

I wasn't sure of the right word. *Builder? Odd-job man? Repairman?* Or perhaps I needed to see a specialist? *Carpenter? Joiner? Woodworker?*

I looked at the keyboard intently, as if the letters could Ouija themselves up, and reveal the answer.

Handyman? I typed it into Google and added my post-code, hope congealing in my heart. Most builders, handy or otherwise, are incompetent, indolent and venal.

I will not pay unless the job is done perfectly, on time and within estimate. I do not provide endless cups of PG Tips with three sugars, ta, nor do I engage in talk, small or large. Preferably no visits to my WC, though a builder who does not pee is rare. Tea makes pee. But if that is necessary, only in the downstairs cloakroom. Afterwards there will be piss under the loo.

I also wanted one who is taciturn. I loathe the inane chatter of workmen hoping to ingratiate themselves while simultaneously padding their bills. A handyman who cannot talk? Bliss. Somebody should set up a company that supplies them. Tear out their tongues or sew up their lips, that'd do it.

I added *taciturn* to my search options, but unsurprisingly

nothing turned up, though one chap described himself as ‘tactile’ which gave me the creeps. I tried various alternatives: *Quiet?* Nothing. *Unobtrusive?* Chance would be a fine thing. I eventually opted for *Thoughtful*, which provided two alternatives: one pictured in a string vest, who I suspect offers a variety of distinctly odd jobs, the other with a few recommendations affixed to his entry, which lauded his reliable service.

Mr Cooper, he is called, but I did not ring him, as that would provide evidence that I can hear, whereas I intended to feign almost total deafness. I emailed him, enquiring if he might be available next week. He responded immediately, which is a bad sign: shouldn’t he be out handy-manning his way around town?

Yes, he replied, he was free next Wednesday and Thursday. What can he do for me?

My requirements of Mr Cooper concern the entry to my house, which has a handsome Georgian door, which will need to be removed and ‘amended’ – I believe this might be the right term – in five ways:

(1) Remove the brass letter box, and then fill in the resultant hole, prep and paint in Farrow and Ball Pitch Black gloss. (There are a variety of blacks, some of them greatly preferable to others, and black is one of the few colours (or absence of colours) in which doors should properly be painted. One of our neighbours, a recently arrived Indian family, decorated theirs in a Hindu orange so offensive, so out of keeping with the tone of the rest of the street that a petition was discreetly and anonymously raised by ‘Your Neighbours’ (guilty as charged) asking him and his wife to reconsider. They did, and repainted it bright turquoise.)

(2) Install a doorbell that rings once only, no matter how many times you press it, and which issues a melodious, inoffensive tone which can be heard clearly inside the house, but not outside the door.

(3) Install a Dia16mm-x-200-Degree-Brass-Door-Viewer-Peephole-with-Cover-and-Glass-Lens, which I will provide.

(4) Install a new keyhole and change lock.

(5) Remove the brass door-knocker, and make good.

The jobs I have outlined will take a day and a half, according to Mr Cooper, ‘unless something goes wrong’, plus an extra visit to put on a second coat of gloss. Mr Cooper’s hourly charge is £35, plus materials, which, when I compare it to others offering similar services (though without extra thoughtfulness), is pretty much standard.

We agreed that he would arrive at 10 a.m., and that I would have a parking permit ready for his van. He seemed untroubled by my announcement of my deafness.

‘No worries, I can get on with my work. Not very talkative myself.’

I considered asking him to bring his own tea, but if he finds himself in desperate need (which he will, he will), he can always pop out to the neighbourhood café, a few hundred metres down the street.

James Fenimore, as I have inwardly designated him – his site, curiously, only describes him as Cooper Handyman – arrived right on time, which was a good sign. Had he been more than fifteen minutes late, I would not have answered the door. He looks reassuringly like a handyman. Stocky, uncombed white hair that manages to be both lank and frothy at the same time, florid face pockmarked like an autonomous wart. The details don’t matter. But the smell did: cheap cigarettes, stale beer, decaying teeth, wood

shavings and something acrid that burned my nose, about which I didn't wish to speculate. He was disgusting, and I could barely resist the impulse to send him away: *Shoo! Off you go!* Like a stray dog.

My senses are out of control, imperious, undermining. I can smell the decomposing bodies of the flies on the windowsill, the morning light burns my retina, the residue of the morning's toothpaste coats my gums, my fingertips tingle when they come into contact with hard surfaces. It's like having a migraine without the headache.

After I opened the door, gingerly, he took a careful builderly look at it, its solidity and sheen, the perfect proportions, depth, weight.

'Don't make doors like that any more,' he said. 'Shoddy rubbish nowadays.'

I held my hand to my ear to remind him of my deafness, and made a quizzical face, as if he were speaking Mongolian.

He spoke louder, and stepped forward, which I instantly regretted. 'Shame to muck it about. Security problems I'm guessing? Lot of burglaries round here!'

None of his fucking business, is it? 'No, not security. Just some changes. I'll leave you to it. Let yourself out when you finish for the day, and I will see you tomorrow.'

At 5 p.m. I heard the door close, and went down to see how he'd got on. I was pleased – and surprised – to see that he had cleaned up after himself, and the reinstalled door closed with the same satisfying clunk as ever. It now had some new wood, undercoated and primed in dark grey, set where the letter box had been, and the area where the former door-knocker resided was filled in, sanded and painted as well. The new keyhole had been installed, and a set of three keys was on the table in the hallway. There was a newly drilled hole at eye level – he and I were much the

same height so I didn't have to be measured for it – where the peephole would go tomorrow. James Fenimore had carefully taped over it with black masking tape. Altogether, a distinctly workmanlike job.

