

DAY ONE

People are afraid of flying. I've never understood that. It's a most remarkable experience; yes, even in a cramped seat in a noisy compartment on a three-hour budget flight with no food. You are still in the air. You are Above. It is extraordinary in the most direct and apt way; you are outside the ordinary. The ordinary is pushed down, rendered for a score of minutes into a mosaic of green and brown and mercury, and then you're with the clouds.

There has never been a better time to be alive, and that is not simply thanks to penicillin, flush toilets and central heating, it's because now we can look down on the clouds. Clouds are utterly faithful to their promise of ethereal beauty. When I was very young, I imagined clouds to be warm and soft to the touch, because I knew they were water, and so therefore they must be steam because that's what they looked like, and steam was warm. Perfect logic. Of course, they are not warm, but in the air-conditioned cylinder of your midweek commercial flight, they fulfil their old promise because they are awash with sunlight – no matter the daytime weather beneath, the cloud tops must be exposed to the sun, that is their guarantee, that is their tiny miracle.

Renaissance artists must have felt this love of clouds, and appreciation of their natural splendour, and having always felt separated from their true glory were moved to populate them with putti and seraphim; so perfect was their approximation of the wonderfulness of being above cloud level that to be there now is to expect these heavenly denizens to be there with you. But they are not. You are alone above a landscape that is forever changing, forever unique, forever special for you; rolling cirrus meadows and boiling mountaintops across unfathomed distance. You are an explorer and this is your new-found land.

But with all this beauty and isolation there is also an obligation – you must return, you must descend, back to the imperfect.

The landing, airport, passport control, baggage reclaim and taxi are all a compressed wedge of brown neon, sweat and stress in my mind. It was one of those dreadful moments when it occurs that the only things connecting you to who you are, what you are, where you come from, and where you are going, are a little purple-bound book ('Her Britannic Majesty's Secretary of State requests and requires ...') and an address scribbled on a scrap of paper torn from a spiral-bound notepad. The notepad itself is in a holdall that may at some stage, *please* God, appear on a conveyor belt still basically intact. It contains the remaining evidence of Who You Are. Who I am. The address, *unless* it has been incorrectly taken down – was it 70 or 17? – corresponds to an apartment building in a completely

unfamiliar foreign city some thirty kilometres from this airport, and the taxi rank is the sinew that links me to it – shelter, a promise of food and comfort – *unless* I am cheated or robbed or murdered, or some baroque combination of those three. These things happen in foreign cities, I had been told, and over the warmth of dinner party conversation I had tried to smile the smile of the seasoned traveller as various lurid myths and truths were recounted. I was no seasoned traveller.

But there were no hitches, and none of the *unlesses* happened and the key fitted the lock and I found myself standing at the threshold of Oskar's flat, getting a good look at it for the first time.

Thanks so much for this; you're a real friend for helping out. I don't feel comfortable leaving the flat for so long, not with the cats ... you'll like it, it's a nice flat ...

The flat, 17, was on the second floor of a six-storey, leaden, inter-war, vaguely Moderne block near the city centre, on a street stacked rigid with similarly bulky buildings that was prominent in the mental map of the taxi driver. And it *was* a nice flat.

At university, I remembered, Oskar had travelled under a thundercloud of good taste. Static permanently brewed around him, building readiness to send down a lightning bolt of scornful condemnation in the direction of anything cheap, or badly made, or, sin of sins, vulgar. As the bolt streaked towards its target, his upper lip would pitch into a perfect, practised sneer, a neat capital A for *Appalling*.

The flat indicated that he had transferred this ideology to his home life here.

A wide hallway stretched from Oskar's front door towards a south-facing living area. The hall was light and airy, with pale wooden floors and icy white walls. Two dark wooden doors were set into the wall to the right, like dominos on a bedspread, one halfway down, and the other near the far end. To the left was evidence of a refurbishment under Oskar's direction: a long glass partition screening a large kitchen and dining area from the hallway. At its end, the hall opened out into the living area, which was demarcated by a single step down. The pale wooden flooring stretched to every corner of the flat, and the glass partition, which I assumed had replaced a non-supporting wall, evenly rinsed the space with the crystalline light entering through the generous south-facing picture windows that took up the far wall of the living space.

Taste and money had met in the crucible of this space and sublimed. The wood, steel and glass were the alchemical solids formed by the reaction.

