The Quiet of the Church: A Novella

William Pittam

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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The Quiet of the Church: A Novella
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

William Pittam
Staffordshire University
Bachelor of Arts in English and Journalism, 2007
Bath Spa University
Master of the Arts in Creative Writing, 2010

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University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

Professor Padma Viswanathan
Thesis Director

Dr. Sean Dempsey
Professor Toni Jensen
Committee Member
Committee Member
Abstract

This novella follows the story of Robert, his partner, Helen, and their son, Tom, after their move from England to Wales. Robert has taken a job on a small farm owned by Paul Harrow, a painter from London. Paul’s marriage seems to Robert as uncertain as his own relationship with Helen, and he develops a quiet bond with Caroline, the artist’s wife. Helen is fascinated by Paul and his prodigal daughter, Nicola, and begins to take painting lessons from the artist. She encourages Tom to join her; she wants him to develop his own artistic talents. As the story progresses, we see Robert’s uncertainty about his relationship with his own family deepen, including his identity as a father.
Acknowledgments

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Dedication

This novella is dedicated to my family.
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The day was hot, and the beach was crowded with tourists. Robert was lying against the sand, finishing his first and only cigarette of the day. Helen was painting a picture of the coast, the ocean shining in the sun. She looked miserable when she worked, even though she loved to paint – she frowned, she sighed. Tom was asleep or listening to his music with his eyes closed. He was pale, in spite of how good the weather had been, how often the days were bright and sunny.

Robert had longed for a moment without conversation, a moment of peace, as should have been available to a family who lived by the sea. But there was something about the scene that ruined his attempts to reach a state of real contentment.

There was another family, for example, a few yards away (and which might have started to appear in Helen’s painting.) They were playing touch-cricket. Their shouting – “Come on! Come on!” – was strange in its obliviousness and conviction.

The mother, a middle aged woman with red hair, dived for the wicket, crashing into the sand to applause and laughter from the teenaged son, the young daughter, and from the father who looked fit enough to have once been a professional athlete.

“You didn’t sound keen on the idea,” Helen said, forcing him out of his trance, sending a wave of fear through his body.

“Keen on what?” he said.

“You know, trying to get in with the Harrows.”

He took another drag, but the cigarette had burnt to the filter.
“Well,” he said, “they’re probably used to people trying to get in with them. I mean, I don’t know how famous the guy is, but – ”

“Paul Harrow’s quite a big artist.”

“Is he?”

“He’s not famous, but he was, I think, connected to some famous artists. He used to be part of a movement called The Brotherhood of Ruralists.”

“Sounds like a cult.”

She only frowned as she worked.

“Just painters interested in nature,” she said.

Robert noticed a man closer to the water, a father lifting his child as the mother rubbed sunscreen into the toddler’s skin. Beyond them two young women paced quickly towards the sea, their arms folded, their shoulders hunched. They faded into the dazzling light of the sun reflected on the water. They shrieked with the cold, and then there was the roar of pebbles dragged across the sand by the waves.

“They seem like the sorts of people we wanted to meet here,” said Helen. She looked up from her painting and at him directly, squinting against the sun.

“Aye,” he said. “I know you’ve been looking for other artists.”

“I mean – that workshop in town. I’m not being funny, but they were just old biddies who paint for a hobby, you know what I mean?”

“Well, Paul is pretty old.”

“That’s not the point I’m trying to make.”

Robert closed his eyes, which only made the shrill cries more like screams, as if the swimmers were in trouble, as if they were drowning.
“I find the guy hard to talk to,” he said.

“Paul?”

“Yeah.”

“What about the wife, Caroline?”

“I haven’t spoken to her much.” This was true, though they had worked together, building fence around the orchard. And it was also true that their shared silence had been profound in some way, a way he had tried to ignore. When Paul came by, the old artist only muttered cryptic things about his paintings.

“I suppose you’re busy when you’re there,” Helen said.

“I am,” he said.

The Harrow family had planned to become self-sufficient. Paul had told him they needed him to work while he “got some footing on his newest series.” Robert was glad of the job and the money, but when he’d met them, he’d seen in the Harrows a frightening premonition. Paul was so like the professors Helen had worshipped when she was at university. Nicola, their daughter, was gifted – also a painter. She was so gifted that something had to be wrong. And then Caroline – younger than Paul, hair prematurely grey at its edges, and a gaze that said she was intelligent but bored by her intelligence; there was a part of him that wanted her to be kept a secret.

“Maybe it’s a class thing,” Helen added.

“I said they were posh,” he said, opening his eyes to the light.

“Yes, but that stuff doesn’t mean much here.”

“They’ll let us eat at the table, I’m sure. But I just find talking to a bloke like that – I don’t know. I’m always lost for things to say.”
She placed her paintbrush against the edge of the easel and sighed.

“You agreed that the people we used to know were dull. You were bored, too, Rob. It wasn’t just me.”

He tried not to look at her. He failed. She was staring at the sea. He followed her gaze and all of the emptiness of it gave way to an intensity he might have been trying to keep at bay for the last twenty years of his life, the entirety of their time together: all of the laughter and fast movement, the people running, a man jumping for a Frisbee; all of the gentle symmetry of the people standing in the broken waves in the distance – all of it took on an edge of sadness.

“We’ve been living here for a year, now,” she said, “and I feel like we don’t have any proper friends.”

“There are people,” he said.

“There are people,” she echoed.

Robert sat up and checked the time. It was five o’clock.

“I wonder,” Helen said, “if you feel a bit threatened by the idea of someone like Paul Harrow.”

He looked at Tom – was he listening? His eyes were still closed.

“Why would I feel threatened?” he said, softly.

She seemed to bring herself back from whatever place she had been in her mind. Her smile came and went. She might have been on the verge of laughter or tears. “I meant it more, as in, you shouldn’t feel threatened.”

“Aye,” he said.

“Obviously, that’s what I meant.”
He began to undress to his swimming shorts. Nobody was swimming; people only walked at the water’s edge or let the waves crash against their shins.

“It’s all right,” he said.

“He’s your boss, anyway. You’ve got the power to sort it, if you want. But if you’d rather not, then don’t.”

Tom opened his eyes.

“Do you fancy a swim, mate?” Robert said.

He groaned.

“Come on.”

Robert never found it easy to imagine his son as the sort of teenager who runs and dives into an ocean.

“I’m not feeling brave enough about the cold,” he said.

“You wussy, come on.”

This had come out wrong: he’d sounded more malicious than playful.

“Nah, Dad. I’m all right.”

“All right, mate,” said Robert.

And he left them in the dunes and walked briskly through the other families. The people on the beach were gathered like nesting animals and blinked at him as he passed. He thought of the word holiday, which made him feel suddenly much better. He smiled. He even bellowed as he jogged into the first wave, the water so cold that he experienced soft hallucinations: spots of white across his vision and the arc of golden sand.
The thing was to swim: swim hard against the cold, which he did, kicking his limbs through the dark water. He swam toward the rocks on the other side of the beach. Beyond this lay a second expanse of sand – a cove, and a waterfall.

As the rocks grew larger, the waves slurping around the glistening shoulders of stone, he turned, and began to tread water. He could just make out the canvas where Helen was painting, and Tom lying next to her.

The water was freezing. When he turned the other way, towards the open sea, he had the sense of a great abyss opening before him. And yet this didn’t scare him. He was more afraid of the two bodies on the beach – his family. He was not afraid of them in any clear way, but, in spite of the cold, in spite of the huge expanse of open sea, he felt relief out here, kicking the water, letting the waves move him gently up and down.

It worried him, the pleasure he took from these abstractions of being. Sometimes it happened when he was driving: on the motorway he became possessed by the sense of scale and by the illusion of grace, the way cars seemed to float. And that would be when Helen would shout – *watch where you’re going, Rob*. And then the fight would start. But then, a fight, it seemed, was always about to start.

The worst time had come with the new boss at the social services where he had worked the year before they decided to move. She didn’t like Robert. She scolded him for failing to keep up with the new methods of administration. He always referred to her as a bureaucrat. But the truth was, he became overwhelmed. The process, he’d realised, must have begun during the early days of his career. He worried about the children under his care – mostly, though not entirely, unselfishly. It had become more common for the police to investigate the social services if the organisation failed to intervene in a
particularly serious case. He rarely slept well. And this felt connected to his relationship with Helen, in that, after some time, he had come to realise that his failings were beyond attitude. They might have been chemical, microscopic. Some kind of dark magic.

When the police came to the house, that same year, some part of Robert was not surprised. Here it is at last, he’d thought – the end.

But the policewoman had asked for Tom. There had been an assault, a man mugged, beaten up, by a group of lads. Tom had told the officer he had only been there. He had not taken part. Although Robert accepted what his son said, he did not know if he truly believed him. How could he be certain, without having been there? There was that element of his son that was forever beyond him. He had feared it the moment Helen said she was pregnant; there was this force both connected to and outside of his being.

There was nothing fixed about the glance, nothing solid, the way she looked up at him as he walked towards the dunes. There was not even the comfort of indifference. But he fought against this by making a show of the cold: “Bloody hell,” he said.

“How was the water?” said Helen.

“Freezing,” he said.

“We’re thinking about packing up for the day, Rob.”

He dried himself with the towel. “All right,” he said.

It was a twenty-minute drive from the beach to the town where they lived. They got into their old Vauxhall estate; the sun was still high. Robert put on his sunglasses and looked at Helen as if to say, “Look at me; I’m cool,” and she laughed and shook her head
– one of those moments when a simple gesture seemed enough. And yet when it passed, the energy between them was even more jagged.

They moved through the winding lanes, through the hills, past signs in Welsh – Penrhiwdrech, Maes Iwan, Parc-Foss – which always made him feel lost, even though he knew where he was going. They waited at a bend in the road for cars to pass in the other direction; he had become used to the politics of these roads, but he was always torn. He would either have to drive as fast as possible and hope there were no cars coming in the other direction, or else crawl slowly along and give way more often. He practiced both, chaotically, trying to feel out whatever was best, so that Helen told him to speed up as often as she told him to slow down.

The town was a little ways from the harbour – all of grey and white stone, old buildings: a series of houses, which had been here for a couple of hundred years. There was a castle at the end of their street, an old bookshop; tourists came to drink at the pubs or for tea at one of the cafés. It was almost anonymous in its evocation of the British seaside. Their house was semi-detached, redbrick, with a tiny patch of garden which Helen had wanted to fill with flowers (she hadn’t yet.)

When they pulled up at the house, their neighbour, an old Welsh lady, was bending down to stroke a cat. The grey frizz of her hair floated in the breeze. The cat fled at the sound of the car doors closing. And the woman, as if some spell had been broken, started back towards her own house.

Helen and Tom waited at the door for Robert to unlock it, which always took too long. The house was dark and musty. They had bought most of the furniture from the
second hand shop in town: the sofa was brown, worn, the table and chairs old and marked. A vase full of dry, crisp daffodils stood before the curtained window.

Helen put a pizza in the oven. Robert had his first glass of Scotch. Tom switched on the television. They ate in front of a documentary about melting glaciers, the scientists speaking with the quiet reverence of mystics – or so Robert felt, though the whiskey contributed to this effect.

And then they watched 2001: A Space Odyssey, which neither Helen nor Tom nor Robert had ever seen. Robert was glad of its strangeness. In summer here, the sky did not become fully dark until as late as eleven. Robert looked through the fog at his watch and it said ten o’clock, and outside the sky was still only a deep silver-blue, the darkness palpable only at the edges of the stars.

When the film was over, Tom went to his room.

Helen sat with her legs crossed, staring at the black television screen.

“We should turn in then, Rob?” she said.

“Aye,” he said.

She heaved herself from the sofa. “You comin’?” she said.

“I’ll come with you,” he said.

He nearly said: I’m not sleeping on the sofa. But he wanted to speak as if nothing was wrong, as if the question of whether or not they would sleep in the same bed was a part of the ritual.

She was already wearing the clothes in which she slept, those blue, soft cotton trousers and white T-shirt. Robert watched her walk across the carpet to the kitchen; she looked, somehow, vulnerable. She was a small woman, not thin, but not tall, and yet
something about her had always suggested largeness. It had been her idea to move to Wales. She had thought that Tom’s behaviour would improve if he lived by the sea – through breathing the fresh sea air.

And in the year since they had moved, he had become better, gradually, although there were times when he expressed no desire to do anything. Helen wanted him to go to college. Robert wanted the same. And yet she might have been right those times she’d accused him of not supporting her when she got onto Tom about applying to the local college. He had this odd instinct to give credibility to other possibilities – even if they were quite obviously inferior.

“You’re staring into space,” she said, now, returning from the kitchen. She drank from a glass of water as she came back into the living room. Her eyes were large as she drank. Her short hair was still ruffled from the beach.

“It’s your thing,” she said. “It’s your religion.”

He smiled, but for some reason this hurt him deeply.

She smiled, as if to a stranger, and went upstairs.

Robert waited a moment, looking over the magazines on the coffee table – the women smiling, the wit and wisdom leaking from The New Yorker. There was an empty packet of cigarettes. There were several ghostly rings from where he’d placed his whiskey glass.

Helen was in bed, reading. She wore her glasses. When she wore her glasses, his whole body ached with a longing that for some reason he found perverted. She peered at him momentarily and then kept reading. Robert took off his shirt, placed it over the back of the old chair. They hadn’t yet made the bedroom their own. Or, rather, Robert had not
contributed to its character. There was a painting above the headrest, a flock of sheep huddled against a rock during a rainstorm. There was a painting of the Virgin Mary cradling an infant Christ.

Robert took off his jeans, hung them over the shirt. He hadn’t chosen any decorations for the bedroom, yet. But he would.

He thought of a skull.

Why not a skull? It seemed as appropriate as the sheep or the Virgin Mary.

What did they call it? A memento mori. Helen had given him the phrase. They were looking at one of those old paintings, one of those paintings of a lord or a king or an explorer – somebody important. And then in the corner, as if to say, I’m not so important, was the reminder of death. Was that what he needed? He didn’t exactly need knocking down a peg. Perhaps, he thought, as he lay back against the cold pillow, it was because the air in the room was dead. The light outside – the not quite night – was dead. The drone of a car passing the house was dead as well.

“We’re still getting settled in,” he said, vaguely.

Helen put down her book; it fell off the side of the bed and hit the floor with a thud that sounded only after she’d thrust her arms around him, holding his waist in a way that made his breath quiver. She held onto him. She breathed quickly.

Then she moaned as if in defeat.

“I’ve been looking at his paintings on the Internet,” she said, her voice weak and muffled by the covers and by his chest.

“Aye,” he said.

“They’re good,” she said.
“I’m sure they are,” he said.

“He has a large head, doesn’t he?”

“It’s full of knowledge,” said Robert.

He stroked her skin. She had flesh on her arms and her stomach he could cup, which sometimes made her moan with something like despair, though he’d always told her it was nothing of which she should be ashamed, that she looked like the women in those paintings – whoever it was it that painted healthy, slightly rosy, slightly plump figures reclining in the nude.

“I’ll talk to them,” he said. “I’m nearly done there. There’s not much else for me to do. I’ll invite them for drinks. It’ll be good to get to know them.”

“It will be good for Tom, as well,” she said.

He thought he could feel tears. He drew back the covers. She looked up at him. Her face was only sleepy. He’d imagined them.

II

The next day, Robert went to work at the Harrow farm. By mid morning, he was pouring sweat. In collecting the last of the potatoes, he felt even more that his work here was coming to an end. When he took the Harrows out of the picture, when he imagined that he was working on his own farm, he felt unreasonably elated.

He had not been very good at collecting potatoes: when he first began, he tried to pull them out by the leaves, but the roots would break and he’d have to dig them out with the shovel; and when he did that, too often he would split the potato in half. The best way
though he wasn’t sure if this was normal – was to sit down, with his arms between his legs, and press his hands into the earth so he could grip the root closer to the potato. He went along the field like this, and because he drew out more potatoes than he left in, he was able to go back and dig more carefully.

Much of the work here had been to do with maintenance – but there was really so little to do. He’d had to build a line of fencing all the way around the farmhouse; for this last job, the Harrows had considered hiring a professional, but Robert, having realised there was not enough work to warrant the pay they were giving him, that they had little sense of what needed doing at their own place, and that they might realise this and change their minds, had worried him greatly; and so, in an effort to keep himself employed, he insisted he’d do the fence himself.

Shortly after he arrived this morning, he had watched the Harrows during their morning ritual. They walked across the fields to the steps that led down to the beach. He thought it part of a greater mystery, the way afterwards they broke off to attack their own projects: Caroline’s writing, Paul’s painting. Nicola was home schooled and much of her work she seemed to do alone. He imagined they spoke about their work as they walked to the beach – slowly, their heads hung in contemplation.

Now Nicola came across the fields with a bottle of water held in the air. The gesture was exaggerated; again, she wore a sardonic expression, as her mother always did. She was a short girl – short like her father; so, in a way, she looked younger than thirteen: except for her eyes, sullen with a sleepy intelligence.

“Hot enough for you, Rob?” she said.

She handed him the bottle.
“Aye,” he said, with a smile. “Cheers, Nicola.”

The water was ice cold, and made his head hurt.

“What are you up to?” he said. “Getting yourself into mischief?”

“I’m going to go and meditate on the beach.”

“Oh, that’s sounds nice.”

“Then I’ve a lesson with Daddy. I’m going to bring you a beer when you’re finished.”

Robert laughed. “Ah, you’re a sweetheart.”

She waved him off and walked on.

He looked at the gap in the fence at the side of the house. There was a shed where they kept the lengths of wood (these had been purchased, not made). He went to the shed and lifted three of the planks over his shoulder. He went back and took the shovel and the posthole diggers, and then returned. As he started digging, the sweat continued to pour down his face. He squinted against it; the sweat stung his eyes. He saw a figure in the conservatory – someone getting up from the wicker chair.

He heard the front door. It was Caroline. She was wearing jeans and an old T-shirt, and she slipped her hands into a pair of work gloves.

“Do you need a hand, Rob?” she said.

“I don’t need it, but you’re welcome.”

“I’m just trying to get out of the house.”

“Not writing?”

She smiled. “It’s just so lovely out here.”
He glanced at the house again, and Caroline glanced with him. This would be the third time they had worked together, and this time he was nervous. He started digging. He handed her the posthole diggers; she plunged them into the earth, scratching and pulling out clumps of soil and grass. Robert could tell she was already getting pleasure from the work. She smiled, and he smiled with her.

They worked for a while without conversation, Robert telling her, now and then, what he needed her to do. Then he asked her about London.

“Do you miss it?” he said.

She looked up at him as if he’d brought her out of hypnosis. She squinted in the light, looked again at the house.

“Honestly,” she said, “I do. I miss my friends, at least. I mean, Paul will say they weren’t friends. But I miss them, even if they were vacuous. I didn’t really hang around with the other actors, or with Paul’s artist friends. Just the weirdoes I picked up at the clubs in Camden.”

“Did Paul like it there, in the city?”

“Oh – not one bit; he didn’t allow himself to like it.”

“I don’t know if I’d like London either.”

“Do you go often?”

“I’ve only been a couple of times. The last time I went was with Helen – not long after we met. So that was a long time ago.”

She slowed her work and looked at him; she seemed to be waiting for him to go on, but he decided to change the subject.

“What about your acting?” he said.
“What about it?” She stood back. “Are you trying to get to know me, Robert?”