He arrived at ten the next morning, clutching a takeaway paper cup filled, I presumed, with builder's tea and lots of sugar. He put it down carefully on the hall table, remembering to put something under it. Keeping the door open, he inspected yesterday's work and tested that the undercoating was dry.

'OK so far?' he asked, in the kind of slow, loud voice one uses for foreigners, recalcitrant children, the stupid and the deaf.

I nodded, trying not to get too close to him. His smell was so invasive that I had not dabbed but slobbered some of Suzy's L'Air du Temps on my upper lip. When I opened the tiny bottle, it released a painfully sharp memory, not visual but somatic, of my head cushioned between her breasts, her original breasts, smelling of a trace of scent, as blissfully content as a boy can be. And a girl, all those years ago, before we were lost, both of us, lost.

'Will you do one thing for me?' I asked James Fenimore. 'Please go outside and shut the door, and then knock on it as loudly as you can. Maybe five or six times?'

He wasn't an inquisitive chap, or perhaps he had already marked me down as not merely deaf but barmy. How likely was it that I would be able to hear the door-knocking if I couldn't make him out at eighty decibels over four feet?

He closed the door, and gave it a few almighty wallops with his knuckles, which must have been severely tried by the experience. I listened carefully, having walked down the hallway into the kitchen. There was a distinct but muffled thudding, to be sure, but it was tolerable at that distance.

From upstairs I would hardly have heard a thing. Well-made door that. Don't make them like that any more.

Greatly reassured, I readmitted James Fenimore, only to find that he recoiled as he passed me in the doorway, stepping back, alarmed, and checking an impulse to raise his hands. His nostrils quivered noticeably, he sniffed. I was wearing scent! And as I hadn't done so yesterday, I must have put it on just to meet him!

It explained everything. The eccentricity, the fussy taste, the fancy clothes, the fastidiousness. A poofter! And I fancied him! I could see this line of thought pass slowly over his features, as he added one observation to another. He stepped back, and leant against the wall, ready to defend himself. I had a fleeting urge to kiss him on the cheek, just for the fun of it.

'When you have installed the peephole, send me an email. I'll be online, and then I can come down and see if it works properly.'

Queer as a coot.

Just after 2 p.m. my email 'ding-ding' sounded, as I was making some notes on my current concerns, composing myself in painstakingly extracted bits. I have no job and no life: no occupation, just preoccupation.

My Inbox revealed that Cooper Handyman would be finished in twenty minutes, and reminded me that I had promised to pay in cash, to save VAT. I had ordered an extra cash delivery from American Express in anticipation of this, because my usual fortnightly £400 would not leave enough to cover the bill.

I had purchased the very expensive peephole instrument for \$200, when you can get perfectly serviceable ones for a tenth of that, because this top-of-the-range model alters the laws of nature. Your Mr Cooper fits it in your door,

and it claims to give you 200-degree coverage. Now I am no mathematician, but even I know that from the flat surface of a door only a 180-degree arc is visible. So, as far as I can make out, the new magical instrument will allow me to see into my own hallway, presumably 10 degrees on each side, through thick brick walls. For the extra \$180 I am longing to see how it works. Thus if I stand in the right position, I should be able to see myself looking at myself.

‘It don’t do that, it can’t!’ says James Fenimore scornfully. ‘Just trying to sell it to idiots. Might work if you just held it to your eye, but it’s for a door! Not worth the money you paid for it!’

‘Shall we test it? If you go outside and close the door, perhaps you could stand in various positions while I look through the peephole.’

‘No problem.’

A moment later I was looking through the new peephole directly into Mr Cooper’s face. He smiled uneasily, perhaps concerned that this might be seen as a come-on. And then, with his back against first the left-hand wall and then the right, waved a hand gently, as if the Queen from her carriage.

I cannot imagine what I have done to encourage this skittishness. Does he think all queers like waving Queens? Next thing I knew he would want us to have a cup of tea together, pinkies in the air.

I think he has had enough of me too, and clutching his small cache of £50 notes, shakes my hand, with firm masculine pressure. I allow mine to melt into his. I will wash it thoroughly when he leaves.

‘You take care of yourself now,’ he says warily.

‘You too.’

I tried to suppress a fugitive feeling of gratitude from my tone. After all, he was a good workman, unexceptionable, scratching out a living.

The new door, as I stand on the step to look it over, is stripped of both grace and function without its knocker and letter box. Black, bare, blank, beautiful in its stripped-down brutality. Just spyhole and keyhole. A bit sinister, as if it were guarding a fortress of some sort.

I hope it works. It locks them out, and me in. It gives me a – might I call it a window? – on the world. Or maybe just a way of peeping, unseen.

The next morning I woke early, and after my showering and coffee rituals, arrived at the door at 7.58. I rolled up a newly washed, fluffy hand towel and placed it above the eyehole, leant forward so that my forehead rested on it, comfortably adjusted it until my eye was perfectly aligned. The world came into focus. Across the street, just on 8 a.m., right on time like the Bombay Express, the Singh family left their house. Doctor and young son, top-knotted, turbaned. Mother and daughter in immaculate saris. You could set your watch by them. Sikh and ye shall find. Every morning both parents walked the children to the primary school before making their way to the Tube: he to the Chelsea and Westminster, she to her accountancy offices. Deloitte's, was it?

They were wonderfully presented, less disgusting than their English equivalents. Stripped of their ethnic accoutrements, their turbans, suits and saris, they would be the colour of lightly toasted Poilâne, redolent of cardamom and ghee. If you were a cannibal, you'd toss aside a pallid smelly Cooper – the colour and consistency of uncooked bread – and have a bite of these tasty Oriental morsels.