Closing the front door behind me with a satisfying clunk of weight and security, I walked down the hall. The living room – Area? Space? – centred on a sofa and two armchairs, all boxy black leather and chrome, the design of a dead Swiss architect. The east wall was one large bookcase, mostly filled with books but also seasoned with some *objets*. The kitchen was all aluminium and steel. Everything must have been imported, I thought, considering the home-grown stuff I had seen at the airport. There

was a table in the kitchen with three chairs. How often did Oskar entertain? At university, he had been a good but infrequent host. He preferred restaurants that we loan rangers were stretched to afford. The kitchen looked more like a showpiece from a designer's catalogue than a work area. Everything, everywhere, was impeccably tidy. There was a jar of carefully arranged twigs on the kitchen table and another on the glass coffee table, which also sported a hotel-style fan of magazines – *New Yorker*, *Time*, *Economist* (more than a month old), *Gramophone*. There were more twigs and a four-day-old *International Herald Tribune* on a small table under the middle of the three picture windows.

In a gesture that was, I suppose, proprietorial, I put my hands on my hips and exhaled, a sigh of relief at arrival and also admiration. It is intensely pleasing when a reality conforms so exactly to expectation, and when a man conforms so exactly to type. This was almost exactly how I had imagined Oskar's apartment to be – it was the obvious habitat for the mind I knew. Multilingual Oskar. Oskar, who appreciated design and modernity and expensive, extravagant simplicity. The apartment's spaces were measured in air miles. Its air had arrived in the bubbles in a thousand crates of San Pellegrino. The beautiful wooden floor didn't have nails, it had a manicure. The only thing missing was a piano.

Had I not already known that Oskar was a musician, it would have been easy to tell from the black-and-white photos tastefully mounted in plain glass frames around the walls: Oskar at the piano, Oskar with baton in hand, a

younger Oskar shaking hands with an older man I didn't recognise, Oskar receiving an award, Oskar ... Oskar with me. Four of us, at university, not long before graduation. Thicker, darker hair, no bellies. Another me. I tried to remember the occasion where the photo had been taken. It was gone.

And ... no photos of Oskar's wife. And no piano. No awards. A mystery.

The first door I tried – the one nearest the picture windows – resolved part of this mystery. The flat was in the corner of its building, and the room I entered occupied the corner of the flat. Two more south-facing windows continued the rank started in the main area, and the western wall had one as well, so the light that articulated every corner and dust mote – even the dust motes looked neat, their flight paths as checked and regulated as the red-eye from Tehran coming into LAX – frosted the surface of the grand piano so that the black lacquer was dental-advert white. A piano, in the corner of the corner of the corner, pushed to the outermost reaches of the flat. Any further out, it would be on the pavement by the crossroads outside. Unlike the kitchen, this room had an aura of useful industry. One wall was filled with shelves, and those were stacked with a regimented clutter of box files, CDs, vinyl, cassette tapes, racks of sheet music, framed certificates, (more) photographs, citations, degrees, honours and awards. A life abridged. Under the nearer of the two south-facing windows was a writing desk with its leather-cornered blotter, pots of pens and pencils, and two stacks of paper – one plain, one ruled

for musical notation. Next to the desk was a stack hi-fi that looked like the product of an abandoned Scandinavian space programme.

While here, in this open-ended episode of enforced idleness, I wanted to write. In London I had been helplessly, prowlingly blocked, and the four magnolia walls of my Clapham basement flat had shut me up. Without those walls, what could stop me? Could a full book be turned out in the three-weeks-to-a-month I expected to be here? Perhaps the breakthrough would stay with me when I returned. If I could write anywhere, I figured, it would be here. Stewing in London, I often fantasised about the ideal setting for creativity, and it always looked much like the room I now stood in. This place seemed impregnated with Oskar's talent and productivity. It would be perfect. I could imagine short stories, plays, perhaps even the start of a novel here. Clamped to the left-hand edge of the desk was one of those turn-handle pencil sharpeners that I associated with school. Directly underneath this sharpener was a steel bin. I peered into the bin, and was rewarded with the sight of – shocking lapse! – some pencil shavings and a discarded tram timetable. Rubbish. Debris, even, just casually left there for anyone to see. Oskar was plainly slipping. For a borderline obsessive-compulsive like him ... it was like catching Brian Sewell at a Britney Spears concert.

As if on cue, prompted by the timetable, a tram rumbled past in the street below. Hadn't Oskar written a piece called *Variations on Tram Timetables*? Pleased with my memory, I wandered over to the piano, flipping open the

lid. This action caused a slip of paper to waft out and describe a swooping arabesque descent to the floor. I scooped it up and read it. Oskar had written on it in a prickly, pointy, fussy hand:

Please do NOT play with the piano.

That would be easy to arrange as I could not play the piano. I ran my fingertips gently, respectfully, over the surface of the keys. They were a nicotiny white and a simplistic black that defied adjectives. Brown-blue-*black-black*. But that's not quite it. I tinkled the same two high notes that musical philistines always tinkle when they are driven to fiddle with piano keys.

