The Whole Wide Beauty

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There is a partial quotation from 'The Wanderer'
by W. H. Auden on p. 291.

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To my father

1

The wind was blowing hard from the north and would bring rain. The bus took a sharp corner into York Way and Katherine watched the flat, scarred earth of the King's Cross development area open up in front of her. The sky above the site seemed vast and unnaturally empty, except for a solitary crane, turning slowly like a giant weather vane. In the distance she could make out a snatch of rainbow among the rushing clouds. The band of colour broke into her thoughts and she felt a simple gladness. It wouldn't last long and she felt the luck of catching it.

It was a journey she made four times a week. The dull parade of shops passed beneath her; House of Kebab, A&K Electricals, Londis, StarBurger. Litter chased into the road and was thrown up in dusty whirlwinds by passing cars. A scrap of magazine caught in the metal grille of the KleenMachine laundrette where it quivered flame-like in the wind.

A couple was crossing a side street, talking intensely. A man joined them, and as the pavement narrowed he was forced to step into the road to stay abreast. He kept jumping and hopping from pavement to road and back again as they all three talked. Katherine watched them,

pleased by the simple choreography. As the bus turned into Caledonian Road, the shifting collage of reflections in the bus window caught her attention, and she saw her own face. She had been so lost in the world outside that she was almost shocked to see herself: her head a neat oval, the wide cheekbones, the lid of short brown hair. Something wig-like about it, a dull helmet, she thought. Her hand moved instinctively to mess it, plump it, somehow improve it. Her green eyes, like jade beads, glared back at her. She opened her mouth. Her front two teeth had been smashed in a bicycle accident when she was small, and one of the caps was greyer than the other. She closed her mouth to hide them. A train was crossing the Camden railway bridge, and she sat up in her seat, her focus shifting back outside.

At Agincourt Road, she got off the bus. The air was cold, the summer warmth sucked out of it. She zipped up her jacket and walked quickly towards the gap in the red-brick wall. There was no sign to announce Ashwood; a remedial school for problem children was nothing to advertise. She tapped in the code at the security gate and crossed the playground to a 1970s complex of two-storey units. The atmosphere was hushed, the boys already in their classrooms. Katherine worked part-time and always arrived in the eerie mid-morning after lessons had begun. She walked through the double doors, the sound of her heels reverberating down the pale green corridor, past the school office where Michelle, the school secretary, sat behind her window like a gate-keeper.

'Summer's over before it's begun!' said Michelle loudly, without looking up, but detecting the form and heat of an approaching adult. 'And I've not worn one of my new tops!'

Katherine stopped to find an appropriate response.

'Yes, autumn's here,' she said.

Michelle pursed her mouth as if to say that responses to her outburst were not required. Katherine hesitated, unsure whether their exchange was over. She had started the job at Ashwood five months previously but still felt like an outsider, especially with Michelle, who seemed equally unfathomable whether she was being stonily silent or loudly opinionated.

'All I know is that my new summer tops have been a total waste of money,' said Michelle.

Katherine stood looking at the crown of Michelle's head as she busied herself with the papers on her desk. She had never been able to understand how clothes could cause such acute levels of anxiety. Her own sartorial style, a friend had once told her, looked like she dressed by throwing all her clothes up in the air and wearing whatever landed on her.

'Perhaps you could wear one underneath,' said Katherine, 'as an extra layer, for autumn.'

Michelle gave her a sideways look and sucked in her stomach, accentuating her tightly-packed breasts beneath a hugging white T-shirt. Katherine saw the bra straps scoring the flesh like string round a joint of meat. The tightness of it seemed like a decision Michelle had

made. The bra was keeping Michelle's life on course, controlling elements of her that might otherwise burst forth and run riot. 'See you later, Michelle,' said Katherine brightly.

She walked down the long corridor past the metal-framed windows which looked out over the playground. Her mobile buzzed in her pocket: a text from Adam. *Okay 2 mt Jack tonight? A x.* Katherine had a vague sense there was something else they were supposed to be doing, but couldn't remember what it was. She climbed the concrete steps towards a small music room. She closed the door and sat at the piano. It was an upright Knight in yellow wood, the kind found in every school across the country, sturdy and loud, perfect for banging out songs in school assemblies. There were two small guitars in soft plastic cases in the corner and a lone snare drum, its black and silver paint scuffed and showing the white beneath. Three glockenspiels and several tambourines were heaped on the piano in an unwieldy pile.

