



DORIAN

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Dorian

AN IMITATION

WILL SELF



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For Ivan

And with thanks to Jack Emery and Joan Bakewell

~~There is an unconscious appositeness in the use of the word *person* to designate the human individual, as is done in all European languages: for *persona* really means an actor's mask, and it is true that no one reveals himself as he is; we all wear a mask and play a role.~~

Schopenhauer

Recordings

1

Once you were inside the Chelsea home of Henry and Victoria Wotton it was impossible to tell whether it was day or night-time. Not only was there this crucial ambiguity, but the seasons and even the years became indeterminate. Was it this century or that one? Was she wearing this skirt or that suit? Did he take that drug or this drink? Was his preference for that cunt or this arsehole?

These combinations of styles, modes, thoughts and orifices were played out in the gloom of the Wottons' dusty apartments and the brightness of their smeary water-closets, as if artefacts, ideas, even souls were all but symbols inscribed upon the reels of the slot machine of Life. Yank the arm and up they came: three daggers, three bananas, three pound signs. At the Wottons', three of anything paid out generously – in the coin of Misfortune.

But such was the particular correspondence between the year our story begins, 1981, and the year of the house's construction, 1881, and such was the peculiarly similar character of the times – a Government at once regressive and progressive, a monarchy mired in its own immemorial succession crisis, an economic recession both sharp and bitter – that a disinterested viewer could have been forgiven for seeing more enduring significance in the fanlight and the dado, the striped wallpaper and the gilt-framed mirror, a reproduction bust of Antinous and a very watery Turner, than in the human figures that actually stood in the mote-heavy beam of light which fell to the runner.

Upper-class people – that much was clear. Anyone would've judged Henry Wotton to be so by his hauteur alone, by the way his arrogant, supercilious face was looking past its own image in the mirror, as if searching for someone more interesting to talk to. Someone who didn't have reddish curly hair, and eyes like the buttons of an undertaker's suit sewn on to an expanse of waxy pallor. There are those for whom all existence is the first hour of a promising cocktail party, and Henry Wotton was one of them.

If any further confirmation were needed, it was provided by his tailoring: Wotton was swaddled in class. His immaculately-cut three-piece Prince of Wales-check suit bagged slightly at the knee; his off-white butterfly-collar linen shirt frayed a tad at the cuff and the link holes; his red knitted silk tie was casually knotted. But only a slice of this costume was on view, a long stripe from his knobbly Adam's apple to his scuffed loafers. (An English gentleman never polishes his shoes, but then nor does a lazy bastard.) The rest of his finery was hidden beneath a full-length black Crombie overcoat; a garment that was also perfectly crafted – if, that is, you like the skirts of overcoats to be overfull, and distinctly epicene.

Behind Wotton stood a scarecrow woman, black hair flying away from her broad brow, which was buried in the hollow between her husband's shoulder blades. He was sorting through the mail, mostly a stack of pasteboard invitations, some inked, others engraved. Wotton tapped these together on the credenza in front of him, with disconcertingly fleshy and

spatulate fingers, then riffled them as if he were shuffling a pack of cards. His wife, Lady Victoria, snuffled at his back. Her skinny arms, like animated pipe-cleaners, writhed in the stale air. Wotton laid the invitations down among overflowing ashtrays, empty bottles, stained wine glasses, crumpled bits of this and that. On the floor at their feet, tumbleweeds of dust sauntered in a febrile draught.

It's worth remarking at this stage on the precise character of the Wottons' house unbeautiful. Please don't let it be misunderstood that this was a filthy mucky home. Like any marital estate it had its ebb and flow of order and disorder; it's just that this disorder was extreme by anyone's standards. The ashtrays were huge, as big as geological features. Cigarette and cigar butts were buried in their cones of ash like the victims of a volcanic eruption. As for the empty bottles, these were so numerous that their ranks formed a kind of anti-bar, offering up a fine selection of dregs, lees and spiritous vapours. And the many glasses which accompanied them were so casually abandoned as to suggest the recent dispersal of a considerable body of people – yet no one had visited the house in days.

Lady Victoria, whose family and friends knew her by the sobriquet 'Batface', was still attired for this long-gone party in a girlishly tiered ra-ra skirt of navy crushed velour. Her hair was a mess and so was she. She wove, her arms snaked, she was so irrefutably aristocratic that she was allowed to do almost anything – short of pissing herself – while remaining altogether acceptable.

And, truth to tell, she *could* have pissed herself as well – nobody would've judged her. Her father, the Duke of This or That, was a dandified bully, a preposterous little popinjay of a man who privileged his children with his superfluous anger. He had so much of everything that there was plenty to spare. When he first came across the infant Victoria, who was by then aged three or four months (His Grace having spent the preceding year – after having mounted the Duchess in the enclosure they kept for rare goat breeds – gaming at Biarritz and game-pie-eating in Caithness), on seeing her vast eyes, her triangular face and her elegantly enlarged ears, he had exclaimed, 'Batface!' Naturally, she adored him, both ultrasonically and stridently. The way her body and her mind both jibed with the world, the way she wriggled and writhed and gurned, all of it derived from his rejection. Lady Victoria stunted herself so as to tenant the queer space of the Duke's contempt.

'Lots of oblongs –' she squeaked on this occasion. They were the first words she had spoken to her husband for some hours. Not that they had been asleep – far from it. In their separate portions of the house – he below, she above – they had spent the hours of darkness secreted in their own ways, observing silence in lieu of repose.

'Sent out by squares.' His tones were deep and cold, a contaminated reservoir of inky disdain.

'We hardly go anywhere... any more... at least not together.' But there was no captiousness in her tones; Lady Victoria cared entirely for Henry, and cared for her own caring for him. Thus she did the sympathy for both of them.

He felt for her, too. He lay down the oblongs, and one of his hands first went to his eye to remove some wakey dust, then came groping behind her, to where one of the tiers of her skirt had become caught up behind the waistband of her tights. This he untangled and set to rights, before turning to face her. 'I don't give a shit about going to any of them, just so long

as they keep inviting us.’ He kissed her lightly on either eyelid; then, releasing her, he glanced around as if looking for a briefcase or a newspaper or some other staff of workaday righteousness, but finding none he opted instead for a bottle of Scotch within which a couple of inches still remained, and, tucking the furl of glass under his arm, he swivelled to depart.

