest figure in British publishing' (*Guardian*), adored by the geeks who write the literary pages and hated by at least half of those who publish books for a living in a more modest, profitable way.

It was a joy to see him. I ran over and we hugged.

'Liam, we weren't sure you were still alive – it sounded too *outlandish* that you'd just fly away to Buenos Aires, look at you, you've got a *tan*, summer, no *spring*'s barely started back home. Though it's ending here, right? Still, this isn't so bad,' he said, looking towards the door, where it was a sunny late autumn day. 'How long's it been?'

'Three months.'

I noticed he was struggling slightly with his wheelie case, limping alongside it, and I leaned over and took it from him. ‘Give me that. How are you recovering? I thought you might be in – ’

‘A wheelchair?’

‘I didn’t know. Plaster, crutches?’

‘Ah, yeah, for a bit, then they whisk them off you and force you to walk around, even though each step hurts like a kick in the bollocks. But you know me, Liam, I have a powerful constitution. I rather think it is the curse of us both. So this is really the morning, hey? I don’t know what time it feels like. Fancy a beer? A beer in the morning, God, this could be a book fair.’

When he mentioned book fairs, I bitterly wondered whether I had been to my last one, but I stopped myself from saying this out loud. I never let myself sound a negative note in Cockburn’s company; we spoke only of the successes we were having. Consequently, after jumping in a cab and accelerating away in the direction of his hotel, we took unequal shares of the conversation.

‘Now, Liam, *buddy*, you may be able to help me out with a small favour – but that’s for later, wow, *look* at this place, man – it’s been ten years since I was last here, the Buenos Aires book fair it must have been, I met this wonderful girl there, was it . . . Charlena? No, that sounds more like an Aussie – Charlotta? Yes, *Charlotta*. *Wow* . . . How are *you* finding the women here?’

‘Well, I – ’

‘You don’t want to talk about that, of course you don’t want to talk about that. The favour I mentioned being – fuck me! – did you see that? – we nearly died! Anyway,’ continued James, fully recovered, ‘we’re going out for dinner tonight, the author, his name is Daniel Requena, the guy can’t speak any English, my Spanish is *muy rustico*, he’s fallen out with the Argies who were going to publish him; those handballers are being no fucking use at all. I did my best to persuade Javi to come out with me but he claims he has to *work*, so – how *is* your Spanish? I noticed the nifty way you directed our taxi driver.’

‘It’s basic. I can direct taxis, order steak sandwiches and score cocaine.’

‘Not a bad skill-set,’ he mused. ‘You may also be able to help me out with the second favour I was going to ask you . . . but first things first, are you good enough to translate for me over dinner?’

‘I’m afraid not.’

‘Ah.’

‘If you showed up with me as a translator, I think he would find it hard to take you seriously. Of course, he may have a very rich sense of humour.’

‘Well . . . naturally, we expect he will. But let’s not risk it. You must know someone out here who’d help. Someone Daniel Requena will be impressed that I know. Someone fascinating.’

‘That is certainly not me,’ I laughed.

He frowned. ‘Come on, Liam. This is serious. You must know someone.’

Of course, I thought immediately of Alejandro. There was symmetry in the betrayed friend meeting the wounded editor, Bennett’s ghost (and Bolaño’s?) floating above us as the ashtrays filled up again, envying the young hotshot, wishing we’d cool it with the cocaine and adjectives.

‘I know someone,’ I told Cockburn. ‘The only thing is, I think he’s hiding from me.’

Cockburn kept quiet for once while I told him the story of Craig Bennett’s early twenties in Buenos Aires with his best friend Alejandro.

‘Jesus, that’s wonderful,’ he said, when I’d finished. ‘Heartbreaking!’ he declared with a broad smile. ‘What a story!’ And then, like a politician, his face set and he reached for the sombre notes. ‘I’m sorry we haven’t spoken about Craig’s death,’ he said, reaching over and putting his hand on my shoulder. ‘We will, mate, we will. I fucking miss him. No one blames you. Except Belinda. And the estate. But no one *really* blames you. I wonder if we could work on the estate; you might be in a brilliant position to write the biography . . .’

‘The estate *hates* me? Who *is* the estate anyway?’

‘Oh, some sister in Australia. From what Craig had told me they didn’t see much of each other. They were separated when they were kids, Craig went with the dad, she went with the mum. He didn’t have a girlfriend. His parents are dead. I guess there wasn’t anyone else.’

‘That’s sad. And she hates me?’

‘She’s expressed certain sisterly anger towards the man who was supposed to be looking after him on the night he died.’

‘And I suppose Belinda has supplied her with her impression of me.’

‘Well, Belinda wouldn’t have mentioned the drugs and nor have I. But you admitted to the police that you were taking drugs with Craig, so she knows from



them you were in it together. Like I say, it's understandable, and probably not irredeemable. You're a charming lad. Don't lose heart. We'll see what we can do.' He reached over and gave me a hug I didn't want. 'Come on, let's find this Alejandro!'

So I let things drop. James was excited. He could scent another book to hunt besides the one he was here to capture. And I wanted to be excited too. My old boss was back and we had some work to do.

I gave the driver new instructions and we drove through to Alejandro's bar. It was empty when we arrived. The polished wood, clean glasses and neatly aligned chairs shone with the optimism of an early-morning Eden. There was only a memory of beer beneath the pine air-freshener.

'Remind me what I drink here,' said Cockburn, squaring up to the bar and startling as the bartender rose from behind it like a lift reaching our floor. He scowled when he saw me.

*'Buen dia,'* I smiled. *'Vos ves Alejandro?'*

*'Lo vi hace dos semanas!'* he accused me. *'A causa de vos!'*

Cockburn liked this bit of aggression. 'What's he saying?' he said, raising his eyebrows.

'He thinks it's my fault Alejandro stopped coming here. I think he's basically right. I wouldn't be surprised if Alejandro was his best customer.'

The bartender was still talking.

'Tell him you think you're going back to England next week,' Cockburn suggested. 'Tell him you need to find Alejandro before you return. Tell him you'll let him know you won't bother him any more.'

I tried. The barman spoke fast Spargie in reply. I looked at James and shrugged.

'Tell him if he sees him to call this number,' said Cockburn, scribbling something down on a napkin before handing it to the bartender with a fifty-peso note.

Cockburn had never forgotten how to tell me to do things and, haltingly, I asked the bartender to call us if he saw Alejandro. *'Por favor, dos cervezas,'* added Cockburn to my speech.

The bartender was more friendly now, though he needed another fifty before he parted with a list of other bars Alejandro was known to frequent. Unfortunately, he didn't know the name of the company where Alejandro worked so we were

limited to this list. Cockburn wanted to try it straight away but I explained that Alejandro would still be at work.

‘Did you see that?’ he asked me as we took our beers outside to drink them with a cigarette. ‘That was like Philip Marlowe.’

‘Felipe Marlowe. You know that’s actual money you’ve just given him.’

He pulled out a note from his wallet and looked at it curiously. ‘Doesn’t look like actual money to me.’

It was now past midday and Cockburn had several hours until his dinner with the new Bolaño. I’d presumed we’d meet, have a quick catch-up over lunch and then he’d go to bed for the afternoon – but he didn’t seem at all jetlagged. His energy was frightening. You looked at him and could almost see someone else beneath his skin, trying to get out.

After I told James about Aleman and his bar, he wanted to go there immediately and score – it was essential for his ‘body-rhythms’ that he did not sleep until late in the night. I flat-out refused to go so early. After coke there would be no real talk; just speechifying and mutual incomprehension. It would be easier to raise the harder topics and more futile when we did. Anything could go; anything would; and all would be forgotten, excused, as long as it wasn’t permanent. I knew now that sometimes it was.

Even so, cocaine might have been useful for bringing the conversation back round to Craig. He deflected all my attempts to bring Craig up: Cockburn was the editor of this trip, this chapter-in-progress, keen to begin with a bang, in media res, straight to adventure before the boring bits, the backstory, my downfall. It was how he had encouraged me to approach my life, the old adage, ‘show don’t tell’. I understood it instinctively. It was easy, too easy. Action over reflection and the reflection takes care of itself. Not in my experience it didn’t, not in time. The problem wasn’t that I wasn’t Hemingway but that now I knew I wasn’t. The innocent days were finished. Craig died.

James continued to dominate the conversation, telling me plot after plot of the novels he’d recently acquired, laying down adjective after interchangeable adjective to describe their unique prose and saleability. I lost my cool and begged him to slow down, to tell me about the last three months, what he knew of the funeral, what people had said, what people were saying, about me, me, me, what had become of me.

James was embarrassed at my outburst. We were still sitting outside and he looked away from me to an office block as he lit another cigarette, a man and a woman in suits emerging for lunch, the moped courier who'd just parked dashing in through the open door. I had broken the rules. He had not wanted to think about my unhappiness.

'The funeral, well, I couldn't make it, I was still lying up in hospital,' he said formally. 'I was surprised to hear you weren't there.'

'Really? But I wasn't allowed to. No one would tell me where it was!'

He looked even more uncomfortable. 'Don't be like that, Liam.'

'I don't want to be protected from what people think about me. Belinda told me not to go. I know what she thinks about me. What about everyone else?'

'Who is everyone else? The people who like you, like me, they still like you. The people who don't know you, they still don't know you.'

'I just want to know what I have to do to be forgiven.'

James pursed his lips like he was disappointed with me. 'You want acquittal, not forgiveness. You want your job back, you want your girlfriend back. Of course you do. You won't feel forgiven till you get a new job, a new girlfriend.'

'I want the old ones, not new ones.'

'Well, I certainly can't help you with Sarah.'

'What about with . . . '

He turned his profile to me and gazed into the distance. When he turned back to look at me I thought I could see new lines in his face. 'Liam, *you* resigned. If I could help, you know I would. My stock is not at its highest this year. A couple of big bets didn't pay off. My biggest-selling author is now dead and you are perceived as having had the power to prevent this. I am also perceived as responsible for this, as though you were my ambassador, my embodied bad practice. Well, yes. Nothing unusual, it all evens out. We'll have another Booker winner next year. But there was the thing about my office too, which pushed things with Belinda a bit too far.'

James had reacted badly when we had moved into the new open-plan office system that had been finished a month after I had started. I had been to his office to see him before I was his colleague, in the days when I was 'punching above my weight' as an editor at a small press. We'd met at a prize ceremony and he'd invited me for breakfast the next day. His office was like a spoiled teenager's bedroom: a battered

leather sofa, ripped music posters, an expensive stereo, a small fridge for beers and champagne and a locked desk-drawer containing two wraps of cocaine and some excellent ecstasy tablets. It was Friday. At 10 a.m. we had had a beer and a line each while the industrious women outside (one of whom I would become) began their working day. Then we had headed out for a fried breakfast that lasted twenty-four hours.

When Belinda decreed James was to lose his office, he had passionately argued that the authors he brought to the firm needed his space to hang out in. 'Bring a different type of author to the firm, then,' she had finally warned him, 'or find a different type of firm. It's like this now.'

He had made a go of it. It was weird to see him sitting at a desk in the corner of a long room, sending emails, and then it was less weird because he was rarely there. He began to take all his author meetings in the pub round the corner, rather than just half of them.

It was in one of these meetings that he joked about sneaking in one weekend to rebuild his office. Jeremy Deller loved the idea and offered to do it with a team of technicians, provided he could film it. That night, they waited till ten and went back to the office with a tape-measure. Two weeks later the logistics were entirely plausible, and all that was needed then was for James, in a fit of hysterical realism, to give in and see what the consequences were.

I had only been at work there for a couple of months when I arrived on that Monday to find a gang of around thirty people staring at a perfect white hut enclosing the space where James' desk used to be. One of the walls was flush with the side of his nearest colleague's desk. People had been trying the lock but it wouldn't open and there was no sign of a key. The walls were smoothed off and painted the same white colour as the walls of the office. There was no sign of Cockburn. Belinda angrily sent everyone away but stayed herself, running her hands over the walls of the new structure and looking nonplussed. At eleven o'clock James walked briskly into work, turned a key in the lock of his office and shut the door behind him. When Belinda made him leave and accompany her to a meeting room, he left the door open. Inside was a meticulous reconstruction of his old office, the sofa, the posters, the old bookcases.

The story reached the trade press and then the nationals. James' aura increased and, as much as Belinda wanted to sack him, he was such a popular figure,

such an extravagant self-publicist, it was easier just to discipline him. The marooned office remained for the rest of the week. James was not allowed to use it, but he had left the door unlocked, and for the rest of the week we took turns sneaking into it, lying on the sofa, reading manuscripts after-hours and taking beers out of the mini-fridge. The following Monday, it had disappeared again, and we didn't see Cockburn for the rest of that week either. Later, a film of the office being reconstructed appeared in a retrospective at the Hayward Gallery.

'It was probably the right thing for you to stay away from the funeral,' Cockburn concluded. 'There are some people, a publicist, a CEO, maybe one or two others, who think you really fucked up with Bennett. Well, you did, he's dead. You and I admit that. We know there was little you could do to stop Craig doing whatever he wanted, but you drew the short straw when he did his stupidest thing yet.'

I didn't believe it. 'I could have stopped him. We chose to believe he was as incorrigible as he pretended he was. Someone should have broken the chain. I was the one there, *I* should have.'

'You're too hard on yourself. People will respect your courage in admitting you had a part – if you have to admit it. There'll be other jobs. Everyone loves a resurrection story. You know what I think? You want your crime to be greater than it is so you can *excuse* yourself from redeeming yourself. Excuse yourself from the hard work of getting on with your life.'

I kept quiet. It was possible he was right about Bennett. And my mind leapt with delight to the possibility that perhaps I was being too hard on myself about Sarah too. That I deserved her back. How easy it would be to succumb to my old good opinion of myself. Why was I resisting?

With Cockburn sat beside me I had begun to feel the thrill and satisfaction of what I had used to do, what I had really done in the office from half-nine to eight o'clock every day, the hard work and not the cartoon hedonism. I knew that Cockburn, even if he took Fridays off, was putting in at least four long days Monday to Thursday, working through the weekend and reading every hour he wasn't drinking. The drinking was the work too, it was with the agents and celebrities who gave him access to the books we maintained that only he could make happen. I remembered the less dramatic way I had worked, the buzz of reading a manuscript late at night that was worth telling people about. It didn't happen all the time but it

still happened. There are writers left who understand that ‘literature is a dangerous calling’, and Cockburn was here with me hoping to find one of them. It was time to find out more about that.

Cockburn smiled when I asked him to tell me more, relieved to be back on safe ground. ‘Liam, this is fascinating. Javi hasn’t even spoken to him yet. It’s only his Argentine agent who’s met him, and I haven’t even had direct contact with her. All I’ve got is a forwarded email from the sub-agent suggesting a restaurant to meet at this evening. And the manuscript. Javi says it’s the best thing he’s read for years. I haven’t heard him this excited. The work-experience girl’s done a rough translation of the first five pages for me . . . It’s a bloody shame Craig’s not around – he’d have given it a read for me. I’ve got the same feeling about it I had about *Talking to Pedro* before it won the Booker.’

‘Does Belinda know you’re out here on the strength of this feeling?’

‘No.’

‘Translated Argentine fiction doesn’t sound very commercial.’

‘There are more important things in life than that.’

‘I hope Belinda hasn’t heard you talking this way.’

I looked over at James and tried not to interpret his idealism as crisis. Belinda wouldn’t tolerate another outright rebellion. Why was he really here? What had driven him onto that plane? If this was another breaking point, I hoped his survivor’s instinct would see him through it – he’d go home to his wife and baby and might last a year or two before he felt compelled to do something stupid. He might be lucky all his life. Someone had to be.

‘And Ella, how is she really? How’s the baby?’

He breathed out a sigh. ‘Ella’s great. Mandy’s great. I nearly made such a mistake there.’

‘Craig told me before he died.’

‘God, I miss Craig. He talked me out of it, you know. I didn’t want to listen at the time so I made that stupid climb round the wall. “He who makes a beast . . .” It makes me feel so guilty sometimes. If I hadn’t been such a prick, if I hadn’t fallen . . . Ella’s perfect, you know. She lets me stay out late in the week when I have to, knows it’s part of the job. That’s the problem, I get in the mood when I think I don’t want perfection. She lets me fly off to Argentina on a whim. You know this is a whim,

don't you? Of course you do. Sometimes I get this feeling in me, like I'm going to do something awful just so I can observe myself doing it. Do you know?'

