

An excerpt from
David Szalay
Spring

GRAYWOLF PRESS

I

London light in the scuffed, keyed windows of a Piccadilly-line train from Heathrow. London light on the open spaces it hurries past, on the passing spokes of perpendicular suburban streets, on playing fields seen through a perimeter line of faint-shadowed trees. The train stops in outlying stations. Then it enters the howl of the tunnel and there is no more London light until he finds it later on the hotels and plane trees of Russell Square.

He is worried that things are not okay. When he phones her, standing in the stale silence of the flat, it is only because he wants to know that things are okay. On that question he is insatiable. Frustratingly, she does not answer her phone. Probably she is still on the tube.

They finally speak later, in the early evening.

Initially she sounds fine. And when he asks her how she is, she says, 'I'm fine.'

'What are you doing tonight?' he says.

'Staying in, I think.'

There is a silence, the very quiet hissing of the line, the pittering of the rain on the skylight. She says, 'I've got things to do. I've got to unpack, I've got to do some washing . . .'

'Okay,' he says. 'That's fine.'

'I just need some time on my own . . .'

'Okay,' he says. 'It's fine. What are you doing at the weekend?'

'The weekend?' she says. 'I don't know.'

This was what he feared. Something like this mysterious evasiveness. Something is not okay, has not been okay since Monday, when he missed the minibus that was supposed to take them to the snowline. At twenty to eleven on Monday morning he was in the Internet place in the medina—they were in Marrakech—in the hiss of frying, the whirring of the juicer, and the histrionic sorrow of a woman wailing an Arabic love song from the old stereo, trying to find out what had happened at Fakenham. It turned out that nothing had happened at Fakenham—the meeting had been abandoned due to waterlogging. Leaving the shop, he had five minutes to get to the Djemaa el Fna. Which would have been fine, if there hadn't been an accident in one of the narrow lanes of the medina—a moped had smashed into some scaffolding—forcing him to find another way, which in that labyrinth was easier said than done.

He was ten minutes late, and there was no sign of the minibus where she had said it would be. Nor was there any sign of her. He waited for a while, and then made his way through the alleyways of the medina to the hotel, where he went upstairs. She was not there. Nor was she at the pool. Nor on the terrace. When he tried her mobile there was no answer. It seemed she must have left without him and feeling forsaken, feeling *forlorn*, he went for a lonely walk in the souk. She was still not answering her phone.

To his surprise, he then found her at the pool, on a sun lounger, in the quiet of the sparrow song.

'I thought you went to the mountains,' he said.

And surprisingly, she laughed. 'No, of course not.'

He sat down on the neighbouring lounge, taking his feet out of his flip-flops and trying to get a sense of her mood. This was not easy—they had not known each other long, less than two months. The fact that she was wearing huge inscrutable sunglasses which hid not only her eyes but most of the upper half of her face did not make it any easier. Her nose was pale with factor forty, her Anglo-Swedish skin sensitive even to this spring sun. He stared at her through his own sunglasses, prescription Aviators, the dry wind fiddling with his thinning sandy hair. ‘Where were you?’ he said. ‘I’ve been looking for you for the last two hours.’

‘I went for a walk.’

‘Where?’

‘In the medina.’

‘See anything interesting?’

She just stuck out her lower lip and shook her head. Then she picked up her book.

‘I’m sorry I was late. There was this thing. I . . .’

‘It’s okay,’ she said, without looking up.

‘Well . . . I’m sorry.’

It was the siesta hour. The palm trees that stood in a line on one side of the terrace were whispering in the warm wind, their shadows mere stumps. ‘Do you want to go tomorrow?’ he said. ‘To the mountains.’

‘No.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘M-hm.’

A few minutes later she went for a swim and in the small shade of his newspaper he tried to work out what it was about her mood that was so strange. There *was* something strange about it. She was lying in the pool with her arms stretched out on the side, her shape wavery in the water, her face tilted to the sun. (Her slick wet hair had an almost metallic sheen.) Her eyes

were shut. He had expected her to be more upset. There was something strange about it.

He was still wondering what it was later, in the eucalyptus whisper of the steam room.

And he is still wondering now, tonight, in his flat in Mecklenburgh Street. He tries to picture that hour at the poolside, as the hotel's shadow moved slowly over the water, tries to picture everything that happened.

'I thought you went to the mountains,' he says.

Surprisingly, she laughs. 'No, of course not.'

