

A TOUCH OF LOVE

Jonathan Coe was born in Birmingham in 1961. His most recent novel is *The Rain Before It Falls*. He is also the author of *The Accidental Woman*, *A Touch of Love*, *The Dwarves of Death*, *What a Carve Up!*, which won the 1995 John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, *The House of Sleep*, which won the 1998 Prix Médicis Étranger, *The Rotters' Club*, winner of the Everyman Wodehouse Prize, and *The Closed Circle*. His biography of the novelist B.S. Johnson, *Like a Fiery Elephant*, won the 2005 Samuel Johnson Prize for best non-fiction book of the year. He lives in London with his wife and two children.

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JONATHAN COE



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Note

I'd like to thank Michèle O'Leary for making it possible for me to write about a lawyer; and Pip Lattey for introducing me to the work of Simone Weil, which came to influence this book.

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PART ONE

The Meeting of Minds

Thursday 17th April, 1986

‘Darling, don’t be silly, of course there isn’t going to be a nuclear war.

...

‘I’m just approaching Junction 21. Should be in Coventry in about twenty minutes. I’ve got to call in at the university.

...

‘Well, forget what he said. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. The world is run by sane and sensible people, just like you and me.

...

‘I miss you too. Kiss Peter for me. And tell him I –

...

‘What? No, some maniac pulled out straight in front of me. Some of these people are doing at least ninety. I don’t know why the police don’t catch them.

‘I don’t know if I’ve got time to call on him. Not if I want to be home tonight.

...

‘Anyway, what would I say to him? I haven’t seen him for years. I can barely remember what he looks like.

...

‘No, I don’t see why we should let him use our holiday cottage. We bought it for us, not for letting out to strangers.

...

‘What do you mean, he sounded peculiar?

...

‘Darling, he doesn’t know what he’s talking about. And neither do you. Libya, Syria, America, Russia – it’s a very complicated situation. If you really think the world is going to be plunged into war, then... well, I’ll come home, obviously.

...

‘All right, give me his address.

...

‘Yes, I’ll pop in this evening when I’ve been to the university. It means I probably won’t be home till ten. May be later. No, I can find it, I’ve got an A to Z.’

...

‘Now don’t panic. Don’t watch the news if it’s upsetting you. Forget he said it.’

...

‘I’ll explain to him about the cottage. I doubt if there’s anything wrong, really. Perhaps he’s just been working too hard. You know how it is with students, they do nothing for weeks and then they stay up until all hours.’

...

‘Don’t worry. I will.’

...

‘You too.’

...

‘Kiss kiss.’

*

Ted came off at Junction 21 and joined the M69. The important thing, as he had come to realize, was to maintain good relations with clients. He had little hope of making a new sale at the university but was some weeks since he had spoken to Dr Fowler and he wanted to check that the new system had been working properly. After glancing ahead to see that the middle lane was clear, he allowed his eyes to flick across to the passenger seat, and to the file in which he recorded the personal details of his customers. With his left hand he turned the pages until he reached the letter F. Fowler, Dr Stephen. Married, two children: Paul and Nicola. Nicola had had a dental appointment on the 24th of March. Two extractions. This would give him something to start off with. (‘Steve! Good to see you again. You thought I’d pop in. You know, in the area and all that. How’s the wife and kids? Nicky’s teeth aren’t still giving her trouble, I hope? Good. Glad to hear it...’)

He arrived on campus shortly before five, but Dr Fowler had gone home. A note on his door said that he would be available for consultation the next morning.

Ted took a circuitous route back to the carpark, surprised to find himself enjoying the late sunshine and the unaccustomed experience of being surrounded by people younger than himself. When he reached the car he did not get inside, but sat on the bonnet and looked around him. He had been preparing himself for his encounter with Dr Fowler with the single-mindedness which had recently, for the second time running, won him the firm’s coveted ‘Salesman of the Year’ award, so it was only now that he was able to give Katharine’s phone call any serious thought. The prospects it raised were not pleasant. He had no real wish to see Robin again: if he had, he would have called on him before, on one of his many visits to the university. Least of all did he want to be put in the position of having to look after him, if, as Katharine had suggested, there was something seriously wrong.

Then again, she was always exaggerating.

Ted did not like to approach a situation unarmed; and part of his unease, he realized, could be ascribed to insufficiency of data. Seeing Robin again, knowing nothing about how he had spent the last four years, would be like meeting a stranger.

He thought for a while, and then took out his file and opened it at the letter G. The pages flapped gently in the breeze. Soon he had put down everything he could remember about his old friend.

Grant, Robin.

Graduated from Cambridge, 1981.

Last saw him at wedding, 1982.

Have been sending him Christmas cards and family newsletters (NB is this how he knows about our cottage?).

Family: mother and father, one sister.

Now working on thesis – and has been for 4 (?) years.

Said to be sounding ‘peculiar’ and ‘depressed’.

Says he needs a holiday.

Violent reaction to the events of the last two days: says that the bombers should not have been sent into Libya.

Ted laid down his pen, frowned and began to feel even more gloomy. People could change a lot in four years. He hoped that Robin hadn't gone all political.

*

As he entered the south-western suburbs of Coventry, Ted stopped to consult his A to Z and found that the relevant page was missing. The spine of the book had cracked and he had been meaning to replace it for more than a month: he had only himself to blame. The only course of action, it seemed, was to ask a stranger for directions. Meanwhile he was not averse to driving at random through these tree-lined avenues, looking at the houses and listening appreciatively to birdsong as it mingled with the music of his practised gear changes. Anything to put off the moment of arrival.

