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‘Surprised to see me?’ said Nicholas Pratt, planting his walking stick on the crematorium carpet and fixing Patrick with a look of slightly aimless defiance, a habit no longer useful but too late to change. ‘I’ve become rather a memorial-creeper. One’s bound to at my age. It’s no use sitting at home guffawing over the ignorant mistakes of juvenile obituarists, or giving in to the rather monotonous pleasure of counting the daily quota of extinct contemporaries. No! One has to “celebrate the life”: there goes the school tart. They say he had a good war, but I know better! – that sort of thing, put the whole achievement in perspective. Mind you, I’m not saying it isn’t all very moving. There’s a sort of swelling orchestra effect to these last days. And plenty of horror, of course. Padding about on my daily rounds from hospital bed to memorial

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pew and back again, I'm reminded of those oil tankers that used to dash themselves onto the rocks every other week and the flocks of birds dying on the beaches with their wings stuck together and their bewildered yellow eyes blinking.'

Nicholas glanced into the room. 'Thinly attended,' he murmured, as if preparing a description for someone else. 'Are those people your mother's religious friends? Too extraordinary. What colour would you call that suit? Aubergine? *Aubergine à la crème d'oursin*? I must go to Huntsman and get one knocked up. What do you mean, you have no Aubergine? Everyone was wearing it at Eleanor Melrose's. Order a mile of it straight away!

'I suppose your aunt will be here soon. She'll be an all too familiar face amidst the Aubergines. I saw her last week in New York and I'm pleased to say I was the first to tell her the tragic news about your mother. She burst into tears and ordered a *croque monsieur* to swallow with her second helping of diet pills. I felt sorry for her and got her asked to dinner with the Blands. Do you know Freddie Bland? He's the smallest billionaire alive. His parents were practically dwarfs, like General and Mrs Tom Thumb. They used to come into the room with a tremendous fanfare and then

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disappear under a console table. Baby Bland has taken to being serious, the way some people do in their senile twilight. She's decided to write a book about Cubism, of all ridiculous subjects. I think it's really part of her being a perfect wife. She knows what a state Freddie used to get into over her birthday, but thanks to her new hobby, all he has to do now is get Sotheby's to wrap up a revolting painting of a woman with a face like a slice of watermelon by that arch fake Picasso, and he knows she'll be over the moon. Do you know what Baby said to me? At breakfast, if you please, when I was almost defenceless.' Nicholas put on a simpering voice:

“Those divine birds in late Braque are really just an excuse for the sky.”

“Such a good excuse,” I said, choking on my first sip of coffee, “so much better than a lawn mower or a pair of clogs. It shows he was in complete control of his material.”

‘Serious, you see. It's a fate I shall resist with every last scrap of my intelligence, unless Herr Doktor Alzheimer takes over, in which case I'll have to write a book about Islamic art to show that the towel-heads have always been much more civilized than us, or a fat volume on how little we know about Shakespeare's

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mother and her top-secret Catholicism. Something serious.

‘Anyhow, I’m afraid Aunt Nancy rather bombed with the Blands. It must be hard to be exclusively social and entirely friendless at the same time. Poor thing. But do you know what struck me, apart from Nancy’s vibrant self-pity, which she had the nerve to pretend was grief, what struck me about those two girls, your mother and your aunt, was that they are, were – my life is spent wobbling between tenses – completely American. Their father’s connection with the Highlands was, let’s face it, entirely liquid and after your grandmother sacked him he was hardly ever around. He spent the war with those dimwits the Windsors in Nassau; Monte Carlo after the war, and finally foundered in the bar of White’s. Of the tribe who are blind drunk every day of their lives from lunch until bedtime, he was by far the most charming, but frustrating I think as a father. At that level of drunkenness one’s essentially trying to embrace a drowning man. The odd eruption of sentimentality for the twenty minutes the drink took him that way was no substitute for the steady flow of self-sacrificing kindness that has always inspired my own efforts as a father. With what I admit have been mixed results. As

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I'm sure you know, Amanda hasn't spoken to me for the last fifteen years. I blame her psychoanalyst, filling her never very brilliant little head with Freudian ideas about her doting Papa.'

