I

In amongst a sea of events and names that have been forgotten, there are a number of episodes that float with striking buoyancy to the surface. There is no sensible order to them, nor connection between them. He keeps his eye on the ground below him, strange since once he would have turned his attention to the horizon or the sky above, relishing the sheer size of it all. Now he seeks out miniatures with the hope of finding comfort in them: the buildings three thousand feet below, the moors so black and flat that they defy perspective, the prison and grounds, men running in ellipses around a track, the stain of suburbia.

The pilot shouts something and points to the right. In the distance a wood is being felled and they can see a tree lean and crash, then another, like matches.

'Surreal from here!' the pilot shouts.

'Yes,' he replies. 'Quail Woods. Falling.'

He leans forward and touches the shoulder of the pilot without knowing what he means by the gesture. A sense of grounding perhaps – he wishes to be back on the ground, and feels nauseous, and a little afraid. In any case the pilot must mistake his hand for a flapping neck scarf or even a bird gone off course, because he doesn't turn.

'My son!' he shouts. 'Down there, in the prison!'

The pilot nods and puts his thumb up; maybe he has not understood.

'I built that prison, the new part, back in the Sixties,' he calls into the wind.

'Yes,' the pilot returns. 'It's awful, I agree. Blight on the landscape.'

He leans as far out as he dare. Can he see his son? Can they see one another? He eyes with dim envy the mechanical, antlike grace of the men running round and round. That one is Henry. No, he is mistaken. That one, perhaps. That one? Impossible to tell, he decides. They are all thin from here, and besides, the wind blurs his vision. The prison is sliding behind them now as the pilot turns east and a limb of shoreline comes into view.

'My son went mad,' he shouts to the pilot. He wants to clear up this point straight away, given that the world has more sympathy with the madman than it does the criminal. 'For a while, after his mother died,' he qualifies. After all, the world has a short attention span even for madmen.

The pilot's word of reply is whipped away by the wind. It sounded a little like 'no', as if the wind itself, the very atmosphere, has simply disagreed with him.

To steady his lilting mind, he focuses on the pilot's thick neck and the roll of collar, wondering what that material is called. It isn't leather, but something like leather, and quite a common thing, the sort of thing he should know. The sort of thing he used to know. Gingerly he touches it and then pulls away, clasps his hands together and brings them to his chin. He closes his eyes and feels a slight churning in his stomach; if only they could go slower, or down.

Now he casts his thoughts out for Henry and all he gets is the usual clamour of data. Henry, after Helen's death, running

across the field behind the Coach House with a carving knife, following the wing lights of a plane, shouting, 'There is God, you holy bastard, come back!' Some might say this is not a happy memory, but he would object that it is not the happiness of a memory that he is looking for, it is the memory itself; the taste and touch of it, and the proof it brings of himself. He reaches forward again in an attempt to attract the pilot's attention.

'Down soon?' he manages.

Another thumbs-up from the pilot, and a turn deeper into that mass of sky that seams with the sea, where everything is unmanageably large and wonderful, everything is *excessive*, he thinks. He consoles himself with confining thoughts of the prison, its four T-shaped wings and cramped cells.

They sail on; if he had more choice he would panic. As it is, where the engine's roar deafens him and the wind whips his limbs neatly into his body, he finds himself compressed into an involuntary composure, pinned back and down into his thoughts. At this moment there is just the image of Henry running manically across the field after that plane – the memory as vivid and isolated as a night landscape brought up sharply by a bolt of lightning – and then a converse image of Henry, sometime later after a period in hospital and drugs that made his hair fall out, tying on the apron Helen had once bought him and beginning a long, sleepy bout of baking: his specialities were *hamantaschen* and almond cakes from his grandmother's handwritten Jewish cookery book. The house smelt of hot sugar for weeks.

There is something about this utter deflation of his son that irks him more deeply than any other run of events, so that he can see him in ever-decreasing magnitudes, like an object receding.

The prison comes briefly into view again over the edge of the plane, then disappears. He closes his eyes. Some time ago, after

the madness, Henry broke into three houses along his own street in the middle of the day trying to find either alcohol, or money to spend on alcohol, or something to sell to make money to spend on alcohol. It was such an inept attempt at crime – in one of the houses the occupiers were sitting having lunch – that Henry was caught and sentenced to community service, which he didn't do because he was always too drunk to turn up.