“Maybe, yeah.”

“I miss that, too, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Did you do all right?”

“I did some stage, some radio.”

“What was your favourite role?”

She thought for a moment. “I was in a Mike Leigh production about an alcoholic living alone in a flat in Yorkshire. She’d lost everything. She’d been used, messed around by these awful blokes. Some of them hit her, you know. Well, at the end of the play she has this exquisite breakdown. She screams and cries and – I don’t know.”

Robert packed the dirt in around the fencepost.

“Why was that your favourite?”

“Because that ending was so cathartic,” she said. “When was the last time you just bloody lost it – I mean, almost without anything to explain why then, there, in that moment – just a spontaneous freak-out?”

He laughed. “That’s not my style.”

“No,” said Caroline. “Nor mine.”

They had stopped working and were looking at one another. She brushed her greying hair behind her ear (which looked funny with the gloves.) Her eyes were closed by her smile and by the way she squinted in the light. Robert felt the pain in his back and his arms fade for a moment, and his heart began to throb.

But then he remembered his mission.
“So, obviously I’ve only got another day or so left. I was thinking you ought to meet Helen and Tom.”

“Yes, of course.”

He could tell she looked at him with something like disappointment. He thought perhaps she’d wanted to keep things between them.

“Maybe we could all get a drink,” he said.

“We should,” she said, smiling in a way that ruined the beauty of her usually sarcastic expression. “That would be lovely.”

“How about tonight?”

There was the sound of Paul talking: he’d come out of the house with Nicola. They were each carrying an easel, and walked toward the edge of the herb garden. The former pointed towards the gorse at the edge of the cliff, the bright yellow flowers. He looked at Robert, but didn’t wave. He was talking to Nicola as she set up her easel.

Robert had sensed there was something wrong between Paul and Caroline. It was not only that he’d hardly seen them displaying their affection – he hadn’t seen them often enough to make a judgement in this regard. He’d seen her sunbathe next to him when he came outside to paint or to teach Nicola. He’d seen her bringing lemonade out to them both, the way she kissed him and spread a blanket out over the grass, the way it sank luxuriously to the ground. And yet she’d complained about how much time he spent working in his studio in the evenings. And the last time they had worked together, it seemed as if Paul kept coming out of the house just to check on them.

Robert wondered what the old artist had been thinking about it all – did he love his wife? What was he thinking now, watching them again?
Nicola said something to him and then ran back into the house. Paul approached them. His skin was a deep orange-brown against the white of his shirt. He had this way of smiling and frowning simultaneously.

“How’s it going?” he said.

“Fine,” said Robert. “We’ve nearly finished this, now.”

“Yes, I think you’ve got everything done here, haven’t you?”

“Did you not want the rest of it painted?”

He squinted at the line of fencing as if searching for an answer.

“Ah yes. That’s the thing do,” he said, nodding.

“I would feel weird painting for a professional painter, mind you.”

Their laughter rang so false it gave him a jolt of physical pain.

“I was just saying to Caroline,” said Robert. “We ought to get together for a drink. I was thinking this evening, if you’re free – or another night, if not.”

“Yes to meet Helen,” said Paul.

“And my son, Tom.”

“Yes, and your son. Yes.”

“Do you want to do that tonight, Paul?” Caroline said.

“Well, but what about someone to look after Nicola?”

“Oh she’ll be fine. She’s thirteen, Paul.”

“Yes, but you know I worry.”

“I do,” she said, plunging the shovel down, leaving it standing in the earth.

“Well, look here, why not come over for dinner tonight. Can we cook something? Caroline? Do you think?”
“Have we got anything in?”
“We’ve got those pheasants frozen, haven’t we?”
“Have we got any booze?”
“Well, we can get some from town – I don’t mind.”
“We can bring some wine,” said Robert.
“Speaking of,” said Caroline.

Nicola was pretending to knock back the green bottle of lager. She handed it to Robert. They watched him as he drank, each with a different expression. Caroline smiled at him, faintly. Paul looked at him as if he were some sort of worm he’d found festering in a rock pool. Nicola nodded, her hands on her hips, as if she knew well the pleasure of cold lager on a hot day.

“Good?” she said.

“You’re a diamond,” said Robert.

“Come round in a few hours,” Paul said.

He started walking back towards where the easels were standing. He turned back.

“Helen paints, doesn’t she, you said before, Robert?”

“Helen, yes. She’s looking forward to meeting you.”

“All right, great. I’m looking forward to meeting her.”

“Great,” said Robert.

Caroline followed Paul, moving past Robert, her hands tracing the circumference of his waist, hardly touching. Nicola followed.

“We’ll see you later then,” Robert added.

Caroline did not reply.
There was never any order to these workdays, but the beer signalled its end. He drifted through the fields and the garden towards the edge of the cliff. He sat down near the edge of the gorse, smelling its honey scent and the salt of the ocean. There was Paul, talking to Nicola in the distance. Caroline had disappeared into the house. Her absence resonated across the grass, beyond the gorse and the cliff’s edge, into the light, moving with the waves in the distance.

*

When he got home, Tom was lying on the sofa, watching television.

“All right, Dad?” he said.

“Hiya, mate. What are you up to?”

“Nothing,” he said.

Robert stood in the dark and dim glow of the television screen. He was nodding. Sometime he would feel angry, coming home after work to find his son lying on the sofa. And yet for some reason he felt a distant sort of contentment. They were here. They were okay. They had an invitation to dinner.

“Where’s your mum?” he said.

“She’s upstairs using the computer.”

Helen was still dressed from the café – in her white blouse and black skirt. There were large, dark patches of sweat beneath her arms; her forehead was oily. She said hello without turning away from the screen.

“How’d you get on today?” she said.
“They’ve invited us for dinner tonight.”

She sighed deeply, looked at him and smiled.

“That’s nice of them.”

“I asked them if they wanted to join us for drinks, but they ended up inviting us to their place. So – ”

“Shit, now I’m nervous.”

“Don’t say that – you’re going to make me nervous.”

“How does the wife dress?”

“Caroline?”

“Yes, what sort of style? Is she very glamorous?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I wouldn’t use the word glamorous.”

He felt his heart begin to race. Helen seemed to search his expression.

He focussed on the old cigarette burns in the grey carpet.

“She’s subtle,” he said.

“Subtle. Okay.”

“I’m going to take a shower.”

“It’s not working too well, so watch out.”

Robert sighed. “We’ll have to get someone in – I won’t be able to fix the plumbing. What are you up to anyway?”

“There’s a teaching job opened up.”

“Oh.”

He was reminded that the money she’d received as part of her father’s will was not as much as she’d expected. She had rarely put her hope into words, for her father had
abused her, physically. He’d lived a double-life, half of it with another woman, the other half with Helen’s mother. But Robert felt that, secretly, she’d expected him to redeem himself with that final act.

They had not been able to pay off the mortgage entirely, and the house had needed much more work than they had realised.

“What about your painting?” he said, nervously.

“I’m just looking,” she said, frowning at the computer with a strange sort of determination. “It’s just in case.”

“I need to take a turn at that computer. See if I can get something in social services, just something so you can keep doing your thing.”

She was silent, and then she smiled.

“I don’t know if I can handle you that stressed out. Not again.”

He was about to speak when she rose and flew into his arms and kissed him sharply. The way she smiled and gazed into his eyes felt like madness.

“Let’s not do this now,” she said. “I’m excited about tonight.”

“Me too,” he said.

“Go and have a shower. You smell.”

“So do you,” he said.

The water was cold. He thought about calling Helen to join him, but, of course, there was nothing inviting about a cold shower.

They almost debated whether or not to take separate cars – one of those moments that seemed to tell them something they knew, on a deeper level, but of which they were
not entirely conscious. Robert pulled out of the drive and nearly hit a white cat. “Rob,” Helen said, “careful, please.” He wondered if that tiny measure of whiskey he’d taken before getting behind the wheel was too much. No, he decided. He was fine.

“You know,” he said, as he stopped for the tourists crossing the road, all carrying surfboards, little plastic buckets and spades, “I was the kids’ favourite at Newford Social Services. They used to say, ‘Get a lift with Rob, he’s bloody mental.’”

Helen smiled weakly. “You probably scared them half to death.”

“They loved it,” he said.

He glanced at Helen. As they passed through the High Street, she looked at her hair in the rear-view mirror, reached to touch it, but didn’t. She turned to Tom, as if to check he was still in the back. He was sleeping.

“Tom,” said Helen. “Come on, stay awake.”

“Sorry,” he said.

The main road opened with farmland on either side; they passed through a narrow lane towards the headland, and began to climb.

“So this is your route to work,” said Helen.

“That it is,” he said. He felt nervous of her knowing this.

They pulled up outside the farmhouse. There was the BMW parked outside; and the four-by-four – both black, unmarred even by a fleck of mud – shining in the sunlight. There were white sheets hanging on the clothesline beside the herb garden to the right of the house, which made Robert think of a millionaire’s yacht. There was not only the
redbrick farmhouse, veined with ivy, but also the modern studio – a long, white
bungalow, where, as Robert understood, the artist did his work.

“Nice isn’t it?” he said.

“It’s terrifying,” said Helen.

“Is this where you work then, Dad?” Tom said.

“Aye,” said Robert. “I’m their servant, mate.”

Tom grinned and rubbed his eyes.

The path that led to the front of the house was lined with flowers; the sun was still
high and the flowers hummed with insects.

“Oh my God,” said Helen, “you can hear the sea. You can see the sea.”

“They’ve pretty much got their own private beach down there.”

When they reached the door, Helen took a deep breath.

Robert knocked, though rather too lightly. But to knock a second time without
knowing for certain whether or not the first was too quiet was too much of a risk. There
was the sound of classical music from inside: soft piano keys. Helen leaned past him and
knocked with a more respectable display of intent.

Nicola answered. She was wearing a black dress. She smiled slowly and with a
sleepiness that said she was queen of the house.

“Hello, Rob. And you must be Helen?”

“Lovely to meet you, Nicola,” said Helen, her voice quivering with nerves.

“And Tom – hello.”

They shook hands, though Tom said nothing.

“Do come in.”
Helen glanced at Robert before they entered, her eyes wide with delight.

The living room was large, the ceiling high. There was a long black leather sofa and two armchairs, and the wall was lined with a long bookcase.

“Would you like a glass of wine?” said Nicola.

They would.

“Tom?”

“Tom can have a glass, can’t he?” said Helen.

“Aye, of course,” said Robert. “We brought a couple bottles,” he added.

“Great,” said Nicola; “My mum ran to the shop earlier, so we’ve got plenty. I’ll go and get her. I think my dad might still be painting. Sorry about that,” she said, leaving the room.

“Oh, not at all.”

They perched on the edge of the sofa. From the window there was a view of the fields, the orchard, the edge of the cliff and the sea.

“Are we early?” Helen whispered.

Robert shrugged.

Caroline appeared in the doorway.

“Oh my goodness,” she said, beaming – a kind of enthusiasm Robert had never seen from her before. “Helen; so pleased to meet you.”

She was wearing the adult version of her daughter’s dress, but with a small brown cardigan and a necklace of amber stones. There was polite laughter. Helen shook her hand. “The pleasure’s mine,” she said. “God what a lovely place.”

“Thank you.”
“And this must be Tom.”

“Hi,” said Tom. They shook hands.

“You’ll notice Paul isn’t here,” said Caroline. “It was his idea for you to come to dinner, and of course he’s not ready. The thing is not to take it personally.”

“Oh,” Helen said. “No problem.”

“He’s very selfish when he’s working on a new painting.”

“That’s probably the right way to be.”

“I’ll give him a moment and then I’ll let him know you’re here.”

Caroline looked out of the window as she smiled. She asked Robert about his day; he said it had been all right. She asked Helen about what she did for a living.

“I used to teach, but I gave that up so that we could come to live here. And, well, so that I could do other things, though it hasn’t been easy, the transition.”

“I understand.”

“I’m working at a café in town. It’s a nice little place, a short walk from where we live. I work at a pub, too. I’ve actually never done those sorts of things before; actually it’s nice to do something that uses less brainpower. I’m trying to save that for my own painting.”

“Yes, Rob told me you paint. How good.”

Nicola returned with a bottle of wine and several glasses. She moved like a waitress, carrying several glasses between the fingers of her right hand, the bottle in the other. She placed these on the coffee table and began to pour. They thanked her. Nicola asked her mother if she could have a drop. “With water,” said Caroline. “As in France,” she said to Robert and Helen, as if by way of an explanation.
“And what do you do, Caroline?” Helen said. “Paul told me you used to be an actress in London.”

“Yes, that’s right. Well, I’m working on a book at the moment.”

“Oh, how fabulous.”

“It’s difficult.”

“I can imagine.”

“You’re lazy, Mother,” Nicola said, sipping her wine and water.

“Yes, that’s probably true,” said Caroline.

They looked at one another: the latter squinted in mock spite; the former did the same; and then they smiled apologetically.

They seemed so relaxed, it was disarming; Robert looked at Helen – she seemed to be panicking, beaming in mad sort of way. She’d finished half her glass already.

“Nicola,” she said; “Robert said that you paint, as well.”

“I’m learning,” said Nicola.

“She’s not as lazy as me,” said Caroline.

“No, I’m not.”

Nicola asked Tom if he was still in school. He told her he wasn’t, but was probably going to college. He simply hadn’t filled the application for the local college, Helen confirmed. “Cool,” said Nicola. “I’ve been home-schooled since we moved here from London – two years, now. I miss school. Probably, I’ve been traumatised by the experience. But that’s okay. I’ll write about it in a memoir when I’m older.”

“Oh, yes, living in a nice big house by the sea, reading and working at your leisure – how traumatising for you. Our hearts bleed.”
Robert enjoyed their banter. Tom appeared embarrassed, and yet the smile on his face was the richest Robert had seen in as long as he could remember. Helen, on the other hand, seemed nervous still, and was on her second glass. It occurred to Robert that Nicola was helping her mother build a kind of wall between their home and what they may have thought of as fans of Paul’s. Perhaps his admirers visited them often, and Caroline and Nicola were tired of pretending the interest was as much in them as in him.

“Anyway,” said Caroline, “I’m going to look for our man.”

She bumped into him in the doorway. They shared a kiss, whispered something to one another. “Hello,” said Paul, “hi,” his face slightly red. He took Robert’s hand. “Hello again. And this must be Tom,” he said, shaking his hand. “Good to meet you, sir,” he said. “And – Helen.” He held her hand gently and then let it go.

“Hi, Paul,” she said. “It’s so good to meet you.”

“And you. Yes, lovely.”

There was a moment between them, and then the artist looked at Caroline. “I’m sorry I’m late,” he said. He gasped and exhaled.

“Fine, darling,” she said. “We’re used to it.”

“How’s the dinner coming?”

“It’s ready, I think. I was mostly just keeping everything warm.”

“Right.”

“Well, get yourself a glass of wine.”

“Yes,” he said, smiling. He poured the wine into his glass and into the silence he seemed to have created by his presence.
He was wearing a black T-shirt with a grey suit jacket and jeans. Robert thought he had looked smart from the doorway, though now he could make out faint stains on his T-shirt, as if he’d dropped mayonnaise down his chest. His thick white hair was standing up in various places. He wore a bewildered expression as he asked Helen and Tom the same questions that Caroline had asked. She had gone into the kitchen, Nicola, too.

He asked about Newford. Of course, he’d never been there.

“There’s nothing there, really,” said Helen. “A new town. Hence the name.” She laughed. “It’s a soulless sort of place.” Her accent had never been entirely Midlands, but Robert noticed that her speech was slower. She sounded slurred, posh.

Paul looked down at the carpet and also up at Helen, as if both to hide and maintain his own indulgence.

“Yes, I know what you mean,” he said. “I like it here a lot more than London. It helps me to work. I mean, just the landscape.”

“Exactly,” Helen said, almost spilling her drink. “I paint landscapes. And we’ve been coming here on holiday for years. I feel as if now I can finally focus on what I consider to be my subject, you know?”

“Right,” he said. “Great.”

“Obviously I know that you focus on animals, as well, but – ”

“Oh, you know my work?”

“Oh, yes,” she said. “I like it very much.”

“Gosh,” he said. “Thank you, that’s very sweet.”
They talked about their favourite beaches. They traded good headland walks. Occasionally, Helen and Paul had their own conversation about art. And as they spoke, Robert had the sense that they had been trying not to do this – they apologised when they noticed the rest of the room had fallen silent. There was still something about Caroline – and Nicola, for that matter – that said silence was nothing to fear. Both ate with a kind of oblivious, animal enjoyment, which made him smile. Now and then, Nicola asked Tom something: “Do you like poetry, Tom?” He shook his head. “Do you like movies?” Of course: “that’s not a hobby, is it?” He smiled in his stoned sort of way, and she smiled back. “Who do you like?” He frowned. “Tarantino,” he said. “He’s a good one,” she agreed. Robert noticed she had the ability to confuse a young man, socially: it was difficult to know whether or not she liked the other person.

When dinner was over, Robert could see that Helen was a little drunk, and he worried what the journey home would be like, how she would feel back in the car with him, away from Paul and their conversations.

Caroline brought out some cheese. Tom had gone with Nicola to feed the chickens. Helen leaned over the table towards Paul.

“Paul,” she said. “Paul,” again, so that Caroline glanced at her.

“Would you mind,” Helen continued, “taking us to your studio – to see one of your paintings, in the flesh, so to speak.”

Paul laughed. “Of course I wouldn’t mind.”

“I’m so sorry to ask,” she said.

“Not at all, I’m flattered.” He’d lost some of his awkwardness.

“It’s such a vulgar thing to do.”
Caroline laughed.

“Isn’t it?” said Helen.

“Oh, no,” said Caroline. She looked at Robert, communicating something with her eyes as she drink.

“Well,” said Paul. “Let’s go then.”

“Would you all like coffee?” said Caroline.

They would.

Robert helped her carry plates to the kitchen. When he turned back to join Helen and Paul, he felt his stomach sink.

They followed Paul through the hallway that ran through the middle of the house. Robert held Helen’s hand. She gave it a brief, merciful squeeze, and let go.

“It really is so good of you to show us your work, Paul,” she said. And Paul said something Robert couldn’t make out, the voice too soft and drifting, and Helen laughed like she was making fun of him – except she wasn’t.

They passed a black door, closed, and Robert wondered if he’d been in this part of the house before. But, no, he used the outhouse when he was at work, when his boots and his hands were covered in mud. He’d never risk dirtying their bathrooms, all marble and gold. (He’d felt dirty using the bathroom in the front of the house tonight, even though they were here for dinner.) No, the feeling wasn’t nostalgia; it was the sense that something terrible was about to happen.

Paul pushed through another black door and flicked on a light. The room was long and wide and held the smell of solvents. There was a painting on the wall, though as his
eyes adjusted to the light, Robert was taken only with its size, and that it was a painting of a bird – all bright colours, pink, purple, and nuclear green.

“Yes,” said Paul, “one of the largest I’ve done. I have to use a stepladder, of course, because I’m so short. And I’m sure that one day I’ll fall, and that’s how I’ll be remembered.”

Robert tried to ignore the way she laughed, the way she touched his sleeve with the tips of her fingers.

He looked at the bird.

He didn’t know about art. He’d looked at lots of paintings throughout his life, because Helen was an artist – though not professional, like Paul.

When he looked at her work, his mind was free of thought. He only recognised the talent, the skill, that the work was good.