After a few minutes, and after passing several pedestrians who did not, for various irrational reasons, strike him as prepossessing, he caught sight of a young woman walking rapidly ahead on his side of the road, with her back to his car. He drew up beside her and pipped the horn. The woman started and turned; and Ted was dismayed to find that she was Indian. Now he would probably have difficulty making himself understood. But it was too late to do anything about that; she was already approaching his open window.

‘Yes?’ she said, fiercely.

He was looking into a pair of strong wide hostile eyes. For a moment he was thrown off guard, suddenly conscious of an intense, vivid personality in confrontation with his own. Unable to hold her

gaze, he looked down and noticed, for the first time, that a button had gone missing from his left cuff.

‘I was wondering if you could tell me,’ he began, ‘how to find –’ and he named the street where Robin lived.

‘Where?’ said the woman: more, Ted might have noticed, in surprise than in incomprehension.

‘Here.’ He fumbled with his file, and found the address which he had scribbled down on a piece of paper after pulling over to the hard shoulder at the end of his conversation with Katharine. He showed it to her.

‘I’ve just come from there,’ she said. ‘Are you going to see Robin?’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s round the corner just behind you. I hope you get more joy out of him than I did.’

She turned and walked away, her hands in her pockets, pulling her coat tightly around her even though the evening was still warm. Ted was silenced, at first, but managed within a few seconds to lean out of his window and call after her:

‘Robin Grant? You know him? Are you a friend of his?’

The woman did not stop, or slow down, or even raise her voice; in fact her reply was barely audible.

‘How should I know?’

Ted watched her receding figure until his eyes glazed over. He was numb with confusion. Then, slowly and more reluctantly than ever, he performed a three-point turn and drove up the side street which she had indicated.

The address on his piece of paper referred to a tall grey terraced house, shabbily painted and separated from the pavement only by a bleak strip of untended garden. Ted got out of his car and locked the door. The street was quiet, dappled with the kindly glow of the evening sun. Slinging his jacket over his shoulder, loosening his tie, he stepped boldly up to the front door and rang the bell marked ‘Grant, R.’.

For some time nothing happened. Then there was the distant sound of an opening door, footsteps, a shadow behind the frosted glass and finally, as the door opened, a pallid, unfamiliar, unshaven face.

‘Robin?’

‘Come on in.’

‘You phoned Katharine. Did she tell you I was coming?’

‘Yes. Come on in.’

Wordlessly Robin led him out of the light down a gloomy hallway, past the bottom of a steep staircase, and through a door to the right. Inside his flat it was even darker: the curtains were drawn and the air was dry and smoky. Once Ted’s eyes had adjusted to the darkness he took in the details of a sparsely furnished bedsitting room, with an unmade bed against one wall, clothes scattered over the floor, two bookcases filled to bursting point, and a desk, which was empty except for a biro and three small red notebooks, piled one on top of the other. On the mantelpiece was a radio tuned to Radio Four: an emotionless male voice was reporting the day’s events in Tripoli and at Westminster.

‘Were you not expecting me so soon?’ Ted asked.

‘I’m sorry. I lost track of the time. Do sit down.’

He revealed a sofa by sweeping a pile of shirts and underpants to the floor.

‘Well, Robin,’ said Ted, looking at him and wondering why he was not properly dressed (he was wearing only a red towel dressing gown and a pair of slippers), ‘we meet in altered circumstances.’

‘How is Kate?’ he asked.

‘Oh, she’s fine. Just fine. A funny thing,’ he announced, to break the immediate embarrassed silence, ‘– I stopped to ask for directions just now and spoke to a friend of yours.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yes. She seemed slightly... Asian.’

‘Her name’s Aparna.’

‘Striking-looking woman, I thought. She’d just been to visit you, too, had she?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, you don’t seem to be short of friends, Robin.’

‘We quarrelled.’

‘Oh? Nothing serious, I hope?’

‘Yes, it was. It was about a book.’

There was another silence. Ted, master of the manipulative conversation, adept at the winning of confidences, was finding it hard to cope with the listless minimalism of Robin’s answers. Fortunately however, there was a sudden change of subject.

‘Anyway, Ted, I spoke to Kate on the phone about your cottage and she didn’t seem to think there’d be any problem. I suppose you’ve brought the keys with you?’

Ted was too nonplussed to respond. Robin sat down on the bed opposite him and continued (his voice cold, effortful, inexpressive):

‘You know, if I hadn’t had the chance to go away somewhere, I think I would have gone mad. Or something. I’ve been feeling so tired. I think I must need some sleep. I think I must need some rest. I feel as though I need to talk. I need to see someone. I need to get away. I need to be alone. I feel frightened. I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know what I have been doing, these last few days. I don’t know where I’ve been. I went into a shop. I picked up a tube of toothpaste, and walked out with it. The woman had to run after me. She said, You haven’t paid for that. I’ve hurt my finger. I slipped and hurt it on the stairs. I feel exhausted. I feel cold and hungry. I’m always hungry. I put a frozen pie in the oven, and came back half an hour later, but I hadn’t put the oven on. I’d forgotten. I had to eat bread instead. I can’t believe what I’ve been hearing on the radio. She let him use our air bases. They used our air bases to bomb Libya. I’m scared. I’ve got to get away. And I’ve always wanted to go back to the Lakes. It’s quiet up there, and clean, and it has associations for me. I used to go up there with my family. My parents and my sister. One of the things I’ve been thinking, the last few days, is how much I miss my family. How stupid it is to cut myself off from them like this. If I hadn’t been able to use your cottage, I was going to write to them, ask them if I could go back home, stay with them a while. But this will be better. Much better.’