He told the courts that he was likely to repeat his crime, not because he thought it was the right thing to do, but because he liked drinking and drink made him irresponsible. So then he was sentenced to prison and enforced sobriety; Henry accepted this with good grace and what looked almost like relief. Yes, he remembers the expression on his son's face – a short smile, a heavenward look as if to Helen, and then a comment: *my dad built that prison, it'll be just like going home.*

The crime was trivial, hapless and alcoholic, the downward spiral of it mapped loosely in his son's appearance. All his life Henry had been blessed with a plume of hair around his face, a plump – but not fat – figure, soft, mollusc features, a gentle height like that of a large leaf-munching animal, long eyelashes. He was pretty, his mother often said. But now he is hairless, thin. His eyes are still dark and bright, and he is still attractive if only one can get past the luckless look, but there it is – lucklessness is a kind of leprosy. You can't get past it.

Perhaps he does not want to see his son after all. The way the plane hangs and lolls on the air unanchored only seems to shake the giddied mind more, jumbling two names in his thoughts: Henry, Helen, Helen, Henry. Similar names – he sometimes confuses them. What if he one day forgets them completely? Then what?

Below them a bird flies, two or three birds. Far below that cars pass lazily along a road. The precariousness of his position

is not lost on him, and the fear will not shake. He forces his mind down into the steep cleft of memory that always provides such comfort: him and Helen sailing along the beautiful flow of an American road on their honeymoon. A brown car, one shallow cloud in a deep sky.

But then very crudely and inexpertly the footage cuts to what he recognises as the beginning of a cruel montage of his wife's life, selected for tantamount pain and anguish. At first she appears in a languid sort of flash (persisting long enough to make the point without allowing the point to be explored); she is slumped at the kitchen table. It is that very particular slump strange with silence, the conspicuous lack of breathing. Oh yes, and the ring finger extended on the melamine tabletop as if severed from the hand, just, one must understand, for dramatic effect.

He forces his mind back to the brown car, and the cloud that seemed to follow them. Hours and hours like this, him and her, side by side and separated only by a handbrake, wondering why life had thrown them together. In the memory they see in unison with one pair of eyes, they eat, drink and feel the same things without knowing each other at all. The only time their attention divides is when they make love and his eyes are to the pillow and hers to the ceiling. Even then some curious and serendipitous force nudges a sperm towards an egg and the creation of a new pair of eyes begins, new shared eyes. Who knows if this is love; it might as well be, it has the ingredients.

Then they are at the Allegheny County Courthouse. Helen stands on its Venetian Bridge of Sighs, eyes closed, freckled eyelids flickering as thoughts pass behind them. On one side of the bridge, he remarks, is the courthouse: here are the free and the godly, those who pass judgment. On the other side is the jail: the imprisoned, those who have been judged. The Bridge of Sighs is a moral structure, and he, as an architect, is becoming

interested in just this: the morality, the honesty of a building. And his wife opens her eyes, shakes her head and tells him that a Bridge of Sighs is no more about morality than is a bridge between motorway service stations. She warns him gently: one should hesitate to cast aspersions. A person's morality is usually a two-way journey – it just depends which leg of it you catch them on.

He takes her hand; they are not on the same wavelength. Never; she is always a frequency above him, and as if to prove the fact he is about to begin humming out the Buddy Holly in his head when she starts quoting something from Song of Songs, chapter five. *My beloved's eyes are as the eyes of doves by the rivers of water, washed with milk* – then tells him that she believes she is pregnant.

He picks her up and spins her around, conscious that this is precisely what a man must do for his wife when confronted with such news. Does he feel joy? It might as well be joy, the buzz and panic of it, and the sickly feeling that he is falling into something that has no clear bottom. Then her spinning feet smash an empty bottle left on the ground, at which she struggles free of him and bends to pick up the pieces. He crouches to help.

'Jake,' she says. 'We'll call the baby Jacob, after you.'

But he disagrees, having never seen the point of fathers and sons sharing names when there are so many names to choose from, and as an alternative he suggests something else, he doesn't remember now what.

'Henry, then,' Helen says. 'We'll call him Henry.'

'What if he's not a boy?'

'He is, I dreamt it.'

It is not that these surfacing memories just come. No, he casts around for them even when not exactly conscious of it, he forces himself into them and wears valleys through them. He plays

games trying to connect them and establish a continuity of time. If it was their honeymoon they were newly married: this is what honeymoon means, a holiday for the newly married. He can nod in satisfaction about the clarity of this knowledge and can then move on. His wife was called Helen. If it was their honeymoon they were young, and he had completed his training, and Henry was conceived.