She was early. Her first pupil wouldn't arrive for fifteen minutes. She played a slow run of jazz chords, modulating through minor to major and back again, letting the sound build. She loved to improvise. She'd danced professionally throughout her twenties, and during that time it was improvisation that she had loved most, letting the flow of expression just happen, one movement following another, without censure. Dancing had been everything; acutely shy as a child, she'd found an escape in it, a refuge from the world of

words her parents occupied. She had danced obsessively in her teens, and though she had never completed a formal training, by the age of nineteen she was choreographing her own work.

She started a melody with her right hand, letting her conscious mind rest, each strain leading to the next, like waves. When she thought of that time in her twenties, living permanently on the edge of her emotions, dancing with manic intensity wherever she could, on the street, in pub theatres, at music festivals, she barely recognised herself.

There was a bell and the roar of boys' voices. The square face of Liam Baldwin popped round the door.

'Hello, miss,' he said loudly, emphasising the 'miss' as if it was an insult.

'Liam. Good to see you.' He was taller than her, thickset and chubby, and her keenest pupil. Like most kids his age, he dreamt of fame. He seemed to think his weekly lessons with Katherine were a guarantee of a place on one of the TV talent shows.

'Right, Liam.'

'Have you got it, miss?'

The previous week he had told Katherine he wanted to learn 'How Deep Is Your Love?'. It was one of his Nan's favourites, he explained reverentially. Katherine had written out the lyrics from the Internet the night before, and she handed them to him.

'Thanks, miss,' said Liam, grinning, his tone still bafflingly ironic.

She played the opening chords loudly, in anticipation of the barrage that would follow.

They made their way through the song, Liam bellowing like a barrow boy, while Katherine accompanied him on the piano, urging him to find a gentler tone. 'Keep it soft, soft, Liam,' she said. 'Imagine you are singing to your Nan.'

They made their way through the song a second time. Liam's voice was becoming more and more accusatory: 'How deep is your love?' Katherine glanced up at him and was unnerved to see him staring directly back at her. She wondered if the brightness in his eyes was mockery. It occurred to her that he was shouting on purpose. There was a meanness in his eyes. He had been shouting ever since he had started lessons with her five months ago. It occurred to Katherine that Liam was a little shit.

He stopped abruptly. 'Miss, am I ready for *The X Factor*?'

'Nearly. Nearly, Liam.'

'Are we finished, miss?'

'Yes . . .'

'See you, miss,' said Liam, backing out of the room. She heard him in the corridor shouting as he went, '. . . cos we're living in a world of dreams . . .'

After he had gone, the door opened an inch and Michelle appeared. She held it ajar to the absolute minimum, as though opening it any more might invite further conversation.

'Conrad Obadino has been sent home,' she said, in a

voice which seemed full of resentment about their earlier exchange about her tops. 'His music lesson is cancelled.'

'What has he done?'

'You don't want to know,' replied Michelle darkly.

'Can Jared Hinton come earlier?' Katherine asked.

'It is not school policy to disrupt the schedule,' said Michelle. She pronounced 'schedule' with the hard American *sk* rather than the English *sh* and shut the door. Her clicking heels became faint in the corridor.

Katherine took out her phone and looked down at Adam's message. Today was the first hearing of his case. He was representing the families of victims of a train crash. Eight people had been killed. She wanted to call him but couldn't face hearing his professional voice, patient and distracted. She walked over to the window. The glass was criss-crossed with metal wire and through the mesh the high brick walls at the edge of the playground were crested by rolls of barbed wire.

She did not notice Jared Hinton enter the room. He stood by the door. It was 11.20. He was ten minutes early. She was shocked to see him. Jared had been forced to do music: one of the other teachers had put his name down on the list as a punishment. He usually failed to turn up at all and Katherine would wait out the half-hour imagining him somewhere in the school, smoking in a toilet cubicle, his scrawny body hard like a fist.