When they went to a gallery, it was different.

There was a way of looking at a painting in a gallery. You drifted toward the picture, as if in a dream. You placed a finger against your lips. You might exit the trance for a moment and step closer, before stepping back again. Even better was to keep staring at the painting long after the others around you had left and moved on to the next. And yet, now, looking at this bird, all those old moves seemed redundant.

It was all in the eyes, black with a silver sheen.

The eyes glistened.

This was a pheasant, he realised now, a bird that reminded him of when he was a boy, living in Derby, when he worked for the gamekeeper, flushing the birds out for the hunt, how the pheasants screeched and fluttered – a sound he’d come to think of as the
music of stupidity; and the clouds of them, grey and brown feathers falling as they flew toward the rippling waves of gunfire. They were simple. They were clumsy. He’d seen them in pictures only on the walls of old English pubs, fattened beyond what was realistic, alongside other paintings of cows and pigs, in tantalising profile.

But here was something else, the wings lifted in a way that suggest a whole language of thought and gesture. The beak was open slightly as if the pheasant were about to speak. Robert laughed. He stepped towards the canvas, traced the curve of its back to the tail, which spread out at its end like a fan. One of its legs the pheasant held in the air, as if waving. Robert stepped back again, and then even further back.

Paul and Helen were talking.

“I’m trying to free the animal,” said Paul, “it’s all about seeing it within its own context.”

“Yes,” said Helen.

Robert felt as if the bird was watching him. Its eyes followed him, as in a portrait of a dead king – except there was none of the pretence of royalty.

“Robert,” Helen said.

She wore a half smile.

“Yes,” he said.

“Well, what do you think?”

“It’s good,” he said.

Helen turned to Paul.

“Thank you, Robert,” he said.

She looked at Robert again, her eyes shining in the glare of the lights.
“Well,” said Paul. “I’m going to go and take advantage of that coffee.”

He didn’t turn to look at them as he left the room.

Helen’s eyes were open wide but exuded only blankness. “I’m glad you like it,” she said, and turned for him to follow.

Robert followed slowly. He let his fingers rest on the switch for a few reverent seconds, before sending the room back into darkness.

He wasn’t sure what to think of Paul, now, as they sat in the lounge, drinking coffee. Paul asked him: “You really liked it then, did you Rob?” There was a note of hesitation in his voice, and Robert realised he was nervous.

“Yes,” said Robert. “I liked it.”

Helen half laughed at what she might have thought an understatement. “It was so good to see one of your paintings up close like that,” she said.

Paul was sitting with his legs crossed, his face softened by what Robert thought was flattery, embarrassment, and a little pride.

“These new pieces have come so easily,” he said. “You know, when we were living in London, I had to remember the landscapes and the birds, and so on. Much of my works were almost entirely imagined. Of course, I used to share a studio in Devon, then, with another painter, and I would go, from time to time, to absorb those surroundings. But being here – ”

“You’re closer to – ”

“To my subject,” he said, “absolutely. Yes.”
Robert felt he’d been quiet too long. “It makes you think differently, too, doesn’t it, living by the sea?”

“I think it *does*,” said Paul, stretching his right arm across the back of the sofa, the wine in his other hand held close to his brain as in some ritual of contemplation. “There’s something about the movements of vast quantities of water.”

“Has it affected your sleep?” Caroline asked – of whoever, it seemed, would answer. She was sitting on the other end of the sofa from Paul. None of them, in fact, seemed physically together, and yet Paul bound them, somehow.

“It changed the way I dream,” he said.

Robert noticed his smile seemed a way of guarding against accusations of being pretentious. He didn’t quite mean what he said. And yet, at the same time, he did.

“How so?” Helen asked.

“It’s hard to explain,” said Paul. “Only, in London I had dreams of catastrophe of one sort or another. There was something about London – or just the city, that seemed to inspire this in me. Something about the commute, I think. The advertisements. The homeless. It all seemed on the verge of collapse.”

“Yes, I know the feeling,” she said.

“And, of course, that fear hasn’t entirely gone away. But it’s been replaced by something more benign. I dream of a different end to things, one more ancient, more natural, I would say. That, I think, is what the ocean does to my mind. It helps me to think in terms of geology, in geological time.”

Helen had her eyes closed. She smiled.

“Yes,” she said.
“It’s the arrow of time,” said Paul. “It’s the sandcastle in the wind.”

Caroline poured herself another glass. She seemed to be going along with it. She smiled at Paul, but with a different sort of irony, one more affectionately mocking, rather than qualifying. “Well,” she said, “this is why I’m so lazy.”

The others laughed.

“That the world will end is no reason to be idle,” Paul said, reaching over to his wife, putting his hand in her hands.

There was the sound of the door, and Tom and Nicola came in. Tom had zipped his jacket up over his mouth; it was hard to read his expression. Nicola smiled.

“You were gone for a long time,” said Caroline.

“We walked down to the beach,” said Nicola.

“Oh lovely.”

“What did you think of it down there, mate?” Robert said.

“It’s nice,” said Tom.

“It’s a nice place to lie around and do nothing,” said Nicola.

“I was just speaking in praise of idleness,” said Caroline.

Paul laughed.

“We used to come here on holiday a lot, as I was saying to Caroline,” Helen said. “Sometimes it’s hard to ignore the fact that we’re not on holiday.”

“Do you find it hard to get motivated?” said Paul, frowning like a doctor on the verge of diagnosis.

“I do. Well, originally we’d planned it so that Paul and I could work part-time, with the mortgage paid off – and then I could work on my art a little more, maybe set up
a little shop in town. But that didn’t work out. We had rather unfortunate squabble with my father’s wife over the will. My stepmother.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yes – anyway. I find it hard to save the energy, now, for painting. It’s hard to get up in the morning. But then I’ve always struggled with that.”

Robert wondered if she was making reference to him, for he was worse than Helen in this regard. And then there was Tom, who, at this point, was gazing out of the window once again.

“Well,” said Paul, “if you ever want to work here – ” he glanced at Caroline, who, as usual, seemed to show no expression. “I mean, when Nicola and I are out painting, you ought to join us.”

“Oh,” said Helen. She appeared stunned. “That’s kind.”

“And, Tom,” said Nicola, “you should come, if you want to hang out.”

Tom smiled. “Cheers,” he said.

“Tom paints as well,” said Helen.

“Is that so?” said Paul.

He shrugged.

“He’s really rather good.”

“Well, Tom, you’re welcome to come and work with us.”

“Darling,” said Helen. “You ought to go and look at Paul’s work, in the studio.”

“Oh, I did,” he said.

“I showed him,” said Nicola, smiling faintly.

“I thought the picture was amazing,” said Tom.
And Robert’s heart sank. And yet he was pleased to see his son animated like this, and by the possibility of his connecting to something, anything.

“Tom’s like me,” said Helen, “struggles to focus.”

“Mum,” said Tom, trying to stop her.

“It’s that idleness thing again,” she said.

Paul laughed like some sort of festive spirit. And then he became serious, the wine glass nearing his head.

“I don’t think I ever feared work. I’ve always feared idleness. Would you guess, Tom, how many days of my life I’ve risen before eight?”

“I don’t know,” said Tom.

“Every day,” he said, nodding, serious now.

“It’s true,” said Caroline, her expression grave, as if her husband had confessed to something terrible.

“There is nothing in my mind more obscene than a life wasted. We’re trained to be idle, doing jobs that contribute nothing. And our reward for working a pointless job is more pointlessness, more entropy. It’s a sad thing. The real trick is to get out of bed early, even if you’ve been up half of the night. I don’t think there is anything more gratifying than the rest that comes after a good day’s work.”

Tom was watching him, frowning in thought.

“But if you’ve some talent,” added Paul, “which I’m sure you do, then you must use it now, before it’s too late. There’s nothing worse than regret, except, of course, for a life wasted. But the two go hand-in-hand.”

“Yes,” said Tom.
“So you must come here and paint.” He had transformed entirely. He no longer seemed small of frame, but towering, terrible.

“I will,” said Tom, laughing the same way Robert had laughed when he looked hard at the painting of the pheasant – a nervous liberation.

“Why not come by tomorrow?” said Paul.

“Tomorrow?” said Helen.

“Well, yes, why not?”

“Well – I’m sure we could, yes.”

Tom nodded.

“Good. Wonderful.” Paul glanced at Helen, or seemed to.

Robert was looking at Tom, the way his son seemed absorbed in a new sort of silence as he, in turn, looked at Paul. And Robert hoped the silence was to do with that notion of geological time, with living close to the sea, and not the effects of an epiphany that had formed in his son’s mind. An epiphany of the blood, if not the mind – for the old man had said little of any originality. But the way he’d said it, how soon he’d said it, and that he had proven that he had talent and a mind for talent, might have done something to him. Robert wondered if there was a word for that moment a boy sees a man as his father, a man who is not his own father, but who seems to contain enough wisdom that the sense of paternity is felt as a spontaneous connection.

III
Once in the car and driving home, Helen wore an expression of elsewhere, as if she’d come out of the cinema having seen something deeply affecting. It was cloudier tonight, the sky dark. Helen kept looking at Robert. He caught her. She turned away slowly, which made her seem drunk.

Robert could see through his rear view mirror that Tom was looking out of the window. The view was pleasant, after all. Robert would have escaped into the hills in his mind, dark grey and speckled with white sheep, but he anticipated an argument. He just wasn’t sure if he would be the one to start it.

“Thanks for sorting that out,” said Helen.

Robert was surprised. He was surprised by the gesture and the sadness in her voice – he wasn’t sure what it meant.

“It was nice to spend time with them properly,” he said.

“It was nice.”

“He wants you to go and work with him, then.”

“Yes,” she said. “And Tom.”

“Aye.”

She turned round to face the back of the car, just as they came out onto the main road, more traffic here, the sky lighter from the glow of the headlights. “Tom,” she said. “What did you think of Paul?”

He took the earphones out of his ears. “You what, Mum?”

“Paul. I wanted to know what you thought of him.”

“Oh, yeah, he seemed all right.”
Robert couldn’t see her face; he wondered if she wore an expression of anger, or one of her smiles that said she was lost somewhere private and wonderful, somewhere that nobody could meet her, wherever it was she had gone.

“What’s wrong, Mum?” said Tom.

“And what about Nicola?” she said.

“She was all right. I don’t know.”

Helen groaned with drunken pleasure.

“I just thought they were both so wonderful. They’re mysterious. I want to get to know them better. You can just tell there’s so much there.”

Robert almost said something about Caroline, but stopped himself.

Helen turned back to face the front. “What do you think about coming with me tomorrow to do some painting, Tom?”

“Oh,” said Tom, “I don’t know.”

“Your work really is very good, you know. You know it is.”

“It is,” said Robert.

“I’ve hardly done anything,” Tom protested.

“No, but what you have done,” said Helen, “is really very good.”

“I’m scared to show people what I’ve done.”

“What have you got to lose, darling?”

“I don’t know. It’s just embarrassing. What if he thinks I’m rubbish?”

“He won’t, darling. And anyway the point is to learn from him.”

“I don’t know, Mum.”

“Tom – ”
“You don’t have to, mate,” said Robert, “if you don’t want to.”

“No,” said Helen, after a pause. “You don’t have to. Obviously not.”

The roads were narrow here as they approached the town. He waited for a car approaching in the other direction. The headlights flashed across Helen’s face, but he couldn’t quite take in what she felt. “I just think,” she said to their son again, “that you ought to take advantage of something like this. This is the sort of thing that could change your life. Paul might become a mentor. He could really help.”

Robert wondered if she was going to say father figure. It was possible Tom was trying, in some way, to display his loyalty. Perhaps he needed Robert’s blessing – and perhaps, Robert thought, this was what he should provide.

“Will you think about it tonight, Tom?” said Helen.

“Yeah, I will,” he said. “I like Paul, Nicola – and Caroline. I like them.”

“It’s worth thinking about what you like, and what you want to do.”

She yawned, and closed her eyes.

When she got up to the bedroom, she collapsed on top of the bed without pulling back the sheets or removing her shoes.

“I drank too much, didn’t I?” she said.

Robert smiled. “No,” he said.

She was stretched out like a starfish; he took off her shoes, a gesture which, without the necessary affection, felt sad and robotic.

“Thank you,” she said.

He hummed, and sat on the edge of the bed.
“Do you remember, Rob,” she said, her voice drifting, “when we were walking on the hills, and that cloud went right through us.”

He laughed faintly. “You mean, we went through the cloud,” he said.

“That’s what I meant. Had you ever felt anything like that before?”

“No,” he said; the smile held fast to his face.

“So cold. And those drops, those raindrops, were like stones.”

“Aye,” he said.

“You screamed like a small girl.”

“I know. I surprised myself.”

“I’d never heard you shriek like that – it was obscene.”

“Glad it amused you,” he said, getting undressed, throwing his clothes over the chair beside the window.

“And then we went back to the caravan. Oh, our little caravan. And we went to bed – remember? It was early. It was bright outside. It was raining. Those showers that come and go. And it was quite intense. Do you remember?”

“Oh, of course I do,” he said.

“How old was Tom?”

“He was twelve then, I think.”

“Yes, that sounds right. I was worried about him.”

“That was when he’d stopped doing so well in school.”

“Oh, Rob, don’t say that – not now.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. He undressed her. She grinned as he struggled to pull her dress from her arms. She slumped back down, and he climbed in beside her. And she
kissed him on the shoulder, and then softly on the neck. Robert felt his skin prickle, as if he’d caught a cold breeze.

“I can imagine things getting better,” she said.

He followed her lead, almost marveling at how gone he was from the moment, that he could move his hands like this, that the fingers could bend, straighten, and trace surfaces, as real as if these movements were the manifestation of actual desire, and not only an idea of how bodies should move.

“Things are going to be good, now, Rob.”

“Yes,” he said.

“I’m going to be strict with us. I’m going to make sure we’re happy.”

He felt her hand moving down his leg – it could have been the blade of a knife. He hoped he could continue. He prayed to be able to continue.

But Helen sat up beside him.

“What’s the matter?” she said.

For some reason he remembered what she’d said to Tom: *find what you love.*

“I’m sorry,” he said.

He couldn’t see her expression in the dark.

“If I could find proper words for it – ”

“How many times have you done this?”

“Done what?”

“This.”

“You say it as if it’s an act, a singular act.”
She sighed. “You’re so eloquent when this happens, in a brain damaged sort of way.”

“I don’t see why I should be condemned for something that’s outside of my control. I don’t know what’s wrong, is what I’m saying.”

“I just daren’t think about how many times you’ve done that.”

“Sometimes there are reasons.”

“Tonight?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is it because of Paul?”

“Perhaps,” he said. “Perhaps it’s because I felt like somebody else just then, and there have been other times. It’s like – you’re cheating on me. With me.”

“You’re a nightmare,” she said. “You’re the devil.”

“Probably,” he said, climbing out of bed. “And, therefore, no sympathy. Go to sleep. I shall see you at work tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, dear,” she said.

“Goodnight,” he said.

As he walked down the stairs, he said in his mind, I love you, Helen; I love you. And it felt, each time he thought the phrase, that he was trying to puncture the surface of an all but solid membrane.

He took a blanket from the cupboard under the stairs and set up on the couch. He remembered: that time he and Helen had been switched on so violently by the rain cloud was also when she had entered St Michael’s Church and felt the hand of God.
He asked the question in his mind: *had her visit occurred before their moment of passion, or afterwards?*

He couldn’t remember an argument, only that she’d left their bed in the middle of the night, and he’d woken to her return, as the light burned through the orange curtain of their bedroom in the caravan.

It was true that they had separated the year before then, and had struggled, in the months after their coming back together, to regain a sense of peace. When they were on holiday here, in Pembrokeshire, they were more together. The place held them together, though never absolutely. Yes, that was when the new boss had been hired, and Tom had started bringing home terrible grades.

Her father was ill, too, though she was never sure how upset she should be. Robert had tried to inspire some sympathy. He remembered what she’d said about the church when she returned, when she sat beside him in bed, staring through the darkness. “It wasn’t simple reassurance,” she’d said. “It felt as if there was some condition, some part of the deal I’m supposed to uphold.”

“What’s worse,” he’d said, “a deal with God or a deal with the devil?”

She’d said nothing to this.

“I was only being silly,” he said. He’d held onto her that night, as if she might leave him again while he slept. And he wasn’t being silly. He wondered if she had conspired against him with God’s help. A deal was, after all, a deal.

As sleep took hold, now, he wondered if true love was a form of worship. He thought of that time they’d gone to London together, before Tom was born, when they visited the Tate gallery, when she looked at that Rothko painting and wept. And he’d
fallen into a frightened sort of love for her – she could be moved by something out of choice, something that required a dialogue of the mind, and of the heart.

He imagined he was cycling to the church along those narrow lanes. There it was, St Michael’s, the small white church on the headland, white and framed by the energy of nightmares. He knew this energy well from his childhood, the feeling that, at any minute, his fear of the dark would drive him out of bed and out into the village – his fear of the dark driving him to seek out an even deeper darkness.

IV

In the morning, he left for work before anybody else was out of bed. The town was quiet, the sun already high. When he reached the farm, there was a stillness about the place that made him nervous. He began his work by watering the orchard. There had been an unusual lack of rain. The last meteorological drought had been in 1976, the result of a dry winter, which was followed, then, by the dry summer.

This summer was not as dry, but not far off.

As he set the hose onto the mulch at the base of the first tree, he saw tiny insects – black with red spots – scuttling away. Their speed said they were fleeing for their lives. Of course, there was talk on the news of climate change. There was talk of storms. He had felt something of this during the last summer, a sense that the sunshine and the heat was something to fear.

Robert moved between each tree, leaving the hosepipe flowing over the base of each, feeling the weight of the sun and listening to the bees. Sometime he imagined they were drunk; there was something so decadent about insects that fed on pollen; it was as if
they’d been given a life of indulgence: he thought of a man being sponsored to drink every day at a chain of pubs that spanned the length of the country.

And when he thought of that he thought of Caroline. He thought of swimming with her in the ocean. Was it possible that this was all he needed? Had he been put on the earth to swim with a woman he found attractive?

By the time he started to paint the fence, there was still no sign of the Harrows. This was strange. They were always out by now for their morning swim.

Then there was the door, and Paul was there with Nicola, each carrying a towel over their shoulder – but no Caroline. They had their usual head-hung demeanour. Paul noticed him and came over.

“Morning, Robert,” he said.

“Hi, Paul.”

“How are you doing?”

“Fine, just finishing off the fence.”

“Lovely,” he said. “That’ll be lovely.”

“And then we’re done, I think.”

“Yes,” said Paul, “I think that’s all we’ll need.”

“It was good of you to have us round last night. I know Helen and Tom really enjoyed themselves. I did, too.”

“Good – are they still coming today?”

“I think so.”

“Lovely.”
They grinned at each other – it was a grin that seemed to push the muscles of the face to their limits.

“Well,” said Paul. “We’re off for our swim.”

“All right then, mate.”

He watched them walk on until they disappeared beneath the tallest ridge, the beds of purple heather, and the gorse.

Half an hour passed and they returned to the house.

Another hour passed before Tom and Helen arrived in the Vauxhall.

Tom was wearing a white shirt, as if for a job interview, Helen a summer dress of bright yellow. They waved at Robert. Helen was smiling, though he noticed as they approached – her gaze was severe.