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I've composed a list of further world-proofing chores. I like lists. You think of every contingency, plan for it, cross it off. It gives the impression that everything is controllable.

It's going surprisingly well, the elements falling into place. First, the essential communication – I hope it will be the last.

Dear George,

It was good, all things considered, to see you last week. As I intimated, I have a small request. I am going to be taking some time off, and I need to redirect my mail. If you will be so kind as to receive it, all I ask is that you throw it away. All of it. Please. I do not want to be disturbed for the foreseeable future, for any reason. I will be out of touch.

I am most grateful for this.

I have also changed my email address, as you can see. I do not want this divulged to anyone. Indeed, I would rather you did not use it yourself, once you have confirmed you can help me in this minor way.

Thanks,

James

George is as close as I came to making a friend amongst my fellow schoolmasters. He is a harmless, good-hearted duffer, and a passionate enthusiast for all things Victorian. He kits himself out in fancy dress: silken cravats or bow ties, itchy tweed suits, waistcoats, flouncy shirts, shoes with buckles. And a bushy beard, of course. He is idealistic, staunch, sentimental, hearty, blinkered, patriotic, and hopeless with women. I suppose – there was speculation about this in the Common Room – you might have mistaken

him for a repressed homosexual, but he is not. He is one of that virtually extinct species, the bachelor. He visits friends in the country at the weekends, is a reliable walker for widows and spinsters, has godfathered half the children in Gloucestershire, and is keen on travel, amateur theatrics, cricket, and especially on the works of Alfred Lord Tennyson. Every 15th of September he celebrates the death-day of Arthur Hallam, the poet's lost friend and only true love, with a select dinner at Boodle's, at which he insists on declaiming the entire text of 'The Lotos-Eaters', a poem that, like Hitler, should never have been born. He acts it out, waving his arms like a drowning fairy, sensuous, mellifluous and slinky.

But, comic figure though he is, I can count on him. I'd solved my incoming mail problem. Brilliant. I have also cancelled my landline, got a new mobile number, and made a database of essential providers: handyman, plumber, electrician, doctor, dentist, optician, nurse, cleaner, ironing and laundry service, computer and telly fixers. I can order cash, coffee, cigars, food from Waitrose or Harrods, wine from Berry Brothers if I outlive my cellar. I have enough clothes and shoes to last a lifetime.

I will never go out again. If I am incapacitated by severe illness or a heart attack, I will abjure the emergency call, suffer and die. If the house catches fire, I will go down with it, perhaps put on some smothering and sizzling music – Stravinsky perhaps, can't think what else he's good for – and smoke and barbecue like Joan of Arc.

Of course the price of my enforced isolation will be a regular invasion of both house and self by a succession of strangers, none of whom will be congenial to me. Of course I dislike a chippy chippy, but I'm equally hostile to the charming, the well spoken or well read, the interesting, the

beautiful, the whimsical. Next thing I know they will be smiling and waving at me from their carriages.

Anyone who enters this house does so as an instrument of my will. I am not here to meet people, but to use them. If they could be replaced by machines, I would do so without compunction, and if they were robots they would be programmed to listen but not to talk.

Only four days after its installation, the doorbell rang. I ignored it. Either it was someone who didn't matter or, much worse, someone who did. I cannot say what time it was. I have renounced my watch, drawn the curtains. It is dark amid the blaze of noon, a total eclipse without hope of day. I am become a thing of darkness.

I do not follow the news, hardly turn on the telly or wireless. My computer wants to tell me the time and date, but after some searching I turn off that function. The house is still, timeless. Eternal in its way.

I drift off in my chair, resolve to drink my way through the wine cellar, nibble smoked oysters on cracked wheat biscuits. The oysters are delivered (on Thursdays) from Scotland. They do not come in tins. Anything that is tinned, tastes tinny: baked beans, tuna in oil, white asparagus, all similarly contaminated. No, my oysters are plump, recently smoked, and come in plastic packaging that hardly affects their taste.

I eat grapes, though it is hard to source decent ones. But if I eat too many, or drink too much, I am sick, sick at heart, vomiting, bereft. The nausea rises out of me like a metaphysical force. It is in the walls, it is everywhere around me, it is the air that I cannot breathe. But I carry on with my grapes, both liquid and solid. I don't wish to die of scurvy. I don't wish to die at all, not yet.

I feel as if the house is under surveillance, staked out, as

I am staked out within it. Crucified. But behind its blank façade, there are few signs of life, as I have few signs of life behind mine.

The only vulnerability is on Thursdays. If you were a weary gumshoe slumped over your steering wheel, eyes propped open, in need of a shave and a toothbrush after a sleepless Wednesday night, in the morning you might observe someone walk up the path confidently, open the door and go in. You might try to confront them, or more likely advise your employer to do so.

When the doorbell rang again a few days later – just once, that was a good idea – I snuck into the hallway, my footsteps muffled by the thickness of the carpet, and surely imperceptible outside the door. I looked through the peephole. It was just as I had anticipated, and feared. I retreated upstairs, my restless heart threatening its cavity, and a few moments later the knocking started, first a regular rapping, followed soon by a robust banging, less loud than burly James Fenimore had produced, but surprisingly vigorous nonetheless. I closed the door to my study.

It happened again the next day, the hammering, and a more protracted and furious banging. When I opened the door a few hours later, having ensured that the 200-degree coast was clear, there was an envelope taped to it, obviously with a letter inside it. Perhaps four or five pages thick. I took it inside, tore it up without opening it, and threw the many pieces into the bin.