‘Have a good day, darling...’ Lady Victoria trailed off. She was always trailing off.

‘Yeah, fuck, whatever – you too.’ They kissed again, this time on the lips, but sexlessly. He opened the front door and descended the front steps to the street, scrunching up the pocket of his coat to feel for his car keys.

It may have been the beginning of the Wottons’ day, but outside morning had passed. It was noon, a noon in late June. The street, although bathed in sunlight, had no freshness about it, but was baking to a harsh monochrome. For this was an impossible late June, with the fruit trees in blossom as well as the flowers in bloom. All along the terrace of off-white four storey houses, cherry and apple trees were bowed down with their gay burden, like willow brides, their veils scattered with confetti. In window-boxes and the crowded little front gardens, a thousand stems effloresced: tulips, magnolia trees, desert orchids, snowdrops, daffodils, foxgloves. It was a veritable riot of verdancy against the urbanity all around, and above it spore hung like a mist of blood over an ancient battlefield.

Wotton hung over his own front railings, as if speared by them, like an overdressed St Sebastian. He pulled the folds of his overcoat about him and shivered. His pocket trawl had resulted in the netting of two pairs of Ray-Ban Wayfarers. Levering himself upright he clamped first one pair and then the second on to his face. ‘It’s perfectly all right to stare into the abyss for days at a time’ – he addressed the empty street – ‘so long as you’re wearing two pairs of Ray-Bans.’

This was the manner of man he was – supremely mannered. A collector of *bons mots* and aperçus and apophthegms, an alfresco rehearser of the next impassioned, extempore rodomontade, whose greatest fear in life was inarticulacy, or worse, *esprit de l’escalier*. Henry Wotton might have professed an indifference about his position in society, but in truth, like all those who have ascended too high and too fast, he had failed to acclimatise, so he gasped desperately for the next inspirational acknowledgement that he existed at all.

‘Gaaa...! Christ – Christ!’ Wotton fought for breath while lighting an outsize filterless Virginia cigarette. Even this suffocating outside was too exterior for him. He longed for the night, for confining drapes, for silky sheets and silken cuddles. He pushed himself up, and like a tree falling in the forest collapsed towards the door of a dark-green late-model Jaguar saloon, which was parked near to – but not exactly by – the kerb. It was a filthy luxury vehicle, the green paintwork furry with dust-upon-sap and maculate with bird-shit. Having finally located the keys in his waistcoat pocket, Wotton admitted himself to the car as if it were a vault, then pulled the door to with a moneyed clunk. The whisky bottle he aligned carefully between the upholstered grooves on the passenger seat.

Wotton organised his two pairs of shades, and stabbed at the ignition with the key. Despite being half-blinded by his ridiculous eyewear, he still adjusted the mirror so that he could see his own face. Turning this way and that he seemed to take a particular satisfaction in observing the white rheum that had gathered at the corners of his cruel mouth, like sea froth on anfractuons rocks.

Once Wotton had shackled the Crombie to the car's cream leather and begun dicking with the controls of the radio, he realised how muted the world's soundtrack had been. His wife's voice, his own footfalls, the avian din, and even the distant roar of the traffic on the King's Road, all were muffled. When he depressed a button on the car radio he recoiled from a blast of pure, stentorian, ordinary news. Information concerning a parallel world in which people walked and talked and brawled and died. A radio announcer blurted, 'In the wake of the disturbances the Government is considering setting up an inquiry under the chairmanship of Lord Scar –' and Wotton – having had quite enough – punched another button, which brought synthesised pop music, thudding and peeping into the car's interior.

Vigorously tapping, Wotton's black loafer burrowed into a slurry of opera programmes, discarded cocaine wraps, biffed cigarette boxes and empty hip-flasks, beneath which his sole felt for the accelerator, so he could jam it to the floor. The Jag pulled away and raced up the nearside lane of the straight residential road. After four hundred yards it veered back to the kerb and stopped. Inside the smoke-filled booth, Wotton extinguished one Sullivan's Export and lit another. The pop still peeped and he sang along with the mincing front man, 'Oh-woh woh tainted love!' for a few bars before summoning himself, killing the engine and exiting the car. The Scotch went along for the ride.

Entering a narrow door in a brick wall, Wotton followed a path that ran obliquely through a patch of thick shrubbery to the door of a two-storey, purpose-built Victorian artist's studio. Using another of his keys, Wotton opened the door of this charming building, still yodelling, 'Take my love but that's not really all!'

It was dark inside. Very fusty. Terribly gloomy. The shrub-choked windows and leaf-pressed skylight of the studio admitted hardly anything of the day, as if this were – bizarrely – of little importance to the artwork undertaken here. And what creation could this have been? For this studio was patently a disordered realm in the midst of an objective insurgency. Good pieces of old furniture were under attack from a rabble of trash. Here a Chippendale dresser fell victim to a slew of dirty plates and piss-filled mugs, while over there a Moroccan divan was inundated beneath a dirty dune of discarded clothing. The same bottles and ashtrays massed and jostled as at the Wottons'.

But in the middle ground there was at least some evidence of an operative intelligence. A series of nine television monitors were ranged in a semicircle confronting Wotton. All of them were on, but eight displayed static, while the ninth was tuned to an Open University programme on physics. 'In which case, the free-ranging electron will combine to form a new nucleus...' a white-coated geek said on screen, while tipping his bald patch at the viewer as if it were a hat. The background to this pedagogy was provided by a mixture of tapestry wall hangings and photographer's flats. A minstrels' gallery was devoid of musicians, but instead packed out with old tea-chests, their sides stencilled with exotic Eastern destinations: Colombo, Shanghai, Manila.

Wotton loafed and squeaked about, hopping awkwardly from rug to parquet like a flightless bird, pecking here at some abandoned underwear, there at a grubby mirror. 'Baz?' he called out after a while. 'You here?' Then, spying a joint stubbed out next to the televised physics tutorial, he knelt, picked it up and relit it using a Ronson recovered from a waistcoat pocket. Still squatting, he ejaculated croakily, 'Baz?'

‘In the cloud of particles formed after the impact new alignments will soon occur –’

‘Baz, are you *here*?!’