A softer man than Ted might have been moved by this speech. Indeed, at a pinch, Ted himself might

have been moved, if he had been listening. Instead he was surveying the squalor of Robin's flat, and thinking about his cottage in the Lake District, and as he did so, his resolve hardened. They had bought the cottage with a legacy from Katharine's mother, who had died in 1983. The question of what they should do with the money had been the subject of several long and violent arguments, which he now recalled with some fondness. Eventually he had had his way, and the Lakes had won out over Cornwall. Physical force had not been necessary, after all. The cottage was on the main road between Torver and Coniston; all that stood between it and a fine view of the water was half a mile of dense pine forest. Ted and Katharine had been conscious, at first, that their presence might be regarded by the locals as invasive, but they had had no difficulty in integrating themselves into the community: their only neighbours, the Burnets, who lived across the road, turned out to be a charming couple from Harrow who were always ready to make up a four at bridge. Ted was not prepared to have his standing among these people compromised by the arrival of this disreputable acquaintance who clearly had no idea of how to look after property. His eye – so used to monitoring Katharine's efforts – had soon picked out the grime caked on to Robin's skirting board, the ash on the carpet, the cobwebs hanging in unvisited corners. Not that he could give this as his reason for refusing, of course. A little white lie would have to be invented.

'Well, the fact is, Robin,' he said, 'that Katharine was being somewhat premature. What she seems to have forgotten is that my mother is staying there at the moment. She'll be staying there for a month at least.'

Robin stared at him in absolute silence, his expression blank, his eyes unmoving. Ted wondered whether he had heard, or registered, or understood his explanation, which had come out, he thought, sounding very reasonable. He tried to phrase a question – 'Is that all right?', 'You do see the problem, don't you?' – but the words would not form. What he heard himself ask, finally, was:

'Now – what about something to eat?'

*

It transpired that there was no food in the kitchen, apart from some margarine and half a packet of flaccid cream crackers. Ted went out to find a chip shop. Not having visited a chip shop for several years, he was surprised to be charged more than three pounds. The owner told him that such prices were quite common now, even in the north. When he returned to the flat, he found that Robin had not fetched clean cutlery and warmed the plates, as requested, but was sitting at his desk writing a letter.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I didn't expect you back so soon.'

Ted sent him off to the kitchen and took advantage of his absence by having a surreptitious look at the letter. It was to his mother, and began:

This will probably come as a surprise to you but I am thinking of coming home and perhaps staying for a little while. I hope this idea appeals to you because I know we haven't communicated much recently but I've been thinking how nice it would be to see you both again. I seem to have taken a lot of wrong turnings recently and I badly need to get away from here and think things through. I haven't put that

very well, but I shall try to explain things more...

This was all he had written. Ted was reading over the letter a second time, puzzled, when Robin came back. Anxious not to be thought inquisitive, he pretended to have been looking at the red notebooks.

‘What’s in these?’ he asked, pointing.

‘Stories,’ said Robin. He handed Ted a lukewarm plate and a knife and fork.

‘You’re still writing, then, are you?’

‘On and off.’

‘I still have that issue of the college magazine,’ said Ted, in a tone of chuckling reminiscence. ‘You know, the one we both contributed to? You wrote a story, and I did a short article.’

‘I don’t remember.’

‘My piece was about object-oriented programming. People told me it was rather humorous.’

Robin shook his head and began to eat chips with his fingers.

‘So what are these stories about?’

‘Oh,’ said Robin, wearily, ‘it’s just a sequence I’ve been working on. I don’t know why I bother, really. There are four stories, all interrelated. They’re about sex and friendship and choices and things like that.’

‘Four?’ said Ted. ‘I can only see three.’

‘Aparna has one of them. I wanted her to read it: she borrowed it this afternoon.’ He pulled apart a piece of cod and took one or two reluctant mouthfuls. Then he added, suddenly: ‘One should think very carefully before speaking. Don’t you agree?’

‘Pardon?’

‘I said, one should think very carefully before speaking.’

‘How do you mean?’

He was leaning forward, newly earnest and communicative.

‘What I mean is, a word can be a lethal weapon.’ He paused on this phrase, apparently pleased with it. ‘One word can destroy the work of a million others. A misplaced word can undo anything: a family, a marriage, a friendship.’

Ted was about to ask him why he thought he knew anything about marriage, but decided against it.

‘I’m not with you,’ he said.

‘I was just thinking how easy it was to upset Aparna today. You see, she showed me this book.’ He pushed his plate aside, once and for all. ‘It was a new book, a hardback. I could see it wasn’t a library book, so I started teasing her about it, saying, “Since when have people like us been able to afford books like that?” Then she told me she’d been given it, because one of the authors was a friend of hers. So I took the book and looked at the title page, and there were two names, one of them English and one Indian. So I pointed at the Indian name and said, I suppose this is your friend? And she stared at me and slowly took the book out of my hand, and she said, “You just gave away a lot about yourself”,’

Ted was baffled. He thought carefully and fast, anxious not to embarrass himself. What was the matter with this man, that they misunderstood each other so often? Friendship, he had always believed, was a meeting of minds, like marriage. Katharine and he not only understood each other as soon as they spoke, but frequently they understood each other even before they spoke. Sometimes he knew what she was thinking even before she had said it. Often she knew what he was going to think even before he had begun to think it. Intellectual compatibility had become one of the constants of his life, one of the givens, a habit, an assumption, like the company car, like the greenhouse – for which, he now remembered, he was meant to be buying three new panes at the weekend.