'Jared,' she said, saying his name to be less afraid of him. 'I'm glad you have decided to come.'

She heard the edge of sarcasm in her voice. It was a teacher's sarcasm, the kind of teacher she didn't want to be. Jared's small eyes were moving around the room, his lips mouthing words, fast and silent. She knew what he was doing; counting, everything he could see, every groove in the radiator, every crack on the wall. He looked at the floor and counted every factory-made fleck.

'Jared,' she began.

His eyes roamed over the window, counting the squares in the reinforced glass.

'What do you like to listen to?'

Jared did not answer. He seemed oblivious to the fact that she was in the room. She smiled at him and he turned and stared at her. He seemed to be counting her features, two eyes, one nose, two nostrils, one mouth. She'd heard from other teachers that he could become violent. The tension inside him was wound up like a tight band.

'It's okay, Jared.'

He blew out through his teeth in a hissing sound, turned on his heel and left the room, slamming the door behind him.

Katherine sat back in her chair fighting the inevitable feeling of failure. When she'd applied for the job at Ashwood six months ago, she told herself she'd be doing something important, something valuable. She had no experience of teaching or of working with difficult children, but had cited her grade eights on piano and violin, and written an accompanying letter stating how passion-

ately she felt about the power of music to transform lives. To her surprise she was invited for an interview and turned up at Ashwood with all the confidence of someone with nothing to lose. In a white-walled classroom, she told Henry West, the head teacher, that every child had musical gifts which needed to be nurtured. Henry West had looked out of the window with a haunted expression and asked her if she thought she was tough enough to cope with troubled adolescents. Katherine had surprised herself by asking him whether he had ever broken his ankle. She found herself explaining that when she had been a dancer, she had been tough enough to continue performing for an hour and a half after breaking hers during a show. Henry West replied that he had never broken any bone in his body, sounding almost disappointed that he hadn't. A few days later she'd received a call to say she had got the job. Whether Henry West had admired Katherine's courage in the face of broken bones was unclear. It seemed more likely that he had confused her application with someone else's; he had concluded the call by saying how good it would be to increase the ethnic mix of his staff.

It had seemed to be a fresh start. After the relentless introspection of the dance world, Katherine had been excited at the prospect of really helping people. The troubled boys at Ashwood needed special teachers, and she would be one of them. The reality was not so straightforward. Although she didn't like to admit it, when she was teaching, she often felt completely at a loss.

She walked back down the corridor and slipped out of Ashwood. As she reached the gates, she suddenly remembered what she was supposed to be doing that night. It was her father's fund-raising evening for the Broughton Foundation. Her mother was coming to the house to see Kieron and they were supposed to be going on to it together. She felt depressed at the idea of it: her father's ceaseless anxiety, the long hours of conversation with people she didn't know. She wondered if she could get out of it. She looked at her watch. Her parents would already be on the train. She had an hour to herself before she needed to set off home, do a shop and pick up Kieron. A precious hour. She'd go swimming.

The pool near Ashwood was Olympic-sized and Katherine went whenever she could. She'd swum regularly as a dancer, to keep fit without risking injuries, and it was the one activity from those days she tried to maintain. She would pound up and down the lanes, alternating crawl and breaststroke, enjoying the immersion, the glide, the heave through the water, the not thinking. She would go as fast and as far as possible until her body ached with the effort.

She stopped at a hole in the wall for some money. It was out of order, so she headed into Felling Hospital, where there was a cashpoint in the canteen. A young man, one of the patients, stood outside at the entrance with his eyes closed as the wind billowed his hospital gown. Katherine passed him and went through the sliding doors. She was walking fast, her hand already reach-

ing inside her bag for her purse, when she saw a woman lying on the floor in front of her. Two nurses were leaning over her. The woman was unable to speak or move. Her T-shirt had risen up around her breasts, and her sagging arms and belly flopped against the hard vinyl, the skin like curds.

'Are you in pain?' asked a nurse.

The woman groaned, her mouth slack and open.

'Is this new pain? Is this old pain?'

