I

By the time Paul got to the Home, the undertakers had already removed his mother's body. He protested at this, it seemed done in indecent haste. He had set out as soon as they telephoned him; surely they could have waited the three or four hours it had taken him to get there (the traffic had been heavy on the M5). Mrs Phipps, the owner of the Home, guided him into her office, where whatever scene he might make wouldn't upset the other residents. She was petite, vivacious, brown-skinned, with traces of a South African accent; he didn't dislike her, he thought she ran the Home to a good standard of care, his mother had seemed to resign herself gratefully to her efficiency and brisk baby-talk. Even at this moment, however, there was no sign that the taut, bright mask of Mrs Phipps's good humour, respectfully muted in the circumstances, ever gave way to any impulse of authentic feeling. Her room was pleasant; an open sash window let in the afternoon spring sunshine from the garden. On the wall behind

her desk was pinned a colourful year planner, almost every square scribbled over with busyness and responsibility: he imagined a space on the planner where his mother's occupation of her room abutted abruptly onto blankness.

If he wanted to see his mother, Mrs Phipps said, putting the right nuance of sorrowful tact into her voice, she could telephone the undertakers, he could go to see her there. Paul was aware of the hours ahead as requiring scrupulous vigilance; he must be so careful to do the right thing, but it wasn't clear what the right thing might be. He said he would take the undertakers' address and number, and Mrs Phipps gave it to him.

– I ought to let you know, she added – because I wouldn't want you to find out in any roundabout way, that Evelyn made another of her bids for freedom last night.

– Bids for freedom?

He thought that she was using an odd euphemism for dying, but she went on to explain that his mother had got out of bed at some point in the evening, and gone into the garden in her nightdress. There was a place they always looked when they couldn't find her: Evelyn's little den in the shrubbery.

– I'm sorry that it happened. But I did warn you that we simply aren't able to provide twenty-four-hour supervision of residents when they fall ill. The girls were in and out of her room all evening, checking on her. That was how we realised she had got out. To be frank with you, she was so weak none of us had imagined she

was even capable of getting out of bed. She can only have been out there for ten to fifteen minutes before we found her. Twenty at the most.

They had brought her inside and put her back to bed. She had had a good night; she only deteriorated after breakfast this morning.

Mrs Phipps was worrying that he might make a complaint, Paul realised.

– It's all right. If that's what she wanted to do, then I'm glad she was able to get out.

She was relieved, although she didn't understand his point. – Of course we were worried about her body temperature, these spring nights are treacherous. We wrapped her up warmly and made her a hot drink, we kept an eye on her all through the night.

Paul asked if he could sit in his mother's room for a while. They had already stripped her bed and pulled up over the mattress a clean counterpane in the standard flowered material that was everywhere in the Home: there were no signs he could see of what had taken place in here. Mrs Phipps had reassured him that his mother had 'gone very peacefully', but he took this as no more than a form of words. He sat for a while in his mother's armchair, looking round at her things: the last condensed residue of the possessions that had accompanied her from her home to her small flat in sheltered accommodation and then to this room. He recognised some of them only because he had moved them for her each time; others were familiar from his childhood and youth: a majolica fruit bowl, a blue glass girl who had once been fixed on

the side of a vase for flowers, the red Formica coffee table that always stood beside her chair, with its built-in ashtray on a chrome stem.

When Paul left the Home, he drove to the undertakers and sat in his car in their small forecourt car park. He had to go inside and talk to them about arrangements for the funeral; but there was also the issue of seeing his mother's body. He was his parents' only child. Evelyn had absorbed the brunt of his father's death twenty years ago, when Paul was in his twenties: now all the lines met in him. Of course his wife would be sorry, and his children too; however, because for the last few years Evelyn's mind had wandered farther and farther, she had become a distant figure to the girls, and he had only brought them to visit her every so often. She still recognised them, but if they went into the garden to play, or even if they went to the toilet, or moved round to the other side of her chair, she would forget she had already seen them; each time they returned she would greet them again, her face lighting up with the same delight.

His father had died in hospital after a heart attack; Evelyn was with him, Paul had been living in Paris at the time and had not arrived until the next day. The possibility of seeing the body had not arisen; in his concentration then on his mother's bereavement, it probably hadn't seemed important. Now he did not know whether this was important or not. He peered into the undertakers' shop window with its kitsch discretion, urns and pleated silks and artificial flowers. When eventually

he got out of his car to go inside, he realised it was past six o'clock. There was a closed sign hanging on the shop door, with a number to contact in case of emergency, which he didn't write down. He would come back in the morning.

He had got into the habit of using the Travelodge, if ever he needed to stay overnight in Birmingham when he came to visit his mother; conveniently, there was one only ten minutes' drive from the Home. He unpacked his few things, a clean shirt and socks, toothbrush, a notebook, the two books of poetry he was reviewing – he had not known when he set out in the morning how long he would need to stay. Then he telephoned Elise.