What was the purpose of this abstruse anecdote? Presumably it hinged on the fact that one of the authors of this book was Indian, and that Aparna was for some reason offended at being linked with her. But surely Aparna was herself Indian? She had a funny-sounding name. Her skin was, not to put too fine a point on it, dark. So was her hair. She didn't have a red spot in the middle of her forehead, admittedly, but that could probably be explained away. Why should one Indian not wish to be associated with another Indian, simply because they were both Indian?

He put this question to Robin, as best he could.

'It's not that simple,' said Robin. 'You see, I've known her now for four years. She's been here ever since I've been here. She's been here longer than that. Six, seven years.' His speech was halting, now as if he had lost the habit of explaining things to people. 'When she got here she was proud of her nationality. She even showed it off. The way you saw her dressed today – she didn't always use to dress like that. She was popular, too, in those days: so popular that it used to make me jealous. Of course, she always had time for me. We were very close, in some ways. But still, I'd be standing talking to her outside the library and every few seconds someone would be coming by, saying hello, stopping to chat. It would be as much as I could do to get a word in edgeways. Not just students, either: professors, lecturers, librarians, the people from the canteen. You wouldn't believe it. What you saw today was a shadow. She lives alone now. In a tower block, right on the other side of town. The fourteenth floor. I'm the only one she still sees. They've all forgotten her. They got bored with her.'

There descended a silence which was, it seemed to Ted, potentially interminable.

'So?' he asked.

'Racism doesn't have to be blatant. It doesn't have to be sudden, either, and it can happen anywhere. She got tired of being thought of as foreign; she got tired that it was always the first thing people noticed about her. She only came here to work, and get her degree, and then she found that people had decided to use her to brighten up their lives. "Their bit of local colour" she used to call it. She fought hard to be taken seriously, but it hasn't worked. And now she thinks that even I'm no different. Even I think of her that way. She's so bitter now, with me and with everybody; and yet I can remember this kindness, this warmth, that I never found in anyone else.'

Ted, who had no idea of what to say to any of this, began to clear up the plates.

'Do you ever feel,' said Robin, 'that you've gone through your whole life making the wrong decisions? Or worse still, that you've never really made any decisions? You can see that there were times when you might have been able to – help someone, for instance, but you never had the courage

to do it? Yes?’

Ted paused at the doorway to the kitchen, and said: ‘You’re not really on top form at the moment, are you, Robin?’

Robin followed him through and watched as he put the plates into the sink.

‘Or even worse than that, have you ever wondered what’s the point of making decisions in the first place, when the world’s run by maniacs, and we’re all at the mercy of interests outside our control, and we never know when something terrible might happen, like a war or something?’

‘Well, you’re absolutely right, of course. Look, Robin,’ Ted turned, and said, unexpectedly, ‘you haven’t got a needle and thread, have you? I’ve lost a button.’

‘Yes. In the drawer of the dressing table.’

They went back into the other room. Ted found the needle and a reel of white cotton, and began threading it.

‘Keep talking,’ he said. ‘I’m listening to every word you say.’

‘I just feel... I need to get away and start all over again. Do you ever have that feeling?’

‘Sometimes.’ The needle had a very small eye, and Ted was finding it difficult to get started.

‘I mean, I just don’t know where the last few years have gone. I seem to have achieved nothing, personally, academically, creatively. I seem to have lost all direction.’

‘Yes, I see.’ He tried sucking the end of the cotton, hoping that this would make it easier to thread.

‘I never see my family. I never hear from my sister any more. There are no jobs in universities these days. I can’t see where my thesis is leading. My relationships with women have been disastrous. I can only see the negative side of things. Everything seems flawed. Everything seems useless and futile. Do you understand what that feels like?’

Ted, having succeeded in threading the needle, and having found a spare button in the pocket of his shirt, was now taking his shirt off. It was halfway over his head as he answered:

‘Carry on. I know what you mean.’

‘I’ve been reading this book. It’s... well, I think it’s clarified a few things about what I may be going through. This woman, she talks a lot about the “I”, the importance of the “I”,’

‘The importance of the eye?’

‘The “I”, One letter. The – the sense of personal identity. You know, your sense of self, the person you are.’

‘Yes, quite.’ Ted tutted. He had not tied a proper knot, the cotton had come adrift, and now he was going to have to start all over again.

‘Are you listening?’

‘Of course I’m listening. Do you mind if I put the light on a minute? I’m having a few problems here.’

‘Well, what do you think?’ he asked, as Ted got up to switch the light on.

‘What do I think?’

‘What do you think I should do?’

‘Well –’ Ted started sucking on the cotton again, and said, ‘perhaps the problem is that you’re lonely. Have you thought about getting a girlfriend?’

‘What?’

‘You know, someone who could keep this flat tidy, and provide you with a bit of company in the evening. Not someone like Aparna, who’d only argue all the time. Someone stable and supportive.’

‘And where would that get me?’

Ted caught the note of contempt in his voice and, although he was engaged in tying another knot, looked up. He said, very seriously: ‘I know one thing, Robin. I was never really happy before I married Katharine.’

Robin avoided his eyes.