From the outside, with the curtains closed, the house might well have looked uninhabited. The only tell-tale sign, ironically, was the change to the door. Why would someone who had left a house for a protracted period feel a need to reinforce its entrance in such a way? No, the unwelcoming black door signalled that someone was inside, who would

not welcome the presence of an intruder. I steeled myself – not a cliché, just the right metaphor – to expect further visits, further knocks, further entreaties. I will ignore them, steely in my resolve.

The air is stifling, humid, it feels as if I could drown in it.

Here I lie where I need to be
I am the sailor home from the sea

I choose the darkness because I hate it, and I loathe the sea, it's so bloody insistent: whoosh whoosh, drown. No, my adventures are over. Save this one, which I am writing.

If – God forbid – I had to go outside now, I would wear a sign. I could print it on the computer, on heavy gauge paper in Gils Sans typeface, and attach it with a string around my neck:

**Do not talk to me, or come near me.
I am not interested in your opinions.**

Thinking this gives me a warm feeling. I can no longer bear to be in the presence of my fellow man, even to dismiss them. I will not go out, though sometimes of a morning I fold my towel and lean against the door, peeping at my fellows on their daily rounds. The sight of them fills me with hatred, disgust and contempt. This feeling comes upon me with the buffeting terror of a tsunami. I am swept away, hardly able to breathe, in danger of extinction. The thought of wandering into the streets, bumped and jostled by these acrid creatures, makes me retch.

I have lost my capacity to avert my eyes, or my nose. They stay open, however much I blink and flinch and turn

away. I keep thinking those thoughts which, if we can only cast them aside, allow us to live tolerable, satisfied and self-satisfied existences. To make do. Reality punches you, pummels you into bruised submission, except that there is no way in which you can throw in the towel, wave a white flag, mutter 'No más' like that poor boxer once did, and retreat to the safety of your corner.

Or perhaps to your house? Reality: out there. Aversion: in here? If only it were so simple. If only it worked. How can we bear to be ourselves? How can we bear our children, whose lives begin in pain and terminate in agony? Enough. Too much.

O dark dark dark. They all go into
the dark.

Fucking T.S. Eliot. All of them? Damned? Surely somebody gets to go into the light, don't Christians think like that? The source, the beginning, the brightness at the end of the tunnel, the soft fading dribble of final consciousness, the ethereal infinite. In his end is his beginning, like a snake with its arse up its head. Welcomed by the heavenly hosts and hostesses. Pearly gates, genial chat with St Peter, try not to push in the queue, get your individual destination. Not very efficient. More sensible to suppose some quick transformation from person to angel. The soul leaves the poor just-dead remains and *Swoosh!* like that sound mobile phones make when they send a text (better than *Quack! Quack!*). The soul shoots away and finds itself in the clouds.

What do you do up there? What are you going to do tomorrow? Next year? Next millennium? What sustains and nourishes them, the angels of the dead? In pictorial accounts

they are corporeal in some faded, washed-out way, like threadbare cotton nighties left to dry in the sun, softly flapping, drained of essence.

Yet they have human features. Faces, chests, wavy hair, noses, arms (wings, anyway), something sort of leggy. In heaven there are no signs or vestiges of what got you there. No swollen tumours, no bullet holes or crushed skulls, no filled lungs or ruptured appendixes. No shrunken cadavers. Every body filled up and filled in. Reformed, reformulated, returned, retuned, resurrected. Good as new. Better.

Does this celestial self retain its humanity? Does it get cystitis or haemorrhoids? There is no testimony that it gorges and disgorges, excretes or sodomises. Do angels have arse-holes?

Do they examine themselves, these freshly minted angels, wonder at this shimmering new essence, this new freedom from weight and care? Might they, before they morph into pure angeltude, do an anxious inventory of what is, astonishingly, missing, as if they had survived some terrible bomb blast, and in a hectic, final shocked moment checked to see what was left of themselves? Lips? Check. Legs? Hard to tell. Eyes? Functioning. Ears. Nothing to hear. No viscera at all at all. No stomach: nothing to eat. No lungs: no air to breathe. No blood: no menstruating angels, no cut fingers. It's enough to make you scream with laughter. Dead and not dead. Body and not body. It makes me hysterical.

Angels are the riddles of heaven: dead things with feathers. Only the damned remain fully alive, cursing and writhing, bleeding and bruising, smelling and excreting, in agony and despair. Bit like life really.

Later in his dreadful poem, Mr Eliot assures us – can you fucking believe it? – that you are damned according to your *profession*. The Great and the Good go to Hell, along

with the usual haul of cowards, narcissists and murderers. Plenty of arseholes in Hell. Mr Eliot includes himself amongst the damned. I like that in a poet.

Heavenly reward is only for the meek, the humble, the unostentatiously kindly: dinner ladies, scout masters, carers, primary schoolteachers, nurses, cleaners, rubbish collectors, gardeners, college scouts, curates and handymen. The worthies who, in their finest hour, are offered an MBE by the Queen, and are charmingly and naively delighted. And after that they become angels!

And here we have him, ladies and gentlemen! T.S. Eliot: classicist in literature, royalist in politics, the most pompous form of the Jamesian American ex-pat. Worse yet: as from his religious conversion, a Believer! It horrified his friends, his erstwhile friends. That frigid snitbag Virginia Woolf was so distressed that she virtually sat shiva with her husband Lenny the Jew to signal the passing of poor Tom, no longer a member of the atheist tribe.

Unlike Leonard's, her nose hooked up, not down, it sniffed, she was a great sniffer, a terrific bitch. Her letters and diaries are fastidious, superior, deadly. So much more enjoyable than all those girly hyper-sensitive novels. Mrs Shalloway. To the Shitehouse. Beyond reprieve or comprehension, poor Tom, sighed Virginia, 'may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He believes in God and immortality, and goes to church . . .'