Box files, all labelled in Oskar's spiky black hand – *Solo #2, Comp '00-'02, Halle Aug '01, Misc '04*, Each one was stuffed ... no, stuffed is the wrong word. Each one had string-bound bundles of papers, newspaper clippings, folders, sheet music, financial documents, travel details and hotel bills meticulously *arranged* in it, as one would arrange a formal vase of flowers, stiffly and conscientiously. Oskar the organised. Oskar the organised musician.

Photos, Oskar with people I didn't recognise, bow ties, penguin suits.

I remembered that my bags were still by the front door and that I had unpacking to do. The door I hadn't tried yet had to be the bedroom. Opening it was a complex action involving holding my holdall with my left hand, hanging my flight bag from the ring and little finger of my right,

and turning the knob with the remaining two fingers and thumb.

There is something primal in the sound of claws against the ground moving towards you, and an animal jumping. It fires something back in the lizard root of the brain, springs the safety catches off, triggering a reaction designed for survival and still operational despite being broadly unneeded; a working Betamax video recorder in the animal mind. Still it wired out its useless message like an aggressive lout shouting a drinks order at a defenceless gland – *A pint of adrenalin, and make it snappy, bitch*. I tensed involuntarily as two furry streaks cannoned through my legs towards the living room, two irresistible vectors of feline purpose. Late and unbidden, my Cro-Magnon fear manifested itself as a foolish and embarrassed sprinkling of sweat.

Ah, I thought, *the cats*. Oskar had mentioned cats, and here they were, or rather there they were, wherever they had gone. Afraid of cats! But not afraid, simply surprised and caught off balance, a simple shock. *And besides*, I thought, appealing to an altogether more recent section of the brain, *it's not as if anyone saw me being surprised by them*.

So that's all right then.

I could ingratiate myself with them later. For now, I walked into the bedroom and dropped my bags by the white linen of the large double bed. There was less to see here; the dominant features were the bed, an armchair and a large standing cupboard. The armchair was plain wicker

with an off-white cushion, an item that seemed to exist solely for the purpose of injecting an air of homely domesticity into a room that was otherwise as coldly modern as the principal living area. It was one of those chairs that had a sad aura of futility, a regret that it had been designed to be sat in and never was, and had often suffered the indignity of simply being a prop to drape clothes over.

Furniture is like that. Used and enjoyed as intended, it absorbs that experience and exudes it back into the atmosphere, but if simply bought for effect and left to languish in a corner, it vibrates with melancholy. Furnishings in museums ('DO NOT SIT IN THIS SEAT') are as unspeakably tragic as the unvisited inmates of old folk's homes. The untuned violins and hardback books used to bring 'character' to postwar suburban pubs crouch uncomfortably in their imposed roles like caged pumas at the zoo. The stately kitchen that is never or rarely used to bring forth lavish feasts for appreciative audiences turns inward and cold. Like the kitchen here, I thought.

And there was a further indicator of this strange psychology of material goods in the bedroom; flanking the bed were two small tables, and whereas the one nearer the windows bore a light, three stacked books, a small notepad and a small stone statuette, the other was empty but for an identical light. So it was clear which side Oskar slept on and which had been taken, until recently, by his wife.

These musings were not a sign of growing gloom; far from it. My smile was broad and growing broader. I had taken up Oskar's invitation and come here to his city in order to write and to be inspired, and I was thrilled –

frankly, a sensation close to exhilaration – that in such a short space of time in unfamiliar surroundings I was already feeling more creative and the insights into detail were coming with the frequency they did. This euphoric state was given more lift by my next discovery. The bedroom's proportions demanded three picture windows, but there were only two and the place of the central set was taken by French windows that opened onto a narrow concrete balcony overlooking the street. As soon as I noticed this, I crossed the room to investigate. The window opened easily, letting in a blast of unruly city air and noise, and I stepped out.

Below, two storeys down, the flagstones and cobbles of the street throbbed with the constant effort of traffic. Another tram passed, shuddering and clanging as it nosed through a melee of battered and tubercular cars from a medley of unfamiliar marques: Ladas and Dacias and Oltcits. The few users of the broad imperial pavements moved with huddled and private purpose to alien, unknowable goals. Opposite was another apartment block, baroque, so grey it seemed moulded from a compression of ashes. Indeed, the four streets pushing away from the crossroads were mainly composed of heavy grey prewar buildings, apart from a few obviously more recent municipal-modern blocks perhaps intended to fill half-century-old bomb wounds or part of an ill-advised 1960s attempt at redevelopment. Washing hung drying from lines between balconies, potted plants spilled colour on sills and through railings, wallpaper in four dozen different styles could be spied through windows.

This exotic chequerboard of domesticity was enthralling after the cold touch of Oskar's Good Taste and Clean Lines.