– She'd gone by the time I got there, he said.

– Oh, poor Evelyn.

– Mrs Phipps said she went very peacefully.

– Oh, Paul. I'm so sorry. Are you all right? Where are you? Do you need me to come up? I'm sure I could get someone to have the girls.

He reassured her that he was all right. He didn't want to eat, but walked around the streets until he found a pub where he drank two pints, and browsed a copy of the *Birmingham Mail* that was lying on a table. His mind locked into the words, he read each page exhaustively, taking in without any inward commentary every least detail: crime, entertainment, *in memoriam.* He had a dread of being overtaken by some paroxysm of grief in a public place. Back in his room, he did not want to read either of the poetry books; when he had undressed

he looked in the drawer of the bedside table for a Bible, but it was a New International Version, no good to him. He turned out the light and lay under the sheet, because the heating was stuffy and airless and you could not open the windows more than a crack. Through the crack the fine spring night sent its smells of greenness and growth, mingled with petrol fumes from the road outside that never stilled or grew quiet, however late it was. He was relieved, he thought. What had happened was merely the ordinary, expected, common thing: the death of an elderly parent, the release from a burden of care. He had not wanted her life prolonged, in the form it had taken recently. He had not visited her as often as he should. He had been bored, when he did visit.

When he closed his eyes there came an unwanted image of his mother out in the dark garden of the Home in her nightdress, so precise that he sat up in bed abruptly. She seemed so close at hand that he looked around for her: he had the confused but strong idea that this present moment could be folded closely enough to touch against a moment last night, that short time ago when she was still alive. He saw not the bent old lady she had become, but the mature woman of his teenage years: her dark hair in the plait she had long ago cut off, the thick-lensed black-rimmed glasses of those days, her awkward tall strength and limbs full of power. When she was still alive it had been difficult sometimes for him to remember her past selves, and he had been afraid he had lost them for ever, but this recall was vivid and total. He switched on the light, got out

of bed, turned on the television and watched the news, images of the war in Iraq.

Lying stretched out again in the dark on his back, naked, covered with the sheet, he couldn't sleep. He wished he could remember better those passages in *The Aeneid* where Anchises in the Underworld explains to his son how the dead are gradually cleansed in the afterlife of all the thick filth and encrusting shadows that have accumulated through their mortal involvement, their living; when after aeons they are restored to pure spirit, they long, they eagerly aspire, to return to life and the world and begin again. Paul thought that there was no contemporary language adequate to describe the blow of his mother's vanishing. A past in which a language of such dignity as Virgil's was possible seemed to him itself sometimes only a dream.

The next morning when he went back to the undertakers he told himself in advance that he must ask to see her body. However, once he was involved in making the arrangements for the funeral, he found it difficult to speak at all, even to give his minimal consent to whatever was proposed: his dumbness did not come from deep emotion, but its opposite, a familiar frozen aversion that seized him whenever he had to transact these false relations with the external world. He imagined the young man he spoke with had been trained to watch for the slips and give-away confusions of grieving family members, and so he tried to make himself coldly impenetrable. Elise should have been there to help him, she

was gifted at managing this side of life. He could not bring himself to expose to the youth's solicitude any intimate need to touch his mother a last time; and perhaps anyway he didn't want to touch her.

Afterwards he went to the Home as he had arranged, to deal with paperwork and to clear his mother's belongings from her room, although Mrs Phipps had insisted there was no hurry, he was welcome to leave things as they were until after the funeral. He sat again in Evelyn's armchair. The room was really quite small; but on the occasion they had come here first to look at it, there had been someone playing a piano downstairs, and he had allowed this to convince him that the Home was a humane place, that it would be possible to have a full life here. He had not often heard the piano afterwards. When he had packed a few things into boxes he asked Mrs Phipps to dispose of the rest, and also to show him what she had called his mother's 'den' in the garden; he saw her wonder whether he was going to make difficulties after all.

In the garden the noise of traffic wasn't insistent. The sun was shining, the bland neat garden, designed for easy upkeep, was full of birdsong: chaffinch and blackbird, the broody rumble of the collared doves. Mrs Phipps's high-heeled beige suede shoes grew dark from the grass still wet with dew as they crossed the lawn, her heels sinking in the turf, and he saw that she was annoyed by this, but would not say anything. The Home had been a late-Victorian rectory, built on a small rise: at the far end of the garden she showed him that, if you

pushed through the bushes to where the old stone wall curved round, there was a little trodden space of bare earth, a twiggy hollow, room enough in it to stand upright. The wall was too high for an old lady to sit on or climb over, but she could have leaned on it and looked over at the view, she could have watched for anyone coming. When Evelyn was a child, when there was still a rector in the rectory, everything beyond this point would have been fields and woods: now it was built up as far as the eye could see. Paul pushed inside the hollow himself and looked out, while Mrs Phipps waited, politely impatient to get back to her day's business. He could see from there the sprawling necropolis of the remains of Longbridge, where Evelyn's brothers had worked on the track in the Fifties and Sixties, building Austin Princesses and Rileys and Minis. At night this great post-industrial expanse of housing development and shopping complexes and scrapyards was mysterious behind its myriad lights; by day it looked vacant, as if the traffic flowed around nowhere.