I did.

'So this came up and I knew you were here, and I thought this might be the lesser of two evils.'

'Is the other woman Craig mentioned the greater of the two?'

'No. That's over.'

'Good. Look at me. This is how you'll end up.'

'You don't look so bad.'

'I'm thirteen years younger than you. But I'm unemployed, perhaps unemployable. I've lost the woman whom I loved unrequitedly for five years before somehow, incredibly, I managed to make her love me. Now I'm terrified to leave this country that I hate living in because of how little is waiting for me at home.'

James fidgeted impatiently. He sighed. 'That sounds quite bad,' he admitted.

'Exactly. So control yourself. We're not invincible. We're just untested.'

It was approaching one o'clock now. The beers we'd drunk made the sun hazy and rhythmic, a psychedelic pulse in a Seventies film. James idea of scoring cocaine was more and more tempting. It is always tempting to feel invincible.

'Let's go and try these places for Alejandro,' I suggested, to take my mind off the hunger. 'He's probably having lunch somewhere.'

We drained our beers and set off. James leaned over and put an arm round me briefly.

## Chapter 17

We walked along the waterfront in Puerto Madero, searching for Alejandro. The waiters knew who he was in two of the restaurants we tried. We left our phone numbers with messages to say that we wanted him to have dinner with us and translate the conversation of a ‘talented young author’. Cockburn tipped the waiters. (I had seen Cockburn tip a bus driver in the past.) All of this killed an hour, but soon we were having another drink. Cockburn was beginning to worry. If Alejandro didn’t come through, the conversation with the new Bolaño might never take place. If Cockburn came back to the office without a book, he was going to have a lot of explaining to do. I had been thinking of Lizzie as we made the trawl round the cafés and bars, of how flawlessly she would have performed the role of vivacious translator. I knew Cockburn would adore her. *This is my great friend Lizzie; I’ve asked her to translate tonight. Afterwards, perhaps we can go out dancing.* She would fit perfectly into the club of excellent people he used to sell membership to his own excellent club. And the more I thought of her the more I was not prepared to have her dislike me, not without doing all I could to make her my friend again.

I described Lizzie to Cockburn as we made our way to the language school, how funny and intelligent she was and how – well, she *was* – beautiful.

‘Liam?’ he asked, after a while. ‘Despite what you said earlier, are you sure you’re not beginning to get over Sarah?’

Of course I was in love with Lizzie – but it didn’t help.

‘I think I’m getting over Sarah every time a woman smiles at me,’ I explained to him. ‘And it lasts for perhaps thirty seconds before I shut my eyes and see Sarah looking at me, the way she used to look at me.’

‘You fucking romantic.’

‘Well, don’t you fall in love with Lizzie too,’ I warned him as we walked up the steps to the school.

We strode purposefully down the corridor to the classroom I’d seen Lizzie coming out of most frequently. She was there, behind the closed door. I could hear her slowly conjugating English verbs before they echoed in Latin accents. James and I sat down on the floor against the corridor walls. It made me think of waiting for Sarah to come out of her lecture, of her new lover and what they would be doing if they were together now . . .



‘You know,’ said Cockburn, ‘there’s nothing like a quest.’

I gave him a weary headshake, but I had been enjoying myself before too, so much it had left me uneasy. I couldn’t carry on as I had been doing, pretending that writing an unreadable love letter and a penitential novel was a purpose in life. Something had to change.

We sat there waiting for fifteen minutes. Cockburn filled me in on the activities of my old colleagues and the new boyfriends and girlfriends they had commissioned. Six months ago I would have been very interested, but now . . . well, I wasn’t naive enough to think it made me a deeper person that I’d lost interest in my fellow human beings. I should try harder. ‘So, you didn’t really answer me before,’ I said. ‘What’s it like being a dad?’

He opened his mouth as if he was about to pitch, and I waited for a torrent of delightfuls and wonderfals, but he shut it again and looked sad. ‘I’d be able to give you a much better idea if I wasn’t here in Argentina, wouldn’t I?’

At that moment, the door opened and a series of office-smart young men and women began to file out. My stomach lurched. I stood up and almost collided with Lizzie in the doorway.

‘You see,’ said James, refilling Lizzie’s glass, ‘there hasn’t been an internationally popular Argentine novelist for, well, for ever.’

We were in a café over the road from the language school. I was only half listening as he carried on but it sounded plausible. You had living literary superstars from Peru, Colombia, Mexico, Chile (with Bolaño, dead for years, still managing to publish a book a month), and the backpackers’ favourite from Brazil, but no Argentines had really made a sales impact in English since Borges, and he wasn’t a novelist. Cortázar had been lauded, Sabato too, but how many English-speaking readers really knew who they were? What was it these people withheld from English?

Lizzie’s initial anger at being ambushed outside her room had turned to confusion as she made out James swaying behind me in his Cuban-heeled boots, 36-inch-long skinny denims, half-undone shirt and greying hair. I had pleaded passionately then for her to come and sit down and talk to us, to understand I had not meant to deceive her or cause problems with Arturo. My English sounded melodramatic, Argentine. She brushed aside my apology as if it was bad form. She was looking at James curiously, and so I introduced him and let him make his own

speech, something about how highly I had praised her, how much he trusted my judgement, how little he now needed to due to the evidence of his own eyes and ears. (Cockburn's English, I realised, had always sounded Argentine.) He elaborated on the tremendous opportunity available that evening, the chance to speak to a prose-stylist of profound originality, to contribute to a mission which, if successful, would in some small way correct the philistine reading habits of the British reading public. Lizzie looked to me after hearing this, as if I would confirm whether or not it was a joke, and when I simply nodded, neither confirming or denying, she agreed to have lunch with us and hear James out.

The waiter brought us our food and asked if we would like a second bottle of the Malbec. Of course we would.

'So what's this guy's name?' she asked.

'Daniel Requena.'

'Never heard of him.'

'He's not even published here yet. My friend Javi from Barcelona's just bought Spanish-language rights. The buzz about him is enormous, though.'

'What's he like?'

'As a person, no one knows. Even Javi hasn't spoken to him on the phone. I'll be the first European publisher to meet him face to face.'

This seemed to have less effect on Lizzie than James intended: 'Look, this is all very appealing and interesting, and I'd be happy to do my best. But I've made a promise to have dinner with my boyfriend this evening, and he gets upset enough when I do things without including him.'

'Oh, well, look,' said James, sounding slightly deflated. 'A boyfriend. I guess you can bring him too – why *don't* you? I mean, if you *want* him to come.'

Lizzie pulled out her phone and sent a text. And then my phone rang. This was still a rare enough occurrence for me to spend ten seconds returning other diners' smug disapproval before I realised the noise came from my own bag. My mum was the only person who rang regularly and, having been used to checking my phone every five minutes in England, where I had friends and purpose, I had accustomed myself to its new silence. But we had left this number alongside James's in the places we had searched for Alejandro, and now an Argentine number was calling.

'*Hola, esta Liam,*' I said.

Alejandro's voice said something long and rolling, and when I could only um and er in response, he switched to English. 'I see your Spanish has not improved. So, Liam, what is the meaning of this elaborate trail you have left for me? You have realised by now that I do not enjoy remembering my old friend Craig Bennett. I will be very angry if this is a pretence for asking me more of your indelicate questions.'

'It is not a pre –'

'Who is this James Cockburn? Is he real? Is that a name, cock-burn? In my society it is the symptom of too pleasurable an evening.'

'He pretends it's pronounced Co-burn. He is real. He's sitting next to me, frowning. He was the-man-whom-we're-not-talking-about's editor. Would you like to talk to him?

'In a minute. And have you seen this beautiful young author?'

'I –'

'And by the way, I am not such a *tart* to accept an unusual assignment for the mere sight of a boy with talent, particularly when summoned by a crassly scribbled note on the back of a business card.'

'I –'

'I will come anyway. Will you present me with James Burningcock, please?'

I handed him over and James started up. 'Hel-lo, I'm so *glad* you *called*. Liam's told me all *about* you.' He stood and strode outside. He couldn't conduct a phone conversation except at a brisk walk. I was alone with Lizzie for the first time in weeks.

'Is he always like this?' she asked.

'Only in the company of people.'

She made a wan smile and looked at her plate. There was a sudden shyness to her I hadn't noticed before.

'Liam.' 'Lizzie.' We said each other's names simultaneously.

'You first,' I said first.

'Sarah wrote to me. She said you'd written to apologise to her. She said you wouldn't be the type to be indiscreet. She said your problem is the opposite, that you think too much about the effects of what you say. She stressed the word *say* as a direct opposite of *do*.'

She trailed her finger in a circle in the crumbs of her tostada and looked down into the swirl she'd made.

‘I can’t argue with that but can I tell you – ’

‘Shut up,’ she said, looking up. ‘I guess I should accept that if you let Arturo know about the business with Hernán it wasn’t through carelessness.’

‘I didn’t let Arturo know anything. I tried to defend you from Hernán’s attempts to make Arturo jealous. I just pointed out Hernán seemed very keen on you himself.’

‘Which, if Sarah’s right about how deliberately you think things through . . . ’

‘You think I wanted to cause trouble deliberately?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Sarah said that?’

‘I wouldn’t say that exactly. She said you’re not malicious. Not on purpose.’

‘I don’t think I’m malicious even by accident, even if you can be malicious by accident. I’m straightforward, really. An idiot, yes, but straightforward.’

‘You’re not an idiot. You hide behind that. That’s exactly the sort of self-deprecating non-straightforward statement I expected you would make. So why did you lie to us from the start about you and Sarah still being together?’

‘It wasn’t simple. I hoped it wasn’t over. I didn’t want to help make it over by announcing it to everyone. If I hadn’t skipped over that, we might never have had a chance to be friends, never had a conversation, let alone an honest conversation. But we did talk honestly, didn’t we? I love talking to you. You’re the best person I’ve met here.’

Despite herself, she made a weak smile. ‘You’re not like me. I would have just told you. I would still have been your friend if you’d told me what had happened with Sarah.’

‘No, I’m not like you. But I didn’t know that then.’

She looked at me suspiciously. I was so weary of wearing the wrong costume.

‘Please don’t think I tried to screw you over,’ I said. ‘Why would I try to cause trouble for you and Arturo? What would be my reason? I love Sarah. Can’t you tell? I flew all the way to Brazil for a day just to see her. Please, Lizzie, let’s be friends. We make *good* friends.’

‘You know traditionally it’s women who cry to manipulate men?’

I rubbed my eyes and looked directly at her. ‘Forgive me,’ I argentined with a hand on my heart, ‘like a man forgiving a manipulative woman.’

People had begun to look over both curiously and approvingly at us. This was a good lunchtime scene. It might not be long before people started to offer us advice.

‘Okay, okay,’ Lizzie sighed, embarrassed, ‘for God’s sake, you’re forgiven.’

I reached out and squeezed her hand. A woman at the next table beamed at me. James came striding back towards us. He sat down and took a swig of wine.

‘Go all right?’ I asked.

He finished his glass. ‘Er, yeah. Friendly enough guy. I tried to tell him we didn’t need him any more now we have the talented Lizzie at our disposal but he wouldn’t listen and kept asking what time, what restaurant. Apparently, the food’s magnificent, extremely expensive, and he will see us there at nine-thirty.’

‘Great, my boyfriend’s looking forward to it too,’ said Lizzie, looking at her phone.

‘I intend to bring no one but myself,’ I declared.

‘Good,’ said James, looking ruffled.

Lizzie had classes after lunch so, at four o’clock, I was left on my own with James.

‘You probably need a sleep?’ I ventured.

‘Very kind of you to concern yourself, Liam, but I’m not going to desert you so soon after our reunion. How about we try your mate’s bar?’

So it was that, after five hours in Achtung!, we made our way to one of the finest restaurants in Latin America without the slightest hope of eating there. We had recently done another large line of cocaine to ‘sober us up’ and when that had not made us sober we had smoked some luminous skunk with Aleman to ‘tone down our rantiness’. These cures had pasted us to the back seat of a speeding taxi.

We looked at each other warily. ‘We shouldn’t really have done that to ourselves,’ said James. ‘Are we really in Argentina?’

‘Probably not,’ I replied.

The streets pulsed past like the beginning of a cinematic car chase. By the time the film had finished I hoped I might be able to speak properly again. The ride proceeded for a few moments in silence.

‘Are you ready to offer your theories to the table about the lack of internationally famous Argentine novelists?’ I asked James. It was a sentence that had taken me no more than six minutes to prepare.

‘Oh, God.’

‘And what you propose to do to change this?’

‘Oh, God,’ he said and scrambled to wind down the window and poke his head out. He held it there for five seconds while the driver addressed me with a stream of animated Spanish, then pulled it back in. ‘That helped a bit,’ he said.

‘Really?’ I asked.

‘Optimism, Liam, optimism.’

When we pulled up, the taxi driver asked for a fare three or four times the going rate. James surprised him by doubling it and politely asking for a *recibo*. There was not a language in the world in which he did not know the word for a receipt.

We were standing outside a restaurant with windows that glowed with intense white light and made me think unpleasantly of an operating theatre. Lizzie and Arturo were standing in its doorway, lit up like angels taking a fag break. They looked at us and laughed.

‘There are two of you!’ Arturo called, coming forward to hug and kiss me. ‘This will be fun!’

Over the last few weeks I had not thought much about our kiss in the alleyway. It belonged to a me I didn’t really believe in. But seeing him there, black jeans, shirt and jacket, brown skin and dark hair, smarter than I’d ever seen him, autumn-eyed, clean-shaven, smirking with our shared secret – I had to turn away quickly to Lizzie.

Which did not reduce my desire. I wanted them both.

## Chapter 18

Daniel Requena was (still is) a woman.

As I entered the restaurant, I staggered at the sight of the severed heads of mythical beasts that lined the walls. Recovering, I concentrated on walking in a straight line and maintaining the calm facial expression of a reformed criminal. James, always more ambitious, accelerated towards a corner table where Allen Ginsberg circa 1947 was sitting with a woman friend beneath a unicorn's head.

'*Hola, soy James Cockburn!*' James bellowed: the words we had practised earlier. The young man in horn-rimmed spectacles flinched. Some peas, or substance made wittily into the shape of peas, fled from his plate. I watched the peas-or-not-to-peas roll to the floor in slow motion. James shouted even louder: '*Encantado! Eres Daniel Requena, no?*'

'No!' said wide-eyed Ginsberg and his startled girlfriend. The maître d' strode towards James as if he was about to rugby tackle him. Two tables along, a young woman began to laugh and stood up.

'James Cockburn! *Encantada! Soy Dani Requena.*'

As if his mistake had never happened, James strode towards her and bent to kiss her on each cheek. It was quite a bend because she was tiny, nearly two feet smaller than him, and he narrowly avoided headbutting her. She was maybe my age, with straight brown hair falling around her narrow shoulders and slim face with neat features that made me think of girls from the home counties. She looked like a writer, or rather, she looked like a writing instrument, like a freshly sharpened pencil.

James gamely introduced Lizzie with the words she'd taught him earlier, '*Mi amiga y la intérprete*', before Lizzie took over in fluid Spanish and made her laugh immediately. I presumed they were laughing at James and me. After they'd embraced, Lizzie introduced Arturo, who had been waiting behind her, looking sideways at Dani through his fringe. Dani spent a couple of seconds taking him in before giving him the standard kiss hello. I was left to introduce myself. I gave her my name and when she continued to look at me expectantly I reached for words to describe my role that I didn't even possess in English. I settled on, '*Soy un editor muerto.*'

She raised her eyebrows, looked round at all of us, amused, and spoke to Lizzie.

Arturo translated before Lizzie had the chance. ‘She says we need a bigger table.’ The maître d’ had been hovering, trying to size up which of these strange characters to deal with first. Arturo spoke to him immediately, and it seconds he was arguing and laughing with him. His personality was quicker and brighter in his own language, inaccessible to me. I could tell Lizzie was annoyed at being usurped in her role by Arturo. She made an attempt to join in the conversation with the maître d’ but he continued to talk to Arturo and ignore her until we were led to a larger table at the back of the restaurant.