‘I never want to be involved with a woman again,’ he said, and left the room.

Ted put down the needle, considered these words, and made a mental note to write them down in his file for future reference; for they confirmed, or rather reawakened, a personal theory which he had once entertained regarding Robin. In fact it had been Katharine herself who first suggested it, back at Cambridge. ‘Don’t be stupid,’ he had said at the time, ‘Robin is as normal as you or I’. Gradually, however, the idea had come to seem less incredible, and Ted had overcome his initial revulsion. In an odd way it had even reconciled him to the closeness of Robin’s friendship with Katharine, to the obvious pleasure which they took in each other’s company. Towards the end of their last summer term, the three of them were scarcely to be seen apart. And Katharine had said to him once: ‘It would explain why he is so sensitive.’

‘Sensitive?’

‘Yes. They’re always the most sensitive.’

He had asked Robin, subsequently, whether he thought that this was true, that they were always the most sensitive, and he had said yes, it was often the case, and had added that some of the people he most admired were homosexual; which struck Ted, then, as being a shocking admission. But he had told himself, Never mind, he is simply less fortunate than the rest of us, and this display of liberalism had been the cause of much private self-congratulation. It had its limits, of course. For instance, he would never have left Robin alone in a room with Peter. Ted believed that you couldn’t be too careful where children were concerned.

Robin came back, and opened the curtains at the window by his desk. The sky was darkening.

‘I suppose you’ll have to be getting back soon.’

‘Well, I’ve been thinking about that,’ said Ted. He had been thinking, in fact, that it would suit him to call on Dr Fowler the next morning; in which case, he wouldn’t have to visit this dreary part of the world again for more than a month. And he had been thinking, distasteful as he found the ambience of Robin’s flat, that here at least was the chance of a bed for the night. ‘You don’t seem too grand and there’s no real reason why I have to be home tonight. Why don’t I phone Katharine and tell her I won’t be back until tomorrow?’

‘If you like,’ said Robin.

This was not the flood of gratitude that Ted had anticipated.

‘Then maybe we could go out for a drink. Do you think that would cheer you up? And perhaps I could read one of these stories of yours.’

‘All right. I’ll get dressed.’

Robin took the least dirty of his clothes into the kitchen and changed while Ted was on the telephone. He returned in time to hear the last few words of the conversation.

‘Who’s Peter?’ he asked.

‘Peter? Surely I must have mentioned him, in one of the newsletters. Our first boy. Two years old.’

‘Oh. Of course.’

‘Yes...’ Ted smiled. ‘He’s a grand little chap.’

Robin picked up the first of the notebooks and slipped it into the pocket of his trousers.

‘Let’s go if we’re going,’ he said.

*

It is a warm night in mid-April; getting on for eleven o’clock. Robin and Ted have left the pub, and are setting off in a new direction, Robin leading, Ted hurrying to keep up. The people of Coventry are sleeping, now, or preparing to sleep; but they continue to walk at a breathless pace, these two friends who are no longer friends.

Up Mayfield Road, along Broadway, across the bowling green, scene of many of Robin’s private reveries. Here he has sat, on windy spring Saturdays, watching husbands and wives pass their time in skilled and light-hearted competition, sporting anoraks and headscarves. Old people, still bound to one another, still bound to the city in which they have lived, worked, grown up; in which they were born. He has watched them on windy Saturday afternoons, feeling at once both contempt and envy. He has wished to join them, to demonstrate his own skill, for he, too, has played bowls, with his mother, father and sister. Naturally he’d be out of practice, a little erratic at first. And at the same time he has wished only to leave them, because he is burning from the touch of their scared occasional eyes, fleeting but eloquent glances which phrase, unmistakably, he questions, Who is that strange man, and why is he staring at us?

Across the road and into Spencer Park. In autumn here the trees rustle, and you have to weave your way through kids playing football, with piles of clothes for goalposts. But tonight it is quiet and empty, except for a young woman out walking her dog: a bit foolhardy you might have thought, but perhaps she feels safe with the dog, an Alsatian after all, and a big one at that. She doesn’t say hello, her eyes are averted. It is very still, once she has passed. And now the lights of the city are before them, beckoning them, these two companions who have nothing to offer each other in the way of companionship, and their stride quickens again.

Across the steel footbridge, and over the railway line. There are few trains at this time of night, services to London and Birmingham and Oxford have all but ceased, but now as they cross the footbridge a goods train passes beneath their feet. It seems immensely long and noisy, making conversation impossible. A good job, then, that they have no wish to converse, although a detached

observer, supposing one were to pass by, might have noticed on Ted's face the marks of a growing unease, the strainings of a question long since framed but as yet unable to express itself. But Robin is oblivious to this nuance; he is chuckling in a secretive way at the graffiti which cover the walls of the bridge from top to bottom, from end to end. Anarchy – The Only Way Out. Say No To Cruise. I Have Seen The Fnords. Disarm Rapists. So Much To Say, So Little Paint. Wogs Out. Nigger Shit. Something about this mixture seems to appeal to him, but the nature of this appeal clearly eludes his confidant (in whom he has no confidence), for Ted's sidelong glances grow more and more puzzled and wary. And sidelong. So that now they have given up all converse not only of the voices, but of the eyes.