In the cloud of particles wreathing Wotton’s head, all was, once again, muffled. He could hear the proximate hiss of the monitors, the distant gibber of an educated voice. In the minstrels’ gallery the tea-chests scraped. Something was up there, something that then dropped like a big cat to the floor, eight feet below. ‘Hi!’

It was a man in his early thirties – perhaps five years older than Wotton. His dark, collar-length hair was mussed, while his tanned and wizened face suggested that he surfed a lot – using a sunbed as a board. The black drainpipe Levis, the white shirt open to the waist, the Egyptian amulet on a leather thong around his leathery neck, all implied guitar-strumming around beach fires and youth gilded by golden sunsets. But up close his vigour was entirely chemical, and all that glistened was sweat.

Baz advanced, his bare feet slapping the floor, while Wotton conspicuously ignored him. This was the very essence of the relationship between the two: Baz Hallward the wayward acolyte, seething with energy and bumptiousness, while the younger man played the part of his mentor, consumed with cool, eaten up with indifference. That they had once been lovers and Baz had assumed the active role meant nothing now. Nothing whatsoever.

‘Late night?’ Wotton drawled through the smoke.

‘What time is it now?’ Baz squatted down to Wotton’s level. ‘Uh-huh, taping. Lotta taping. Didn’t finish until four, got the model comfy, did some editing, sequencing...’ he shat these phrases out ‘... and now you’re here.’

‘Were you out?’ Wotton cared more about where the people he knew had been than where he himself was at any given time.

‘I went to your mother’s –’

‘To my mother’s?’

‘That’s right, your mother’s – to meet a kid.’

‘You went to my mother’s to meet *a kid*? Fuck, Baz, you are the one. I s’pose it was some charity-load of old douche-bags you had to make yourself presentable for...’ He rose and began ambling about the studio, still puffing the joint and leaving tedious fumes in his wake.

‘Yeah, I had to borrow a fucking suit – but I’d met the kid before –’

‘*En passant*?’ Wotton never used an English phrase where a French tag would do.

‘Literally in passing.’ Baz translated them without comment. ‘I brushed up against his butt in the hall when I last paid the rent on this place. He’s just left Oxford, and now he’s helping your ma with that Soho project.’

‘Silly bitch.’

‘He isn’t very intellectual, if that’s what you mean.’

‘No, I meant Mama, but anyway I don’t want want to mount some encephalitic *thing* – its brain swelling like a *bubo*.’

‘Yeah, fuck, I dunno why I bothered with the whistle, her house is overrun with renters, tarts and social workers. But this kid is absolutely divine, he’s a true original, he’s *gorgeous*, he’s next year’s model – take a look at the stuff we did last night.’ Baz headed over to a bank

of video recorders which were connected to the monitors by coiled creepers of cabling. He fiddled intently with these while Wotton prowled. After a while he located a spoon, a glass of water, a two-millilitre disposable syringe, and a drug wrap on a windowsill. Then the two men's conversation assumed a common purpose.

'Is this gear?' Wotton held up the wrap.

'No, give over, Wotton, it's charlie – and it's my last.'

'Yeah, well...' Wotton considered this proposition while unbuttoning the cuff of his overcoat, his suit cuff, his shirt cuff. 'Ach! All this buttoning and unbuttoning. This is my *last* hit for this hour. This is the *last* summer of the dormouse. Moments, Baz, are dying out all about us, we are in the midst of a great extinction to rival that of the Cretaceous era...' He concocted the fix precisely, rapidly and elegantly. 'You dare to speak of your last charlie, when I am irrefutably the last Henry. The last with such a rare combination of gung-ho drugging...' he used the bunched-up sleeves in lieu of a tourniquet, and pushed the Ray-Bans up on his forehead so as to see his swollen main line better in the green light from the window – 'and *comme il faut* tailoring.'

But this supramundane rant remained unacknowledged, just as the peculiar sight of Wotton's aureole of red hair and flushed works full of green blood – as if he were a junky Pan – remained unobserved. Baz's attention was wholly caught by the first monitor, which zipped and zagged into life. It showed the naked figure of a beautiful young man, posed like classical Greek kouros: one hand lightly on hip, the other trailing in groin, half-smile on plump lips. A naked figure that turned to face the viewer as the camera zoomed in. The second monitor came to life and this displayed a closer view of the still turning youth. The third view was closer again. The sensation imparted as all nine monitors came to life was of the most intense, carnivorous, predatory voyeurism. The youth was like a fleshly bonbon, or titillating titbit, wholly unaware of the ravening mouth of the camera. The ninth monitor displayed only his mobile pink mouth.

Wotton's rictus responded to this as it quivered and grew a moustache of sweat. 'Time flies when you're watching replays, eh Baz?' He drew the needle from his arm, licked up the gout of blood, grinned.

'Whaddya think, Henry?'

'I thought you'd found yet another epicene swish, Basil, but this boy looks tough –'

'But tender, yeah?' He laughed.

'I like bodies better than minds, Baz, and I like bodies with no mind at all better than anything else in the world.'

'If all I'd wanted was flesh, Wotton, I'd've gone to a butcher or a meat rack –'

'Yes, well, whatever other things you can accuse my mother of being, a pimp isn't one of them.'

But it was Baz who was agitated now, who paced about from screen to screen, before heading over to where Wotton stood by the windowsill. 'Your mother remains incredibly helpful, and very understanding... and as for him, *he's* interested in my work, *he* wants to help. He's unashamed – not like us. He belongs to a totally new generation, the first gay generation to come out of the shadows. That's what I've wanted to get with this –' he

gestured towards the monitors – ‘that would be perfect.’

‘Unashamed? *Gay*? What the fuck’re you talking about?’

‘Of being a faggot, Wotton. A queer, a bum boy, an iron-bloody-hoof. Of that. And in your case, as a result, of being married to a Duke’s daughter who you treat like a convenience store. That.’

Wotton, despite his snobbery and his affectation, liked nothing better than a proper joust. ‘Baz, Baz,’ he cooed, ‘our proximity makes it essential that we be strangers to each other, Batface and I.’

‘Whatever. Perhaps you can’t see the hypocrisy you’re mired in, but don’t you have some responsibility for your wife’s feelings?’

‘Don’t be absurd, I’ve never misled Batface for an instant concerning my sexual inclinations.’

