

I
Across the Narrow Sea
Putney, 1500

‘So now get up.’

Felled, dazed, silent, he has fallen; knocked full length on the cobbles of the yard. His head turns sideways; his eyes are turned towards the gate, as if someone might arrive to help him out. One blow, properly placed, could kill him now.

Blood from the gash on his head – which was his father’s first effort – is trickling across his face. Add to this, his left eye is blinded; but if he squints sideways, with his right eye he can see that the stitching of his father’s boot is unravelling. The twine has sprung clear of the leather, and a hard knot in it has caught his eyebrow and opened another cut.

‘So now get up!’ Walter is roaring down at him, working out where to kick him next. He lifts his head an inch or two, and moves forward, on his belly, trying to do it without exposing his hands, on which Walter enjoys stamping. ‘What are you, an eel?’ his parent asks. He trots backwards, gathers pace, and aims another kick.

It knocks the last breath out of him; he thinks it may be his last. His forehead returns to the ground; he lies waiting, for Walter to jump on him. The dog, Bella, is barking, shut away in an outhouse. I’ll miss my dog, he thinks. The yard smells of beer and blood. Someone is shouting, down on the riverbank. Nothing

Wolf Hall

hurts, or perhaps it's that everything hurts, because there is no separate pain that he can pick out. But the cold strikes him, just in one place: just through his cheekbone as it rests on the cobbles.

'Look now, look now,' Walter bellows. He hops on one foot, as if he's dancing. 'Look what I've done. Burst my boot, kicking your head.'

Inch by inch. Inch by inch forward. Never mind if he calls you an eel or a worm or a snake. Head down, don't provoke him. His nose is clotted with blood and he has to open his mouth to breathe. His father's momentary distraction at the loss of his good boot allows him the leisure to vomit. 'That's right,' Walter yells. 'Spew everywhere.' Spew everywhere, on my good cobbles. 'Come on, boy, get up. Let's see you get up. By the blood of creeping Christ, stand on your feet.'

Creeping Christ? he thinks. What does he mean? His head turns sideways, his hair rests in his own vomit, the dog barks, Walter roars, and bells peal out across the water. He feels a sensation of movement, as if the filthy ground has become the Thames. It gives and sways beneath him; he lets out his breath, one great final gasp. You've done it this time, a voice tells Walter. But he closes his ears, or God closes them for him. He is pulled downstream, on a deep black tide.

The next thing he knows, it is almost noon, and he is propped in the doorway of Pegasus the Flying Horse. His sister Kat is coming from the kitchen with a rack of hot pies in her hands. When she sees him she almost drops them. Her mouth opens in astonishment. 'Look at you!'

'Kat, don't shout, it hurts me.'

She bawls for her husband: 'Morgan Williams!' She rotates on the spot, eyes wild, face flushed from the oven's heat. 'Take this tray, body of God, where are you all?'

He is shivering from head to foot, exactly like Bella did when she fell off the boat that time.

Across the Narrow Sea

A girl runs in. 'The master's gone to town.'

'I know that, fool.' The sight of her brother had panicked the knowledge out of her. She thrusts the tray at the girl. 'If you leave them where the cats can get at them, I'll box your ears till you see stars.' Her hands empty, she clasps them for a moment in violent prayer. 'Fighting again, or was it your father?'

Yes, he says, vigorously nodding, making his nose drop gout of blood: yes, he indicates himself, as if to say, Walter was here. Kat calls for a basin, for water, for water in a basin, for a cloth, for the devil to rise up, right now, and take away Walter his servant. 'Sit down before you fall down.' He tries to explain that he has just got up. Out of the yard. It could be an hour ago, it could even be a day, and for all he knows, today might be tomorrow; except that if he had lain there for a day, surely either Walter would have come and killed him, for being in the way, or his wounds would have clotted a bit, and by now he would be hurting all over and almost too stiff to move; from deep experience of Walter's fists and boots, he knows that the second day can be worse than the first. 'Sit. Don't talk,' Kat says.

When the basin comes, she stands over him and works away, dabbing at his closed eye, working in small circles round and round at his hairline. Her breathing is ragged and her free hand rests on his shoulder. She swears under her breath, and sometimes she cries, and rubs the back of his neck, whispering, 'There, hush, there,' as if it were he who were crying, though he isn't. He feels as if he is floating, and she is weighting him to earth; he would like to put his arms around her and his face in her apron, and rest there listening to her heartbeat. But he doesn't want to mess her up, get blood all down the front of her.

