

Of course, you know where it begins.

It begins the way life begins, with the sound of screaming.

I was upstairs, at my desk, balancing the books. I recall being in a rather buoyant mood, having sold that afternoon a mid-Victorian drop-leaf table for a most welcome amount. It must have been half past seven. The sky outside the window was particularly beautiful, I remember thinking. One of those glorious May sunsets that crams all the beauty of the day into its dying moments.

Now, where were you? Yes: your bedroom. You were practising your cello, as you had been since Reuben had left to meet his friends at the tennis courts.

At the time I heard it, the scream, I had already lowered my gaze towards the park. I think I must have been looking over at the horse chestnuts, rather than the empty climbing frame, because I hadn't noticed anyone on East Mount Road. There was some kind of numerical discrepancy I was trying to solve; I can't remember what precisely.

Oh, I could hold that scene just there. I could write ten thousand words about that sunset, about that park, about the trivial queries of my profit and loss accounts. You see, as I write I am back inside that moment, I am back there in that room, wrapped up warm in that unknowing contentment. For this pen to push that evening on, to get to the moment where the sound of the scream actually meant something, seems a kind of crime. And yet I have to tell you how it was, exactly as I saw it, because this was the end and the start of everything, wasn't it? So come on, Terence, get on with it, you don't have all day.

* * *

The scream struck me first as a disturbance. An intrusion on the sweet sound of whatever Brahms sonata was floating to me from your bedroom. Then, before I knew why, it caused a kind of pain, a twist in my stomach, as if my body was understanding before my mind.

Simultaneous with the sound of the scream, there were other noises, coming from the same direction. Voices unified in a chant, repeating a two-syllable word or name I couldn't quite catch. I looked towards the noise and saw the first street lamp stutter into life. Something was hanging from the horizontal section of the pole. A dark blue shape that didn't immediately make sense, high above the ground.

There were people standing below – boys – and the hanging object and the chanting gained clarity in my mind at the same time.

'Reuben! Reuben! Reuben!'

I froze. Maybe too much of me was still lost in my account books as, for a second or so, I did nothing except watch.

My son was hanging from a lamp post, using the greatest of strength to risk his life for the sake of entertaining those he thought were friends.

I felt things sharpen and began to move, gaining momentum as I ran across the landing.

Your music stopped.

'Dad?' you asked me.

I rushed downstairs and through the shop. My hip knocked into something, a chest, causing one of the figurines to drop and smash.

I crossed the street and ran through the gate. I crossed the park at the pace of a younger self, flying over the leaves and grass and through the deserted play area. All the time I kept him in sight, as if to lose him for a second would cause his grip to weaken. I ran feeling the terror beat in my chest, behind my eyes and in my ears.

He shuffled his hands closer towards the vertical section of the post.

I could see his face now, glowing an unnatural yellow from the

lamp. His teeth bared with the strain, his bulging eyes already knowing the insanity of his mistake.

Please, Bryony, understand this: the pain of a child is the pain of a parent. As I ran to your brother I knew I was running to myself.

I stepped on the park wall and jumped down to the pavement, landing badly. I twisted my ankle on the concrete but I fought against it as I ran towards him, as I called his name.

Your brother couldn't move. His face was twisted in agony. The glare of the light blanched his skin, releasing him of the birth mark he always hated.

I was getting closer now.

'Reuben!' I shouted. 'Reuben!'

He saw me as I pushed my way through his friends. I can still see his face and all the confusion and terror and helplessness it contained. In that moment of recognition, of distraction, the concentration he needed to stay exactly where he was suddenly faltered. I could feel it before it happened, a kind of gloating doom leaking out from the terraced houses. An invisible but all-encompassing evil that stole every last hope.

'Reuben! No!'

He fell, fast and heavy.

Within a second his screaming had stopped and he was on the concrete pavement in front of me.

Everything about him seemed so hideous and unnatural as he lay there, like an abandoned puppet. The crooked angles of his legs. The accelerated rhythm of his chest. The shining blood that spilt from his mouth.