James took one head of the table and invited Dani and Lizzie to sit either side of him. Arturo chose to sit on the other side of Dani rather than next to Lizzie, leaving me to sit next to her, facing Arturo.

I began to think we might pull this off. The sudden change of company had shocked me from my introspection, and James’ incredible self-belief was bulldozing its way through any of his own residual paranoia.

‘*Supones soy el hombre,*’ Dani said to James and he caught the meaning before Lizzie could translate.

‘*Si*, I admit it,’ he said. ‘Everyone kept calling you the *new* Bolaño, not the *female* Bolaño. And the pages I’ve read seemed so . . . precise and cold and spare.’

Lizzie, looking grumpy, finally got to do some translating, though when I looked at Dani tilting her tiny chin up at James I had the feeling she had understood each of his words.

‘Do you think only men are precise and cold and spare?’ Lizzie asked James.

James and I looked at each other. We were the precise opposites: scattershot, febrile and superfluous.

‘No, of course,’ apologised James. ‘There’s probably no such thing as male or female style. But there is such a thing as male or female *nombres* and Daniel Requena is to me a *male nombre*.’

‘Like George Eliot,’ I suggested, glad to have something to contribute.

‘No, not like that,’ said Dani in English and then she spoke some rapid Spanish we could tell was politely refuting our suggestions. Already it seemed the Englishmen abroad were destined to play the idiots in this exchange.

‘One,’ translated Lizzie, ‘it is not like that really, because Dani or even Daniel Requena is my real name, short for Daniela Requena, so I have not misled



you; rather, you have misled yourselves. Two,’ she paused dramatically, ‘flattery will get you everywhere.’

We all laughed and Dani smiled at us tolerantly. She seemed to have some sympathy for comic characters, if that’s what we were. It was a change from the role of the villain I had been getting used to. So I sat quietly and did my best to sober up. Sin, guilt and repentance: it was some sort of structure for a life. Instead of disappearing to the toilet, I watched James, Lizzie and Arturo fight for Dani’s attention. Alejandro had not arrived and I felt like an interloper at a double-date. Whenever Arturo succeeded in distracting Dani from James, Lizzie and James took their revenge by flirting heartily with each other until Arturo was forced to bring them back into the conversation and revert to English. The spotlights shining on the mounted unicorn heads above us made them glow white as bone. I stared at them until eventually, exhausted, I slipped out for a cigarette on my own.

Dani arrived, just as I was stubbing mine out. ‘Hello,’ she said, pulling a cigarette out of her bag.

‘*Senorita*,’ I said. My anxiousness at speaking Spanish often led to this type of Tourette’s.

She giggled.

‘I mean, hello,’ I said, smiling back. ‘*Hablo solo un poquito Castellano*.’

‘*Tengo una confesion*.’

‘*Una? Tengo muchas confesiones*.’

‘Your Spanish is cute,’ she said. ‘I appreciate the effort.’

‘Well, it certainly is effortful. Thank you.’ For a moment I felt very proud of how my Spanish was progressing until I realised we had switched to English.

‘Well, of course, I speak English,’ she said.

‘Yes, I can see that now. Is that your *confesion*?’

‘I do not realise how good I can speak English until I hear your Spanish.’

‘*Gracias*. I’m glad I came in useful for something. So, why go through all that interpreting?’

‘Oh, I thought it might be interesting. To have distance. I was not sure I wanted to meet James. Being private is working well for me. I didn’t want to ruin things.’

She’d understood perfectly how to intrigue a publisher like Cockburn. Agents are so keen to tell you about their authors’ physical blessings, their advantageous

networks and starring roles in incredible personal melodramas, that to be refused any information at all is suspense of the highest order. James was not such a sophisticated reader as to refuse the pleasure of seeking the great revelation, and I could see how he was now delighted with the current twist. The story of his meeting with her in itself was valuable for him even if he failed to buy the rights to her book.

Dani went on: 'But in the end I became too curious. I wanted to meet this character James Cockburn my agent makes sound like Jim Morrison. My agent exaggerates. It is more easy to have a mystery through a translator, to have a distance. That is also why I wanted to meet the English first, because you *always* need a translator with the English. And perhaps I worried that *distinguished English publishers* would speak English so well I would be confused.'

*'A que hora llegan los distinguido Inglés publishers?'*

She looked at an imaginary watch. 'They're supposed to be here now.'

'I'm surprised you've managed to get away from one of them.'

'Yes, I had to pretend I go to the toilet.'

I finished my second cigarette and stubbed it out. 'You're interesting,' I said.

'You're interesting too,' she said. "*Editor muerto*".'

'That's only half of it. What's Castellano for "murderer"?''

*'El asesino o la asesina.'*

*'Soy el editor asesino.'*

'You guys have read too much Bolaño. You need to lighten up.'

I laughed or I would have liked to. She picked a bad night to offer me this advice. The wind was beginning to pick up, there was a chill in the air, the coldest I'd felt since being in Buenos Aires. I shivered.

'Don't you want to tell me who you murdered?' she asked.

'If I have to. Do you know Craig Bennett?'

She nodded. 'Of course.'

'I was with him when he died, it was partly my fault. I murdered my career that night, whatever happened. I murdered myself. Now I'm stuck here in purgatory.'

'I don't believe you're a murderer. And please, as if Bolaño wasn't enough, now you're going to do Dante?'

I felt suddenly as if I was choking on the dust of all the unread books I had left in boxes in my aunt's basement. 'Oh, God, books, let's not talk about books, I'm so sick of books.'

‘What should we talk about?’

‘We could always try . . . not talking at *all*.’

My reflex attempt at flirtation surprised me, as much as it was in keeping with my normal behaviour, my mid-binge leaps for transcendence. I slowed my voice and held eye-contact with her. She was about my age but her green eyes examined me from years away, and her laugh, when it arrived soon afterwards, was kind but not entirely un hurtful.

It was then that the taxi pulled up and Alejandro leapt out with a shout and came towards us. ‘My young friend, hello!’

He looked suave in a black suit and white shirt. He kissed my cheek and turned to Dani. He had never greeted me with such affection before. ‘*Buenos noches*,’ he said, offering her his hand and looking to me for an introduction.

‘This is my new friend *Daniel* Requena, the novelist I mentioned who is about to set fire to the Argentine literary world. Dani, this is my friend Alejandro, friend of writers, muse, entertainer, bon vivant. We had asked him to join us to translate for you before Lizzie accepted – and before you revealed to me just now that you can speak English very well.’

‘You are *not* the gorgeous young man?’ Alejandro asked Dani.

‘I suspect I am. I understand why you thought I was a man,’ she said, turning to me. ‘But how did you know I was gorgeous?’

‘A lucky guess,’ I said, and then she began to talk too quickly to Alejandro for me to understand.

Back inside the restaurant it was time to order. I had gone without cocaine for over an hour now but any preference for food was still purely abstract. What type of food *would* a food-eating human prefer? James seemed back to his perkier but was mainly engaged with the wine list. It appeared Dionysius had already drunk the greatest share of two bottles. There was talk around me of suckling pig, of octopus, rabbit in white wine, unicorn fillet served with figs and soaked in cognac, the thigh of a centaur, slow-roasted with lemon and thyme, salt and pepper gorgon hair, dragon tail and fennel risotto. In the end, with help from Alejandro – ‘What is the best small meal for a man recovering from a daytime cocaine binge?’ ‘You look pale, my friend, you need some red meat in you.’ – I ordered the only steak on the menu, bloody, expensive.

Alejandro was making a useful impact on the table, helping to diffuse the resentment brewing between Cockburn and Arturo, between Arturo and Lizzie. He poured water on Arturo's jealousy by showing him a fascinated attention while simultaneously shunning Cockburn. Cockburn was trying to court Alejandro, perhaps thinking of the important role he could play to Bennett's biographer. His tactic to win Alejandro over was to talk without interruption about his, James Cockburn's, lead role in Craig Bennett's life-story, in long, excitable sentences which confirmed my suspicion that he would not be eating his dinner.

'Liam,' Alejandro asked me, pretending not to hear another of Cockburn's questions, 'why did you not bring Arturo to the bar when you came to annoy me? Then I would have been much happier to be annoyed by you.'

Arturo was not the sort to refuse flattery from man or woman. He sat back, amused, enjoying James' rejection and talking to Alejandro in quick bursts of Spanish which he would, with his instinctual good manners, alternate occasionally with slower English to keep me in the conversation.

I was grateful for that. As I rescinded from the conversation, I was happy just to watch his face. I could see no sign that he was the man who had kissed me in the alleyway, and I found this an enormous relief. There was at least one other man at this table who played the roles he chose to, and he had done me the kindness of letting me, and perhaps me alone, see this. I smiled at him and watched him almost imperceptibly purse his lips at me before he resumed speaking to Dani, having spotted Lizzie laughing at one of Cockburn's jokes.

At the other side of the table Dani was contributing more and more in English but still seemed to enjoy having Lizzie translate to James for her. From the way they smirked at each other I suspected they were conducting a private conversation about James.

As the evening wore on, all of the flirting in which I was hardly involved made me feel alone. If I would only take my medicine I could happily impose myself on others and not notice I was unwelcome. But I was determined to eat some of my dinner and to look the waiter in the face when he came to collect my plate, determined for once to behave with some manners. Cockburn too had begun to flag and fall out of the conversation, and as he took time to breathe the conversation switched to Spanish between the rest of the table. Cockburn's eyes met mine and travelled to the other two men at the table. Alejandro had his hand on Arturo's arm

and was leaning in to tell him a story close to his ear that was making Arturo laugh steadily, economically, as though to preserve his energy for what was to come. It wasn't just Arturo who was attractive: some girls would certainly have preferred Alejandro, who, though fifteen years older, with his well trimmed and silver flecked beard, presented a more classically masculine picture of beauty.

James and I, pasty-faced, red-eyed, with droopy hair and dishevelled faces, were not obviously well-matched opponents with the Argentines. But, as usual, if they had the skill, beauty, underhand tricks, we Brits would hope to win the day through sheer doggedness. James raised a non-existent cigarette to his lips and we left the table for a team-talk outside the restaurant.

'Not very friendly this Alejandro, is he?' said James.

'I don't think he likes *you*,' I said.

James spread his arms with the mystified innocence of an Argentine defender receiving a yellow card.

'You're going on about Bennett too much. I told you he's touchy about him. Every question you think you're asking him is prefaced by such a long anecdote about one of the classic adventures of Cockburn and Bennett that it's a direct challenge for Alejandro to prove his stories are as good as yours. He's not interested in competing.'

'Oh, well, thank you for reassuring me.'

'I worry about you in that office without having me around to offer advice.'

'I really wouldn't worry on that count, Liam: there's no shortage of people left who are happy to point out my shortcomings.'

'How many more lines have you had?'

'None! Well, one. And to be frank, I need another.'

'No one *likes* Frank. At least wait until after dinner.'

'Dinner. How unedifying.'

We went back in and James tried once again. 'So, Alejandro, Liam tells me you and Craig used to get up to all sorts of trouble.'

'Well, we were friends and we were young and brave and stupid,' he said and turned back to Arturo.

'Well, go on, please tell us a story,' James persisted.

‘I am afraid,’ said Alejandro, ‘that it was always Craig who told the best stories, certainly in public. I am shy, you see.’ He turned again to Arturo and said. ‘I need more intimacy to tell mine.’

‘Oh, *please*,’ said James, and Lizzie and Dani joined in to ask Alejandro to tell us more.

‘Yes, tell us a story,’ said Arturo.

Alejandro swatted an invisible fly. ‘Must I? It really was the usual shit. Heroin, cocaine, fraud, extortion. Young boys’ games.’

‘Oh, come *on*.’

‘I do not know how to tell it without cliché. Liam? Perhaps you have found a way?’

Everyone looked at me.

‘Has he not told you, Cockblock, that he is researching the life of Craig Bennett in Buenos Aires and writing a novel about him? I have watched him writing it next to me at the bar. You write quickly, Liam. I have read it over your shoulder. There are some sentences I quite enjoyed.’

Cockburn had sobered up suddenly and was looking at me. Dani had become more alert too.

‘How do you do it, Liam?’ Alejandro continued. ‘How should I tell our story? Any tips?’

I mumbled something glib about avoiding sex scenes and lyrical descriptions of taking ecstasy.

‘That doesn’t leave us with much,’ said Alejandro.

Dani spoke and Lizzie translated: ‘You never tell a story about someone else, only yourself.’

‘What about biographies?’ asked Cockburn. ‘Don’t you believe in them?’

‘I believe in their *existence*,’ said Dani through Lizzie. ‘I have seen them in the biography sections.’ She looked up at the unicorns on the wall. ‘They are not mythical creatures.’

‘Homosexuals,’ said Alejandro.

‘Pardon?’ James asked.

‘It’s something we started at school. No women around then. It’s what wrecked the friendship in the end. I didn’t have as much trouble believing in it as a category of existence as he did.’

‘He never did settle down for long,’ mused James. ‘But it was always Amy he talked about.’

‘Amy’s a friend of mine,’ I said. ‘He was talking about Amy on the night he died.’

‘You never write about someone else, only yourself,’ said Dani, this time in English.

‘Oh, I know *Amy*,’ said Alejandro. ‘I am sure you will want to tell it like he did,’ he said, looking at me sadly.

The starters arrived – not for James or me – and I appreciated their quality as abstractly as I would that of a well-made violin bow.

Alejandro and Arturo went out and came back giggly and red-eyed from a cigarette break. Dani was increasingly unable to stop interrupting James in English as she realised interrupting was the only tactic available to take part in a dialogue with him. Lizzie, however, was still contributing clarifications and explanations in English and Spanish, and I began to feel jealous. As James got into his flow, selling the imprint, his ambitions for the book, for her, for the future of modern letters, Lizzie, with her pithy summaries and asides, came across as his new, improved, more-talented lieutenant. While I knew this was only for tonight, I knew too that there was someone in London just like her, my real usurper.

Even surrounded by friends, I experienced the usual Buenos Aires loneliness, the unbelonging, the fear of waiters. As I watched Alejandro and Arturo giggle like children under the skulls of legendary beasts, I felt as if it was me who had just smoked a spliff.

I could have done some coke, one can always do some coke, and that’s exactly why I didn’t.

Instead, I slipped out of my seat, out of the restaurant and round the corner onto the busy main road. Here I found a quiet neighbourhood bar, bought a beer, found the darkest corner and called my father.

I woke him up. I heard murmurs from a woman in the background before he promised to ring me back in five minutes. He had mentioned a new girlfriend before. In the minutes while I waited for him to ring me back, the bar’s darkness began to oppress me and I walked outside to the street again. I leant back against a wall and looked out at the traffic flying past, so far from the woman I loved, and I tried to imagine the insensible vastness of so many other roads, so many versions of myself

in every country staring at cars rushing past and seeking something other than fragments of their reflection in electric windows. I wanted home and I did not know where it was. Then Dad rang back.

‘Liam, how are you?’ he asked. ‘It’s nice to hear from you, even if it is so late.’ He sighed the type of bone-weary sigh he had sighed on the phone shortly before and after he had disappeared for three years.

It was easier to forgive a sigh like that now. I hoped it wasn’t how I had sounded to Sarah in the weeks before I left England.

‘Are you all right, Dad?’ I asked.

As usual, he began to tell me about his work. After he had crashed out of teaching, he had become a freelance copy-editor, and now we were in the same industry he was always keen to talk shop. As I listened about his deadlines for Sandra and Jonathan and the problems with Indian typesetters I found myself patting my pockets for a cigarette despite already having a lit one in my hand. Dad had become old without the support system, without the almost-paid-off mortgage, the wife, the salary. What could be passed off as light comedy for a younger man was dark and threatening to him. I see now he was looking to me for reassurance, for tips I could never give. But all his talk of money reminded me of my own dwindling resources and I couldn’t help interrupting him.

‘Can we talk about something else, Dad?’

‘I’m sorry, Liam,’ he said, sounding hurt. ‘What?’