Once again, I travelled in my mind's eye back to those walls that defined my space in Clapham. Walls dented by chair backs and grimed by the touch of human hand and hair. Carpets cratered by careless smokers at drunken parties and spotted with spilled red wine. A topology of blemishes and taints from myriad unknown miscreants. A slow-motion and inevitable despoliation by scores of hands. And did I notice it? No. These grazes sank into the patina of the background, the grain of my life. I had signed an armistice with entropy, come to terms. I let it happen. It was a rented flat – landlords expect wear and tear, and I supplied it.

But how did Oskar see it? He owned this place, had done for years, and the manner in which he kept it ...

In fact, I knew how Oskar would feel about it. He had not surrendered. He would not let these details sink into the background. He had fought entropy to a standstill and forced it to accept *his* terms.

I felt a sudden and foolish urge to declare my presence from the balcony, state that I had arrived, and that I would be staying.

Of course, Oskar had left a careful list of instructions on the dining table. Oskar did not do chaos. He did not do disorganisation. He did not do disorder. At university, we had a bad joke about him:

Q: Where does Oskar go on holiday?

A: The Coaster del Sol.

Ha, ha. This was a direct reference to Oskar's habit – treated with bafflement, ridicule and mild annoyance by the other undergraduates – of swooping down with a coaster whenever it looked as though a drink served by him in his rooms might come in contact with a surface. The crowning insanity of this was that the surfaces came with the room, were supplied by the college, and were already heavily pitted and scarred by decades of use by less conscientious members of the intellectual cream of the nation's youth. He even did it with beer mats in *pubs*.

The flat was quiet, and the cats – both a mixture of black and white – were grooming themselves on the sofa. I needed noise and stimulation before sitting down to read Oskar's instructions, so I returned to the study, propped the door open and tried to pick a CD.

There was no danger of being denied choice: the CDs must have numbered in four figures. As might be expected, the vast majority were yellow- and red-spined classical. Not being very familiar with classical music – its codes and sigils, the *K341s* and *scherzos* were a strange and threatening language to me – I hunted for the familiar, the recent. After a few moments I found, in a discreet and embarrassed corner of a shelf, Oskar's half-dozen popular discs: David Bowie, Simon and Garfunkel, Queen, the Kinks, and a 'Best of' the Velvet Underground, which I plucked and slotted into the hi-fi. 'Sunday Morning' in Lou Reed's wistful tones filled the strange flat in the distant city. I calmed.

Four A4 pages, closely filled with Oskar's script, anchored by a bottle of red wine. I read:

My old friend,

Again, thank you for your help in what is sadly such a difficult time for me. The flat is not large and what I need from you not great, it is mainly a business of knowing that there is a trusted soul in situ and that I need fear no break-ins or fire. As I sincerely hope you are aware, I would gladly repay this favour for you at any time.

First, let me address the issue of my friends the cats. They are called Shossy and Stravy. They are fond of their activities and often very fast and busy, but they are good souls and happy to be picked up and very happy to be stroked. Please do this, it is good for everyone I think! But they must be fed and their hygiene must be attended. I have left tins of their favourite food, and their bowls, and the bag with their litter, and their tray, in the little room by the kitchen, with the clothes washing machine. They need half a tin each in the morning and the same in the evening, with a sprinkling of their biscuits, which are also in the cupboard with the food. Please remove their doings every day; there is a scoop for this not very nice job! Every week, change the litter.

When you go to bed, please shut them out of the front door, and in the mornings, you will find them back and hungry, ready for their breakfast! They are allowed on the bed for their sleep BUT NOT THE SOFA or the chairs in the living room.

Shit. I looked across at the sofa. The cats were still happily sprawled there, enjoying their illicit activity. Not a good start. Well, they were meant to be 'fond of their activities'. I broke off reading to banish them from the forbidden zone, watched them saunter sulkily back into the bedroom, then returned to the note.

Please make sure that the windows and the front door are securely locked if you leave the flat and when you go to bed. I have written down some numbers of plumbers and other emergency people: ...

I started to skim. Emergency numbers, location of spare keys, the nearest pharmacies, supermarkets and so on. A few details about the city.

While you're here, do make an effort to see something at the Philharmonic. They are very good, and I do not say that simply because of my connection with them! Their summer season has now begun and I would love to think that although I cannot be there to enjoy it myself, it might give you some pleasure.

Oh, and finally what is perhaps the most important thing since the cats are able to take care of themselves and will tell you if they are in need of something: PLEASE, YOU MUST TAKE CARE OF THE WOODEN FLOORS. They are French oak and cost me a great deal when I replaced the old floor, and they must be treated like the finest piece of furniture in the flat, apart from the piano of course.

DO NOT put any drinks on them without a coaster.