Nicholas's rotund style of delivery was fading into an increasingly urgent whisper, and the knuckles of his blue-veined hands were white from the effort of holding himself upright. 'Well, my dear, we'll have another little chat after the ceremony. It's been marvellous finding you on such good form. My condolences and all that, although if ever there was a "merciful release", it was in the case of your poor mother. I've become something of a Florence Nightingale in my old age, but even the Lady with the Lamp had to beat a retreat in the face of that terrifying ruin. It's bound to act as a brake on the rush to get me canonized but I prefer to pay visits to people who can still enjoy a bitchy remark and a glass of champagne.'

He seemed about to leave but then turned back. 'Try not to be bitter about the money. One or two friends of mine who've made a mess of that side of things have ended up dying in National Health wards and I must say I've been very impressed by the humanity of the mostly foreign staff. Mind you, what is there to do with money except spend it when you've

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got it or be bitter about it when you haven't? It's a very limited commodity in which people invest the most extraordinary emotions. What I suppose I really mean is *do* be bitter about the money; it's one of the few things it can do: siphon off some bitterness. Do-gooders have sometimes complained that I have too many *bêtes noires*, but I need my *bêtes noires* to get the *noire* out of me and into the *bêtes*. Besides, that side of your family has had a good run. What is it now? Six generations with every single descendant, not just the eldest son, essentially idle. They may have taken on the camouflage of work, especially in America where everyone has to have an office, if only to swivel about with their shoes on the desk for half an hour before lunch, but there's been no necessity. It must be rather thrilling, although I can't speak from experience, for you and your children, after this long exemption from competition, to get stuck in. God knows what I would have made of my life if I hadn't divided my time between town and country, between home and abroad, between wives and mistresses. I have divided time and now doth time divide me, what? I must take a closer look at these religious fanatics your mother surrounded herself with.'

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Nicholas hobbled off with no pretence that he expected any response other than silent fascination.

When Patrick looked back on the way that illness and dying had torn apart Eleanor's flimsy shamanic fantasies, Nicholas's 'religious fanatics' seemed to him more like credulous draft-dodgers. At the end of her life Eleanor had been thrown into a merciless crash-course in self-knowledge, with only a 'power animal' in one hand and a rattle in the other. She had been left with the steepest practice of all: no speech, no movement, no sex, no drugs, no travel, no spending, hardly any food; just alone in silent contemplation of her thoughts. If contemplation was the word. Perhaps she felt that her thoughts were contemplating her, like hungry predators.

'Were you thinking about her?' said a soft Irish voice. Annette rested a healing hand on Patrick's forearm and tilted her understanding head to one side.

'I was thinking that a life is just the history of what we give our attention to,' said Patrick. 'The rest is packaging.'

'Oh, I think that's too stark,' said Annette. 'Maya Angelou says that the meaning of our lives is the impact we have on other people, whether we make

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them feel good or not. Eleanor always made people feel good, it was one of her gifts to the world. Oh,' she added with sudden excitement, gripping Patrick's forearm, 'I only made this connection on the way in: we're in Mortlake crematorium to say farewell to Eleanor, and guess what I took to read to her on the last occasion I saw her. You'll never guess. *The Lady of the Lake*. It's an Arthurian whodunit, not very good actually. But that says it all, doesn't it? Lady of the lake – Mortlake. Given Eleanor's connection with water and her love of the Arthurian legends.'

Patrick was stunned by Annette's confidence in the consoling power of her words. He felt irritation being usurped by despair. To think that his mother had chosen to live among these resolute fools. What knowledge was she so determined to avoid?

'Who can say why a crematorium and a bad novel should have vaguely similar names?' said Patrick. 'It's tantalizing to be taken so far beyond the rational mind. I tell you who would be very receptive to that sort of connection: you see the old man over there with the walking stick. Do tell him. He loves that kind of thing. His name is Nick.' Patrick dimly remembered that Nicholas loathed this abbreviation.