‘It’s not that I’m not interested,’ I lied. ‘It’s just I rang because I really needed someone to talk to and I haven’t done any talking yet.’

‘Well, talk.’

‘Um . . .’

‘Where are you right now, for instance?’

‘I’m walking up and down a street outside a bar. It’s about half-ten. Round the corner is a fancy restaurant I ran away from twenty minutes ago. I was having dinner with my old colleague James Co –’

‘I saw him on the telly last night discussing the future of the book.’

‘Really?’ I was disappointed but not surprised. He loved being on TV. ‘How boring of him. Anyway, I was having dinner with him and the new Bolaño –’

‘The new Bolaño! What’s he like?’

‘*She*. You sexist. *She*’s all right.’



Dad chuckled. He had a good chuckle, stronger, more plausible than his sigh. He should have sounded like this a lot more. It was easy to make him laugh. He liked my stories, about my friends, about women I met, and especially about publishing. He envied me for getting to meet novelists while he got to email academics. He would have liked me to spend more time telling him stories about them so he could relay them to his friends from the pub. We had a good time together in the pub. He wanted to be proud of me. We put on a show for each other. His friends would keep congratulating us on how close we were to each other.

‘You sound like you’re having fun out there.’

‘I’m losing my mind, Dad, that’s what I’m trying to say. I’m not joking. I’m losing it this very minute. I’ve got no one to talk to. Everyone’s young and annoying or incomprehensibly Argentine. I miss Sarah. God, I miss Sarah.’

‘I’m sorry, Liam.’

‘Oh, I’m all right really.’

‘I bet you tell yourself that a lot.’

‘All the time. Always with a manly swig of a drink or pull on a cigarette.’

‘Ah, *cigarettes*. I’ve had to give up smoking.’

He’d been giving up for years, it was almost his hobby.

‘I just can’t seem to get my blood pressure down,’ he continued. ‘The doctor says I need to do more exercise, but when I do . . .’ Dad’s voice was tired out. He hadn’t meant to cause all the pain he had. He just hadn’t thought hard enough. My heart went out to him. I didn’t mean it to, but it did. I wanted to tell him I understood. Subtract at least that from your sadness. You are forgiven.

‘I don’t do much exercise here, either,’ I said.

‘I’ve been getting DVDs, magazines, *Men’s Health*, I’ve even started running. I can’t do it. It’s shown me how knackered I am. Really, Liam, I am.’

‘Perhaps you just need to try to accept you’re slowing down. Tell me, is there any point after thirty when you stop comparing how knackered you are with how much less knackered you used to be?’

‘Is there? Let me think. Certainly not after thirty-five. No. No, there isn’t. It gets worse and worse.’

‘I thought it might.’

He laughed again. ‘Don’t tell me *you’re* worried about how old you are.’

‘Sometimes. But no, not really. I’m more worried about how young I am and what I’m going to do for the rest of my life now I’ve fucked up everything that mattered to me.’

I had tried to say that lightly. The line went quiet for a few seconds and then Dad spoke. ‘I don’t think that hurts less when you get older.’

I shivered. It was getting colder. I took a deep breath, threw down my cigarette and asked the question I had given up asking him years ago.

‘Dad? When you went missing, where were you, what did you do? All those years, what were you thinking about?’

There was a long pause, a sigh I could draw by now. ‘I’m sorry, Liam,’ he said eventually. ‘I will. We need to talk. I’d like to talk actually. It might be good for us both. Not like this, though. Face to face. When are you coming home?’

I had not been greatly missed in my absence. Most people had finished their food, except for Cockburn. Lizzie and Dani were giggling as they bullied him into taking mouthfuls of octopus or perhaps kraken he was doing his best to avoid. Arturo and Alejandro were watching them and laughing. A severed human heart lay on my plate, leaking blood. My stomach amazed me with a carnivorous lurch. I cut a piece off and chewed it, reached for a bottle of red and filled my glass rim-full.

I remember heading next to Mundo Bizarro . . . an argument, a drink being thrown . . . by a girl? At Arturo? Or was it Lizzie? A pill placed in my palm. El Coronel shouting. A punch aimed at James. *Las Malvinas son Argentinas!* We left. Lizzie and James in a taxi. Where was Arturo?

I was lying in a corner of a nightclub. *Porteños* were pointing at me and laughing. I staggered to my feet and checked my pockets. There were two packets of crushed cigarettes but I no longer seemed to own a wallet. I found my phone and saw someone else’s smashing against a wall, shiny innards glinting against the streetlamp. It was 3.45 a.m. now and I had seventeen missed calls.

In the bathroom mirror I checked my face. My lips were covered in black filth, but when I washed this off I was semi-presentable. With enough cigarettes and gin-and-tonics and hardboiled irony I hoped I could lose the permanent seen-a-ghost expression of the ecstasy overdosee. Incredibly, as I dug my fingers in the ticket pocket of my jeans, I found a small plastic bag that probably contained coke. There

was a wedge of notes I had folded up and squashed in there too. They'd both help. I splashed more water on my face, smiled at the guy next to me and left.

I was at least two drinks below normal. Once I had headed to the bar to make a start on the gin-and-tonics, I began to look around me. I didn't recognise the club, but in other, less disorientating circumstances I would have loved it. Heavy, Freudian house music played and blurred into the dry-ice and hot bodies dancing. The room I was in was dark, narrow and low-ceilinged, and seemed to stretch forever into the distance. Mirrors on each side of the wall drew all the dancers who had ever lived in a procession towards the centre of the earth. It was a club as Borges would have described it in one of his interminable stories. It was likely I would be here for all eternity.

Such thoughts, at first a relief, began to oppress me, and I headed through the endless dance floor in search of my friends. I hoped I still had them. I had a feeling bad things had happened. The E – yes, it was certainly an E I could feel, and there was an awful suspicion that I had had two – made me forget my predicament in short flashes, and I found myself grinning at the boys and girls I passed.

And, eventually, above me, unmistakably, was James Cockburn, shirt undone to the navel, dancing on giant speakers in the middle of the antechamber I had reached after several miles of dance floor. I watched him turn to hug the gleaming man in a pink musclevest beside him, and then he caught sight of me and held his arms aloft before stepping down from the speakers and mingling me in his damp embrace.

'Where've you been?' he shouted. 'This place is incredible!'

'I'm not dead, am I?' I shouted back. 'This isn't actually the afterlife?'

'No, mate,' he shouted. 'Afterlife's in Rio, I think. We're in Library of Babel!'

This didn't seem strange then. 'Where's everyone else?'

'There's only you and me and Lizzie! We thought you'd left. Where've you been?'

'Unconscious, on the floor.'

'Nice one!'

'Not really, no.'

The crossfader switched and a piano riff of simple, yearning optimism dropped into the room like the news in the midst of a natural disaster that your loved

ones had survived. It took my breath away. We stopped talking and hugged and danced and the happiness I felt brought tears to my eyes. I wished Sarah was there so I could communicate my soul to her in the same joyful chords I would not remember tomorrow. It was at this point Lizzie arrived with a new girlfriend, a small brunette with a mod fringe and panda-eye make-up. I watched them dancing closer and closer, slowing down, gazing into each other's eyes, and then . . . and then . . . and then they were kissing, and James and I didn't dare move, and then we were all kissing, back and forward, the softness of Panda-eyes' lips and open mouth a surrender, the muscularity of Lizzie's tongue a carefully-controlled tour, the soaked sharp stubble of James an unpleasant joke we quickly laughed off. This was what I loved about ecstasy and as close as you could get to the emotion artificially. We had a kiss to remember when we were coming down. It was how the past could redeem the future. Or doom it.

We were still there at six. I'd given everyone another half E by then (I had found three in a back pocket). Lizzie had tried to tell me about the big argument she'd had with Arturo that I couldn't remember – apparently he'd punched me after I stuck up for her in the middle of an argument they were having. I had struggled to hear her over the music. Arturo had taken Dani and Alejandro to another bar. It was just after he'd left that she'd thrown her phone against a wall in anger. 'If he wants me to cheat on him, he's made me feel completely up for it,' she shouted. Cockburn moved in and put his arms round her waist. She pushed him away and kissed Panda-eyes again. Cockburn put his arms around both of them.

Later, when I was in a cubicle with Cockburn, my phone rang again and I realised it was Arturo, that he must have been trying to reach Lizzie on my phone for the last couple of hours. That, or apologise to me. That, or threaten me. 'Shall I answer it?' I asked.

'What do you think he's going to say to her if he finds out she's in a club doing ecstasy with both of us?' asked Cockburn, digging around in the wrap with his key.

I didn't answer that. We silently watched the phone until it stopped ringing.

'Quick, turn it off,' said Cockburn.

I did. We each inhaled a quick keyload of coke and unlocked the door.

'I can't believe I'm in Buenos Aires, in Library of Babel, having just kissed two beautiful bisexual women,' said Cockburn, looking in the mirror.

‘They’re no more bisexual than we are. It’s not real, it’s a dream. That’s just how people on ecstasy shake hands. We understand; others won’t. So don’t do anything else. Ella’s at home.’

‘Thank you, Liam,’ he said, suddenly thoughtful. ‘You’re right. Always looking after me.’ Then his face broke into a broad, excited grin. ‘Shall we go and find the girls again?’

It was dawn when we returned to James’ hotel, seeking his mini-bar. Our friend Panda-eyes was gone, frightened away by what in re-telling this story I will describe as Cockburn’s wandering hands; we hugged her goodbye and lamented her loss and would remember her for ever as perfect. James’ jetlag had finally caught up with him: the drugs weren’t working on him at all as we left the taxi. He was slurring something about having left his coat in the garden of forking paths as Lizzie and I propped him up and marched him across an enormous shiny foyer to the lift. The receptionists brightly called out to us in English, ‘Good morning!’ Perhaps the speakers in the foyer were broken; there was no electronic tango music playing. Once in his room, James collapsed on his bed immediately, and Lizzie helped him out of his jacket and shoes and tucked him up. It was important to keep moving at a time like this: we had had a wonderful time and perhaps it was worth it but there were many frightening consequences to face if we allowed ourselves to, not least this crisply cold dawning morning. ‘Have you got anything left?’ asked Lizzie. There was a tiny bit of coke left and a whole pill we didn’t dare wait to digest. We crushed it down and did the business. It was a big, spacious white room. That helped. Our noses stung horribly. We took a beer out onto the balcony and lay on the deck, watching the sun bleed through the night. The drug kicked in and made us feel incredibly nice again. We talked and talked. The air was chilly. I brought a duvet out and we lay under it, smoking fags, passing the beer back and forth between us, explaining to each other everything we had ever done or dreamed. The ecstasy magnetised our bodies, her legs across mine, my arm around her waist, her head on my shoulder. At one point I couldn’t resist kissing her again. It only lasted a few seconds and didn’t mean anything, but it felt wonderful. ‘That wasn’t romantic,’ she warned me, and I lay back with the new sun shining in my face and laughed. I was so happy.

I was alone when I woke up. For a few moments I didn't know what I was, let alone who I was or where I was. The distant noise of traffic said this was a world where cars existed. The concept of what a car was – *just*. Turning onto my side, I found a note under an unopened can of Quilmes, scribbled in biro on what looked like a page torn out of my notebook. My satchel was open nearby, but when I looked inside it my notebook wasn't there. This was a worry too awful to contemplate and so I pulled the note from beneath the beer, hoping for some instructions. *Your name is Don Martinez. You do not remember anything. Not even about your wife, who is in grave danger. You must find her. Now, go to the bathroom.*

No, it was not as useful as this.

Dear Liam (and James)

You fell asleep. Now I've started worrying and won't be able to rest. I'm going back to face the music with Arturo. It will be easier now than later. Thank you for a very lovely evening.

Lizzie xxx

After I had read the note, in a gesture that was all to do with the coping mechanisms of style and little with desire, I opened the can of beer and took a swig. It was wet, I can say that for it.

'Bravo!' called James from the bedroom. He appeared out on the balcony in a clean shirt, wet hair and sunglasses.

'What on earth do you look so pleased about?' I asked.

'You may well ask,' he said, raising his clenched fists to his shoulders and gyrating his hips in a sickening motion as if he were hula-hooping.

'Stop that,' I croaked.

He complied but pulled out his BlackBerry and brandished it at me. 'Email from Daniel's agent, expressing her client's desire to sign a contract with us. Job done.'

He put his phone back in his pocket and began to stretch his right arm behind his neck and over his left shoulder, repeating again the other way.

'She probably wants to write you *into* a novel,' I said.

'And so she should.'

'As a sort of grotesque Dickensian caricature.'

‘Now, Liam,’ he said, stopping stretching and returning inside the room, ‘that’s hurtful. I’m going to order us breakfast from room service, and then we can start.’

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘Start what?’

He didn’t answer and I heard him back up the phone and order two *desayunos Inglés*, coffee and orange juice.

When he came back onto the balcony he was holding the notebook I had recently finished my novel in. He flourished it at me like a red card.

‘You know, I think this could make everyone a *lot* of money,’ he said. ‘And what’s best, in a way Craig would have just *loved*. A fitting tribute, if you will.’

‘You read it?’

‘I loved it. Well done, Liam: it’s really very fucking good.’

‘You mean it?’

‘Yes, I mean it.’

I felt my hangover lifting.

‘Do you think you might want to, er . . .’

‘Of course I want to publish it. There’s just one big stumbling block,’ James went on, ‘but I know just how to get over it.’

And then he told me his plan.

## Chapter 19

Editor's introduction to *My Biggest Lie* by Craig Bennett (October 2009, Eliot, Quinn)

The night when Craig Bennett won the Man Booker Prize in 2000 exceeded my wildest dreams. Not only was it the first time that a novel I commissioned won the prize; but it was won by a writer who had become my best friend. It was an achievement beyond any expectations for a debut writer whose talents nevertheless truly deserved it.

Bennett's life was something of a boomerang (cultural stereotyping intended): flung from the UK to Australia as a young boy; continuing to spin onwards in his twenties to Latin America (a place that would be enormously important to his writing); before returning back to the UK and the success of first publication, at which point his profile, and the myth of his 'bad behaviour', spiralled out of control.

Bennett was born in Sydney after his parents emigrated from Yorkshire. He was the son of Ralph and Maureen. He lived with them and his sister until his mother left his father for another man. Craig alone continued to live with his father, who gave up his engineering job and moved them to the country, having bought a partnership in a vineyard in New South Wales.

Ralph Bennett is portrayed in Bennett's memoir *Juice* (2008) as a domineering, unpredictable character, capable of great charm and compassion, but also of bleak depression, violence and mania. Ralph never forgave his wife for the affair that ended their marriage and so Craig saw very little of her and his sister. Instead, he was 'home-schooled' on the grounds of the vineyard his father was (only at times successfully) preoccupied with. Craig taught himself to drive at twelve, the same young age at which he describes beginning to drink wine regularly. The rhapsodic freedom he felt at that age – so different to most young people – is I think the key to understanding his work.

At thirteen the authorities caught up with him and he was sent to boarding school, where he was expelled in his second month, but the next attempt to educate him met with more success and he remained at Victoria Boys School for the next four years, alternating his holidays with his father at the vineyard and his mother in



Sydney. It was here he met Alejandro Montenegro, who would be a close friend of Craig's for many years. It is Montenegro who has unearthed this previously unseen 'first novel' of Bennett's.

Montenegro's family was from Buenos Aires, and after finishing school Alejandro and Craig moved together there. Bennett was to spend many years in Argentina and briefly worked in the film industry. After the success of his first novel his circle completed as he moved back permanently to the UK, settling on the Welsh coast. It is of great sadness to everyone that at this calmest period of his life he should die of a heart attack during the London Book Fair.

This novel, *My Biggest Lie*, was written in the mid-1990s, shortly before *Talking to Pedro*. The typewritten manuscript was long believed lost and Bennett was trying to reconstruct the novel from memory when he died. Ostensibly an autobiographical novel based on Bennett's first years in Buenos Aires, *My Biggest Lie* explores prevailing themes in his work: the relationship between autobiography and fiction, between person and persona, between truth and lies. The hunt for other 'new' manuscripts continues.

## Chapter 20

I wanted to go home but now I was trapped in Buenos Aires. I had work to do.