“Hi, Rob,” she said. “You’re working hard.”

“Aye,” he said. “But I’m nearly done.”

“Is this your last job?”

“Yes,” he said. “Are you working tonight?”

“I don’t know. I’m waiting to hear from the pub.”

“Somebody covering your shift?”

“Maybe,” she said.

“All right, mate,” said Robert to Tom. “You look smart.”

“Mum made me wear a shirt,” he said.

“All right then,” said Helen. “Well if we’re all free later, we can do something.”

“Aye,” he said.

They walked to the house.
Robert heard the door open, and then laughter.

He continued to paint. He was aware of them walking, not far off.

“The beach is lovely today,” he heard Paul say. “So we should set up down there –” the rest lost in a breeze that whistled in his ears.

They walked by towards the edge of the headland, all carrying art supplies, a canvas folded up, over the shoulder, under the arm. They looked like a military unit – Paul the leader, Nicola second in command. Their laughter and conversation faded as they went beneath the heather.

Robert continued painting. His back ached and he began to sweat. He imagined their lesson. He imagined Paul telling his son some new way of looking at the sea. Of course, he couldn’t imagine the specific method: only the image of them standing together, looking out.

Later, once he’d finished the fence, Robert went to the house to see about his pay. There was also the chance Caroline would be there. He had this vision of asking her to drink with him alone.

Helen and the others had still not returned from the beach. He went into the house through the back door. The kitchen was immaculate – the white walls and black tiles – save some apples on a tray, cut in half and browning. The white-framed clock on the wall was loud, and gave him the impression of urgency. Either at any moment, she – Caroline – would burst into the room. Or the possibility of his seeing her would slip like sand through his fingers. He thought about eating one of the apples.
“Hello?” he said. He left the room for the lounge, took in the length of the smooth leather sofa. One of the cats was there, white against the black, peering at him with all the strangeness of an Egyptian deity. He left it alone, and returned to the kitchen.

There was an envelope on the sideboard containing the last of his money. He took it. When he left the house again he was possessed by a great sadness. The light made him dizzy. These summer days were relentlessly long. He hoped Helen would not make plans with the Harrows for the evening. He would have to go down to the beach to find out whether or not they would be having dinner or drinks.

He walked towards the heather at the edge of the cliff. The wind picked up and he felt the sweat on his face dry and itch. The white horses of the ocean curled over in the wind, emerging, fading, and reappearing. Seen from the distance, a rough sea did not appear any less powerful. They were still working – he could see them, all of them – Tom, Nicola, Helen, and Paul, each standing at their respective canvas.

The light, the fact of so much sweat having entered his eyes throughout the afternoon, and his general fatigue: all of this affected his vision, gave the figures on the beach the quality of a mirage. He wasn’t sure if Helen was looking at him, or looking at her painting. Her arm was not raised, and she didn’t wave at him. Paul was standing next to Tom, the latter working hard – or so it seemed to Robert. He felt, through some strange intuition, that his son had just experienced a breakthrough. And it was probably true that he could have seen his partner, Helen, lying beneath the old artist in the sand, and it was probably true that this would not have struck him in the gut as solidly as the notion of Paul inspiring in Tom’s mind an epiphany.
He didn’t know why he was driving to the church; he felt in a blur as he passed through the lanes, through the small communities, and the odd farm. When he reached the place, he parked on the road, and got out. There was forest here, and the heat gave the woods a prehistoric feel, the way it lined the banks alongside the road that went down to the bottom of the hill, dark and thick with moisture. Between the birch trees, all covered in lichen and moss, were large green ferns. He’d found fossils of these ferns on the beach. It wasn’t hard to imagine a giant dragonfly buzzing between the trees.

He walked up the hill to the church, passing through the metal gate. There were no other cars parked here, though one passed him as he walked the stone path to the door. This was St Michael’s Church, where Helen had had her experience, and where they had been together many times. Already, he felt a kind of reverence – perhaps for his psychic relationship with the place. He waited before pushing through the great oak door, if not out of respect for God then for how strangely the place fit into his mind.

Inside, the church was bright and quiet. There were purple flowers set in steel containers on the small windowsills that lined the walls. The walls on the inside were also white. When Robert had first entered the place with Helen and Tom, years ago, he’d been struck by its brightness. That old Norman church in the village in Derbyshire where he’d grown up was a dark, gloomy place; to enter such a church at night alone would have been frightening. But here, because of the walls, the impression was different.
He put a pound coin into the donation box and took an information pamphlet from the box beside it. He sat down in the centremost pew, and began to read. The Welsh name for the place seemed a name for what it was he could not grasp about Helen’s experience: Llanfihangel-ar-y-Bryn, a building not only quaint and nice, the sort of place one stopped on the way to the beach, to sit and smile and think about the ocean and ice cream and family, but one of ancient, ritualistic properties, an idea carved by obsession.

*It is known that our forefathers used Druidical Circles for building wattle and wood before stone followed many years later. The late Professor Rice Rees, an authority on Welsh saints, says that all churches dedicated to St. Michael were founded from 800 to 850 AD but the prefix “Llan” (as in our Llanfihangel-ar-y-Bryn) – Welsh for an enclosure – indicates that the site was used for worship long before the construction of an actual building. The churchyard is circular and almost certainly Druidical – made circular not square so that there would be no corners – hiding places for the Devil!*

There was the sound of the door opening and closing.

The woman was around Helen’s age, maybe a little younger – at least thirty. She had very short hair; she was wearing a white T-shirt and cycling shorts; her cheeks were red and she seemed to be catching her breath. She looked over the message board above the donation box. She seemed to be making a show of her interest, as people do, Robert thought; she had probably wanted to be alone.
“Hi there,” he said.

“Oh,” she said, as if she hadn’t seen him. “Hiya.”

“Nice, isn’t it, this place?”

“It is; it’s lovely.” She had a light Welsh accent, a swing to the sound of lovely, like luv-a-lee. She moved beside him, frowning up at the wooden crucifix. Then she sat in the pew a couple down from Robert’s own. He wondered if his deep desire to talk to her was something she could detect in the air.

“Are you from round here?” he said.

“Newport,” she said. “So, not far.”

“I’m a fan of Newport.”

“It’s all right,” she said, smiling politely.

“Nice day for a bike ride.”

“It is; it’s lovely.”

They fell silent. The wind had picked up outside, whistling beyond the walls. Robert looked at the woman out of the corner of his eye. Her smile remained. She turned to him again.

“Are you on holiday, are you?”

“I live here,” he said. “Well, not far.”

He told her the name of the town, and she said that that place was lovely, too. It seemed reasonable for her to refer to everything pleasant by this word, perhaps because her voice had a way of renewing its sweetness each time she said it.

“I was just reading about the graveyard out there,” said Robert, “how it’s circular so there are aren’t any places for the devil to hide.”
“Oh right,” she said. “I’ve never heard of that.”

“If I’d had have been told that as a child,” he said, “I would’ve avoided any other sort of graveyard, I tell you.”

She laughed.

“What do you have kids?” he said.

He felt reckless having asked this, and he noticed the redness of her cheeks, that she was no longer tired from cycling – she was blushing.

“No, I’m afraid not,” she said.

“Wise.”

This time her laugh was pure politeness.

“I’m only joking. I’ve got a son myself. Sixteen. Smart lad.”

“I used to work with children,” the woman offered.

“Oh yeah?”

“I used to be a primary school teacher.”

“Oh, great. That’s like my Helen. My partner. She used to teach.”

He wished he could read her expression; she’d turned back to face the cross.

“Primary school?” she said, only glancing at him.

“That’s right. She’s doing other things, now. We’ve just moved here – well, a year ago. It still feels new.”

“It’s hard to get teaching work here, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, well, it was more out of choice. But I’m sure we’ll find out about that soon enough. You said you used to teach – you don’t anymore?”

“No,” she said. “I just got my dream job, actually.”
“What do you do?”

“Well, I still work with kids, but I also work with creepy crawlies.” She moved to the edge of the pew, closer to him. Her eyes were brown, her lips thin, her mouth turned down slightly, which made her look on the verge of a self-deprecating comment. “I work for a wildlife centre. I go to schools and give them lectures on invertebrates.”

“And you do that full-time?”

“I do some tutoring – one-to-one, but this pays pretty well.”

“I’m afraid of insects, you know.”

“Are you?”

She laughed, and he wondered why he’d said something so childish.

“I mean, not especially, but – ”

“No, I understand. I’m the same. And some of the creatures I work with, the large stick insects, they actually hold onto you – onto your skin, you know.”

“Jesus.”

“Yes. They’re big things, you know.”

“How did you get over your fear of them?”

“I don’t know if I did, but I love the job.”

Robert felt his skin prickle. He shuddered, only half for effect.

“I wonder why we’re so afraid of bugs,” he said. “You know, people who are.”

“It’s the touch of them, I think.”

“Yeah, but what is it about the touch?”

She laughed, perhaps at the oddness of their conversation.

“I’ve thought about this,” she said. “I’ve thought about it before.”
“Well, what do you think?”

“I think it’s this idea of being touched by something that doesn’t really know it’s touching you – not in a way that we understand, not in a complicated way. You know, what I mean, if somebody touches you –”

“It’s intimate,” he said.

“That’s it,” she said. “But the intimacy isn’t there with a life that simple.”

He laughed.

“Aye, but we should love them, shouldn’t we?”

“Well, yeah, they’re part of the ecosystem, so – I give the talk on ecology and all that. We’re not supposed to just save the pretty ones, you know what I mean?”

“It’s an ethic, isn’t it, love?” Robert said.

“You what?” she said.

Again he recoiled at his own words. “Oh, I was just saying, it’s not in our nature to love insects, even though we should. I reckon a human is the only thing that can’t trust its own nature, you know.”

She smiled in a way that said she was delighted; though she may have been humouring him. “That’s an eloquent thing to say.”

“Oh, fuck knows,” he said.

“Well, I like the way you said it, even if I don’t agree.”

He offered his hand. “Robert,” he said.

She had to step out of the pew to take it. “Lindsay,” she said.

“Good to meet you.”

“And you.”
She continued to smile at him before turning away.

In the quiet that followed, he thought about Caroline, the energy between them. He looked at Lindsay, the edge of her dark hair and the skin of her neck. He thought of carnal acts in front of the crucifix. He might have been about to catch fire.

“What are you up to now?” he said.

“I’m about to cycle back to – to where I’m staying.”

“Do you fancy getting a drink?”

An agony in the moment he waited for an answer.

“I can’t really,” she said. Now really was the evil cousin of lovely.

Robert remembered he’d mentioned Helen.

“That’s all right,” he said.

“I hope you get on well here. It’s a lovely place to live.”

She rose and shook his hand again.

“Well, it was nice to chat to you.”

“It was,” she said, letting her smile linger. “It was lovely.”

* 

When Robert got home, he saw that Helen’s car was not outside the house. Inside, he found Tom sitting up on the sofa, reading a book.

“How did it go today, mate?”

“Oh,” said Tom. “Pretty good.”

“Did you have a good lesson?”
“Aye, it was decent.”

“What you reading there?”

“Oh, it’s an art theory book. *Ways of Seeing*, it’s called.”

“Did Paul give you that, yeah?”

“Yeah, he did.”

Robert went into the kitchen, he poured out a small measure of scotch and downed it quickly. “Where’s your mother?” he called.

“You what?”

Robert came back into the living room. “Helen,” he said. “Where is she?”

“She stayed with Paul.”

“What do you mean?”

“She asked him if she could watch him work on his new painting.”

Robert collapsed on the sofa beside his son, masking his panic with a display of exhaustion. “Was Caroline there?” he said. “Nicola?”

“I didn’t see Caroline today. But Nicola was there.”

Robert went back into the kitchen and took another glass of scotch. He thought about going up there. He could call Helen. He could ask her what she was doing. But then again, why bother? The idea began to fade. He closed his eyes. There was just the only of paper against paper as Tom turned the pages of his book.

It occurred to him that they had not sat quietly like this, just the two of them, for some time. It was awkward between them when they were alone, Robert realised, though he wasn’t sure why. He thought of Paul standing beside his son at the beach, instructing him. He thought of what he told him yesterday over dinner. He’d never believed in the
authority of parenthood. He couldn’t believe in it. And his confusion about this was perhaps more palpable when they were sitting together, when he didn’t have to give advice or orders – if he couldn’t play the authoritarian, then how could he play the authoritarian at rest?

“You fancy a lager, mate?”

“What, now?”

“Aye. We could sit on the table out front, while I have my fag.”

“I suppose it’s still nice out there.”

“We’ve got that little table, mate, we ought to use it.”

“All right,” he said.

Tom was waiting for him outside when Robert came back carrying two cans of Carlsberg. He handed him the can and sat down. The street was quiet, the sun reflecting from the windowpanes of the old Welsh houses.

He opened his lager; the splintering fizzing sound was answered by Tom opening his own. “Cheers, mate,” Robert said.

Two young women walked by, each perhaps in their mid-twenties; they wore tops tied at the navel and long tie-die dresses, their long hair shining in the sun.

“Nice view here,” he said, with a grin.

“Yeah,” said Tom; his smile said he was in pain.

And of course he was. And Robert had not felt any real desire to say something vulgar about those women. He’d had an idea of a father in mind: a man who relied on crude wisdom, a man who called a spade a spade. Perhaps he’d thought it would be reassuring for his son to have a buffoon for a father.
“So tell me what Paul said today then.”

Tom took a drink before he spoke. “Well,” he said, “he said some interesting stuff. I wrote a lot of it down.”

“Oh right.”

“He said that I mumble.”

“He said what?”

“Not literally but, I mumble with the paint, sort of thing.”

“What does that mean?”

“He said the images on the canvas should be loud. I think he used the word heightened. Yeah, he did. He said that the language of Shakespeare is heightened, and that we should paint heightened images. He thinks that prehistoric paintings are like that.” He said the word again: heightened.

Robert laughed, though his heart throbbed; it was envy, envy that pushed its way into fear. “Heightened images,” he said, taking a long drink.

“He said nature is heightened, but we’ve lost our eye for it.”

“I’ve got you.”

He hummed as if he understood.

But when he thought of that painting of the pheasant, he felt at once that he really did understand. To think of the painting made him look at his surroundings more closely. He noticed the white seeds from a dandelion gliding through the air. He saw the lichen on the stones of the wall over the road. He looked at his son, and realised that the sadness in Tom’s expression had to do with things between him, between Robert, and Helen. And he realised, too, that he’d seen this expression before.
“I put in for college,” said Tom.

“You did?”

“Before you got back. Did all the stuff online.”

For some reason even this felt like a betrayal.

“Well done, mate.”

“I picked art as one of the core subjects.”

“That makes sense. Listen, I’m proud of you.”

He downed the rest of his beer. He rarely delivered, even with these small pieces of praise. “When do you start then?” he said.

“After the summer.”

“That’s good.”

“Aye,” said Tom.

Robert lit his cigarette. He felt at once sentimental and removed. Part of him wanted to tell his son about how he’d fainted during his birth. He wasn’t even sure if Tom knew this had happened, if Helen had ever told him. It was almost a metaphor for how he’d been as a father. There were times he wondered whether or not he really loved his son. These were nightmare thoughts, which he pushed out of his mind as quickly as they came. That he’d fainted may not have been evidence of his lack of love. Perhaps it was an overload. And yet he thought the image too vague to present as any kind of gesture – it could have meant love. It could also have meant fear.

“What do you fancy for dinner, mate?”

“I don’t know. What do you fancy?”

“Maybe a steak? Couple of steaks?”
“Yeah, sounds good.” Tom smiled.

Robert put out his cigarette.

“I’m going to walk to the shops then.”

There was traffic, since this town was a throughway for tourists travelling to the beach. There was the castle up ahead, which had once been a Marcher castle, a remnant of the Norman Conquests. It had been destroyed and rebuilt two hundred years later. Now it looked like a Tudor building with two towers set at each side of the stone house. Robert had heard an Englishman lived there now. He crossed the road in the direction of the castle and the butcher’s; a right turn lead to the café where Helen worked.

He was grateful that the thought of her could be lost in an effort to appear content, to focus on the idea of himself as seen from outside – a man who lived by the sea; a man who was about to eat steak for dinner.

He bought the steaks and then returned home. And there was some peace in the quiet of his cooking, as Tom read on the sofa. He put on the radio; there was something in Welsh; his hands were covered in spices so he left the radio running, and he enjoyed the sound of the language. They ate together on the sofa, still quiet. Robert watched the news – more talk of the weather, the heat. Then he drank until Tom went upstairs.

Helen had still not returned. Robert paced around the living room, wondering what he should do. He wasn’t sure he should do anything at all.

He found Tom’s sketchpad.

There was a picture of a woman on the page: he did not recognise the face – the short hair, the gaze of concentration. The woman was painting on the beach; there was the hand before the canvas, the brush against the canvas. It was Helen.
He called her mobile, but there was no answer. He called again – still no answer.

Robert knocked on his son’s door.

“He called,” said Tom.

He was bathed in the glow of his computer screen.

“He called,” said Tom.

“He’s ten o’clock.”

“Yeah. Not that late.”

“I suppose it’s not. I’m going to bed early.”

“All right then, Dad.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

The only thing to quash the panic was to sleep. He would sleep and Helen would wake him on her return. Then he would question her. He opened the window, listened to the odd sound of a car, some Welsh lads chanting, perhaps as they walked from one pub to the next. The breeze was cool and calming.

V

When he woke the next morning, Helen was standing at the foot of the bed. She was still wearing her bright yellow dress.

“Morning,” she said. She put a cup of coffee on the bedside table.
“Where were you?” he said; the drowsiness of sleep left him at once. “Where were you last night?” He sat up.

She sat on the edge of the bed, and sipped her coffee.

“I was here,” she said.

Her hair was ruffled.

“Did you sleep downstairs?”

“Yes,” she said.

She got into bed next to him, placing her coffee next to his. She smelled faintly of sweat and perfume. She put her arm around his waist. He recoiled.

“I stayed till very late,” she said. “I’m sorry I didn’t call.”

He looked at her until she looked up at him. It was difficult to determine whether or not she was telling the truth. “Were you alone together?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, was Caroline there?”

“Well, actually she went to Carmarthen.”

“Oh.”

“I can’t remember why,” she said.

“I tried to call,” said Robert.

“Yes, I’m sorry – the signal’s bad out there.”

“I should have called the house.”

“Robert,” she said, “I’m okay.”

He wondered if he could detect a trace of disappointment in her voice.
They held one another. There was the cry of a seagull beyond the open window, a kind of scream. It frightened Robert that he was so relieved to cling to her like this, to put his arms around her waist.

“You working this morning?” he said.

“No,” she said. “There aren’t any hours at the café.”

“What about the pub tonight?”

“Yeah, I’m in at nine.”

He sighed. “I need to start looking for work.”

Their voices were hollow, as if overheard from the street outside.

They slept, and Robert felt his own sleep a kind of deep privacy. His dreams were of Caroline, and here the Welsh seas were warm, azure. He dreamt of Lindsay, the insect girl, and the word lovely, repeating – lovely, lovely.

Something of the dream remained when he awoke, though he felt it ebb away as Helen sighed and turned onto her back. He watched her. The quickness of her breathing made him worry; seemed to emphasise about her that which was fragile, or perhaps the possibility that her dreams were not peaceful. But she almost snored, each exhalation a sharp puff, like steam from a tiny engine. And this made him smile. And yet then the smile then became a tightening of the throat.