Two orderlies hurried down the corridor with a trolley. They lifted the woman up on it, and she groaned as they wheeled her away.

Katherine went into the canteen and withdrew some money. She bought a coffee and thought about the woman who'd fallen. She sat at one of the tables. Under the hard strip lights, all the people around her looked isolated, abandoned. An elderly woman was crying into her hand. A man sat smoking in a wheelchair, sucking the smoke deep inside him. A nurse came over and told him to put it out. A father sat silently with a child in school uniform, an untouched doughnut on the table in front of them. Katherine sat there for an hour. She didn't go swimming, she just sat there watching the people, and knowing she didn't want to go home.

2

Oh God oh God oh God! His back, neck and arms tense as rope, all thoughts obliterated, the breath high in his lungs, David Freeman threw open the passenger door as the car sped on to the forecourt of Carlisle train station. Before it had even stopped he was grabbing his bags and running through the stone arch, his heart thumping, towards the platform, lungs heaving, bags banging, calling out, 'London? London? Is this for London?' Interpreting a nod from a guard in a high-visibility waistcoat as affirmation, he leapt on to the train and stood against the door, taking in great gulps of air and adjusting to the sudden calm of the interior. His second-hand greatcoat, fraying at the hems and with a tear in the right arm, hung off his shoulders. His hair, still black at seventy, stood up in wild peaks, blown by the north-east wind. He smoothed it down, and with his briefcase in one hand and a clutch of plastic bags in the other, he made his way into the carriage.

After the madness of catching it, the train now stood frustratingly still, as though in stubborn reproach at his panic. He leant against a seat and lifted the briefcase on to the table. It was full of papers and would not close. In his haste to leave, he had swept everything from his desk

into it: notes for his speech that night, a copy of the Broughton Foundation's annual accounts, minutes from the last board meeting, a thick bundle of draft letters to potential sponsors which needed editing. There were several books; a *Complete Works of William Blake*, a *Collected Works of Duncan Harris*, and two thin volumes by new poets that he'd promised to read.

He looked out of the window as Ken came lumbering along the platform, hugging his coat round his enormous body, as if to stop himself falling apart. He was smiling anxiously at David, looking for a sign of his approval after the drama of the car journey. It was because of Ken that David had missed the earlier train; Ken had driven too slowly along the winding roads from Braymer, scared of the corners. They had missed the connection to Newcastle at Hexham by two minutes, leaving them no option but to race down the motorway at breakneck speed to Carlisle to catch this, the slower West Coast train to London. Ken was the gardener at the Broughton Foundation. He had only driven David because his assistants, Paul, Guy and Matthew, were already at St Mark's in London getting ready for the big night. David watched Ken through the window as he shifted from foot to foot, his open face full of the same selfless devotion he had shown when David had first offered him work almost thirty years ago. He couldn't stop a wave of irritation as he watched him. What an idiot he was! God knows what this delay would mean, today of all days, when nothing could go wrong.

The train pulled out of the station. David raised his eyebrows in a mock 'here we go' and Ken waved happily, relieved to have David's attention at last. Ken's smile was an unassailable thing, as uncomplicated as a baby's. Despite himself David smiled back and a snatch of Coleridge came to him:

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware.

The train picked up speed, and Ken disappeared. David sat back and watched the slate roofs of Carlisle pass. Poetry was essential to him; as essential as breathing. It reassured him that feelings, no matter how complicated or hidden, could always find expression. Fragments often flew into his head from nowhere, like rags caught in branches. The pertinence of the lines in this instance was not absolutely clear: whether his smile was blessing Ken or Ken's was blessing him, but whatever it was, they brought him a sense of benevolence. His mind calmed, and he was able to admit to himself that it hadn't been Ken's fault they had been late, but his own. In fact, Ken had been early; David had seen him from his office window, polishing the mirrors of his car, proud to be asked to take the Director to the station. David had caused the delay, panicking at the last moment and rushing back into the office, convinced there would not be enough catalogues to hand out at St Mark's that night.