When Morgan Williams comes in, he is wearing his good town coat. He looks Welsh and pugnacious; it's clear he's heard the news. He stands by Kat, staring down, temporarily out of words; till he says, 'See!' He makes a fist, and jerks it three times in the

Wolf Hall

air. 'That!' he says. 'That's what he'd get. Walter. That's what he'd get. From me.'

'Just stand back,' Kat advises. 'You don't want bits of Thomas on your London jacket.'

No more does he. He backs off. 'I wouldn't care, but look at you, boy. You could cripple the brute in a fair fight.'

'It never is a fair fight,' Kat says. 'He comes up behind you, right, Thomas? With something in his hand.'

'Looks like a glass bottle, in this case,' Morgan Williams says. 'Was it a bottle?'

He shakes his head. His nose bleeds again.

'Don't do that, brother,' Kat says. It's all over her hand; she wipes the blood clots down herself. What a mess, on her apron; he might as well have put his head there after all.

'I don't suppose you saw?' Morgan says. 'What he was wielding, exactly?'

'That's the value,' says Kat, 'of an approach from behind – you sorry loss to the magistrates' bench. Listen, Morgan, shall I tell you about my father? He'll pick up whatever's to hand. Which is sometimes a bottle, true. I've seen him do it to my mother. Even our little Bet, I've seen him hit her over the head. Also I've *not* seen him do it, which was worse, and that was because it was me about to be felled.'

'I wonder what I've married into,' Morgan Williams says.

But really, this is just something Morgan says; some men have a habitual snuffle, some women have a headache, and Morgan has this wonder. The boy doesn't listen to him; he thinks, if my father did that to my mother, so long dead, then maybe he killed her? No, surely he'd have been taken up for it; Putney's lawless, but you don't get away with murder. Kat's what he's got for a mother: crying for him, rubbing the back of his neck.

He shuts his eyes, to make the left eye equal with the right; he tries to open both. 'Kat,' he says, 'I have got an eye under there, have I? Because it can't see anything.' Yes, yes, yes, she says, while

Across the Narrow Sea

Morgan Williams continues his interrogation of the facts; settles on a hard, moderately heavy, sharp object, but possibly not a *broken* bottle, otherwise Thomas would have seen its jagged edge, prior to Walter splitting his eyebrow open and aiming to blind him. He hears Morgan forming up this theory and would like to speak about the boot, the knot, the knot in the twine, but the effort of moving his mouth seems disproportionate to the reward. By and large he agrees with Morgan's conclusion; he tries to shrug, but it hurts so much, and he feels so crushed and disjointed, that he wonders if his neck is broken.

'Anyway,' Kat says, 'what were you doing, Tom, to set him off? He usually won't start up till after dark, if it's for no cause at all.'

'Yes,' Morgan Williams says, 'was there a cause?'

'Yesterday. I was fighting.'

'You were fighting yesterday? Who in the holy name were you fighting?'

'I don't know.' The name, along with the reason, has dropped out of his head; but it feels as if, in exiting, it has removed a jagged splinter of bone from his skull. He touches his scalp, carefully. Bottle? Possible.

'Oh,' Kat says, 'they're always fighting. Boys. Down by the river.'

'So let me be sure I have this right,' Morgan says. 'He comes home yesterday with his clothes torn and his knuckles skinned, and the old man says, what's this, been fighting? He waits a day, then hits him with a bottle. Then he knocks him down in the yard, kicks him all over, beats up and down his length with a plank of wood that comes to hand ...'

'Did he do that?'

'It's all over the parish! They were lining up on the wharf to tell me, they were shouting at me before the boat tied up. Morgan Williams, listen now, your wife's father has beaten Thomas and he's crawled dying to his sister's house, they've called the priest ... Did you call the priest?'

Wolf Hall

‘Oh, you Williamses!’ Kat says. ‘You think you’re such big people around here. People are lining up to tell you things. But why is that? It’s because you believe anything.’

‘But it’s right!’ Morgan yells. ‘As good as right! Eh? If you leave out the priest. And that he’s not dead yet.’

‘You’ll make that magistrates’ bench for sure,’ Kat says, ‘with your close study of the difference between a corpse and my brother.’

‘When I’m a magistrate, I’ll have your father in the stocks. Fine him? You can’t fine him enough. What’s the point of fining a person who will only go and rob or swindle monies to the same value out of some innocent who crosses his path?’

