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Oliver February

Strange Turnings

Reflective Essay and Creative Work Submitted as Part of the Master's Degree in Creative Writing at the University of the Witwatersrand 2019 Oliver February

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Reflective Essay

Introduction

In the proposal for my master's project I set out some coordinates for what I intended to write, coordinates that I now think can be grouped into two categories: those which have been useful and those which have been restrictive. The former category loosely corresponds to the type of narrator I wanted to create, the latter to the themes and structures I had planned to use. A third category is the stylistic qualities I was not aware of beforehand, but which began to emerge and become visible, largely through the comments made by others in the master's workshops. Although what I intended to do with narration has generally been productive, the stories I ended up writing did inevitably drift from this a little. And while I found the themes and structures I said I would use became more and more difficult to sustain, there are some fragments of these that are still present in the final collection of short stories. These small differences and similarities are, I find, just as interesting and revealing as the large ones. Because I did not (or could not) plan for the observations about the stories that emerged throughout the course (the third category), these are completely unexpected and are, perhaps, the most interesting difference on which to reflect.

Narration

My proposal states that "the central focus of my collection will be a narrative consciousness, and the central focus of my project will be on successfully creating this consciousness." This has remained true. The proposal goes on to state that "my narrator is anxious, paranoid, deeply reticent, cynical, and resentful." Most of this is also still true, although the emphasis and combination of characteristics has, inevitably, changed a little I think. By far the most significant characteristic that my narrator has come to demonstrate is obsession. Perhaps his most representative moment in when he thinks: "I am terribly concerned that I haven't worried about this enough."

The resentment and cynicism are still there, but they are not the focus. And, as it turns out, one of the most significant characteristics that have come to light about this character is a kind of delight or joy in the use of language and in his attempt to use language to capture the obsessive nature of his reality.

Maybe one of the reasons for this is that other characters have not been as important to this narrator as was originally proposed. Most of my stories feature another character, but not all of these characters are as significant or as fully realised as those in the earliest written stories. The idea of thwarted connection with another character has recurred through many of the stories, but it is not as central as I wrote that it would be in the proposal, or at least the representation of a connection being thwarted is not always the main focus of a story. Far more emphasis is placed on the inner life of the narrator and the emotion and humour of his contradictions and self-deceptions. This is quite refreshing: it creates a more likable and sympathetic character, I hope.

Themes and Structure

Originally, I wrote that my stories would dramatize "the effects of a global, neoliberal culture and of the Anthropocene." These were the themes I hoped to consider through my fiction, partly because they interested me and I thought they would result in some interesting stories, and largely because I thought that they fitted well with the structure that I thought all my stories would have: that of two characters walking around the built or natural environment. But I began to realise that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to write fiction while consciously trying to illustrate a few unified thematic ideas through that fiction. Fiction, at least in my experience, is not always the same as an idea. After a while I realised I had little to no interest in dramatizing neoliberal culture, or the Anthropocene.

The difficulty, even impossibility, of consciously keeping certain themes in mind is an interesting one, if only because it helps illuminate a general problem that I have been struggling with throughout the process of writing this thesis. The problem is this: whenever I write fiction and I know exactly what it is that I want to say, or exactly what I am doing, whenever I write with a certain theme in mind in other words, then I feel that what I am writing is not very interesting.

It is difficult to articulate exactly why fiction written like this does not seem to work, but it has something to with the connection between creativity, improvisation and unconscious or semi-conscious thought. For writing to be exciting I believe that is generally needs to do something unexpected with language and there is no way I can surprise my own linguistic expectations if all I am doing is taking a theme or idea and then making up some image or situation that illustrates this idea. If I am writing about philosophical or sociological ideas then I might as well be writing philosophy or sociology.

This is not to say that writing only has aesthetic value and that it cannot be used socially or politically. If creative writing is partly a kind of semi-conscious improvisation then it is quite possible that some part of the writer's own socio-political experience will be part of the process of creation and end up in the finished product. It is just that the formal requirements of the writing come first. Furthermore, if all the technical aspects of writing are given primacy, then the writing is likely to be more open to interpretation by a reader than if it had been written with some didactic thematic message in mind. This is because the writer will not have tried to consciously manipulate the reader into reading in any particular way in order to understand a specific message.

To put this slightly differently, I would say that my writing cannot be validated by recourse to some other, prior, thematic meaning. If the significance of a piece of writing comes mostly from its themes, then the writing itself does not really have its own significance. Creative writing has to validate itself, or at least mine does. The significance of the writing should come from its formal originality[1]. It should come from how it uses rhythm, whether this comes from the pattern of stress and unstressed syllables, or from the modulation of syntactic structures, or at a broader level of the paragraph or the chapter. Writing can also gain its strength from tone, from the kind of voice it uses and the attitude this suggests and from texture, by which I mean the precision with which it realises what it describes. In my writing I became increasingly interested in the syntactic rhythm of long sentences, in creating an obsessive, fastidious tone and in how to represent the texture of my narrator's inner life and the sensuousness of his thoughts. This is why I quickly found the themes I had intended to use fell away from the writing I was producing as part of my thesis.

Something that took somewhat longer to jettison was the proposed structure which I had set out as I started to write, but slowly, partially, this structure was eventually jettisoned. In my proposal I wrote that each of my stories "will consist of a conversation between the narrator and another character" and that "the stories will follow the rhythm and elliptical patterning of the walks in which the characters are engaged." Besides being rather dense (what is the elliptical patterning of a walk?) this structure allowed me a basic formula with which to write my stories. At first this was quite useful: instead of being faced with an entirely blank page, I always had some scaffolding around which to build my stories. But eventually it became a crutch and then a burden.

As an analogy for wandering thought, walking is useful but limited. Walking was used as a device that allowed meandering contemplation by writers as early as Jane Austen, and already, as she refined her technique, Austen began to dispense with its artificial staginess. James Wood compares an early Austen heroine to a later one and observes that "where before Elizabeth had to roam outside to express her thoughts, Emma's thought arises in the most ordinary of domestic settings, among her puffs, powders, and biller-doux" ("Birth of Inwardness").

[1] An example of what I mean by formal originality can be found in the work of Lydia Davis, whose "A Second Chance" I discuss at length later in this essay. The length of Davis' stories often correspond to the length of a particular moment of her narrator's self-consciousness. This an example of how she uses a formal feature (length) in an unusual way: rather than stretching out her stories so that they are long enough to include more conventional elements like rising action or the description of a character's physical features she allows her material – often the workings of her mind – to dictate how the narrative form should take shape.

What I liked about the wondering/wandering homonym was that it allowed me to represent circular, obsessive thought, which is evident in the long, winding sentences that are present in my stories. However, the more I used the wondering/wandering device the less useful it became and the more gimmicky the connection between wondering and wandering seemed to grow. I was interested in representing thought free of the restrictions and requirements set upon it by everyday society and everyday fiction. It became clear, after some practices, that the device of walking was only one way to examine this interest and to escape the strictures of everyday society and a certain type of conventional fiction. The device became less and less useful.

It happened something like this. I would find some snippet of thought or language inspiring and then begin to write about it and form it into a story. Part of that forming consisted of forcing the story into the mould that was its shape as a walk and conversation shared between the narrator and someone else. This meant that I had to set the scene, give a backstory to at least one of these two people, explain how they knew each other, why they were on this walk, what the landscape around them was like, and how it changed.

As it turned out, I was not particularly interested in any of these things. I was interested in the narrator's mind and how to represent it in writing, which meant how to shape and distort thought in linguistically interesting ways. I was not interested in making things up at a situational level, only at a linguistic level.

The root of the problem was that I could not decide why one thing should happen instead of another. It all seemed incredibly artificial. If I was inventing things that happened, then I could invent anything and so the possibilities were endless. This became overwhelming. I just did not know why one thing was any more significant or had any more right to happen than one other thing. What is more, this overwhelming choice linked back to the suspicion I had discovered regarding themes: if I did make something up rather than some other thing, then the something I did make up must have some kind of thematic significance. It would have to have this significance in order to be chosen from the set of infinite possibilities, because I could see no technical, linguistic reason why one thing should happen instead of another.

In the end the entire structure of my stories came to seem forced because I felt obligated to intersperse descriptions of landscape and dialogue between the obsessive internal monologues in which I was really interested. One of the writers who has influenced my writing the most, Lydia Davis, was extremely helpful in showing the possibilities of fiction written outside of these restraints. In an interview Davis said the following about this aspect of her style:

> I am simply not interested, at this point, in creating narrative scenes between characters. Maybe I'm shying away from a certain artificiality that I perceive to be present in many such scenes as written … We all have an ongoing narrative inside our heads, the narrative that is spoken aloud if a friend asks a question. That narrative feels deeply natural to me. We also hang on to scraps of dialogue. Our memories don't usually serve us up whole scenes complete with dialogue. So I suppose I'm saying that I like to work from what a character is likely to remember, from a more interior place. ("An Interview")

I find Davis' observations deeply liberating, particularly her ideas about the artificiality of most narrative structures and the 'naturalism' (to use her suggestion) of the fragmentary narrative and dialogue going on inside our heads. Davis' forms are often very short, some no longer than a single line, but all of them have this kind of moving intellectual and emotional naturalism. What they do not have is the kind of realist rhythmic balance between internal and external narration.

To persist with the musical analogy: the rhythm that I found restrictive is very four-square, in the pejorative sense that Hans Von Bülow used that adjective of the first movement of Beethoven's Op. 27 Piano Sonata in E-flat major (Schiff). Von Bülow meant that Beethoven's phrases where all four bars long and this lack of variation did not have much artistic and improvisatory interest. In literary terms this kind of four-square rhythm is very common. Here is a slightly facetious example:

> "What are you talking about?" asked A.
>
> "A spitting buck," I said. "It's something that lives in the trees and spits on you as you walk underneath. If the spit lands on your hair then it starts to fall out"
>
> It was the day of the eclipse and she and I were walking along Albertina Sisulu Road near its south-eastern end where it is broad and tree-lined. It was spring so the pavement was shaded over with the tantalising lime-green of new oak leaves whose interstices where projecting thousands of little suns onto everything below.
>
> What is this really about, I thought? Why did she ask what I am talking about like that? When people ask, what are you talking about?, they are not really asking to know what you are talking about, in fact they are not really asking anything at all, what they are doing is warning you that what you are saying does not make sense or is unacceptable in some way.
>
> "Who told you about this?" she asked.
>
> "Some man came up to me once and told me he liked my hair but that I should watch out for the spitting buck. Then he told me all about it"

> As I was speaking the penumbra was slowly growing larger like a fingernail over the bulb of a torch light. Soon it the moon would cover the sun completely and we would be in complete shadow for a few minutes. We had said we would be home before that so we quickened our pace.
>
> I wondered what it was about my story that she found so objectionable? Was it not believable? It had really happened and how I said it was how I remembered it, so either there was a problem with my memory or there was something wrong with how I told a story. But which one was it?

In this short excerpt from one of my (otherwise unwritten) stories the rhythm I am talking about is slightly exaggerated, but it is nonetheless a good indication of the form. There is the kind of four-square balance between dialogue, external description and internal monologue. The different modes are very obviously distinct and the internal monologue is clearly signalled with markers like 'I thought' and 'I wondered'.

It is not that I find this kind of pattern necessarily clumsy, although it often is, and in this example it definitely is. It is possible to use it to build up tension by interspersing something ominous happening on one of the different levels while the other modes of narration run blithely on. In the above I tried to do this with the internal monologue and also, to some extent with the external description. It is just that I am not interested in doing this, just as I am not interested in how to create the illusion of time passing or in realist attention to deceptively arbitrary detail.

Like Davis, I am simply not interested in this kind of pattern, which is more theatrical or cinematic than literary, in my opinion. The difference of course is that in these media it is far more difficult to represent inner thought. What this suggests is that inner monologue is one of the things that fiction can do very well, and it is certainly something I find much more interesting than the kind of rhythmic patterns demonstrated above. In any case, I am far more interested in syntactic rhythm, which has the ability "to notate and reproduce the tiniest qualifications, hesitations, intermittences, affirmations and negations of being alive" (Wood "Madness and Civilisation"). I not interested in the tension created in the external world, but in the tension created by a very long modifying phrase placed before the subject and main verb of a sentence. Or I am interested in what a very short modifying phrase can accomplish, and what the difference is between this and the previous example. I am interested in obsession and how to represent it, for example by having one sentence correspond to one thought, so a very qualified, obsessive thought would be written as one long, hypotactic sentence.

It is not that I do not like the stories that are about walks that I have already written, or that I do not feel that they have a place in my project as a whole. I believe that they definitely do. Where all of these discoveries have lead me is back to my proposal and to my concern with writing a particular kind of narrator, one that I think is equally, or perhaps even better, served through syntax and internal monologue than through dialogue and landscape description.

Discoveries during the Writing Process

Many of the most interesting discoveries I made during this master's have been during the writing process and often through the suggestions of others in the writing workshops.

One of the most useful comments of all has been how my original plans had some resonance with the works of Thomas Bernhard. Not only has Bernhard influenced almost every other writer whom I have found useful (Sebald, Davis) but his technique of exaggeration and its use in representing obsession has been extremely valuable. Another useful element of Bernhard is his long sentences, which also tend to show obsession, but which often have a certain amount of clarity, and which are always absolutely grammatically correct. This is a style I have found very productive.

Of course, Bernhard led me to Lydia Davis and she has been the single most important influence on my work. Her stories dispense with named characters, traditional plots, conventional dialogue and thematic imagery, but they are full of moving inner life in spite, or perhaps because, of these absences. Here is one of her stories, quoted in full, that helps demonstrate this influence.

"A Second Chance"

> If only I had a chance to learn from my mistakes, I would, but there are too many things you don't do twice; in fact, the most important things are things you don't do twice, so you can't do them better the second time. You do something wrong, and see what the right thing would have been, and are ready to do it, should you have the chance again, but the next experience is quite different, and your judgment is wrong again, and though you are now prepared for this experience should it repeat itself, you are not prepared for the next experience. If only, for instance, you could get married at eighteen twice, then the second time you could make sure you were not too young to do this, because you would have the perspective of being older, and would know that the person advising you to marry this man was giving you the wrong advice because his reasons were the same ones he gave you the last time he advised you to get married at eighteen. If you could bring a child from a first marriage into a second marriage a second time, you would know that generosity could turn to resentment if you did not do the right things and resentment back to kindness if you did, unless the man you married when you married a second time for the second time was quite different in temperament from the man you married when you married a second time for the first time, in which case you would have to marry that one twice also in order to learn just what the wisest course would be to take with a man of his temperament. If you could have your mother die a second time you might be prepared to fight for a private room that had no other person in it watching television while she died, but if you were prepared to fight for that, and did, you might have to lose your mother again in order to know enough to ask them to put her teeth in the right way and not the wrong way before you went into her room and saw her for the last time grinning so strangely, and then yet one more time to make sure her ashes were not buried again in that plain sort of airmail container in which she was sent north to the cemetery. (Davis *Collected Stories* 256-7)

In many ways, and especially in those ways that have been most influential to my own writing, this story is exemplary of Davis' style. It starts out, as many of her stories do, with what appears to be an abstract, almost pedantic problem, with the narrator offering an obscure though logical reason for why she cannot learn from her mistakes. Through the next four sentences, the story does not so much depart from this original abstraction, or laugh at it, as much as it demonstrates that the obscurity is actually an attempt at precision. It is this narrator's best effort, by avoiding cliché and sentimentality, to present in fiction the regret she feels about some of the most significant relationships in her life. How Davis achieves this combination of the obscure and the precise is something I have tried to learn in writing this MA.

As is so often the case, the story dispenses with much of the scaffolding of conventional fiction. There is no dialogue, and while there are other people in the story they don't have particular depth and are only really presented in the relationship to the narrator and are reflected through her consciousness. Though there is a faintly established time of narration from which memories of earlier experiences are considered, there is no real attempt to represent the passing of time. The only examples of specified place are the generic hospital room and the cemetery in the north.

The story is not even divided into paragraphs. It is an unbroken block of text made up of five sentences, each longer than the one that comes before it. What is more, except for the difference between the last and second last sentences, the amount by which each gets longer also gets longer as the story progresses. The obsessive narrative tension is built up as the sentences increase in length exponentially. The sentences themselves are fairly complex, and while they increase in length, the abstract complexity is present from the very first, which we cannot reduce much further than: if 'if A, B, but often C, in fact mostly C, so D', which of course means not A. This kind of syntactic and logical pedantry is present in all the way through, so that even in the very long final sentence you have: 'if A, perhaps B, but if B, perhaps C and D', where B comes at the devastating cost of C and D. So the syntactical seeds for the story's final blow – the combination of pedantry and deep regret – are there from the very beginning of the story.

Effectively what this does is deepen the abstraction into intimate emotion, but the movement of the story can also be seen as repeated attempts to be more and more precise about something that is nearly impossible to articulate, that is, the depth of the narrator's regret. This regret is impossible to represent in a more conventionally emotional way because then it might become sentimental: naming the regret would rob the writing of intensity. In this sense it is not

really a movement from idea to feeling, but a series of bids to describe a feeling that is almost inarticulable. The convoluted sentence construction is not obscurantist in that it is not attempting to be difficult for its own sake: it is attempting to be accurate about something that cannot be represented in any conventional way and the only way to do so is through this syntax that is so odd in its written form, even as it retains some of the naturalism of spoken language.

Perhaps it is this principle of grammatical accuracy that prevents the story from becoming overwrought, although this is also prevented through its use of the broader formal properties of many of Davis' stories, such as brevity. The self-consciousness that is present in much of her work always seems to begin simultaneously with her stories and when this moment of heightened self-consciousness ends for the narrator, so does the story. This is why her stories are often so short, because she (or her narrator) shows no compulsion to continue a thought after its natural end just so that it fits in with the expected narrative structure of rising action, crisis and resolution. In "A Second Chance", there are only three examples from experience that are slotted into the contorted sentences: an unhappy marriage, a difficult experience of raising a child, and the death of a mother. The story does not go on belabouring its point with many different examples and does not dilute them with gratuitous detail. It ends, almost but not quite abruptly, after saying just enough, which is also just the amount, without the formal requirements of scene-setting or backstory, one might naturally think about this problem before moving on to some other thought. Syntactically the end is present in the beginning and narratively the story refuses to go on any further than is necessary.

One of the difficulties I have had when writing my stories is how to end them convincingly. Davis is so naturalistic, her story forms follow so closely the spontaneous free association of thought, that in some ways she is a very difficult model. Two of my own stories, however, do follow the lead of "A Second Chance" and others like it. "Mental Categories" relates two apparently disparate things: the narrator's obsession with how we classify people and things into categories, and his repressed or at least unspoken desire for his friend. Hopefully by the end of the story it is clear that these things are actually symptomatic of the same emotions. In "Routine" the narrator tries to address his feelings of isolation by closely analysing the routines of others. In both these stories, my aim has been not to obscure or intentionally allegorise what could be seen as the emotional truth of the story, but, on the contrary, to show it precisely as possible by trying to avoid diluting it with cliché.

The challenge posed by this technique of trying to avoid artifice and formula (the reason for moving away from external description and dialogue) is that the technique becomes a new kind of formula, its own kind. One of my concerns with "Mental Categories", for example, was

that the connection between mental categorisation and unspoken desire would become too laboured. It is difficult to match Davis' concision of only three experiences in three sentences to complete a story. Another writer who is useful as a model of how not to let technique appear laboured is W G Sebald.

In novels like *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlits*, Sebald manages to move through seemingly unrelated topics so deftly that it does not seem that the narrator is intentionally using rhetorical manipulations to connect these different subjects. Of course, there must be some work being done to facilitate the change from one subject to another, it is just that Sebald's books are able to do it almost invisibly. Partly this ability has to do with his very long, hypotactic sentences, learned from Thomas Bernhard, which both hold the reader's attention with expectation of syntactic resolution, and are so drawn-out that it becomes impossible to remember exactly where they began. In an interview Sebald has said that this "moving from one theme to another always requires some sleight of hand" ("W G Sebald"), that despite their apparent lack of artifice, his stories are (obviously) extremely constructed. He goes on to explain that some of this is to do with the apparent obliqueness of using an antiquated style to discuss the holocaust, something he does as "there is no point in exaggerating that which is already horrific" by representing in fiction, because it is almost impossible comprehend this kind of catastrophe by looking at it directly. There needs to be some kind of contrast, in his case the obliqueness of his style and seemingly unconnected subjects so that the intensity of the horror does not overwhelm the reader's senses and thoughts.

Sebald has turned out to be less of a conscious model than Davis perhaps because, thematically, we are so far apart. His themes are so enormous. Interestingly, much of his work involves a walker wandering around the natural landscape, a model I used in my early stories before moving away from it. Also, he often has his narrator report on the speech of others, as I did at the beginning of this project too, although in his case the reported speech is inflected mostly with signs of compassion, whereas mine mostly shows sign of contempt or resentment (in this case I am closer to Bernhard's tone). At first I thought that these differences meant that my project didn't show any direct influence from Sebald, but his oblique style, in combination with Davis' mixture of precision and apparent obscurity has, in fact, been very useful. My stories have come to follow these two writers, if only inasmuch as they show that one way to be specific about what is inarticulate is to be very precise about something that exists at a slight angle to it, so that what is unspoken or unspeakable emerges in relief, and as the writing progresses, not as a premeditated theme.

This avoidance of premeditation has become an important principle for me. We can see this approach in Davis, in her eschewing of drama and invention and her lack of traditional narrative manipulation, distortion and revelation. In fact she has mentioned that premeditation is something she avoids both in her fiction and her translation, the latter of which she often does paragraph by paragraph, before reading the whole of the original text ("Notes on Translation"). On the BBC World Book Club podcast the Norwegian writer Per Petterson describes this kind of aesthetic in the following way.