The strangeness of that moment has been there ever since. It started on Monday at the poolside, and has just not stopped.

Once he wanted more than he does now. Once, his idea of his own life, of what it was meant to be, was something magnificent. It seems a sort of insanity now. A sort of megalomania. An impediment to a proper view of the world. That idea of himself was formed when he still knew nothing about life, when he was still at school—and it has taken life twenty years, the last twenty years, to purge him of it. Probably that is an unusually long time.

He is shaving. The mirror is haloed with feeble steam. He isn't the same as he was even a few years ago. Even a year ago. Is it just tiredness? Is he just *tireder* than he was?

For quite a few years the space in which he lives has been shrinking. He has never seen the metaphorical force of this until now. Only half a dozen years ago he lived with Thomasina—sweet Thomasina!—in the house on Victoria Road. It was never even properly finished. For tax reasons, it was technically the property of Interspex, his Internet start-up, and Interspex was worth some eye-popping figure at the peak, in the millennial year. Many millions, tens, hundreds of millions. And then nothing, and the liquidators seized the house on Victoria Road while the Milanese artisans were still tiling the single-lane swimming pool . . .

He stirs the razor in the scummy water. The next spring—*après le déluge*—found him washed up in Fulham. Then there were other places, each smaller than the last, and finally, Mecklenburgh Street. The ex-local-authority flat is in an unfaced terrace of London brick. The front doors of the houses are painted black—dust-bleared fanlights, massed doorbells. The basement flats have their own entrances. Metal steps, textured like a fire escape, tack down via a square landing. The area is littered with dead brown leaves. The bedroom curtains are permanently closed.

He pulls the plug and the shaving-water noisily sinks away. No more magnificence. Now he just wants things to be okay. He wants somewhere okay to live. An okay job. One or two holidays a year. Perhaps a few modest luxuries. A middle-class life in other words. And a woman. Of course a woman. She is the indispensable ingredient for such a life. Without her it would have quite a sad, lonely look. Yes, without her, there would be something sad, something futile, about those few small luxuries. He towels his face in the forty-watt light of the bathroom—it is an odd stooping space, under someone else's stairs, the frigid London morning sliding in through a lint-furred vent. There is this Katherine King. This woman he has been seeing for the last month or two. Indeed, it is possible that she is the inspiration for this whole train of thought—that the idea of a middle-class life in London, forever, has its sudden look of enticing plausibility now that it is framed in terms of a middle-class life in London, forever, *with her*. These days, to imagine other things—new things—leaves him feeling exhausted. (And, he thinks, splashing the sink's limescaled surface, surely *that* has as much to do with its sudden look of enticing plausibility as she does.) She is still married to someone else, of course. Not an insurmountable problem. They met at a wedding, a winter wedding in London. Her father was

some sort of Swedish financier, and it showed—her straight, sharply parted hair was sawdust. She had her English mother's voice. They exchanged phone numbers. Met up the following week . . . (He turns off the tap and tugs the sprung string of the light, snapping on the darkness.) The start was unpromising, to say the least. In fact, things started with a total fiasco. On their first night together he was unable to have sex with her. That wasn't the fiasco, of course. That was essentially fine. They fell asleep in a loose spoon with the light still on in the hall. No, that was not the fiasco.

The next Tuesday they had supper at the old trattoria near his flat—a place that still offered a prawn-cocktail starter served in a little stainless-steel dish and flaunted the stale-looking desserts in a transparent fridge. There, they were unable to keep their hands off each other and having made a spectacle of themselves for an hour they walked back to Mecklenburgh Street. As soon as the door was shut he started to kiss her. Still standing in the hall, still urgently kissing her, he lifted her short skirt and pulled everything down as far as her mid-thighs. Still kissing him, she seemed to make a weak effort to stop him. Instead he pulled everything further down, past her wavering knees, until she lifted first one foot and then the other to let him tug the things off. They stumbled into the bedroom and ended up on the floor. It seems to him that what happened next has introduced a permanent flaw into everything that followed. He was moving in a fog of fear there on the floor as he started hurriedly to unfasten his trousers. His view of the situation was mechanistic—it seems strange to him now how straightforwardly mechanistic it was. For what had happened last time to happen once, he thought, was okay. If it happened twice it might start to seem like a problem.

'Please don't come inside me,' she said.

Suddenly still, they lay there in silence for a few seconds. Then she said, 'Did you come inside me?'

He was not even sure. He had been so preoccupied with other things . . . 'I don't know,' he said.