ALWAYS wipe your feet before entering the flat, and take off your shoes when inside.

If anything should spill, you MUST wipe it up AT ONCE!!! so that it does not stain the wood. Be VERY CAREFUL. But if there is an accident (!), then there is a book on the architecture shelf that might help you. CALL ME if something happens.

The cleaner calls twice a week (you do not have to pay, it is a service of the building, so do not worry).

I do not know how long I will be in Los Angeles, no one will tell me, and perhaps they do not know. But I think I will be safe to return after about three weeks, and with any luck for me, less than that. I will telephone you at times and let you know how things are going.

And again my thanks. The wine is for you. I hope to see you soon.

Your old friend,

OSKAR

I stared at the note for a brief time after reading through it, to see if any deeper meaning became obvious. Was a note of this length, in this sort of detail, normal? Normal for Oskar, I supposed. How he must hate to leave his flat like this. 'A trusted soul' he had written. Really? Not so trusted that I could escape being micromanaged by notes, it seemed. So clean, so ordered. I thought of the pencil shavings in the wastepaper basket. Oskar's neat-freakery only made minuscule 'lapses' like that more noticeable. He had the assistance of a cleaner, of course. But how thor-

ough was the cleaner? London was full of Eastern European women working as domestic cleaners, but I had no idea if they did a good job. Besides, did we get their 'A-team' or their 'B-team'? Did the best and the brightest cleaners head west? Or only the ones who could not cut the duster in their own countries?

The bookshelves that covered one wall of the room drew my eye. Bookshelves are a devil to keep clean – dust gathers on top of the books with surprising rapidity, and it is difficult and tiresome to thoroughly clean those areas. I strolled over to get a closer look. I also wanted to find a guidebook that would help me navigate this city, something better than the inadequate volume I had brought with me. I doubted I would find one, because I had nothing similar about London back at my flat. But perhaps.

Like the rest of the flat, Oskar's books were beautiful and carefully arranged. They were organised first by category, and then by size. At least four languages were present, with German and French accompanying English and Oskar's mother tongue. There was a large number of paving-slab-sized glossy, expensive books of art and photography and 'design classics'. The art emphasised the 'modern' and the difficult -ists, constructivists, vorticists, futurists; Diane Arbus and Nan Goldin; and a blast of warmth and light from volumes on Warhol and Lichtenstein, the sort of art that did not make me so uncomfortable. There was architecture, of course, again characteristically modern: Le Corbusier and Mies, Richard Neutra and Herzog & de Meuron. The Neutra, like the Lichtenstein, suggested a Californian hand here. Did

Oskar's wife have any input when it came to the content of the bookshelves? I doubted it. The mixing of the bookshelves in a relationship is a gesture of vast, almost foolhardy, mutual trust, and Oskar wasn't able to live on the same continent as his wife, let alone jumble up the contents of his library with hers. Just thinking of the idea made me picture him wincing. But there did not seem to be even a shelf for her – none of the books I imagined she'd read, auction catalogues and law journals, blockbusters for those interminable flights across the world, West-Coast self-help, yard after yard of management 'bibles' by 'gurus' – business secrets, the main habits of monied sociopaths, the utterings of successful salesmen and speculators. But not an inch of them was to be seen. Her mind had not established the tiniest beach-head in Oskar's mental world. Who cheesed her move? The rest of the bookshelf was filled with the typical and the expected. Shelf after shelf of the books I associated with Oskar. There were a variety of novels and histories, broadly twentieth-century classics: Koestler, Camus, Salinger, Solzhenitsyn. History, cultural history, books about World War II and the Nazis and the Soviet Union, *Schindler's Ark*, modern politics with an emphasis on America, Russia and Germany, stacks of books about music, biographies of composers and musicians. Not a hint of dust, anywhere, so another 'win' for Oskar there. But already it was settling all around me.

One book caught my attention – a big book about Oskar's orchestra, the Philharmonic, in German. It seemed to be a history written in celebration of a very recent anniversary – 150 years of something. I thumbed it open, plan-

ning on looking up Oskar's name in the index, and found that a leaflet was slipped into it – a programme for the present concert season. Oskar's photograph smiled out from the page. I grinned at the vanity of it – bookmarking the page with his own photo on it. He was standing beside another man, taller than Oskar, with receding ultra-pale hair revealing a bullet-shaped head. They were wearing the highly formal evening wear that infests classical music, and Oskar's companion was carrying a violin. It was a good photo – a warm smile from Oskar, a pleasure enhanced by its relative rarity. Oskar applied the same rules to interior design and facial expressions: less is more. A smile was a superfluous decorative extravagance; a grin was rococo excess.

There was something written on the concert programme, in Oskar's hand:

Maybe Useful?