He moans: tries to do it without intruding.

‘There, there, there,’ Kat whispers.

‘I’d say the magistrates have had their bellyful,’ Morgan says. ‘If he’s not watering his ale, he’s running illegal beasts on the common, if he’s not despoiling the common he’s assaulting an officer of the peace, if he’s not drunk he’s dead drunk, and if he’s not dead before his time there’s no justice in this world.’

‘Finished?’ Kat says. She turns back to him. ‘Tom, you’d better stay with us now. Morgan Williams, what do you say? He’ll be good to do the heavy work, when he’s healed up. He can do the figures for you, he can add and ... what’s the other thing? All right, don’t laugh at me, how much time do you think I had for learning figures, with a father like that? If I can write my name, it’s because Tom here taught me.’

‘He won’t,’ he says. ‘Like it.’ He can only manage like this: short, simple, declarative sentences.

‘Like? He should be ashamed,’ Morgan says.

Kat says, ‘Shame was left out when God made my dad.’

He says, ‘Because. Just a mile away. He can easily.’

‘Come after you? Just let him.’ Morgan demonstrates his fist again: his little nervy Welsh punch.

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Across the Narrow Sea

After Kat had finished swabbing him and Morgan Williams had ceased boasting and reconstructing the assault, he lay up for an hour or two, to recover from it. During this time, Walter came to the door, with some of his acquaintance, and there was a certain amount of shouting and kicking of doors, though it came to him in a muffled way and he thought he might have dreamed it. The question in his mind now is, what am I going to do, I can't stay in Putney. Partly this is because his memory is coming back, for the day before yesterday and the earlier fight, and he thinks there might have been a knife in it somewhere; and whoever it was stuck in, it wasn't him, so was it by him? All this is unclear in his mind. What is clear is his thought about Walter: I've had enough of this. If he gets after me again I'm going to kill him, and if I kill him they'll hang me, and if they're going to hang me I want a better reason.

Below, the rise and fall of their voices. He can't pick out every word. Morgan says he's burnt his boats. Kat is repenting of her first offer, a post as pot-boy, general factotum and chucker-out; because, Morgan's saying, 'Walter will always be coming round here, won't he? And "Where's Tom, send him home, who paid the bloody priest to teach him to read and write, I did, and you're reaping the bloody benefit now, you leek-eating cunt."' "

He comes downstairs. Morgan says cheerily, 'You're looking well, considering.'

The truth is about Morgan Williams – and he doesn't like him any the less for it – the truth is, this idea he has that one day he'll beat up his father-in-law, it's solely in his mind. In fact, he's frightened of Walter, like a good many people in Putney – and, for that matter, Mortlake and Wimbledon.

He says, 'I'm on my way, then.'

Kat says, 'You have to stay tonight. You know the second day is the worst.'

'Who's he going to hit when I'm gone?'

'Not our affair,' Kat says. 'Bet is married and got out of it, thank God.'

Wolf Hall

Morgan Williams says, 'If Walter was my father, I tell you, I'd take to the road.' He waits. 'As it happens, we've gathered some ready money.'

A pause.

'I'll pay you back.'

Morgan says, laughing, relieved, 'And how will you do that, Tom?'

He doesn't know. Breathing is difficult, but that doesn't mean anything, it's only because of the clotting inside his nose. It doesn't seem to be broken; he touches it, speculatively, and Kat says, careful, this is a clean apron. She's smiling a pained smile, she doesn't want him to go, and yet she's not going to contradict Morgan Williams, is she? The Williamses are big people, in Putney, in Wimbledon. Morgan dotes on her; he reminds her she's got girls to do the baking and mind the brewing, why doesn't she sit upstairs sewing like a lady, and praying for his success when he goes off to London to do a few deals in his town coat? Twice a day she could sweep through the Pegasus in a good dress and set in order anything that's wrong: that's his idea. And though as far as he can see she works as hard as ever she did when she was a child, he can see how she might like it, that Morgan would exhort her to sit down and be a lady.

'I'll pay you back,' he says. 'I might go and be a soldier. I could send you a fraction of my pay and I might get loot.'

Morgan says, 'But there isn't a war.'

'There'll be one somewhere,' Kat says.

'Or I could be a ship's boy. But, you know, Bella – do you think I should go back for her? She was screaming. He had her shut up.'

'So she wouldn't nip his toes?' Morgan says. He's satirical about Bella.

'I'd like her to come away with me.'