‘Maybe not – so I s’pose she just goes along with the fraud because she finds it perfectly natural. But I want a different kind of relationship. I want truth and beauty and honesty, but the world wants to destroy that kind of love between men. I think Dorian could be these things for me – but he’d probably mean nothing to you.’

‘That’s too many buts,’ Wotton sneered. ‘Better stick to buns – *Dorian*’s buns. What is this, Baz – in love with *Dorian*, are we?’

To Wotton’s surprise Baz shovelled up this facetiousness with great seriousness. ‘I dunno. Y’know what I’m like, Henry, always getting hurt, and Dorian already seems to sense this. He’s sweet and charming and naïve on the surface, but I expect he’ll turn out to be a vicious little bitch like all the others.’

‘He’s here now, isn’t he? Not that I give a shit, it’s just that if he’s making you into this much of a bore I’d better leave – it must be serious.’

‘Yeah, well, serious enough for the work, at any rate.’ Baz waved at the televisions. ‘It’s called *Cathode Narcissus*, and it’ll be the last video installation I make. The whole fucking medium is dead. Fuck, it was *born* decadent, like all the rest of conceptual art. First it was Nauman, then Viola and me, now it’s finished. From now on, conceptual art will degenerate to the level of crude autobiography, a global village sale of shoddy, personal memorabilia for which video installations like this will be the TV adverts.’

Wotton, grinning, stoked up his friend’s little furnace of ire. ‘What, with special offers on bottled piss, canned shit and vacuum-packed blood –?’

‘That’s all been done already!’ Baz expostulated. ‘When I was with Warhol –’

‘When I was working at the Factory with Drella – with Andee...’ Wotton was a superb mimic, a master of the accented caricature, and his Baz was a whining, preening, mid-Atlantic hipster. ‘Well, *maan*, and Billy Name and Edie and – oh gosh! Doc-tor Robert – well, we all *did speed*, you know... It was part of the scene, *maan*.’

More unexpectedly, Basil Hallward could do Henry Wotton just as well, exaggerating the lisp, turning up the affectation as if it were the contrast knob on one of his television monitors. ‘We ate at Harry’s Bar and then wepaired to the Gwitti Palace, where I quaffed quails’ eggs from her carefully coifed cunt –’

And he would’ve gone on and on and on with this, had it not been for Wotton breaking

back in with another impersonation – complete with acoustic air guitar – of Baz doing Bowie doing ‘Andy Warhol’: ‘Baz Hallward looks a scream, standing on his silver screen/ Baz Hallward looks a scream, can’t tell him apart at all, at all, at all...’

In a cubbyhole of a bedroom hidden behind successive dark, membranous curtains, the object of Baz’s affections and his latest muse lay, only just now awoken from the easeful slumber occasioned by weed and wine and mutual wanking. Dorian Gray had been seduced thus far by Baz Hallward but no further. He’d been impressed by his connections and excited by his air of debauchery. He’d been beguiled by Baz’s suggestion that he model for this video installation, but there were limits. So during the videoing it was weed not coke, and afterwards he let Baz take him in hand, not mouth or arse. For now, Dorian was just young enough to want to go to bed with his elders out of a sense of being flattered by their attentions.

Dorian could hear the two older men hooting and railing. He stirred himself and thought perhaps ought to find out what was going on, but it was difficult to get motivated and so much more pleasant to lie in a tatty pile of sheets and blankets, stretching luxuriously and admiring the way the tendons and arteries writhed in his own wrists, or the way his brown legs – twined in white cotton – assumed this or that angle.

Liquid blobs of light shimmered on the wall above Dorian’s tawny head. On the bedside table stood a half-empty glass of whisky and beside that was a metallic cigarette lighter, and beside that a pair of nail-clippers. Like the rest of the studio the cubbyhole was oak-panelled. Here and there a bronze-effect spotlight had been insensitively inserted. In each of these reflective surfaces Dorian Gray sought himself out, while lip-synching to the narcissistic soundtrack that played in his empty head. ‘She’s a model and she’s looking good, I’d like to take her home it’s understood... She plays hard to get, she smiles from time to time... It only takes a cam-er-a to make her mine...’

The cackling voices of the two older men in the studio kept cutting into Dorian’s reverie. So, in one sinuous movement, he arose from the bed. From the floor Dorian retrieved white boxer shorts; he pulled these on and then sheathed them in white chinos which he fastened with a snake-buckled belt. *Cathode Narcissus* was no contrivance; this young man moved with the performer’s zeal which assumes an observer even when none is present.

Dorian jived a little as he pulled on a T-shirt. He began to pay attention to the voices in the next room. ‘She’s a one’ – Wotton was in raconteur mode – ‘a real card. Have you seen her back room?’

‘Yeah, man.’ Baz was only half-listening.

‘It’s worth scoring off her just to see it – row upon row of new clothes, all still wrapped in polythene. Then electrical goods stacked up – all still in their boxes. She’s even got five fucking Corby trouser presses – showed them to me with great pride.’

‘Yeah, I know, man.’

‘It really proves that drug-dealing should be legal – not, you understand, for any of the usual reasons, but simply because the likes of Honey don’t know how to dispose of such outrageous profits tastefully...’ Baz Hallward may have heard about the trouser presses, but Dorian hadn’t. He wanted to know more, and to see who was describing them. On bare feet he padded towards the drawl, which continued, ‘I don’t suppose you have anything much

more than a list to contribute to this shopping expedition, eh Baz? Everything gone on trying to pump yourself up enough to satisfy little *Dorian*, hmm?’

Dorian stood in the doorway, swivel-hipped, blank-faced, floppy-fringed. Wotton fell silent, feeling new eyes upon him. The two older men turned to regard this Adonis, and in their heated appraisal and Dorian’s cool appraisal and their more fervid reappraisal of this and his more frigid reappraisal of that was the most exacting and timeless of triangulations: Baz would always love Dorian, Wotton would never love Dorian but would want him consistently, and Dorian would betray Baz and would never love anyone at all.

‘I’m incredibly sorry’ – Wotton, misinterpreting Dorian’s disgusted pout, began secreting charm – ‘you must have heard that. I didn’t mean anything by it at all – I only said it because I was hoping to upset Baz, I do so like him when he’s aggrieved... I’m sure that if your association persists you’ll soon find out how comical it can be to wind him up until he positively twangs with stress and indignation...’ Wotton advanced, his hand out, his many flopping cuffs adding to the cavalier impression ‘*Ça suffit*. You must be Dorian Gray. I understand you know my mother; I’m Henry Wotton.’