'Get an ambulance,' I shouted at the crowd of boys who stood there in numb silence. 'Now!'

In the distance cars sped by on Blossom Street, heading into York or out to the supermarket, immune and unaware.

I crouched down and my hand touched his face and I pleaded with him to stay with me.

I begged him.

And it seemed like some kind of deliberate punishment, the way he died. I could see the decision in his eyes, as the substance of life retreated further and further from his body.

One of the boys, the smallest, vomited on the pavement.

Another – shaven-headed, sharp-eyed – staggered back, away, onto the empty road.

The tallest and most muscular of the group just stood there, looking at me, a shaded face inside a hood. I hated that boy and the brutal indifference of his face. I cursed the god who had made this boy stand there, breathing before me, while Reuben was dying on the pavement. Inside the desperate urgency of that moment I sensed there was something not quite right about that boy, as though he had been pasted onto the scene from another reality.

I picked up one of Reuben's heavy hands, his left, and saw his palm was still red and indented from holding onto the post. I rubbed it and I kept talking to him, words on top of words, but all the time I could see him retreating from his body, backing away. And then he said something.

'Don't go.' As if it was me who was leaving and not him. They were his last words.

The hand went cold, the night gathered closer and the ambulance came to confirm it was too late for anything to be done.

I remember I saw you across the park.

I remember leaving Reuben's body on the pavement.

I remember you asked me, 'Dad, what's happening?'

I remember saying, 'Go back, Petal, go back home. Please.'

I remember you asked about the ambulance.

I remember I ignored the question and repeated my demand.

I remember the boy in the hood, staring straight at you.

I remember I became insistent, I remember grabbing your arm and shouting, I remember being harsher with you than I had ever been.

I remember the look on your face and I remember you running back home, to the shop entrance, and the door closing. And the knowledge below the madness that I had betrayed you both.

As you know, for much of my life I have spent my time mending broken things. Repairing clock dials, restoring old chairs, retouching china. Over the years I have become accomplished at removing stains with ammonia, or a dab of white spirit. I can remove scratches from glass. I can simulate different grains of wood. And I can restore a corroded Tudor candlestick with vinegar, half a pint of hot water and a piece of fine wire wool.

To buy a George III mahogany dressing table suffering the scars and strains of two centuries, and then return it to its original glory, once gave me such a thrill. Or equally, to have Mrs Weeks come into the shop and run her informed fingers over a Worcester vase without detecting the cracks, not so long ago filled my soul with happiness.

It gave me a kind of power, I suppose. A means of defeating time. A way of insulating myself against this foul, mouldering age. And I cannot explain to you the desperate pain it gives me to know that I cannot restore our own private past in quite the same way.

Here is something you must understand.

There have been four people in this life I have truly loved, and out of those four, you are the only one remaining. All of the others died of unnatural causes. Son, wife, mother. All three before their time.

You love three people and they die. It hardly warrants a public inquiry, does it? No. How many would you have to love and watch die before people grew suspicious of that love? Five? Ten? A hundred? Three is nothing. A fig. Three is just plain old bad luck,

even if it is three-quarters of all you have ever cared for in the world.

Oh, I have tried to be rational. Come on, Terence, I tell myself. None of these deaths were your responsibility. And, of course, my defence would hold up in a court of law.

But where are the courts of love? And what possible punishment could they enforce that was worse than grief? I came to believe, after Reuben died, that there was something wrong with me, and with the love I had to offer. I had failed Reuben. I let him die among friends I had never met.

I had loved him, but I always imagined there would be some later day when I could make everything up to him. I couldn't accept that these later days would never come.

Of course, the death of a child is, for any parent, always an impossible fact. You hear the opening bars of a familiar sonata and the music stops but you still feel those silent notes, their beauty and power no less real, no less complete. With Reuben I had been ignoring the tune. It had been there, all the time, played continuously for his fourteen years, but I had switched off, stopped listening. I was always concentrating on the shop, or on you, and left Reuben to his own devices.