Down Grosvenor Road, a deserted warehouse to their right, houses to their left, half of them boarded up. Soon they are walking through the subway and then into Warwick Road, past the lit windows of estate agents and the door of a crowded wine bar, from which people are beginning to emerge. Robin hesitates here briefly, but soon moves on, faster than ever. Ted stops and peers in confusion at the doorway, then runs to catch up. It occurs to him, not before time, that Robin has in mind, as the mainspring and primary motivation behind this walk, the consumption of further alcohol. He puts this question bluntly, and is answered with a nod and a noise. Robin now stops again, this time to look in the window of a bookshop. He ignores the main display of paperbacks and picture-books, concentrating his attention instead on a bulky volume half hidden towards the back, in a right-hand corner: *The Failure of Contemporary Literature*, by Leonard Davis. A sticker attached to the front cover announces, as a further inducement to prospective purchasers, that Professor Davis is a Local Author. Robin clicks his tongue.

The precinct is all but deserted. There is the occasional down-and-out, obviously, slumped in a doorway, but you get these even in the most prosperous cities. In fact you get them especially in the most prosperous cities. The precinct has a haunted air about it at this time of night. Built for public use, designed purposely to accommodate crowds of happy shoppers, thronging, swarming, threading and out of Smiths, Habitat, Woolworths, BHS, Top Man, and yet tonight there are only these two figures, wordless, distant, their footsteps echoing in the concrete square, their shadows faint in the fluorescent light. Where are all the old women, dragging shopping bags on wheels? Where are the young couples, window-shopping, arm in arm? Where are the punks and skinheads? Tucked up in bed somewhere, I hope, in terraced houses or high-rise blocks, hundreds of feet up in the air. They would have received little attention from these two, tonight, anyway, because they are now walking faster still, and Robin has begun to glance anxiously at his watch.

They cut across Broadgate, past the statue of Lady Godiva, and head down Trinity Street. Ted has no way of knowing it, but they are not far from the cathedral; here, in the daytime, you can while away a pleasant hour or more admiring the windows, looking at the Sutherland tapestry, or experiencing (for a small fee) the holographic recreation of the Blitz, an aural and visual adventure in three dimensions for those who weren't lucky enough to have been present at the real thing. But Ted's only memory of the cathedral will be of a dark bulk rising to his right as he crosses the square, somewhere behind the old library. And even then he will not have known that it was the cathedral, because he is tired, and angry, and has stopped asking questions. Robin, needless to say, never ventures information unsolicited. Ted has long since ceased to feel any curiosity about his surroundings anyhow, and the

whole city has begun to seem like a clammy inferno, one unsavoury district after another. He hardly notices, then, that they have left most of the shops behind, have just walked past the dimly-lit forecourt of a large, run-down hospital, almost uninhabited, it seems, at this hour, and that they have entered upon a long street composed mainly of bulky terraced houses. He does notice, however, that only about one in four of the people they have passed in the last few minutes has been white; and this gives him a certain anxiety.

Before long they have taken a right-hand turn, into a very dark side street. They stop at the door of what appears at first to be a house, in a row of houses. Through a glass panel in the door, a faint orange glow is visible. Then Ted realizes that there is a sign above the door, that the house has a name: that it is, in fact, another pub. Robin is knocking on the glass panel, rhythmically, like a code, and now a man has come to the door. A few words, and they are admitted.

*

‘What’s going on?’ asked Ted.

They were seated in a small gloomy bar with perhaps a dozen other men, most of whom Robin seemed to know. Everyone was absolutely silent, and the average age of the patrons, not counting Robin and Ted, was about sixty-two.

‘A friend of mine told me about this place,’ said Robin. ‘They lock the front door and then let us stay until about three or four. The police know about it but they usually turn a blind eye.’

Ted was appalled.

‘How often do you do this?’

‘I don’t know. A couple of nights a week.’

‘You need the drink that badly?’

‘It’s not the drink. I can get that at home. It’s the company.’

‘The company!’ He looked around in astonishment. ‘But look at these people. They’re old men. You have nothing in common with them. Nobody’s even talking.’

‘It’s better than being alone.’

‘But tonight I would have been with you.’

There was no reply to this remark, so Ted assumed that it had struck home. He noticed that he was drinking too fast, and had nearly finished the second of the gin and tonics which Robin had pressed upon him. When he had suggested going out for a drink, he had envisaged a convivial evening, drinking pints of lager in a boisterous, youthful environment. Now he felt bored and drunk and homesick. Robin was fingering an empty glass, his eyes half closed, slumped in his chair, his head bowed in a gesture of militant introversion.

‘It seems to me,’ said Ted, ‘that you’re overreacting to this little quarrel.’

‘Quarrel?’

‘Your argument with Aparna. I take it that that’s why you’re behaving in this way?’

He looked up and his eyes awoke, briefly.

‘It’s not the only thing,’ he said.

Ted could see, none the less, that he had touched a nerve, and ditching his original theory about Robin he began to wonder whether there was more to this friendship than he had suspected. There was no point, he decided, in trying to approach the subject delicately; so he simply asked, ‘Are you having an affair with her?’

Robin’s stare was cold and enquiring. ‘What makes you think that?’

‘You mentioned having been close.’

‘We are,’ said Robin, but amended it to ‘were’.

‘And?’

‘It was never physical. I suppose that’s what you’re getting at.’

‘I see. A platonic friendship,’ said Ted, drily.

‘If you like.’

‘A meeting of minds.’

Robin hesitated, then rose to his feet. Ted thought, for a moment, with a mixture of panic and relief that he had taken offence and was about to leave; but he had merely stood up in order to fetch the red notebook out from the back pocket of his jeans.