'Maybe useful'? Why would he write that on a programme for his own orchestra? No one would know the schedule of performances better than he. Or was the note, and the programme, meant for me? If the programme *was* intended for me, then tucking it into a book like this was an unusual move – especially this book, this page. Unless he knew I would look in this book – but that was unlikely. Or maybe he thought that looking in this book meant that I was interested in the orchestra and therefore might attend a concert? The photograph of Oskar smiled at me. That smile now seemed teasing. Perhaps the leaflet had

been meant for someone else (the wife?), or Oskar was in the habit of leaving notes to himself.

Taking out the programme, I closed the book and put it back on the shelf. Odd, odd. Inside, three performances were marked, their dates underlined, with an asterisk next to them in the margin. The season had started three weeks ago, I saw, but the highlighted concerts were all in the next two weeks, as if they were intended for me, suggestions of performances I might enjoy while I was in town, or ones that Oskar particularly wanted me to hear, for some musical reason that was beyond me. The soonest marked concert was two days away.

In a sudden thrill, the entire oddness of the situation, my situation, struck home; Oskar's home. Here, his flat, was the aggregation of his *entire life*; his collected works. And the collected works of Oskar that surrounded me not only displayed the mainstream of his personality, his ordered, taxonomic brain; they also displayed the interstices in that plane of self, the gaps, the discarded bus tickets, the quirks and wrinkles.

Flush with this weird sense of omniscience, I felt a growing need for domesticity, for a small obeisance to the household gods. I wanted to make myself a cup of coffee in order to test the kitchen. Also, I didn't know what time the cats had last been fed. Oskar probably fed them before he left this morning – he had certainly let them back into the flat – but that may have been quite early. They might by now be hungry, and I thought that feeding them would give me a bit of good PR. Aha, they would think, this is a man who knows how to use the tin opener.

But coffee first. The person in this relationship needed sustenance before the animals. Besides, a quick poke through the cupboards would also establish if there was anything tasty-looking for supper, and there was the horrible possibility that Oskar only stocked coffee beans that needed to be ground and percolated and all that tedious rubbish. It was the sort of thing he was capable of, and there was a coffee-maker-percolator thing on the work surface, its gleaming chrome winking impossibility at me. Those twisty detachable wrench-handle-cup parts pointed accusingly.

Thinking along the lines of the ergonomics of the kitchen, I tried the cupboard immediately above the treacherous mercury-shine gadget. The payload – a waft of dried beans and leaves, pressure-packed, freeze-dried, connoisseur-approved, corporation-imported caffeine for a dozen delivery methods – was hit instantly, but also released with that relieving aroma was a slip of paper that, sucked out of the cupboard by the air-pressure difference created when I opened the door, flipped, looped and swayed down to the worktop.

It read, again in Oskar's cramped black hand:

Please help yourself to all tea and coffee, but if it should run out please replace.

I stared at the note, just the tiniest strip cut from a pad, for a little while. It was thoughtful. It also felt unnecessary, perhaps; it was pedantic. Did he fear I would strip the flat of the materials for making hot drinks, leaving him thirsty

and bereft on his return? Why did he feel another note was needed? The concert programme was still on that table, next to Oskar's instructions, which had seemed to me to be very comprehensive. But then, this was his flat, he above all had very specific ways of going about the business of existing. The sense of Oskar's very recent departure from the flat was a static charge in the air. Here was a man with very clear views on what should happen in his home. He had always been particular.

Perhaps it was appropriate that a composer should make notes. At university, Oskar had littered the staircase we shared with slips of paper, instructions, proscriptions, statements of intent, reminders, invitations and rebukes. In the first week of the first term, a little note appeared on the back of the door of the shared toilet: Please use the air freshener. O. On top of the cistern was a brand-new bottle of air freshener: pine. None of the other toilets had air freshener, but this was the one that Oskar used. He had bought it himself. As it was pinned to the back of the door, I was able to inspect this note at my leisure on scores of occasions. The O was hypnotic – a perfect circle, with no obvious beginning or end.

That was just the start of the notes. The emphasis was generally on the NOT. Please do NOT make so much noise after 1 a.m. Please do NOT leave dirty plates in the sink. On our staircase, eight people shared a kitchen. It was the scene and subject of endless disputes. Oskar was far from the only resident with a retinue of grievances and bugbears, and he was inevitably the most courteous in

settling them. But his clipped, frosty demeanour, the formality of the notes and the pathological neatness of his room put people on the defensive. The others engaged in volcanic screaming matches that were forgotten within hours. They screamed shithead and bitch at each other and went to the pub together that evening. Oskar never lost his temper, never blew up. He was regularly angry, but his anger was as controlled and modulated and systematic as the music he would later write. Similarly, he never erupted into riotous geniality or helpless laughter. I only ever saw him drunk – properly drunk, that is, different-person drunk – on three occasions.