So what I once ignored I strained to find, and if I strained hard enough I caught flashes, brief bursts of the life that was transformed but did not truly end. Notes returning not in pretty sequence, but as a cacophony, crashing over me with the weight of guilt.

The morning of the funeral I awoke to the sound of buzzing. A rather angry, sawing noise that cut its way through the darkness. I opened my eyes and raised my head from the pillow to see where it was

coming from. The room, softly lit by the morning sun that filtered through the curtains, was all there. The framed photograph of your mother, the wardrobe, the Turner print, the French mantel clock. Everything, apart from the noise, was normal. It was only when I sat up further, propped on my elbows, that I identified the source. Low above the bed, over the section of blankets that covered my legs and feet, I saw what must have been five hundred small flies, hovering, just hovering, as if I was a sun-rotten corpse in the desert.

For a moment, there was no fear. The sight of these creatures, moving in short oval swirls, at first had a mesmeric effect. Then something changed. As if suddenly aware that I had woken, the flies began to move in one cloudlike motion further up the bed, towards my face. Soon they were all around me, a dark blizzard, with their angry, unstoppable noise getting louder every second. I dived down, deep under the blankets, hoping the flies wouldn't follow and with that sudden movement the noise stopped completely. I waited a second in the warm and cushioned dark, then resurfaced.

The flies had all disappeared, leaving no trace. I looked around again and, although the creatures had gone, I couldn't help but feel that the room was different, as if every object had shared my delusion.

I remember Cynthia and me talking in the car, patching our grief with small nothings, as the funeral procession rolled through the old Saxon streets. At one point she turned to you and said: 'You are doing so well.' You returned your grandmother's sad smile and I muttered an agreement. You were certainly remarkably composed, as you had been for much of the week. Too composed, I had thought, worried you were keeping it all locked in.

I tried to keep my thoughts on your brother but found them gravitating towards you, and to the effect your twin brother's death was having on your behaviour.

You hadn't played your cello all week. This, I told myself, was understandable. You had gone to the stables every evening, to take care of Turpin, but you hadn't ridden him since the day before Reuben died. This too was as might be expected. You had lost your twin brother and you were stranded now, an only child of an only parent. Still, something troubled me. You had been off school, and I had closed the shop, yet I don't think we had talked properly for the whole week. You had always found an excuse to leave the room (to check the iron, to feed Higgins, to go to the toilet). Even then, in that slow-moving car, you felt my eyes upon you and you seemed to wince, as though there was a heat to my gaze, scorching your cheek.

Cynthia's hand squeezed mine as we approached the church. I noticed her nails, decorated with their usual black varnish, her face painted in her macabre style, and remembered her tear-stained joke that morning about how the one useful thing with regard to her sense of fashion was that she never had to think what to wear for a funeral.

We pulled up at the church. We left the car with faces filled with the grief we felt, but also knew we had to show. As we walked past those cramped old graves of plague victims I thought of all the dead parents, separated from their children. Do you remember Cynthia's old ghost story? About the plague boy who had been buried outside York's walls, in line with the new laws, and the spirit of his mother rising up from the graveyard to search in vain for her son? She told you both it when you were younger, walking back with your oranges and candles from Christingle, and Reuben laughed at you for being scared.

It is strange. I feel myself sinking. You remember one thing and there is always something else, lurking below, pulling you under. But I must keep my head up. I must stay gulping the fresh air.

* * *

You may wonder why I need to relive these things, when you were there too, but I must tell you everything as I saw it, for you know only your side, and I know only mine, and hopefully when you read this account you will look behind what I have done and a kind of truth will emerge somewhere in that space, that airy space, between your reading and my writing. It is a vain hope, but the last I have, so I will cling to it, as I clung to you as we walked up the path.