Seen from the outside, I may not have appeared to be a man in captivity. I had left my monk's cell to move into a pleasant one-bedroom apartment in Belgrano sublet by one of Lizzie's colleagues who'd gone travelling for three months. After all the moaning I had subjected her to about the hostel, I should have bounced out the door. But I felt sad saying farewell to another familiar place, handing my key back to the same miserable man who had checked me in on the first day.

'You've been with us a while, *ché*,' he said mournfully. 'Where are you going?'

In the background melancholic accordion filtered like a melodica through a dub beat. It was a suicide-inducing sound.

'I'm renting an apartment in Belgrano,' I said. 'Listen, do you like this music?'

He looked up. 'Me, I like rock n roll. The Stones. Springsteen.' I hadn't seen him this enthusiastic before. 'The boss – not Bruce, my boss – he makes us play this. For the atmosphere. The guests, *you* like it.' He was slowing down again now. 'Argentine, but contemporary. We have some CDs for sale if you like,' he said, reaching for drawer beneath him.

'No, no, please, *gracias*.'

He handed me my deposit and before I left I put *El Diego* back in the shelves. No one had taken up my old copy of *Labyrinths*, and so I returned this to my suitcase. Outside the taxi beeped its horn.

Cockburn had arranged for Eliot, Quinn to pick up the bill for my new apartment: expenses for my short-term contract as 'on-site project editor'. To the strangers I met in bars now I could tell a story of why I was in Buenos Aires that implied no shame, no crisis, no breakdown. In searching to reverse loss I had found not love but profit. Lying had got me into this and now lying would get me out.

James' arrival back in the UK made national headlines. Not only had he signed Dani Requena, the 'new Borges' (our night dancing in the Library of Babel had strongly affected Cockburn), but – sensationally – he had tracked down a never-been-seen lost novel from recently deceased Booker Prize-winner Craig Bennett.

I read out loud to Alejandro from the *Guardian*'s website:

'It was an unbelievable find,' said James Cockburn. 'I'd heard a rumour from a colleague about an old friend of Craig's living in Buenos Aires. Sadly, they had fallen out. There's a love triangle described in the book which seems to be quite autobiographical. After a day running all over Buenos Aires and chasing leads, I managed to track down Alejandro Montenegro: we immediately became great friends.'

Bennett and Montenegro had met in a private high school in Australia and been inseparable until late into their twenties, when they had worked on film scripts together in Buenos Aires.

During Cockburn's meeting with Montenegro he was given part of a photocopy of an early manuscript from Bennett. Fifteen years earlier, Bennett had given it over to Montenegro for his opinion. It was marked with crossings out and minor corrections in pen from Bennett.

'Alejandro had always assumed this was a novel that had already been published,' said Cockburn. 'He had always postponed reading Craig's novels, not wanting to be reminded of their painful falling out. He confessed to me that he always hoped he would get a chance to read them once they were friends again. He knew it was worth money but it meant more to him than that.'

But this manuscript was actually the unpublished first-written novel by Craig Bennett, completed when he was thirty years old, a manuscript long believed lost. Cockburn was transfixed as he realised what he was reading.

'This is a brand new Craig Bennett novel, every bit as surprising and brave an expedition into the human heart as his four others. A young man's novel, it's less guarded and more romantic than the later works, and it sizzles with the eroticism of the Buenos Aires nightlife.'

Cockburn and Alejandro are reconstructing a manuscript with the aid of an editor in Buenos Aires, and Eliot, Quinn will rush-release the novel in October this year. 'This is without doubt the literary event of 2009,' said James Cockburn, 'and I will go as far as saying this century.'

This *century*. Not even this century *so far*. This century and the ninety years left of it.

Alejandro had not said anything while I read the story and when I finished I turned around to see him staring at me, holding a cafetiere and slowly shaking his head.

‘Your boss. He is an enormous arsehole, you know?’ he said eventually.

Alejandro had to be in on the plot.

It can be easy to forget how competent and single-minded Cockburn is when it comes to a publishing opportunity. His senses are super-tuned: he had made sure during our night to get a card from Alejandro with the name of the legal practice where he worked, and it was there we headed in the afternoon after our calls to his mobile went unanswered. After a brief argument, Alejandro agreed to let us buy him a drink after work. Here I kept quiet and felt nauseous while Cockburn explained his proposal. Alejandro stared at me throughout.

‘And how do you feel about this, Liam?’ he asked.

I was tired of feeling. I wanted nothing more than to surrender to instruction.

‘I’m in,’ I said.

Alejandro was all I could have hoped for in my first editor. We met every other night in the week and on Saturday afternoons at his apartment. He read my pages and corrected my imaginings of what life had been like in Buenos Aires in the early 1990s. Sometimes he would chuckle: ‘I wish it had been like that; leave that in.’ Other times he would be angry: ‘What species of charmless bore do you think we were?’ He added magnificent *lunfardo* swear-words and expressions and suggested ways to render them against English style. He told me long anecdotes over our coffee breaks and a few days later I presented them back to him in some reworked pages. My novel became better and less of my own. Alejandro breathed the ghost of Craig Bennett over it and I felt his laughter vibrate through its bones.

By the end of a month in which I worked longer than twelve hours a day, seven days a week, I had typed every chapter from my notebook onto my laptop and reworked each several times with Alejandro. We sent this to James. Now it was time for the next stage. On an old manual typewriter Alejandro owned, I copied the finished manuscript, including extra mistakes and sentences for Alejandro to scribble out and add notes to in a separate colour. This was the typewriter Craig used to borrow to write stories and film scripts. Alejandro had moved it and a sealed spare

ribbon between the six different apartments he had lived in since Craig left Buenos Aires fifteen years ago. As I pressed down on the old levers, I felt Craig's fingers rattling, clashing against the ancient ribbon, tattooing the words onto the pale page. The machine gleamed in black metal and made a racket like a factory. I had hardly drunk while I had been writing on the laptop but now I started on whisky early after lunch, drinking most of a bottle and smoking two packs a day in my lonely apartment. The old hunger for cocaine spread through my body and I lay out on my bed, feeling the flames lick along my arteries and roar in my skull. I was not myself. I was being consumed.

But when the fires died down, there would still be something left of me. I would bring myself back, sit down again and type.

A week later, I brought the manuscript to Alejandro. We removed pages at random and crumpled them into balls, we set fire to their edges, we spat on them and covered them in cigarette ash, we splashed coffee and beer on them and ground them beneath our feet.

I photocopied them all and we gave this new copy the same treatment, scraping and scribbling, gouging and ripping.

I photocopied them again and FedExed these pages to James.

I had just finished my first publishing assignment since losing my job in April.

Despite my mixed feelings, as I posted the manuscript to England, I was proud of my work.

I was able now to go back home to England, as I'd resolved, but I had my apartment paid for another month and I decided to stay on. I had invoiced Eliot, Quinn for my work/unofficial advance, and James had promised to keep me topped up if I ran low. My money would go a lot further in Buenos Aires, and despite my homesickness it was hard to imagine living with my mum in Blackpool for more than a week or two.

More than anything, what stopped me from running to catch a flight was the feeling of having finished a job in Buenos Aires, of having had a colleague, a purpose, a desk. I was getting used to the place. I hassled James and he gave me a copy-editing job with the promise of some more; I began to toy with the idea of getting my own flat when this one ran out, making a living from doing freelance work for English publishers. The old fiction began to try and reassert itself over the reality I knew: I would write my second 'debut' novel from exile, live the life of a

Beckett, a Joyce, a Gombrowicz . . . as drawn by a child with bright crayons. I was too much of a tart to even attempt to write like them; I cared too much about people liking me.

It was weeks later now, the end of August, and I had not seen Lizzie or Arturo since our night out with James and Dani. I was not very surprised and had anticipated a cooling-off period while Lizzie and Arturo tried to resolve or ignore their differences. I'd sent one email to Lizzie just after James had left, saying how much I'd enjoyed my night out with her and how sorry I was for any difficulties it had caused. She had replied briefly, telling me not to worry about it, but that it would be difficult to see me for a while. She'd get in touch. After a week passed I accepted the implications of this calmly. No one was going to save me from myself but me.

Channelling Craig had emptied me out and now I began to put myself back in. I made regular phone calls to my mother and sisters and reassured them that I was working, had a roof over my head, was seeing how things might go here but would be back in England soon. Their relief brought home to me for the first time how much I had worried them, how much they must have feared me repeating my dad's disappearance. I kept meaning to phone my dad too, but I felt guilty that I was still here, that I'd gone back on my decision to go and see him. I resolved to go to see him as soon as I arrived back in England.

Dani Requena contacted me and I met her for lunch. We talked about – what else? – books, and she probed me about the new Craig Bennett novel James had discovered. When had he discovered it? Why hadn't they mentioned it at the dinner? She knew there was something amiss, something entertaining, and I was very close to confessing to her. So close, I decided I could not be trusted to see her again and put her off when she next suggested meeting up.

This is not a story of a remarkable reform. There were times when the allure of cheap stimulation and easy sociability was too much and I ended up on sofas in strange apartments arguing with people whose names I could not remember in the morning.

On one occasion a man wanted me to fuck his girlfriend while he watched. It was so much the wrong thing to do I decided I really should do it, except: I really didn't want to. I tried to sleep on their sofa, listening to them in the other room, appalled and compelled and crazy, before I ran out into the night, far lonelier than I had been before I met them.

Perhaps I needed those minor, controlled breakdowns that I could attribute the next day to a temporary chemical imbalance. I bled my madness in small doses.

In the hope that it would help me to avoid getting into such situations, I had started writing something else, a novel about a publisher who accidentally killed one of his novelists. And I had resumed my grand undertaking, the best love letter the world had ever seen. I was only beginning now to realise how much I had underestimated the task, just how many hours and drafts would be required. The codes of love had been exhausted, had exhausted her, and I had to break through them now, to the moments of loss and truth that I believed must lie beneath them, the feeling I had within me that it must somehow be possible to make her feel too.

The novel was my morning book. I lay on my bed, remembering and inventing conversations, writing a paragraph an hour, crossing it out an hour later. In the afternoon I copy-edited the biography of an indie-superstar Cockburn was publishing. It was not until the evenings that my work really began. I had my notebook, valentine-card red and leatherbound, the type favoured by pretend Hemingways and Picassos and myself – and I took it with me on walks around Buenos Aires, to cafés and bars, to cheap *parrillas* and pizza joints. The end of the night would often come with me sitting on a bar stool at Mundo Bizarro, straining to read my last sentence in blue sodium lighting while the disco ball spun brighter petals across the pages, autumn falling in the garden of forking paths. I wrote for hours each evening, and after two weeks I had barely ten pages left to fill, a madman's diary. I knew that the greatest love letter in the world would not be this long, would be, at best, the average length of a short story in the *New Yorker*. Still, I continued to work. I would write out all the clichés of love and cross them out and with what was left form a concentrate of pure communicated love. I bought another notebook, and it was on one night when I was filling this in that I felt a pat on my back and turned around to see Arturo.

Alejandro had given me his version of our falling out: 'It was most entertaining and then it wasn't. The two English editors who could already not stand up somehow got hold of some ecstasy in Mundo Bizarro and didn't offer any to Arturo. So when Cockshop had his hands all over the nice English girl Lizzie, Arturo got angry. It was James he had meant to hit, not you, but you walked in the way and started delivering a lecture about old-fashioned attitudes towards women, and then, when your friend mentioned the Malvinas – he used, of course, a different word – it

became, unsurprisingly, an issue of national pride. The house drug dealer took issue. If you hadn't had such a dramatic bleeding lip I suspect Lizzie would have been on Arturo's side, but as it was . . . it ruined a perfectly nice evening.'

I couldn't remember being punched by Arturo, and there had been no pain anywhere on my face the next day, so I had put Alejandro's story easily to one side. Now, as I faced Arturo's dark-stubbled chin and implacable expression, I had no idea if he was planning to hit me, for the first or the second time. Perhaps he was also wondering. I decided to make it more difficult for him to by smiling and standing up to embrace him, leaning over to kiss his cheek.

'I am sorry I hit you,' he said.

'I had to have two teeth replaced,' I said.

'No!' he said, trying only to look shocked and not slightly proud.

'No, not really,' I said. 'Sorry. I didn't even know you'd hit me.'

'You knew I'd hit you.'

'No, honestly.'

'I think you know.'

'OK, I know.'

'I'm sorry I hit you.'

'It was very painful.'

'*Vale.*'

'But I deserved it.'

'OK.'

And then we were friends again. I asked how Lizzie was and he sighed.

'It's not good. She's on holiday from the language school, travelling with her friend. I don't want her to go. She says she has to, I have to learn to trust her. We are maybe broken up. We see when she gets back. Tell me, what happened at the end of that night when she got back to her flat so late?'

I told him the truth, omitting one small kiss, just as I had not mentioned one other small kiss to Lizzie.

'That's what she said,' he said, shaking his head, as if disappointed to find out he had not caught his girlfriend, or whatever she was now, in a lie. I think he believed me. I was too poor a liar in his eyes to really represent a threat.



I offered him no more advice about Lizzie. I owed that at least to her. And to him. When Arturo invited me over to join him and his friends, I was tempted, but something made me stop.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, ‘I need an early night, I’ve got work to do tomorrow.’

‘How long are you staying here?’ he asked.

‘I’m not sure,’ I said, beginning to realise that wasn’t true.

‘I’ll see you again before you go?’ he asked. ‘You have my number?’

‘Just in case I don’t, come here,’ I said, and we kissed and embraced again.

Perhaps I held on too long – it was him who pulled away first. ‘If not here, I will see you again in England,’ he said. ‘The drinks will be on me,’ I said, and we both smiled like we believed it would happen. ‘The drugs too, I hope,’ he said. He looked over his shoulder towards his friends. Then he winked and squeezed my arse and walked away. I sat at the bar and finished my drink, watching him laughing with his friends, sweeping his hair back and scanning the bar’s horizon for interest. He was beautiful and I was glad for him.

An hour later, when I got back to the apartment, I went online and booked a flight to Gatwick, leaving in a week’s time.

The next morning, after a Spanish lesson, instead of working on my novel I set off on a walk. I headed out into the Microcentro, through the elegant business women, through the wide shopping streets and out west, through Korean neighbourhoods, past desultory prostitutes looking for trade, cumbia smashing out from shopfront ghetto-blasters, bargain shops selling two-peso Marias, graffiti murals of streetcars, Che Gueveras, Frank Sinatras, a sudden white church in a tree-lined square, a kung-fu palace, life fading out into middle-class suburbs, quiet graveyards, end-of-the-line metro stations. North next day, designer shops into wide boulevards, packs of thirty dogs walking one human in the park, past a bronze Borges staring over a fountain at a manicured hedge, a lonely walk that found me turning sooner than I expected, northwest in a circle and back to the centre.

During my walks I would look at people and try to imagine their lives. I say people, I mean women. It was a kind of prayer I found easier than the ones I had been taught. What did she do with those shoes when she got in? Did she kick them off across the floor, collapse on a sofa and light a cigarette? Did she place them

neatly in a shoe rack, have a shower and cook dinner? What book was she reading? What food did she cook? Did she go home at all?

Dreaming of such intimacy convinced me I was destined to live a life of solitude for ever. So I was delighted when I bumped into Ana-Maria, coming out of a clothes shop, her smile towards me turning into a look of delicious mock anger. It was almost impossible to imagine that this was a woman who had made love to me one night, who had taken command of me, in this city, a woman in a sleek dark blue dress with hard pointed feet, in the type of shoes that made me crazy, feet that had sloped and pressed into my back.

‘You are still *alive*,’ she said, coming forward and kissing me on both cheeks.

‘I am now. I had been wondering. You look incredible.’

‘I intend that,’ she laughed.

‘Do you know I once had a dream I went to bed with a woman as beautiful as you?’

‘It was a *good* dream!’

‘You would have thought so, wouldn’t you? I don’t always enjoy good dreams the way a normal man would.’

‘Practice, is what you need.’

‘Practice, that’s a good idea. Do you want to, er, meet up one –’

‘Ha ha! I am, er, with someone at the moment.’

I looked at her. I remembered her room, the dresses she made. She was talented. There were so many talented people. Perhaps I could become one myself.