Of a sudden, he's all public pious, intellectual, and – how ghastly, how utterly uncongenial – a seeker after wisdom. We are told his poems have spiritual quality. What an oxymoron. Worse! He would be an imparter of wisdom, another failed-priest poet. Like them all.

Like that dreadful gasbag Kahlil Gibran, the archetypal fakir, whose platitudes informed the weddings of a whole

generation. Lucy produced two of his 'poems' at her ceremony: one read with doleful earnestness by her soon-to-be husband Sam the other intoned by herself:

Sing and dance together and be
joyous, but let each one of you
be alone,
Even as the strings of a lute are alone
though they quiver with the same
music.

Christ! This ghastly humbuggery was enough to make me yearn for Mr Eliot. Perched in the front row on a hideous plastic chair wrapped in a floppy gentrifying serviette, I suffered mightily, and (I gather) let out a discernible groan. Lucy glared at me. She was still angry from our disastrous conversation two days before.

I'd thought I was helping, like a signalman on the tracks diverting a runaway train. She'd been at the house, sitting on the bed doing something with a pile of clothes. She and Suzy had been assembling her 'going-away outfit' – which I gather is what your change of clothes after the wedding is called – and Suzy had announced she was popping out to buy some suitable garment or other. Lucy was turned away from me, her shoulders hunched, shaking gently and regularly.

'Lucy, love, are you all right?'

'It's Mummy, she's driving me crazy. This whole bloody farce is down to her. Just because she had to endure a big wedding, she's inflicting it on me. She says it's one of a woman's rites of passage, like childbirth, you just have to bear it.'

I hate weddings, especially this one, for which I had to pay. Why does the bride's family have to shell out? Though we would have had to anyway, for Sam's worthy parents didn't have two beans to rub together. Though if they'd had them, they would have.

Give me a good funeral any day: some happy memories and encomia rather than fatuous hopes for a dodgy future. No drunken rowdies, no idiotic dancing till early morning, no ill-dressed maids of honour losing theirs with best men desperate to shuck their formal clothing and get on the job.

Lucy's eyes drifted downwards again, and she selected a cream blouse, pressed it against her chest, looked into the mirror, put it back down. She tested another blouse, rejected it, frowning. Her displeasure was directed more at the activity than the various garments. There were only two days until the wedding, and (as Suzy insisted) *choices have to be made*.

Lucy had been suborned into compliance. Left to her own devices, she'd have put on a frock, gathered a couple of friends as witnesses – *not* her parents, nor Sam's – trotted off to the local registry office, had a celebratory nosh-up with some pals, then gone back to work the next day, a wife.

'Lucy? I've been thinking . . . Can I say something?'

She put down yet another blouse, and sat on the bed. 'Sure. What?'

'I just wanted to say, you know, while there's still time . . .'

'What?'

'You don't have to do this, you know.'

She nodded her head in agreement. 'I know I don't! But I got hassled into it by Mummy, and somehow once you agree to a proper wedding you end up with all sorts of

stuff that you don't need or want.' She leant sideways and began to flick through various items of clothing.

I was determined to persevere, though I had nothing to fall back on emotionally. Suzy told me I needed to 'work on my relationship' with Lucy, but I never thought we had one, not quite, which was rather a relief. She was unaccountable to me, and I cannot recall many sustained personal conversations between us. I was rarely alone with her adult incarnation, and vaguely ill at ease when I was. She had made, it seemed to me, a set of uninspired choices, the consequences of which – work at a desk in some down-at-heel centre of worthiness – were no doubt admirable in some abstract way. Sam was another, and far more dangerous, example of her bad judgement.

'No, love. I'm sorry. Do come over here and sit for a moment.'

Lucy looked up, puzzled by my request for enhanced proximity, and came to sit beside me in the twin armchairs in the alcove by the window, her body turned slightly away, as if shielding herself from unaccustomed intimacy. 'What's this all about?'

'I just want to have a little chat, you know, before the day.'

'Day? What day? You're being awfully mysterious.'

'I'm so sorry, I'm not very good at this. Your wedding day, of course. Saturday.'

She turned to face me squarely. 'What about it?'

'Well, I was wondering, perhaps you might be getting cold feet? You seem on edge. And I just wanted to say it isn't too late if you want to reconsider. I – Mummy and I – would quite understand . . .'

'Let me get this straight. Are you asking me if I have cold feet, or advising me to have them? Because if you are . . .'

I knew there was some risk involved, but was determined to pursue the thought. 'It's just that people often marry in spite of the fact that they have misgivings. They just get carried along with the flow, and are too timid to say "hold on a minute, I'm not sure I'm ready for this".'

She stood up from her chair, until she was only a few feet away from where I was sitting, and I was looking up at her angry face.

'How dare you! First Mummy hassling me about clothes and stupid fucking details, now my father is trying to call the whole thing off! That's it, isn't it? That's what you want!'

'No, love, not at all. It's just that - '

'You've never liked Sam. You never gave him a chance, did you? You never met him halfway, sat down and talked and tried to get to know him?'

That was true enough. From our first acquaintance, when he came to dinner to meet the parents, uncomfortable in a new jacket and tie, I'd spotted him as the sort of earnest working-class Northern boy who would have benefited from a decent education, had his sharp edges and broad vowels polished and regularised.

She was leaning down now, her face close to mine. 'And you know what is sad? You don't get it at all. Sam is his own man, and he has wonderful qualities, you just can't see them.'

'Tell me what you mean.'

'It's hardly worth bothering,' she said, standing straight and backing away, making a curiously operatic gesture with her hands. 'You'd find it hard to recognise his virtues.'