‘D’you mean Phyllis Hawtree?’ Dorian took the hand, held it for second while exerting no pressure and would’ve let it fall, but it held on to him.

‘Quite so,’ Wotton snapped. ‘She will insist on changing her name every time she changes her bed partner.’

‘I’m sorry...’ Dorian floundered ‘... I’ve just woken up... Um, yeah, I’ve... Your mother –’

‘Warned you against me in no uncertain terms, told you of profligacy, drug addiction, sodomy, and even more exotic vices? Am I right? Of course I am.’ Wotton, still retaining Dorian’s hand, led him to the centre of the room and drew him round so that they faced each other, like dancers frozen in a minuet.

Baz smiled at this exchange in a twisted way, while Dorian summoned himself to play his part. ‘No no, she said you were a brilliant –’

‘Mistake? I daresay I am, but we weren’t talking of me, we were discussing you, your hopes, fears and most intimate, most quavering desires. Tell them to me. Now. All of them. But make it snappy!’

‘Wotton –’ Baz began a teeny admonition.

‘“Woot-ton,” he cries, like a fucking maiden aunt with a maidenhead the size of Maidenhead! But I mean it! I want to know your intentions now you’ve been exiled from the groves of academe. Your willingness to associate with my philanthropic mother suggests that you’re well on your way to becoming a man of the people, *Mister Gray*.’ He let Dorian’s hand fall as if the very idea were contaminating. ‘Or have I got it wrong, do you intend devoting yourself to Baz’s bizarre art fetishism? He’s been showing me *Cathode Narcissus*.’

‘Isn’t it fantastic –’

‘Fantastic, absolutely. Quite fantastic that any medium – let alone one as shallow and transparent as Baz’s – should be allowed to traduce *your* beauty.’

‘I dunno.’ Dorian moved off, gifting the two older men a view of his feral prowl. ‘I try not to be hung up on the looks thing –’

‘Hung up? “Looks thing”? I reel with the impact of these heresies.’ And, as if choreographing

such a reel, Wotton pivoted, stooped, yanked up his Scotch bottle from the floor, uncorked it with a 'plop', hoisted it to his mouth, drained it, gasped, lit a cigarette, then continued, 'You should remember, *Mister Gray*, a nude body requires no explanation, unlike a naked intellect.'

Dorian shrugged, unimpressed. 'People are always coming on to me about acting or modelling or whatever. But I think it'd be chronically dull. You may think your mother's ridiculous, but there's nothing funny about the Youth Homeless Project she's fundraising for.'

'There's certainly nothing funny about *youth*' – Wotton smiled, replete, for he loved a good feed line – 'a *youth* is the one thing worth hanging on to.'

'It's not much, but I feel I'm doing something. I go into this place in Soho three afternoons a week and talk to the guys there about art. It's as good a use as any for an art history degree, and I get to meet some amazing characters... Even if I'm just turning them on to a different way of seeing things, surely that's worthwhile?'

But Wotton wasn't thinking of value judgements – he was still feeding. 'Art for the underdog, eh? Thrown like a titbit from your high table. Pity they can't jump up enough to reach it –'

'Look, Wotton,' blurted Baz, who'd been agitating to get in, 'd'you wanna sit on the terrace and have a coffee with Dorian, or what?'

'Terrace? Coffee? We're not in fucking *Naples*, y'know –'

'I know. What I'm trying to say is I want to get on with the editing and sequencing, Dorian's moving into a new pad and this installation is the centrepiece for it, right? Now I don't object to you two rapping but it'd be cool if you gave me some space...' And as if responding to the doggy way Wotton and Dorian were sniffing around each other, Baz Hallward began to shoo them out of the studio. 'C'mon – scat! I'll bring you some coffee out. I'll come to Honey's with you in a bit, Wotton; for now, keep the client entertained.'

Outside in the garden, Wotton took Dorian's arm. He could do this – casually take someone's arm. It was odd that such a caustic character should have such an easy physicality – but no odder than the garden itself, for here, as in the street, the dense and overgrown foliage was oppressively, queerly diverse. The presence of so many different plants and flowers from so many different regions of the world would in and of itself have been disorienting, but since they were all simultaneously in flower and in fruit, the effect was deranging.

Not that Dorian Gray noticed; he allowed Wotton to lead him by the arm into this upsetting thicket. They paused in front of a carnation and Wotton pointed out the peculiar green shade of the flowers. 'My mother cultivated plants before she moved on to humanity,' he drawled. 'I'm not altogether sure which is the higher life form.' With a flourish he lit yet another cigarette and blew brown scrolls of smoke among the green leaves and brilliant blossoms. In the mid-distance traffic rumbled, while at their feet insects pulsed and chafed and buzzed. 'You see that man?' Wotton snapped after a while.

'Sorry?'

'There...' His naked arm – cuffs still flapping – hailed the sky overhead, and the tip of his fag pinpointed a window five storeys up in a block of flats next to the garden. 'You see the jiggling man?'

‘He’s more swaying back and forth like a metronome,’ Dorian corrected him. And it was a better description of the odd sight, this ordinary man in a V-neck sweater and an open-neck shirt, hands stuck in his pockets, rocking sideways, from foot to foot.

‘He does it all day,’ Wotton continued, ‘and all night... and in the early morning. I once came out here at five-thirty a.m. just to make sure he hadn’t knocked off. I’m convinced that it’s he who’s really meting out the minutes. He’ll probably cease when the apocalypse begins. I call him the jiggling man, and I suggest that if you want to dub someone “metronome man” you find your own fucking loony!’

‘Actually,’ Dorian said, ‘that’s not something I want –’

‘Ah, exactly, but what is it that you *do* want?’ Wotton rounded on him. ‘D’you know? Do any of us? I’ve a terribly fey friend who swears that he isn’t really a faggot at all, it’s just that he has these vivid dreams of being buggered – which, as we all know, is perfectly normal, even for the most red-blooded of heterosexuals – and when he awakes he finds it terribly hard to shake them off. Now what, *Mister* Gray, d’you say to that?’