She laughed and sat up straight, pulling her skirt into place. 'What do you mean you don't know?'

'I don't know. Maybe . . .'

'You don't know whether you came?'

'No.'

She laughed again and said, 'I can't believe this.'

'What?'

'Is that just *normal* for you?'

'No . . .'

She was shaking her head. 'I . . . I never let anyone come inside me. I've only ever let one person do that. Someone I was totally in love with.'

For a moment he wondered who this man was. Then he stood up, stumbling in his lowered trousers. 'Look, I'm sorry,' he said.

'You don't know whether you *came*?' She sounded shocked, on the verge of tears.

'I'm not sure. I think so.'

'That's just weird.'

'I'm sorry . . .'

'What if I get pregnant?'

'You're not likely to get pregnant . . .'

'Why not?' she said. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean you're not likely to get pregnant. It's not likely. From one . . . you know . . .'

She seemed to be looking at something on the floor, though outside the shape of light that spilled in from the hall it was too dark to see anything. 'This isn't what I expected,' she said. He put out his hand and touched her. When he tried to hug her she

stood stiffly in his embrace. He sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. Leaving him there, she went to the bathroom, evidently to settle the question of whether or not he had ejaculated inside her. He heard the toilet flush, fistfuls of water splash in the sink. When she unlocked the door, she picked up her things from the floor in the hall and went into the living room.

The standard lamp was on and she was standing next to his desk, inspecting her tights. She did not look at him.

'I'm sorry . . .' he said.

Still without looking at him, and in a more quivering-lipped tone than the first time, she said, "This isn't what I expected."

The wind howled in the dark shaft over the skylight.

He stood there, wondering what to do.

'I think I'm going to go,' she said quietly.

However, she did not put on her tights. She was still standing there next to the desk. She seemed to be waiting for him to say something. 'Don't go. Please don't go,' he said, shocked into total sincerity. 'Please. That would be terrible.'

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In the morning she had a shower and, when she was dressed, he said he would walk her to Russell Square station.

'No,' she said. 'It's okay.'

'Are you sure?'

She nodded quickly. 'M-hm.'

He followed her out into the frigid shade of the area, where the dead leaves were veined with ice, and watched her walk up the metal steps. On the pavement, in a flare of sunlight, she waved to him, but when they spoke on the phone the next day, she sounded strange, and vague, and as if her heart was not in what she was saying. He persuaded her to see him on Sunday—

she wasn't free, she said, until then—and then when they spoke on Sunday afternoon, she said she was tired, that she had been working since eight in the morning, and how about meeting some other time?

There was a longish silence.

He said, 'Look, I want to see you. Today. Please.'

She sighed. 'I'm tired, that's all. I look shit. And I won't be much fun to be with. I've got to do some ironing . . .'

'Why don't we meet at your place then?'

'Well . . .' she laughed. 'If you don't mind watching me iron.'

'I don't mind watching you iron,' he said.

On the tube he started to wonder whether he should have forced it like that. She very obviously did not want to see him. For a few minutes he loitered in the foyer of Angel station, wondering what to do. Then he set off up Essex Road in the sleet, and when she opened the door he was soaking wet.

Her flat was on the upper floor of a modest terraced house on Packington Street. The downstairs entrance hall was a narrow moth-eaten space full of unloved objects, from where severely straitened steps went up to a landing under a light bulb and the plain front door of the flat.

'Do you want a towel?' was the first thing she said.

He said he did, and while she went for one he waited in the hall, and then followed her into the living room.

'How are you?' she asked.

'I'm okay. Wet.'

'Do you want some wine?'

She had already started on the wine. He took off his jacket and towelled his soaking hair. He had a sense, handing her the towel, exchanging it for wine, that things were not quite as hopeless as he had thought. It had started with the way she looked at him when she opened the door, the way she took a moment

to let him fill her eyes. And she was not ironing; there was no sign of the ironing board. Still, when the wine was finished he expected to be encouraged to leave—so he was surprised when instead she said, ‘Do you want to get something to eat?’

‘Sure.’

‘There’s this Indian,’ she said. ‘It’s okay.’

‘Fine.’