He couldn't feel anything inside his mother's space, couldn't get back the sensation of her presence that had come to him the night before; there had been no point in bothering Mrs Phipps to bring him out here. But in the afternoon, driving back to where he lived in the Monnow Valley in Wales, he found himself at one point on the M50 quite unable to turn his head to look behind him, so sure was he that the boxes of Evelyn's bits and pieces on the back seat had transmogrified into her physical self. He seemed to hear her familiar rustle and

exhalation as she settled herself, he tensed expectantly as if she might speak. His knowledge of the fact of her death seemed an embarrassment between them; he felt ashamed of it. He had driven her this way often enough, bringing her home for weekends before she grew too confused to want to come. She had liked the idea that her son was bringing up his family in the countryside: although all her own life had been spent in the city, she had had a cherished store of old-fashioned dreams of country life.

In Evelyn's room the miscellany of her possessions had seemed rich with implications; transposed here to Tre Rhiw, he was afraid it might only seem so much rubbish. He couldn't think where they would keep the ugly fruit bowl, or the Formica smoking table. There was no smoking in this house. His daughters were fanatical against it, at school they were indoctrinated to believe it was an evil comparable to knife crime or child molestation. Paul had given up anyway, but when his friend Gerald came round in the evenings the girls supervised him vigilantly, driving him out even in rain or wind to smoke at the bottom of the garden; in revenge Gerald fed his cigarette butts to their goats.

The girls were still at school; the bus didn't drop them off until half past four. Elise was in her workshop, but she came over to the kitchen as soon as she heard him. She was in her stockinged feet, with a tape measure round her neck, red and gold threads from whatever fabric she was working with clinging to her black T-shirt and

leggings. She had a business with a friend, restoring and selling antiques. Paul called her a Kalmyk because of her wide cheek bones. Her skin was an opulent pale gold, she had flecked hazel eyes; her mouth was wide, with fine red lips that closed precisely. She was three years older than he was, the flesh was thickening into creases under her eyes. She had begun dyeing her hair the colour of dark honey, darker than the blonde she had been.

– You've brought back some of her things.

– There's more in the car. I told Mrs Phipps to get rid of the rest.

She picked items out of the box one by one and held them, considering intently a Bakelite dressing-table set, filled with scraps of jewellery. – Poor Evelyn, she said, and her eyes filled up with tears, although she hadn't been particularly close to his mother. She had used to get exasperated, when Evelyn was still *compos mentis,* about her panics, her fearful ideas of what went on in the world outside her own narrow experience of it. Evelyn's eagerness to spend time with them would always sour, after a couple of days, into spasms of resentment against her daughter-in-law, Elise's insouciant-seeming housekeeping, her unpunctuality. Evelyn had been bored in the country, she had feared the river, and the goats. They always ate too late, which gave her indigestion.

Elise put her arms around Paul, and kissed his neck. – It's so sad. I'm sorry, darling.

– I wish I could have been with her. It doesn't seem as if anything real has happened.

– Did you see her?

He shook his head. – They had already taken her away.

– That's awful. You should have seen her.

After she had hugged him for a while, she took the kettle to the sink, filled it from the noisy old tap that squealed and thundered, lifted the cover of the hotplate on the Rayburn.

– I don't know what to do with all this stuff, he said.

– Don't worry. Think about it later. It will be good to have her things around, to remind us of her.

Paul carried the boxes down into his study. This was at the opposite end of the kitchen to Elise's workroom, built into an old outhouse sunk so low into the steep hillside that the sloping front garden crossed his window halfway up; on the other side, he had a view of the river. The walls were eighteen inches thick; he liked the feeling that he was at work inside the earth.

When the girls came home they were briefly subdued and in awe of what had happened to their Nana; they cried real tears, Becky shyly hiding her face against her mother. She was nine, with a tender sensibility; shadows had always chased across her brown freckled face. Ten minutes later they had forgotten and were playing outside his window in the front garden. He could see their feet and legs, Becky jumping her skipping rope, Joni the six-year-old stamping and singing loudly: 'Bananas, in pyjamas, are coming down the stairs.'