Here again is Helen, her bare shoulder beneath him and her hips sharp against his; she was only twenty then. They are in bed, then in the car. There is a handbrake between them; she lays her left hand on it idly and he can see the ring finger, calm and static against the rush of road.

The news on the car's transistor radio reports that a monkey has just come back alive from a space mission, and images have been captured from the spacecraft. Inside Helen's womb Henry is a solitary blinking eye. Helen says that flight is the most excellent invention and that, through photographs, it will allow the earth to see itself from outer space.

'If nothing else,' she tucks her hair behind her ear, 'mankind's existence is utterly justified by this gift it will give to earth, the gift of sight, a sort of consciousness. Do you understand me?'

'No,' he contests after a pause. 'Not really. But it sounds thoughtful.'

Buddy Holly is still possessing his mind, and the tin-can voices from the radio (the word monkey sounding so strange and primal in that modern car on those wide roads). There is a sense of continued but happy absurdity at the way, with all the millions of people in the world, he is now Helen's and she his.

The pilot turns the biplane to the left and the airfield comes into view. 'We're going to begin our descent,' he shouts, pointing downward.

Very well, he thinks, staring again at the man's collar. The plane

seems to pull back slightly and slow. Even up here, unhinged and feeling like a puppet swinging from a string, he finds the reserves to worry over the loss of that word. Leather? No, not leather. But something like leather. The word *skein* comes to mind but he knows that isn't right, skein is just a word dumped in his brain from nowhere; a skein of wild swans, a skein of yarn. It is not about forgetting, it is about losing and never getting back – first this leather word and then the rest, all of them.

The moors spread ahead of them, and behind them Quail Woods is being disassembled tree by tree. One must be careful, he thinks as he turns from the man's back and strains to see the land below, not to become too attached to what is gone, and to appreciate instead what is there. He eyes the small neat grids of houses below and finds, as he always has, that these spillages of humanity are not to be scorned for their invasion of nature but are to be accepted, loved even; he names some of the streets in his head and maps the area with compass points and landmarks, his hands now clasped to his knees.

At the point at which he expects the plane to descend, the pilot suddenly turns its nose upwards to the empty blue sky. 'One last dance!' he shouts. The wind rips through the cockpit as they change direction and the prison appears way down below at a tilt, as if sliding off the surface of the earth. Looking down briefly he sees, perhaps, a figure waving. Henry said he would look out for him and wave. He lifts his arm in response, less edgy now and more exhilarated by the air smashing against them and the disorientation as the plane lists and the scenery changes faster than the mind can map it.

They make a large, noisy loop. He feels sick and young, thinking abruptly of Joy in her yellow dress and blinking to find the vision gone. Joy, joy! *Nakhes*, as his mother would once have said when she still allowed herself some Yiddish. His mother

would have loved Joy; would always have thought he made the wrong choice. He sits back and looks up, for the first time, to the sky.

As the plane slows it descends, too sharply. And with the slowing comes fear. He looks at his watch. For a moment he fails to understand what the watch hands are doing, where they are going or what for. He studies them like a child. Twenty to three, twenty to four, something like this. I have been unwell, he means to say to the pilot, as if to imply to himself: I am no longer unwell. It is impossible to accept that you will never be well again, and everything you have will be lost. A man is not programmed to think this way, he will always seek out the next corner and look around it in expectation that something, *something*, will be there.

He has been told not to think about it, and his son buys him a half-hour flight for his birthday so he can block it all from his mind. 'What?' he says. 'My birthday?' 'No,' his son corrects. 'Your – problems.' And he kisses him, all his plain, unscented good looks released from their misfortune for that one moment in that one simple exchange. Henry no longer has to stand on tiptoes to reach his cheek. How old is Henry, he wonders, and for that matter how old is he? When is his birthday? What year? He can't remember at all.

He thinks of Helen tucking her hair behind her ear and reading from the Song of Songs. *My beloved's eyes are washed with milk* – and her feet smashing glass, and her picking at fish and chips in newspaper wrappings while she read the news. Monkey goes into space. Mother's milk gives baby brain damage. Israel attacks Egypt. Dog goes into space. Twenty thousand jobs cut at the steelworks. Monkey goes into space. Brain damage. Her picking at batter with her skinny fingers and then flattening out the newspaper saying, 'I'll keep this, this is important,' and him

screwing it into a ball and throwing it in the bin. 'It smells,' he would say, 'and besides, tomorrow there will be more news.'

The plane drops towards the airstrip and he heaves a sigh of relief, recognising in the slow-down of the engine, the lengthening of its chugs, a familiar creeping desire to be getting home.