Leaving the house he wondered whether this was the moment to touch her, whether even to try and kiss her. Something about her posture—hands shoved in pockets, shoulders hunched—prevented him. The pavements shone wetly as they walked. They stopped in front of the Taste of India on Essex Road, under the sopping green awning, and he touched her for the first time as they went in. It was not much of a touch—letting her precede him through the plate-glass door, he placed his hand lightly on her back for a moment. She might not even have felt it through the substantial white puffa jacket she was wearing. Inside, in the tired velvet shadows and quiet, seemingly formless sitar music, they studied takeaway menus. There was a palpable Sunday-night atmosphere. Standing there, poised to take their order, the waiter yawned.

While they were waiting, he touched her a second time. Sitting side by side at a table near the entrance—a stained tablecloth, plastic flowers—they had lapsed into silence and he put his hand on her thin jeaned thigh and stroked the fabric a few times with his thumb. She did not seem surprised. She did not tense up or move her leg. She just lifted her eyes from the Taste of India carpet and looked at him steadily for a minute with no particular expression on her face—or an expression, at most, of tolerant indulgence. Then the smiling waiter approached with their supper.

They ate it with the television on. Her flatmate, Summer, was

there—she had been away for the weekend with some man; her suitcase was still in the hall. He had not even known of her existence until they found her sitting on the sofa with her small stockinged feet on the old leather pouf, watching TV. Her presence had the effect of taking most of the interesting tension from the situation—things seemed flat now that she was there—and when Katherine went to do the washing-up, leaving them to talk amongst themselves, he felt that it was probably time for him to leave.

He found her standing at the sink in the kitchen. She may not have noticed he was there until, stepping up to her, he put his hands on her waist. When she did not move even then, he went a step further and, tucking down the tag of her sweater, kissed her exposed neck.

‘Do you want to stay the night?’ she said, still sloshing things in the sink.

‘Do you want me to?’

‘It’s up to you.’

He seemed to think for a moment. ‘Yes, I’d like to.’

‘Okay.’

‘Are you sure?’ he said.

‘Am I sure?’

‘Are you sure it’s okay? I don’t want to stay if you don’t want me to.’

‘It’s okay,’ she said, freeing herself from his hands, which had stolen onto her stomach, and taking a dishcloth.

Her pale hair was tied up severely, showing the high pallor of her forehead, and her face had a freshly scrubbed look. She was wearing a loose T-shirt and old-fashioned pyjama trousers. ‘I’ve still got my period,’ she announced, turning down the duvet.

‘Okay.’

Sitting there, he found it slightly difficult to see what the point of his presence was—she was under the duvet now, and did not seem to pay him any attention as he slowly undressed and joined her. She was lying on her side, facing away from him, and she did not move when he put out his hand and sent it down the shallow slope of her side and up the steeper hill of her hip, feeling under his fingertips the filled, homely fabric of the pyjama trousers.

‘Are you sure you want me to stay?’ he said.

A sudden susurrations of the sheets—she turned. In such proximity her face looked different. His perusal of it, and his silence, seemed to unnerve her and shaking her head on the pillow, she said, ‘What?’

‘Nothing . . . I like looking at you.’

She smiled very slightly and he kissed her. She let him. She let him kiss her unparted lips, once, twice, and even then it seemed no more than a sort of tolerant indulgence, until her mouth melted open and for a few seconds seemed to be searching urgently for something inside his. His hands were inside her T-shirt. ‘I don’t want to have sex,’ she said. ‘I told you, I have my period. And even if I didn’t, I wouldn’t want to have sex.’

They lay still for a while.

She put her hand on his face and said, ‘I’m sorry. I’m pleased you insisted on staying.’

‘Insisted? I didn’t insist . . .’

She smiled. ‘Okay, you didn’t insist . . .’

Taking it from his face, he kissed the palm of her hand—plump and mild and slightly damp—and that was the start of a tortuously slow exploration, an exploration *sub specie aeternitatis*, of the sense of touch.

Towards morning—they were naked on the mattress, their senses painfully peeled in the warmth of the storage heater—she

muttered, 'I don't think I can not have an orgasm,' and letting her knees fall open, quietly started to play with herself.

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Suddenly, unexpectedly, no longer even seriously hoped for, there were a few lovely days. Sun-fire on frozen ponds. Everything seemed okay then.

Then on Saturday afternoon, towards the end of the afternoon, when the winter daylight was starting to fail, he met her at Angel tube station, and there was something wrong. He had sensed it earlier in the day when they had spoken on the phone, and when he met her at the station and tried to kiss her she just turned and started to walk away.

They had walked some way up Essex Road—past Packington Street, were in front of the open facade of Steve Hatt the fishmonger, standing on the stained pavement in a faint sea smell—when she stopped and said, 'What are we doing? Where are we going?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'Where *are* we going?'