> If you know something important that is going to happen in your book you should not hold your cards to your chest, you should say it as soon as you can to the reader, because I think it is very cowardly of the writer to know something very important of the book and the people in the book know something very important of the book and the reader doesn't … If you have a big secret that is going to be revealed, put it on the first page … Many writers think that if you take it all up at once from the well the well will get empty, but you have to get it out to let it fill again. (Petterson "Per Petterson")

Petterson goes on to say that he would not go back to what he has written before and alter it in the light of anything he discovers about his narrative along the way because that is cheating too. This is an approach to writing fiction, and especially to narrative voice, that I find very appealing and also one that is influenced by Davis and Sebald. About his 'buried' themes of war and genocide Sebald has said "you need to find ways of convincing the reader that this is on your mind, even if you do not roll it out on every page. The reader needs to be prompted that the narrator has a conscience and that he is and has been engaged with these questions" ("W. G. Sebald"). I am not exactly interested in convincing my reader that my narrator has a conscience, but I am interested in getting the reader to like, or sympathise with the narrator, despite his obsessive, oversensitive tendencies.

Although my stories are largely dawn from my own experience they are highly exaggerated and selective. In a way there are two narrators, or at least two different versions of the same narrator. There is the obsessive who experiences, reacts and thinks, and then there is writer who observes these obsessions and odd quirks of mind and writes them down. This second narrative voice has a certain amount of detachment, simply observing what is interesting, amusing or moving in the language, thoughts and experiences of the other narrative voice. I am not particularly interested in my own experience per se, I am interested in how thought works and my own are the only thoughts I can experience. My aim is partly to show the reader what kinds of thinking are interesting and how.

One of the ways to do this is to use what I will call the Petterson ethic, to avoid narrative withholding, even to the level of the sentence. In this way it is possible to find interest even in the spontaneous way that thought is realised in unusual sentence constructions. Notably, this

Petterson ethic also tends to almost collapse the distance between the narrator who writes and the narrator who experiences. Something I try to do, in writing things as soon as I think them, is to write the experience of writing. In other words, I am bringing the time of writing as close as possible to the time of experience itself (or perhaps the other way around).

In a sense this links back to Davis' overbearing self-consciousness and the mimesis of her stories' lengths with their narrator's moments of self-consciousness. This is because these moments, although now we can call them narratives, of obsessive self-analysis are defamiliarising in how they expose the minutiae of what we don't know we think. The defamiliarisation opens up the possibility of infinite obsession – once we begin to understand what we don't know that we think, and how much we don't know, what is there to stop us from being stuck in an infinite loop of our own circular obsessions? – and so the narrative tension comes from the desire to split apart the narrating and experiencing voice, removing the danger of this heightened self-consciousness and falling back into the safety of a more distant, traditional, gap between these two voices. There is safety in this gap because the narrating voice does not need to enact the same obsessions that the experiencing voice has, it only needs to describe it from a distance. Something I taken from all this is that keeping this gap as small as possible means that my narrating voice does not have enough distance to judge the experiencing voice, which means the reader does not have a detestably superior narrator or pathetic experiencer.

So Davis is concerned with obsession, but in a less aggressive way then Bernhard. Her narrators almost seem embarrassed by thinking or speaking as much as they do, but in this there is a paradox. Although a Davis narrator is often self-effacing about her thought, there is always a simultaneous delight in, and celebration of, the wonderful strangeness of the mind. A Davis narrator is embarrassed about the weirdness of her obsessions, but her stories spring from the joy of finding, or inventing, the language to capture this weirdness. This is an ambiguous joy that I also feel, both in the moment of inspiration before the writing and in the experimentation of the writing itself.

However this way of representing emotions leads to another of the observations made during workshops: that my stories are banal and humorous on the surface, but are bursting with emotion just below. This is certainly something that interests me and something that I mentioned in my proposal, although there it was in reference to the inner life of the other characters, while in practice it has turned out to be focused on the narrator himself.

The issue of emotions represented obliquely is a delicate one. One of the dangers is to use obliqueness as a kind of short-hand so that the writing does not actually tackle deep feeling,

but appears to because it is so restrained and so *must* be masking something deeper. Another is to use it simply as a formal exercise, again in order to avoid deep emotion by turning it into a technical challenge and eliding the psychological difficulty. The kind of obliqueness I am trying to get at is, I hope, neither of these things, but rather an attention to detail so precise that it becomes strangely and unexpectedly exaggerated of the kind present in Davis and in Sebald. In this way my writing is oblique in the unique precision of its grasping after reality.

Something that separates me from Sebald is that the emotional life I am trying to describe is both moving and ridiculous. This exaggeration, and the contrast between pathos and the ridiculous has sometimes been amusing, but, like so much else in this writing, it is also something that cannot succeed if I work at it consciously. It has to happen almost by accident. I am not trying to create a distancing irony by writing an unreliable narrator. I am taking the narrator very seriously, but exaggerating his obsessions just enough to have fun with them and if this ends up being funny then that is a lucky chance. I suspect that the humour comes in taking what is ridiculous very seriously and never condescending to it.

Another of the comments made in workshops that I have found valuable is that grammar is clearly very important to this narrator: it is almost always the first way he approaches something that does not make sense. In fact most of the 'drama' in the stories, especially the later stories, comes from the narrators attempts to use the tools of grammar and syntax to try and interpret something that has happened or something that someone has said. The obsessive, almost insane way in which he does this is also one of the very important observations made in seminars: this narrator is slightly mad. If he is, ultimately, unreliable, perhaps it is in the excessive extent to which he withholds the internal mental volume of his thinking from everyone with whom he interacts, although not, of course, from the reader. In fact the reader becomes complicit at times, such as when the narrator uses the second person pronoun.

One final insight from the workshops is the way in which these stories focus on the minute fluctuations and interplay of power between people in conversations. It is something that is present even in the stories with the barest attempt at conventional dialogue. This is not really something unexpected, because it was something I planned to work on in my proposal, but it is interesting to see that it is something that has persisted in the writing despite moving away from the scaffolding and support that was my thematic interests as set out in the proposal. It is reassuring that one of things I have accomplished is one of the things that I had already planned to do, because, along with the Davis like delight in the eccentricities of thought, it is perhaps the most important quality that I hope to achieve in this project.

Conclusion

The amount of space I have devoted to each of the different sections I described in the introduction confirms my claim that what was discovered in workshops is the most interesting of the three, as it is this category that has received by far the most attention. One last element to consider is the overall structure of my story collection and how this was influenced by what I have discussed in the body of this essay.

The effect of my discoveries in form and influence and of my departure from my original plans about walking stories, interlocutors, dialogue and landscape has meant that my stories have varied greatly in length. Like Davis, some are only a sentence long and some a paragraph. This length is due to the internal narrative integrity of each story that I learned from Davis and described above: the fact that a piece need only be as long as the moment of self-consciousness it enacts. As a result I have discovered that my stories fall into a number of different formal categories, with each category having what I hope is its own narrative integrity. These categories are: the realist walking stories; the monologues like "Mental Categories"; paragraph length stories; lists; and sentence length stories.

In grouping these stories into my final collection I find it useful to resort to the analogy with music once more. As in serialist music in which a tone is not allowed to be repeated until all of the other eleven semitones have been played (although with less of the absolute strictness) I have used the rule that one kind of my story-forms is not repeated until an example of each of the others is placed in the collection. What is more, I have tried to group stories by feeling and content, so that a particular feeling, or the fragment of an experience that is present in, say, a sentence length story and also in a realist walking story means that these two stories are placed next to one another.

In this way the stories' variations on the same feelings and experiences became an important structuring principle. Here the collection is similar to Brahms' *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*. The aria, seventeen variations and fugue are related, not by the deep structure of an underlying theme present throughout the collection (as in Bach's *Goldberg Variations*) but are connected in series. Each variation is connected either to the aria, or the variation that comes before or after it or to the fugue with some sequential similarity. Nicolas Cook describes this relationship as "edge-related, with each variation being lent significance by its relationship with what comes before and after it, or by the group of variations within which it is located" (60-4). This is the organising principle I found that my stories seemed to want and has made the most sense in bringing out their similarities and differences. Finding

this kind of unusual structure that is also a necessary and truthful part of the formal and emotional aspects of my writing is the final instance in a long process of discovering the inherent connection between forma and content. It is a process that has accompanied the entire two-year master's project, one in which formal discoveries may at first seem arbitrary but turn out to have an important, if spontaneous, emotional and narrative impulse.

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Story Collection

Strange Turnings

Anxiety

I’m terribly concerned that I haven’t worried about this enough.

Don't Believe Everything You Feel

It is a very fortunate thing that we have been waiting at the stop since before sunrise, have in fact, in anticipation of the bus arriving late as it has done every day this week, been standing here waiting six buses early (according to the timetable, on which they are scheduled to come every twenty minutes) because, as it turns out, today the bus is not going to arrive at all: it has been cancelled, and we will have to make our way on foot. She found this out from Twitter, and the fact that she was able to do so is another fortunate thing because I, who do not have Twitter, would never have thought to use it to look up news of the public buses and even in the event that I thought to do so, would not have known which hashtag to use. Whatever the reason for the cancellation, it is apparently not deemed to be of any importance by whoever wrote the tweet, although we both say how happy and lucky we are that they chose to write it at all, because without them doing so we would have been waiting here until it was too late.

So we begin the long walk from the hostel, which is on the slopes of the mountain, into the city to the music school, which is also on the mountain's slopes, but much lower down, and which is closed for the holidays except for these few days in which we are giving fundraising recitals. From this point at the beginning of the journey it is possible to see all the way across the flats separating this mountain from the north-western range. The city, which covers most of the land in between, is hazy, giving it a curious sense of power, in that the fog it generates seems to mask its reality and to ensure its otherworldly presence. I think of how beautiful the view must have been before the roads and the buildings and the farms. But thousands of years ago that land might well have been covered by water, with the mountain an island perhaps, in the middle of a hostile sea. How long will the city's spell last, I wonder? How long before the buildings and the fog are hidden and the land is once again covered by water.

As we set off I express my frustration and anger towards the buses, though complaining aloud only makes me more annoyed because there is no-one to really to hear this expression, no-one from the bus company anyway, no-one with any power who will listen and consider making improvements. After I while I grow self-conscious of my rant and think about what it must be like for she, or anyone else for that matter to overhear me. When I think about that I stop complaining at once.

Because the road we know, the road taken by the bus each day, is clearly far longer than is necessary, we take an unknown route somewhat at random, but nevertheless in the direction that we know leads to the music school. I notice that she begins to grow uncomfortable with the silence, or rather, I notice that there is a silence and I begin to imagine what she might be

feeling and all that I can imagine is that she is uncomfortable with this silence and so I become self-conscious which makes me grow uncomfortable and awkward and this only exacerbates this situation so that now I am thoroughly anxious and quite incapable of saying anything so the silence continues and I can only think that she is now really very frustrated and uncomfortable.

However, when she starts up a conversation it seems enough like jovial banter to put me at ease for the present.

She says that I really ought to get into the habit of using Twitter. Do I not see how practical it is? I must admit, at least after this morning that it is the easiest, most reliable and most efficient way of communicating information, and also the most democratic.

At this point I have to disagree, or at least ask for qualification. How is it the best?

It is the best way of publicising the news. It allows everyone to have their say so it takes away the monopoly of the big media houses.

But that news is too short to be anything but cursory, I say. It doesn't give an in-depth critical analysis. You can tweet without thinking and it certainly doesn't require much thinking to read a twitter feed. How is it better than an online newspaper?

Critical analysis? she asks derisively. It's not meant to give an in-depth critical analysis. It's meant to allow people to have a voice, to voice their opinions and feelings. Don't I know that it's not always about thinking deeply? Somewhere she had read something: don't believe everything you think. Feelings are just as important as thinking, she informs me, and you can't be misguided by your feelings. They're always honest and true to the moment. And what's more, Twitter is far less controlled and restricted than Facebook, for example. If you really think about it tells you everything you need to know and it does it immediately.

Nothing is immediate I think and I tell her as much.

Well, I say, perhaps it is much less controlled than Facebook, but that doesn't mean that it's totally autonomous any more than our feelings are ever autonomous. The corporate interests that used to, and often still do, control the media are the same ones that control people's desires and feelings, that tell people what to desire. It's really just quicker. What qualitative difference is there that makes Twitter better than any other news source?

This conversation is going round in circles, she says, beginning to get annoyed. I should stop asking about how it is better. Am I not listening to her? And anyway, what am I talking about, she asks. She doesn't see how this is relevant. Just like mediation. How is *that* relevant? She doesn't remember saying anything about desire! She isn't talking about desire but about

how this is the best way for ordinary people to share their ideas, their news and experiences! Desire has nothing to do with it.

Okay, I say, but what makes…

But she is rolling her eyes. Here comes the question again, she says, now thoroughly irritated. She says it in a way that is both hurtful and admirable, the latter because it shows the audaciousness that I have always admired and resented in her. I have no response.

Never mind, I say quickly, because although there is a lot I would like to add, although I want to say that nothing is immediate because there is nothing outside mediation and, in actuality, everything – everything – is mediated, I do not say this because I know it is too abstract and to an extent I agree with her that none of this is of particular relevance, and although I would also like to defend myself against the eye-rolling and irritation I can see no way, legitimately, of pointing this out. This seems to her to be enough to bury the argument and I take my lead from her.

…

We eventually arrive at the school and she begins to set up. Today we will play the final Brahms Sonata, she on clarinet and I on piano and then she will play Stravinsky's three pieces for solo clarinet. Tomorrow we will be joined by a singer and we will play Schubert: The Shepherd on the Rock. The Brahms seems to go well. Anyway, the audience, which is composed mostly of parents and grandparents of music students and who are really just paying extra fees at this fundraiser, enjoys it, and so do we, though I get the feeling that she relishes introducing the sonata as an *autumnal masterpiece* more than anything else. It is how she described it to me before gushing about its exemplary status as an example of Brahms late style. I do not see that it is very useful to divide things into early, or late phases, but I can see this same explicatory will to power in her playing as in that conversation. This behaviour is also present when she introduces the Stravinsky.

These three pieces, she says, are a set of masterpieces. To her, they tell us something about thought and feeling, they tell us that we cannot believe everything we think, we cannot think our way into these pieces because they are so expressive, they are, after all jazz, which is the most expressive of music forms.

So this is where the research on the danger of thinking has been headed. This speech is quite ridiculous I think. These pieces are Stravinsky, they are not jazz and if they are particularly expressive at all they are expressive of his personal allusion to jazz in his own

idiom and not expressive in the way that jazz is expressive, which is mainly to do with the amount of improvisation it requires – that is how it arrives at spirituality. Stravinsky requires very little improvisation in this way.

Between the second and third pieces she makes a great show of staggering around, gasping and puffing in order to demonstrate beyond any doubt the difficulty of the music and her own virtuosity in performing it. It is an entirely unnecessary and almost vulgar affectation that really detracts from the originality and the confidence of the actual performance, I think. But the audience members seem thoroughly to enjoy themselves, the enthusiasm of their applause thankfully extending to the size of their charitable donations. After the recital we meet the husband of the singer we will play with tomorrow, who is also, as it happens a clarinettist. She talks to the other clarinettist for some time before we make our way to the stop in the hope that the late afternoon buses will at least be running.

They are not, but rather absurdly there is a man in an official neon-yellow bib waiting eagerly at the stop. As we wait he comes and sits very near us, right between us in fact and asks if we mind if he talks to us. When we say no we don't, he informs us that he is taking a customer satisfaction survey.

At this I feel her eyes on me. They seem, goadingly, to say that this is my chance to complain, here, just as I wanted, is someone who will carefully record everything I want to correct and relay it to the correct authorities. I try to suggest to the man in the bib that he let me fill out the form myself but he refuses to hand it over, insisting on asking every one of the questions himself.

When he gets to question g he reads: how would you rate the efficiency and communication abilities of the bus staff: excellent, good, fair or poor?

In the end, because he appears so enthusiastic and also so earnestly, vulnerably motivated I cannot, despite my earlier exclamations, despite how much I wanted to make my frustration known, to have my grievances recorded with whoever is in charge of bus scheduling, bring myself to choose the 'poor' option, and cannot even choose the 'fair' option, I tell him to write a tick in the box that says 'good'.

As we walk back to the hostel, she points this out jokingly to me. Didn't I say, just this morning, that I wished there was someone I could inform about the inefficiency of the bus service? But this joking is essentially benign and as we walk back up the long avenue lined with chestnut trees, I am glad to have something about which to banter and also something to distract from the dark green tunnel of trees that is so long it begins to seem like it might never end.

More serious is the next topic that she introduces. Don't I want to go out tonight? There is a band playing, the band of the moment, the group that is most popular among everyone who knows best about these things and they are playing in the country only for this week after which it will pretty much be impossible to hear them play again, short of travelling overseas specially in order to do so. The only issue is that travelling there will not give us enough leeway to get back in time for tomorrows recital. But that is all arranged, she says. The singer's husband can take her place and she is sure that they can find someone among the musicians who attended the recital yesterday, one of the schools accompanist's perhaps, who can stand in for me. The Schubert is not difficult at all, the singer is the main performer anyway and our singer is already prepared, has even performed the piece before with the husband who would be filling in, and so it all works out.

But we are not supposed to leave the hostel, I say. This is perfectly true. When we are not performing, we are meant to stay inside with all the other musicians who are here for the week, playing in the youth orchestra and at various other places. A pointless rule but nevertheless a rule.

Since when does a person need permission? These past few days you have been so overly concerned with permission, she says. We're adults, not children.

I find that the severity of this last statement induces a certain degree of anxiety and for a time it becomes necessary, as you might well imagine, to consider it silently so that I can be sure that I do not respond in a way that will cause further conflict, that I do not, in short, respond rashly and impulsively and misjudge my current feelings or react to them in a way that exaggerates their seriousness. Perhaps the length of the silence gives her the hope that she is victorious because she asks, as if only to make sure, whether we are in fact going to be going out.

Well I say, I will have to think about it, after which she has enough tact at least to leave the matter to rest.

…

Back in the hostel, for some time now, in fact for the best part of three quarters of an hour, I have been considering what I should do, whether I would prefer to go out or stay in, although of course I know I would prefer to stay in, that I will in fact hate going out, and so what I am really doing is trying to convince myself, by weighing up the advantages and disadvantages, that there are really more benefits to going out despite the clear disadvantage

that I will find it insufferable. The reason I am giving this so much deliberation is, oddly, precisely because I think I will not like it and have never liked it, and because she has asked so many times before, when we come on these trips, and sometimes I have gone, and sometimes not, although more often I have not gone, and always when I have gone I have hated it and she has noticed and been disappointed by this. I am trying to decide based on all the data I have at hand in this specific occasion and not based on my feelings of all those times before.

In the end I decide that I will go and that I will also, to the best of my ability, try to enjoy myself. I will tell her as soon as she finished the phone conversation that she is having with her mother and which I can hear vaguely through the wall of our adjoining rooms. She is talking about the ordinary occurrences of the day, about the walk and the recital and the plan to see the performance later this evening, when suddenly her voice changes. It drops and grows more secretive. Now I cannot really hear what she is saying despite the fact that it is the first time I am really listening. I catch the words boring and pedantic and then I think that her mother must have been asking about me, because she says that I am lying on my bed (her tone says that *all* that I am doing is lying on my bed) and reading the Schubert score, which is what I told her I would do when she left the room.

The fact that this discussion is about me and is conducted in such a secretive tone almost goads me into confronting her right then, about the conversation, held with so little consideration for the fact that I could almost certainly have overheard it, about its content, and about everything else that has happened today. I imagine bursting into the room and asking her what the problem is and why she is talking like this. How would that conversation go, I wonder.

I can imagine a certain scene in which I tell her that I can hear what she says and then I explain why I do not want to go out, explain how little I enjoy it and that it has nothing to do with her, so she shouldn't be offended. In this scene I also explain to her how I found certain things that happened earlier in the day to be hurtful and explain exactly why I had these reactions. I am very articulate and forthcoming in this scene. All the worries and thoughts that I have been having throughout the day are brought out into the open and properly addressed. She goes off happily to see the band and I stay in and really do read the Schubert score, also happily. Most importantly I am able, in my imagination, to get her to see how certain of her actions can affect me in complicated ways so that she apologises for them and also thinks carefully about similar actions in the future. All I need to do to make this image a reality is to go through into her room and start the conversation.

But I do not do this. I am not at all sure that what I imagine is how the interaction will play out. How will I, for example, get her to understand the significance of acts that individually

and out of context, and perhaps even in context, might seem insignificant to her. I do not trust that my feelings are legitimate enough to illicit this reaction. Starting the confrontation would require a level of faith in these feelings, a certainty that they will play out in the right way that I simply do not have. To start such a conversation would be to have the assertive eloquence that is really much more in keeping with her character than it is with mine.

The Dermatological Incident

Daughter: Mom, you tell it. You tell it so much better than I do, how bad it was.

Mother: It was *so* bad!

A Good Situation

The other day I was talking to my friend and she was telling me about a series of events of an unpleasant nature that had occurred in her life in the previous few weeks. We live in different cities, so she tells me everything over the phone and, it is often quite difficult for us to fit our talks into reasonable gaps in our two different and often conflicting schedules, so when we do get a chance to catch up there is often quite a lot for each of us to tell the other.

When she began to recount her experiences over the time preceding the phone call, she did not, in fact, use the word unpleasant, but said rather that she'd had a very bad couple of weeks. When she said this I experienced some moments of panic, because on one occasion when she phoned me to tell me something it was extremely bad news. However, when I asked, she assured me that everything was okay and that at the time of the call, everyone important in her life was fine. It was much easier to concentrate on the different developments of her story, once she assured me that nothing very terrible was waiting for me at the end.

She had been having some trouble with keys. There were, in fact, three different stressful incidents related to keys. The first happened when she was at the shops with her mother, who misplaced the set of keys to the flat they share. Luckily this was not a big problem, because my friend also has keys, and so they were able to get back inside, and from there could trace the lost set, which turned out to have been handed in to the lost and found office at the supermarket. They were lucky, she said, that they were together and that each left the house with her own set of keys. I remember thinking that this was indeed lucky, and also how lucky they are to have such a close and practical relationship in general; for mother and child to share lives that fit together so harmoniously. I am often pleased with my independence, because I do not live with my own parents (and we would certainly not do our shopping together) and also because I live alone and can keep my own routine, coming and going when I please without having a responsibility to anyone else, but I thought that to live as they do so closely and so easily would not be an unpleasant thing.