When she awoke, she reached out to him, but did not open her eyes.

“We should walk today,” she said, “before I go to work.”

“Aye,” he said. “That would be nice.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“I want to go to a church.”
“Which one?”

“Not St. Michael’s. Maybe Nevern?”

“With the bleeding yews,” she said.

“Aye,” he said.

She got out of bed. She took a T-shirt from the cupboard and pulled it on, then underwear, and a pair of jeans. He tried to see something in her movements, something that might reveal the truth of her actions; or better still a deeper truth, some clarity that would help him to know how to act. It was true, at least, that he felt reassured now she was dressed in her walking clothes. She made a comment about how the sea made her look as if she always slept outside, “amongst the dunes,” she said.

She smiled and opened her hands as if to say ta-da.

“You look ready,” he said.

Tom’s was pleased to go with them. He stepped out of the house with his camera around his neck. The air outside seemed dark.

“Wow,” he said, looking up at the sky. “Where did that come from?”

“Oh,” said Helen. “Looks like we might get wet.”

The cloud above was a rippling of black and grey, and it spread out to the horizon in what seemed like a tremendous dome.

“Shall we still go,” said Robert, “if it’s going to rain?”

“Let’s just take our coats,” said Helen. “A bit of rain won’t hurt.”

“It might pass,” said Tom. “We can wait in the pub. Or the church.”
There was something apt about the gloom, Robert felt, as they drove in-land towards Nevern and the church of St Brynach. They passed into the Preseli Mountains. Helen said something about the stone here, the blue stone, and Tom said, yes, Paul had mentioned, the stone here had been taken two hundred miles south to build Stonehenge. “I wonder why,” said Helen, looking out of the window as they passed the outcrop of rock the colour of mould or dead flesh.

“It’s interesting, isn’t it?” said Tom.

“It is,” she said.

They passed through lanes and woods and listened to music on the radio. Robert wasn’t really listening. He mainly tried to remember the way to Nevern, making sure he turned down the correct lane whenever they reached the next fork in the road. Then the rain began to fall – drizzle, at first, smears against the glass – until it was heavy, filling the river that ran beneath the bridge.

Robert slowed over the old stone bridge, big enough for only one car to pass at a time. He parked outside the pub. From here one could make out only a few buildings – there was a café and a bookshop, and a town hall where they also sold tea and cakes. Beyond this: fields and hills.

When they entered the pub there was the impression of bustle, of urgency: two young women in the doorway argued in whispers, though their Welsh accents were clear. They both tried to smile as Robert edged past towards the bar. He ordered three pints of lager, and a bowl of chips. They sat at a booth with a window. The pub was very dark. There was one other party, two old couples, sitting a few tables away. They were all
dressed in what looked like expensive wax jackets: the rural posh. They were loud enough for Robert to hear that their conversation was about local property.

“Here’s to you,” said Robert, raising his pint.

“You didn’t have to get me a lager, Dad,” said Tom.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean – I don’t always feel like drinking.”

“I never said you did, but we always get a lager when we’re out.”

“You’re allowed one while you’re underage,” confirmed Helen.

“I know – I’m not havin’ a go, Dad. I’m just saying. I’m not sitting here praying for a lager, do you know what I mean?”

“All right, mate.”

“Gosh, it’s really coming down out there,” said Helen, her face dappled by the shadow of the rain.

“Aye,” said Tom.

They drank and watched it fall. One of the Welsh women came to their table with the chips. They ate and drank and listened to the two English couples brag and lean back in their chairs. Suddenly, Robert found himself in an awkward silence with his own family. Tom was almost fighting Helen for a view from the window.

Robert searched his memory for a sense of how to talk to them, what to say. He felt his skin prickle with sweat. He drank and finished his pint – Helen and Tom both had over half left in their glasses. He remembered seeing other families in this same paralysis. And he’d pitied them. And yet, what had he ever said to his own family?

“I think I may have another,” he said.
“Robert,” said Helen, “you’re driving. Should you do that?”

“One more won’t hurt. Anyway, if you pair drink a bit faster, I won’t need a third – or a fourth. Do you know what I mean?”

She looked at him with a startled expression, which made him wonder whether or not he was joking in the way he’d intended. He forced himself to laugh. She laughed with him, and shook her head.

When they left the pub, the rain fell less heavily, one of those strange impressions that made Robert wonder if they were being watched. They went first to the church – they planned to walk to the Pilgrim’s Cross.

They lingered on the path that led to the entrance of the church. The red sap of the yew trees mixed with the rain, and ran a brighter red than usual, flowing like fresh blood down the trunks of the trees.

There was a haze of rain; they looked at the trees in a trance. The yew trees had, Robert thought, with their twisting veins and tendons, the quality of muscular human bodies; a robustness that made it difficult to imagine cutting them down.

“Did I tell you the myth of these trees?” Helen said to Tom.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“A medieval monk was falsely convicted of murder, and the authorities hung him from one of these trees. The trees are supposed to bleed until his name is cleared.”

“How old are they,” said Tom, “the trees?”

“Close to a thousand years, some of them older, I think.”

There was the Celtic cross in the churchyard to the right of the entrance. It was about seven feet high and with braided patterns running from the top to bottom. The cross
was not perfectly straight, but curved, leaning, Helen said, the way Christ in crucifixion inclined his head to the south. The church itself was built slightly out of alignment for this same reason.

“How do you know these things?” said Robert, as he followed her inside, into the murkiness of the church itself.

“From books,” she said, quietly.

Why had he asked that? He knew she’d read about this place; they’d come here before. So why did it feel new? Why did he have this feeling, as Helen and Tom took their places in separate pews, of walking through a museum after hours?

Helen prayed. Tom bowed his head.

Robert closed his eyes. There was something building, humming, at his core: not only his heart (which beat fast) but something else, something that came from the walls of the church and from the stagnant air. He felt he knew that something had happened between Helen and Paul. In his mind, he didn’t wrestle with images of their swimming naked, or even holding one another; it was something spiritual; it was everything about spirituality that he feared, an immaterial connection, which meant she didn’t have to lie about something having “happened.”

There was a flash of white light: Tom was taking a photograph. Robert watched his son looking at the stonework in the window frame. Again, Helen told Tom about the history, the engraving that lined the right side of the window. She said it was in an old Celtic language called Goidelic. Tom waited a moment and then snapped another photograph. Helen followed him down the aisle towards the vestry.
Robert could hear her whispered references to the history of the place, the history of Christianity in this part of Wales – from the time of the Druids to the Romans and then the Normans. And yet, as he traced his fingers across the stone, across those old Celtic words, he felt unable to believe, to feel, with any conviction, that those things about which she spoke – those migrations, invasions – had ever truly occurred.

They left the church and walked up the hill to the old castle. There wasn’t much in the way of ruins, only a mound of raised earth. They drifted around the site as Tom took photographs. And then they walked back down and over the old bridge, into the fields; in Robert’s mind, the wind and rain separated them further; the rain was not heavy, but the wind whipped the droplets into his eyes and ears.

The nature of this place was such that one would find oneself in the hills and then suddenly beside the ocean: there did not feel a clear distinction between inland and coast. They walked through a field of long grass, which wet their clothes. Then they were in the hills, walking single file through the trees; there were wildflowers everywhere, pink, blue, white, and yellow. The damp air was oppressively rich; it suggested an overabundance of life.

As they walked through the woods, Robert was filled with a sense of dread. He wondered if this was his own mind playing tricks, or if – after a life of delusion – he was finally aware of some deep, unpleasant truth. There was nothing binding about this walk. He did not feel closer to his son or his partner. On the contrary, as they walked on ahead through sodden grass, between the dark, damp trunks of the trees, he knew, somehow, that he was witnessing the start of their walking forever from his life.
They were talking about their next lesson. He caught up with them, eager to contribute, to say something – anything.

“And I was thinking,” said Helen to Tom, “it would be great if you’d spend some time with Nicola, you know – sometimes, after the lesson’s over.”

“Aye,” he said.

“Just – she’s rather lonely there, I think,” she added.

“I know,” he said.

“You like her, don’t you?”

“She’s all right.” He said this brightly; he’d meant it.

“Well, what do you think?” said Helen. “The thing is, Paul is a bit paranoid about her going off on her own, so you might take her to the beach one day – something nice like that.” Her accent was affected again, Robert thought.

“Yeah,” said Tom. “I guess it’s only ethical,” he said.

*Only ethical.* The phrase did not belong to him, Robert thought, but to Paul.

“I think you’ll get something out of it,” said Helen. “She’s such a bright girl.”

“I will,” said Tom. “I’m looking forward to the next time.”

The cross was carved in the stone on the bank of the hill. There were a few steps leading up to it, and which were worn down by centuries of worship.

Helen spoke of the pilgrims – St Brynach himself would have been one of them. She said he’d gone to Rome before coming back to Wales so that he could establish the church. He was supposed to have killed a demon in Romania. He gave his food to the poor. He was rewarded in the form of spiritual visions. He spoke to angels.

“And a cow,” said Helen. “Strangely, he was given a cow as a reward.”
“That’s more like it,” said Tom, including Robert with a glance. “Conversations with angels might be interesting. But a good steak –”

“Oh, he didn’t slaughter it. He kept it for the milk.”

Tom kneeled at the worn stone before the cross; Robert could not tell if this gesture was ironic or not.

“He was supposed to have enchanted the beasts,” Helen continued. “Supposedly, a wolf took the cow to pasture in the morning, and brought it home at night.”

“That’s weird,” said Tom.

“Isn’t it?” said Helen, smiling.

“It’s no stranger than anything else,” said Robert, vaguely, and with unexpected weight. Helen and Tom looked at him, the former with an intensity that brought back the feeling he’d had in the church. There was a secret, something kept from him. And perhaps all he could do to deny it was to claim it was all mythology.

“It’s going to rain properly soon,” he said.

“Yes,” said Helen. “Let’s get home.”

Tom rose from the cross. He put his camera to his eye, but lowered it again to look at it, to see it, perhaps, as it was, before joining them on the path.

That night, Robert went to the pub to check that Helen was there. When he found her working, laughing with the barman, he made an excuse, tried to turn it into a romantic gesture. But as he sat down at the bar, he felt childish, weak. They talked briefly, now and then, about nothing in particular. She spoke to some of her customers, old locals. Occasionally she said, “This is Rob,” without saying more. He longed to drink heavily,
but didn’t think that he should. He ordered whiskey from the barman – an old, grey-haired Welshman with a moustache. “Sneaking one by the misses, is it?” he joked.

After a few hours, Robert was falling asleep.

“Why don’t you go home, Rob?” said Helen, catching him with his head sinking towards the bar. “I’ve got to close, so I’ll be here till late.”

“I’m tired of you coming home late,” he said – perhaps too loudly; he sensed the barman listening. “I’m sorry. I just – well, all right then. I’ll wait for you at home.”

“Wait for me,” she whispered; or hissed – he wasn’t sure which, as he rose from the stool; he was conscious of her watching him as he moved carefully between the two tables, through the dim light of the pub.

The rain was coming down. At the house, in their bedroom, his hair was wet as he set his head down against the pillow. He shivered, and burned.

Later, he woke to her cold hands in his own. She’d held onto them. Her hands warmed, her grip softened, as he drifted back into sleep.

VI

Robert wasn’t sure how to feel about the days. During the next, Helen went for a shift at the café, and then, again, went to the Harrow farm with Tom; and then she was at the pub till late; and he missed her until she was leaving in the morning to do it all again.

He went for a job interview in Carmarthen – a position with the local social services. He felt guilty for not working while Helen worked two jobs. And his desperation must have been felt during the interview; when he tried to show his own passion for the well being
of the children in his care, he came off as paranoid, overly negative. “You never know how bad it will be,” he said, “how much the child has suffered. You can lose a lot of sleep. You can go crazy.”

The day after was spent the same, Robert applying for work in the nearest towns, hoping for an interview. He marvelled at the paintings his son brought home. Robert was glad he knew Turner’s work, for this meant he was correct when he said Tom’s pictures reminded him of Turner’s. And with each day, Tom looked better, enriched – he had colour in his cheeks. Robert thought of the word *blessed*.

Meanwhile, Helen was more distant. And yet she was kinder, somehow. She held him in a way that reminded him that they were family, if nothing else.

One day, he walked with them to Carningli, the mountain where St Brynach was said to have communed with the angels. And this time Robert understood something of the purpose of these places, these rituals. He began to understand that the true form of spirituality was a kind of selflessness, that to speak with the angels (metaphorically, at least), one would need to suffer for the sake of others: Helen, in his case.

And he held onto this notion partly, perhaps, out of spite, out of the possibility that his righteousness could be used against her (which, of course, made it false; he still thought about Caroline.) And he held on to this notion when Tom suggested they go to the beach, because his son had said it with the caution of a psychoanalyst preparing to unleash some terrible truth.

They decided they would walk. They passed through the town and the lanes to the harbour. The air was warm, potent. Great plumes of purple cloud boiled in the sky above.
Robert noticed that Tom wore that strange expression, the one that belonged to Paul – the frown and smile together.

“How was your interview the other day, Dad?” he said.

They had come out of the lanes and were walking by the golf course where a few tourists seemed to be packing their things away at the other end of green.

“Oh, it was good,” said Robert.

“Good.”

The car park before the beach was empty. There were a few gulls floating in the sky. Robert and his son waited at the side of the road for a car to pass.

“How was your last lesson?” said Robert.

“Good,” said Tom.

“I’m glad you’ve been enjoying the work.”

Again, that strange smile.

“It’s hot, isn’t it?” Tom looked up at the sky.

“Aye, it is, mate.”

“Shall we swim when we get down there?”

“You serious?”

“You don’t have to join me.”

“Hey, I’m not going to chicken out. I’m just surprised.”

“Surprised that I want to swim?”

“Aye.”

When they got down to the beach, they left their things in the dunes, and Tom removed his shirt. He was bigger. He’d put on weight. Tom had always been very thin,
and his thinness had reminded Robert of when he was a teenager, the sense that the vulnerability of boyhood prevailed, and would always prevail.

Tom walked towards the sea and then passed into the waves as if merging with them. Robert followed. The water was hostile in its bitter cold. He couldn’t quite get the rhythm of his swimming to take away its sting; it was a battle he lost, over and over, as he paddled in the wake from his son’s butterfly stroke. Robert swam back to the shore and stayed for a while on the edge of where the waves spread across the sand, droplets rising with a sudden wind. He jogged on the spot, his arms folded. Watching his son moving through the water, he was struck with a feeling akin to that which the ocean swimmer feels seeing something unknown moving in the dark waters beneath.

The storm clouds, arcing above the black water, and with only a blade of silver white sky, gave the impression of an enormous pair of jaws; and from this Tom emerged, dripping, panting, and grinning in a way that, mercifully, gave him something of his old, familiar aspect: a teenaged boy who, most often said of the sea: you’d have to pay me to swim in an ocean that cold.

They dried themselves and then sat in the sand. He’d brought a few cans of lager; the splintering sound of the cans set something in motion, something that filled the scene with pathos – the black sea, the temples of dark cloud slowly rolling, as if towards them. This was the end of something; it was the end of a summer day, and yet something else. Robert had been frightened by what he associated with Paul, the importance of seeing. Now he’d developed his own way of seeing, though he wasn’t sure if it was a kind of clarity, or its opposite. There was always that feeling of pathos at the end of a summer day; everyone knew how that felt. But now, as they lay against the sand drinking lager,
listening to the gulls – those cries shrill yet distant – and the sky dark, he could feel the
day’s end signalling something greater, more terrifying, and of which he was sure few
people on the beach would be conscious.

“I’ve been getting to know them,” said Tom.

“Paul, Caroline, Nicola?”

“Aye. Well, more Nicola than anyone else. Caroline hardly seems to be there, I’ve
got to say.”

Her name triggered in Robert a sensation like the opening of cloud above a
sunbather, a spreading of warmth that comes and goes with the wind.

“And Paul,” Tom continued, “he’s sort of difficult to know. I feel like he exists in
flux. He’s got so many ideas it’s hard to pin him down. But I like that about him. He just
tells me what he thinks, and what I should do.”

“I see.”

“Which is nice, sometimes.”

“Aye, it is,” said Robert. He felt the sting of the accusation. He remembered their
move to Newford and watching Tom – age four – kick a football against the wall of the
house three times before giving up. There were the pylons looming above the disused
industrial estate. He could have gone out and tried to teach him some tricks. He could
have done more than fill his bedroom with little musical instruments. At least he could
say that he’d read to him. Yes, they had read the *Narnia* books together. It was when he
was older that he had let Helen step in, though he wasn’t sure why.

Now he smiled. He didn’t want to say anything cheap.

They took a drink at the same time.
“And so what about Nicola?”

Tom took another swig. His short hair moved in the wind.

“She’s lovely.”

His gaze was fixed on the sea. Why did this produce a strange pang in Robert’s chest? That word again: lovely.

Robert tried to say, “Good,” but he coughed, choked on the foam from his lager.

“The thing about her,” said Tom, “she’s very intelligent. Which makes me feel a bit daft, you know what I mean? But then, in other ways, she feels very young.”

“In what ways?”

“She knows a lot about art, and about books and stuff. She’s like her dad. And she’s always, like, gloomy and sarcastic. She can be kind of a bully. But then, I don’t know, the last time we were together, I gave her a hug and she went mental.”

“What do you mean, mental?”

“Her body language. She kind of collapsed. That’s the only way I can explain it. We watched that old film, Brief Encounter. She likes these black and white films. But it was like she was watching somebody getting murdered. It was weird. Her eyes were wide. She seemed sort of confused and frightened. It made me nervous.”

“Well,” said Robert, “she is younger than you.” He wasn’t sure if, with this, he’d delivered a warning. His son’s expression was the same – thoughtful, focussed.

“I’ll tell you something,” said Tom. “I know what I’m doing there. I’ve realised how to manage it. I know what could happen, and I’m going to be careful.”

“All right, mate.”

“I don’t need help.”
“I’m sure you don’t.”

“I know a lot of people do.” Now he seemed to be making a real effort not to look at Robert. “A lot of people need guidance. It’s always been assumed that I need guidance. Direction. But I don’t think I do anymore. I think I understand what I’ve got to do.”

“Well perhaps you can give me some guidance,” said Robert. There was between them an odd mixture of jest and competition – perhaps more of the latter.

“It’s not my place,” said Tom.

He drank, tipped the lager as far back as he could. He twisted the empty can into the sand until it stood on its own.

“I think that a man should risk losing everything to find what he loves,” he said, a little music to the voice.

Robert couldn’t seem to stop the grin from spreading across his face, even though he knew it was an ugly grin. “That’s a cliché,” he said.

“I suppose it is.”

“It’s not only a cliché but it doesn’t help. It doesn’t tell us anything.”

“Well, I think that when people aren’t true to themselves they can hurt others. Doesn’t it worry you, Dad, the thought that there are these people living such dishonest lives that they’re basically destined for regret? They care so much about the other person that they’d rather lie. But in doing so, they steal life from that other person.”

Robert pressed his own can of lager into the sand. He pressed it too far so that the lager spilled out in tributaries of gold and white foam.

“No,” said Robert. “You’re right. You’re right.”
“I tell you,” said Tom. “I like Nicola. I’m not going to hurt her. I’m going do everything to make it good. I’m going to find a way to avoid suffering.”