She tipped herself even further forward on her toes and kissed me goodbye. ‘Go home and practise dreaming,’ she said, turning around and blowing me a kiss.

I got back to the flat late in the afternoon and settled down at my desk with the two red notebooks. I wanted to send my letter to Sarah before I left Argentina, announcing I was on my way back to see her. I was under no illusion she’d be delighted to hear this news. It really would need to be the greatest love letter in the world.

I looked at the notebooks, their many thousands of words in my neat handwriting, neat even when I wrote drunk. There was always one part I could hold still while the rest shook.

I shut the notebooks. I took a new sheet of paper and wrote my address at the top of it. Its exotic glamour did not escape me. But after that I tried to be direct and simple. I wrote that I was coming home, that I would like to see her. I wrote about the things I'd seen that day that had made me think of her, the way that she had made me see the things I'd seen that day. I wrote that it was becoming harder to imagine that we had lived together, that certain memories were fading and certain ones growing stronger. I admitted I had a stronger image of the first moment I realised she wanted me to kiss her than anything that happened later. That was probably a bad sign, but how to know?

After an hour and a half it was done. I re-read it, and though I knew I'd regret it in an hour, I put it in an envelope, went to buy a stamp and posted it.

It wasn't that day, it was the next day, that my sister called me. I was relaxed now I knew I was going home, determined to enjoy my last few days in Buenos Aires. I'd been out having coffee and reading Borges, who I was pleased and surprised to find no longer made me want to vomit. No one ever rang my phone so I hardly ever took it out with me. But when I got back to the flat I had several missed calls from my sister and a text telling me to ring her. I remember flinging my book on the sofa and collapsing into it with a sense of great satisfaction. Then I called her up. Her voice was strange.

'Liam,' she said, 'I'm really sorry. I've got some awful news.'

That morning my father had headed to his yoga class, as he did every Wednesday. It was a lovely sunny day, my sister told me. I imagined the bright skies as he left the house, how he had been happy, alive. He felt better, and because he wanted to be better he had gone for a run on the common, determined to lower his blood pressure, determined to be as young as he looked and felt, determined that the mistakes of the past would not destroy the future.

A woman walking her dog found him and called an ambulance. By the time they arrived, it was too late.

## Chapter 21

The last page of a long love letter:

*remember when we came back that night on your birthday, late in that first summer, the smell of smoke and grass in your hair, the splayed trees caught like Christs? We danced around your room, the evening deeper bluing minute by minute, the day and the night stretched so thin we seeped into each other. Every one of the first nights was like that night when we felt like that. I can't imagine feeling like that now, but I can remember how it surprised us, how we surprised ourselves into someone new.*

*Now we have knackered spines and hangovers hurt more. We own nothing of any permanence. Which could mean: we are free. We could do it again, surprise ourselves by what's possible, into the new life.*

*I mean it, that dirty word love. When I say I love you it is selfish, desirous and manipulative. I owe you that, at least: you're gorgeous. You make a glorious possession. I want. The way you chew your hair. The way you smudge your stolen make-up. That dance of yours, which no one in the world before had ever thought to do. I love. I want to make you happy too. I want to make you laugh. I want to be there for you. I want you to be you and for me to try but always fail to imagine what that's like. I want you to be not me. A mystery. I love you. Don't just hate me for it. Forgive me and have your revenge. Love me back.*

*I know it's hard to answer a letter like this. All I want to know is one thing for now. I'll be back next Wednesday. Can I come and see you?*

## Chapter 22

He was buried in a wicker coffin, a basket with a lid, with ivy and flowers threaded through the strands. I stood at the base, at the head, and with my sister's fiancé was the first to take the weight of his body from the hearse. He was heavy, heavier than he had looked the last time I had seen him, too long ago, heavier than I had ever realised. Nearly two hundred people lined the path to the hall, both his parents, my mum and the nice one of the two subsequent wives, my sisters, his sister, all the new friends he had made, and we shuffled through them, my shoulder burning, damage accruing. When I turned to my left I was shocked to find out I could see him through the strands of the coffin, his face covered in transparent white gauze like the packaging a new laptop or TV would come in. He had always looked young anyway and the gauze softened his features further; it was me I saw lying there. I had turned down the chance to see his body in the hospital. I didn't know if I would regret that. It was too late for that. I had to change my life or it could be me soon.

Later, when we lowered his coffin down into the grave, his friends from the bands he had played in began to sing. 'Everyone hold hands and make a circle for Michael,' a woman shouted, too cheerily, too conventionally unconventional, and I pretended I had not heard and stepped forward closer to the lip of the grave. I shook off the hand of someone who tried to pull me back and held my head down, getting angry and relishing it, a lone figure inside an enlarging circle of people, pretending I was not aware of what was going on around me. Eventually his half-brother the heroin addict came and placed his arm around me and stood with me. I remained for a few seconds and let him lead me back into the circle. Someone sang *Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz*. It was something. It was as good as anything.

Afterwards, at the wake, I stayed by Mum while the many friends I had never met came and told me stories about a different man to the one I had known. There were a hundred fathers in the room: none of them sounded like him. The aunt I rarely saw told me what a mature brother he had been, how he'd tried his best to be the man of each of their houses, learning DIY, putting up shelves, fixing things – only for my absent grandfather, who paid the bills, to move them every couple of years, nearer to whichever new job he had taken. I hadn't thought about the damage done to my father, only of the damage he'd done to us. I had failed to imagine his life just as we had thought he failed to imagine ours.

My sisters and I stayed close, making jokes, laughing, drinking. We had all made our own separate speeches in the humanist service (we inherited our Catholicism only on our mum's side). The night ended somehow in a smalltown disco, drunk beyond comprehension.

I caught a train the next day back up North, where I stayed with my mum for two weeks. It was a sunny September, and I walked the beach in the daytime while she was out teaching. How did my parents end up here, at the end of the world? It was a place to go to hide from the cops, a violent boyfriend, a drug deal gone wrong. They arrived here with me aged two, fresh-faced teachers in the full bloom of their optimism. So I simplify: I have no idea how they felt washing up at the end of a peninsula, staring across the wide, bleak, beautiful view to Morecambe Bay, the hills of the Lake District behind, all horizon and nowhere to go. It must have appealed to Dad. He found somewhere to stay put and managed to for fourteen years. It was the longest he would live anywhere in his life. I had been luckier than him, than my sisters. For sixteen years I had had my father with me. That was something. I would never again say that it wasn't.

The weeks went quickly. There was a date pressing on me, a date I never wanted the world to see. But no further apocalypses occurred and on that date I caught the train to London.

## Chapter 23

London showed itself in the muted colours of an old TV set, a bad home video of itself.

But it was home. The damp air. The lack of emphasis in the grumbles of the pissed-off people on the Tube. The pushers, the shovers, the pigeons, the dickheads on daft bikes; their rudeness was a welcome-home hug.

I was just around the corner from my old office when the skies remembered me and I was washed into the London Review Bookshop to take shelter.

I'd accustomed myself to the constraints of the hostel's library, so the number of readable books on the shelves made me giddy. Then perverse: I bought *We Love Glenda So Much*, a collection of Cortázar short stories imported from the States, and settled down in the café to read. It turned out I could appreciate a high level of Latin originality with a proper English pot of tea beside me. I had completely disowned the barbarous taste of my man in Buenos Aires when I looked up and noticed my old publicity and marketing director Amanda Jones walk in. She was with a fashionable young man with dark hair and glasses. He was either the newest young writer from Brooklyn I would soon hear about or a gleeful philistine from an agency about to reinvent 'the book'. (Each week now brought joyful threats of violence to 'the book'.) Amanda hadn't spotted me, and watching her I realised that I hadn't spotted that I knew other people in the room too. The agent Bill Flowers was busy talking in one corner with a dealer in rare books. He caught me looking in his direction and gave me a nod. I nodded back and carried on reading, but it was hard to concentrate. I was back in the world, in the book club. Confrontations were heading my way.

A shadow fell over Julio Cortázar, and I looked up.

'Amanda,' I said. She was looking at me like she'd caught me watching pornography late in the office. Cockburn has a funny story about –

'You're back,' she said.

'I'm back,' I confirmed. 'Amanda, I owe you an apology. Would you like to sit down?'

She harrumphed, but sat down anyway. 'This won't take long,' she said.

'Yes,' I said, 'I agree about the uselessness of most apologies. But I never even attempted to explain to you what happened that night. Did you know my girlfriend left me in the morning? I couldn't think about anything else. If you told me

that day that Craig had a heart problem, then it just did not go in. I wouldn't have just ignored that. By the time I knew, there was no stopping him. Or me, by then. It was much more difficult than it would have been earlier. Are you sure you told me about his heart?'

'Both Belinda and I clearly said you were to keep him away from drugs. If this is an apology, it doesn't sound like it.'

'I do remember that. I just assumed that was standard advice for all authors.'

'It is!'

'Well, see? I disobeyed you both, I'm sorry. But I thought I was just abandoning basic good practice, not endangering someone's life.'

'You're welcome to defend yourself in whatever way you like. The man's dead. Do you even understand what that means? To be dead? He's *dead*.'

I flashed with anger and tried to stay calm. She didn't know about Dad. And neither, really, did I. I turned away from her. Was it my weakness that I found it so hard to condemn people, or hers that she found it so easy? Behind her the boy she was with had whipped out a laptop carved out of dull gunmetal. Bill Flowers was looking in our direction and I wondered if he had heard what I had said.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'That's all. Thanks for listening.'

She shook her head. 'I liked you, you know, when you first arrived. You went out of your way to be friendly, to find out how you could be helpful. That's what teamwork is. You and fucking Cockburn – that is not a team. Do you think he defends you in the office? Do you think it even occurs to him? You really did pick the wrong man to emulate.'

'I really am sorry,' I said, beginning to get annoyed at being told what I already knew.

'Yes, well. I presume it's coincidence you're here and you're not intending to come along tonight?'

'What's on tonight, Amanda?' It came out like a challenge.

She pushed back out of her chair and was up. 'Don't you dare think about it,' she said, and walked back to her table.

I would have left immediately if Bill Flowers had not arrived before I could get up. He peered at my book and raised his eyes.

'Cortázar? Showing off? Bloody good writer, though. Where the fuck have you been?'



‘Argentina, actually.’

‘So that’s why . . . Borges, labyrinths, Maradona . . .’

‘You seem to know as much as I do about the place.’

‘Right. Any good?’

‘No good at all.’

‘Thought as much. You know, I think I’ve just realised something. You’re the “on-site editor” they mentioned in the *Bookseller*, aren’t you? Was it you who really found this Bennett manuscript?’

‘Um . . . well . . .’

‘I knew it wasn’t that *egregious* cunt. What a wanker, taking the credit like that.’

‘Well, it may as well have gone to a publisher. These days I’m just an unemployed aspiring writer.’

‘Nothing wrong with that.’

‘Apart from everything.’

‘I suppose so. Do you have an agent?’

‘Probably not any more.’ Suzy Carling had never contacted me again and I had never dared to contact her.

‘You know where I am.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Fucking convenient.’

‘What?’

‘Fucking convenient, that Bennett manuscript showing up, just when Cockburn needs a book that might sell some copies. Not a fake, is it? I wouldn’t put anything past that cunt.’

‘Um, I, of course it’s –’

‘Sounds like a fake to me. I’m joking. Tell Cockburn I’ll be giving it a close read.’

‘Don’t do that. I mean, yes, ha ha. I will.’

‘Bye then, Liam. Head up. Look after yourself.’

And then he was gone, back to his seat and his antiquarian bookseller, leaving me with an incipient panic attack. I left a fiver on the table for my tea and got out of there, avoiding eye-contact with Amanda. I didn’t want to see anyone else from the literary world. I really didn’t. But I was too late. As I opened the door to the shop, in

came Olivia Klein and backed me up into the literary magazines. A copy of *N + I* fell off the top shelf and hit me on the head.

‘Liam,’ she said, looking shocked. I picked up the magazine and put it back. ‘How are you? I was at a party last night and saw James. I heard about your dad. I’m so sorry, are you all right?’

Dad was dead. I had begun to feel like this was a world where it was possible it would never be mentioned again. She came forward to kiss me on one cheek and I pulled back to kiss her on the other, like we did, but she held on and pulled me in for a hug. She was nearly as tall as me. The smell of her perfume, the softness of her cheek, it was too pleasant. I was so angry and this was so unexpected. Suddenly my chest was shaking against her shoulder. The same copy of *N + I* fell off the shelf and hit me on the head again. It didn’t help matters. ‘Oh, Liam, come on,’ she said, ‘come out, come with me.’

She bought me a pint in the Museum Tavern.

‘What did James say?’ I asked.

‘Just it was sudden, a heart attack – yes?’

‘Yeah, he was out running. He didn’t know he was so ill.’

‘I’m sorry. My father died a year ago.’

Her father, the doctor, with his well-stocked library of European classics. It hadn’t occurred to me that these people died too, or that they lived.

‘I’m sorry to hear that. How?’

‘Cancer.’

I was very sorry then. Comparatively I must have had it easy. I hadn’t expected it so in many ways it was like it hadn’t actually happened, I said. ‘I didn’t speak to him enough. In some ways, things are just the same.’

‘I don’t think it works like that.’

‘Why not? It has to work somehow.’

Up close, in daylight, you could see the pattern of freckles that seemed the only thing stopping her skin from being transparent. Her eyes were palest Alice blue.

She shrugged. ‘You’ll find that out.’

‘I thought we didn’t like each other,’ I said.

‘I’m sure you loved each other.’

‘Thank you. But no, I thought *we* didn’t like each other.’

‘I thought that too,’ she said. ‘We probably *don’t* like each other.’

‘You’ll be pleased to hear that James and I have found the new Borges,’ I told her. ‘The one you thought was missing.’

She laughed. ‘So where was he?’

I tutted. ‘Sexist. *She*.’

Sometimes it’s the strangers who save you. It feels so light to shed an enemy, so simple when it’s done. All our invented animosity turned into laughter. I made a friend. Two hours later, as arranged, I met up with Alejandro in the same pub. I hugged Olivia goodbye; she had been kind enough not to leave me on my own, and Alejandro took over her shift. Eliot, Quinn had flown him over and put him up in a hotel for a week. It had been Cockburn’s idea; Alejandro’s presence here would authenticate the novel. No one really thought we could have been audacious enough to forge a Booker-winner’s novel. I certainly wouldn’t have had the courage to start the project on purpose.

When I had said goodbye to Alejandro before I caught my flight home I had told him about my dad. I don’t remember much of the conversation afterwards, except that he was kind. I was drinking. He gave me a tight hug when I left for the flight. His dad was dead too. They all died. No one knew what a short time they lasted until it was too late.

We brushed over the subject now. The book was weighty enough and we spoke of it in whispers. Neither of us had seen it yet, apart from on Amazon. There was a strict embargo which no one had broken to review early. The reviews were all to appear in the weekend’s papers. For now, it was still as unreal as it was on the morning when, after three hours’ sleep and a morning beer, I had agreed to let James take command.

We had drunk a few drinks by the time Alejandro and I left for the launch, but I am good at drinking, it is my best skill, and so I wasn’t too drunk when we arrived at the venue. As launches went, this was as formal as they came, rows of seating, and three different speakers. We had assumed I would get in easily as Alejandro’s +1 but Amanda had posted a publicity assistant on the door to look out for me. As we mounted the steps to the entrance a slender Arabella whispered in the security guard’s ear and he immediately stepped forward and pushed his palm out into my chest. ‘Are you Liam Wilson?’ he asked.

‘I am a guest of honour and this is my invited friend,’ began Alejandro, as the blonde girl raised her mobile phone to her ear.

‘Leave it,’ I told Alejandro, walking back down the steps and beckoning him back to talk. ‘I’ll never get in if I make a fuss.’

‘I’m going,’ I announced to the bouncer, ‘you win,’ and I walked off away from the door.

## Chapter 24

Five minutes later, I had circled the building and was approaching the back from an empty alleyway. Alejandro had gone looking for a way to let me in from the inside. The men's toilets faced the wrong way, but he thought the women's looked like they connected with the back of the building. I hung up, called Olivia and explained my predicament. 'Are you serious?' she asked. Yes, I explained, I was.