The second incident resulted from my friend locking herself out of the house while her mother was away at work. For a while, she told me, she was in a state of some consternation, because although she could see the keys on a table in the lounge, her arm was not long enough to reach them. Eventually she was able to fashion an extension to her arm with an old broom handle to which she attached a piece of wire she found in the garden, and in this way was able to knock the keys onto the floor and drag them closer to the window until they were near enough for her to reach in and grab them with her hand.

When she told me this part of the story, I greatly admired her resourcefulness, not only in making the best out of the materials she had at hand in the garden, but also for making the best out the emotional materials she had at that point. She allowed herself to feel a certain amount of pride in her achievement, and what I admire most is the satisfaction she took from such a modest success, enough to make her recount, with considerable excitement, a story that many people might find too mundane, or too lacking in drama, to repeat at all.

Often I have noticed myself thinking that this sort of behaviour is admirable in her. She and her mother, living alone except for each other and their three pugs, have no reason to find or create conventionally dramatic situations to talk about. For them the tiny fluctuations in the dogs' diets; or the unexpected silence, after months of incessant noise, of the neighbourhood seagulls; or the discovery of a parking space directly opposite the entrance to their building are enough for an evening's conversation. To get to that point, to feel so secure with another person that you do not need to impress them or fascinate them with daring exploits or original ideas is something quite special. And there is something to be said about having someone to come home to, to cook for and eat with, and in the morning to drink tea with, all without the pressure to be particularly interesting.

The next incident was the most alarming one of the three to do with keys. She and her mother were out again and her mother accidentally locked the car keys inside her car. The spare car keys were inside the flat, which was quite a way beyond walking distance, and the bags with phones and purses were inside the boot. For a while they were at a loss for what to do and almost began to panic in earnest, when my friend realised that she did at least have her bus card, which luckily she had removed from her purse and transferred into her coat pocket earlier in the week. Because of this she was able to take the bus to within walking distance of the flat and fetch the spare set of car keys before returning on the bus, while her mother waited by the car.

Another of these negative occurrences was a scare they had regarding the youngest of their three pugs. Because they live by themselves (my friend's father having died of a heart attack one morning three years ago while the two of them were out driving) the dogs are very important to them and so when one gets sick it is often quite troubling. They take great care with the dogs and treat them very well, just as if they were part of a family of mother, daughter and three pugs, as indeed they are. I have always thought that it is quite a good situation, not least for the pugs. On top of free and comfortable shelter and bodily care, each has the companionship not only of two other dogs of the same breed as themselves, but also of two large and different animals, animals who provide food, protection and regular exercise and

affirmation, and do not expect very much in return, other than the pugs simply going on being themselves.

In this case the young pug developed a rash that grew steadily worse despite their efforts to medicate it, until eventually they took him to see a specialist who prescribed an extra strong trial of cortisone. In the end the cortisone seemed to work, although he is still on special diet and is unable to do certain things, such as swim in salt or chlorinated water, or run through freshly cut grass, or eat food with a significant amount of carbohydrates. The cortisone trial, as yet still ongoing, has coincided with an increase in his weight, but it does not seem to concern him as did the irritating and painful rash.

The final and worst thing of all was resolved a few days before our conversation. Some weeks previously my friend's mother had been to the dermatologist for her annual check-up. (They take regular medical exams very seriously, quite different from the father, who, in the final few years of his life refused to go to any doctor's appointments whatsoever.) At the check-up the dermatologist found a suspicious mole on the mother's back and removed it and sent it away for testing. For the week or so that the tests were being conducted the household was in a state of nervousness, the two women knew that there was a possibility of bad news and the dogs, my friend said, could tell that something was up.

In the end, as I have said, none of them need have worried, although the pugs, of course, do not have the ability to decide when worry is warranted and when it is unreasonable, which strikes me as quite a valuable attribute, given that, in my experience, knowing that worry is unreasonable in no way prevents one from worrying. The truth is that the two women have turned inwards in such a way they could always protect each other, and each could probably survive anything at all in the world, except for losing the other, the possibility of which, as you have seen, tends to cause them extreme consternation, and the reality of which might well be devastating. That, I think, is the danger of too great a closeness, although, from the outside at least, it is so appealing that I cannot stop myself from envying it in many ways, especially in those long periods when I lie alone and awake in the dark, or weeks go by and I realise that I cannot go on eating because I have been cooking only for myself.

The test results, when they arrived, brought with them the reassurance that the mole was very unlikely to be dangerous, or it indicate the likelihood of any other kind of danger. The resulting relief, my friend told me, was inconsiderable and it took some time before she or her mother could really convince themselves that the all the worry was for nothing.

The pugs, on the other hand, recovered from their secondary anxiety almost immediately.

Past Lives

A friend of mine claims she has never had an enjoyable encounter with an Irish person. In fact, she says, all her encounters with Irish people have been bad. Although she admits that these negative experiences probably have more to do with her than with Irish people, she always repeats, whenever she gets the opportunity, that all her encounters have been bad.

She once explained her run of bad luck, as she calls it, by telling me that she was James Joyce in a past life, and that in this life she is unhappy with her artistic achievement in that former one. Although this tension between her different lives has resulted in her inability to get along with an entire nationality, she does at least have the consolation of being someone who obviously knows quite a lot about her past lives, quite a lot more than I do anyway, and more even than anyone else I have spoken to about that kind of thing.

I admire this unabashed peculiarity of thought, even if I do not approve of its anti-Irish manifestation. I should like to resemble her more, at least in the way that she is comfortable believing in such a scientifically unpopular thing as past life.

In her past lives, she informs me, she has been: a goldfish, and James Joyce, although, she adds, she is more convinced about the goldfish.

Suspicion

"There are those whose main concern is to avoid further damage to themselves, at whatever cost. And those are the ones who are ruthless, and the ones to be careful of" – Julian Barnes

Then let me take you to the edge of the ocean, so that I can show you the curve of the earth he says. That is how the argument comes to a close. That's how he ends it. And so it is decided that by making the long walk down through the valley to the beach, and watching the ships as the pass, hull-down – that is, with their lower parts just over the edge of the horizon and their upper parts still just visible above it – he will demonstrate the categorical evidence that there is not and never has been an excuse for thinking the earth is flat.

The argument began after he derided the ignorance of anyone who, at any point in history and at any place in the world, ever laboured under the delusion that the world was anything but a sphere, or *ellipsoid*.

Imagine we don't have access to the most contemporary data about the shape of the globe, he said, without any special equipment or particular mathematical skill, the earth might not seem an ellipsoid, but at worst it would seem a perfect sphere.

So you admit it is possible to think the earth is some other shape" I asked, half-jokingly. This was a big mistake.

No, he said, anyone who thinks that is an idiot and I can show you why.

I suggested that this was condescending, and it was at this point the disagreement began, though it was never really a disagreement about the same terms, because he wanted me to take up the position opposing his, that is, to claim that the earth is really flat, whereas I only wanted to point out that many people in certain circumstances might have many reasons to think that to the best of their knowledge (a flat earth) was indeed the case. I never really wanted to take up the position against him, and anyway, when I argue, I find that I am never really defending the precise terms of the argument. What I am really defending is myself. And in this way we are similar, he and I, because he too is only really defending himself, I think. Similar, but similar in a limited way, and within those limits completely different, because his self-defence is full of intensely passionate fervour, whereas I have decided that the best strategy for self-preservation is resignation and, once I realise that I am defending myself, to withdraw from the argument so as to prevent any harm to myself. And this is how we end up deciding to make the walk.

…

We have to begin early, because in addition walking, and often climbing, down the valley itself, there is the long drive that must also be slow because it winds along a dirt road through the vineyards. From the car window, the spaces between the rows of vines seem to jump together so that the many stretches of empty red dirt seem to merge into one that follows the car, and the illusion is only interrupted by bent figures of blue-overalled farmworkers as they begin their long day's work. When we park there are no other cars around us and no people in sight.

Once we leave the car behind we begin without talking, and there is no sound coming from the surroundings so that for a while there is a silence broken only by the whistle of air through nasal passages and the crunch of gravel underfoot. The silence makes me very uneasy and I think of anything I can say to break it, but nothing I can think of seems a desirable topic of conversation, and everything I think of I feel certain he will respond to in the way he does many of the things that I find exciting in my head (but which, when spoken aloud I realise are banal or strange) that is, with unconvincing good humour.

So we walk in silence as we pass squat farmhouses thick with whitewash in the gloom of massive oaks whose shadows turn the green eaves black. The trees and the houses seem to exert a powerful influence over the land, so that together they do not appear out of place, whereas I get the feeling that each on its own would not be at home in the hot dry land. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that they transfigured what was around them into a dream space and in this way were able to achieve a fragile dreamlike balance. As we continue he seems to draw energy from the surroundings and he becomes more talkative, and I too begin to feel more at ease and we begin to speak in a slow rhythm that unfolds along with the pace of our walking.

He asks why I am studying the landscape paintings of the mountains around the town, and because the wandering path and the conversation have made me let down my guard I decided to tell him not the usual and plainly honest explanation which amounts to: so I can write a literary thesis on them, but instead to give him a more glancingly anecdotal story, which for all its slightness might well have a deeper honesty. Before I have gone very far I realise that the anecdote is going to not going well, however. I say it is because my friend who, during her father's sixtieth birthday party when the two of us found a painting in the cellar that we thought might be a Pierneef, after asking her father who had too many glasses of champagne and so thought that we were asking his opinion about the beauty of the painting and not about

its painter, became so frustrated that she ended up shouting (jokingly) at the old man. It was not a Pierneef as things turned out.

That really is it, that is the whole story, and I stupidly give away the potential punch line – that my friend shouted at her father on his sixtieth birthday over what turned out not to be a valuable painting – before the story has even really begun.

As I continue I realise with panic that the direction in which I am going is not a particularly interesting one. He is laughing in all the right places and this is worrying because it means he is waiting for the moments he know he ought to be laughing at, and worse still, I know that the points are not at all funny because I haven't successfully translated the vague feelings that were so important (about the relationship between my friend and her father and my relationship to both of them) into an engaging narrative. He is clearly laughing out of politeness, but even for this I am grateful.

At the beach there are no ships to be seen on the horizon or anywhere else on the sea. We arrive with just two hours to spare before we have to turn back if we are to retrace our steps before dark. We wait for the entire two hours but still there are no ships. While we wait he describes the other ways that it is possible to prove that the earth is not flat. Trigonometry after climbing to the top of a high mountain, apparently, or watching the land rise out of the sea as you sail towards it.

Only an idiot would think that the earth is flat he says again and I am too wary, now, to respond.

He continues repeating himself: the earth could be a perfect sphere, that is a mistake that I would allow but it is *not* flat.

And right now I must admit that I feel myself bending to the logic of his argument and can't think why I would ever suggest anything different.

Yes, I say, only an idiot.

Somehow I do still feel it is more complicated than that, but really the complexity has nothing whatsoever to do with the shape of the globe, which we can both agree is not flat, so why not just agree with him and save the energy?

When the time comes we leave the shoreline and walk back up the valley, looking back often at first to make sure we don't miss the chance to see any ships, but still there is nothing.

…

On the way back we meet a woman who probably works on one of the farms. She begins to tell us that she has lost her job, but he cuts her off and pre-empts what he evidently decides is going to be a request for money.

We don't have any cash, he tells her. And this is true we brought no money with us and we have none to give to her. But she perseveres with her story. She has lost her job, you see, and she needs some money to get home, and perhaps some extra money because her young sister is sick at home and she needs to buy paraffin to heat the stove and get some bread for dinner. She does have almost enough money for these things but it happens to be her sister's birthday and so she would like to have something extra besides the bread.

I've heard that song before, he says reminding me sharply of Toad of Toadhall at that moment. You told me this story about a month ago!

No it wasn't me, she says, and looks straight into his face, fully prepared to stare him down.

No? Then you should tell your friend to stop using your story! he gleefully declares. Which is it? Are you a liar or is it your friend who is liar?

He waits expectantly for an answer, and she simply repeats that it he has never spoken to her before, adding that it is not her friend, whoever it is that has spoken to him before. This seems perfectly reasonable to me. I am so embarrassed by his triumphalism that I turn away. I give her the four sandwiches and the chocolates and orange juice that we didn't get round to eating on the way. I am still ashamed and I hesitate to meet her gaze as she thanks me.

When I turn around he is already walking away along the path. I run to catch up and think carefully about how to bring up his arrogant cruelty and then hate myself for becoming so uncertain about the only thing I have really been certain about this whole day. How weak I am!

I don't think you should speak to people like that. I don't think you should have spoken to her like that.

She is a liar. She told me that same story a few weeks ago!

She says it wasn't her, and regardless, it's disrespectful to call someone a liar.

She is a liar he says so what else can I call her?

You don't have to call her anything. It is not really about the truth of her story, I say, it isn't that truth that is significant in this case.

Then what is significant, if truth is so unimportant? He asks sarcastically.

I don't know what to say. I want to tell him that what is important is that she is poor, and that whether or not she has lost her job, or spoken to him before, or her sister was born on

this day not too many years ago, or whether she has a sister at all, or is telling the truth in anything that she said to us, what is important is that her situation is much worse than our own, in many respects and although any action we take is unlikely to change that in any real way, it still feels less wrong to do something than nothing.

But he seems to think that the conversation is over and in any case, what material difference is there to outwitting him now when I didn't have the courage to do something earlier, to stop him as he was speaking to her. After a while he seems to reconsider some of his actions and his tone becomes more conciliatory.

For all we know, he says, she is a liar.

But I can't understand where he puts the emphasis on this statement and whether it is meant to reaffirm or to cancel his earlier words and actions.

Yes, I say, I agree, even though I don't know what I am saying yes to, I just don't want to argue any more.

On the drive back I realise that the friendship is probably at an end. I would like to think that the breaking point was his extraordinary callousness to a desperate woman, but really it has more to do with the dynamic between us. Really it was he who dominated the relationship from the beginning, including setting the terms that led to such a desultory end. I will never understand him, I decide, and it seems quite likely that he will never understand me.

What did he mean, I wonder, when he said for all we know? I think about this for some time. At first I think that he means that although there are things that we do not know, there are things that we do know, there are certain facts that we are sure of, and that it is possible with these facts to form a coherent picture of the world. Not only is it possible, it is relatively simple and from this coherent picture we can build a simple morality so that it is always easy to tell right from wrong because they are both based on facts. His righteousness is based on his logical certitude, I think. For all we know, or, given what we know to be true, she has used the same story on him and is a liar. Then I think: there is another interpretation. For all we know could mean: in spite of what we do know, there is always the possibility that what we think we know might be wrong and the margin of doubt complicates everything. This second interpretation is highly unlikely to be the one he intended and is not clearly in keeping with everything that he has said before. I like it, though.

But perhaps I have not fully understood anything that he has said before. There is a chance that his crude rationality does not extend to all areas of knowledge, and this is a hopeful chance. Perhaps I have got it all wrong. Thinking about it now I realise that this is probably the way to understand everything about our discussions. The correct interpretation is the key and

with it I can work him out. I should ask him what he means because this will make things clearer: I will be able to decide whether he is someone who can respect other people, and whom I can respect, and if he is, I can find out what he is feeling towards me and whether it is anger, or disappointment or boredom or disgust. But then I realise I cannot ask him because I already lied and told him that I agree with everything that he says, as you know.

Warning Signs

I am not a scientist, but there are many things I admire about science. I enjoy the elegance of some of the writing about science I have read, and the clarity with which certain scientists are able to use metaphor to organise their thinking. When I was a child, I read a book that had a lot of science in it, even though it was fiction and not a textbook or theoretical description. I enjoyed the book, for the moving story and complex characters, but also for the excitement of the scientific ideas, many of them based on real theories and experiments.

One of the central ideas of the book had – as I found out through later, more purely scientific reading – to do with an experiment imagined by a man called Erwin Schrödinger. In this experiment there is a box in which there is a cat, some radioactive material, and some cyanide that will be released from a sealed container if enough radioactivity is measured. There is, given the amount and kind of radioactive material and the period of time for which the box is closed, a fifty percent chance that there will be enough radioactivity to cause the release of the poison and kill the cat. The important thing is, that at the subatomic level at which the radioactivity is caused, the particles exist in the state that means there is not enough radioactivity to release the cyanide, and also exist in the state that means there is enough to release the cyanide, and they exist in these two different contradictory states at the same time. These particles only begin to exist in one state and not two once someone opens the box to observe which state that is. For the cat, the effect of all this is that it is both alive and dead, or rather that it is untrue to say that it is alive and also untrue to say that it is dead, until someone checks. For many reasons it is somewhat difficult to imagine a cat that is neither dead nor alive until we look at it, and this difficulty, as I understand it, is the point of Schrödinger's experiment: he wanted to show the implications of something called quantum indeterminacy and how difficult these implications are when applied to the ways in which we usually think about the world.

I have never really understood what quantum indeterminacy is, or how one particle can exist in two different ways at the same time, but if the point of the experiment is to show how confusing all of this is then I can certainly understand that. In fact, when the idea of Schrödinger's cat again came into my life, through a conversation between two of my friends as we were spending the day on a long walk down the beach, I did not remember many of the details about quantum indeterminacy and particle states, but I did remember how sorry I felt for the cat, and how the point of the experiment was to be illogical.

One friend was explaining the experiment to the other in broad strokes. She was having some trouble getting to the end of her explanation because he kept asking for more details about the box (such as how the amount of radioactivity required to release the poison was measured, and how, once this measurement was taken, the poison was actually released) details which she seemed to feel were irrelevant. At this point I thought I could helpfully interject the information that the significance of the experiment was that it should not make any sense and so the fact that the details provided were insufficient was not very important. This however did not satisfy the questioner and out of frustration with both myself and the friend who originally brought up the cat, he decided to do his own research.

He told us, after having conducted his research using the internet, that the radioactivity was in fact measure using a device called a Geiger counter, and that the container of cyanide was broken with a special hammer. He was very satisfied with this knowledge as was clear even from his body language which was tense and quick when he was looking up the experiment, and grew more relaxed once he had the information he wanted. He also told us that he was satisfied because he always liked to know how things worked in detail, particularly when these details were of a practical or scientific nature. He went on to tell us not to feel inadequate in any way for the fact that we had not known, or felt it necessary to know, what seemed to him to be essential details. That was just the difference between us, a difference that he put down to our different ways of thinking.

In fact what he said was that we had different kinds of brains, that the two of us who had not thought the hammer and the Geiger counter very important had *artistic brains*, whereas he – and I remember very clearly that these were the words he used – had a *scientific brain*. He could not help, having a brain like his, the desire to understand exactly how everything worked in a practical way and he imagined that my other friend and I could not help our tendency to generalise and focus on the overarching narrative shape of something either.

I remember at the time being rather offended by this comparison although because I could not decide exactly why this was or judge how reasonable my reaction was I did not say anything until I could be sure of whether or not I could trust my feelings. Afterwards, when I thought about it and tried to work things out I came up with many reasons as to why what he said was not very fair.

For one thing, I do not see why the hammer was an important detail. If the experiment was designed to show that the methods for describing the world at a subatomic level make no sense when describing the world at the level of things the size of cats, then the hammer doesn't seem very important. Surely it does not matter what was used to release the cyanide. As I did

not understand much more about a Geiger counter than I did about quantum indeterminacy I could not say how important it was as a detail. While the Geiger counter may have been an important detail, the hammer was not. I could not agree with my friend on that score and the more a thought about it the less doubt I had regarding that part.

But what about his intentions behind his actions? Did he mean to show frustration in the movements he used to research what we could not tell him? Or was he just frustrated and this came out in his movements even though he did not intend it to? Or, was he not frustrated at all, had I, sensitive to the implied inferiority of not knowing enough, only interpreted frustration as the motivating force behind his actions when those actions were really motivated by something entirely different. But it does not seem very likely that at least some of his actions did not indicate feelings of frustration. I certainly do not believe, for example, that the opposition of scientific and artistic brains was entirely innocent. Neither do I believe that there is any truth in the idea to begin with. It is ridiculous to claim that one brain, a natural evolutionary development, can adhere so closely to those concepts that are invented by human beings, concepts that only exist in language.

I did not think that this part of his statement was innocent because I could imagine only one reason for his having made it, which was to imply that he was the most intelligent of the three of us and that his *brain* was the best. Perhaps he thought that if he made his claim for his own cleverness through the seemingly objective recourse to biology, then it would not appear as if he were making it at all. But in that at least he failed. It was perfectly clear that something was going on, even if I was not at first sure of what it was, and on some reflection it did become clear that what he was really doing was showing us he was cleverer than we were.

The difficult thing about this whole experience, or perhaps it is more accurate to say one of the difficult things, or, the more difficult thing (there is of course a fair amount of difficulty in being told you are not very clever) is that it came as a shock to me. The reason that it took me so long to work out why what he said was so upsetting was that, before that time, he never once did anything to make me feel inferior, or to suggest in any way that he might be the sort of person that claim superiority in such an underhanded manner.

Up until that point he was only the kindest and most generous of friends, always friendly and always ready to be helpful. I remember one afternoon when he rode over twenty kilometres on his bicycle, just because he thought I might like to have tea with him. Once, running into him at a dinner party, I mentioned to him in passing that I was think of fixing a shelf to the wall of my bedroom, so that I could display my plants, and asked him whether he had any advice because he seemed like someone who would know about such things as how to

put up shelves. I may have mentioned to him that I was planning on doing this the following weekend and perhaps even asked for his help, but I definitely did not expect or even hope that he would actually want to help. The week after that dinner party I did not hear from him, and I did not really feel comfortable contacting him and asking him again for his help. But the morning I planned to make the shelf, while I was still in bed (I was deceiving myself and would have found some excuse to avoid doing the physical work) he phoned me and told me that he was on his way to my flat and asked if I wouldn't mind getting ready to go with him to the hardware store so that I could get the few thing he thought I might need to install the shelf.