Q: What does Oskar drink?

A: Neat vodka.

Neat. Ha ha. He liked neat vodka at less than zero degrees centigrade – its high alcohol content means that it does not freeze. He bought a bottle, the best the off-licence had to offer, for himself and guests, and had no other place to store it than the freezer compartment of the communal fridge. This was a big purchase for a student, and the bottle monopolised the minuscule compartment, reduced to a letterbox by a thick sleeve of permafrost. The girlfriend of one of our neighbours failed to appreciate that vodka has to be stored at below-zero temperatures, and transferred the bottle to the main fridge when trying to find a berth for half a tub of chocolate ice cream.

Moved from its small and little-used nook and placed in the view of half a dozen thirsty, thirsty students, the

bottle fared as you might expect. Most of it disappeared within three nights. Oskar discovered this on the fourth, when he had company. He took this badly, and having established the owner of the ice cream ('Not even someone on this staircase!') restored the vodka to its rightful place – with a note attached, saying Please do NOT put this out of the freezer.

This dispute somehow sparked off an impishness in the others. It became their mission to remove the bottle, drink some of its contents, and leave the depleted vessel in an unusual place. At this point, Oskar and I became friends: he recruited me to help look for the bottle. I was a nonentity to the others – not unpopular, just uninteresting, only there to make up the numbers at parties. My peripheral status made me an asset to Oskar: he knew I was not among the conspirators, and enlisted me to help search for the vodka.

So we searched together. The first time it turned up in the toilet cistern. The second time it was eventually discovered tied to a light fitting in the hallway. The third time we couldn't find it for weeks. We had given it up for lost when Oskar found it. Somehow it had been duct-taped to the underside of his desk. The tiresome repetition of the theft did not enrage Oskar – if anything, he seemed to become calmer every time it happened. A few days after the bottle was returned to the fridge for the fourth time, Oskar knocked on my door and calmly informed me that it had disappeared again. Usually on these occasions he looked grim and disappointed – I often felt that he thought he could actually change the attitude of our peers with his

little notes and chilly equanimity, an idea that was patently ridiculous, as I regularly told him – but this day he bore a small smile. I asked him if he wanted help recovering it.

‘No,’ he said. ‘It is mostly urine.’

He raised a supermarket bag; inside was a bottle of Absolut and a bag of supermarket ice. That night was the first time I saw him properly drunk.

Only Oskar could have been certain of producing absolutely clear urine.

Neat urine.

There was, among the various coffee specialties and special teas, a jar of Maxwell House. The kettle throbbed and phlegmed. Milk was in the fridge door. Brown sugar in a bowl on the table. Mugs were on the shelf above the beverage-makings. A spirit of efficiency ruled in the kitchen. It was easy to remember the efficiency and economy of Oskar’s music, and easy to imagine the exasperation and frustration of his wife, with her Californian outlook and kitchen that was primarily used as a platform from which endless boxes of take-out cuisine could be eaten. Look into these steel surfaces for as long as you want, you could never make out the blood-orange, blood-transfusion blaze of the Los Angeles dawn. Europe’s skies are older than America’s; Europe’s clouds start over there and by the time they reach here they are tired and ragged from their journey.

Boiling water over granules, a tilt of milk, and I stared into the result. Pale clouds lived and died by an unknowable rhythm under the surface, storms pulsating, growing

and shrinking in the atmosphere of a gas giant, updraughts and sudden sinks pulling in a convective pattern. A spoon obliterates the system.

Billows of steam and condensation rose from the mug as it cooled on the side and I began to look for the cat food. Again, this was a short search; the cat food was in the larder-style utility room, along with a martial display of tinned foods and sacks of dried goods.

On the floor next to two water bowls and two spotlessly polished dishes was a pallet large enough for sixteen cans of diced mystery animal remains in a rich sauce of whatever, with the shrink wrap broken at one corner and fourteen cans remaining. Each can bore, next to the incomprehensible Slav-ese (probably containing the words 'juicy', 'stronger teeth' and 'at least some % meat'), a picture of a feline with eyes that twinkled like taxidermists' glass and a tongue that, captured in illustration, would now forever explore that same corner of its smiling mouth. Cat rendered as brain-dead consumer, trapped in lockstep with thirteen clones, licking tongues raised to the right in a bank of Heils, eyes fixed without focus on an endless future of more of this delicious food every day. Next to this band of brothers was a sack of the miniature biscuits that gave this gloop some texture. And a slip of paper, neatly folded on one of the surgically clean dishes, that I had not noticed at first; bleached paper on bleached china.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR FEEDING CATS, *I read.*

Half a can of food in each dish in the morning and the same in the early evening. Each time with a handful

of their crunchy mix each, and be sure to refill the water bowls with fresh each time. Move the tray with the dishes into the kitchen for S. and S. to dine, and then when they have finished clean the dishes and return the tray to the cupboard.