A few minutes later a small window opened, high off the ground, about six feet from the floor, and Olivia's head appeared through it. 'Quick then, hurry up,' she said, with bossy schoolgirl authority. 'There's no one in here at the moment.'

I had to take a running leap at the window ledge and haul myself up on my elbows. I heard my jacket rip. There was just enough room for my head and shoulders to get in and Olivia had to grip me under my arms and pull me through. I realised I was about to drop directly onto my cranium with my arms pinned by my side, but Olivia squeezed my chest in a tight grip and dumped me sideways in an undignified heap on the floor.

At the very moment I landed, we heard Belinda and Amanda's voices. I dived into a cubicle and locked the door.

'The cheek of it,' said Belinda. 'Well done Katy for spotting him.'

'It's unbelievable, isn't it? Hasn't he done enough? Oh, hello, Olivia. Are you all right? You look flushed.'

'Hello, Amanda. Don't mind me. What's happening? It sounds dramatic.'

'Ah, nothing for you to worry about,' said Belinda. 'Have we been introduced?'

'Belinda, this is Olivia Klein, who reviews for the *Guardian*,' began Amanda, and I listened to Belinda ask if she was reviewing *My Biggest Lie*. 'That's gone to our lead reviewer,' said Olivia. Undaunted, Belinda suggested she could interview James Cockburn about putting the book together.

None of this calmed my mood. I had not thought about James doing interviews, but realised now that he might be all over the weekend papers.

Their voices trailed off. I'd never felt as nervous as this. It was shameful for me to be anywhere near this building – so what if it was my book being launched? I'd let Cockburn take that away from me, knowing that he was right – I'd written a passable novel that would sell in large numbers only if it was written by someone

else. I hadn't missed out. Not having my name on the cover of my book wasn't the worst thing at all. The worst thing was having let Cockburn convince me that Craig wouldn't mind, that he'd be very much amused, that what we were doing was creating a perfect tribute to his anarchic personality. But this was not our own special memorial for him. However we put it to ourselves, what we were doing was fucking him. He was dead and we were desecrating his memory, trying to make sure that the way he lived on would be forever false. It wasn't a private funeral but a private execution; we were about to finish killing him once and for all. The very least I owed Craig was to be here to witness it.

It was not my first time in the women's toilets. The sharing of cocaine is a pleasant excuse to challenge unnecessary gender segregation. I don't need to say that this was not one of those enjoyably intimate occasions. I heard the door go. Had Olivia deserted me? I waited another minute and was about to make a run for it when the door went again, Olivia called 'Quick!' and I scuttled out to meet her. 'It won't be long till the speeches,' she said. 'You'll be safe in the middle of a row. I've got nothing to do with this any more.' She turned and walked away without looking back.

I came out at the end of a crowded room laid out with chairs in front of a small super-lit stage. There were TV cameras set up to either side. There might have been eight hundred people in the room. I saw Belinda at one side of the stage talking to Alejandro, and steered myself around to the other side of the crowd where she wouldn't be able to see me. I looked out for Amanda, but couldn't see her. This was ridiculous. What was I doing? Lauren Laverne was talking into a TV camera on one side of the room. I began to spot faces I knew. There was only a second or two for me to freeze and try to imagine what I would say to them and then my former colleagues were saying hello to me, surprising me with their smiles, by asking me how I was doing, by saying how pleased they were to see me. They were indignant about the way I had disappeared. *I sent you text after text!* I apologised (unless I tell you otherwise I am always apologising) and took a couple of numbers again on my new phone, gave away my new number. I took a glass of wine from a passing tray, helped myself to a canapé. That such simple remembered actions were still possible felt incredible to me.

I shouldn't have been so surprised at the warm reception. I knew most people were polite and forgiving. But I had expected to detect the bad flavour of myself in the way they breathed next to me, expected their revulsion to be impossible to bear.

Perhaps I could bear it. Once, in a clap clinic, the week after Sarah and I came properly together, I had been made to ring one by one the six women I had slept with in the last six months to tell them I might have chlamydia. It turned out I didn't have chlamydia, or anything else, but encouraged by a male nurse with a shaved head I made my telephone confessions and waited to hear what a bastard I was. They were all so kind, so grateful. I had assumed I had given it to each of them and it was only afterwards I realised they had all assumed they had given it to me.

I sipped my wine and took another canapé. I was beginning to feel like I belonged there, and then I was forced to duck and pretend to tie a shoelace as Amanda walked past. 'Take your seats please, everyone, speeches in five,' she called.

I stood up again and looked around. There she was, my pen pal. Amy Casares, talking to James Cockburn. She turned and saw me; I watched her slow red carnivorous smile. James was leaning into her, flirtatious, and hadn't seen me. Amy, as you may know, is an astonishingly attractive woman. She has the hair of a Scandinavian, skin that has advertised moisturisers. She wears immaculate dresses casually, gives them the slightest suggestion of a messed-up sheet.

I saw she was about to call out to me and hurried over so she wouldn't draw attention my way. It could only be a matter of minutes now before I was spotted and removed from the premises.

I charged into her, put my head in her blonde curls and squeezed her tightly. When I opened my eyes I could see James over her shoulder. I was pleased to see him looking worried. I hadn't told him I was coming.

'Liam!' she said. 'You're looking so well. Considering, obviously. I'm so sorry about your dad. James was just saying how sad he was you couldn't make it.'

'Oh, really,' I said, smiling at James. 'No, I came here to surprise him.' James looked around warily.

'But how are you?' Amy said. 'It must have been such a shock.'

'I'm fine. We can talk about it later. It's so nice to see you.'

'You too. I'm so surprised at this book,' she said. In the shock of meeting so many old faces, I hadn't even spotted the book table but now I followed her eyes to a pyramid of black-and-gold hardbacks. Even from quite far away I could spot the rubbery S&M-style supermatt finish on the black, a void rejecting the light of the chandelier above while the foil titles glittered like fool's gold.

'So that's them,' I said and James nodded somberly.

‘I can’t wait to read it,’ Amy continued. ‘He must have written it round about the time I was in Buenos Aires with him. I never really believed he was writing a novel then.’

‘You might be in for a big surprise. Hey, James?’

‘I was just saying that we can’t say for certain exactly when he wrote it,’ said James. ‘Only when he gave it to Alejandro, and he’s only really guessing from memory.’

‘Weird he gave it to Alejandro,’ said Amy. ‘He was always so private about his writing. He wasn’t a sharer at all.’

‘No, he wasn’t,’ said James. ‘Who knows – we may even find another novel!’

‘I’m *sure* we won’t,’ I said.

‘What makes you say that?’ asked Amy.

‘Just a feeling,’ I said, looking at James.

*Take your seats, please* came over the microphone. Amanda was standing on stage now. I moved so Cockburn’s tall body was between us. It could only be seconds now until my discovery. Other people in the crowd were looking at me as they went past to find a seat, not all of them in a friendly way.

Alejandro arrived and made himself smile. ‘Liam! Amy! Cockshop! Let’s all sit down.’

‘I’ll see you later,’ said James heavily. He walked away from us. He wouldn’t want Belinda to blame him for my presence here. I had been wondering for weeks now how much she knew of the novel’s provenance. She might not have wanted to ask many questions, even if she had doubts.

Amy took my arm and guided me into the second row from the front, right in the middle, with Alejandro to one side and Amy to the other. A few heads turned to look at me. ‘What on earth are they staring at?’ said Amy. ‘You’re very brave coming here, Liam. Ignore those *fucking idiots*.’

She said this fiercely enough to snap some heads back round to facing the stage.

Belinda was walking up the steps now, the cameramen swinging around to follow her. She reached the top of the stage, stood in front of the mike and looked out.

In that instant she saw me and drew her head back involuntarily. She looked away. Then she looked back and stared hard into my eyes for the longest time before inclining her head towards the back of the room, to the exit. I stayed still, kept her



gaze. She couldn't throw me out without causing at least a disturbance, at worst a scandal. The cameras were on and who knew what I might have shouted if I'd been pulled out.

That was the last time she looked at me during her five-minute speech. It was consummately professional, warm, grave, intimate and always correct. How touched she was to see so many people who loved Craig Bennett's writing gathered together. How sad that this was the last time we could welcome one of his novels into the world (unless we're very lucky!). How wrong it is to have to do this without him here with us.

I wasn't listening hard to her. She stood on the stage in front of a black curtain, the kind of curtain you had in small theatres like this. There had been a similar one in the community hall where we held Dad's service. We put the head of the coffin down on the edge of the stage and pushed it along to the centre, squeaking against the boards. Belinda held Craig's book in the air; he came in a smaller container.

Towards the end of Belinda's speech, one of the cameramen came in closer to her. I looked behind me. There were familiar faces, book journalists, publishers, rock stars with author wives: the biggest book crowd I had been part of since Craig's last party. The look on so many of their faces of being in a gathering with a noble end: reading.

Such awful complacency. I hated them. There is nothing noble about reading novels. It is an escape, a throwing-off, an evasion. We are not good people.

Belinda finished and we all clapped. She didn't look once in my direction on her way down. Then James appeared on the right of the stage and made his way up the stairs.

'Here we go,' muttered Alejandro. Amy reached over and squeezed my hand.

Standing in front of the microphone, James stared out at the crowd. He put a hand in his hair and swept it back. A chunk of it stood up dramatically and slowly wilted. He coughed. He stared out again. The cameras trained on him made the silence longer. His hair continued to wilt until he swept his hand back through it again. We waited for him to speak, growing more awkward. To my right, the bouncer who had denied me entrance was standing at the end of the aisle, keeping an eye on me, looking more bored than threatening.

‘I didn’t speak at Craig’s funeral,’ James began. ‘I’d only just got out of hospital after having fallen out of a window during the London Book Fair.’ (Titters from the crowd.) ‘I suppose that *is* amusing,’ he carried on, sardonically, disdainfully. ‘You all heard the gossip, I suspect.’ James looked from side to side at the crowd then raised his hand to his mouth and stage-whispered, ‘*I was pushed*. By Craig, of course. Because he was sleeping with my wife.’ James now smiled broadly. ‘He wasn’t sleeping with my wife.’ Now he frowned. ‘In fact, he never even tried to. We were most offended. My wife is a beautiful woman.’ (More titters from the crowd.) ‘The funniest reason I heard to explain why Craig pushed me out of the window was that he was angry about how much we were paying him. How marvellous that journalists think this is how the publishing industry works. Everyone here in the trade knows in which case it would be Craig’s *agent* who pushed me out of the window. Hello, Suzy, thanks for coming.’ I followed the direction of his gaze and saw Suzy Carling for the first time in six months. She wasn’t laughing but the crowd were loving the showman publishing, and the TV cameras would too. James paused to let the laughter die down and continued. ‘Craig himself was always amazed at how much money his books brought him. I wasn’t – he was brilliant, he made people want to read his books: what you paid for what you *received* was piffling. But I remember him saying, “I will never complain about the money I get paid from publishing books in case they realise how much they’re paying me.” I liked that *they’re*. I’m not sure he realised that I was “one of them”. He seemed to think sometimes that we were both getting away with the same great scam. I loved that about him. He was generous enough to think that his writing was a very small gift he could offer. Writers don’t normally continue to think like that after they’ve had a big success. Of course, most are never lucky enough to. It is rare that talent is rewarded with money.’

‘No, Craig’s tastes never became more expensive. We’d still get through quite a lot of money together in the pub when he came to London, don’t get me wrong. But the rest of the time he was quiet, at home in Wales, trying to live the simple life, perhaps failing as much as he succeeded. All of you here who knew Craig knew his gentleness, knew it through his concern for you. If he liked you, he was concerned. When we argued it was because he was trying to look after me, because he was trying to stop me from falling over. Many of you may remember times he put himself in the way of your fall. No, he was not a pusher but a catcher.’

‘Well, that’s true at least,’ muttered Alejandro.

‘He was not a pusher but a catcher,’ repeated James sonorously, then laughed at himself. The tone of his voice was changing. He was trying to be jokey, cheerful, professional, but a revulsion was showing through, attacking his usual persona. He looked over at us and smiled again. ‘Make of that what you will.’ He straightened up again and paused. He suddenly looked stricken. ‘He is not around to catch us any more.’

I wondered to what extent he had planned to look like this at this point of his speech, how staged his presentation was. A month ago I had stood in front of the same sort of curtains, making a speech for Dad. Afterwards so many people came up to me and said how moved they had been. I had regretted it every day since, its fluency, its easy humour, cheap sentiment and professionalism. I had treated the occasion like another book launch. My sisters watching me in the front row. My simplifications. An excuse for a public-speaking contest. A brick wall spray-painted with a stickman.

James looked to be learning about that. His face contorted with disgust.

‘The next time I decide to do something stupid – more stupid even than falling out of a window – I will not have Craig to prevent me. Except, because he is not here, and will never be here again, I will have to remember him, what he loved about us and what we loved about him. So perhaps he will still protect me. It is one way to keep him alive, to keep me alive. And when I need a reminder of what he was like, or want to share Craig with someone who never met him, I will turn to the books.

‘This is why we are here today. There is one more book to read. In a while we will be hearing from this, an extract chosen by Craig’s sister Helen, who sadly can’t be here with us today as she’s expecting a baby this month. Craig’s agent Suzy Carling will read the extract, and a message from Helen. I want to thank Suzy and Helen, who together with myself are Craig’s literary executors. I want to thank them for choosing to work again with Craig’s long-term publisher Eliot, Quinn – we’ll have to hope that in his travels across the world Craig has left many more manuscripts lying around. Who knows what he might have left behind in a carrier bag in one of his eighty-four favourite bars? I will certainly be heading to one of them when I leave here tonight.’ James looked up at me and his face fell. ‘Sadly,’ he

went on, ‘I think we may have already had more luck than we have deserved in finding this book.

‘Before I talk about what this book contains, I – I was going to say something in my speech now about another man who loved Craig. I’ve decided instead, on the spur of the moment, to talk about two other men who loved Craig and who both played an integral part in bringing us this novel – a novel I know you will want to buy and take home with you today.’

James had looked steadily towards Alejandro and me as he spoke, and the audience were turning as one to follow the direction of his gaze. I say as one, but there was a notable exception, Belinda, who was staring at the side of James’ head as if, if she concentrated hard enough, she could burn a hole in it. James was careful never to turn once in her direction.

‘The reason why I had only planned to speak of one of these men,’ said James, ‘is because I didn’t think the other one would turn up. Specifically, I didn’t think he would turn up because the bouncers on the door were given strict orders not to admit him.’ James smiled and the crowd laughed, assuming he was joking. ‘You think I’m joking but I’m not. What’s more, Belinda told me earlier that the bouncer carried out these orders and turned this man away. This is a man, I can tell you, who loves Craig so much I have learned he climbed through the window of the ladies’ toilets to be here. I’m talking about my friend and colleague Liam Wilson, who, having seen Craig Bennett have the heart attack that killed him, blamed himself for this, quit his job and moved to Buenos Aires. It was in this city we assume that Craig had written this novel *My Biggest Lie*, which we’re all here for today, perhaps at the same age as Liam, just a few years before he won the Booker Prize with his first published novel *Talking to Pedro*.

‘It was Liam himself who tracked down Craig’s best friend from those days. He joins us here tonight, Alejandro Montenegro. Without Liam introducing me to him at a memorable dinner in Buenos Aires three months ago, we would not be here tonight.

‘That is a story for another time. I’ve said Liam feels in some way responsible for the way Craig died. I’m not going to tell Liam not to blame himself – I won’t insult him that way – if he wants to blame himself, it’s for him to decide how long he should do this for and for him to go into why he does. I wish he had done something different that night that would have meant Craig was still alive, but I’m

not sure what that something is, or that I would have done it. Everyone makes mistakes, everyone could have done something different. We have to remember that it was Craig who made the biggest mistake, and that is why he is not here. I want to thank Liam for being his friend on the night when my own stupid mistake meant I could not. I want to thank Liam for caring about Craig's life when it was gone, for wanting to preserve it. Thank you, Liam.'

Amy next to me began to clap and slowly the room followed, the whole room, until a wave of noise sweeping over me was like something cracking, tightening, splitting, a sound I heard and feared like it was the sound of my heart bursting. I put my head down and waited for it to finish.