Peter, the vicar, was at the other end of that path to meet us, ready to give sympathy and the necessary instructions. He said something to you, and Cynthia butted in on your behalf, defending you against any obligation to speak. It was then that I turned round and saw the boy who had been there the night Reuben died. The boy whom I had hated instantly, for the blank indifference I had seen in his face. His hood was gone. He stood in a cheap suit, wearing a black tie, yet I must admit he had a striking appearance. The pale skin and black hair and those eyes that seemed to contain a dark and brooding power. Something violent, and dangerous.

I don't know if you had seen him. Had you? I spoke a word in Cynthia's ear and walked past those antique graves towards him.

'May I ask what you are doing here?'

He didn't say anything at first. He was wrestling with the sudden fury that was marked on his face.

'Ah'm Denny,' he said, as if it should have signified something.

'Denny?'

'Ah were one of Reuben's mates.' There was a rough arrogance to the voice, something confrontational that seemed wholly inappropriate to the occasion.

'He never mentioned you.'

'Ah were there when he . . . You saw us.'

'Yes, I saw you.' I bit back insults and accusations. It was not the time nor the place. 'Now, why are you here?'

‘The funeral.’

‘No. You weren’t invited.’

‘Ah wanted to come.’ His eyes pressed harder than his words.

‘Well, you came. And now you can go.’

He looked past me, over my shoulder. I turned and saw you still struggling with the vicar.

‘Go,’ I said. ‘You’re not welcome here. Leave us alone.’

He nodded. A suspicion confirmed.

‘Right,’ he said, through a tensed mouth. As he turned and walked away I had the most strange and unpleasant sensation. It was a feeling I can only describe to you as a desertion, some essential part of my soul being pulled away, leaving me for a moment uncertain of where I was. My vision darkened, my brain fuzzed with a strange energy, and I grasped the stone gatepost for support.

My memory jumps at this point to inside the church. I remember the slow trudge behind the coffin. I remember the vicar’s vague niceties. I can see Cynthia, up at the lectern, delivering the bit she had chosen from Corinthians with none of her normal theatrics. ‘For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being . . .’

Even more sharply, I remember myself looking out as I struggled to start the poem I had chosen. I saw so many faces, all wearing the compulsory expressions of grief. Teachers, customers, undertakers. And you among them, on the nearest pew, staring over at your brother’s coffin. I looked down at the sheet in front of me, the sheet Cynthia had printed out so neatly from her machine.

For a while I couldn’t speak, I couldn’t cry, I couldn’t do anything. I just stood there.

I made those poor people live lifetimes inside that minute. I could hardly breathe. Peter was already heading towards me, raising his eyebrows, when I finally pushed myself into it.

‘To sleep,’ I said, the words echoing off the cold stone walls.

‘To sleep.’

I kept saying it – ‘To sleep’ – turning the key to an engine in my mind. ‘John Keats.’

*O soft embalmer of the still midnight!
Shutting, with careful fingers and benign
Our gloom-pleas'd eyes, embower'd from the light,
Enshaded in forgetfulness divine;
O soothest Sleep! if so it please thee, close,
In midst of this thine hymn, my willing eyes,
Or wait the 'Amen', ere thy poppy throws
Around my bed its lulling charities;
Then save me, or the passed day will shine
Upon my pillow, breeding many woes;
Save me from curious conscience, that still lords
Its strength for darkness, burrowing like a mole;
Turn the key deftly in the oiled wards,
And seal the hushed casket of my soul.*

I sat back down. Peter concluded the service. I watched the feet of the pall-bearers as they turned down the aisle. The left shoes crossing the right. Four pairs of feet moving in perfect time, like the beginning of a macabre dance routine.

My eyes slid up and reached one of the faces, trying to hide the strain it took to shoulder the coffin's weight, struck by a grief it didn't feel.

I looked at you and told you, 'It's all right.'

You said nothing.

Outside, five minutes later, and soft rain pattered on the large black umbrella that I held to shelter you and your grandmother. After a week of silence, your tears came, bringing Cynthia's with them. Only my eyes remained dry, even though my heart must have wept. I'm sure it must have.