This is what made him so trustworthy: he really seemed like someone who did kind things for the sake of being kind, and without much expectation of anything in response. It is so unusual to find someone who honours so tenuous an arrangement, let alone a more fixed arrangement that was clearly agreed to by everyone involved. Making arrangements is extremely difficult, especially when people have to agree to feel a certain way about those arrangements.

Although I knew that people are complex and capable of many different kinds of behaviour, it was difficult for me to reconcile the spontaneous generosity of someone who would cycle for over an hour, just for the possibility of having tea (on that occasion things were also not arranged beforehand) with someone who would do something calculated and undermining, like pretend that he was not calling his friends foolish when in fact he was.

What makes his actions on that day even more confusing is that they seem at odds not just with the way he acted before, but also with everything he has done since, almost. He acted in that way only once. There needs to be a repetition of at least three of the same kind of thing, I am told, to establish a pattern, and so there is no way of establishing a pattern with which to interpret what he said and did on that day.

It might be possible, but probably not in any way useful, to establish a pattern anyway, without the two other examples of similar behaviour to use as a blueprint. It might be, for example, that the kindness and generosity are all part of a kind of gallantry, and that gallantry is an attempt to mask a deeper, darker and less warm-hearted nature. Perhaps what we saw that day was a flash of that. But there is just no way to know for sure. And in any case, I would not want to see things in that way. I do not want to go back to all the many gentle acts he has done, for me and for others, and to change them into something different. I think that his actions should count by themselves, and his actions have been, with this one exception, only admirable. I know all too well about the private struggles of the small-hearted in our attempts to be big and if he has acted with gentleness then I think he deserves to be thought of as gentle. It is what

I would want him to do for me, if he ever has similar concerns, although I doubt that he ever does.

There are a million, and probably far more than a million, ways to read those actions but there is not enough information to be sure that any one of those ways is the right way. Each of those interpretations is equally valid, or perhaps it is better to say that none of them are valid. In that instance he was and remains an enigma.

…

So often I find people act in strange an unexpected ways and then it is a great struggle to understand why. Actually, most things that people do take some effort on my part to understand, and sometimes, if I think about it long enough, and I introduce enough information to limit the variables, if I consider everything that I think is relevant to the situation – and often, of course, I find myself thinking for some hours, or days, or weeks about some piece of information that I might think is relevant to the puzzle, but that in the in the end I decide is quite irrelevant and then have to admit that all that time is wasted and go back to the beginning, which normally means the whole process takes much, much longer – in order to better interpret it, and if I am very honest about myself and what it is I really feel and how much those feelings could affect how I understand what someone did, and if I am also honest about how much of an explanation I am owed, both in the transparency of that person's actions at the time and in how much I might reasonable ask them to account for those actions after the fact, then I am able to work something out and say, with relative certainty, what it is that someone might have meant.

Sometimes in such cases I find that an initial emotional reaction to the enigmatic behaviour was misplaced. Sometimes I might think someone is saying something cruel, dismissive or aggressive when in fact in turns out that they are simply acting out of their own insecurities, or more often it is my insecurities that have initiated a negative reaction towards them in myself. At other times, someone does something that confuses me and then upsets me, and then while I am trying to work it out, the same person will do something else upsetting, and perhaps even a third or fourth thing, and then I will be forced to acknowledge that in fact the first negative action was a red flag warning me that this person and I were not suited to one another.

The conversation about the cat was one such incident of red flag behaviour, although the person who acted cruelly that time was the other friend, the one who also has an *artistic*

brain (which just goes to show how frequently people act in an opaque and upsetting ways). Our conversation took place on an outing to the beach and after a long day of walking we were quite hungry and decided to get some fish and chips as takeaways. She ordered fried snoek and I ordered grilled hake.

While we were waiting for our orders, she asked me what I ordered and a told her, somewhat hesitantly, as I never really like to discuss what I have decided to eat because food is such a touchy subject and people can often be quite judgemental about what I order. In this case my hesitation was not misplaced because she told me that my order was quite boring. I knew that hake was the most common seafood fish in those parts of the world and so I was not surprised at her reaction but my feelings were still a little hurt. I did not think it was very nice to call someone boring.

I did not see any point in defending myself (and thought that if I tried I might run the risk of appearing just as boring as she accused me of being), or I might have explained why I chose the grilled hake. The first reason was that I was watching what I ate and so I preferred not to eat something deep fried in batter, but I said nothing about that because generally people are even more judgemental about what you choose not to eat than what you do eat. The second reason was that it was November, and though I do in fact prefer the taste of snoek I knew that you are not supposed to eat it during a month that has an r in it. I did not want to tell her this because I did not want to appear to be making a judgement about her choice and that would be, in effect, what I would be doing. She should not have ordered the snoek in November, although perhaps she did not know this at the time. It is possible that she might have appreciated being told about the dangers of what she did in order not to repeat them, but in my experience people do not like being told technical information about what they are not supposed to do. It is also true that I was unsure how much detail to use at that point, and I thought that inserting the details about months with rs in their name might cause her some annoyance.

Anyway, on that day, for some time after she said that my choice was boring I was quite upset, no matter how many times I told myself that it was just her own insecurities that were playing off mine, I could not help thinking that it was really a thoughtless thing to say. Eventually I decided to bring it up with her and ask her why she called me boring. When I mentioned it she immediately said that she was only joking and that I shouldn't take her so seriously. That made me feel better temporarily, but after a while the negative emotions came back.

And then one day when she had a bit to drink she repeated the accusation that I was boring, this time giving no indication of wanting to take it back, and also combining the verbal

attack with a drunken physical one, punching me in the chest to emphasise her frustration with my boring and timid behaviour, largely inspired by my refusal to go out and party with her. After that things became quite easy. It was clear to me that the two of us were not to getting on.

But the Schrödinger incident was not one of those cases. It seems that it is not really someone acting in an opaque way as an exception to a general rule of human comprehensibility. I truly believe this because the actions of my friend regarding Schrödinger and his cat are not the only enigma I have come across. There have been other times that someone has acted in a way that I have not understood and which has resulted in a significant bout of ambivalence being introduced into my feelings about them, and no matter how much I have thought about I have not been able to make things any less clear or less ambivalent. To make matters even worse, there are also many times in which someone I have liked or respected has done something that has puzzled me, and that causes me to doubt my good opinion of them, and, after a long period of consideration, it has turned out that my good opinion, at least in all matters related to the way they have acted, has been wrong and that actually a bad opinion is far more suitable. So I think that it is not safe to deduce a rule of general incomprehensibility either, because sometimes people are understandable, given time.

The other friend, for example, the one who brought up the idea of Schrödinger's experiment in the first place, is one of those people who acted in a way that caused me some confusion and even distress and after thinking about it for a while, and after she went on to act in the other ways that made me uncomfortable, my ideas about her changed from mostly positive to something else.

So you will see I think, how difficult it is to tell when a red flag really is a red flag, and when it is just nothing at all and why, in the case of the cat, I do not know if I can trust my feelings. Perhaps it is something, but then again, perhaps it is nothing, and it is impossible to tell. It could be that in some point in the future something will happen and then I will be able to look back and realise that his words on that day were indeed a sign of something. Perhaps he will be overtly cruel (and at this point I do not see why I should just come out and say it: that I am terrified that he will be cruel) and I will have to say to myself that, well, in fact there were signs of this and I should not be surprised at all. But then again maybe he will not ever be cruel and the cumulative weight of his generosity will cause me eventually to decide that what happened on that day was just a freak anomaly, or else some strange and inexplicable coincidence in my own inner life that provoked me to respond as I did. But how many good actions will be enough? When will the day come when I can say, once and for all, that there

was nothing very much in the *scientific brain* except for an ill-considered metaphor and that Schrödinger is finally behind us?

I never seem able to decide. After I have spent a long while in fear of him, I think of all the kind ways he has acted and I have to chastise myself for being so negative. But then I think again of that day on the beach and I have to admit that I really was, and really am still, offended and that I cannot pretend otherwise just so that I can feel like a better person. It may be that my feelings have nothing to do with him, but they are still real feelings, they are still mine and they are all that I have. So that day remains unreadable. Like the cat, it exists in two opposite states at the same time, or in neither. It is not true to say that it definitely was a red flag, and also it is not true to say that it is not. Like the cat, our relationship is dead and alive simultaneously, until someone is able to check and see which it is.

Two Different Stories

One: Waking up.

Two: Getting out of bed.

Too Much Information

When I am telling someone a story, especially if it is a story about something I have experienced directly, I am never sure how much I should add to it. How much information is too much information? Which details are relevant, and which are not? If I have to choose, I usually try to put in as little as seems possible: it is not good to bore people, or annoy them, by talking too much. But often when you do that, then the story you are telling is not as convincing as you would like.

Look at this example. The other day my friend S took me out for dinner. Neither of us is a very decisive person and so it took a long time to decide on what we wanted to eat, but eventually we chose the roasted vegetable salad as something each of us thought we might like. While we were waiting for the meal to arrive we got to talking about rocket (among other things, the salad came garnished with rocket leaves) and how it was something neither of us much used to like, but is now something we like very much. In that way it is like coriander, another taste we only acquired later in life, we observed.

She said that for some people, for a certain percentage of the population, it just isn't like that. Coriander is just never a taste they could ever grow to like. To them it will always taste like soap. For these people, this was a condition caused by genetics, she said.

I had heard this before, although not from anyone I considered to be as trustworthy a source as on that occasion[2]. I had also heard someone say that to them coriander tastes like eating stink bugs, and I said this to S. I was been hesitant to add this detail, as I am so often hesitant to add details, and in this case one of the reasons was because it was such a peculiar, unseemly detail. A stinkbug is so specific and outlandish a detail, one that draws attention to itself so that someone might wonder, what sort of a peculiar person would focus on such a weird detail and select if out of all the other details they might choose when telling a story. In drawing attention to itself these prurient kinds of details also run another risk, of course, and

[2]I am not sure if this is really worth going into here, although it might be useful, so I will try it out and see. The person from whom I first heard about the taste of coriander being genetically predetermined is someone who claims that it tastes like soap, and also someone likes to use science to explain things about himself. Of course, any of us can use science to explain most things about ourselves, but he does it in a way that seems overly defensive. If you want an example, take this story with the coriander. He seems to be saying that if it weren't for something over which he has no possible mental control, that is, his genetic make-up, he might well like coriander. He is not, in his words, being fussy, and neither is he spoilt (another self-diagnosis). It isn't that I don't believe that there are people whose genes cause them to detect soap when they eat coriander, it's just that he seemed too eager to protest his innocence of the possibility that he might actually just be picky. The way he says it makes it seem like genetics is the only real reason you could have for disliking food and that any other reason is just not good enough.

create the danger that people might think they are made up. This latter response certainly seemed to be the lines along which S was thinking that night.

Stink bug?!, she said. How could anyone possibly know what stinkbug tasted like?

At this point I realised that that might have been one of the occasions that a story needed a little more detail to work effectively, so I told her that that the person who told me that coriander tasted like stink bug *had* in fact tasted a stink bug. This person had been travelling in the back of a bakkie without its canopy and as she had been talking and a bug had flown, or had been blown, into her open mouth. After that coriander always tasted like stink bug to her, she had said.

In fact you know who I am talking about, I told S. You know H, who works with your mother? Her daughter K is the person to whom this all happened. According to Kayla, there are similar chemicals at work when you crush a coriander leaf as there are when stink bugs release their odour to protect themselves.

Now that I think about it, it might not have been necessary to tell S who it had eaten a stink bug. Maybe it was even a little disloyal to K, to share her story so freely with someone who knows her only distantly. I know that if I ever ate a stink bug, or any kind of bug for that matter, I would certainly not have liked it if someone went around telling strangers and acquaintances all about it. What is more, I am almost sure that it was not necessary to tell S exactly how she might know K.

Now I hope that you see my problem. If you try not to bore people by giving them too much detail then you can end up giving them too little, in which case they might not find what you are saying believable. I think that I only added all that about how S is connected to K because of the way she asked how anyone could possibly know what a stinkbug tasted like, as if she wasn't really asking how anyone could know, but saying that no one could know what it tasted like (that is, that my story couldn't be true, that I must be making it up), while still phrasing it as a question which somehow made it more alarming. If I added more detail then perhaps she wouldn't have said it like that, and in quite such an incredulous tone, although then when I tried to fix it I went too far in the other direction.

The problem might not be too difficult if it were just a matter of finding the right balance, but it doesn't always seem to be that simple. In that case, for instance, what would the right balance be? When I said only what some people tasted when they eat coriander, then the story was unconvincing. But then when I tried to fix it, it became unwieldy and embarrassing[3].

[3] Overwrought, perhaps, is a good word to describe what happened to my story

If I had left out the part about just who Kayla is, then the story might still have been unconvincing, even though adding this detail in was also seemingly a bad idea.

And of course it can also be bad to be on the other side. Asking for too much information about what someone is saying can annoy them just as much as giving them too much when you yourself are talking. In fact something like this also happened with S that same evening when she was telling me about some troubling and upsetting things that recently happened in her life. The last of these things she talked about was her explanation as to why she was out of contact for the previous few days. I wasn't able to get hold of her, she said, because, while she was at the station one day, she was mugged and her cell phone was stolen. It took her a while to track down all the important numbers from the people whom she sees regularly and from those of her friends whose numbers she knows off by heart. Although she wasn't hurt, the mugging was quite unsettling and she said she felt lucky and was glad that nothing worse happened.

I said that that I was glad about that too, but I told her that I thought it was bad enough that the crime occurred at all.

Oh well, she said, I am still here and everything happens for a reason.

At this point I wasn't sure what to do. I have heard this from a few people now, and that evening was the latest of a number of times that someone has said it to me. Everything happens for a reason. But I have never really understood what this means. Or at least, I have not agreed with what I understand it to mean when I think about it, so I think that it is likely that I do not really understand it.

For one thing, I don't even know exactly what it means to say that anything, let alone everything, happens *for* a reason. If there is a reason for something happening then that thing happened because of, or in support of, or with regards to, that reason, it didn't cause it. The reason has to come first, not the other way round. If something happens *for* a reason, then it sounds like the thing that happened comes before the reason. It's as if the thing that happens is the reason for the reason for the thing that happens. And of course, that is a senseless tautology. How can something cause itself to happen?

I think this confusion has partly to do with my understanding of the word for. When I have brought up this problem in the past (before the evening at the restaurant that is) I have been told that for doesn't have to mean supporting, or regarding something, it can also mean *as cause for something*. If this is true, then it does seem acceptable to say that something happens for a reason, although it also seems a little tautological to say that.

If I bracket off my confusion about things happening *for* a reason, then what the statement seems to mean is that there is a reason for everything that happens. This might make sense as a logical description of how the world works, but it doesn't make sense as a popular statement that gets repeated so often. There probably is a reason for everything that happens, because most things that happen are caused by something else happening first. If things didn't cause other things to happen then very little or nothing would ever happen at all. This at least is my assessment of the situation. The problem with this is that if there is a reason for everything that happens, then saying that everything happens for a reason is also redundant. Nothing could happen without a reason, so of course everything happens for a reason. What is the point of saying it all? Why is it even put it to words, let alone words that are repeated so often?

Perhaps what they mean is that everything that happens will be the reason for something else that happens and that eventually one of the things that happen will seem meaningful, or will make a positive change in someone's life. This last explanation is the one I find most likely, because people tend to say that everything happens for a reason when something bad has happened. I think that they do it to save the bad occurrence from being as bad as possible, because if the thing that happened will be the reason for some positive change some day, then that, at least, is something.

But even this doesn't really seem to hold up under scrutiny. It is all well and good that everything that happens is the cause of something else that happens, but there just doesn't seem any cause to believe that something bad happening will eventually be the cause of some equal but opposite good, or even something good of any significance whatsoever. It might be true, statistically, that something good will eventually happen at some point along the causal chain of events that also contains the bad thing that happened, but there is no guarantee that this good thing will happen close enough to the bad thing for it to really be worthwhile. Not in a human lifetime. There is not enough time for the numbers to work out, in eighty years or so.

All this is something that I have been thinking of for some time, quite a lot of it before that evening with S, and some of it afterward. At the time I didn't know what I should say. I thought that it would certainly be tactless, if she said everything happens for a reason in order to make herself feel better, to tell her that it is pointless to say so. On the other hand, from where I sat it also seemed a little inconsiderate to allow her to think that what happened to her was good in any way, even if it was only good insofar as it would be the reason for something good happening in the future.

That is why I decided to ask her what she meant, although that didn't turn out to be a great idea. Nothing really terrible happened. All she said was Oh, and then my name, but it was

accompanied by a certain eye roll and sigh that made it clear that she would have much preferred if I had not said it, and that she definitely did not want me to go on talking about it, and asking so many questions.

After that the evening went on for a while, still quietly successful, although I didn't enjoy myself that much. I wouldn't say that I regret mentioning it, because I still think it was important to let her know that there wasn't anything good about what happened to her, not even the small good of something bad causing a greater good later on. It may have made my evening less happy, to say something stupid like that, but I still think that it was more important not to let her keep thinking that something quite bad was a little bit good.

I still think there are some things – many thing, in fact – that are so bad that it is not worth it to say of them that everything happens for a reason. But if someone can say that everything happens for a reason then at least what has happened is not so bad that it has prevented them from saying this. They can speak, and think, at least enough to say that. And this is some small comfort, which is perhaps why they say it in the first place. Perhaps what they are really saying is that yes, this thing that happened is bad, but at least we got through it and are still talking about it. I would like to say this to S and hear what she thinks about it, but I don't think that I will. At least not until I am sure she will not think it is tiresome or irritating. It is quite a lot to of information and quite a lot of detail, after all, and I am not sure how much of it is relevant.

Wisdom from Madhur Jaffrey Concerning Spices

When you talk about the expiration of spices, of all the spices, coriander, ground, is the first to go.

Routine

I live alone and I often have to find ways to trick myself into thinking the time is passing more quickly. Even though things are happening and changing all the time, it is sometimes more difficult to believe this without someone else to walk into a room and tell me about the unexpectedly exciting day they had, the new lover in their life, the exciting new poet or thinker that they just can't keep to themselves, or whatever other major life development might have occurred. One of the tricks I have developed is to observe very closely all the routines that go on around me.

For example, at seven o'clock in the morning I can hear the youngest daughter of the family who live in the main house leave for school. I stay in a flat which shares a wall with the garage, so when I hear her father starting his car and the electronic door opening, I know it is time to get out of bed and start the day. At six and seven every evening, someone will stand at gate of the neighbours across the street and shout what sounds like a name for at least ten minutes. When I hear the shouting I know that it must be after six, so I can stop whatever I am doing and start cooking supper.

These routines are helpful beyond letting me know what time it is, and when to start on the next part of my day. They help to relieve the monotony that can descend when I spend many days alone. It is helpful to have these small markers to divide up the tedium. I have grown quite attached to all the different routines that go on around me, but by far my favourite is dog feeding time.

Every day the dogs grow excited around four thirty in the afternoon: they are hungry. The large young one eats first. He has to be fed separately because he would like to eat the others' food and would eagerly do so, were he given the chance. The small old one is fed last. He must be fed inside because he is so anxious: someone has to stay with him while he eats, to reassure him. In between these two there are the others: one large and old and two small and young. They get fed down at the bottom of the garden.

While all this is happening, and often from some time before, the hadeda ibises gather in the trees surrounding the place where the middle three dogs are fed. They are waiting to see what scraps of cartilage and bone marrow they can scavenge.

All year round, the two sisters take turns to feed the dogs, each on every other day, and I have to be careful if I want to help them. If I help the one, the other might grow jealous and resentful. But if I help the other she will be worried that her sister will find out that she has not done her chore alone, and that she will then be told to do it again the next day, all by herself.

This is the balancing act that I have to do. It is why it is easier to keep my own routines separate from the routines of other people and why, perhaps, the most pleasure comes from watching the routines of other animals, rather than those of other people. When it is just me, alone, then I can keep my routine in my head and I don't need negotiate it with anyone else, for the most part. If I don't want to get out of bed when I hear the father and daughter leave for school, I don't have to, and not doing it is much less likely to affect anyone then if I had a routine that involved other people more directly.

Routines that directly involve other people become much more complicated. Everyone has to agree on them and they have to be stated as explicitly as possible. Even when this is done, then there are often people involved in the routine who are not always happy about it. Take the younger sister, the one who doesn't like it when I help her or her sister with the dogs. There is no way to please her, really, because she doesn't want to be involved in that particular routine, despite the fact that it may have been laid out clearly, and that she probably agreed to it at some point in the past. One problem is, how can you really know that someone is happy with an agreement? How can you see into their most private experience and judge that in fact their consent to a particular routine is given along with a deep and authentic enthusiasm? And what do you do if you can't judge this? Do you assume their agreement to be true, or false? If true, then you risk the danger of resentment or worse, at some point down the line. If you assume that it is false, that someone is not really enthusiastic about agreeing to do something even though they say that they are, are you not, in fact, disrespecting them and their ability to speak for themselves?

But even when everyone agrees and everyone sees some benefit in the agreement, things are still complicated. Stating things explicitly and committing to them are features of routine that bring their own problems. For me the major difficulty is committing, in the present, when things are one way, to something in the future, when things are likely to be quite different. And things become even worse when the commitment involves feeling a certain way, as commitment to a routine sometimes does. Sister two, for instance, retains a certain amount of freedom, because she doesn't seem to have committed to feeling any particular way about her chores. She is allowed not to be happy about it, and often utilises this allowance to its full extent.