It was unclear whether Dorian understood Wotton at all, or comprehended him only too well. ‘I’m happy enough...’ he replied. ‘I’ve only –’

‘Only what?’ This was another of Wotton’s myriad techniques of seduction, the continual interruption as a means of making up another’s mind. ‘Only spent the one white night with poor, washed-up Baz, who’s not so much hip as a hip-fucking-replacement? I congratulate you. Did he seduce you with potions and rub unguents on you?’

‘We smoked a bit of grass... I’m not sure about hard –’

‘Hard what? Hard talk? Hard cocks? Hard labour? Hard drugs? Hardly anything? You should remember, my young friend, if you don’t know what you want to do, at least do something. There’s no other cure for indecisiveness.’

‘Henry,’ Dorian demurred, ‘look, we’ve only just met, I don’t know why it is you’re being so intense... Actually, that’s what your mother said about you, that you’re a brilliant talker. But I don’t want to be cured of anything, any more than I’m obsessed by looks – least of all my own – they’re such a superficial thing.’

‘You say that Dorian, you say that, but we are in an age when appearances matter more and more. Only the shallowest of people won’t judge by them.’

There was a terrace, of sorts, by the door to the studio – if you call twelve bird-shat-upon-Portland paving slabs a terrace, which in London most do. This Wotton and Dorian now regained, still arm in arm, and both of them felt as if the interlude in the bijou jungle had been significant, although in Wotton’s case this was partly because it was the longest walk he had taken in several weeks.

It could have been a Neapolitan terrace, because there was a small, round, metal table and two folding metal chairs. Baz had managed to assemble a tray of coffee, complete with matching white china cups and saucers, sugar bowl, cream jug. The whole ensemble was ridiculously elegant and bright in the dull, oppressive afternoon. They scraped their seats to sit, and Wotton was mother, while Dorian became his vain daughter, twirling a teaspoon between his fingers, so that he might admire the way his face ballooned then hollowed, ballooned then hollowed. ‘I’ve no idea what I’m going to do,’ he said after a few slurps. ‘I’ve come down from Oxford with an indifferent degree and too much money – hardly a recipe

for success.'

'*Au contraire*,' said Wotton, 'if you've got it – and you have it all – you must use it, and you must use it all. Before this jaded century is utterly exhausted, at least one individual should've pleased it thoroughly. I'm prepared to be your pandar, I'll take you under my ample wing...' at last he noticed the bloodied, flapping cuffs and began to button them '... today!'

'Today?' Dorian saw the blood and prevaricated, but the people who had warned him about people like Wotton should, in turn, have themselves been warned about. 'Look, I'm – I'm not sure, I said I'd drop in at this reception your mother is giving – for her donors.'

'Fine.' He was not to be deflected. 'I'll accompany you.'

'If you're sure...' Dorian warmed to the idea; Wotton might be disturbing, but at least he wasn't boring. Wotton might want to fuck him, but at least he didn't make Dorian into an object of veneration as Basil Hallward did.

Baz, who at this point emerged from the studio, and having overheard the last exchange, snapped at Wotton, 'I thought you were going to Honey's, to score?'

'I am' – Wotton was unperturbed – 'I shall go *en route* to the reception and take Dorian with me; I doubt he's seen five trouser presses in one place before –'

'But I need Dorian for the sequencing.'

'Really? I thought *you* were coming with me to score,' Wotton sneered, 'but anyway, Baz, no buts, I warned you about them.'

'Whatever you say, Wotton – besides, I s'pose I can do without you, Dorian; *Cathode Narcissus* is about done –'

'I want to see it!' And the way Dorian rose from the table and headed impetuously for the door was a reminder for Baz and Wotton of how much younger he was than them. As if they needed it.

Inside the dark studio the nine monitors were sharply outlined. Across their faces, hissing with static, the fluid images of Dorian presented a cascade of motion. There was a soundtrack as well, an insistent thrumming beat entwined with a breathy fluting. Dorian was transfixed for a few moments, but then he moved closer and began to sway in time with his own televisual images. Nine naked Dorians and one clothed. In synchrony, youth and the images of youth waltzed to the heavenly and eternal music of self-consciousness.

'Well, whaddya reckon?' Baz blurted out from the shadows, and Dorian turned to see him and Wotton, their faces soiled with lust.

'He's absolutely superb,' Wotton answered, 'and this afternoon has become remarkable since I encountered your faun.'

'I think I've caught him at just the right point –'

'Oh, indeed you have, Baz, he's like a ripe grape dusted with yeast.' Wotton made as if to pluck one of the monitors and eat it.

Dorian felt uncomfortable with the way the older men were speaking; was it at cross-purposes, or did they regard him and the video installation as entirely interchangeable? 'How long will these tapes last, Baz?' he asked.

'It's hard to say... Certainly years, if not decades, and by then they can be transferred to

new tapes, and so on – for ever, I guess.’

‘So, these’ – Dorian gestured – ‘will remain young for ever, while I grow old, then die?’

‘Yeah, well,’ Baz snorted derisively. ‘You can’t copy bodies – yet.’

‘I wish it was the other way round,’ Dorian said, and to support the throwaway nature of the remark, he picked up a black windcheater which was slung over a chair and headed for the door, calling over his shoulder, ‘You coming, Henry?’

‘Er... yuh.’ Wotton stirred himself, as did Baz.

‘What about the piece, Dorian?’ he pleaded. ‘I need to do two more recordings for the soundtrack. I *must* do them.’

‘Well, if you must.’ Dorian’s whole tone had hardened since he’d seen the installation. ‘Personally I’m jealous of the bloody thing – it’s already hours younger than me.’

Baz took this as the acceptable petulance of the patron who’s also a model. He smoothed his hair, hooking strands behind his ears, and began moving from monitor to monitor, switching them off. ‘As soon as the recordings are done,’ he told Dorian, ‘and the sequencing and editing are finished, I’ll bring *Cathode Narcissus* round to your apartment and set it up. Then you can do whatever you want to your several selves. Scratch their eyes out, or jerk off with them. Whatever.’

‘OK.’ Dorian paused in the doorway, and Baz, thinking of him at dawn – screaming with delight, trussed in a sheet, his erect cock arched like bow, a pearl of his semen on Baz’s tongue – couldn’t play it cool any longer.