“That’s good of you, mate,” said Robert. And though he was aware of how young his son sounded, he wondered if he was, himself, attempting a similarly impossible task by never questioning Helen, by letting things go the way they were going.

Everything else, of course, he took quite personally.

Tom was staring down at his own toes, which he wriggled slightly.

Robert made a show of reclining deeper against the sand. He closed his eyes.

Later, he could hear the scratching of graphite against paper.

“What you drawing, mate?” he said.

“You,” said Tom.

Robert turned his head slightly, felt more of the warm sand against his stubbled cheek. He wondered if this change in position would make him appear more authentically himself. Somehow it occurred to him that if he could only reveal the uncertainty at his own core, then he would lose some of those pretentions that went with fatherhood. He smiled. “Am I difficult to draw?” he said.

“I don’t know,” said Tom. “I don’t know if you’re difficult to draw, or if I’m not good enough to capture your essence.”

“My essence,” Robert echoed – he’d wanted to sound affectionately mocking, but he’d almost chanted the word in reverence.

The sound of the sea and the pencil scratching: the rhythms of each made him relax, drift almost into sleep; except he did not allow himself to go just yet, knowing that
once the sound of the pencil ceased, he would find an image of himself as seen through his son’s eyes. And yet he did drift off, eventually.

When he woke up, Tom was walking along the edge of the surf. The sketchpad was beside the towels in the sand. The image, Robert thought, was ghostly. His image was made of very faint lines. The proportions, overall, did not seem quite right. He seemed at a distance from his son, like a stranger sunbathing nearby.

The more he looked at it, the more it seemed – not incorrect – but the result of stylistic intention. He’s getting good at drawing, Robert thought.

And he thought of that drawing again that night when Helen woke him at dawn, climbing into bed beside him.

VII

Robert woke the next morning to the sound of the rain. He listened to it – that splintering sound. He thought of the rain filling up the drains and the ditches alongside the road outside. He felt Helen sleeping beside him. He saw himself – as if from outside – in this strange and unfamiliar house, listening to the rain; as if he were a character in a film he had started watching midway through, conscious only of the ominous tone, unfamiliar with the room, the man, and the woman lying by his side.

As he lay listening, he knew that in some way he should be angry with her. He should make a simple accusation. The feeling that she had been with Paul was a sense as strong as any other. And yet, waiting, listening, his desire to accuse her was mixed with
that of total detachment. Helen stirred, turned over. She turned over again, to face him, and his heart beat fast.

“There’s a party tonight, Rob,” she said.

“A party?” he said.

She nodded, her eyes still closed.

“Where?” he said.

“The Harrow place.”

“Well, I don’t care if you go,” he said.

She yawned, or pretended to.

“We should all go,” she said. “Paul finished another painting.”

Robert wondered about the painting as much as he wondered why she was inviting him. Perhaps she didn’t really want to. It might have been some sort of paradoxical urge: a fear of falling that fuels the desire to jump.

“It’s good, Rob,” she said. “You’ll want to see it.”

She turned over, away from him.

He had to admit – he did want to see the artist’s newest painting. He considered the rush of blood to the head; why had he felt that at the notion of seeing Paul’s work? Did it represent another chance to speak with Caroline? Or was it true that the feeling he’d experience seeing that brightly coloured pheasant had permanently affected his mind? Perhaps it was that the work might contain something of the mystery that had formed itself around him and Helen – that silence.

It had been there in their hotel room in Notting Hill when they were twenty years old. The hotel was the cheapest they could find – terrible breakfasts, a shattered picture of
a lion above the bed. And she’d told him, in the darkness, after their visit to the Tate, that she loved him. And he had failed to respond. And in his desire for redemption he had said it every day that followed.

Yes, he thought, now, there was also the possibility that she wanted to bring everything to an end.

“I’m sure we can go,” he said.

“Okay,” said Helen.

She shut her eyes tight, held them closed, and then opened them again, as if to check whether or not he still appeared troubled.

She sighed and smiled. Robert decided that it was best not to say more. He felt some relief at the possibility that he was not entirely excluded from their world; and yet stronger than this was the detachment he’d felt upon waking. Helen’s breathing, the smell of her hair (a faint scent of artificial honey), the warmth from her body: all of it was here and yet not here. Or, rather, he was present and yet removed. And he felt, now, that this was how it was supposed to be. He turned onto his back and stared at the white ceiling. He suspected that the opportunity to understand the distance between them was within reach; a semi-presence was more than adequate. He would act like a scientist, watching forms of life from afar. He would take on the aspect of an anthropologist, dealing with the subject of the love between him and Helen.

He faded into the whiteness of the ceiling. Saying nothing more, Helen got out of bed and went into the bathroom. Robert heard the rushing sound of the shower, the sound of it fusing with the sound of the rain.
The narrow lanes unfolded in darkness cut by headlights. Helen took the rear-view mirror in her hand, angled it in her direction so that she could check her appearance. She plucked at her hair in that swift, non-committal sort of way that made no difference. Robert wanted to reassure her by being conversational and upbeat, but he could only concentrate on the road. “You look nice,” he said.

“Cheers,” she said. “So do you.”

Tom was sitting in the back; he was wearing a white shirt, which brought out the bronze colour of the skin. There was in his face a kind of strength. Robert was reassured by it; however, he also remembered his son’s words from the day before, that half-veiled suggestion that he leave Helen for the sake of their happiness.

And yet there was, still, that simple fact of his looking better. There was that time back in England when he heard his son come home very late from a night out wandering the streets with his friends. He went to bed, leaving his bedroom door open. And Robert, walking past, on his way downstairs for a glass of water, saw the boy’s face – white and gaunt – illuminated by the hallway light. Robert wondered if the most romantic vision of one’s child was that of perfect physical health. He had not imagined him learning to play the piano, or becoming a famous actor – he simply imagined a healthy child, which he saw now: he didn’t even care that Tom might catch him looking and reel with embarrassment.

“Rob,” said Helen. “Rob.”
She shouted. He turned his gaze from the mirror to the road ahead. He’d started
towards a tree on the edge of the woods. He slammed on the breaks but they struck it
with a bang. They jolted forward and back in their seats.

“Are you all right, Helen?” he said; “Tom, are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” said Tom, “I think.”

Helen was rubbing the back of her neck.

“Bloody hell, Rob. What happened?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Tom – are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’m sure.”

“Did you hit your head? It sounded like you’d banged against the seat.”

“I did but I’m fine.”

“Fucking hell.”

She was staring at Robert.

“Are you all right?” she said.

“I’m fine. I’m fine. I’m sorry. I better get out and have a look.”

The dent in the car was deeper than he’d imagined considering what they’d felt
upon impact; the front bumper had been pressed several inches into the bonnet. One of
the headlights was cracked and gave out no light.

He got back in and started the engine.

“What’s it like, Rob?” said Helen.

“Not good,” he said.

He sighed.
“I suppose we better head home.”

“No,” said Helen. “No – we’re almost there.”

“As long as you don’t mind showing off the damage.”

“I don’t care,” she said.

Robert knew he didn’t care; he thought getting drunk with strangers far superior to heading home.

“Does the car actually work?” said Helen.

He reversed; the car clunked back onto the road.

“Seems like it,” he said.

They continued along the lane with one headlight; there was a strange rattling sound about which nobody said a word. As they continued through the lanes, Robert felt a smile spread across his face; it might have been a nervous reaction. Perhaps he was going mad. He was a child again. He was sitting at the back of the silent classroom, knowing that to laugh was to sign his own death warrant.

He started to laugh.

He glanced at Helen; she looked at him in disbelief.

He covered his mouth. “Sorry,” he said through his fingers.

He heard a snort. Helen had turned red, her expression a sort of grimace, contorted by her trying not to laugh. She glanced back at Tom. Robert looked in the mirror. He was afraid he would find his son frightened by this display, but Tom was smiling and shaking his head. They were all laughing.

They were still laughing, their eyes wet, as the Harrow place appeared. There were several cars parked outside. Robert wondered if the tears in his eyes were still from
their laughter. There was a confusion of emotion. It was almost as if he were very happy.
He was laughing with his family. They were going to a party with people they admired.
They lived by the sea. The lights from the conservatory and from the studio glowed
against a sky made darker by the cloud.

“Thank God nobody’s outside,” said Helen. “We might be able to just sneak in
without anybody seeing the car.”

Stepping out onto the grass, she smoothed down her dress, crouched so she could see her reflection in the wing mirror.

She sighed. “Okay,” she said.

He put his hand on her back, but she walked across the garden quickly so that it fell away from her. And Robert felt again like a sleeper who hunts for clues as to whether or not he inhabits a nightmare.

Paul opened the door, letting the music flow out into the night – triumphant brass and kettledrums. He was holding a glass of whiskey. He hugged Helen. He looked at the car.

“My goodness,” he said; “did that happen this evening?”

“I’m afraid so,” said Helen.

“Well, are you all right?”

“Yes,” she laughed. “Just a bit embarrassed.”

“Well, my God; at least you’re all right. Come in and get a drink – Robert, good to see you.” He didn’t offer his hand.

“We brought some wine,” said Robert. “It’s not much, but – ”

“Lovely, that’s great, but you must join me for a whiskey.”
He took a drink; he seemed to flinch and hold back a look of revulsion. “This is a good one,” he said, raising his glass. “Shall I fix you a glass?”

“Please – thank you.”

“Ice?”

“No,” said Robert, “just a bit of water. Cheers.”

“Tom,” he said, “good to see you; how are you doing?”

“Fine, Paul,” said Tom, “thank you.”

The music was Wagner, somebody said, and it suited the scene perfectly. There was a sense of victory about the gathering, the brightness of the smiles, the quality of the clothing, mostly black; shoes glinted in the studio lights. It seemed as if every face bore the same expression: all lifted in attitudes of ironic intelligence or empathy of a very distant sort.

Tom and Helen had moved into the midst of the crowd; they were talking to a young couple; Helen presented him. Paul was at the other end of the room talking to a small gathering, gesturing with his hand to a tiny picture on the wall.

There was no sign of Caroline.

He joined Helen and Tom.

“Oh Robert,” said Helen. “There you are. This is my partner, Rob. Robert, this is Jeremy and Clarissa.”

“Hiya,” he said. “Nice to meet you both.”

“Jeremy’s an English professor at Cardiff.”

“From London originally,” he said, shaking Robert’s hand. “How are you finding Pembrokeshire?”
“Oh, we love it,” said Helen, sipping her wine.

“Robert,” said Clarissa, “what do you do?”

“I used to work for Paul and Caroline.”

“Oh, you did? Doing what?”

“Just taking care of things round here.”

“Oh, like a farm hand?” said Clarissa.

“He found it therapeutic,” said Helen. “Didn’t you, Rob?”

“Well, it’s hard to find work here, you know.”

They nodded.

“I’m unemployed now, of course.”

“Ah,” said Jeremy, “the life of leisure.”

“Aye,” said Robert.

Nicola came in and seized Tom by the arm; “Tom,” she said, fixing him with a determined sort of gaze, a half smile, communicating something private.

“Hey,” he said, “what are you up to?”

Robert excused himself.

“I’m going to see about that drink.”

The kitchen seemed empty; an army of wine bottles stood on the sideboard. There were flowers, too – orchids, standing in a jar of water. Robert heard laughter. Caroline came in from the studio hallway. “Robert,” she said, in a way that reminded him of Nicola. She frowned at him, and held his hands; she seemed a little drunk.

For some reason, now, the sparkle in her eye looked completely impersonal. If he were to fall in love with her the way she looked now, it would only be the love somebody
thinks they have for a certain film star, a vague attraction, little more than a trick of the light. And yet, even though he was conscious of this effect, the old warmth spread throughout his chest.

“You don’t have a drink, Robert,” she said, pouring him a glass of red, handing it to him. “How have you been? How’s the job hunting?”

“Not too bad. I’ve applied for some social work positions.”

“Oh yes?”

“I’m not looking forward to that, but it’s got to be done.”

“I wish you could work here,” she said, her gaze full of mischief. “It was so nice to have you around. You should come and swim here sometime.”

“I’d like that,” he said. Had the pitch of his voice just faltered, as if he were sixteen years old? He cleared his throat. “How’s the book?”

“I’ve got the ending,” she said. “It was all a dream!” She laughed. Then she stared at him. “You must come and swim here some time.”

Paul appeared, then, rubbing his hands, smiling and gazing vacantly about the kitchen. “It’s all ready,” he said.

“Sorry?” Robert said.

“Paul’s prepared something in his studio.” She shrugged.

Paul smiled at her; they embraced. Robert held his glass to his mouth without drinking, peering at them. He could deduce nothing at all from the way they kissed—sharply, but not entirely without passion.

“Robert,” said Paul, “I was going to get you a whiskey. I’m sorry.”

“I’m fine,” said Robert, raising his glass of wine.
Paul took his own glass of his whiskey from the sideboard and drank – again, that grimace, which he was simply unable to conceal.

“Let’s get back out there, shall we?” He held Caroline around the waist; she went back into the living room first; Robert tried to find something in the way she glanced at him, a glance that might have been only for him, for Robert.

They were back in the bright light, amongst the faces. The music was different.

Mozart, somebody said. He knew it was Mozart, even though he knew nothing about classical music. “Requiem in D Minor,” somebody else said. “Strange music for a party, really.” This was an elderly man with a thick beard and with a younger woman on his arm; they were laughing; and Paul was saying, “I’m new to all this. Should I have chosen something more disco?” The music was turned up very loud.

Robert moved closer to Helen. She was talking, again, with Jeremy and Clarissa. Robert smiled at her. She smiled back. And yet he felt he couldn’t put his arm around her. They were talking about art – “Caspar” somebody, a German; yes, he’d seen the painting with man on the cliff looking out at the mist.

“We saw the original in Berlin,” said Clarissa.

“It was wonderful,” said Jeremy. “You know, I see something of him in Paul’s work; at least, I see them as rather religious images.”

“Well, but he’s trying to bridge the gap, isn’t he, between secular and religious imagery. Don’t you think?”

“I think that’s absolutely correct,” said Helen.

Robert drank and listened – Caroline filled his glass once, twice. She drifted around the room, her movements exaggerated, dance-like.
He could see Tom sitting with Nicola on the sofa. They were reading a book, or, rather, she was reading to him. And he didn’t look annoyed; he appeared lucid; for some reason the word came to Robert – *gallant*. It was as if all the high language in the room converged, made him pregnant with eloquence and higher notions. He saw the word in the air, above his son, in the bright hot air of the living room.

Later, after a few more glasses, Robert sat down on the sofa. He was drunk. He had tried to make sense of things: he had seen Paul and Caroline together, seemingly in love. He had seen Paul with his hand on the small of Helen’s back, a gesture that seemed horribly natural. But then, he’d also seen the old artist do the same to another man. Now, Robert was unable to identify who exactly was laughing and smiling, whose hand was placed on the other’s hand, or the shoulder, or the waist.

“Right, everybody,” said Paul, clapping his hands. “I wonder if you’d all follow me to the studio. I’m going to recommend that you remove any nice jackets, and that you roll up your sleeves.”

Robert watched the small gathering head to the kitchen. He followed. They passed through the hallway. There was the sense of anticipation. The corridor seemed darker than usual. He looked for Helen; she was walking with Paul. Tom and Nicola were together. They all fed into the studio.

He realised, now, that he’d not spoken to the other couples at all since having arrived at the party. There was a strange tension in the air as they all waited for Paul to explain. Robert saw that there was a new painting on the wall – a rabbit painted in a similar style to the pheasant – large and vivid. Next to this was a blank canvas.
“Here,” said Paul, “is a box of red charcoal. What I want us to do is cover this canvas with hands – impressions of our hands. Sort of like you did in primary school. And just as our ancestors did in the Chauvet Cave of Southern France.”

Everybody looked at one another, smiling nervously.

“What I’ll do,” Paul said, “is what we used to do, thousands of years ago. Come and place your hand against the canvas, and I’ll blow pigment over it – don’t worry, it’ll wash off very easily. And here’s some water if you want to do that.”

Nicola went first, placing her tiny hand against the white. Paul pressed a bamboo pipe into the box of red charcoal, and he blew the dust over her hand, once, twice, until the stencil remained, an outline. Tom went next. Paul patted him on the back and then followed with the same act. Robert felt his own smile fade as the others followed. The room had taken on all the quietness of deep history, of prehistoric caves. The only thing that seemed strange was that they were all dressed in superficially modern clothing – a wristwatch on a man’s arm looked out of place.

He watched Helen press her left hand against the canvas; Paul leaned close to the back of her hand as he blew into the pipe. Robert felt a pang of jealousy, which came and went as quickly as if it had never come at all. Soon, everybody was waiting for Paul, each after the other, pressing a hand against the canvas. Eventually Paul placed his own hand on his forehead; he was out of breath. “I feel rather funny,” he said, smiling, the first word spoken in what seemed an age.

“One more round,” he added.

And as he captured another set of hands, Robert felt this strange connection to the others in the room; he looked at the couples with whom he’d not yet spoken; smiles were
exchanged, soft and dreamy; it seemed the effect of the ritual, and not the booze. It was an act of binding. Paul put up his hands again, as if to declare the ritual done. Tom was sitting on the floor next to Nicola; Jeremy and Clarissa were sitting on the floor, too. They all looked at the paintings. Had somebody dimmed the lights? They must have done, for it was dark in here save the lamps that lit the paintings – the pheasant, the rabbit, and the red pattern of so many human hands.

Caroline brought wine into the studio. There was no longer anything hostile about this place. There was music, so soft it seemed a trick of the mind. Robert spoke with some of the other guests: names did not seem important. The subjects of conversation were out of touch with normality, in that they went without superficial gestures, the cocking of the head, the polite tone. Robert spoke about Wales, how in a ways it was strange to live here. In a way, it was more colonialism. The bearded man hummed. “Especially given our history with the language; I wasn’t a young man when we were trying to keep the language from Welsh schools.” His wife agreed that that law was something of which the English should be ashamed.

“And yet, we’ve never had problems here,” she added.

“Well, Pembrokeshire is such an English part of Wales,” said her husband.

“That’s true,” said Robert.

“Can you speak Welsh?”

“No,” he said. “Can you?”

“No,” said the man.

“No,” said his wife.
The man was a professor of percussion, which Robert liked. He’d always liked the idea of the drums. The man said that, at this point, he thought in terms of drumming. “Everything is rhythmic,” he said, and winked at his wife. They laughed. And yet there was nothing vulgar about this; it was endearing, and Robert felt his eyes fill with tears. Helen was sitting with Tom and Nicola; they were looking up at the painting of the rabbit. They smiled sleepily as they spoke. Caroline was talking to Jeremy. There was nothing of that sparkle in her gaze any longer. She looked rather grave, but was perhaps only being respectful. She’d lost her air of play.

Paul came by, sipping from his glass, and the professor asked him if he could speak Welsh. Paul shook his head.

“I know a few words,” he said.

“We were just expressing our guilt,” said the professor.

“Oh,” said Paul. “I understand. It doesn’t really affect me too much, I must say.”

“Guilt in general?” said Robert. He might have been trying to challenge the old artist; but really he wanted to know more; he wanted to understand.

“Well, I think guilt is the product of the superego, a by-product of civilisation.”

Again there was the smile, that qualifying distance.