Had she promised to feed the dogs every second day and be happy about it then things would be different. Not only would she have promised to do something routinely, for the foreseeable future – and so, in effect, promised to overcome the possible external hindrances like rain, or absent mindedness, or business – she would also have promised to feel a certain

way about it, which would mean having to overcome, on top of everything else, all the internal hindrances to feeling happy, which, as by now you must agree, are fairly numerous. Emotions change all the time and there is no sure way to predict them that I can see. This is why I try to avoid making commitments to routines with other people, especially when they are routines I am supposed to be happy about.

When I say that I am happy to do something for the foreseeable future, all I am really saying is that, at the moment of speaking, I commit to trying, in the future and to the best of my ability, to feel a certain way about something in the face of all the possible obstacles, internal and external, that might get in the way.

The commitments I have made regarding my current living routines are, I think, rather good, (although as you will see even good routines can go bad). I have to pay regularly, but not too much and I can leave without any official notice and without having to pay anything more. I do most things for myself: shopping, cooking and cleaning. For the most part I don't have to negotiate my daily movements with anyone and I don't have to let anyone know what my plans are, or even what I am thinking, if I don't want to.

Most of the time this suites me perfectly. I like the excitement of planning meals and being able to experiment without the danger of disappointing anyone else. I can eat whenever I want, and in general I spend many hours in the kitchen, disturbing no-one and not having anyone to disturb me. Shopping for food is not boring if the meal I am going to make is interesting, and cleaning is bearable if I am doing it for myself on my own schedule and in preparation for the next meal. Often the best part of my day is when I hear the neighbours shouting to each other and I know I can stop whatever it is I am doing, and also whatever I am feeling, or worrying about, and start the routine of cooking.

But even good things do not remain good forever. Some months ago I just stopped being interested in cooking. It was a time at which a number of other things in my life were not going very well, and cooking changed from a catharsis to an almost unbearable obligation. Because there was no excitement in cooking, shopping and cleaning became almost unbearable too.

At some point I think the family in the main house began to notice that I wasn't leaving the flat that often, and that most of the other things I did routinely had fallen by the wayside. They would invite me to spend time with them more and more frequently, which was pleasant because they began to provide the distraction that usually came from cooking.

The problem would normally arise when I was with them and it came to be time for a meal. Generally they would ask me if I wanted to eat with them, but only after they had already

set a place for me. I would say yes because it seemed more polite than saying no, even when I would have preferred to say no because I sensed that their offer, too, was made more out of politeness than sincerity. Even when I had no plan or desire to cook for myself, I would say yes, not because I minded missing a meal but because I missed the excitement of cooking, which I felt could be recovered in some way in the excitement of the ritual of the family eating together.

As I have said, the original arrangement was that I would do most things for myself, so I knew that when I was invited to eat with them it was outside of the agreed upon routine. Usually it was only a couple of times a month that this happened, and I could normally plan things so that I could leave just before meal preparation started. But at one point things got to the point that I shared three meals in a row with the family. The first was a supper I tried but was unable to refuse. (Although I think I ought probably to have tried harder.) The second and third were a breakfast and dinner that just seemed to happen because we were spending the day together, but just before the third the mother explained that three unscheduled meals in a row was too much, for her, but for that day she would accept it. She said that it would be better if we entered into a new agreement, in which I told them, in the mornings, if I expected to eat with them in the evenings, because while sharing the meal was not a problem, the uncertainty was.

Of course I agreed, though I was very embarrassed and the next day I had a terrible fever, which made things much worse because then they offered to feed me and even brought the food to me in bed. I was very worried that they might interpret the fever as a kind of passive aggressive act, as though I somehow caused or willed my body into crisis to illicit their sympathy. This was, at least in part, my own interpretation, although I do know that conscious will had nothing to do with it. How ridiculous I am! What is more, I was not really happy with the new obligation of telling them (demanding really) when I wanted to eat together, but I have found that the way around that is just never to be around from late afternoon onwards.

I do not know why I didn't just tell them what my feelings about cooking for myself at that time were, or even my concerns about how they might understand the fever. They are kind and generous people, for the most part. It is not that I am afraid of them knowing these very intimate things about my emotions and my body, it is that I am afraid of trying my best to explain these to them, and being unsuccessful. The risk of this new routine in which I have to declare my expectations is just too great. Much better, I think, to be involved only obliquely in other people's routines in ways that do not affect them materially, and which do not result in too much obligation on my part.

Conversation with Mother about Classical Music

Me: Do you want to listen to some Beethoven today?

Mother: Why are you still listening to Beethoven? I thought he was too *masculinist*.

What I Never Feared

When I was young I spent a lot of time worrying about what I might be when I grew older. I often worried that I might one day become like my mother, and hold on to all my anger until I exploded, seemingly for no reason; or that I would be the sort of person who never finds one person to share his life with; or that I might turn overly religious so that I wouldn't be able to tolerate people who did things differently to how a religion says they should be done; or that I might grow to be a rich person obsessed with money, and making money, until this became the most important thing in the world to me; or that I would want to have many children and dote on them cloyingly; or that I might one day become a heterosexual.

In general I tended to worry that I would become someone who did not share the values I had when I was young. What actually scared me was that I knew, were I to change into one of the things I feared, I would, in fact, no longer be afraid. After all, I would have to stop being afraid of the kind of person who frightened me if I were going to become that kind of person. It was this potential inability of my future self to recognise my past self that scared me the most.

As it turns out, I need not have been so concerned, at least for myself up until this point. I have not yet exploded in anger; I am still an atheist with nothing against believers per se; I am not rich; I still do not want children; and I feel no urge whatsoever to become a heterosexual. Admittedly, there is no sign as yet of my finding anyone to share my life with, but as this still terrifies me more than anything else in the world, I think that my younger self would be at ease, or half at ease.

What I didn't fear was that I would become the sort of person who writes whimsical little stories that have no well-rounded characters; no plot development; minimal dialogue; the barest attempt at setting a scene; and are often less than half a page long, although I probably should have: do you see what I have become?

Value for Money

Something that I have noticed lately is how easy it is for someone to make a small remark that gets me thinking and then I start to think about it more and get irritated about thinking about it, but by then it's too late: I'm stuck with it and my ideas go round and round in a loop and don't go anywhere. Take the other day, for example. I was walking around the city with someone I know and we were getting tired and didn't quite know where we were, so he decided we should call a taxi. I wasn't sure I could afford to get a taxi, but he said he would pay for it.

He said that he didn't care about the money, which didn't seem fair. For one thing he probably has more of it than I do and for another by I don't care about the money, what I think that he meant is that one ought not to care about the money, and also maybe that I am in general the sort of person who does always care about money, which is certainly not the kind of person I want to be, or even the kind of person I think that I am. Now it seems that perhaps I am at least the kind of person whom someone like him sees as always being concerned with money, and so in a way I am this kind of person. After all, this person exists, even if only in his head and, in his head, it is the same person whom he thinks of when he thinks *him*, thinking of me.

And then it is possible to go even further and think about all the other things that I think I am not but that it may turn out I actually am, from his perspective, such as:

Someone who isn't experienced enough or clever enough to make the kind of money he has made, or someone who only spends time with him because of this money;

Someone who is not practiced at making tough and wise decisions, who isn't responsible about financial matters, and in fact does not know how to be responsible in this way and is always relying on others; the kind of person who is always doing things like spending impulsively on one thing rather than planning carefully for many things, or forgetting save things so as not to have to buy them again, or letting go of money owed out of confusion and embarrassment.

Perhaps he even looks down on the work I do, if he thinks about it at all, and thinks that it is not real, valuable, hard work, like the kind he does.

In a way, even though I do not think that I am very much like this, even though I am actually a very careful person, I feel a closeness to this person that I imagine he thinks of when he thinks of me, a closeness based on the anticipation of his disdain shared between the real me and the imagined me. Of course, it is also possible that he didn't mean any of these things when he said that he didn't care about the money. Maybe he really doesn't care about it, in this case. But that doesn't seem extremely likely.

I know that I shouldn't worry about stuff like this: there are so many other, better things that I could worry about. If I say to myself: don't worry about this, it doesn't really matter that much and in the grander scheme of things it doesn't matter at all, then I can usually feel better for a bit. But the problem is that after a while I become concerned about feeling better and start to worry that I haven't worried enough, that I haven't taken the situation, whatever it is, seriously enough, and then the whole cycle starts over again.

Probably he doesn't think all those things about me, and even if he did think some of them, I know that they are not true, or at least that they aren't the whole truth. I know that I work hard, for instance. But how do you judge what is hard work? Whenever I am doing some work there is always the thought in the back of my mind that I could be doing some better, harder, more valuable work. And then I think, what if you judge the value of the work by how difficult or unpleasant it is. In that case I don't think that the work I do is very hard, because it isn't always very unpleasant, especially compared to the work many people in the world have to do.

Often the work I am doing is unpleasant enough though. In fact sometimes the only way to get through it is to remember that I am being paid for doing it and so I have to think that however many minutes of mild discomfort I have to go through now, there are these many Rands I will get in remuneration. It is never very much but of course it is a lot better than nothing. It is not always easy to equate a negative experience with a monetary value, so what I tend to do, after I have translated a difficult experience into its equivalent monetary value, is translate it back into whatever pleasant experience I will be able to afford using the money.

I say to myself: so many tiring hours spent poring over this draft looking entries to add to the index will afford so many new rare succulents for my collection. Even when it is not work in the stricter sense it helps to think about this process of translation so that: these horrible moments spent trying to pry some funding from this aggressive, callous bureaucrat will hopefully become so many new pieces of cooking equipment in the kitchen. And the longer or more intense the feeling, the better the reward needs to be, so, for example: these many, many cold hours before sunset marking hundreds of exams scripts in nervous, scrawling writing becomes enough money for a plane ticket out of this claustrophobic city.

It helps to think of things like that, in a strict equivalency. It stops them from becoming overwhelming. And in instances like this, when I am doubting the value of the work I do, when I am worried that it does not have immediate results, I can think of this strategy and be reassured that, yes, there is actually tangible value to what I do, even if that value is tangible only in the future and only to myself.

But now there is a new problem to add and I am not sure that my old strategies will help to solve it. He says that he doesn't care about the money and even if all he meant by that is what he says, he did get me thinking about money, which has now led to thinking about thinking about money and to thinking about how much I think about it, which is clearly quite a lot.

Is thinking about money a lot the same as being concerned with it all the time, and is it the same as thinking that it is the most important thing there is to think about? Is that the sort of person I have become? Don't all people think about it a lot? I certainly haven't always thought about it this much in my life, but that is mostly because I haven't needed to think about it, which probably says more about my life then than it does now.

I was thinking about these sorts of things while we were waiting for the taxi and eventually I told him some of what I was thinking. I didn't tell him about how I was worried he might see me, but just about how I have to think about whether something is worth the money it will cost, as anything I might spend is generally bought very dearly through doing something tedious or difficult. When I told him all this he laughed and the he said: these years are the best years of your life, you shouldn't be worrying about things like paying for taxis.

I am never sure what people mean when they say things like that, even though I have heard it many times now: these are the best years of your life. It is normally some older person thinking back to some time in their life that I happen to remind them of and then they say something like that. It is not that I don't understand what their literal meaning when they say this, since it is fairly clear, but I don't understand why they are saying it to me. What do they mean by it? Are they just reminiscing about some lost period of happiness that they fear they will never get back? Or are they warning me and saying that I should be making better use of my time now? If it is the latter, as I sometimes feel that it is, then I can't help but think that there is also an implicit judgement involved. After all, aren't they saying that I am the sort of person who doesn't enjoy life, or live it to the fullest? A boring or timid person, or someone who doesn't appreciate things properly. I would like to be someone who enjoys things as much as possible, so I generally dislike it when I feel that someone is drawing attention to the ways in which I am not doing so.

It is not that any point in my life has been particularly terrible, although there have been some unpleasant bits here and there. It is just that I do not want to think that I am already part of the way through the part of my life that is going to be the best. I would like it if the best is still to come. If I think about myself in the future then I want to think about myself as having at least as happy a time as I am having now, and, if I am honest, probably a better time.

When I was younger I often had ideas about myself in the future and spent a lot of time worrying about who and what I might become when I grew older. In general I tended to fear that I would become the sort of person who went against the beliefs I had, at that age. One of these fears was that I would become overly concerned with making money until it become the only important thing in the world. If I think about it, I am not really concerned that I have become any of these people. Even though I do think a lot about money, I definitely don't think it is the only important thing there is. The thing that most concerns me about myself now – that I spend much of my time thinking and thinking, and worrying and worrying, about things that are not very urgent in the first place – also seems true of myself at that age, after all, I was worrying about problems in the future that were too distant and indistinct to really control.

…

In the end we ended up splitting the cost of the taxi equally. On the way home I worked it out in my head, and decided that I could actually afford this cost, seeing that it was just a once-off thing. For a little while that was satisfying and even relieving, because it turned out that I didn't have to panic after all. At least for the ride home I was able to think of other things and not the same things that had concerned me so much just a few moments before. But then I thought about what else I could have used that money for, which brought everything back, unfortunately. And as you can see I am still thinking about all of these things, and still unsure about most of them, and about what to think or to say about them.

And what is it possible to say, in the end? That I am the sort of person who cares about money (like everyone else) and also the sort of person who can panic at the possibility of not being able to afford something, and then be relieved when it turns out that I actually can afford it, but still a little resentful that I had to spend the money on this rather than any of the other things that I might have been able to afford. And what kind of person is that? It would be useful to see myself from the outside, even though this is very difficult, if not impossible. To see myself as other people see me, because this might provide some useful perspective and help me with puzzles like this one about who I am in relation to money. And other things about myself too, like whether I am making the best use of all that is available, at this time of life, and not squandering things in a way that I will regret when I am no longer young.

It would be very useful to get other people's views on this, though I am never sure if these will be honest if I ask for them. In any case, I am generally too embarrassed to ask. I have to settle for imagining what it is that someone might think.

In his case I do sometimes think that there is something about me and my youth that he finds appealing, which sometimes makes me worry it is the thing about me that he likes more than more than some other, personal attribute. In that way, in my paranoia at least, we have a kind of symmetry: I like him because he is rich, he likes me because I am young. I know, of course, that things are really more complicated than this, but I have always found that knowing a thing, even knowing it very strongly does not alter how I feel and think in my most private thoughts.

At This Age

I am simply not interested in fiction, or in making things up. If I want to forget who and where I am completely, I read cookery books.

Conversion Tables for a Student Budget

A difficult and hostile interaction in a writing consultation with a client who clearly thinks quietness and femininity are signs of incompetence equals: one pat of the best quality grass-fed butter on rye toast topped with apricot jam.

An agonising moment groping for the right words, or for any words to say in front of a tutorial full of unsympathetic, glassy-eyed undergraduates equals: a trip to the viewing station at the top of the tallest building in Africa, with spectacular views around the city.

A long and boring transcription of a poorly recorded meeting with sound that is faint and scratchy equals: a pinch of saffron to colour this rice porridge.

This excruciating and monotonous meeting full of spoiled, senseless postgraduates who want only to talk about themselves, and their parents' beach houses, and how dull and unliterary their students are equals: one campsite in the desert under the stars.

This seventh email to a student who does not seem to want to submit her essay equals: ten minutes in a national park full of antelope and graceful birds.

Kneading this dough with frozen fingers at four thirty in the morning equals: one quarter of the price of the annotated version of volume three of the Clavier-Übung.

Cutting out five hundred templates for pyramids, five hundred for cubes, and three hundred each for the other platonic solids, carefully pasting them together, and painting their faces alternate colours equals: a bottle of melatonin for those days when exercise and red wine and waking up at five in the morning are not enough to ward of insomnia.

These many minutes fighting through the crazy traffic and drunken crowds to fetch those partygoers on New Year's morning equals: one elegant new sandal from the shop in Nairobi.

Walking this shrill and neurotic Maltese poodle past the rapid, deafening German Shepherds and Rottweilers and Bull Terriers equals: enough red beans and sugar to fill a basket full of steamed buns on a cold winter night.

Reading and recording this chapter of the sickly hagiographic biography of princess Diana at the Library for the Blind, going back over each fumbled and inarticulate sentence until it is perfect equals: enough wool to knit the collar of a jersey.

Hearing and correcting the bagatelle in A minor for the eleventh time without any sign of improvement equals: one pair of earrings in the shape of foxes, or dragonflies, or pelicans.

Six hours in the dark, the damp and the dust reorganising and cataloguing old copies of storybooks and literacy materials equals: enough data to call G in Beijing for half an hour and hear about her latest exciting and outrageous exploit.

This final dark hour before sunrise, alone in the cold and the silence, listening in fear for the sound of the alarm, set off by accident or otherwise, or for the sound of alarms in the neighbouring house, or in the house one further over than that, or for any other disturbing sound, equals: enough cash in hand to rest assured that there will in fact be enough petrol to drive all the way home and be with my family for Christmas.

Sympathy with Losers

Perhaps because, in preparation for these exams, I have grown used to getting only four or five hours sleep a night or perhaps for some other reason, when I open my eyes it is two in the morning and I am more fully awake than I usually am when it is nine or ten. Last night I went to bed relatively early because the evening was overcast, and so my plan – to drive out to a friend's farm, some distance from the city's lights in order to see the full moon – then seemed pointless.

The clouds were a disappointment because, I have been told, this moon is not only full, but also much closer to the earth than it has been in many years, and then it will be for many years to come. Now that there is no chance of returning to sleep, I check to see whether the sky is still obscured. From my window I cannot see the moon itself but the small part of the sky I can see over the chimney pots and aerials is free of clouds. Despite it being nearly the middle of the night, this square of sky is the pale grey colour of early dawn. This seems hopeful and so I decide, without out any deliberation, to walk up to the highest point of the hills surrounding the city to get an uninterrupted view of the moon.

On the way out I see that J is already up. He can't sleep either. He has been fasting for the past two weeks and his sleeping pattern has also shifted so that he is awake most of the night and asleep most of the day. He agrees so enthusiastically when I ask if he wants to accompany me that I have to check that he is not being sarcastic, but as far as I can tell he isn't.

The buildings surrounding the house loom up so tall on either side of us and the alley going down to the road is so narrow that we cannot see the moon until we leave the complex. It is so bright, once we are outside and can finally see it, that it colours the rest of the sky like twilight. The broad tree-lined street and unusually prolonged dusk make it seem like we have been transported to a different city, a city somewhere where the evenings stretch on and on forever.

For a while we walk in silence. I remember that last night I overheard him and Blade having one of their discussions, or disagreements (I can never tell which it is). They never seem serious, but also don't ever seem entirely playful. It was all to do with the word science and how J thought that there was a dangerous tendency to use it in lax and irresponsible ways. Using science or scientific in imprecise colloquial terms, just to mean anything that referred to physical or natural laws, without requiring real testing and experimentation, was dangerous. It led, apparently, to things like people not vaccinating their children and so on. Personally I think this statement was a little excessive, but I have a deep tendency to sympathise with J, and in

any case, Blade was behaving in such a provoking and pedantic way, creating a slippery slope where there was none (he was bringing in colloquial uses of other words, ones used by J, in order to show him up) that I tended to take against his side. Anyway, I fell asleep before I heard the end of the conversation.

The thought of science and terminology leads me to thinking about a conversation J and I had a few months earlier about objectivity. It was a conversation that, as has subsequently seemed to happen more and more with him, deepened from something quite dry and insignificant into something of great resonance to me although I can't quite put my finger on exactly what the turning point was.

…

At the time he was completing the methodology section of his thesis and was lamenting the many hours he spent on what he said were pointless formalities before he could even get down to saying anything interesting. One of the greatest annoyances for him was the fact that he had to acknowledge, at such great length, over and over again, the many ethical implications of his own perspective as a researcher. He knew, for example, that he could not be objective and that his presence as an observer must have some effect on what he observed. But what was the point of stating this again and again, in different ways, over so many pages? Surely there was an implicit acknowledgment of this fact? What was the need of stating it so explicitly? When he read work that he really respected, then the self-critique was always already there, even if it didn't need to be qualified repeatedly. Announcing one's lack of objectivity and fallibility to such a degree was really full of self-importance, he said.

I thought that what he was complaining about seemed to be a certain kind of failure. Failure and dishonesty. It was a failure to act in a way that one said one would act. I tried this theory out on him.

Perhaps it is about context, I said. So, if someone remarks at great length about how they are so unavoidably involved in what they are observing, then we expect them to come up with some important insight about their involvement, to do more than just explain what they won't do.

Yes, he said. In a way that is what they are promising. By denouncing the goal of objectivity so thoroughly they are almost promising an alternative. Not in so many words but contextually, or implicitly.

What he said mirrored so exactly what I had been thinking about for some time that I grew excited and continued to link his ideas to mine, thinking aloud in a way that I would normally never have felt comfortable doing.

I said that I always thought that context was really important, that the way in which something was said was almost more important than, and at least as important as, what was actually being said.

Apologising, for example, is something that so often doesn't work, I said, because the person apologising limits the options of the person they are saying sorry to, and forces their hand. If you apologise to someone then you choose the time at which you force them to accept or reject your apology, they don't get a say in the matter. Even if you tell them that they have all the freedom in the world and that they have as much time to think about it as they want, you are not being entirely honest because there is something about the context of the situation that requires them to accept your apology, or to reject it. So in a way it is a trap, I said. I told him that in my experience, the only time an apology actually works is when the person that needed the apology had already decided to accept it and was only waiting for it to arrive.

As I said these things I felt that I was becoming too abstract and obscure, and so I cut myself short, but to my surprise he agreed with what I said.

People hardly ever truly hold themselves open to the possibility of an equal conversation, he said, especially when a conversation falls into disagreement.

At that point I asked whether he thought it was ever possible for a conversation to be completely open and free of disguise or constraint.

He said that he thought it was possible and then, electrifyingly, that he thought that our conversation was one example of this.

…

We continue to walk without speaking and I think that perhaps it is the fact that I do not feel his silence to be awkward and weighted with expectation that I don't think that he is uncomfortable or that he feels I am imposing this silence that makes it so easy be around him. Maybe the turning point was that he allows me to think aloud, to give voice to what is going on inside my head without judgement that makes talking to him so significant. With him there is more balance between what I think and what I say than with most other people. Although thinking that doesn't really answer the question because I can't really say what it is about him that makes it so easy for me to voice my thoughts.