I still hear Peter's voice.

‘We have entrusted our brother Reuben to God’s mercy, and we now commit his body to the ground.’ The pall-bearers lowered the coffin, releasing the black straps in steady motion. ‘Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.’ The comfort of repetition, of ritual, did nothing to calm your sobs. ‘In sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.’ The coffin reached hard ground, settled, and was still. ‘Who died, was buried, and rose again for us. To him be glory for ever and ever.’ And then at last there was the collective ‘Amen’, spoken so low it seemed to come from the earth that would bury him. The earth that made us believe he was gone.

The police were going to do nothing to his friends.

‘He wasn’t forced up there.’

Such a primitive notion of force, and accident, and responsibility.

I never told you this but I went to see them. The boys. They hung around the disused tennis courts, so, after I had dropped you at the stables, I went to voice my feelings.

They were there. All except him, Denny.

I pulled up to the kerb and wound down my window.

‘I hope you’re happy,’ I said, leaning out. ‘I hope you had fun, watching him die. I hope you sleep the innocent sleep, knowing you are soaked in his blood.’

They stood there, behind the crossed wire, like thugs in a Bernstein musical. The shaven-haired boy with the sharp eyes made a rude gesture, but said nothing.

‘Murderers,’ I yelled, before screeching off.

And I didn’t leave it there. The next evening I yelled the same

accusation. And the next, and the next, but I never saw him. I never saw Denny there. Indeed, by the fourth time, I couldn't see any of them. I was yelling into nothing, accusing the air. Guilt had made them evaporate, I told myself. My words had moved them on. The strange thing is I felt no satisfaction at this. My heart fell when I realised they weren't there, and my anger sank swiftly back to despair.

From his early school reports it was clear that your brother was not going to be a high achiever in an academic sense. There were none of the 'outstandings' or 'exceptionals' that always rained down on you, never a 'pleasure to teach' or a 'joyous addition to the classroom'.

Reuben had no interest in books in the way you had. For him, reading never rose above the level of a necessary chore. He enjoyed my night-time stories of Dick Turpin and all those other old rogues, as you both did, but once he had heard one story he wanted to hear it again and again, whereas you always craved tales you had never known before.

I see him now, at the window, his finger making patterns in the condensation. 'A quiet boy.' 'Easily led.'

Money, in this blind century, has become the measure of love. A crude outsider would tell me I exercised more care for you because, from the age of eleven, I paid for your schooling.

Yet what could I do? I could only pay for one of you – should you have both suffered for the sake of equality? Was it my fault the Mount was a girls' school? Would it have been better to send Reuben, who had never shown any interest in his education? No, St John's was the obvious choice for him.

Yet, of course, I must admit this was not the only extra-vagance I afforded you. After all, you wanted to ride, so I paid for a horse and for it to be at livery. You wanted to play music, and I paid for you to have violin and then cello lessons at the college. You wanted a cat, specifically a coffee-cream Birman, and I bought you Higgins.

Yet you were actively interested in these things. They weren't acquired out of any fatherly overindulgence, or if they were I would gladly have shown the same indulgence to your brother if he had only requested such presents. Where were Reuben's interests? I never had any idea. He wanted a bicycle and the one I bought wasn't good enough. He wanted all this technological claptrap that he knew I wouldn't allow before he asked. No, we must never forget it, your brother was not easy. Even in my grief I could not ignore this. Indeed, my grief required me to remember it very well, for I already knew how sentimentality can flood in and drown memories, leaving the true person beyond recall.

I wanted to remember him as he was. I wanted to remember his incessant screams through the night as a baby, his later tantrums, his insatiable appetite for jellied sweets. I wanted to remember how cross he got when you used to read from the same picture book together. I wanted to remember the rows he had with you, even the one where he tore up your sheet music.