What if Sir Richard Seaton needed one and they'd run out? The thought had been too much for him to bear. He'd gone through the shelves stuffing copies into a plastic bag until it had split. He'd had to put it inside another to make a double bag, by which time he had misplaced his briefcase and lost his jacket. Finally, when he burst from Sellacrag Cottage and climbed into Ken's car, they were already too late to catch the train at Hexham.

The train slowly gathered speed through the superstores and business parks on the outskirts of the town. It passed a scrapyard with an old pantechnicon parked in full view, an advertisement on its side: *Tommy's, Carlisle's Best Car Dealership.* The view changed to fields, and sunshine broke through the clouds. The fields lost their greyness and shone green. Summer was over but the trees still held on to their leaves. Black and white cows patterned the fields so perfectly they might have been arranged. David felt the relief of finally being on his way.

And from my neck so free,
The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea.

In the buffet carriage he ordered a coffee and some shortbread. A sour-faced woman served him quickly and disappeared. He took a sip of coffee and stared at the Scottish piper on the shortbread wrapper, his mind on the evening ahead. He went over and over it. Sir Richard Seaton. Sir Richard Seaton. Everything depended on Sir Richard Seaton awarding them an endowment, the new

library, the future of the Broughton Foundation itself, *everything*.

He opened the shortbread. The cellophane wrapper tore in a sheer line through the tartan man. The biscuit inside was broken and spilled on to the counter. He put a piece in his mouth and the sweetness soothed him.

He had visited the site of the library earlier that morning, dashing across from Sellacrag, head down in the bitter wind, clutching his jacket round him, a hopeless protection against the driving rain, wanting to feel his vision in the bricks and mortar and fuel his zeal for the evening ahead.

The new Broughton poetry library was to be a perfect mixture of modern and old. The roof would be Shillismoor slate, to match the surrounding farmhouses. The walls were to be built from granite like the dry stone walls which chase up and down the surrounding hills. The interior would be finished in oak, beech and chestnut. In the basement, display drawers of manuscripts would glide from cabinets like silk on silk into a climate-controlled atmosphere. The reading room would be dominated by three arched windows, capturing the majesty of the hills in triptych; Bastlegyle, Lyne Top, Kield Hope. There would be hand-carved desks for readers, and poetry would reach within them, seeping deep into their souls and beyond into the moors and fells themselves.

Standing in the unfinished building that morning, the wind beating against the plastic sheeting, David fought a

sense of despair. The library stood abandoned, the windows shuttered with chipboard, the walls smeared with pink plaster dried into rough eddies and creases. Every unfinished wall and exposed wire mocked his vision. The rough mosaic of boot prints on the boards which covered the floor was all that was left of the builders.

Nine months previously, Nicholas Durant, Director of Endeline Insurance, and the Broughton Foundation's most significant sponsor of the new library, had suffered a massive heart attack and died. His family had immediately pulled the plug on his promise to underwrite the project. Nicholas's daughter had visited David to explain. A pinched, birdlike soul with none of her father's generosity, she clearly felt that the best way to convey bad news was to be blunt. She had told David that the family wanted to use the money to support the Heart Foundation. 'If we can save one life, my father's death will not have been in vain,' she had said, sounding rehearsed. David had argued valiantly for honouring her father's passion for poetry but it had been no use. The family's mind was made up. With Nicholas's money gone, construction of the library had stopped. The workmen had downed tools, and the building had stood like a ruin in reverse ever since. David faced bankruptcy, and his critics had declared, not for the first time, that the expansion he had undertaken was a hubristic pipe dream. The Broughton Foundation, they argued, should be a modest place with a tea shop, not the international leviathan he envisaged. David had almost drowned in

the flood of rhetoric: poetry was out of date, they told him, marginal, elitist, redundant, above all in the North-East, they argued, where work, not art, was what people needed. The Board of Trustees paid for an independent financial adviser to submit a feasibility report on the library's future. David had argued that the money would be better spent on plasterboard. The building was already in existence, the horse long since bolted, he said, jocular in the face of his critics. Privately he was desperate. He knew the figures. To finish the library, pay the interest on the acquisitions bill and secure the Broughton Foundation's future, he needed two million. No amount of cost-cutting would raise that kind of money.