‘Come tomorrow, Dorian, please, at around noon?’

‘All right, Baz.’ And withdrawing the psychic knife from between Baz’s ribs without troubling to twist it, Dorian left.

* * *

It was, apparently, a tactical withdrawal, as if he wanted his rivals to fight over him forthwith. This they obliged him by doing: ‘For fuck’s fucking sake, Wotton!’ Baz howled. ‘How long are you gonna go on shooting me down like this?’

‘Only as long as you go on shooting up at my expense’ – Wotton was straightening his tie, patting down his clothes – ‘and poncing this studio off my mother.’

‘I like him,’ Baz near screeched.

‘And I like him too.’

‘You don’t like *anything*, Wotton, you’re poison running in the gutter.’ Baz walked over to Wotton and taking a wad of currency from his jeans pocket, peeled ten notes off and stuffed them into the top pocket of his friend’s overcoat. ‘Get us one of each, willya?’ he snarled.

‘What’s this – in funds, are we Baz?’

‘Dorian paid me for it – for the piece. Cash down.’

‘Oh really?’ Wotton sniggered unpleasantly. ‘Something makes me think he’ll have to go on paying indefinitely.’ And without waiting for Baz’s reply, the vile fop turned on his heel and departed.

Henry Wotton drove his five-litre Jaguar around central London as if he were at the wheel of a powered lawnmower, and the city itself but a rough oblong of lawn, to the rear of a romantically ruinous country house. A lawn planted with stucco models of famous metropolitan buildings, perhaps one-tenth scale, between which he piloted his vehicle at once lazily and wildly. He seemed to have no concern for either the Highway Code or the sensibilities of other drivers. Indeed, if there was the remotest awareness of a danger, it was merely that he might tip over the ha-ha.

Dorian Gray understood this about his new admirer as soon as he buckled himself into the car's cream interior. Clearly, to be in Henry Wotton's Jaguar was to be in Henry Wotton's capricious and cruel embrace. At first he stole the occasional sidelong glance at his chauffeur who guided the car with three fingers of his left hand on the lower rim of the steering wheel while trailing his cigarette hand out of the window and lolling his reddish curls against the headrest. But soon Dorian surrendered to the lurches, surges and drifts of the big car. He began peering at the detritus on the car's floor, a veritable midden of discarded material from which much information on the Wotton culture could, undoubtedly, be gained. Pop music purred from the car radio, as if a sonic brook were running between the two men.

The car was at the traffic lights at the top of Exhibition Road when Dorian exhibited his first find, a brace of opera programmes. 'D'you like the opera?'

'My wife does,' Wotton drawled. 'My main pleasure at Glyndebourne is counting the homosexuals in the audience and seeing if they outnumber those on the stage.'

'What about these?' Dorian held up a flyer for a stock car race at the White City Stadium. An old drug wrap was stuck to it.

'I adore destructive spectacles; they are the last refuge of the creative.' The lights changed and a loafer came down on the accelerator; the big car gathered its massy inertia under its whale's back of a bonnet, and then slid smoothly past the Albert Memorial. By the time the Jag reached the bridge over the Serpentine it was travelling at sixty. It swiped to the left, then to the right, weaving between two lumbering vans, before tucking into the chicane that led up towards Lancaster Gate.

Dorian knew intuitively that it was profoundly uncool to mention Wotton's driving, but he couldn't help himself. 'How d'you manage to get away with it?' he asked. 'You had no way of knowing if there was a car in the oncoming lane.'

'I have an aerial view, Dorian. I see the whole situation from above.'

'Are you serious?'

'Never more so.'

'But how? It's not possible.'

'I don't expect *you* to comprehend it' – Wotton peeked slyly out at him from under his four brown lenses – 'but my father buggered me relentlessly when I was a young child. While he was doing it I found myself becoming curiously disembodied, floating up to the ceiling of the room where my child-self lay as he heaved and panted. I occupied this point of view – in the

region of the cornicing, although occasionally revolving around the chandelier – on a regular basis between the ages of five and eight. For so long, in fact, that I have retained it into adulthood.

‘You, my dear young friend,’ he continued, ‘are condemned to a seventy-millimetre, windscreen view of the city. You are a mere corpuscle, travelling along these arteries, whereas I have a surgeon’s perspective. I float above it all, and see Hyde Park as but a green gangrenous fistula in London’s grey corpse!’ And with this flourish he yanked on the handbrake, for they had arrived in Marylebone High Street.

Henry Wotton adored drugs and he adored buying them. He understood, of course, that the aesthetics of drug-dealing left much to be desired. This painfully *petit bourgeois* little flat, marooned eight storeys above Marylebone High Street, its chintz-wrapped windows looking out over the Westway flyover, was no mud-bricked stall in the walls of an ancient citadel. No, this was no caravanserai, or souk, and nor was Honey – a stringy blonde, in loose white smock and tight black leggings – a noble spice merchant, with a scented beard and indigo robes. Her conversation with her customer displayed no elaborate courtesies, nor alluded to prices with great subtlety, hiding them in invocations of the Prophet. On the contrary, the two of them sat rapping in front of a glass-topped coffee table, upon which she unceremoniously weighed up the product using jewellers’ scales.

‘Yes,’ said Wotton, ‘I remember that fifty quid owing, but I sorted it out with you the day before yesterday.’

‘Nah,’ Honey sniffed, ‘your mate came by and racked up a g on your slate yesterday evening.’

‘Christ – I’ve got to take more drugs than I want just to keep up with that bastard. All right, here’s a hundred and seventy.’

Dorian turned from his careful examination of a modular wall rack, which contained compartments for picture books, pot plants, pen pots and potpourri, to see Wotton laying notes down on the table, while Honey poured powders into envelopes and neatly folded them.

‘Not these two.’ Wotton stayed her hand, took two of the envelopes, deftly married their contents, withdrew a small capsule from his capacious pocket, unscrewed it, poured in a tiny dun cascade, screwed it up again, and dropped it in a waistcoat pocket; the drug wraps were tucked in another. All these actions were neat, precise, focused. They spoke of concomitant thought processes – fold, wrap, tap, snort, shoot, walk, pay – going on in the Wotton psyche while the sweat simmered on his brow. ‘Right,’ Wotton rapped, ‘that’s that. But before we go *chère Miel*, my young friend would love to see your splendid collection.’