'I've heard of a ship's cat. Not of a ship's dog.'

'She's very small.'

Across the Narrow Sea

‘She’ll not pass for a cat,’ Morgan laughs. ‘Anyway, you’re too big all round for a ship’s boy. They have to run up the rigging like little monkeys – have you ever seen a monkey, Tom? Soldier is more like it. Be honest, like father like son – you weren’t last in line when God gave out fists.’

‘Right,’ Kat said. ‘Shall we see if we understand this? One day my brother Tom goes out fighting. As punishment, his father creeps up behind and hits him with a whatever, but heavy, and probably sharp, and then, when he falls down, almost takes out his eye, exerts himself to kick in his ribs, beats him with a plank of wood that stands ready to hand, knocks in his face so that if I were not his own sister I’d barely recognise him: and my husband says, the answer to this, Thomas, is go for a soldier, go and find somebody you don’t know, take out *his* eye and kick in his ribs, actually *kill* him, I suppose, and get paid for it.’

‘May as well,’ Morgan says, ‘as go fighting by the river, without profit to anybody. Look at him – if it were up to me, I’d have a war just to employ him.’

Morgan takes out his purse. He puts down coins: chink, chink, chink, with enticing slowness.

He touches his cheekbone. It is bruised, intact: but so cold.

‘Listen,’ Kat says, ‘we grew up here, there’s probably people that would help Tom out –’

Morgan gives her a look: which says, eloquently, do you mean there are a lot of people would like to be on the wrong side of Walter Cromwell? Have him breaking their doors down? And she says, as if hearing his thought out loud, ‘No. Maybe. Maybe, Tom, it would be for the best, do you think?’

He stands up. She says, ‘Morgan, look at him, he shouldn’t go tonight.’

‘I should. An hour from now he’ll have had a skinful and he’ll be back. He’d set the place on fire if he thought I were in it.’

Morgan says, ‘Have you got what you need for the road?’

He wants to turn to Kat and say, no.

Wolf Hall

But she's turned her face away and she's crying. She's not crying for him, because nobody, he thinks, will ever cry for him, God didn't cut him out that way. She's crying for her idea of what life should be like: Sunday after church, all the sisters, sisters-in-law, wives kissing and patting, swatting at each other's children and at the same time loving them and rubbing their little round heads, women comparing and swapping babies, and all the men gathering and talking business, wool, yarn, lengths, shipping, bloody Flemings, fishing rights, brewing, annual turnover, nice timely information, favour-for-favour, little sweeteners, little retainers, my attorney says ... That's what it should be like, married to Morgan Williams, with the Williamses being a big family in Putney ... But somehow it's not been like that. Walter has spoiled it all.

Carefully, stiffly, he straightens up. Every part of him hurts now. Not as badly as it will hurt tomorrow; on the third day the bruises come out and you have to start answering people's questions about why you've got them. By then he will be far from here, and presumably no one will hold him to account, because no one will know him or care. They'll think it's usual for him to have his face beaten in.

He picks up the money. He says, '*Hwyl, Morgan Williams. Diolch am yr arian.*' Thank you for the money. '*Gofalwch am Katheryn. Gofalwch am eich busnes. Wela i chi eto rhywbryd. Pob lwc.*'

Look after my sister. Look after your business. See you again sometime.

Morgan Williams stares.

He almost grins; would do, if it wouldn't split his face open. All those days he'd spent hanging around the Williamses' households: did they think he'd just come for his dinner?

'*Pob lwc,*' Morgan says slowly. Good luck.

He says, 'If I follow the river, is that as good as anything?'

'Where are you trying to get?'

Across the Narrow Sea

‘To the sea.’

For a moment, Morgan Williams looks sorry it has come to this. He says, ‘You’ll be all right, Tom? I tell you, if Bella comes looking for you, I won’t send her home hungry. Kat will give her a pie.’

He has to make the money last. He could work his way down-river; but he is afraid that if he is seen, Walter will catch him, through his contacts and his friends, those kind of men who will do anything for a drink. What he thinks of, first, is slipping on to one of the smugglers’ ships that go out of Barking, Tilbury. But then he thinks, France is where they have wars. A few people he talks to – he talks to strangers very easily – are of the same belief. Dover then. He gets on the road.