By now we have left the city streets and are walking up along the dirt road to the top of the hill. In the bright moonlight the fields of bracken and heather and abandoned stone cottages on the hillside make it look even more like we are in a completely different place, like a fantastic moor in a dream.

Eventually we come to the top of the hill. From up here, contorted into odd folds in the slopes of the hills, the city looks like a child's toy map that has been squashed and bunched up: even less deserving of the designation city than usual. It is freezing cold and my eyes are beginning to water, but the moon is huge and bright and is turning the sky all around it pink and orange just like the sun as it sets. He explains that the proper name for this phenomenon is perigee syzygy, and also how it works, although I don't fully understand everything and my mind begins to wonder, which he seems to notice.

At least now I know the proper scientific name, I say, jokingly, trying to make him feel at ease, and there's no danger of me using colloquial terms to describe it.

Joking about the discussion from yesterday is a gamble that I quickly see might not have been successful, because he frowns and says, oh, so you heard us last night?

Yes I say smiling.

But you agree, don't you, he asks, and I think that it is a serious question, though expressed humorously. I think about this before I answer.

In one sense I agree with Blade, because I don't hold as much store by the importance of proper scientific terms as J does. But in a deeper way, I feel that Blade's provocations made his argument much less appealing. Increasingly I have noticed that I tend to agree with the content of one side of an argument, but felt a greater resonance with the other side because of how the person I superficially agree with has actually argued. If I agree with the content but not with the way in which the arguer has conducted themselves, then I cannot really agree with their argument. They have all been trivial arguments, this latest one included, but now I wonder how I would react if the argument were serious. I can see that he notices my hesitation though, so I tell him about how I do and don't agree.

I tell him that if I were to put my feelings into words then I would say that when someone is right about something they can go about saying it in the wrong way. I can agree with someone's argument but disagree with how they argue and this turns me against them.

Increasingly I have observed this in myself, I say. It seems to happen mostly when people are enjoying the argument. I don't trust people who enjoy arguing, because it seems like they are taking pleasure in it in a vindictive way. It isn't serious to them and it isn't important. To me they don't seem to be invested in it. They only care about winning, or at least proving

that they are more intelligent than someone else. There is no emotional weight in it for them, or maybe there is, they just don't know that there is so they're in a kind of denial. They argue a position only because they think that this position is objectively accurate and not because they feel any particular subjective investment in that position. If they acknowledged that they also have an emotional investment, that partly they are arguing to defend themselves and what they feel, and not just what is objectively true, that would be more honest. Whatever it is that is going on in these situations I often seem to find myself sympathising more with the person whose actual propositions I don't really agree with. Especially if they are losing. Perhaps that is what I sympathise with, I smile. I sympathise always with losers.

So you don't actually agree with me, he asks, in that way that he has that is both comical and serious, that I find so difficult to read, but at the same time so thrilling.

No I think I am saying that I do agree with you, on a deeper level. It's all about context.

Context isn't as important as everyone seems to think – I'm not even sure what everyone means by context, he says. Certain things are just generally true, whatever the context. If we allow for science to mean different things in difference contexts then it does become dangerous: a person not trusting in medical science is dangerous. It's like this, he says removing his watch so as better to articulate his point. Do you know that some people don't use vaccinations, just because they think there is real scientific evidence for them not to use them? That is dangerous

At this point I experience a number of complex things. Firstly there is the fact that he does not seem to remember our conversation of a few months ago about context, or if he does then he doesn't remember it in as much detail and in the same way as I do. Curiously this is not disappointing. If anything it makes him less formidable – more human. So perhaps it is true that I don't know as much as he does, but I remember things, or at least conversations, far more clearly and in greater detail. Added to this is his slightly unnecessary illustration of his argument with the idea of vaccinations. It seems like such a banal and arbitrary point and reminds me of a tendency in someone else I know, someone whose opinion I respect much less, to use unnecessary metaphors and mundane examples.

But just like the fact that he does not remember the earlier conversation, this lapse seems only to make him more appealing. It makes no sense that this is how it should affect me! There is also something that changed about how I see him when he took of his watch, something that is simultaneously so childish and adult – so manly! – about taking off a watch and placing it down beside him. It is strange that this purely physical action could have such a deep effect but now, after so small a change, he seems so much more complex a person.

As we walk back down the hill, the moon is setting but the sun is rising, so it seems like the sky, which has been kept in stasis at the point of twilight has now been reversed, so that it never got a chance to pass into night but is going straight back into daylight. I consider whether or not I should remind him of what we has said all that time ago about the importance of context. Now it seems too late to bring it up though. I do not want it to seem like a reproach. On the one hand he now seems easier to talk to than ever, but on the other there are still definitely certain things that I cannot say because they, no matter much I qualify them or how much freedom or time to respond to them I tell him he has, remain a trap.

The Benefits of Peculiar Taste

The books I like are always available in the library.

Lives without Fear

So many people I know are unashamed of their ideas and eccentricities. I should like to be braver, like they are. As they do, I should like to care less about what others think.

Sometimes it is a clear and obvious bravery that would surely impress everyone.

Like W who tells unpopular lecturers that they are unpopular, especially when they seem not to know it; who once felt so strongly about her support for students who were protesting being cheated out of their government bursaries that she scaled the fence of their school, just because the police told her not to; and who has quit her job many times now because employers are so often immoral, whether hers were rape apologists, or exploited their workers, or chose workers over women in their writing of history, or simply because they expected her to commute many hours to work every day.

Or B who falls asleep in meetings; and who brings up all the ways that the men in whom she shows a romantic interest have spoken badly of her and confronts them face to face.

Or S who walks away when people do not make an effort to talk to her about interesting things; who responds earnestly to telemarketers and once told an electoral canvasser that she did not believe in representational politics; who relishes the chance to debate with political partisans when they stop her on the street; who tells visitors when she feels they should not have come.

Or E who once put her arms around a loud and aggressive Zionist at a meeting for Palestinian solidarity because she felt safe as a senior citizen and that holding him like that was the best way to keep him from interrupting.

At other times it is someone who behaves in quite unusual ways, but doesn't mind what people think about this, as long as they themselves are happy.

Like A who sometimes forgets her false teeth at home and goes on to teach all her classes for that day anyway; who writes little notes next the flowers from her garden that she presses between the books she gives a gifts without fear of how peculiar this might appear; and who is resourceful past what is acceptable in most polite society, once cutting the cheese for her sandwich using her library card when she had no knife.

Or like C who asks for one teabag to share between two people in order to save money when she is with another person at a restaurant; who has been scammed many times because she cannot refrain, in spite of her better judgement, from helping people when they appear to have dropped some money, or ask her for directions, or tell her the need to use her phone to make an emergency phone call; who asks questions aloud to strangers on the train and on the bus when she comes to a point in her thinking that she cannot answer herself; and who asks the men who hoot at her from their cars what they want when she is walking along the street.

Or P who ties her long-sleeved shirts around her head as a turban when she doesn't have a towel to dry her hair; and who argues with her husband when she believes she is right even when he shouts appallingly and her face grows red from embarrassment.

Many times I admire people just for being so much themselves in the fact of all resistance from the world that I cannot help but love them.

Like G who tells strangers about all the difficulties in her life in great detail, when they greet her by asking how she is doing; and who complains loudly when she is underdressed for a fancy restaurant and the waiters refuse to serve her.

Or R who spent each weekend sleeping in a different place around the house regardless of who was visiting or what his family would say; and who refused to go to doctors' appointments and medical check-ups because he said he wanted to live his life and not worry about living it, or about when it might end.

Or K who is honest about what she wants even when it might sound selfish; and who likes to give strangers feedback on their communication skills if she meets them on the bus or in a taxi and find that these skills are lacking.

Or D who wears his clothes until they are falling apart so that bank employees think that he is confused when he goes to speak to his personal banker; and who left his chance to be the first black man to climb Everest because the team leader was so arrogant and irresponsible.

Or Y who mispronounced the words dwarves, clinic, egotist, women, Helen, dude, frangipane, irreparable and felon but spoke each one with such confidence that is seemed like she was right and the rest of the world was wrong, and who convinced me, for the majority of my childhood, that the pet catfish in the tank was a *pacostima*.

Or I who resigned from her job because her colleagues did not applaud when she sang Celine Dion at the office Christmas party karaoke, who sings Mozart arias in terrible German when she is bored in public; who once threw an empty wine bottle across the street at a couple

of whom she was jealous after they sounded like intruders, because she always defends herself against burglars using empty wine bottles; and who creates wild and ostentatious personae when she feels the need to express deep emotion and once dyed her hair blond and called herself Rismilka The Russian Ex-Spy, after a long and boring period in hospital.

Or L who brings up whatever she finds interesting or even things she does not find interesting but wants to talk about anyway because she has no need to please people with her topics of conversation.

Like T who fights with bouncers and with club patrons when they obviously have a racist and sexist admissions bias; and who takes off her shoes whenever she feels particularly passionate at political meetings.

And other times a person's speciality can be so multifarious and beautiful that I cannot categorise it at all.

Like H who tells people about her feelings, especially when they are difficult and have been hurt, and even when it is uncomfortable or seems unnecessary to do so; who does not speak unless she is absolutely comfortable, and once spent an entire dinner party in complete silence; and who screws up the courage to tell people uncomfortable things when she believes it is right they should know, even when this makes her seem unpleasant and shrill.

Or like J who once hitchhiked across the country despite everyone he spoke to telling him that he was probably going to die; who once wore a second pair of boxer shorts on top of the first because he had no trousers to go hiking with; whose speech is slow and formal and inflected with a slight German accent even when this strikes people as affected or precious; who makes friends widely and easily and keeps them because he is unafraid to show affection, or to receive it; who day after day wears the same shapeless pants from an old opera costume his mother once designed because they are comfortable and do not conform to any trend; who goes to bed without warning when he has unwanted guests who will not leave; and who focuses his fierce attention and empathy on everyone he meets, regardless of who they are, of how interesting they might be, and how deserving they are of empathy.

Childhood Memory

It is Plecostomus, not pacostima.

An Authentic Performance

This is often how things go, before a performance: first M will watch and listen to me play on the Bösendorfer and then she herself will practice while I wait outside and then we will walk back together through the school grounds and down the hill into town.

That is how I like it anyway, because while I wait outside (if it is sunny) I can see how the sunlight changes the green of the grass and makes it more yellow with warmth and changes also the different greens in the oak leaves and in the bougainvillea.

While I am waiting for her a message arrives; it is from him.

Hey, it says.

I heard from M that tomorrow you guys are playing the Fantasia that we were meant to do together. I didn't realise you were still doing it. Man, I'm really sorry things went south with us. You have to believe I really am. Anyway, good luck tomorrow. Peace.

I think about this as calmly as possible.

The message is unexpected. Even though there have been many times every day that I have gone over some version of this in my head I have never thought it at all likely to happen. Now here it is: an apology, just as I wanted. So why am I not pleased?

Certainly he seems honest enough. He is sorry, really sorry, he says. He even thinks that it is necessary to tell me to believe him, to ensure me that the message was sent in good faith, as though he thinks I will find it unbelievable that he is sorry. If he thinks it is so unbelievable, does this mean that it is unbelievable, I wonder? Is it untrue? Or is it just that he thinks that I am suspicious and paranoid and unlikely to believe anything positive of him? That I am a narrow and cynical person, in other words. That could also explain the petition for belief.

It seems that he is earnest but there is something not quite open about his language. 'Man' in particular is too casual to be really serious. He is trying to keep things light, like he is afraid if he doesn't keep a tight hold of the tone that I will get control of it and then I will allow things to get out of hand in some overly dramatic way. And why 'south'? 'South' is metaphorical. There are supposed to be certain connotations to the idea of 'going south' that are negative, suggesting failure, in this case. It is a clichéd use, among other things, and I do not see why he could not have taken the time to explain things with more specificity. He is choosing not to be literal and to me it seems like he is avoiding saying things as they are by refusing to take words at face value.

As for ending a message with 'peace', I think that that is perhaps the most disingenuous choice of all. It is like 'man' but worse because it is possible to read 'man' as being chosen

only for its contribution to an easy-going and friendly tone. But ‘peace’, while it certainly also adds to this tone, also suggests its opposite, as if, had he not said it, I might have launched straight into hostilities, which supports my idea that he is so worried about my suspicious nature that he thinks he needs to pre-empt it.

But what if I am getting it all wrong and he really meant only to say sorry.

Although I was thinking of responding immediately, I think better of it. I need to decide exactly what the message means, or what I think it means, or at the very least, what I feel about what I think it means.

…

I am still trying to work it out and sitting on the wall of cool red bricks outside the hall when a large man dressed in khaki comes around the corner and, looking pointedly at my face (too much melanin to be innocent, that is what I know he thinking) and hair (too wild), asks if he can help me.

There is no reason that he should think that I need help. I am clearly not lost, because I am not walking around, nor even looking around for where to go. There is nothing to suggest that anything is wrong with me, unless sitting down and looking at a phone is reason to think that someone is in trouble.

But something is wrong with me, from his perspective. Or I am wrong just for being here, which amounts to the same thing in the end. I realise that he not really offering to help me, unless it is help in leaving the property.

He is not actually asking a question at all, except maybe the questions: what do you think you are doing here? What right do you have to be in this place?

He is not asking a question, he is making a statement and disguising it as a question. What he is saying, in fact, is this: you don’t belong here. Leave quickly and things will not get ugly. I have the power to make them ugly. If you don’t believe me, stay put, and see what happens.

In responding truthfully to what he has phrased as a question I could just say no. That would be honest. Then things might well get ugly and I am not brave enough to find out what that would look like. Then again, I could be truthful in another way. I could point out to him that he is not offering to help me and I could tell him exactly what he is doing. But this is obvious to both of us and if I do point it out things will definitely become ugly.

In the end I decide to be honest in the third and least way. I say simply that I am waiting for my music teacher, which is a truth that is not really connected to his question (statement) and which satisfies no-one (although he pretends he is satisfied). What I have done, in effect, is to ensure that he has lost the chance to exercise his power and prejudice and I the chance to challenge it.

At this point M comes out of the hall and he seems more fully at ease. Now, in fact, he seems keen to start up a friendly conversation.

Are we attending the recital tomorrow?

Yes, M says, we are the performers.

How wonderful! His daughter is a budding musician. She is just starting out but everyone says she is very musical. She will be at the recital tomorrow.

Then she ought to come and see me, says M, after the performance. More students are always welcome. And if she is really just starting out my student here could even help her. She is likes beginners.

He appears to be very pleased (with the offer of M teaching his daughter anyway).

I am so pleased, he says, and then to me, and with great warmth:

Would you be interested in teaching my little girl? She has only been playing around for a few months but already she has picked up that wonderful little Beethoven piece.

I think with dread of someone fumbling their way through the A minor Bagatelle, as he goes on talking.

You are very lucky to have such a talented and generous teacher, he says.

I smile and say that I know this, because that is what the situation clearly requires even though I am not yet sure that I want to commit myself to the revisionism he is clearly now attempting.

The abruptness of his change of attitude is quite disconcerting. It feels as though I might have imagined hostility in what came before that wasn't there, or that I came to a conclusion about his character too quickly. But I think this only for a second and the small part of my mind that was always sure of his behaviour grows larger as I remember the voice and the face and the smug body language, his hands on his hips which were thrust forwards aggressively. In fact his friendly behaviour after his hostile behaviour is worse because it casts into doubt what came before and makes me feel as though perhaps I were imagining things, or as though I am too sensitive. It casts me in the role of trouble maker, of inventor of discord.

I try to say all this to M as we are walking, but she dismisses it. He was only worried about his school and the students, she says. He would have acted that way with anyone.

I do not agree that he would have done but it is not an argument in which I think I will be successful, nor one for which I have enough energy. For a while feel guilty about not facing up to this disagreement but soon my nervousness about the performance takes over so I say nothing and wait for her to bring up her criticisms.

She does not do this right away and so we walk in silence, first past the last of the school buildings (designed without the least discretion about their long and dubious tradition and in fact advertising this tradition freely, complete with heavy stone battlements and military flags) and then down the many sets of stone steps connecting the huge chalk-lined sports fields that descend slowly into town.

…

Eventually she starts speaking again. The Schubert Fantasia is fine, she says, even quite musical.

We have been practicing breathing together so that we are exactly in time with each other and today even the final fugue, difficult to pull of successfully in all but the most musical performances, was controlled and full of energy.

The anguish in the final bars was finally enough.

Only the slow movement, she says, could perhaps have more grand and stately drama, but that might come in the performance.

As for my other work, which thankfully will not be included in the recital, there are some problems.

She says she knows what is wrong:

There are two problems. The first problem is focus. How long do you practice every day?

That is too long, she says, when I tell her that it is between three to four hours, mostly. I should try practicing for only one hour every day but I must do so with extreme focus. She looks at me carefully and then says that she can see that that kind of focus might cause trouble for me.

Think of him, she says.

He is someone who is focused always on the task at hand. He is always present and always in the present, never worrying too much about what will happen next but giving attention to what is happening as it happens.

At this point there is a pause in which I am supposed to agree, or disagree, but definitely respond to the topic at hand. Since he is the topic I hesitate because I have to be careful to control what I say. I do not want to state things to emphatically before I know exactly what the things that I should state are. I know that she will not be interested in what it is that I would really like to say about the topic, at least not in everything that I would like to say, but if I make up something bland and safe she will not be interested in that either. It must be something true, but it cannot be so deeply true that it makes things uncomfortable.

In the end I say that it is remarkable, his ability to be so continuously present. It is one of the first things I noticed about him and one of his best qualities I say, and then I tell her that he sent a message.

I say it in a way that I know will seem to her like praise or will seem to be an invitation of praise from her (which is very close to being the same thing). As a tactic it is not quite honest but also not quite dishonest. Anger at the message is something I am likely to feel in a little while (this is almost a certainty) but at the moment it isn't yet quite the case that I am angry. Right now I am being honest, at least in my desire to try out what satisfaction at what he has written might feel like, even if it is only for a few moments.

She says that he is very considerate and that it wasn't even necessary for him to say these things. She is not meaning this as a reprimand or a comment on my reaction. She does not know the nature of the depth of the feelings involved here, so she cannot know how intense the response is likely to be.

I continue to play the part of someone who is full of admiration, although it is no longer at all honest to say that I want to know what it feels like or that I have a chance of actually being such a person. I know I am not that person and I have no interest in being him.

I think, anyway, that it is probably a useful idea to talk to her about this today, even though she is not really someone who I would normally trust in this way. I think it is a useful idea because it is something that I want to talk about so often and I know that most people do not like to talk about the same thing very often, and because there are so few people who I really trust to talk to about something like this I often end up talking to the same handful of people I do trust and those people must often get fed up with the same topic of conversation all the time (I think), and so I am careful to alternate which days I bring it up so that I only talk about it to one person (a different person) each day. Now, if I am careful and control myself, and make sure that this discussion is not too disappointing, I will have a whole extra day when I don't have to bring it up with any of the normal people.

However, just as I think this she seems to tire of this subject and moves back to her list of problems with my playing.

The second problem is quite complex, but it begins with the fact that I am too tense: I place too much tension in my shoulders. It is because I am a small person.

That is what small pianists do, she says. They worry that they do not have the weight and power of larger musicians, so they try to compensate by placing all their tension in their shoulders.

I have to imagine that I am someone else. Imagine that you are a big man with lots of weight to throw around, like Brahms, she says. That is the only authentic way to play these pieces. You have to imagine being him, if you are going to be playing his rhapsodies. Especially this one. It is so long, so extroverted and so very difficult for small hands.

I won't manage it, she says, without imagining I am someone else. That is the only way to give an honest performance.

She tells me that the nerves are holding me back. I am prevented from playing to my true capability because I am too nervous and so I can never give a properly authentic performance.

Again I try to work out what this means. What she says seems not to make sense at all. I am supposed to imagine that I am not myself in order to have fidelity to the music, and in the end my goal is to be more truly myself, to reveal to the audience more of myself then the habitual fear generally allows. But if I perform a kind of bravado that I don't actually have then how is that more authentic? Surely it is more authentic to be honest about the fear and the nerves. Surely any performance is slightly dishonest by its very nature?

I point this out to her but she says that I am placing too much on the concept of performance, that I am making too great a distinction between performance and the rest of life.

How do I deal with being nervous in general? Are there not times when, because of worry, I am held back from speaking, and so prevented from showing a more honest version of what I am feeling?

I do not think that this thought experiment makes a significant difference to what she has said before and I present it to her like this:

If the things that are stopping me are natural parts of myself, as the nerves seem to be, then I have the following dilemma: Either I can try to ignore the fear and speak, but that always feels like a kind of performance anyway, one that makes me uncomfortable. Or I can simply accept the fear, and in most situations this leads to doing nothing and to not expressing what I am feeling. So in uncomfortable situations, I could be honest about the type of person that I

think I am when I am comfortable or I can be honest about the discomfort at that moment and be silent. It is always very difficult to tell but mostly I choose the latter. I do not add, that this is more like him, in her estimation, like his characteristic knack for taking each moment as it comes.

Mostly, or always, she asks? Are there never situations in which the risk of not performing, of saying nothing, is too great?

Well, yes, I think. I thought that that was the how things were with him. That not bracketing out my insecurities would mean losing too much and so I did that and tried to act in a way I thought I might act if I weren't nervous. That clearly didn't end well and since then I have always thought that acting the way I did (the way I act when I am trying to be truthful to some ideal, unselfconscious version of myself) was the reason for it not ending well.

To her I say only that yes, sometimes the risks are too great, but even then, when I try to act in a way that is more true to who I could be, I still end up feeling less authentic. I am not even sure that authenticity is real, I tell her, perhaps it is not.

She does not think that it is unreal. Even though there are a lot of external factors that influence it, we are not the same people and do not have the same internal workings and this leads to difference which is what gives validity to authenticity.