When Sir Richard Seaton announced an arts endowment of six million pounds for arts organisations in the North, David had felt the timing was almost personal. David had met Sir Richard Seaton on several occasions and had been inspired to find a man with qualities close to his own; the same infectious passion, the same stubborn pride in the North. Above all, they shared the same drive to pursue a goal at any cost, even when others could not see or understand it. It was this sense of vision that had made Sir Richard's telecommunications company the empire it was. The evening at St Mark's that night was ostensibly to celebrate the Broughton Foundation's achievements that year, but in reality it had only one real purpose – to impress Sir Richard Seaton and secure an endowment.

The train braked hard, stopped, jolted forward, and stopped again. David picked up the coffee to stop it sliding down the counter. From the window he saw an inland dump bordered by dark pine trees, and above it, seagulls circling, like shrieking scraps. The tannoy crackled into life.

'This is your guard speaking. There will be a short delay to your journey today. This is due to signal failure . . .'

David's heart sank. A delay would mean being late for his brother-in-law, Gregory. He was supposed to go straight from the train to meet him at the flat. For years David had stayed at Gregory's London flat when it wasn't being used by Gregory and Charlotte. He'd had his own set of keys but Gregory had changed all the locks after a burglary on a lower floor, and David had arranged to meet him there to get the new ones. He knew Gregory disliked waiting. The last thing David wanted was to anger him. The whole situation about the flat was already so delicate.

He set off down the carriage, holding his bags in front and behind so as not to bump them against the sides, and sat down at an empty four-seat. Across the aisle, three old women were settling in, putting Tupperware boxes on the table, their faces sweet and lined, their hair done for the journey. One of them looked at David. Something about her disturbed him; a nervous doubt in her eyes, as though she was searching for something. He knew he was about the same age as her, but he felt he was from a younger generation. He did not feel old and uncertain,

and he did not look it. People often told him he looked fifty-five, and although he affected a self-deprecating modesty, he had quietly come to believe it. When he looked in the mirror he saw that his face was still impish. It had a way of suddenly lighting up, like a slatted blind on a sunny day. The woman stared at him with her eyes that seemed to tremble, and suddenly it occurred to David that perhaps she was ill, terminally, forever ill. Her face had an unearthly pallor to it. He looked away, out of the window, not to see her.

The train started up again. The sunshine disappeared as fast as it had arrived and the fields lost their lustre. A terrible thought came to him. What if Sir Richard Seaton was ill? What if he became ill? Nicholas Durant had been the fittest of men. David put his hands to his face as if to shield himself from his spiralling thoughts. He cursed Nicholas for his sick and fattened heart.

A sense of dread descended on him. There was no one with whom he could share his burden. He alone bore the weight of the Broughton Foundation. He alone knew how much depended on success at St Mark's that night. It had always been that way, and he felt a sudden crushing loneliness. He reached over to his briefcase and took out some papers. He would go through his lists. Lists helped, they always helped. He put his hand in his pocket and felt the thin reassuring hardness of a pencil.

For the hundredth time, he went through the list of guests, writing small reminders alongside their names in the margin. He made a note to take particular care of

Harold Flacker, his old friend, the ex-government minister who had done so much to help with St Mark's. Next to Harold's name he wrote *Katherine*. Harold liked young people and Katherine was still young at thirty-three. May had insisted on inviting her. She'd said Katherine needed cheering up. David had agreed she should come, not out of concern for his daughter but because Katherine had a vitality that, should she care to display it, would open up some of his more difficult guests. She would be perfect for Harold. He wondered what would be the best way to introduce her now. He had liked it when he had been able to say, 'This is my daughter, Katherine, a dancer'. He couldn't understand why she'd given it up. Dance had seemed to consume every moment of her life until out of the blue she'd thrown it all in for motherhood and, more recently, some teaching job. Teaching what . . .? He couldn't even remember. He jotted down *job?* next to her name and felt a prickle of irritation as he did so.