‘Since you’ve mentioned the phrase,’ he said, ‘why don’t you read this story? Then you might have more idea what you’re talking about.’

He threw the notebook down on the table and went to get two more drinks. After a while Ted picked the book up and looked apprehensively through its pages of small, untidy handwriting. He had read some of Robin’s fiction at Cambridge, and not found it inspiring: in fact they still had one of his typescripts back at home. In their last term, shortly before Ted and Katharine announced their engagement, Robin had presented her with a story – inscribed rather fulsomely, in Ted’s opinion. He had only ever managed to read the first half. Still, this appeared to be considerably shorter, and it would at least provide some respite from an increasingly chilly conversation.

He turned to the first page of the notebook, and began to read.

1. *The Meeting of Minds*

Christmas comes to Coventry.

It would be too much to hope that it will be white, of course; the only one that this place has to offer is wet and grey. Anyway, a white Christmas would only mean frozen pipes, and ice on the inside of the windows.

There were four weeks or twenty-four shopping days to go when Richard bought the last of his Christmas cards. We are dealing, then, with an organized man. The last card was for his ex-girlfriend and had been the hardest to choose. When you are actually going out with someone it is easy, you simply get the biggest and most expensive card in the shop, scribble a few florid words and a lot of Xs, stick it in the post, and there you are, the year's work done. But how can a mere card, however tasteful, however well designed, express the complexity of your feelings towards a woman whom you have not seen, properly, for three years, a period almost equal to that for which you were (unofficially) engaged to her?

In the end he settled for one of a snowman pulling a cracker with a rather dissipated-looking reindeer.

How the precinct irked him, at this time of year. Not because it was too crowded (crowds were comforting) and not because Christmas had become, as any fool could see, a viciously exploitative commercial exercise (for how did it differ, in that respect, from any of society's other festivals or holidays?). It was the atmosphere of enforced enjoyment which was so depressing, which gave rise, all around him, to a palpable mood of suppressed panic and desperation. People couldn't just get away with being unhappy at Christmas. At any other time of year, fair enough, but if they were unhappy at Christmas then they knew, at heart, that they were irredeemably unhappy. Signs of this melancholy truth were on every other face.

I dislike this mode of writing. You pretend to be transcribing your characters' thoughts (by what special gift of insight?) when in fact they are merely your own, thinly disguised. The device is feeble and transparent, and leads to all sorts of grammatical clumsiness. So I shall try to confine myself, in the future, to honest (honest!) narrative.

Richard lived in a two-bedroomed flat, on the fourteenth floor of a tower block in the worst part of the city. He shared this flat with a friend, whose name was Miles. They were close friends, with several qualities in common, including laziness and intellectual snobbery. They were both students at the nearby university. ('Nearby'! Sometimes I wonder why I don't chuck this business in altogether and do something useful with my life. For is it likely, we have to ask, that they would be students at a university situated four hundred miles away?) Neither of them had lived in the city for long, or was

native to the Midlands. Neither of them was now, or had recently been, involved in a close relationship with a member of the opposite sex.

That evening, after Richard had posted the card to his ex-fiancée, with feelings of such a complicated nature, involving such nuanced shades of ambivalence and contrariety, that it would frankly bore the backside off the pair of us if I were to try describing them, he and Miles had an argument. They were watching the news, and an item came on about Northern Ireland. Some soldier had been blown to bits, or something, or two civilians had been cold-bloodedly slaughtered outside their own homes, or some woman had had to watch while her twin babes were hacked to death by terrorists. The precise nature of the incident is immaterial, as far as this story is concerned. Miles and Richard began to go over the pros and cons of the British military presence, familiar enough ground for both of them. After a while, though, the discussion became acrimonious, and they found themselves disagreeing fundamentally over the nature of the Irish conflict, Miles insisting that it was religious, Richard that it was political. Soon their conversation had ground to a childish stalemate.

‘There’s no point in my discussing this with you, anyway,’ said Richard. ‘Let’s have a cup of tea.’

‘What do you mean, there’s no point?’ said Miles, following him into the kitchen.

‘I mean that it’s always the same when we try to talk about religion. Every time, I come up against the stone wall of your bloody Catholicism.’

‘I see. So you think I’m bigoted.’

‘Of course not. Look, don’t take offence. I don’t want to quarrel. It’s just that suddenly you become predictable. The whole thing becomes predictable. Suddenly it’s not a discussion any more, we’re both acting out roles. I know what I can and can’t say to you, and whenever you say something, I have to ask myself, Is that what he really thinks, or just what he’s told he has to think?’

Back in the sitting room, Miles was subdued.

‘I didn’t know you felt that strongly about it.’

‘It’s not *you*, Miles. It’s these wretched compromises we have to go through, every day of our lives. We never arrive at the truth, because we’re always too busy making allowances. You end up never speaking your mind, you just say what you know the other person wants to hear. You frame a different truth for every context. You can’t talk about socialism with a group of conservatives, and you can’t talk about conservatism with a group of socialists. If you want to talk about religion, you’ll find yourself saying completely different things depending on whether it’s a Buddhist, a Christian or an atheist you’re discussing it with. If you ask an academic for an opinion, it’ll be an academic one, if you ask a doctor, it’ll be medical, if you ask a solicitor, it’ll be legal. The minute we become socially active, we sacrifice honesty, integrity and neutrality to the impulse to avoid confrontation.’ He sighed and concluded: ‘It’s very depressing.’

‘You sound like a friend of mine,’ said Miles.