“This is why I want to go back,” Paul continued. “Back to a time before national identity. We call it primitivism, but I think it’s possible we’ve become less pure over time. It’s possible that civilisation has been forged on the basis of a mistake.”

“Hence your interest in cave art?” said the professor.

Paul looked at his own work, the hands, the pheasant, the rabbit.
“There are many theories about the purpose of cave paintings: they were there to communicate information about the movements of certain animals, some say; they were part of religious ceremony – since so many are in regions of the cave which are hard to reach. Or they were used for hunting magic, the use of which we still see in the tribes of our time. But one thing I feel is that they were without irony. They didn’t need it. Before art galleries, in the modern world, a painting was merely a curiosity. Flash forward a few hundred years and there were galleries. A couple hundred later and a painting couldn’t exist without making some comment on the gallery itself, on the notion of the commodity. And that’s rather sad, I think.”

Robert was thinking about the first time he met Helen – outside the school gates, and how, when he worked at the pub, he wore a suit. After he stopped drinking so much, he felt it necessary to dress well. And she took this seriously, as if it were an essential part of his sobriety. They had talked about the irony with which people got married. People were even ironic about having children.

They had had conviction, at least, in their fear of these things.

“But isn’t it possible,” the professor was saying, “that the prehistoric artists dealt with the same kinds of problems? I mean, who’s to say they didn’t step back from their paintings and laugh?”

“But that isn’t the same thing,” said Paul. “And, anyway, you’re not taking into account the historical. There’s always the historical context. If there’s anything essential about animals or human beings, it’s always bound up with history.”

“So now you’re saying it’s impossible to return to the past?”
“I think it’s very difficult.” He turned towards the painting of the rabbit. “Look,” he said. “The rabbit. What do you think of when you see this animal?”

“Stew,” said the professor.

“Easter,” said his wife.

“Anything else?”

“Hunting again,” Robert said; his voice sounded sudden, unexpected. “I’ve hunted rabbits before.”

“Well, you know,” said Paul. “The rabbit has hardly changed physical form at all in millions of years. From what we know of the lagomorph family, the Gomphos, which is the oldest fossil of this animal type, existed around sixty-five millions years ago. And then there are theories that the Neanderthal died out, because it failed to adapt to eating rabbit meat. The Gomphos possessed much of the cuteness of the modern rabbit. It could hop. It was only slightly larger. So we see Easter, and chocolate, and Walt Disney. But there are theories that suggest the rabbit hopped through the death of the dinosaur, and hopped through the death of that failed version of – us, of human kind.”

As in the painting of the pheasant, the rabbit faced forwards, its eyes full of emotion. The scale of it removed the animal from the context of hunting. In this painting it had the appearance of a great historical figure. Robert looked at Paul – his eyebrows sat high on his face, the eyes wide, inviting everything in. When he spoke like this, the artist seemed larger, too. If there was anything hostile about the man it was in the way he shared his thoughts, his work, his wine.
There was still, of course, the historical context, the fact of him and Helen. But there was something about the man that meant he could liberate himself from that, if only for a moment. He could do that and then he could sit here and talk about his art.

Tom and Nicola disappeared together. The other guests left: first the two couples — including the couple Robert had been talking to about Wales and Paul’s art — and then the other. Jeremy and Clarissa stayed till late; they were talking with Helen and Paul and Caroline. And though he tried to stay awake, Robert fell asleep. He woke what seemed a mere moment later. Caroline was lying on the sofa, watching him.

“I think,” she said, “that we just woke up at the same time.”

There was nobody else; the living room was dark save the lamp that illuminated her face. She didn’t look sleepy – she looked as if she’d only just set her head against the cushions of the sofa, so that she could look at him.

“Where is everybody?” he said.

“Tom and Helen are in the guest rooms.”

“The guest rooms?”

“I expect so.”

“What time is it?”

“I don’t know.”

She sat up, smiling vaguely into the dark. She snatched a packet of cigarettes from the coffee table. “Care to join me?” she said.
Robert realised he had two choices: he could try to investigate, look for Helen, and try to get them out of here, now. Or he could take things further: he could have his own role in the strangeness of the evening.

“All right,” he said.

They went out through the conservatory. The clouds had shifted in a wind that continued to roll over the headland. Robert’s sleepiness seemed to shield him from the cold. Caroline pointed the packet of cigarettes in his direction. He took one and lit up. And they smoked for a while, watching the clouds rolling across the white moon, the light shifting over the ocean in the distance.

“Tom and Nicola were getting on well, weren’t they?” she said.

“Yes, definitely.” He thought of what Tom had said; he wondered if anything had happened between them, a thought that would have set his heart racing were he not in this dream-like state. “They like each other,” he said.

“It’s sweet.”

“Aye.”

“We might keep an eye on them, though,” said Caroline. “If you know what I mean?” Her half smile suggested caution.

“Oh, aye,” he said. “Well, Nicola seems very headstrong, very bright. I’m sure she can handle our Tom.”

“Tom is very bright,” she said. “I overheard Helen, once, complaining about how he was back in England. Was he very bad?”

“He got into trouble with the police,” said Robert.

“Ah.”
“He’s fine, now. He’s safe, I reckon.”

“Things like that – I suppose you wonder what they’re doing when they aren’t getting caught.”

“Well, like you said, we should keep an eye on them.”

She smiled, shook her head. “I’m not a stranger to mischief. I used to be bloody awful. That’s what you get for having an old fashioned authoritarian for a father.” She clutched the front of her brown cardigan tightly, frowning against the cold wind. “Paul rescued me from all that, thankfully. From more than mischief, too, I should say.”

“Did you drink?” he said. He apologised for being so blunt.

“I’m afraid so.”

“But you still drink. You’re able to drink again?”

She glanced at him, her mouth scrunched up in an imitation of shame. Then she looked out at the ocean, frowned, smoked and exhaled.

“Paul is this contradiction,” she said. “When I was a student, he was so square. He used to work all the time. This was when he was up and coming. Of course I was an idiot and didn’t realise that making art is just the same as having a job. He used to go to bed so early. He’s still this way: goes to bed early, rises early. But over the last few months, he’s developed a thirst for something else, for – fun, I suppose. And I hate the idea that an entire life can unravel, because of such a simple sort of need.”

There was, in her voice, the touch of her past career, and Robert wondered how practiced was her gaze – the contemplative look she wore as she looked at the sea.

“He’s still a good father,” he said.
“Oh, yes. But then, I wonder about that, too. He and I argue about Nicola. I agreed that London was a dangerous place for her to grow up, in some ways. But in other ways, it was a wonderful place. She had friends. She had better access to culture. But, of course, Paul had these ideas about natural beauty. He became something of a paranoiac about the city. He’s a romantic. He has these ideas about perfection.”

“Tom has improved because of him,” said Robert – almost against his will; the words had simply come to him.

“It might have worked on an older kid. But with Nicola, I know she feels guilty a lot of the time. If she doesn’t know something – the name of an artist, for instance – he shames her. He says, ‘Well, you know, it’s not that you’ll make more money knowing these things, but that you’ll enrich your life. Waking up one day, realising you don’t know anything – well, there’s nothing worse than that.’”

Robert laughed.

“He’s a man who loves certainties, in the end,” she added.

“But you love him, don’t you?” said Robert.

“That question doesn’t mean much. Of course I love him. So what?” She looked at him then, and he knew what he should do and what he wanted to do, but he did nothing. She dropped her shoulders, a dramatic gesture of collapse.

“No?” she said. “That’s bullshit, Rob.”

“It isn’t bullshit.” He felt a pain spreading across his forehead. He felt the cold, suddenly, spreading through his bones.

She drew out another cigarette and handed it to him. What he felt for her remained; it didn’t seem like it would pass. He took the cigarette and lit up.
“I’m going to go,” she said. “I think I’m probably going to go.”

“I’m going to go,” she said.

“No, I mean, get out of here. Not just for a day or two. For a long while.”

“Where are you going to go?”

“I know it seems like we can’t say these things here, because we’re by the sea, in a place of designated natural beauty. But I’m going to leave and live with my sister in Carmarthen. She’s a complete wreck, just like me.”

“So I won’t see you.”

“No, well you should come and see me. It will be much easier that way. God knows it’s been easier for Paul since I’ve been staying there recently.” She took her mobile phone from her pocket. “Put this number into your phone. Save it under a different name.”

Robert obeyed.

He reached out to give her a friendly hug, but the action devolved quickly into something more. They fell onto the cold grass, and it was all darkness. And there was this desperate unbuttoning of shirt and blouse. Robert looked up at the house: it was mostly dark there, too. She seemed to sense his concern, and pulled him to his feet; and they walked, hunched, as if escaping from a prison, ducking beneath the beams of the searchlights, until they reached the steps down to the beach.

The ocean here was all breath, all black. The tide was in, and the waves thumped against the steps, the last of which were underwater. They were beneath the gorse bushes; Robert could smell them, smell the coolness, the honey scent mixing with the crispness of the night and the salt of the ocean. They continued. Robert was conscious of this strange
divide between their desire and its manifestation: it wasn’t that he struggled, absolutely, with the hook of her bra; and, probably, usually, she did not struggle with the buckle of a man’s jeans; but there was this mixture of desire and restraint, which, when he noticed it, forced him to stop, so that he was only holding her, kissing her forehead. His desire had not left him, but he was content with the terms of it, the limits of what he – and perhaps Caroline, too – were able to reach. They were lying on the cold grass, at the top of the steps, half undressed, baffled, breathing heavily.

After a while, Robert had the sense that they might, at any minute, fall off the cliff into the ocean – he held onto the grass. He was drunk and guilty and very tired. He felt he deserved to fall. Suddenly, he appreciated that Caroline could not read his thoughts: the connection between them seemed fragile, now. He had his arms around a stranger.

The warmth returned as he helped her to her feet. It wasn’t fair to say she felt to him like a stranger. It wasn’t accurate. They were here, together. They were walking back towards the house. Robert made a joke about how lucky they were to try to throw their nice lives into turmoil, because there wasn’t anything else except the beauty of the sea. She didn’t laugh. She had her arm around his waist.

Back in the house, she got a glass of water. She drank and handed it to him. He took a drink. She lay down on the sofa and closed her eyes. Robert sat in the armchair opposite. He could not imagine that Helen and Tom were sharing a guest room. He couldn’t imagine that Helen had left Paul alone, or that Paul had left her alone.

He had made no effort – at least that he could remember – to arrange the evening so that he would be alone with Caroline. But perhaps they had made the effort to be alone with one another, not worrying about him, or her. He wondered if this was Helen’s final
call for him to act. She had decided to do something absurd, invite him to a party where she would sleep with Paul and he would sleep with Caroline.

It must have been Paul’s idea, Robert thought, watching Caroline until he heard heavy breaths, until he felt she’d fallen back to sleep. He got up and passed through the kitchen into the hall by the front door. He went up the stairs to the bedrooms. It seemed fitting, somehow, because of Paul’s art, because of those animals one associated with the quaintness of the British countryside. Real stories took place in Russia, in Asia, or in the United States – those were the places things could happen, where many of the animals were still predatory in the old fashioned sense. They had dignity, a wildness that gave them freedom. Paul had wanted this for the British pheasant, for the rabbit.

One of the doors was open slightly and emitted light that was different from that of the moon shining through the window above the stairs. The other door was open. The third was closed. Robert went first to the door that was open. He flicked on the switch, filling the room with light. The bed was empty, the covers neat, immaculate. He went back and approached the room with the door ajar. A floorboard creaked. There was movement from the bed – the bedside lamp was switched on. It was Tom.

He was lying on top of the covers, Nicola with her head against his chest. And though he squinted at the doorway, he did not register any recognition. Tom and Nicola were both still dressed from the party. Robert withdrew. He didn’t hear either his son or Nicola say a word. He waited until Tom put out the light.

His mind went quickly to Helen.

It was obvious. It might even have been reassuring that his fears were confirmed. He’d never doubted it. The only bedroom left was the one with the door closed. He had,
of course, hoped to find Helen in a bed and with Tom on a foldout next to her. But he realised that they had opened themselves to the kind of corruption of which Paul had dreamt, but perhaps never lived. And perhaps only now had the desire to enact.

He could have knocked. He could have done something. In a strange sort of way, he felt content with the quiet of the house. It was almost peaceful. He was guided away by the smell of mahogany, by the moonlight shining through the window.

He went back downstairs, and collapsed into the armchair. And in spite of the terrible ringing in his chest, he began to fall asleep.

Robert woke to Helen standing before him. She said his name. He almost asked her to say it again, for the way she’d said had been lost. Caroline had gone.

“Are you ready to go?” Helen said.

It was light, though it must still have been very early.

“Aye,” he said. “Where’s Tom?”

“Here,” she said.

Tom appeared, then. He looked as if he’d been awake for some time.

The car bounced and rattled through the lanes, and Robert struggled to see with the sun in his eyes. He switched on the radio, blasting the car with classical music – as if in homage to the scene from the night before. “Chopin,” Tom declared, smiling with a sort of vague madness, the piano keys distorted by the cheap in-car speakers. Helen stared ahead as if she were being driven to her execution.

“Well that was a lovely evening with the Harrows,” Robert said, raising the volume of his voice above the music.
He caught Tom in the rear-view mirror – fear in his eyes.

“Wasn’t it?” he added.

Helen said nothing.

When they reached the house, they got out of the car slowly. It was hot and bright. Robert unlocked the door, and let them inside. Tom went upstairs. He said he needed to take a nap.

Helen sat down on the sofa, gazing sadly at the gas fire as if it gave out a cosy glow on a cold day.

“I don’t know what happened,” she said.

He sat down on the other end of the sofa.

“I think you do,” he said. “I think you planned this all along.”

“No,” she said.

“I think you planned it from the day we met.”

“What on earth does that mean?”

He didn’t know what it meant. He had a great thirst for the details – a masochistic urge to know and to see. His own secret felt insignificant. He was enjoying, too much, his position of power. He clenched his fists, and she moved slightly deeper into her end of the sofa. Wasn’t this what he’d lacked his whole life, a kind of violent passion?

“We can talk about it,” said Helen. “We can just admit that this is happening, that I’ve done these things. I don’t know what you’ve done. Maybe you have something you need to admit. Let’s just talk.”

“Why did you invite me to the party?”

She lightly chewed on the knuckles of her right hand. Her eyes were wide.
“Maybe,” she said, “to stop more things from happening. Or maybe – I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

“Did you sleep with him?”

“Of course,” she said.

She looked at him; she had tears in her eyes.

“Well, I deserve that,” said Robert. “And, look, I’m grateful for what he’s done for Tom. I’m glad we met them. I’m glad you’ve found somebody you can relate to.”

“Rob.”

He got up and headed towards the door.

“Robert, where are you going?” Panic in her eyes.

“I’m going to see him.”

“Rob, don’t, please.”

“Should we duel? Is that the thing to do?”

“People don’t duel anymore,” she said.

He got back into the car, and started the engine. Helen stood in the doorway, her hands wrapped around the backs of her arms as if it were cold.

*

Nicola answered the door. She had the worn look of a politician being bothered by reporters of the gutter press.

“Caroline’s not here,” she said.

“Is your dad around?”
“He went into the fields. He’s gone shooting.”

“Right. Thanks, Nicola.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes, it’s fine. I –”

“Well, all right. Goodbye, then.”

Robert thought of Tom; he wondered what had happened between them.

There was the crackle of a rifle shot.

Robert set off through the garden, the orchard, towards the bushes of gorse that lined the brow of the hill where the house stood. Then it opened out and down into grass fields. He could see him there. As if by some intuition, Paul turned and looked up – the figure was small; Robert couldn’t make out the facial expression. *He has a gun*, he told himself. He was reassured by the fact that this was Wales. The place was green. The sea was blue. There were tourists eating ice cream at the same moment he walked down the hill. No real person was a nemesis; although Paul might have been enjoying the familiar symmetry of the moment – he might have imagined that he, Paul, was the Homosapien, Robert the Neanderthal, and that, in a moment, they would fight to the death.

He walked towards the figure in a slow, yet deliberate way; he wasn’t even sure, himself, what effect he wanted to create. The grass was long and wet.

They stood for a moment, looking at one another.

Paul wore a tight frown.

“I was going to pretend everything’s fine,” he said, the pitch of his voice waivered slightly. “I was going to give you a bit of theatre, but I shan’t. You’re supposed to be here. I’m sure that whatever it is you came here to do, you’re justified in doing.”
Robert started towards him – Paul flinched – and then he stopped.

The artist looked old; the light from the sun fed into the rivulets of his face. He wore a pained expression. His chest rose and fell with quick and heavy breaths.

“It’s funny, you talking about theatre,” said Robert.

“Why’s that?” said Paul.

“Because it all feels like theatre.”

“Which bit?”

“The lot of it,” he said.

Paul nodded.

“This,” added Robert.

“Well, you know, Shakespeare said – ”

“I don’t give a toss what Shakespeare said.”

“Fair enough, Robert. Fair enough.”

Robert knew he would have to work hard to conceal the fact: he was here partly out of need, and not only rage and frustration.

“I’m shooting,” said Paul. “Would you care to join?”

“Are you going to shoot me?”

He laughed. “Only if there’s nothing else to shoot.”

Then his face changed. “I might ask you the same question, Rob. Since you showed up here, like some sort of assassin.”

“Do you have any coffee?”

“Yes,” he said, pulling the flask from the side of his rucksack.
Robert took the flask. There seemed something primal about this – a peace offering. Paul watched him as he drank, and the former felt he could stretch out the moment; eventually he nodded as if to say that it was good coffee, and the latter smiled nervously. Robert spat into the dirt and Paul flinched. It took him a moment to recover. He smiled.

“Come on,” he said. “Come with me.”

The Preseli Hills shimmered in the distance. They appeared to Robert as entirely abstract things. He almost had to remind himself that they were hills.

“What are we shooting?” he said. “Birds?”

“Whatever we can,” said Paul. “Rabbits mainly, I’d say – but if we see a pheasant then that’s fair game.”

“I thought pheasants were out of season.”

“Oh – it’s fine.” He held the gun in one hand as he drank from the flask with the other. He handed the flask to Robert.

“How much do you know about hunting, here?” said Robert, then taking a drink.

“I know enough. I know where to go to find the game.”

“Is this your land?”

“Absolutely.”

“I suppose that’s all you need to know.”

Paul laughed.

“Are you going to shoot?” he said.

“I don’t know,” said Robert.
They continued walking towards the hills on the other side of the valley. The fields were bright green, and the wind combed the grass, turning it white and gold in the sunshine. Paul led the way along the edge of the field. He might have seen something in the distance; he slowed and crouched and raised his hand.

Robert couldn’t see what he was aiming at; Paul was kneeling in a sniper’s stance, his left eye closed as he took aim.

Paul remained this way for some time, and then he breathed and fired – the shot was louder than Robert had expected it to be.

There was a look of great pleasure on the old artist’s face. He smiled deeply. He heaved himself to his feet and walked out to the centre of the field. The rabbit was on its side in the grass; there was no discernible wound. Paul kneeled down next to it; he stayed there like that – and somehow this made him look older, weaker. He took the animal into a bag he’d been carrying under his arm. He was groaning, almost singing.

He turned to face Robert, and then looked away as if he’d been caught doing something obscene.

“What’s the matter, Rob?” he said.

“Nothing.”

“You’ve gone pale.”

“I’m all right. I suppose I’m wondering why you’re so delighted.”

“Well – it was a good shot.”