I wanted to remember the way he used to sit and watch television, with his hand covering the birthmark on his face. I wanted to remember the cigarette incident, the shoplifting incident, the smashed vase incident. I wanted to remember the early Sunday mornings when you would both go with me to an antiques fair, and he would grumble all the way down the A1.

Yet the memories of him were always hard to relive and restore. When I thought of him a thought of you would swiftly arrive in its place. When I tried to picture you as babies, as your mother last saw you, I wouldn't be able to see his screaming face. There was always

just you, lying placid by his side, lost in your innocent unworded dreams. A dream yourself.

Now, that first day I opened the shop after his funeral. Your first day back at the Mount. I kept myself busy polishing the ewers and tureens and all the other pieces of silverware. All day I was there in my white cotton gloves, filling the shop with the smell of polish, my curved reflection staring back with manic eyes.

Customers came in and I scared them out of spending their money. I made mistakes. I gave people the wrong change. I dropped a Davenport jug. I was feeling dreadful.

‘Come on, Terence, pull your socks up,’ said Cynthia, helping out behind the counter. ‘You’ve got my granddaughter to feed.’

I know I used to grumble to you about how she scared away the customers with her witch’s nails and wardrobe and forthright manner, but really she was a great help.

zThen there was her special meal she was already planning for no specified purpose. ‘I’m inviting my old am dram friends,’ she said. ‘We’re going to the Box Tree. It’s got a Michelin star, apparently, and just had a refurbishment. You have to book months in advance, so if I want it for August I’m going to have to arrange it now. Do you both want to come?’

You were on the sofa, in your jodhpurs, ready to go to the stables. ‘Yes, I’ll come,’ you said, much to my relief.

‘Yes, Cynthia, of course,’ I said, realising how important it seemed to her. ‘I’d love to be there.’

‘Very good,’ she said. ‘I’ll write it on the calendar.’

* * *

You said little in the car, en route to the stables. I remember leaving you there, and feeling what I had felt at the funeral. That strange sensation of departing myself, a leaking out of my soul, complete with the darkening sense of vision. And then on my return, of course, I saw him. Denny. It was getting dark and so, when I turned towards the paddock and saw this sweating figure in running clothes, shining pale in the car headlights, I thought it might be a hallucination. I blinked him away but he was still there, staring straight at me.

I got out and told him to leave. He walked away, giving me a look of steely resolution, before continuing his run. Then I called to you, do you remember? And we had that row as we walked Turpin back to his stable. Apparently you had no idea what he was doing there. Apparently you hated him just as much as I did. Apparently he'd never been to gawp at you before.

You were perfectly convincing, and I was perfectly convinced, even if I had the sense that I had been woken up to something. There was so much that was precious in my life that I had been leaving open and undefended. 'I'm sorry, Petal,' I said. 'I shouldn't have raised my voice.' And you nodded and watched the houses slide past, perhaps wishing you were behind their square, golden windows, happily lost in another girl's Tuesday night.

I remember trying to sort out your brother's belongings. I sat there, on his bed, and felt the foreignness of the room. Posters of films I had never heard of. Unfathomable technology I didn't even realise he owned. Magazines covered with women who didn't look like women, women who looked so inhuman they might have been designed by an Italian sports car manufacturer.

I went through his school bag and found a letter he never gave me. It was from his headmaster, informing me that he had missed two of Mr Weeks' history lessons. The letter dated from March,

before Mr Weeks had lost his job. I remembered him from the time he had come into the shop with his wife and his son George, to buy the pine mule chest. A tall yeti of a man who could have been quite a bully in the classroom, I imagined.

It was strange, being in his room. Reuben's presence was so real, contained as it was in all those objects, those possessions that reminded me how little I had understood him. With Cynthia's help we eventually packed a lot of stuff away in the attic. You helped with some of it, didn't you?

Though the thing I really need to tell you concerns his bicycle. As you know, I popped an advertisement in the window, offering it for twenty-five pounds. Within a day a woman had called and arranged to come in and buy it for her son. A Scottish lady with a long face that reminded me rather of the aboriginal statues on Easter Island.