'Oh yes? Tell me about them. I'm genuinely interested.'

'Goodness,' she said. 'And integrity.'

'I'm glad you feel that way.'

‘I do. I only wish you did too. And I do want to marry him with all my heart. It’s the only thing in this whole ghastly mess that I’m certain about.’

I stood up to comfort her, though reassuring cuddles are well outside my normal repertoire.

She turned away. ‘Let’s leave it,’ she said.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, ‘perhaps it was ham-fisted of me. But I meant well.’

‘Did you now?’ she said.

This always seems to happen when I try to be fatherly.

Lucy’s stare, as I perched on my plastic, was a rich amalgam of triumph and warning, and I turned away, unforgiven. I stifled myself, clenched my cheeks.

Suzy elbowed my ribs, then clasped my hand firmly in tacit reassurance. The sleeve of her silk blouse, that we’d bought in a market in Rajasthan fourteen months before, made a shocking contrast with the pallor of her wrist, where the veins traced their purple trails in a manner that should have felt ominous. The royal blue of the silk shimmered, startlingly lit by a tribe of crimson parrots, beaks slightly agape, dangerous and moronic, yearning to squawk or to nip.

She’d been uncertain, in that stifling market smelling of turmeric and petrol, cooking curries and cow dung, urine and the waft of human shit. I gagged with humid disgust. She held the blouse in the air to inspect it, then placed it across her chest.

‘Very nice lady! Very nice! Parrot most lucky bird. I give you good price!’

A tiny boy and his smaller sister, dressed in rags, had followed us around the market, importuning, holding onto Suzy’s skirt and attempting to grab hold of my trouser leg.

A quick slap put paid to that. The little boy pointed to his slim but by no means distended stomach, and groaned piteously. The little girl looked up – at Suzy – beseechingly. At first glance – I didn't take a second – the lower half of her face was composed entirely of snot.

'Hungry, sah!' He put his hand out, and his tiny sister mimicked the gesture. Suzy patted them on the head kindly, already thinking of a way to slip them a few rupees without causing an urchin storm. She took out a piece of Kleenex, wiped the girl's nose, and threw the tissue into the dirt with the other detritus. I shuddered. I know nothing of caste systems, but these children were verily untouchable.

'For pity's sake,' I said, 'just buy the damn thing! How much can it cost? You can always give it to Lucy if it doesn't suit you. Let's go!'

'I give you best price!'

'Yes! Yes! She'll have it. How much?' I offered half the amount.

'Hungry, sah!'

'Are you sure?' Suzy held the garment uncertainly. I had confused her by switching categories. Was it for Lucy? Would it suit her?

Back at the hotel, after a revolting walk of some fifteen minutes, beseeched by beggars of the heat and dust, the children paid off by the front gate, I made straight for our room, convinced that the stench of the market followed me across the marbled foyer, carried subtly on the jasmine-conditioned air. I spent the next ten minutes in the shower, soaping and gelling and scrubbing. I sniffed my hands, and they carried still the odour of dung and spice. I washed them again.

The ritual of changing into freshly laundered clothes was soothing, and with each layer – freshly ironed socks and

underwear, a crisp cotton shirt with a touch of starch, and finally the careful donning of my mushroom linen suit – I felt as if I were being reincarnated. I put my filthy clothes in the hamper, ready for the hotel butler to pick up and return – pristine – tomorrow. Draped over the chair were Suzy's nightgown and bathrobe, and on the floor lay discarded underthings, for she had changed, God knows why, before we went to the market. Getting clean to get dirty.

The unshowered Suzy was standing on the veranda, her rumpled carrier bag with the silk shirt in it on the recliner beside her, looking over the gardens and the water below. The late afternoon air was freshening. I opened a bottle of wine from the fridge, and poured a glass for each of us.

My box of cigars was in the safe in the wardrobe. I opened it ceremoniously, spirits already lifted by the anticipation of my evening treat. The hotel had a humidor in the bar, next to which a stagey turbaned gentleman with silk robes and silkier moustaches stood at attention, whose sole employ was pompously to facilitate the choice of a cigar for anyone willing to fork out the hefty price for importation from Havana to a five-star palace in Rajasthan. That didn't bother me. Good for them. But the cigars – I was informed before coming – might not withstand the travel, and would deteriorate further languishing in an inadequately moisturised humidor. They would be brittle to the touch, crack and crumble in the mouth, and shed outer leaves in the hand. I saw a florid gentleman, the evening before, expostulating furiously as he peeled the dried outer leaves off the Bolivar Churchill for which he had paid the equivalent of £65.

Forewarned, I'd brought a box of twenty-five Montecristo No. 2s, opened it in London and smoked three cigars – just

enough to create room for two peeled halves of a new potato – and resealed it firmly, tapping the nails back into place. The cigars would stay moist for our full three weeks, allowing my usual one a day. Twirling it between my fingers, I snipped the torpedo end, and gradually heated the tip, turning it slowly and regularly, until a red glow showed across the entire area, blew on it gently, then slightly more firmly. I took the first, the most highly anticipated, the perfect first draw, held it in my mouth, exhaled slowly, allowed the smoke to surround my face – indeed, stepped right into it – and took a deep breath. Richer than a glass of great claret: earth, cinnamon, cream, perhaps a hint of vanilla, also some chocolate, perhaps a homeopathic trace of manure. Even in the morning, when the smoke would have settled and infused the curtains – and as Suzy would remark (again) her clothes (I like it when it infuses mine) – it would still, in its lingering staleness, be one of the great smells of the world. And quite enough, just then, to get the filth out of my nostrils as effectively as the water had expunged it from my pores.