If you help load a cart you get a ride in it, as often as not. It gives him to think, how bad people are at loading carts. Men trying to walk straight ahead through a narrow gateway with a wide wooden chest. A simple rotation of the object solves a great many problems. And then horses, he’s always been around horses, frightened horses too, because when in the morning Walter wasn’t sleeping off the effects of the strong brew he kept for himself and his friends, he would turn to his second trade, farrier and blacksmith; and whether it was his sour breath, or his loud voice, or his general way of going on, even horses that were good to shoe would start to shake their heads and back away from the heat. Their hooves gripped in Walter’s hands, they’d tremble; it was his job to hold their heads and talk to them, rubbing the velvet space between their ears, telling them how their mothers love them and talk about them still, and how Walter will soon be over.

He doesn’t eat for a day or so; it hurts too much. But by the time he reaches Dover the big gash on his scalp has closed, and the tender parts inside, he trusts, have mended themselves: kidneys, lungs and heart.

Wolf Hall

He knows by the way people look at him that his face is still bruised. Morgan Williams had done an inventory of him before he left: teeth (miraculously) still in his head, and two eyes, miraculously seeing. Two arms, two legs: what more do you want?

He walks around the docks saying to people, do you know where there's a war just now?

Each man he asks stares at his face, steps back and says, 'You tell me!'

They are so pleased with this, they laugh at their own wit so much, that he continues asking, just to give people pleasure.

Surprisingly, he finds he will leave Dover richer than he arrived. He'd watched a man doing the three-card trick, and when he learned it he set up for himself. Because he's a boy, people stop to have a go. It's their loss.

He adds up what he's got and what he's spent. Deduct a small sum for a brief grapple with a lady of the night. Not the sort of thing you could do in Putney, Wimbledon or Mortlake. Not without the Williams family getting to know, and talking about you in Welsh.

He sees three elderly Lowlanders struggling with their bundles and moves to help them. The packages are soft and bulky, samples of woollen cloth. A port officer gives them trouble about their documents, shouting into their faces. He lounges behind the clerk, pretending to be a Lowland oaf, and tells the merchants by holding up his fingers what he thinks a fair bribe. 'Please,' says one of them, in effortful English to the clerk, 'will you take care of these English coins for me? I find them surplus.' Suddenly the clerk is all smiles. The Lowlanders are all smiles; they would have paid much more. When they board they say, 'The boy is with us.'

As they wait to cast off, they ask him his age. He says eighteen, but they laugh and say, child, you are never. He offers them fifteen, and they confer and decide that fifteen will do; they think he's younger, but they don't want to shame him. They ask what's happened to his face. There are several things he could say but he

Across the Narrow Sea

selects the truth. He doesn't want them to think he's some failed robber. They discuss it among themselves, and the one who can translate turns to him: 'We are saying, the English are cruel to their children. And cold-hearted. The child must stand if his father comes in the room. Always the child should say very correctly, "my father, sir", and "madam my mother".'

He is surprised. Are there people in the world who are not cruel to their children? For the first time, the weight in his chest shifts a little; he thinks, there could be other places, better. He talks; he tells them about Bella, and they look sorry, and they don't say anything stupid like, you can get another dog. He tells them about the Pegasus, and about his father's brewhouse and how Walter gets fined for bad beer at least twice a year. He tells them about how he gets fines for stealing wood, cutting down other people's trees, and about the too-many sheep he runs on the common. They are interested in that; they show the woollen samples and discuss among themselves the weight and the weave, turning to him from time to time to include and instruct him. They don't think much of English finished cloth generally, though these samples can make them change their mind ... He loses the thread of the conversation when they try to tell him their reasons for going to Calais, and different people they know there.

He tells them about his father's blacksmith business, and the English-speaker says, interested, can you make a horseshoe? He mimes to them what it's like, hot metal and a bad-tempered father in a small space. They laugh; they like to see him telling a story. Good talker, one of them says. Before they dock, the most silent of them will stand up and make an oddly formal speech, at which one will nod, and which the other will translate. 'We are three brothers. This is our street. If ever you visit our town, there is a bed and hearth and food for you.'

Goodbye, he will say to them. Goodbye and good luck with your lives. *Hwyl*, cloth men. *Golfalwch eich busnes*. He is not stopping till he gets to a war.

Wolf Hall

The weather is cold but the sea is flat. Kat has given him a holy medal to wear. He has slung it around his neck with a cord. It makes a chill against the skin of his throat. He unloops it. He touches it with his lips, for luck. He drops it; it whispers into the water. He will remember his first sight of the open sea: a grey wrinkled vastness, like the residue of a dream.