O.

That was fine. The general list of instructions had contained nothing specific as concerned the feeding of the cats, and this job was clearly more important than the making of tea or coffee, hence the fact that it had been honoured with a full sheet of notepaper. Oskar was the most attentive absent host I could imagine, even across half the world. The conductor, the composer of precise, clipped piano pieces, the lord of a minimalist and restrained realm, would not have left things to chance. My liaison with his flat, his world, had to be organised with far more care than he had arranged his liaison with a Marlboro-blonde art jockey from the history-less West Coast.

I freed one of the cans of food from the shrunken plastic and carried it with the tray through to the kitchen, where I set it down on the floor.

This must have been the auditory clue, the Pavlovian bell – the soft sound of tray with dishes meeting the dull glow of the kitchen's wooden floor. At once, before I had even straightened up, there were two dull thuds from the bedroom and the unmistakable skitter, slip and scratch of claws against shining plank. Turning towards the source of the sound, I saw something I never expected – heading

full pelt through the glass-partitioned corridor separating the bedroom from the kitchen, the cats had accelerated so much in such a short time that as they rounded the corner they left the floor, pacing the white wall like a wire-assisted Jackie Chan in a medium-budget kick-'em-up, flipped and held by the invisible hands of momentum and centrifugal force. As the wall ran out, so they ran down, not seeming to lose a joule of energy, only to stop dead in the middle of the kitchen, at least four feet short of the tray. But they didn't stop – they slid with practised elegance along the trajectory they had set and wound up, kinetic energy burned off against wood, a neat few inches from their proposed supper, circling and making plaintive noises.

My jaw hung flaccidly, its tendons sliced by this display of athletics. As Shossy and Stravvy mewled and arched their warm backs against my legs, I fought the urge to try and recreate what I had just witnessed, to move them back to the bedroom and the tray back to the cupboard, to recreate the phenomenon, but it was clear that it would not work. The butterfly's wings could not be unflapped, the cloud would never again assume the same shape. Perhaps they would do the same thing tomorrow, but it would never have the same effect as it just had. It had been done. The moment had broken and could not be reassembled.

Still adrenalised, I hefted the sack of dry food from the larder, fetched a fork (the obvious drawer, obviously), raked the lumpy brown treats into the bowls, and sprinkled the biscuit bits over the portions. The cats were already tucking in as this finishing garnish was applied.

With the recent feline acrobatics still on my mind, I wandered over to the scene of the feat. The floor glowed in golden perfection – it was clearly necessary for the stunt. On a whim, I walked to the front door and kicked off my shoes. Toeing the floor, its silken finish betrayed only the tiniest natural imperfections of grain and warp; it felt almost frictionless.

The decision was made by some over-ambitious subcommittee in the lower portions of my brain and failed to pass through the proper scrutiny procedures before the action it outlined was already under way. I braced, devoted the slightest of moments to a complex calculation of forces in motion, and launched myself down the corridor. After four and a half paces at the maximum acceleration I could muster, I braked, laid my stockinged feet flat on the wood and locked into a slide to the far wall.

Some twenty or thirty minutes later, the pain in my left knee and big toe had – aided I believe by a broad-ranging swear-word monologue – subsided from crippling agony to merely irksome.

By the time I had recovered from my pratfall and unpacked my bags it was early evening. The light had yet to die in the sky but the sun was low. I made a sandwich with some cheese and salami from the fridge and opened the bottle of wine that Oskar had left for me. I ate on the sofa with the TV on BBC News 24. The rhythm and jangle of rolling global news is an odd comfort, but the flat was filled with British accents and familiar branding. The repetition of

bulletins and headlines was soothingly metronomic, a lullaby more than an alert. Rolling snooze.

I don't know how long I slept on the sofa, or the exact time I woke, but it was night in the city outside and the room was washed with the Lucozade orange of sodium street lighting. Travel and unfamiliar places can be exhausting, and I was more tired than I had realised. One of the cats was standing on the sofa next to me, regarding me with a quizzical air.

'Meow?' it said, tilting its head to one side.

'Yeah,' I said, rising slowly to my feet and stretching. 'You want to go out. Time for bed.' Several joints complained as I twisted to free my watch hand from its awkward position. I was neither sitting nor lying; just sort of slumped. I must have dozed off. Struggling to my feet, I scooped the puss off the sofa and walked it over to the front door where its partner was waiting like a partygoer holding a taxi for a friend. They needed no encouragement to disappear into the night.