The women across the aisle were slowly eating sandwiches from the Tupperware boxes. On the table in front of him, David saw his own hands clasped, and dull-skinned with age. He ought to call Gregory to let him know he would be late. He reached for his phone and tried to turn it on. His fingers fumbled for the button at the top. It was such an awkward slither of a thing. He pushed, trying different angles. Eventually he realised the battery was dead. He cursed Matthew, his personal assistant for neglecting to charge it. He cursed the train for

being delayed. If Gregory couldn't wait for him, where would he and May spend that night? Katherine's house was impossible; it was miles from the centre of London in some never-ending suburb, and with no spare room. He needed the flat, and for that, he needed to keep Gregory happy.

The thought of his relationship with his brother-in-law depressed him. He had found him difficult from the moment they met fifty years ago. A sullen stone had settled in his belly. The reason was his sister Charlotte. As a boy, David had adored her. Charlotte was the only one in the family who had shown him affection. His father was a farmer, and his parents worked all hours. David was often ill. His mother had little time for him; as far as she was concerned he was a useful pair of hands missing. He would sit in the big chair under a blanket reading books and she would look at him with her grey, cold eyes as she wiped down the long sycamore table. If he ever got under her feet she would slap him. He would run upstairs or escape to the cowshed to hide his tears. Charlotte, five years older than him, always came to find him. She would pick him up in her arms and cosset him like a little lamb, 'Davey, Davey,' she would say. 'Never mind, Davey, never mind.'

Gregory had married Charlotte when she was just seventeen. It had seemed to David that he had taken her as far away as possible on purpose to hurt him, down to Fairhampton on the south coast. Charlotte's life changed and so did she; she became a society hostess, got involved

in charity work, and was wealthy enough to pursue her interest in high fashion. David saw her occasionally at family weddings and funerals, or when he borrowed the London flat, but never again found the closeness they had shared as children. David had been unable to shake off his crude, childish resentment of Gregory, and over the years it collected like low and stagnant water. In later years, Charlotte began to drink heavily. Privately, David blamed Gregory for her pain. She would ring late at night, a slurred voice on the end of the phone. 'Davey, Davey, never mind, little Davey, never mind . . .' she would say. He would hang up the telephone, finding her unhappiness unbearable, but what was worse was to feel her drunken words still soothe him, as they had when he was a child.

Charlotte slowly became a stranger to herself. One night Gregory had called David out of the blue to tell him that she had suffered a mental breakdown, and that her deterioration had been so rapid that she had been hospitalised. He had added almost as an afterthought that he was now sharing his life with a woman called Margery, a friend of Charlotte's, and that she was coming to live with him.

The news had shocked David, and the sullen stone shifted inside him. He felt a pure, clear rage and it alarmed him. He decided never to visit Charlotte in her care home, never to see her brought so low. He resolved never to visit Gregory and meet his new partner, in case he should betray his true feelings. But he needed the

London flat, and it was necessary to remain on good terms with Gregory. He redoubled his efforts to please his brother-in-law, and tried wherever he could to involve him in the Broughton Foundation's activities. It was not just that his fund-raising trips to the capital were crucial to David. The flat had become a haven for a side of himself that he could not share with anyone.

The train pushed on, at a grudging pace, into Wigan Station. The crowd of passengers on the platform started to funnel towards the train doors, their voices raucous, the broad tones still Lancastrian but leaning towards the slacker, more open-jawed Yorkshire. Men and women bundled past him down the carriage, searching for seats, their voices known to him from his childhood, from the farm, his father and the farmhands coming in from the fields for tea, sitting at the table, talking about the livestock and the weather, as his mother served bread, cheese and cold beef, and made tea in the brown pot.

A young man in his early twenties stopped at David's table. He slung a kit bag effortlessly on to the overhead rack and took the seat diagonally opposite. He sat effortlessly upright. David noticed the bulk of his torso under his blue T-shirt, his dark hair closely cropped, his level stare; a soldier; a man whose mind is blank, whose body moves unthinkingly. David leant forward in his seat.

'Going far?'

'Crewe.' The man spoke without hesitation, but gave no invitation for David to continue.

'Lancashire Fusiliers?'

'That's right.'

'You're stationed in Afghanistan, aren't you?'

'Kabul.' The soldier looked out of the window.

David searched for an opening. 'I was reading somewhere. Some of the soldiers are fed up with the war . . .'