'Similarly,' began Cockburn, 'I want to thank Alejandro Montenegro, all the way from Argentina because of his love for Craig.' At this, Amy reached over me and took Alejandro's hand. It was a nice gesture of solidarity, which had the effect of locking me down in my seat like the bar on a rollercoaster. That's what it felt like too, like being on the Big One on Blackpool Pleasure Beach, slowly cranking your way to a height from which only disaster could be conceived.

'I have heard wonderful tales, from Craig, from Alejandro, from their friend Amy, about the closeness of their bond. They grew up in Australia together before Craig followed Alejandro to his family's home in Argentina. Alejandro was the first reader of this novel, twenty years ago. A manuscript we can only guess was ever sent to publishers.'

'I'm sure he would have mentioned that,' whispered Amy across me to Alejandro.

Alejandro looked down at his feet.

'It wouldn't surprise me if it was sent to publishers and turned down,' said James. 'Not because it's not good: it's wonderful. No, I wouldn't be surprised if it was rejected, because publishers make mistakes. It is our job to make mistakes, to have the courage to get it wrong so that sometimes we have the courage to get it right.' James was really beginning to choke up now. 'I have a confession to make,' he said decisively, 'about this book.'

This is the moment when the cart reached the top of the hill and teetered on the summit. Now he would not meet my eye. Now he was looking at Belinda and she would not meet his. I made my conclusion about her complicity. I wondered if she had known from the start or only discovered when it was too late. It had been easy at

first for us to pretend we were not doing the appalling thing we were doing. Now James wanted to confess. And now was the end of all our careers, perhaps even our liberty.

The human seatbelt keeping me from fleeing grew tighter. ‘Ow!’ said Amy to Alejandro. ‘You’re squeezing me too hard.’ He let go, and I picked my escape route, preparing to haul myself past all the knees to the aisle – and run. ‘What in God’s name is he doing?’ asked Alejandro, turning to me, pressing down with his hand on my knees as if predicting my impulse to flight.

‘What’s wrong with you two?’ asked Amy.

I looked up imploringly at James and he continued. ‘My confession is this, and it’s not a good confession for a publisher to make. The thing is, I haven’t, to this day, accepted what losing Craig means. Or that there’s no bringing him back.’ He held up the book, stark gold capitals on sex-shop black. ‘*My Biggest Lie* . . . This, after all, is only paper and ink. This, after all, is nothing.’

And with that he walked suddenly down the stairs, still holding the book, and strode with his long quick step to the back of the hall, where he disappeared through the door. A confused and excited murmuring broke out throughout the room. Belinda made her way up the steps and back to the microphone.

‘Thank you, James,’ she said, letting out her breath more quickly than she’d intended. ‘We are now going to welcome Suzy Carling to the stage, to read a short extract from *My Biggest Lie* by Craig Bennett, chosen by his sister Helen Edwards.’

‘Are you all right?’ Amy asked me. ‘You’re both acting very strange.’

‘I’m going,’ I said to her, ‘this is too weird.’

‘You’re staying,’ said Alejandro, holding on to my arm. ‘This is your launch. Our launch. You need to listen to this.’

‘What are you talking about?’ asked Amy.

People were looking round at us, shushing. Suzy Carling made her way to the stage in a black dress and heels. She surveyed the room before she spoke, her eyes resting on me. There was no anger in the look, just calculation, the assessment a predator makes of its prey.

‘Thank you all for coming. I’m going to read you an email from Helen Edwards, Craig’s sister, about why she wanted me to read this particular extract.’

She unfolded a piece of paper and read.

“‘I’ve chosen this extract for its simplicity, for its calm and optimism, for it’s compassion for people: the facets of Craig’s character everyone liked to ignore. This is Craig at his best, the Craig I know.’”

‘He was a great man,’ said Suzy. ‘I miss him.’ She opened the book, turned the thick, creamy paper to the right part. Then she started to read.

Falling in love was not what he had thought falling in love was like. The other times had been something else, different in kind and degree . . . After they had kissed goodbye and she had gone through to catch her plane, he walked in circles around the concourse, hungrily spinning new sights before his eyes, filling himself up with the world he was now at home in, its new language, his new palate. He sat down, giddy, and looked up at the atrium. He breathed in the air. Then he stood and went outside to the taxi queue.

On the way back to the centre, he told the taxi driver that he had fallen in love. The taxi driver laughed. You are lucky, he said. Craig asked the taxi driver about his wife, whether he had any children. The taxi driver told him about his son and daughter, 18 and 21, the son working in an office, the daughter at university studying science. He was proud of his children. ‘And your wife?’ asked Craig. The taxi driver seemed not to hear him and told him instead about the area where he lived, Barracas, a poor, working-class area, but not a slum, a proud working-class area, a place famous for its protests. Craig didn’t ask again about the driver’s wife, you didn’t do that here, but suddenly the driver was telling Craig about the night she disappeared in 1978. I think about her in a room, alone with those animals, and how I was not there to help her. She was from a different world to me, a university lecturer. She was out of my league, I thought. I don’t know why she liked me but she did. A miracle. I asked her to dance with me at a *milonga*. She would not accept the way things are in this filthy country. It is where the children get their brains. My son was a baby when she went, my daughter was three years old. She would never have left them. I was terrified they would come and take me, but, shamefully, they were not even interested. I say shamefully but I am not ashamed I can be here for my children.

It was the first time since Craig had arrived in Buenos Aires that a stranger had told him a story like this, though he may have met many other people who could have. There were awful stories everywhere. The driver told him about his mother-in-law, her illnesses and her passion, the marches she attended and invited him to attend

with her. I have to drive, you know? he said. I have to work for my children. But I go with her when I can.

Craig listened and tried to imagine the taxi driver's sadness, his guilt, the way it had felt to be terrorised like he had been. He felt bad about being happy himself, until he realised he had to be happy, it was the only fair thing, because nothing had happened to the woman he loved.

A kid ran in front of the taxi, stooped to pick up a rolling football, and ran off. The taxi driver beeped his horn, opened his wallet and showed Craig two photos, a young woman smiling with a baby, a gawky teenage boy grinning as a girl put his arm round him. The taxi driver wasn't in either photo – but he had taken them, he had looked, he was the invisible part.

'Thank you,' said Suzy Carling, putting down the book and walking back to her seat. Alejandro had been quietly crying. I felt nothing. Amy turned round and looked at me, her eyes dry, glittering, inquisitive. Was there something in the reading, some detail, that had awoken her to its untruth? I would have to go and see her tomorrow, confess and beg her to keep quiet.

Alejandro let out a big sigh. 'Schmaltz,' he said, but he looked sad, sad the way schmaltz makes us when it reminds us how we've been tenderised to it. Belinda made a final exhortation for us to buy the book and we stood. The middle of the row, having afforded a protection earlier, now penned me in.

'I'm going to go and talk to his agent,' said Amy, 'and pick up a copy of this weird book.'

'Before you go,' I started, but she had found a space and slipped through into the aisle. The way she marched to the book stall made me feverish. The bouncer who had not let me in was still waiting in the aisle for me, but he was suddenly pushed back by a crowd of agents, editors and journalists heading our way. Being thrown out was a delightful idea. I looked over to the drinks table, miles away, the clean white table cloth, the endless rows of golden wine.

'Get ready to do some serious lying,' Alejandro whispered to me. 'I'm going to try to get thrown out,' I told him. But it was too late. They were upon us.

It seemed to go on for ever. The questions, the optimistic insinuations. Journalists suggested the most outrageous turns of events, hoping we would be taken aback and



reveal their truth, yet they suggested nothing as outrageous as what was actually happening. Nor was it the journalists who set my teeth most on edge, for whom making our story consistent was most frightening. It was worse with my friends, the colleagues and rivals I'd always liked and admired; they were harder to lie to not just because I didn't want to lie to them but because they knew what they were talking about, how incredible it was for an unheard-of novel by Craig Bennett to appear overnight. In our tribute to Craig, our enormous fuck-you to Craig, James and I had consigned ourselves to either a lifetime of lying or a lifetime of disgrace. The two things I had fled to Buenos Aires to try to cure myself of.

I thought the bouncer would never come for me, but after the fiftieth question I found myself with a strong arm round my shoulder, being marched towards the back of the room. I didn't even notice who he was until I was already well away from the pack. 'I'm afraid you're going to have to leave now,' he said.

'That's OK,' I said, leaning into him like a tired girlfriend. 'Are you going to beat me up?' I asked as he led me into a corridor away from the party.

'Do you want me to?'

'There's a part of me that thinks I probably deserve it.'

'A little guy like you? Mate, you don't deserve nothing.'

And with that he opened a fire door and pushed me outside. I was round the corner from the front entrance, but he pointed me in the other direction. 'You're going to walk that way and I'm going to stand here and make sure you do.'

I nodded and held out my hand. He looked at it and pointed in the direction I was supposed to be going. I smiled. He didn't. It was a satisfying exchange for both of us. 'Bye bye then,' I said. I thanked him and went.

## Chapter 25

I found James upstairs in the Academy, sitting at a table in the corner using my novel as a bar mat for a whisky. The bar wasn't very busy. A handsome man who looked like he'd been sleeping in his suit was telling the barmaid about his day at work: 'And so I told the designers, if you want to play around with coke then do it at the Christmas party under controlled conditions and not on my fucking front cover.' The barmaid started to tell him a story in return about a cocktail she'd invented last night which used a cooked sausage as a stirrer.

I'd suspected James was going to be here, but I would have come anyway. Craig had taken me here on the night he died. Here, in the middle of my despair, he had filled me temporarily with the greatest of optimism. I walked over to James and sat down.

'He was sitting, staring gloomily at a glass of whisky, when the boy who had killed his friend walked in.'

James looked up and took a deliberate sip. 'Not a bad first line. Hemingwayesque? Graham Greene? Is the "gloomily" essential? What's the next line?'

'The boy looked at him and tried to contain his anger – seriously, what the fuck was that speech? I've had Lauren Laverne trying to interview me for *The Culture Show*. My phone's been ringing non-stop. You've put me in the news.'

'That seems a little melodramatic and implausible now as a work of fiction.'

'It has become implausible. What are we going to do about that? The whole point is for it to *not* be implausible. And now we have a subplot about a disgraced editor who was with Craig on the day he died and who subsequently discovered his long-lost novel. And who then broke in through the girls' toilets to his book launch! Christ.'

'But what a great *story*.'

'Do you mean that?' And in that instant I realised he did. I put a cigarette in my mouth, put it back in my packet. I tried to say something and couldn't. 'You did it deliberately,' I eventually managed, 'for publicity.'

'I did it for you.'

'It hasn't *helped* me. You've just transferred the responsibility for this monstrosity from you to me. You asshole. Don't think I won't bring you down

when we get caught. Don't think Alejandro won't support my side of the story, how you stole my novel.'

James gulped down the rest of his whisky. 'Liam, listen mate. What's all this? Don't think like that. I don't think like that. What we did was a terrible idea, OK, I know, I realised that on stage. I'm sorry. We should never have done it. I wanted to confess. I came this close.'

'Can you imagine what would have become of our careers, of our lives, if you had done?'

'I did imagine,' he sighed. 'I imagined quickly and accurately and I changed my mind. What you said about me doing it for publicity, it wasn't like that. I did it for *you*, Liam. I didn't expect to see you, I wasn't allowed to invite you, and then having to do a speech for your novel and not mention you – it was obscene. It was your night. I had to say something. It was an awful thing to take your night away from you.'

'That's the least awful thing. It was never my night. Be consistent. Remember how you convinced me? You don't even believe what you're saying.'

'I do believe what I'm saying. I always believe what I'm saying.'

'That's the fucking problem.'

'Liam, Liam, I just wanted to credit you.'

'Then you shouldn't have persuaded me to forge someone else's book.'

'Shhh,' he said, looking around him.

It was pointless for me to try to make him confess his motives. He didn't know them himself. His promotional reflexes were so instinctual they occurred to him as morals. I could never rely on him as a friend, still less, as I had tried to, as a father figure. But I'm not convinced you can rely on most friends or fathers either, and for better or worse I was bound to him.

'Please let's not argue,' he said. 'Get a drink, won't you? After all, this for us is Craig's wake. Let's raise a glass to him. Go on, my card's behind the bar.'

It was not a very funereal drink. I ordered a bottle of the house champagne, the same type I remember sharing with Craig on his last visit here. It was our launch night, after all.

'Would you like me to pop the cork?' the barmaid asked.

'No, please stay alive,' I said.

She looked at me funnily and left the cork in. What fragile hearts we have. What pathetic excuses I had allowed mine while I had pretended Sarah's wasn't beating.

I carried over the ice-bucket and our two flutes. James nodded. I banged the bottle down on the table like a call to business, twisted off the cork and we watched the foam rise from the neck before I poured two glasses.

'To Craig, our friend,' said James. We clinked. 'Angie, come over here and drink a glass for Craig,' he called to the barmaid.

It wasn't long before we had finished the bottle and another was popping. Enough was never enough. This is what I'd learned from James, from life, and this is what would kill me, like Craig, like Dad, if I didn't unlearn it. I looked at my phone to check the time, noticing the many missed calls I had accrued from unknown numbers. I had to be somewhere else in an hour.

While I scrolled through these numbers, I heard James answer his phone – 'Clara, how are you? Of course, we're in the Academy, bring the gang. Yes, yes, I'm with Liam. Come down.'

'Was that Clara Pembroke?' I asked, when he had put the phone down. 'The literary editor of the *Sunday Times*?'

'It was. She's coming down with some of the crowd from earlier.' He was excited. He had completely forgotten why I had been angry with him.

'I told you I'm not giving any interviews about this,' I said, putting on my jacket. 'You need to keep these people away from me, they are all *yours* now.'

I wanted to tell him to stick the money too, whatever that was going to be, however he was going to sneak it through the company's books. But I was implicated too far already, and I needed the cash.

'Enjoy yourself, I'm off,' I said, picking up his copy of *My Biggest Lie*. I wanted that for later.

'Liam, don't go away like that,' he pleaded. 'You do understand, don't you? We have to forgive each other.'

'If I ever forgive myself, I'll forgive you too,' I said. 'But I don't think I ever will.'

With that I walked away. But I made the mistake at the door of looking back into the room before I climbed down the stairs. James was standing up, looking at me miserably. Craig was dead. We'd made sure of that. I remembered my friend who

had tried to save me when I didn't deserve it and walked back to James and hugged him.

'We've done such an awful stupid thing,' he said.

'You never know, we might get away with it until retirement age. And if we don't it will be a relief to tell the truth. If we do have to go to prison, at least it will make quite a good book.'

He managed a faint smile at that. 'I'll find a way to destroy the company's manuscript accidentally,' he said. 'Perhaps I'll burn down the offices. Except there's a copy with the agent. Perhaps I'll burn down *her* offices.' He looked excited now.

'That's a fine plan,' I said.

'Craig wouldn't mind, would he, what we did?'

'Of course he would. He'd be bloody furious.'

'He would have found it funny, I know that.'

'We can only hope so. Let's stop being so funny, though, let's have less fun. For him. For ourselves.'

James put his hands on my shoulders and looked at me proudly. 'A good idea, Liam.'

I didn't like that look. It didn't belong to him. But he could own that pride if he needed it. I couldn't give it to anyone else. He let go and we looked at each other sadly.

'You sure you won't stay?' he asked.

'I'm sure. I have to be somewhere else.'

'Somewhere good, I hope.'

I hoped so too. Sarah had rented a new place close to our old one. She had answered my letter and agreed to meet me. We'd spoken on the phone just after the funeral but I didn't know any of the important details about how her life had changed. I had not dared to ask if she had a new boyfriend.

'Someone good,' I said.

'Good luck.'

I'd need more than that.

On the bus, getting close to our old stop, I took out my pen and dedicated a dead man's novel to Sarah. I crossed out Craig Bennett on the title page and wrote the very last line of the love letter.

*I am sorry, Sarah, and I hope you will forgive me. Love from Liam.*

It was something I could offer to her that no one else could. My biggest lie. My only love. For a moment, I toyed with throwing it out of the top window. But it was a heavy book, and I had done enough damage with it already.