But this doesn't make sense either.

Authenticity is a positive thing, supposedly created by a unique and indivisible essence, while identity created by difference is, by its definition, negative, so that doesn't work, I tell her.

She ignores this remark and returns to the idea of risk. She sometimes acts in ways that don't seem natural or authentic to who she is, she says. It is a sacrifice that she chooses to make and she hardly ever regrets it, even when the risk is frightening. The more risk she takes the braver it makes her and the less she feels afraid to take similar risks in the future.

But I do not think that this is always true. The more risks I take, the worse I feel, very often, worse and worse with every risk. I feel that now more than ever.

Well she says, perhaps seeing my face, this isn't really of the utmost urgency is it? After all, tomorrow will go well, she thinks, whatever I believe in authenticity and risk taking.

…

Back down in town we pass an old woman I know on a scooter who is being pulled over by the police. There seems to be some irregularity with her licence. That as least is what the two of us guess.

Shame M says, that poor old woman.

After I tell her that I know her, she says I should go and help.

I say that I am pretty sure that she can look after herself, even though M doesn't think that she looks it.

In the end the old woman seems to come to some kind of solution and she is allowed to go.

I am very grateful because did not want to go up to her and ask 'can I help you', as M suggested. I really have no idea what I could do to practically help with the police.

In this case it would have either have meant, to her: I am here for moral support against the police (and this might have been helpful but it would not have been that helpful), or to the police themselves: Watch out! (this might easily have made things worse.) Neither is something that would have been particularly helpful to the old woman, and if there is another alternative it escapes me and I am grateful I am allowed to do nothing without it seeming intentional. That, at least, is the most authentic thing I can do.

Mental Categories

I wonder if you ever have this problem; I think that it is fairly common. I often think of something that someone has done, or something particular about a person, before I am able to remember who it is that has done the thing I am thinking about, or whose characteristic I am thinking of. It tends to take me a while, sometimes it is a few seconds and sometimes it is weeks or even months. There are some actions or qualities that I have been trying to place for many years now.

This inability to place things could, I think, be known to many, if not most, other people, if only because it is so well-known to me. And this is not the only reason that I believe it is not something peculiar to myself. I know at least one other person – my grandmother – who definitely used to have the same kind of experience. If, for example, she wanted to address me, she would sometimes use my father's name, instead of mine, and sometimes my uncle's. Towards the end of her life she would do this with increasing frequency, and in the year that she died there was probably a chance of about thirty-three percent that she would use the correct name. I think that whatever it was she wanted to say to me had to do with a certain quality that she believed was shared between all three of us and that is why she confused us.

This was not really much of a problem because it was normally quite easy to work out who she was talking to. What is interesting about it is that she only ever confused the three of us: she didn't just confuse anyone with anyone else. It was only men to whom she was closely related that she confused with other men to whom she was closely related.

Of course, she would sometimes confuse other people but it would always only be people whose names existed in a specific category she had made for herself. She would never confuse the three of us with, for example, the father and son to whom she sold her television, or the different female presenters on the local radio station. She would only ever confuse these people with each other, that is, the father with the son, and the different radio hosts with one another. In a different category she stored the driver at her old age home together with my mother (to my mother's great and lasting offence), both of whom used to take her to the shops when they were too far away for her to walk. There were certain rules that determined which names were interchangeable with each other, and it may even be possible to say that there are certain rules for this habit of categorising people in general.

The main rule seems to be that interchangeability depends on where, in your mind, you originally store the information about a person and their name. It depends on how you construct your mental categories. My grandmother stored all close male relatives in one place, and all

men from whom she received money in exchange for important household electronic items in another, and in a third she stored women who have their own show on the radio. Gender was an important designator for her, as I think it is with many people, as was degree of familial relation to herself. Of course, sometimes gender would be trumped, as in the unfortunate case of my mother.

Once a person has been placed in one category it does not appear that they can be moved to another. Even in the event that someone might qualify as a member of two categories it is still the category to which they were first assigned – and I think this indicates the category of most importance – which takes precedence. My grandmother, for instance, would never confuse me with other people in the category of *people who drive her to the shopping centre*, even though, objectively speaking, I ought to have fallen to that category. No matter how many times I would take her to the shops she would never confuse me with the man from her old age home who used sometimes to drive her too. No matter how well she got to know this (and she got to know him very well, in fact he became one of her closest friends in the retirement village) she would never confuse his with the name of someone in a more intimate category, such as close relatives. It would seem that in her case close did not include relatives through marriage.

I can give you a different example of how these categories work, one from my own experience. I think that it shows some of the more important features of this phenomenon. Particularly it shows the persistence of where you originally store a person's name, no matter how much that person might change in your estimation as you get to know them better.

When I was in school, two new boys moved to my class at the same time: J and M. Both of them where very tall and conventionally good-looking. That was the first thing I noticed about them, and so I suppose I must have stored them in a space in my mind that you might call *tall and handsome strangers*. I know that I must have stored their names in the same place because I did use to get them confused. If M would do something of interest to our small school community, like driving to school on a scooter before he was old enough to have a license, I might say did you know, today J drove to school on a scooter, even though the idea of a person that I was holding in my mind was the idea that corresponded to M and not J.

At first it wasn't much of a problem because neither of them were a big part of my life. Eventually though, J's friends started becoming friendly with my friends, and eventually he himself started to be friendly with my friends, and finally with me. Even then it was still not such a terrible thing, although a little awkward, when I might say something like, will M be joining us today? when I was really talking about J.

The real trouble started when J and I became really close friends. At a certain point we were almost inseparable. As it turned out, we had very similar interests. He was good at maths, better than I was, but I liked the elegance and clarity of that kind of thinking. We were the only two in our grade to take a certain special kind of maths class, which was only taught at another school, and so we spent a part of many of our afternoons walking there, just the two of us. We would discuss and debate many things on those walks and it seemed like that part of the friendship would go on forever.

When it happened that we really disagreed on something, which was not often, then the shock of his not thinking as I did was so strong it confirmed the closeness of our ideas in every other instance. I remember once walking to the advanced maths class together and talking about the usefulness of logic as a way of describing the world. We both liked logic and rationality, just like we both liked maths, but he said that logic was the best and only way of describing the world and I said that it always seemed to fall short of being able to describe the deepest kinds of experience. He energetically disagreed and the intensity of his disdain for what I thought was upsetting, not only on its own terms, but also because it was so unusual that he directed that kind feeling towards me. I had grown to value his respect so much that its absence was troubling in that situation.

Once after class we were walking together next to the sea and our attention was so focused on conversation that we did not give enough to the water. When an unexpectedly large wave hit, we did not see it coming and suddenly there was a wall of water right in front of our faces and then just as suddenly it was behind us, leaving us sodden and salty. My home was much closer than his and when we got there I lent him some of my clothes. Because we were so completely soaked he needed a full outfit, right down to underwear and socks. He was a little awkward in my clothes because he was taller than I was and his chest and shoulders were much broader than mine and so everything he borrowed was quite tight.

…

Apart from maths both of us were interested in music. The piano was my first instrument and only his second, and when we would play together at the keyboard I was better than he was, the opposite of how things were in the field of mathematics and logical thinking. His first instrument was the cello, which I couldn’t play at all so the relationship was inverted only in maths and never in music.

Once we were playing a duet that presented quite a few difficulties: there was some complex hand-crossing between us, some dramatic slow playing that required absolutely precise rhythmic control, and a general need to improvise with the pacing throughout in order for the performance to be successful. We spent a great deal of time working on it and didn't seem to be getting anywhere until we decided to try coordinating our breathing. During the final rehearsal (we never did perform that piece for anyone else) I had to touch my forehead to his chest to properly match his breathing, in order, he said, to get it into my head, and I clearly remember the feeling of his collar bone against my temples.

Although there are a few things I can think of that are more intimate than breathing together with someone, and improvising music with them, there are not many. And yet, in spite of this, I still said to another friend one day that M and I were playing a duet together, even though what I mean to say was J and I. She laughed and seemed to think it was very funny, but I was embarrassed. At this point the actual social categories that M and J existed in were so far apart that there was no good reason for me to confuse their names, or at least no good reason beside the reason that did cause me to confuse them, which was good enough actually to cause it. I was embarrassed because of the way she laughed, which I thought meant that she might suspect what this reason was. After all, who wants people to know that one of the ways you organise your mind is according to category *tall and handsome men*. It just goes to show, really, how nonsensical these mental categories are and how dangerous it would be if everyone could see into out innermost thoughts.

Double the Problems

Sometimes I think oh, how difficult it is to be me, my life is so hard, and that makes me feel quite sad. After a while I think about things some more and I have to admit that, relatively speaking, my life is quite lucky and I feel churlish. Then I feel like a bad person on top of feeling sorry for myself.

Cliff-hangers

People say that you can never see yourself from the outside, but I am not so sure. Sometimes I think it's almost possible to get a sideways glance.

The other day at the bank I did a silly thing. I put my card into the atm even though the teller told me that there was a problem. When she said it I thought she meant that it was an anomaly, that when I inserted my card and the machine displayed an error message it was a freak accident and I only needed to insert it again and everything would work perfectly. But as it turns out she meant the machine was faulty and in the end it swallowed my card.

I often do silly things like that, and sometimes as I am doing them I begin to suspect that they are silly though I go on with them anyway because I think it will draw attention to my mistake if I stop, even if no-one else is watching and it is just my own attention that will be alerted. In this case, at least at first, I didn't even begin to suspect that I was doing something so silly, until the out of order message came up on the screen for a second time and I couldn't get my card back. Then I thought that perhaps something was up.

When I realised what I had done I began to get the usual feeling of foolishness, and then I had the chance to hope that I could get away with it without anyone noticing. After a few seconds though, I had to accept that my card wouldn't be coming back. I finally looked over at the teller and she raised her hands, half-jokingly, in exasperation and said my name and then said now your card isn't coming back!

I thought that this was kind of her, because she was making light of the situation while at the same time addressing the serious issue at hand. Using my name was a nice touch because I didn't know that she knew what it was. She even got up from her cubicle and unplugged the machine and tried to screw the card out from the back. Her hands-on attitude made me more relaxed because it was a little over-the-top, almost like she was making a joke about the incident and I was in on the joke, and also because it made me think that there was a solution coming. Her no-nonsense approach reassured me that the situation was not completely hopeless.

And in fact her attitude was not entirely misleading because, after all, it was just a bank card and things weren't entirely hopeless. It was gone forever though, stuck fast in the back of the machine where we could see it wedged in with another card and some twisted pieces of slip paper from the end of the roll. She had to issue me a new card, which she did for free, despite the problem arguably being my fault. I left the bank thinking how kind she was and feeling quite happy considering I was involved in an embarrassing situation.

Afterwards, though, I was thinking about it and I began to see it in a different way. The fact that she knew my name was probably because she saw it on her computer screen a few hours before when I first went into the bank to get some documents, but maybe she only remembered it because when she was helping me that first time she already decided that I was the sort of person that might do something that would allow her to say my name in that half-exasperated, half-endearing way. Perhaps I cut a ridiculous figure that people can see from some way off, I thought.

This would make sense because often when I go to the bank, or the computer shop, or the cell phone shop or any place where the person helping me has to be polite but also has a lot more technical knowledge than I do, the consultant or assistant is sometimes quite off, but in a blustering, superficially polite way. I'm always quite upset afterwards although I can't put my finger on what it is that upsets me at the time. More often than not it is a man who is aggressive, perhaps because he thinks that I am not assertive enough, or I don't display the right amount of authority about technical information, or fail in some other way to live up to whatever idea he has of what it means to be a man, so that might have something to do with it. These altercations always make me angry, but not for too long, because I think that if all I am doing is making a man uncomfortable without intentionally doing anything then I don't really care very much. But if this warm, intelligent woman also reacted to my oddness then perhaps, I thought, there was something more to it.

When she said my name and threw up her hands in mock-dismay I had one of those brief moments of perspective, almost as if I could see myself from the outside, as if I could see things clearly for a short time, while otherwise I am too wrapped up in myself to notice. When I thought about it afterwards, I could vaguely remember what it was like to see myself in that way and I began to worry about what I might look like from the outside. What sort of person attracts this strange combination of condescension and courtesy (or the even stranger mixture of passive aggression and courtesy, as in the cases in which men have been involved)? What was it in me that brought out the things in others the way it did? Was it a way of moving, or of speaking? Or was it the way I dressed? or my appearance in general? Or was it a combination of all these things mixed so complicatedly in such different amounts that it was impossible for me to tell without stepping out of myself completely (which unfortunately I can never do, of course, despite the feeling that I sometimes get that I am seeing things in perspective) and into someone else's view of the world. Or was it something else entirely something so unexpected and unknowable that there was no way for me to guess what it was. I could see at this point that I was starting to grow hysterical and that ideas were leading to one another so fast that they

would soon become an unstoppable avalanche, which is what sometimes happens. No matter how much I try to stop thinking about something there is never any way to really stop thinking, aside from the one obvious one.

Eventually things calmed down slightly and all this thinking led me to consider all of the other times someone's reaction has shocked me into gaining some perspective of myself, into this feeling of being able to see myself from the outside.

I once told a friend how a thoughtless guest at a wedding had made a racist remark. Before actually recounting the remark I told my friend that the guest had said something very special, and then paused to make extra sure that she was listening to the story. After I paused she accused me of using cliff-hangers too often and that made me realise that I do use them a lot for the same reason I used one on that occasion: to force people to pay attention. I saw myself from the outside and realised how my use of cliff-hangers, of which I was, up till that point, quite proud, was really a sign of how little I thought of myself and my stories. I never really have the confidence to feel that my stories can stand by themselves, so at every point I try to find out how they are being received and also to ensure that this reception is positive, or at least that I have tried my best to make sure that whoever is receiving the story has a good opinion of me, as I am sure you already know. Seeing things from that angle was a little alarming and while I have subsequently tried to get rid of the urge to please as I tell a story I am not sure it will ever leave forever.

Another of these uncomfortable ecstatic moments occurred one day when J and I were walking to the spring. A while before we had spoken about the pros and cons of having children, he confessed to having *baby fever* and responded with derision to my stated beliefs on the ill-advised nature of procreation. I did not really meant to align myself with a utilitarian argument about the total misery in the world, but in expression our positions (the utilitarians' and mine) converged, which is what caused his outrage. He took it back after we agreed that I was not, *thank god*, in fact a utilitarian, but his anger was such as to put an end to the subject for some time.

We talked about other things, none of them of any particular interest at the moment – the landscape and the way a cloud always seemed to hang ominously over the town; the general friendliness of everyone collecting water from the spring –, but internally I went on thinking about the previous discussion and worrying whether or not he really did believe that I was not a utilitarian, whether or not, in other words, he thought I was an idiot.

At some point I tried to breach the subject of children again and said something along the lines of, but… perhaps what I mean is not that I think there is a total surplus of misery in

the world that ought to prevent us from having children, but that in my case I am terrified of not being able to protect children from the world and it this fear that is at the root of all my problems and that is the reason I don't have the any natural an spontaneous feelings of *baby fever* (using his words).

As I was speaking his face went from quizzical to comprehending and eventually he interjected (still, while I speaking) with, ahh, I wondered what this would turn out to be about.

His attitude, like the bank teller's was genial, and in a similar way to what happened on that occasion the full experience of the outside perspective gradually grew as I thought about it afterwards.

Now I have long known about a tendency that I have (analogous, perhaps to the need to insure that people are appreciating my stories) to pick up an external discussion in the middle of conversations that I have been having with myself internally as if the other person present were privy to what was going on inside my head. In fact, after a number of people pointed it out I even tended to play up this habit, intentionally starting to verbalise my inner monologues at points in which I felt I needed someone else's point of view, whereas before I only ever did so without noticing.

The reception these outbursts, as we might call them, received suggested them as examples of whimsical oddities, unusual but endearing. J's face and words seemed at first to continue this tradition but in considering them after the fact I grew less sure of whether they did actually continue that tradition. Was it possible that his words concealed a repressed frustration? Or, perhaps even more likely, they were not really concealing anything but were a gentle warning of this frustration and of the impenetrable self-involvement of this habit. After all, to expect anyone to find anything endearing is quite close to demanding that they find it endearing, and to expect them to work to figure out what it is I am talking about without introducing the subject in the conventional way is more demanding still.

I did not, on that day, intentionally started my sentence in the middle of a thought, but J's response, because it was J's response perhaps, alarmed me so much that I decided never to do so intentionally again, and even to work and reducing the instances in which I do it unintentionally.

At this point the problem remains, how do I reduce something that I do unintentionally? And do I even want to, really? If it something I do unconsciously then I have no control over it and I am not really certain that I would want to get rid of it, given that it is a part of me. Of course to do it intentionally borders on the manipulative, like talking in cliff-hangers, but doing it without meaning to is different, it is an indication of something deep inside of me. I do not

want to manipulate anyone, but neither do I want to lie to them about who I am, and part of who I am seems to be someone who unexpectedly brings up conversations he has been having with himself without noticing it.

But what to do about J? There is not really a way to tell if it was frustration that he expressed on that day, much less so whether that was what he felt. And if I bring it up it might constitute a violation of the very rule I am trying to implement in the first place (not to purposefully and without proper warning bring up the conversation that go on inside my head fairly continuously). If he knows I am thinking about it so obsessively, this knowledge might cause a frustration that was not there in the first place, or feed one that was only very slender to begin with. But what if the frustration is feeding all by itself, growing like a mould in the absence of the light that an open discussion of the problem might shed. In that case it might be really helpful if I bring it up, it is just that it is so very difficult to tell which it is.

Intentional Fallacy

I know that the fly is not really trying to annoy me when it makes that obnoxious drone; or flies in those aggressive zigzags so close to my head; or buzzes so incessantly at the corner of the pane until I get up and open the window to let it out, and then flies in the opposite direction back into the house, but I don't really believe that it is not trying.

What Is It About J?

For the past few days I have been anxious in anticipation of seeing J again one last time and have in fact been spending a large part of my waking and much of my sleeping as well obsessing over it. Now the day has finally come.

…

It is the first day of the month and our lease is up. I have been out of town where there is no reception and when I come back there is a message from Blade: will I meet him at a certain place, because there is something that he still needs to give me. When I arrive he is waiting for me and he has a long story. It has been difficult, he says, for him to make a plan and find somewhere to stay. He has not been sure where exactly he is going to stay, not until just now, and it turns out that he is staying on the very far end of town in the opposite direction to the house we shared with J. He needs to get there soon and in fact he is already late and so would I please go back to the house to meet Pierre the landlord and return the keys to him. He hands me the keys and then there is the goodbye that I have been dreading, awkward but not too long. I am, anyway, too irritated by this new turn of events to give much attention to the how the farewell greeting could have gone better.

I am shocked and angry as I walk back to the house. The keys are already late. Pierre expected them a day ago and it was only because Blade had not finished packing up and had not found a place to stay that he (Blade) needed to give Pierre the keys a day late. What is more, it is only because he had not done his share of cleaning that we agreed he would have the responsibility of returning the keys instead. He was supposed to ask Pierre about the possibility of handing in the keys on the first day of the new month, rather than last day of the previous one, but left it so late that I offered, reluctantly, to call Pierre myself. On the phone Pierre sounded impatient, but he said that Blade could meet him early in the morning with the keys when he came to inspect the house. This worked out well for Blade, I thought because he could spend one more night in the house and have a reason for being there when Pierre arrived in the morning.

But it is now no longer early morning. It is late morning, and in fact it is bordering on noon. Pierre must be at the house already and his impatience will by now have grown into outright annoyance. I am worried about keeping Pierre waiting, but even more worried about the prospect of keeping J waiting, or even being so long at the house that I will have no time

to see him at all. He was the first of us to leave the three bedroom house, and he is now back in town for one day only.

When I arrive I am flustered from rushing there and I can see Pierre's truck parked in the driveway. As I come in I see that he is just coming out from the alleyway between the houses, and I think that he must be tired of waiting. When he sees me, pale and out of breath, he is angry.

Oh there you are, he says.

There is something in his tone when he says *oh there you are* and in the way he looks at me and also in the way he stands that is disgusted, disgusted at this ridiculous and inconvenient figure standing before him, pathetic and panting.

I am shocked, he says, shocked!

The words pass through me like that bout of adrenalin that is released when you just catch yourself from falling from a very high place, or you feel that you might just have fallen.

The state of the house is disgraceful. It is filthy.

I am too embarrassed and upset to respond and I do not know how to respond without meeting him in his game of outrage and aggression, so as we walk back to the house he continues uninterrupted.

There is stuff everywhere! How could we leave the house in this state?

All I can say now is that I am sorry and I keep repeating this, because I cannot think of anything else and also because now the initial fear has worn off it seems easiest to assume the character of apologetic tenant, which is so clearly the co-player that he wants to go with his own character of disrespected landowner, righteously angry. I give in to his wishes. How pathetic!

We arrive at the house and as we cross the veranda to the front door he gestures to the floor. You guys didn't even sweep! he says.

This is not strictly true. I had cleaned most of the house and swept every room, leaving only the veranda to be swept by Blade, in addition to his duty of returning the keys. It seems he has shirked this as well.

Once inside I can see that Pierre has been exaggerating rather dramatically. The *stuff everywhere* is nothing more than the bookshelf and sleeper couch that J has sold to the new tenants. In J's room there are the furniture and other possessions of this same new tenant, who has moved her things in early. After hearing this, and especially after he knows that the stuff all belongs to the new tenant, the nice white lady who has been discussing everything so civilly over the phone, Pierre seems to calm down, though he is still very irritated, warning me that

there will be money taken of the deposit if the tiles at front of the house is not properly swept and washed. He leaves, full of bombast, taking the keys and locking the house (we have after all lost our legal right to enter, a fact which he makes abundantly clear), but leaving the driveway gate unlocked so that the veranda can be swept and cleaned.

He will be messaging the other two to let them know how displeased he is. How could Blade not have even the decency to show his face here? Is the final thing that he says before driving off in a huff.