Joining Suzy on the veranda, I offered a glass of wine to her unresponsive hand. She looked out over the lake, unmoved, sucking at a cigarette. Why the smoke did not penetrate her clothing, while mine did, was one of the unexplained mysteries of our marriage. Her claim, which had no merit that I could detect, was that her Sullivan & Powell tipped cigarettes emitted only the mildest and least penetrative of odours. Unlike my Montecristos.

‘Never again,’ I said. I may actually have shuddered. I remember some involuntary movement, a full body tremor. ‘I’m happy to see the sights. I like our driver. But keep me off the streets. They utterly disgust me.’

She half turned, and took a long drink of the wine, lips

pursed as if against excessive acidity, some crass grapefruity sauvignon perhaps. It wasn't. Along with my box of cigars, I had imported an adequate supply of Meursault, which had travelled better than I had.

'Tell me about disgusting,' she murmured, not meeting my eye.

I came up behind her and put my arms around her. 'I'm so sorry,' I said, 'this is all my fault.'

'I know,' she murmured, 'you're doing your best. It was asking too much of you . . .'

I kissed her neck, which smelled of the market and humid air.

'There's still time before dinner,' she said. 'Let me have a quick shower.'

She 'felt at home' in India, she said, though this was our first trip together. She'd been determined to save me the discomforts of such a visit, but eventually I had insisted: if she felt that India was (in some idiotic way) 'her spiritual home', then the least I could do, before we both dropped off the perch like dead parrots, was to accompany her there.

She would happily have abjured the palaces and luxury hotels with which India is now so amply provided, and stayed instead in simple hostelries, or – more desirable yet – with 'real Indian families', as she had on previous visits with various friends. (I don't know what 'unreal' Indian families would have been. Except, of course, for her own.)

Her parents Henry and Sophia – latterly Sir and Lady – lived in a Georgian rectory in Dorset, which they purchased in their late-thirties with money gouged out of the City. They proceeded to reinvent themselves as stereotypes, took up country pursuits with the idiotic enthusiasm only urban refugees can generate. They hunted (fox), fished,

went on bracing walks in wellies, planted a kitchen garden, were active in the local church, and provided occasional jobs for a number of locals, whom they, not entirely discreetly, called yokels. Their only deviation from the county norms was in their choice of governesses for the children, Suzy and her older brother Rupert. Not for them the sulky and hormonally hyperactive au pair – ‘trouble on wheels, my dear’ – nor indeed, did they look for the sort of nanny self-advertised in *The Lady*. No, they wanted only Indian women, of mature age, to look after their children. They wanted an ayah, and indeed a succession of them were called just, and only, that. The local gentry sneered, but Sir Henry was triumphantly unrepentant: ‘It’s what they would have done, if they’d thought of it first. Too late now.’

And so Suzy grew up, in their Dorset idyll, a foster child of Empire. Sir Henry encouraged Ayah to read Indian stories, sing Indian songs, draw pictures of tigers, elephants, and parrots, make Indian sweets, and otherwise indicate to the children that there was something other – if not something more – than the long tedious days of West Country life. He could hardly wait to catch the 6.50 train from Dorchester to London every Monday morning and spending the week at his set in Albany. He had some grand times there, and Sophia left him to it. It was rather a relief, she said.

On the raised dais, slumped next to the couple as they exchanged rings, was their dog Bruno, an ungainly slobbering half-breed, tarry black, bleakly unappealing, intermittently dangerous. He’d twice bitten their postman, and their mail now had to be picked up at the local post office. The ring had been attached to a string around his neck, and the wedding celebrant, who to my surprise wore

neither beard nor sandals, had some difficulty getting it off the beast's neck, and into the hands of the increasingly anxious groom.

Further noxious blather ensued. Suzy's crimson parrots seemed to mock and threaten me, as her hand released the firmness of its grip, and became still, coolly resting in mine. When the groom, finally, kissed the bride, with more enthusiasm than I thought seemly, the pleasure on Lucy's face soothed me. Next to me Suzy wiped her tears. Our daughter was married.

I presume it should be a happy memory, but its edges are frayed and foxed by sadness. Happiness is fragile at the very moment of pleasure-taking, so easily defeated by a toothache or an itinerant virus. And past happiness? That lovely weekend at Lake Garda? The week that Suzy's first novel came out? Delicate, easily bruised, soon rotten, evanescent. Do we lie on our deathbeds remembering such nonsense? Who cares? Who cared?

I was undelighted by Lucy's choices and prospects, though I am unsure, as things developed and she entered fully into her life as wife and mother, whether I was right to worry so. And now worry seems a pallid, almost desirable state of mind compared to my daily dose of helplessness, desperation and withdrawal. Oh, to have some worries! School fees. Recalcitrant teenagers. Marital disharmony. Any of the above, please. All of the above. Anything, rather than this.

When Lucy was three, I recall her slight and wispy in a favourite cotton dress, white with tiny pink hearts perhaps – I can't remember – but in the story I am constructing she looks dreamy in it, worn unfashionably long for one so tiny, floaty and ethereal as an angel. She would walk alongside as we went to the local shops, reach up on tiptoes

and, if I leant down, put her hand in mine. We weren't holding hands, hers was too slight to grasp mine, yet, but I would enfold her tiny fingers in my palm, and squeeze them as gently as if I were testing a downy apricot in the supermarket, anxious to avoid bruising.

I found myself whistling quietly as the song drifted through my head: Johnny Mathis's 'Misty', a sentimental ballad that I had always scorned, though when I was sixteen my first girlfriend found it moving, though not moving enough. *I get misty, just holding your hand.* The metaphor felt surprisingly appropriate, for such a rotten song. Love fills every available space, soaks, suffuses and diffuses like a sea mist filling a room. Distances recede, all you can see is what is in front of your face. It makes you feel soggy. Nothing is better than love.