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‘Seamus sends his best,’ said Annette, accepting her dismissal cheerfully.

‘Thank you.’ Patrick bowed his head, trying not to lose control of his exaggerated deference.

What was he doing? It was all so out of date. The war with Seamus and his mother’s Foundation was over. Now that he was an orphan everything was perfect. He seemed to have been waiting all his life for this sense of completeness. It was all very well for the Oliver Twists of this world, who started out in the enviable state it had taken him forty-five years to achieve, but the relative luxury of being brought up by Bumble and Fagin, rather than David and Eleanor Melrose, was bound to have a weakening effect on the personality. Patient endurance of potentially lethal influences had made Patrick the man he was today, living alone in a bedsit, only a year away from his latest visit to the Suicide Observation Room in the Depression Wing of the Priory Hospital. It had felt so ancestral to have delirium tremens, to bow down, after his disobedient youth as a junkie, to the shattering banality of alcohol. As a barrister he was reluctant nowadays to kill himself illegally. The alcohol felt deep, humming down the bloodline. He could still

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remember, when he was five, taking a donkey ride among the palm trees and the packed red and white flowerbeds of Monte Carlo's Casino Gardens, while his grandfather sat on a green bench shaking uncontrollably, clamped by sunlight, a stain spreading slowly through the pearl-grey trousers of his perfectly cut suit.

Lack of insurance forced Patrick to pay for his own stay in the Priory, exhausting all his funds in a thirty-day gamble on recovery. Unhelpfully short from a psychiatric point of view, a month was still long enough for him to become immediately infatuated with a twenty-year-old patient called Becky. She looked like Botticelli's Venus, improved by a bloody trellis of razor cuts crisscrossing its way up her slender white arms. When he first saw her in the lounge of the Depression Wing, her radiant unhappiness sent a flaming arrow into the powder keg of his frustration and emptiness.

'I'm a self-harming resistant depressive,' she told him. 'They've got me on eight different kinds of pills.'

'Eight,' said Patrick admiringly. He was down to three himself: the daytime antidepressant, the nighttime antidepressant, and the thirty-two oxazepam

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tranquillizers a day he was taking to deal with the delirium tremens.

In so far as he could think at all on such a high dose of oxazepam, he could think only of Becky. The next day, he heaved himself off his crackling mattress and slouched to the Depression Support Group in the hope of seeing her again. She was not there, but Patrick could not escape from joining the circle of tracksuited depressives. ‘As to sports, let our wear do it for us,’ he sighed, slumping down in the nearest chair.

An American called Gary kicked off the sharing with the words, ‘Let me give you a scenario: suppose you were sent to Germany for work, and suppose a friend you hadn’t heard from in a long time called you up and came to visit with you from the States . . .’ After a tale of shocking exploitation and ingratitude, he asked the group what he should say to this friend. ‘Cut them out of your life,’ said the bitter and abrasive Terry, ‘with friends like that, who needs enemies?’

‘Okay,’ said Gary, relishing his moment, ‘and suppose I told you that this “friend” was my mother, what would you say then? Why would that be so different?’

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Consternation raced through the Group. A man, who had been feeling ‘completely euphoric’ since his mother had come over on Sunday and taken him out to buy a new pair of trousers, said that Gary should never abandon his mother. On the other hand, there was a woman called Jill who had been ‘for a long walk by the river I wasn’t supposed to come back from – well, put it this way, I did come back *very wet*, and I said to Dr Pagazzi, who I love to bits, that I thought it had something to do with my mother and he said, “We’re not even going to go there.”’ Jill said that, like her, Gary should have nothing to do with his mother. At the end of the session, the wise Scottish moderator tried to shield the group from this downpour of self-centred advice.

‘Someone once asked me why mothers are so good at pushing our buttons,’ he said, ‘and the answer I gave was, “Because they put them there in the first place.”’