The artist’s smile faded.

“You’ve eaten what I’ve killed before, haven’t you?” he said.

“I suppose I have.”
“Somebody had to kill the animal for you to eat.”

“You might be a bit more respectful,” said Robert.

“What difference does that make? What difference does it make if I work with a smile? It’s work, isn’t it? I smile when I paint, as often as I shed a tear.”

“I’m surprised you can paint those pictures, and then come out here and do that – so casually.”

“But, in a way,” said Paul, “those paintings in Europe, in the caves of France and Spain, are also just pictures of food, aren’t they?”

Robert said nothing, and Paul seemed to withdraw somewhat; his smile-frown faded, and he looked over at the hills, and then down into the grass.

“I know you’re angry, Robert. But I’ll say this. In the end, sometimes, we need simply to act. Action is violent. You know this, I’m quite sure.”

Robert thought he must have got this from Helen.

“Even an accident. There’s a kind of poetry to that, isn’t there, if you think about it? I got into painting by accident. I met Caroline by accident. Honestly, Nicola was an accident – and I’m very proud of her.”

He wanted to ask – Helen; was she an accident? But still the desire to learn was there. He hated himself for it. But it was there nonetheless.

“All accidents,” said Paul. “But not the products of inaction. An accident is not necessarily a mistake, if the outcome is good.” He seemed to have regained some of his courage. He smiled again.

“Right,” he said. “We should stop here and watch the fields, see what we can see. We’re a bit early, but if we wait – ” He handed Robert the rifle.
It was heavy. “I don’t know if I’m going to shoot anything,” he said.

Paul said nothing.

Robert looked through the scope.

He traced the edges of the fields – a pool of brackish water, a dead tree sprouting at its edge; there were trails of white rocks lining the edges of the hills: a few crows had landed by the water and were pecking at the mud.

“I’m sorry about everything,” said Paul. His voice was different, more human. “I’m sorry the way things went, and so quickly. You have to wonder, of course, if this is how it’s supposed to be.”

As Paul spoke, a rabbit came into view – or perhaps it was a hare, for it seemed larger than a rabbit. “I’ve never really had the courage to sin,” he said, “even though I’m sort of an atheist.”

The way it sniffed the air suggested it knew Robert was watching; its dark, glassy eyes became more expressive the more Robert looked. And again his heart began to race. He cleared his throat softly.

“There’s one,” he said.

Paul inhaled and exhaled slowly. “Well there you are,” he said. “Keep him in your sights. Tell me what you see.”

“I’m not sure if it’s a rabbit or hare. It seems large. Hares are bigger, aren’t they?”

“It’s probably a hare.”

The animal withdrew somewhat, its ears fell limp, and then they were erect again. It was about to move towards the water.
Robert sighed. He watched the animal moving in his direction, still far away. It had decided the coast was clear.

“Are you going to shoot?” said Paul.

“I don’t know,” said Robert.

“I think you can do it.”

“I probably can.”

“Can you?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think you can.”

“I’m not sure she’s in range.”

“A female, is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s good to give it an identity, a backstory.”

“I’m not giving it a backstory.”

“You need to relax, or you’ll miss.”

Robert could see that it was afraid. He felt as if he were only a pair of eyes, an omnipotent thing floating through the valley. Like a bird of prey, he could see his prey but his prey could not see him. He remembered the perversion of hunting, which he’d realised as a boy. And yet, his finger was on the trigger, tense.

He felt Paul’s hand on his shoulder, a touch so light he did not disturb the tension.

“The truth of it, Robert,” he said. “When I’m out here,” he laughed in that way that was all breath, all exhalation, “I feel, finally, definite.”
Robert squeezed the trigger. There was a flash of grey; he felt as if Tom had watched him do it, Helen, Nicola, Caroline, too.

“Did you get her?” said Paul.

“I don’t know.”

By the time they reached the water, Robert felt sick. He felt older than Paul, somehow, and yet also younger. A feeling of fragility took him over, spread through his bones like an immense cold. Paul confirmed that it was a hare. Yes, it was a large animal, and the bullet had hit the ribs. The expression on the hare’s face was comically savage, a frozen scream – the eyes wide, teeth bared. Paul took a plastic bag from the rucksack and put the hare inside, offering it to Robert. There was nothing ironic in Paul’s eyes. It was more than a peace offering; it had something of an old curse about it, too.

*

Robert drove with all the determination of a man possessed, passing again through the lanes, but without any intention of stopping at home.

If the police pulled him over for speeding, they might also wonder if he’d killed someone and was carrying the body in the backseat – which he was, in a way, except the body was that of the hare. (If there was a smell, it escaped him.)

After he’d passed the house, he kept on in the direction of Carmarthen. He passed along the main road, over roundabout, through field and farmland, and then on through smaller villages. He passed through Woodstock, the name of which had always made
Helen laugh: it was only two houses and a post office. Then there were bigger towns; supermarkets, tourists passing in the opposite direction.

Gradually, the air took on the worn aspect of early evening. It was light, but Robert could feel it. He’d felt it before during his last day of work at the Harrow place, when he went into the kitchen – hoping, perhaps, to see Caroline. And yet the feeling – he knew – did not connect only to her and that fantasy. Yes, he could see her there, in a small house in Carmarthen: an old Welsh house with a slate roof and walls textured by pebbles of white quartz; like his own house, but with different associations: newness, excitement. (There was also the word *oblivion*.)

But to what else was the feeling connected? He’d killed a hare and now he was going to see his mistress. This would be his revenge. He had the power to do so. It was better to be a bastard than to be boring, to be vague, to be lost. If love was a kind of paralysis, he thought, then he didn’t want anything to do with love at all.

And yet, why then, had he gone past the turning for Carmarthen? He had thought he would call her, and ask her to meet him at a pub. That would have *done* something; that would have set new things in motion.

He passed onto the A-road that ran, uninterrupted, from Wales to England. Here were the Cambrian Mountains, the road passing through the valley between them, then rising again, circling the slow circumference of each slow, grassy hill.

A river, the name of which he did not recall, ran along the valley. There were few farms below, though many of the fields were full of sheep. There were ruined buildings of old stone, which reminded him of a journey here from England, before they lived in Wales and were coming on holiday. Tom had remarked that this seemed such a lonely
place, and Robert had agreed. He remembered heavy rain. He remembered getting lost. They had passed through a thicket of pine trees; the pines grew in wide ranks, military regiments. The woods here were artificial, though the landscape itself had an ancient quality. It was possible to imagine Celtic tribesman running alongside the foaming stream, releasing cries of battle.

In most of West Wales, the land was good for nothing but grazing, which was why so many of the ancient sites in Pembrokeshire remained. Had he learned this from Helen? Perhaps. But what he felt now was all his own: there was something bleak and remarkable about the fact that unfertile land kept the history alive.

Was this part of what he’d experienced walking through all those ancient sites? Helen loved to be part of the past. Paul had claimed the same. And yet for Robert there was something oppressive about the past, the accumulation of it – all those moments of silence; he hated that they could become a sort of currency.

He parked the car at a layby overlooking the river and the mountains. It was a lookout post for tourists. There was an old ruined cottage below.

The sun had gone behind a dark cloud; it might have been humid, but here the wind was strong, and he felt the cold.

He had often wondered about the human desire to keep moving. Why couldn’t the suburb contain the same energy as a city? Why hadn’t they been able to live in that town in the Midlands? Helen had been the one with the wanderlust, even if it was, in a sense, inverted: like Paul, she’d wanted what was pure, what was essential.

Had she lost him on her journey to this? He’d thought so, years ago, when she’d had her experience in St Michael’s Church. But now, he wasn’t sure. He began to pace up
and down the tarmac. A car passed with a roar, then another. Then he was alone again with the view of the valley and the white river below, and the pine trees climbing over waxy yellow grass, into the silver peaks of the mountains.

There had been another time, of course, long before this – perhaps many other times. And he had betrayed her (in his mind, if not with his body.) There was that guitar player she had known at university, and the spectre of his conviction. *Dear, Helen, as sure as I am that I breathe air, I know I love you.* He’d thought Paul was the same.

Wasn’t Paul the same? Full of certainties, as Caroline had said?

Robert leaned back against the door of the car, defeated. He closed his eyes. He could almost hear the river, though he wasn’t sure – he didn’t know if it was the river or the wind. An image came to him, then: he saw Paul drinking whiskey, twisting his face in disgust. Yes, he’d seen it more than once, the old artist with his glass – the way he’d held it was a gesture of conviction, a militantly intellectual pose. But when he’d taken a drink, the robes had fallen away. There was no hiding it, Robert thought, a simple truth – the way whiskey tastes to a man who doesn’t like the taste of whiskey.

VIII

The next afternoon was bright and hot. Robert and Tom were cycling to the church of St Michael’s – inland but riding along the line of the coast. Robert felt as if they were pushing through time with their bicycles: that metallic clatter, the crunch of stone and gravel. They rode quickly through the lanes, past hedgerows buzzing with insects, past sheep grazing in the sun. Last night he’d longed for such an escape. Or,
rather, not an escape, as such, but a chance to carve new meaning from what had happened. Helen had seemed oddly calm when he returned to the house.

And yet what she said was full of disaster and a kind of sadness that seemed without the possibility of an end. He told her about Caroline, and she only nodded. They agreed it was pointless to talk specifics. It didn’t matter what exactly had happened.

“It just feels,” she said, “as if we’ve tainted something. We’ve marked it permanently. I’ve never done this before, Robert, I promise.”

He asked her if she’d ever wanted to, and she said nothing.

Of course, he had wanted to before. And, again, perhaps this made no difference.

“It always felt like there was something else, somebody else,” he said.

“Paul,” she said, “had worried he’d not been able to do something like this. I think he and Caroline will stay together.”

“I realised,” said Robert, “he doesn’t know anything more than I know.”

“Did you think about leaving?” she said.

“Yes, but I changed my mind.”

She sighed. She was angry.

“Is that enough?” she said, as if to herself. “A change of mind.”

“I don’t know what else there is.”

“Nor do I.”

He was sure of nothing but how she felt holding him around the shoulders, the light beyond the windows growing dim.

He told her about the hare in the back of the car, and she went from horror to laughter, to pragmatism.
“I don’t know how to skin a hare, or how to prepare it for stew, or anything.”

“I could take it to the butcher’s.”

“Well, they’ll be closed.”

“Maybe freeze it.”

But when they brought the animal into the house, they were squeamish. There wasn’t room in the freezer. They decided to bury it. Tom came out to find Robert digging in the garden. They all three smiled at one another, as if to confirm that the act was not without madness. Once the animal was laid to rest, Robert put his arm around Helen’s waist, and they stood for a moment – almost waiting, he thought, for somebody to say something, a prayer. Then they drifted back inside.

Now Robert, with Tom cycling behind him, came towards a church – not their destination, but intriguing for its being here, at the side of the road, standing out on the edge of the grass field.

“Let’s have a look at this place,” he said.

A hole in the hedgerow opened onto a patch of yellow grass and then the church itself. There was a clothesline with white sheets, jeans, and underpants, blowing in the wind. Tom looked afraid. Robert smiled and said: “it is a bit creepy.”

The church was of both slate and redbrick, so it must not have been very old. It was condemned – a hole in the roof looked as if it had been recently repaired. There was a blue VW van parked to the right of the building. Robert imagined a group of longhaired men sitting around a fire before the great wooden door, smoking, hunched, like survivors of the end of the world.
The windows of the church were black. The breeze carried with it something of the cold of the sea. Robert noticed an old washing machine in the midst of the withered gravestones, beyond where the van was parked.

They were on somebody’s property, and yet the act did not feel exceptional – somehow only an essential part of life here. Tom began to leave; Robert noticed he was nervous. Tom had said he’d wanted to talk about everything, about Nicola, and so Robert had suggested they go to the beach near St Michael’s.

They road on, and Robert was nervous, too. They didn’t speak about big things. They were usually too afraid. But he knew it was necessary. Still, they would wait to find a proper place to talk.

They rode on through the lanes, past those signs in Welsh, which he had finally begun to get used to, until they reached the woods. Again, the heat gave the place a feel of the jungle, the great ferns pooled with moisture, sprouting in between the trunks of the trees. And the forest turned down the slopes towards the beach. They stopped at the wall for a rest, and then went up to the white church, Robert having suggested they take a look. He was careful to smile, to speak as if they were here on holiday, as if nothing needed carry significant weight.

There was the sound of the wind beyond the walls – the white walls of the church, which gave out that pleasing brightness.

They sat down.

Tom had his head bowed, as if in prayer.

Robert sighed.

“You all right, mate?” he said.
Tom cleared his throat. “You know I wanted to talk about Nicola,” he said.

“Aye.”

“Well, you’re wondering what happened between us, yeah?”

“I’m just listening to you, mate.”

“Nothing happened.”

“She’s too young for that, isn’t she?” Robert confirmed.

“Aye, exactly. But, I suppose it’s complicated.”

Robert waited for him to go on.

“She wanted something to happen. I’m not saying – that. But she said she feels strongly about me, and I had to say that I wasn’t sure I wanted it to be like that. And she cried. And now I feel –”

“Like the devil?”

“Aye,” said Tom.

“Well, you did the right thing.”

“I don’t want to speak to another girl ever again.”

Robert laughed.

“You did the right thing,” he said again.

“I suppose I did, but it feels like a kind of cosmic injustice.”

Robert delighted in the sound of the phrase until he felt its true meaning. And then he felt a burning sensation on the back of his neck; he bowed his own head in agreement and in shame.

“I’m sorry, mate,” he said. “About the way things are.”

“It’s all right, Dad.”
“I’m sorry you’ve had to listen to so many arguments.”

“He wanted to say that all he cared about was his son’s well being and that Helen was happy. But he would have to say that this was also complicated, that Helen wanted more than to be happy. And perhaps it was the same for him, too. He did not even know whether or not happiness was exactly what he wanted.

He waited for a question that seemed inevitable: are you and mum going to work it out? But it didn’t come. This was a question Tom had asked when he was younger. He was older now. He looked at the walls and the crucifix ahead with a searching expression, a frown, no smile, but a note of sadness. And Robert felt suddenly very ill, imagining that through all his fears he’d created in his son a kind of deep scepticism. Now there was also what had happened with Nicola, what had happened with Paul and Caroline. It was ugly. Helen might have been right: the mark might have been permanent.

“Let’s get down to the beach then,” he said, “shall we?”

“Yes,” he said.

He let Tom go first, so that he would not be able to read his expression. They got back on their bicycles and continued down through the woods.

The lane rang with the sound of squeaky brakes as the hill became steeper. Then they came out at the little car park and old mill, which was now a café that sold tea and cake and ice cream. Robert asked Tom if he wanted anything. He said lager, though he was joking – the café didn’t sell beer. And so they kept on through the tourists, past the café and the edge of the woods.
There were tourists walking down the lane to the beach – an elderly couple with a white dog, a family with three small children. This was the problem, Robert thought. You couldn’t tell anything was wrong. Everything about the place, the promise of the seaside, the hills, the sound of the seagulls, suggested a pact, a deal that had been done, which meant that you had to at least pretend you were content.

The beach came into view: there was that *hush* sound as the waves toppled over. There was the river, opening in a fan of smaller streams, running over the pebbles, into the sea. They chained their bicycles to the post on the concrete embankment, and went over onto the soft sand. There were the usual sounds, like a prerecording: a child screaming playfully, the scatter of paws from a dog running across the sand.

They lay down amongst the rocks. Robert tried to conceal his panic. He lit a cigarette. He even thought about offering one to his son.

He’d told Helen last night that he thought they were still free to wait and see how things felt in the morning. (Now he noticed some children smashing a sandcastle, fragments of its architecture whirling in the air with the wind.)

She’d looked at him as if he’d said something wise, which of course he hadn’t. She’d been sceptical of his epiphany, his decision to stay. He had thought he had found in Paul the possibility of understanding – a vision meant understanding, he’d thought. But of course, this was wrong. And he wasn’t sure, yet, if not knowing was a kind of liberation, or just another form of paralysis.

Tom sat in the sand, his arms wrapped around his knees.
Robert took off his own T-shirt and his jeans, so that he was in his swimming shorts. The act felt contrived, English in the worst possible way. He thought he could feel the sun shining off his chest into his eyes and his brain.

There were voices then, female voices, laughter. The accents were refined. The girls were in their late teens, early twenties. They sat down a metre or so away from Tom and kicked off their sandals. They laughed. Robert could tell from the hints of what they said, and the way they laughed (everything was very funny indeed) that they had about them that intelligence and humour that had always struck a chord.

Nice people were rare, he thought.

There was the jingle of glass; one of the girls produced a bottle of beer, which fizzed as she opened it. Robert noticed that Tom was watching them. He wanted Tom to speak to them. He wanted Tom to make friends.

“Tom,” he said. “Go and see if you can join them.”

“Nah,” said Tom.

“Go on, mate.”

“Dad – no.”

“It’s the best idea you’ve ever had,” he joked.

“Dad –”

“Excuse me,” he said, raising his voice, edging towards the girls where they sat. They turned, their faces hidden by shadow.

“I was just wondering if you could spare a bottle of lager for my son and I.”

When they noticed Tom sitting there, they smiled.

“Are you asking to join us?”
“Oh, of course.”

Robert wasn’t sure if it were horror growing in his son’s heart; there must have been some measure of it. He sat down and called him over. Tom jogged, as if late for school. “Hiya,” he said. “Sorry about my dad.”

“No,” said one of the girls. “It’s nice to meet people.”

“Are you on holiday or locals?” said the other.

“We live here,” said Robert. He went on to talk about the beauty of the landscape, the churches, the hills, how there was this strange mixture of posh English and the native Welsh, how there were millionaires drinking alongside the sorts of drunks who slept in a barn. “There’s more to people here than meets the eye,” he said. At this point he noticed how quiet his son had been. The girls were here on holiday from Hereford. “We love it,” said the redhead (she had a nose ring, not on the side of her nose, but the centre.) “The only thing is,” she said, “the sea is so bloody cold, even now.”

He agreed.

“I’m going to swim in a bit,” said the other girl.

“Good luck with that,” said the redhead.

Tom was not even smiling.

“Anyway how about those beers?” said Robert.

“Well,” she said. “We’ll give you a beer if – if you tell us about the water, how cold it is, so that we know.”

“Oh, harsh,” sad the other girl.

He looked at Tom.

“That’s all?” said Robert.
“That’s fair, isn’t it?”

“Tom?” he said.

Tom laughed, rubbed the back of his head.

Robert heaved himself to his feet.

He ran towards the ocean, splashing through the foam, cold as ice. The first wave struck his waist. He saw flashes of blue and white. He sank into the water and his brain seemed to rattle in his skull. He swam for a while; his body felt numb, almost warm. Once he was comfortable, he worried about having left his son on the beach.

As he turned in the water, he could just make out Tom sitting in the same position beside the girls. He turned onto his back, kicking water, growling, cursing; tasting salt in his mouth. And above him, the white sky offered that old solace, that abstraction of being. Except this time, he no longer wanted it. He wanted something more: his son, his family. Robert turned over again.

He saw Tom running towards the water, at once thin and enormous, the way he crashed against the first wave. He cursed. They could speak only in swear words. And then Robert tried to take the high ground – “no, it’s nice,” he said. “It’s lovely,” he said. And they swam in urgent little circles, without grace, without direction, because it was cold, and because there was nothing else they could do.