The man turned and looked at David.

'Some,' he said.

He looked away again and passed his hand over his shorn head, and in the gesture David saw what he had left unsaid; he read the man's mind as clearly as though he had spoken out loud. The soldier, far from being indifferent to talking, was afraid that if he started he might never stop. He was frustrated not by the madness of war but by others' lack of commitment to it.

'I don't understand them,' said David.

The soldier looked directly at David. 'They're a fucking disgrace.'

The swearing excited David. He received it like a physical touch.

'We've come too far not to get it done properly,' he said.

'To come home now would be an insult to those who never will,' said the soldier, and in his quiet fierceness, David heard the voices of others, voices from the past; not an opinion but a belief, passed down through generations.

'Your father an army man?'

'Used to be. He got injured in Belfast.'

'So you were always going to be a soldier?'

'Ever since I was eight . . .'

. . . and the young man let go. His defences fell away and he gave in to David's attentiveness, grateful to speak, to articulate the thoughts he had learnt so well to discipline. David sat back and listened, his eyes bright with pleasure as the soldier spoke of his father, a fitter at the Ford factory, struggling to hold on to his job after a life in the army with tours of duty in Germany, Hong Kong and Ulster. He spoke of his father's pride when he had joined up at the age of sixteen. He spoke of his brother and two sisters, all younger than him and of how they had looked at him when he had arrived home from his first tour of duty in Afghanistan, how they'd insisted he wear his uniform for the first five days of his leave, and how proud he was that they'd made him. He had been asked to talk at his brother's school and had stood on the stage at assembly and the children had clapped as though he'd won the war all by himself, and that evening, his brother had announced that he wanted to join the army too. It was then the soldier's face changed.

'Mam went mental.'

David waited for him to continue.

'Harry's the sensitive one. She wants him to go to university, become a doctor or something, you know . . .'

He fell silent. David saw the soldier's mind turning. He felt the difficulty of the man's return from the war to the petty tensions of his family, his confusion at realising that home was no longer a place to which he belonged, or wanted to belong. The train was pulling into Crewe.

'My stop,' said the soldier.

He stood to take his kitbag from the rack above them. As he stretched up, his T-shirt lifted and David saw his taut belly in shadow, the curl of black hair at the navel. He felt the familiar ache inside him. A man with whom he had begun a connection was already leaving. With more time they would have become close, gained each other's trust, exchanged addresses. David saw himself writing to the soldier in Afghanistan, saw the soldier opening his letters in the hard sunlight, lying on his bunk bed penning his reply, a short dusty missive, and as he thought of it, his fantasy grew.

He reached into his pockets and pulled out their contents: tissues, old receipts, keys. Among them was a clip of business cards. He handed one to the soldier.

'If you're ever in Northumberland,' he said.

'Thanks.'

David smiled. The soldier swung his bag on to his shoulder like a dead weight, and disappeared through the sliding doors. David didn't watch him go. He didn't look out of the window down the platform. He knew how painful the sight of the disappearing figure would be. He didn't want to watch him go or see his business card lying discarded on the platform.

He wished his wife May was with him. She would be on a train herself now. She would have finished her teaching in Carlisle and caught the first East Coast train south to meet him at St Mark's. He had never understood why she insisted on keeping her teaching job. She seemed

to insist on being busy just when he needed her most.

The train pulled out of Wigan Station. David looked at the leaden sky, the blurring fields, the rain streaking the dirt down the window. He began to feel sleepy. A memory came to him of Katherine as a little girl, alone in a garden. It was rare to see her without her brothers; the children, all close in age, had usually swarmed together squabbling and noisy. She was dancing in bare feet, leaping and twirling on the wet grass. He saw himself in the garden too. He started to join in her dance. He hopped delicately from foot to foot. He danced through the trees like a spirit. He danced along a silver river. He beckoned for Katherine to follow him into the glittering horizon. He would dance her all the way to the sea.

He awoke, his face softened by sleep. His doctor had told him that these sudden, deep sleeps were normal; just refuelling, he said. David looked out of the window. Black crows flocked over a field like shreds blown from a fire, and a kestrel flew high and alone.