Everyone nodded gloomily, and Patrick asked himself, not for the first time, but with renewed desperation, what it would mean to be free, to live beyond the tyranny of dependency and conditioning and resentment.

After the Support Group, he saw a caved-in, illicitly smoking, barefooted Becky go down the staircase

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beyond the laundry. He followed her and found her crumpled on the stairs, her giant pupils swimming in a pool of tears. 'I hate this place,' she said. 'They're going to throw me out because they say I've got a bad attitude. But I only stayed in bed because I'm so *depressed*. I don't know where I'm going to go, I can't face going back to my parents.'

She was screaming to be saved. Why not run away with her to the bedsit? She was one of the few people alive who was more suicidal than him. They could lie on the bed together, Priory refugees, one convulsing while the other slashed. Why not take her back and let her finish the job for him? Her bluest veins to bandage, her whitening lips to kiss. No no no no no. He was too well, or at least too old.

These days he could only remember Becky with deliberate effort. He often watched his obsessions pass over him like so many blushes, and by doing nothing about them, watched them fade. Becoming an orphan was a thermal on which this new sense of freedom might continue to rise, if only he had the courage not to feel guilty about the opportunity it presented.

Patrick drifted towards Nicholas and Annette, curious to see the outcome of his matchmaking.

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‘Stand by the graveside or the furnace,’ he heard Nicholas instructing Annette, ‘and repeat these words, “Goodbye, old thing. One of us was bound to die first and I’m delighted it was you!” That’s my spiritual practice, and you’re welcome to adopt it and put it into your hilarious “spiritual tool box”.’

‘Your friend is absolutely priceless,’ said Annette, seeing Patrick approaching. ‘What he doesn’t realize is that we live in a loving universe. And it loves you too, Nick,’ she assured Nicholas, resting her hand on his recoiling shoulder.

‘I’ve quoted Bibesco before,’ snapped Nicholas, ‘and I’ll quote him again: “To a man of the world, the universe is a suburb”.’

‘Oh, he’s got an answer to everything, hasn’t he?’ said Annette. ‘I expect he’ll joke his way into heaven. St Peter loves a witty man.’

‘Does he?’ said Nicholas, surprisingly appeased. ‘That’s the best thing I’ve heard yet about that bungling social secretary. As if the Supreme Being would consent to spend eternity surrounded by a lot of nuns and paupers and par-boiled missionaries, having his lovely concerts ruined by the rattle of spiritual tool boxes and the screams of the faithful, boasting about

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their crucifixions! What a relief that an enlightened command has finally reached the concierge at the Pearly Gates: “For Heaven’s sake, send Me a conversationalist!”’

Annette looked at Nicholas with humorous reproach.

‘Ah,’ he said, nodding at Patrick, ‘I never thought I’d be so grateful to see your impossible aunt.’ He lifted his stick and waved it at Nancy. She stood in the doorway looking exhausted by her own haughtiness, as if her raised eyebrows might not be able to stand the strain much longer.

‘Help!’ she said to Nicholas. ‘Who are these peculiar people?’

‘Zealots, Moonies, witch-doctors, would-be terrorists, every variety of religious lunatic,’ explained Nicholas, offering Nancy his arm. ‘Avoid eye contact, stick close to me and you may live to tell the tale.’

Nancy flared up when she saw Patrick. ‘Of all the days *not* to have the funeral,’ she said.

‘Why?’ he asked, confused.

‘It’s Prince Charles’s wedding. The only other people who might have come will be at Windsor.’

‘I’m sure you’d be there as well, if you’d been

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invited,' said Patrick. 'Don't hesitate to nip down with a Union Jack and a cardboard periscope if you think you'd find it more entertaining.'

'When I think how we were brought up,' wailed Nancy, 'it's too ridiculous to think what my sister did with . . .'

She was lost for words.

'The golden address book,' purred Nicholas, gripping his walking stick more tightly as she sagged against him.

'Yes,' said Nancy, 'the golden address book.'