I was retrieving the bicycle from the shed when the darkness crowded around me and I again felt that peculiar sensation at the back of my brain. Only this time it was stronger. It was as though someone was turning a dial in my mind, sliding it across frequencies, trying to find a different station. The feeling was at its most intense as I patted the saddle and let the Scottish lady wheel the bicycle away from me. I stood there for a while, in this kind of vague trance, watching her roll it down the street. I stayed there until the bicycle disappeared, and the sensation stopped, leaving my mind restored to its comforting mode of sadness.

As your former hero Pablo Casals once put it, to be a musician is to recognise the soul that lives in objects. A soul that may be made most visible by a Steinway or a Stradivari, or may be most well expressed

by a Bach or a Mozart, but that is always there, in every thing of substance.

Of course, I am not a musician. I sell antiques, but the same knowledge applies. You sit all day in a shop, with the old clocks and the tables and the chairs, the plates and the bureaux, and you feel just like them. Just another object that has lived through events it could not change, crafted and transformed, forced to sit and wait in a kind of limbo, its fate as unknown as all the others’.

A customer came in one afternoon – a bullish man of the Yorkshire mould. The sort of chap within whom arrogance and ignorance compete for top billing. He grumbled his way around from price tag to price tag, telling Cynthia and myself that he’d be very surprised if we’d get this much for an art nouveau figurine, or that much for a reading table.

‘Oh,’ said Cynthia. ‘But it’s rosewood.’

‘Makes no difference,’ the man said.

‘And it’s early Georgian.’

‘Early Mesopotamian wouldn’t justify that price.’

By that point, I’d had enough.

‘There are two types of customer for antiques,’ I told him. ‘There are those who appreciate an object’s soul, and understand that, truly, even the smallest items – the sauce ladles, the thimbles, the silver barrel nutmeg graters – can only ever be undervalued. These I would call the true aficionados, the people who appreciate all the lives that have grated with, or worn, or poured, or sat at, or cried near, or dreamed upon, or cried against, or fallen in love in the same room as such things. These are the people who like to frequent an establishment such as Cave Antiques.’

He stood there, mirroring Cynthia’s widening mouth and eyes, as unlikely to interrupt as the figure in his hand. The Girl with a Tambourine, decorated in green and pink enamels. I had bought it originally as part of a pair. The other one had dropped and smashed

when I had collided with the chest on my way to reach Reuben, the night he died.

I continued: 'Whereas the other type, the type I might just see before me now, is the customer who sees an object as the sum of the materials with which it has been made. The customer who does not understand or acknowledge the hands that went into its making, or the centuries-long affection which various and long-dead owners have bestowed upon said item. No, these people are ignorant of such matters. They don't care for them. They see numbers where they should see beauty. They look at the face of a brass dial clock and see only the time.'

The man stood there, almost as bemused as myself by this outburst. 'I was going to buy this for my wife's birthday,' he said, placing the art nouveau figure back where it came from. 'But with service like this I think I'll take my custom elsewhere.'

After he left I had Cynthia to deal with. 'Terence, what on earth has got into you?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'I just didn't like the way he was talking to you.'

'Good God, Terence. I'm old and ugly enough to look after myself. We just lost a sale there.'

'I know, I'm sorry. It wasn't about him. I'm sorry.'

She sighed. 'You know what you need, don't you?'

I shook my head.

'You need to get away. You and Bryony. A holiday. I could look after the shop for a week.'

A holiday. Even the word seemed preposterous. A dancing jester at a wake, handing out picture postcards. It prompted a fleeting blink of a memory. Heading south on a French motorway with you and Reuben asleep in the back, your bodies curved towards each other like closed brackets.

'No, Cynthia, I don't think so,' I said, but all afternoon the idea grew and grew.

Maybe it wasn't so preposterous after all. Maybe this was our

opportunity to restore things. To pick up all the broken pieces and put things back the way they once were. Yes, this was the chance to heal our fractured souls.