Despite my own frustration with Blade I cannot help noticing the superiority and meanness of implying he has no decency. But now the problem that is most pressing is the fact that J will hear about the incident and the chance that he too will be angry and will see me as responsible in some way.

I call him immediately so as to prevent this eventuality. He has already heard from Pierre. He is not angry. He seems to think the whole thing is funny and is not worried about the deposit. He will come to the house as soon as he gets into town and together we can deal with the dirty tiles

J's reaction makes me feel much less upset. I am still furious with Blade for creating the situation and for making me deal with it, but I am also embarrassed for reacting so strongly and for so readily falling into the position of righteous anger in relation to him that I know I have fallen into so many times before. I still think that I have a right to be angry but now I am not sure how angry.

I try to decide how much an appropriate amount of anger is. Blade, who was the last of us to move out and who had not organised anywhere to stay when the lease ended let me call Pierre in order to arrange the key drop-off and spent the night of the 30th (in contravention of the lease) in the house and then, for whatever reason, left the house before Pierre arrived and without cleaning the area he was supposed to clean, and waited for me to give me the keys that he was supposed to give to Pierre because he needed, right away, to go and meet the person with whom he would be staying.

His story seems in certain places, if not immediately to contradict itself, then at least not to hold up under scrutiny. I decide that I cannot take issue with the fact that he did not find somewhere to stay because the end of the year is a difficult time for everyone and accommodation is stressful. But why didn't he wait for Pierre at the house and why did he not expect Pierre to behave in the way that he did (if indeed he didn't expect it and was not just acting like there was nothing to worry about in Pierre's reaction when I say him)? Surely there was no deadline on his arrival at the house of his friend. At the very least I refuse to accept

that. How was it that at the moment I arrived back in town was precisely the same moment at which he absolutely had to go and meet his friend?

I still do not fully trust my judgement though, because for a while now I have noticed a dynamic between Blade and myself in which each of us sets the other up in roles that neither of us much want to be cast in. He, for example, being unused to household chores, or lacking consideration for their importance would take days and days to wash the dishes, or would never take out the rubbish because he had no idea where the bin was, and so I would do these things for him and in doing them would think of him as lazy or even as something more worse, as someone who does not acknowledge the importance of domestic work. When he found the tasks that he was supposed to do were done for him, he would (although I have no concrete evidence of this) see me as a passive aggressive person who pointedly did the things that he ought to before he could do them in order to show him up. In the beginning I just did his chores because they needed to be done, without any thought of how this might seem to him, but over time I got the idea that he resented it or else that he felt that I resented doing it and began to resent my resentment, and for this I really did resent him and began, in fact, to do those things passive aggressively even though I did them quite happily before that.

Like I said, there is no proof that this is actually how he thought, it was just a feeling on my part. For this reason, and because I promised myself when I noticed these things happening, that I would not in future allow myself to fall into the easy position of self-righteousness, I do not want to be angry if it can at all be avoided. Of course, I am angry because my anger comes despite whatever it is that I have promised myself in the past, but in the end I cannot decide how angry I am and wait for J who I hope will be able to clear things up, as he always seems able to do.

…

The town, which sits in the middle of a natural depression, like a deep bowl in the hills, and whose decaying infrastructure was built with only the minority of the population in mind and was never properly reconstructed to meet the needs of the whole population, only patched, haphazardly, where problems arose, so that now with increasing frequency it collapses under the weight of more and more people, has run out of water. There have been many leaks along different stretches of the pipes, leaks that have been dealt with individually as they arise, but now the plumbing has given out altogether and the water pressure is gradually growing less and less all over town. Our house, or the house in which we used to live, is built high on the

slope of the hill and so it is one of the first to lose first pressure, and then also all water whatsoever. If J and I are to sweep *and* wash the veranda, as per Pierre's new request, then we will have to walk the two kilometres up past the dam to the natural spring by the side of the highway. This is an unexpected and welcome turn of events because it will require that we are alone together longer than we might otherwise have been.

As I wait for him I cannot help but worry and think of all the other times over the past year that I have waited for him, many of those times in vain. Sometimes I would not know when he would be coming home. I would go out in the morning, before he woke up, and by the time I came back he would have gone out. The days when I noticed his absence most were the days on which I was scheduled to cook dinner. Then I would start early, around 4:30 and I would often cook something that took some preparation, like caramelised onion tart or a traditional goulash, so that by the time it was nearing six o'clock I would be quite tired, but also pleased with my work and especially pleased with the idea that it might please him, and I would look at the clock and see that is nearly six and that if he was not back already, he was probably not coming home, but because there was still a chance that he might arrive (sometimes he would play football till after seven) I would go through the alley past the other semi-detached houses and down the driveway to the street and look up and down in the dusk to see if he was on his way home. Often I would put of eating late into the evening while waiting for him to return, a habit which always greatly annoyed Blade.

Once, I was lucky. I went to check if he was coming and did not seen him so I came back into the house, and sat down in the kitchen and decided for once not to wait after the food was ready. That evening I made a soup by carefully frying cinnamon and cardamom in butter and then adding onions before simmering everything together with tomatoes, lentils and coconut milk. The aroma of frying spices and onions filled the whole kitchen and the rest of the house and must have wafted even further, because just as everything was ready he came in the door saying that he hoped it was my cooking that he could smell from the street. That was a particularly good day.

As it turns out, I am lucky again: he arrives on time and seems as unperturbed about the walk to the spring as he was about our *war with Pierre* (as he calls it) and about cleaning the front tiles.

We set out and walk up through a valley so covered in bracken and heather that we might as well be on the moors in Scotland. We walk for some time in silence after an awkward, embarrassing disagreement, too painful for me to go into now. When we reach the top and take the path down to the spring he turns and looks back at the town.

It's like a huge bowl isn't it?

I guess so, I say.

I've often felt that way, even that it's like a crucible with all the knowledge rolling down the sides of the bowl to be reduced and specialised in the university.

This is rather too whimsical for me to allow, even from him, and I respond with silence.

You disagree? He asks.

Well, not knowledge, I've never had that thought. All I've noticed collecting at the bottom is the cold.

And the loneliness, I think privately. While out loud I say that I've always thought it's very claustrophobic.

You are happy to be leaving then?

I think about this a while before answering. Because I cannot say what I want to say which is no, I am not happy to be leaving – because although I may be happy to be leaving the insular little community whose members have the hypocritical belief that promiscuity means sexual liberation, or that consuming vast amounts of alcohol or other drugs while still scraping by at school or at work is something to be admired as strength, or that any of this behaviour is anything other than unspeakably privileged – because I cannot say that despite all these things I will still be devastated to be leaving him, I lie and say yes.

And as is his way, which is perhaps what is in him that made me so distressed to be leaving in the first place, he lulls me into such a sense of ease and intimacy that even though I do not tell him what I am feeling most deeply, I do tell him with more clarity and candour then I have told anyone before, how much I hate the narrowness of the young people in this town.

As I talk, I am aware that I am becoming overexcited and revealing a lot about myself, that things I should have revealed more slowly over a year of living together I am revealing in too short a space of time. I am aware that this is quickly becoming self-confession with the ever-present danger that he might not like the self that is being confessed, that what I am confessing may in fact simply be selfishness. Even as I am telling him about how excluded I feel – from the promiscuity, from the drinking, from the privilege – I can see the danger coming and attempt desperately to avoid it.

I am not saying that this is a structural exclusion, I say, or not directly.

But if it is not based on a specific social structure, a structure of oppression like class or gender then he cannot understand how it is a significant exclusion. If it is not structural then it can't be based on material, or on anything much at all, he points out.

Despite his use of the words significant and material I do not feel that he is dismissing the experience. In fact this may be one of the few occasions where someone is really trying to understand, really holding themselves open to the conversation. I know that he is unconvinced about the feelings I am describing and mostly I agree with him. They don't feel very convincing to me either, as I am saying them. But I feel that there has to be a way of raising the idea of psychic discomfort, the feeling of awkwardness and melancholy that does not equate it with structural oppression, I just don't know how to articulate it and I tell him as much.

Well, he says again, we will have to speak again when you can articulate it.

This seems hopeful and in fact, despite what seems a desultory conversation or even a gentle criticism, I am ecstatic. Something about the intimacy and vulnerability he was able to elicit is wonderfully new and exciting.

…

At the spring there are many people waiting, but everyone is friendly and talkative. He says it is because it a last example of a commons and the community knows this and shows that it knows this. The divisiveness of private property does not exist here.

Back at the house the cleaning of the veranda takes much less time than expected and soon it is time for him to go. The parting is disappointing, mostly in its lack of large emotions. There is a hug, which is more than I hoped (I expected only a handshake) and that is it. He says he has very much enjoyed living with me and would certainly do it again. All I can bring myself to say is goodbye, because I am trying so hard to memorise every detail.

In the end I remember very little, only that he had a small cut on his arm from the corroded metal at the mouth of the spring and that he smelled of bleach from cleaning the tiles.

Later, thinking of the walk to the spring, a fear: that living with J was only so good because it was also living with Blade. That a deep and spontaneous connection is only possible together with a mutually disappointing connection. But that is not it, exactly. Perhaps it is that some pattern learned in childhood must always pit a close and happy relationship against all others and even absorb all positive emotion and energy at the cost of every other relationship. But this is not quite right either.

The Problem with Exercise

If only endorphins could be administered intravenously.

Always Be Prepared

All right, I say, then let's go, you and me, while it is still evening and we can still use what light there is of this magnificent sunset to see by.

You and me, she smiles. In all that time spent studying literature didn't they think to teach you about basic subject and object grammatical categories?

I know that I am supposed to respond in kind and that this remark is intended only to be humorous banter, but I have never been very skilled at coming up with clever ways to respond to humour and so I say nothing. What is more, even though her comment is presented as a joke I cannot help thinking of her general opinion of studying literature, or art in general: she thinks it is self-indulgent. Too learned, she will say if I back up what I am saying by comparing it to something that someone once wrote down.

For a while we walk in silence and I have time to appreciate what is indeed a magnificent evening. We are mostly alone – the streets are almost deserted – and the sun is setting behind us and staining the stacked cumulous clouds pink and red, and somewhere, or in many places, sulphurous burnings are dying the air pale yellow and orange so that the evening spread out in front of us seems to overwhelm everything else in the intensity of its colour.

Soon, however, the thick air that has caused such sensational colours has made breathing at our brisk pace difficult, and has begun to collect the smut of the city day on the pools of water that refuse to drain away into the gutters so that the splendour of the moment passes as quickly as it came. We are walking to try and find the nearest petrol station so that we can fill the two five-litre plastic bottles we are now carrying and take them back to my car which has run out of petrol and is not starting.

So what did you think of it, she asks, referring to the wedding. This is a question that I have been dreading: I hate having to have a response to something, especially so soon afterwards. Sometimes I wish I could have the most contentious or unpopular response imaginable, just so that I wouldn't be left with nothing to say. It always leaves me feeling deficient. Luckily this time I have prepared something, although it is not anything very much.

Idyllic, I say, and then when she looks at me in a way that shows she needs something more (she has a way of narrowing her eyes, pursing her lips, and cocking her head that we now both know means she wants more information) I decide to say what I have been holding onto for later. I will tell her my one eventful story from the wedding and play my trump card, though I was hoping to save it for somewhat later in the conversation as, besides this, I have nothing to say.

You know Jane? When she first saw me she told me how well I looked and said that she likes my beard. Then she said something special, I say, trying hard to convey a sarcastic tone.

At this point I pause to make sure she is listening and also to give more emphasis to what is coming next.

Well? Why do your stories always have to have cliff-hangers? she jokes. And why do you always have to hype up what you are saying like that? It's so annoying. Your stories are the worst!

We are in sight now of a petrol station and in relief we slow down a little. I have not noticed, until now, that my stories have these features in common. At least not quite in the way she describes them. I generally use these kind of pauses because I am worried people are not actually paying attention to what I am saying. This is a persistent fear of mine. As for hyping up my stories, as she calls it, I think that I only do this to make things easier for my listener, so that they know exactly what part I would like them to find particularly intriguing or moving (I have discovered that these are precisely the parts at which people in fact tend to lose interest, so that my stories often fall flat just where I am expecting them to go out with a bang.).

Well, I say, not knowing how to respond to her interjection though it gave me quite a lot to think about, as you will well imagine, then Jane said that when she first saw me she thought that I had looked rather sinister, almost like I had a bomb hidden under my shirt. Because of the beard, I say, and then quickly add, I think, so as to distance myself from whatever it was that Jane was actually thinking in case I am asked to explain what that might have been. I really have no idea what she might have been thinking.

What?! She asks, incredulously? And she's still alive?

Yes, because I am a coward, I say, after thinking briefly about how to answer.

I'm sorry baba I don't know why they like doing weird shit like that. But also why didn't you say anything? Why do you never say anything? You make them think it is okay to talk to any brown person with a beard like that.

I didn't have time to say anything. I didn't know what to say and I had to think about it, I tell her.

Well now it's too late.

I don't know, I say. I think that there is still time.

Time for what, exactly?

Enough time to prepare a response to meet her, next time I meet her, I say. I do not say, although I think that both of us know that this response is unlikely ever to happen. Even if I do

meet Jane again, I don't think I will be able to bring up what she said. I also doubt that anything will come of it or that she will really see how bizarre her statement was.

Well I think you should have said something then and there. That's what I would have done. In fact, I'm going to go right back to what we were talking about the other day. Have you thought yet about how you are going to ask him what your situation is? Are you going to see him again? What are going to say to him?

Oh, I say, do not ask what is it. We're at the garage now, let's deal with one problem at a time.

…

It is a lucky thing we have the two large water bottles because the garage does not sell cans of petrol and we have to buy it straight from the pump. While we are waiting for the bottles to dry completely of water (we didn't think about this eventuality until now) we look back up the way we have come to see if we can see where the car is. By now it is completely dark though, and all we can see is the pattern of orange street lamps thrown against the hill on which the car must be waiting somewhere.

What a thing to happen! You really need to be more prepared. The gauge was in the red for ages before you decided to start worrying about it. You can't always do nothing and just hope that things are going to work out. What if we had not found a garage? Or we didn't have anything to transport the petrol in? What if the car still won't start once we get back, or if you've flooded the engine or something?

I guess in any of those cases we would have been fucked, I say. Or we will be.

That is accurate she says, although she is smiling and doesn't seem to be too concerned. There isn't one positive thing about this whole sorry situation!

One positive thing about this whole sorry situation, I think privately, is that I can add it to my list of anecdotes.

I often add to a list that I like to keep in my head that I call "Interesting, Amusing and Exciting Anecdotes". I find keeping a list like this to be very useful because, in certain social situations when there are more than two or three people, I always end up being unable to think of anything interesting to say, particularly if the situation requires me to say something interesting as such situations so frequently do. When I keep a list I can update it regularly so as to keep it topical and interesting, and before going to a gathering of more than three people

I can go over the items in my head, deciding which of them will be best suited to that specific occasion.

At the moment my list includes: you should never keep tomatoes in the fridge because they come from a warm climate and they will become mealy and lose the fresh flavour; the other morning a black cat jumped partway through my bedroom window (which I had left open to allow air into the room), setting of the alarm and waking the whole house; a woman at a wedding I recently attended, the mother of the groom in fact, told me how well I was looking and that she liked my beard, before adding that when she had first seen me she had thought me quite sinister, like I might be hiding a bomb under my shirt; a little while ago my family had to evacuate our house because of a fire back in the city I am from, my mother and the dogs went all the way to the next suburb, but my father went only as far as the front garden from which he and his friends staid to watch the fire; it is best to make pesto in a pestle and mortar because this is the least effective way of breaking the cells and so the pesto will be courser, with a taste closer to fresh basil.

Some of what is on the list has been there for a long time (the story about the fire is at least four years old) and it always takes me a while to decide on a new addition to the list, and I am never sure exactly what criteria I should use to decide.

Now, if I am careful in how I construct what has just happened and what is currently happening to us I think will end up with a very interesting anecdote, one that could, in fact, take pride of place at the very top of my list and that seems likely to be well-suited to almost any social occasion that I can think of:

> Once when my car engine ran dry my friend and I had to carry two five-litre plastic bottles full of petrol. This was at the height of student protests and so we had to prepare what we were going to say, first to whomever we could find to sell us the petrol and then to the police who were stationed all over town and on campus. Luckily nobody thought we were going to petrol bomb the campus.

…

We are walking back now, again in silence and I am enjoying the evening and the freedom of not having anything to do or to worry about until we arrive at the car and have to deal with our predicament.

Then she says: don't think I've forgotten that you haven't told me what you are going to say to him. You can't just let him completely ignore you like that. The whole wedding! That is three weeks that he has said nothing to you. Only hello and goodbye. You have to stand up for yourself.

Yes I know, I say, agreeing with her instead of standing up for myself.

If I were to disagree I would just point out that there wasn't really much I could have done. In fact what could I have done at all? Should I have disturbed all the quiet talking around the tea on the white linen on the tables under the vines laden with grapes so perfectly ripe? Or should I have forced an awkward conversation in the middle of all the polite chatter around the cheese platter with artisanal pesto and the gin bar with kale and pomegranate juice? And what would be the point of all this, of creating a scene and exposing myself and my feelings, of asking him why he said one thing and then done another thing when, in all likelihood, all he would say is that what I thought he meant was not what he meant at all.

That is not it at all, he would have said.

I don't… she begins, but then says that she has thought better of it and doesn't say anything further.

She clearly didn't think that much better of it because she still decided to begin saying it, I observe to myself, but for a while I don't say anything out loud either. Perhaps things could have gone differently. Perhaps I should have done something rather than nothing.

Maybe I should have said something, I tell her.

Too young for regrets! She says. Regrets are not acceptable, at your age. Regrets are for when you are too old to chew your food and you have to think carefully about what you eat. In this case there is still time, all you have to do is work out what you think he meant the last time the two of you really spoke. Then you need to decide what you want to say to him regarding what he said.

As we walk we are trying to work it out. Or rather, she already seems to have it worked out and I am trying to understand her version and also trying to work it out for myself and checking to see if the two versions match. She seems to think that what he meant was clear, or at least that a part of what he meant was clear: the part which now seems to warrant a response from him, in her judgement.

But I am not so sure. To me the dangers of expecting something from him based on what he has said are too great. The alternative, of course is to continue to do nothing until he does or says something to start up communication again.

I say this to her and she says that in that case I will have to accept the alternative.

Those are your choices, she says. Either you think of something to say or you wait and wait. In my opinion you will be waiting a very long time, if you take the second choice. Why don't you make one of your lists weighing up the pro and cons of the whole thing?

I look at her to see if she is joking, and if she is joking whether she is doing so in a friendly or derisive way, but I am not able to tell. In any case, I cannot think clearly about the pros and cons. If I were to make a list for this situation it would be a list of only two facts:

Because neither of us contacted the other it seems that we both lost interest at the same time.

I can find nothing to say that he might find interesting.

…

When we finally get back to the car and put in the petrol it starts without any problems, thankfully. As we set off down the hill to fill up before heading out of town she asks what I have learned from this whole series of events.

Check the petrol gauge more regularly and always respect the warning light, I say.

Alright Boy Scout, she says.

A Modest Request

I do not want to be amusing, exciting, interesting, impressive, original, clever, unusual, exotic, daring, remarkable, accomplished, magical, entertaining, popular, fascinating, thrilling, angelic, hilarious, enigmatic, devastating, proactive, intriguing, incredible, exceptional, irresistible, radiant, profound, magnificent, provocative, brilliant, fearless, wise, controversial, fantastic, musical, striking, enchanting, radiant, formidable, lyrical, passionate, adorable, whimsical or mysterious.

Neither do I want to hold all the cards, beat anyone at their own game, fit the bill, blow anyone away, rock the boat, blaze a trail, bring down the house, grab the bull by the horns (or life by the balls), let bygones be bygones, strike the right chord, work like a charm, pass anything with flying colours, bite the bullet, live it up, push the envelope, go out with a bang, float anyone's boat, play hard to get, get on with other people like a house on fire, hit the nail on the head (or though sometimes I'd like to hit the jackpot), bring home the bacon, play the field (in fact now that I mention it, I would prefer not to play the game at all), beard the lion in his den, play with fire, come up roses, or go down a storm.

I do not want to have people rolling in the aisles, a bag of tricks, my eye on the ball (or the prize), a lot of bottle, a card up my sleeve, the last laugh, my name up in lights, or true grit.

Nor would I like to be in the know, on top of the world, a tough act to follow, ahead of the game, on a role, armed at all points, a barrel of laughs, the bees knees, number one, the belle of the ball, on the crest of the wave, the best thing since sliced bread, the joker in the pack, a blast from the past, bloody but unbowed, the life of the party, an open book (or a closed book for that matter), the picture of perfection, all the rage, the one that got away, as tough as old boots, dressed up to the nines (or dressed to kill), a diamond in the rough, one of the boys, in the lap of luxury, the man of the match, a joy to behold, a breath of fresh air (or the breath of life), as bright as a button, a tower of strength, as busy as a bee, the toast of the town, the icing on the cake, a name to conjure with, as cool as a cucumber, a dark horse, just what the doctor ordered, the first among equals, the cream of the crop, the king of the castle, the sharpest tool in the shed, a jewel in anyone's crown, the lesser of two evils, larger than life, worth my weight in gold, a sight for sore eyes, a ray of sunshine, a legend in my own lifetime, an iron hand in a velvet glove, or to pack a punch.

But do not mistake me. All of this does not mean that I aim to be unusual, inscrutable, unpredictable, unassuming, incontestable, incalculable, uncompromising, unfailing, unbelievable, unscathed, indifferent, unselfish, incautious, inconceivable, indescribable,

indefatigable, unstoppable, unstudied, unforgettable, indecipherable, impenetrable, unsettling, unobjectionable, unafraid, unbiased, unconcerned, unemotional, unflappable, unimpeachable, unfathomable, inaccessible, .

In fact I want only to be companionable and also, perhaps, uncomplicated, which I am willing take at the cost of being a little uninteresting.