Honey rose, and, gums smacking, nails scratching, she led them out of the room, down a short corridor stinking of air freshener and into a back bedroom. The entire room had been crammed full of stuff. On three freestanding Dexion shelving units reposed irons, televisions, stereo units, tape recorders, kettles, food blenders, and all – as Wotton had said – still in the packaging. There were also rails hung with polythene-wrapped clothes, and many many stuffed animals. Honey garbled a wired commentary on this materialistic superfluity, while massaging the shoulders of a trouser press. ‘Not that I need all of ’em, yuh, but these Corby ones only have three pressing settings, whereas these Danish ones have five...’ While she

rattled on, Wotton felt for Dorian's hand and took it, a gesture the younger man found simultaneously tender and subversive.

Back in the car, as they barrelled down Park Lane, Wotton yanked the little capsule out, fiddled with it, stuck it up his nose, honked noisily, repeated the fiddle, then passed it to Dorian. 'Just hold it up your nostril and sniff – go on.'

'I'm not sure –'

'Go on, I insist. It would be bad manners not to.'

'Oh, all right.' And he did, he sniffed. Dorian had decided to absorb as much of Henry Wotton as possible through whichever membrane presented itself. He knew his own limitation: he had money but no real style. His upbringing had been here and there, on the fringes of film sets, in foreign hotels, in transit, sitting at tables with hired, pan-European staff. It had given him polish but no shine. He lacked the deeper lustre of someone like Wotton, who by remaining *in situ* had acquired cultural verdigris.

The Jaguar coasted to a halt at some traffic lights. The stereo was cranked right up and belting out 'Too Drunk to Fuck' by the Dead Kennedys. It was amazing that the duo weren't in the process of being righteously busted, so flagrant were their activities, but through the tinted windows, surrounding drivers could be seen, stalled in every sense, eyes front, sitting mindlessly, eating a late lunch out of their noses.

'Hnghf – oof! That stings.' Dorian passed the capsule back.

'But you're not losing your nasal virginity?'

'What?' Dorian near shouted, frantically rubbing his nose.

Wotton killed the Dead Kennedys. 'You've done gear before?'

'Gear?'

'Horse, scag, smack, H, *he-ro-in*.'

'Oh, I thought that was charlie.'

'I always add the merest whisper of smack to take the edge off. The merest.'

Dorian changed tack. He pulled down the sunshade to reveal a vanity mirror, and spoke while observing his own pupils. It was as if he'd been snorting vanity mixed with cocaine and heroin. 'I thought you liked Baz.'

'I love him. He's a fucking genius.'

'But back there?'

'I love him, but he's becoming sentimental – that's bad. That means he isn't *simpatico* – and that's worse. That I can't abide. Worse still, he repeats himself – all that avant-garde bullshit, the hamster wheel of the Manhattan art world, how he scored with Burroughs on Avenue B, and "William" threatened the spade with a sword-stick – you've heard all that, yuh?'

'Well, yes.'

'That was me.' Wotton flashed an unexpected smile. 'With the fucking sword-stick, you fo – although it wasn't New York, it was Marseille. I don't *do* America.'

Wotton parked the Jag in Savile Row and they walked around the corner into Piccadilly. The afternoon heat was fierce, so Dorian took off his jacket, but Wotton ploughed on in his overcoat regardless. Dorian resolved to be measured for a three-piece suit as soon as possible.

The charity reception for the Youth Homeless Project was being held in the restaurant of a cavernous hotel which had grown seedy and unprofitable in the recession. Its grey flanks were pitted, its reception rooms smelly and its staff surlier than ever. 'Naturally we're extremely late,' Wotton declaimed, leaving his coat in the cloakroom, 'but then punctuality is the fucking thief of time, burgling precious seconds which we could've spent getting higher.' The woman behind the counter scowled at him, and he smiled back while handing her a pound note.

The interior of the restaurant was vernal in the extreme: great tubs full of blooms stood about, connected by troughs full of shrubbery. The carpet was floral-patterned, the drapes the same, the lighting in this painforest was noonday equatorial. From between two pointy-shouldered PR girls – their dumpling bodies unsuitable for such sharp suiting, their blonde sausage curls and retroussé noses making them altogether spaniel-like – came Phyllis Hawtree. She set off gamely towards Dorian and her son across the trackless waste of carpeting, but the distance was so great they had plenty of time to appreciate quite how mad and ethereal she appeared, with her coiffure so stiff it vibrated with each arthritic step, and her knee and arm both surgically braced. As she drew nearer they could see that her crevice cheek was so powdered that a careless air kisser might find themselves tumbling into her face.

'My mother,' Wotton whispered, 'is an intelligent woman who views the distressing of the social fabric with the very real emotion she withholds from all those around her. Like Schopenhauer, the more she loves mankind, the less she loves men.' Dorian was going to say he thought this was unfair, but it was too late, he was caught in her bony talons.

'Oh Dorian,' she fluted, 'I'm so glad you're here, there are so many people who want to meet you.' She ignored her son and he took this as his familial due, merely following in her wake as she led Dorian into the throng of superannuated debs, professional faggots and off-the-peg suits – a flat company leavened only by a handful of the requisite donkey-jacketed roll-up smokers (just as a charity event for multiple sclerosis sufferers would have its wheelchair users, or for sickle-cell anaemia its blacks).

Eventually, after traversing the trench between two buffets, where glistening kiwi fruit cascaded and miniature sausage rolls were piled up like some novel form of ammunition, they reached their target. He was a florid politico in a suit with wide chalk stripes and a yellow waistcoat. He had an impressive lick of chocolate hair over a bulbous brow, and those out-of-control eyebrows which only men firmly within the British Establishment can carry off.

'Dorian,' Phyllis cooed, 'this is David Hall, the Member for Bexleyheath, he's on the Housing Committee. David, this is Dorian Gray, the young man I told you about, the one who's putting the shelter on a computer... And this is my son,' she added as an afterthought. Then she evaporated, leaving only the stench of her perfume.

'Are you working voluntarily at the shelter, Mr Gray?' Hall's accent was as fruity as the buffet.

'Dorian, please – and yes, there wouldn't be money to pay me, and I've no need of it anyway.'

'What're you doing, exactly?'

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