‘Really?’

‘Yes. I’ve got a friend who thinks just like that.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Karen. Haven’t you ever heard me talk about Karen?’

‘The name’s vaguely familiar.’

‘She’s always complaining that she can never have a proper discussion with anyone.’ He thought for a moment. ‘You two really ought to get together.’

After a few more minutes, this became a serious suggestion. Richard was opposed to the idea of actually meeting Miles’s friend, however. He claimed that the sort of conversation which he envisaged could only be truly impartial, truly detached, if the participants were to remain at a distance from one another. He proposed an exchange of letters.

‘All right,’ said Miles. ‘I’ll call her up now.’

Soon afterwards he returned with the news that Karen had responded enthusiastically to the proposal.

‘She asked you to write the first letter,’ he said, ‘and wants to know whether you think the United States or the Soviet Union is the more expansionist. She asked you to link your answer to the mood of increased liberalization in Gorbachev’s Russia, and to say whether you think this is indicative of a crisis of identity in the communist countries generally. Just to get the ball rolling, really.’

Richard sat up until three that morning, writing his letter. He found the experience uncommonly liberating. Miles had told him nothing about Karen: all he knew, then, was that she was female, and that she was roughly his own age. Freed from the constraint of having to adjust himself to the known requirements of his addressee, he was able to express himself honestly, fully, as his head and his heart dictated. He did not even know her surname, or have any idea of where his letter would be sent. He simply wrote ‘Karen’ on the envelope, and left Miles to address and post it.

Three days later, a reply arrived. Richard picked it up from the doormat, sat down at the kitchen table and looked at the envelope. It was postmarked Birmingham. The stamp was a special Christmas issue. His name and address were typed. The envelope was expensive.

Opening the letter, he found ten pages of large, decisive and tidy handwriting. There were many crossings-out, and here and there a whole phrase had been deleted with Tipp-Ex. The letter began with ‘Dear Richard’, but ended, ‘with very best wishes, Yours in anticipation’. (He had given a purely formal ‘Yours sincerely’.)

Having taken in these details, Richard began to read in earnest.

Her analysis of recent developments within the Eastern bloc was, he found, both astute and well informed. It was also infused with a militant anti-Americanism which he felt to be rather intimidating. Her thesis was that the price Gorbachev might end up paying for the liberalization of Soviet Russia was, ultimately, its Americanization, the possibility of which she saw as being the apogee of Western capitalist consumerism. Consumerism and expansionism were, she argued, but different sides of the same coin.

To tell the truth, Richard got slightly bored somewhere in the middle of the letter. It suddenly occurred to him that he was probably dealing with a student of political science, and, while he enjoyed political discussion as much as the next man, politics students tended to be the most insufferable people on earth, in his experience. It perked up noticeably towards the end, however, when she began to talk about the impact of mass communications on relations between the superpowers, and on our received models of political relationships generally. He saw a way in which this could be usefully

diverted towards a broader argument about the breakdown of traditional forms of communication, with specific reference to the impact this was having on literature. He didn't feel like writing about politics any more, since he suspected that she had the edge over him, on that subject.

His next letter began:

Dear Karen,

Thank you very much for an interesting and thoughtful letter. You cannot believe how pleased I am to have found a correspondent such as yourself; there are times, as I'm sure you know, when you simply can't be candid even (or especially) with your friends, and although I find the intellectual environment at this university stimulating, I can see that my discussions with you are, in the end, going to be much more rewarding. Also, I think that the different cast of our two minds is bound to make for fruitful argument: I am an English student, whereas you (I presume – or will you have to correct me?) must be studying either politics or history. It could have been so boring, so sterile, if we were both to bring the same approach to bear on every topic, but I know, I can feel, that it is not going to be like that.

Karen's reply came by return of post; after which, the correspondence continued unabated for the next two weeks. During this time, the following subjects were covered, with varying degrees of thoroughness: politics (again); the decline of the welfare state, with particular reference to the National Health service; sexism, its origins and effects; religion; astrology; fashion; and personal relationships. Consequently, Richard was by now in reasonably sure possession of the following bits of information: that Karen was a socialist; that she wore NHS glasses; that she was blonde; that she held no religious beliefs; that she was Pisces; that she wore trousers, not skirts, was partial to denim, never used make-up, and favoured the colours red and blue; and that she had had two boyfriends, but had not been going out with anybody now for more than a year.

At this point they found themselves presented with an unforeseen problem. There were now only ten days to go until Christmas, and although neither Karen nor Richard planned to return to their parents' homes just yet (for Karen, it had transpired, was indeed a student, studying Art History at Birmingham University), the onset of the festive season was, nevertheless, beginning to place an obstacle in the way of their correspondence. Owing to the increased volume of mail handled by the post office at this time of year, it was now taking as many as three days for their letters to be delivered. This was, in Richard's view, an intolerable delay; and so he suggested, in a postscript, that – purely as a temporary measure, of course – they should perhaps continue their conversations over the telephone.

Three days later, Karen telephoned him.

What a charming voice she had, to be sure. It had, unless he was much mistaken, a distinctly Scottish lilt to it. There was an attractive roughness about the way she pronounced her Rs when using words such as 'structuralism' and 'Derrida' (for they began by discussing literary theory), an appealingly guttural quality to her intonation when she used phrases like 'the auteurist conspiracy' and 'the camera as voyeur' (for they ended by discussing film aesthetics). He wondered whether his own obvious Home Counties accent was annoying her.

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