It was striking, only a year or so later, when Lucy had gained a couple of inches and no longer had to tiptoe, nor I to lean, that we could walk hand in hand, she giving me an answering squeeze, as firm as she could. We were both aware, I felt, of some new dimension to our relations, something grown up, reciprocal but diminished. I had stopped singing 'Misty' by then – you had to lean down to feel that way.

Her childhood reappears, now, only in cloudy vignettes that I rather suspect I have invented, or at least elaborated considerably. I suppose it doesn't matter. We reconvene what time allows, and the arc of our stories is drawn from the few incidents that we recall, or make up. Most of my memories of her as a tiny girl are set in the summer. In the winter she was a demon, felt the cold terribly, shivered and sniffled, and resolutely refused to wear warm clothing when she went out. One Christmas Suzy bought her a chic olive green duffel coat with wooden toggles, which Lucy

loathed from the very moment it emerged from its wrapping paper and refused to wear.

‘No buttons!’ she would howl. ‘No! No! No buttons!’

I was inclined to struggle and to confront, hold her steady and force her arms into the sleeves, to insist on doing up the dreaded toggles.

‘Not buttons!’ I said, trying to keep calm. ‘Toggles! Toggles good, buttons bad!’ I pushed her little arms firmly into the sleeves and commenced toggling her up. If she cried, too bad. Children have to be taught to stop crying. ‘Do hold still! How are you going to keep warm without a coat?’

‘Don’t you say that *to me!* No buttons!’

What was so objectionable about buttons was unclear. She hated them on a blouse, on pyjamas, on a coat. We eventually capitulated, for Lucy was amenable to zippers, which she liked to play with, and (particularly) to Velcro.

‘Velcro! For fuck’s sake. I have a daughter who loves Velcro . . . Kill me,’ said Suzy, initiating a lifetime’s disappointment with her daughter’s tastes. She even disapproved of Lucy’s Laura Ashley phase: ‘all those cutesified anodyne patterns, the awful pastel colours, the sheer drab mediocrity of it. She’s Welsh, you know.’

‘Who is?’

‘Laura Ashley. All you need to know.’

Call me a damn fool, but I loved it, at least on Lucy. Her mother would have looked sappy swanning about in all those flowery garments, but on a three-year-old they looked peachy.

I want to remember Lucy’s dress as it was, that summerised day walking to the newsagent’s. I scrunch my eyes up to replay it, to see us walking so slowly and happily up the street, hand in hand. Some sort of little girly dress, wispy and delicious. I can make one up if I want to. I try a variety

of colours and patterns, of the kind that she loved. Pink? For sure. Polka dots against a cream background? Or perhaps white? I try them on her. She looks – we're in the present tense all of a sudden – she looks gorgeous in it – cream is better! So delighted and free, aware of herself.

That was the past, then: not immutable, oddly biddable, malleable. There was no one to object, and it no longer mattered. The past is something we make and remake, remember or disremember – same thing, almost. You can polka-dot it, change times and seasons, rewrite the dialogue, rearrange the cast of characters. There is no dissembling in this. Most is lost, the vast percentage of what we have been. This is what it is to be a person, and it gets worse as you get older.

'Worse?' Not that, not quite. As we age, our stories are reduced until the constituent flavours are enhanced and concentrated. And sometimes, as in this story of little Lucy, too great a concentration gives not pleasure but something closer to pain, as a reduction of the essence of sensual pleasure, say, would produce something unendurable. As my recollection of my little daughter causes me to smile and to wince.

I am reduced to this. I live in reduced circumstances, left with the unendurable intensity of wormwood and gall (whatever they are), with fading hints of honey. There is something both inevitable in this, as we move towards the final telling of our final stories, the last version of ourselves, and something moving.

This journal? A coming-of-old-age book, dispirited, hopelessly knowing. For what happens, faced squarely, is loss. Loss of what we have been, loss of the history of our dear loved ones, loss of the incidents and narratives that have defined us.

I cannot locate much by way of gain in this process, save

that most of what I have forgotten wasn't worth remembering. Good riddance really, like clearing the attics before the house is sold.

So what? I can't even remember the plot of the novel I read last week. Or its title. I struggle sometimes to remember what the names of common objects are, I keep losing things. A fork, a sofa, the Prime Minister. I am still a master of adjectives and verbs, and pretty damn good at summoning adverbs, but I am losing my nouns at an alarming rate.

I would worry about early onset Alzheimer's, only I'm not young enough for it. But you can get away with a lot when there is no one to talk to but yourself, and you know you are 'misty-fying', like one of those fade-out images in a film, but you are watching it by yourself, and can turn your head at the scary bits, whine a little and put your paws over your eyes.

How do I remember myself? Or Lucy? Or Suzy? Why should I?

I cannot bear dogs, they disgust me. Why would a civilised person welcome such a creature into an otherwise orderly home? No matter how cunningly disguised by fluff and fealty, all I see is a shameless slobbering arse-sniffing leg-humping scrotum-toting arsehole-flaunting filth-spreader: as profligate a shitslinger as Kahlil Gibran, only closer to the ground. If I presented myself like that I'd be hauled away, no matter how much I licked your face or howled on your grave. No dogs in heaven.

I particularly detest my neighbour's dog, whose hideous noises are sufficient to awaken the dead, or at least the dying. I gather it is called Spike, and it looks the part, with a face composed of overlapping layers of fat mysteriously transformed into muscle. Hard blubber, hideously