'I thought you wanted to get a drink,' she said.

'Is that what you want to do?'

'Isn't that what you want to do?' . . . 'Do you want to get a drink?' she said.

'I don't mind. What do you want to do?'

If it was a drink he wanted, she insisted on returning to Angel, and they were nearing Islington Green, still in silence, when he stopped and said, 'Look, if you're not going to say anything, maybe I should just go.'

She went very still.

'You're not saying anything either,' she said half-heartedly. Then she said, 'I'm sorry. I don't know . . .'

'What?'

'I'm sorry.' She put a hand on his arm. 'I feel a bit weird.'
'What do you mean you feel a bit weird?'
'I've been feeling a bit weird this afternoon, since earlier.'
'I don't know what you mean when you say *a bit weird*.'
'Let's just get a drink,' she said. 'Let's just get a drink and see how it goes.'

'See how it *goes*?'

'Yes,' she said.

He followed her into the nearest pub. Not a particularly nice pub. The Nag's Head. And she still seemed to be feeling quite weird. While they stood at the bar waiting to be served, surrounded by screens shouting about sport, she started to laugh. Perhaps it was just the fact that they had ended up *there*, in the Nag's Head, a straightforward pub with a passion for sport, and a sour smell of lager soaked into wood. They sat down at a long table which they had to share with some other people. She seemed strangely exhilarated. There was a strong flush in her pale skin.

He was wary. He pressed her on what she had meant outside when she said she was feeling a bit weird.

She stopped smiling. 'I just . . . didn't . . . feel anything,' she said.

'You didn't feel anything?'

'No.'

'What do you mean? When?'

'This afternoon.' Seeing the expression on his face, she took his hands in hers and said, 'It was just something weird. I don't know what happened. I'm sorry.'

'This isn't just what you're like, is it?' he suggested, smiling sceptically.

She laughed and shook her head. 'No.'

'You're sure?'

'I'm sure.'

Over the second pint they started to talk about other things—

he told her how he had once owned a pizza-delivery franchise nearby, and how he had mortgaged it to produce a film (directed by Julian Shoe—the name made her laugh, he swore he wasn't making it up), which had never found a distributor, forcing him to sell the pizza franchise and work instead as an estate agent at one of the snootier Upper Street outfits—Windlesham Fielding, pinstriped suits moving in the shop window. Though she knew by then that he had old links with the postcode, this was the first time they had been mapped out for her. He told her how—after a stint in the City which ended in minor scandal—he had set up on his own as an Islington estate agent. For a while he was successful. He owned up to having owned a Porsche—to having been a Porsche-owning estate agent. (She laughed at that.) He said he had lived in several thousand square feet of warehouse flat overlooking the canal. He had not seen the place for years and he suggested they walk over there tomorrow.

'Okay,' she said.

It was dark when they left the Nag's Head. Under towering streetlights, the junction at Angel pumped people and vehicles like an exposed heart.

He was sufficiently upset by what had happened to seek a meeting on Monday with Toby, at whose wedding they had met. Toby had known her since university; they had been at Cambridge together, had shared history tutorials as undergraduates at Trinity. And Toby had something to tell him. She was married. Separated for a year or so, but still, so far as he knew, married. Her husband—he had left *her*, was Toby's feeling—was some sort of photographer. Fraser King.

'He's some sort of pap. She hasn't told you this?' he said, surprised.

'No.'

‘She’s not mentioned him?’

‘No.’

James thought, and then said that the only hint he had had of it was that nestling in the mess on the little night-table next to her bed—among the tumblers of stale water and screwed-up tissues—he had noticed a watch. A man’s watch. It looked like a pilot’s watch or something. A very macho watch. He had of course wondered who its owner was.

‘Probably Fraser’s,’ Toby offered. An overweight City lawyer, tanned from his Indian Ocean honeymoon and still in the suit he wore to the office, he was jiggling his portly knees and looking wistfully towards the door. They were in a pub and he wanted to smoke. ‘Sounds like the sort of watch he would have.’

‘Did you ever meet him?’

‘A few times.’

‘What was he like?’

Toby shrugged. ‘He was okay,’ he said, putting the emphasis on okay so as to make it vaguely praiseful.

‘She’s said some things . . .’ James said, thinking aloud.

‘What?’

‘Things about the past. I don’t know. That she still has ties to the past or something. Nothing specific. That must be what she meant . . .’

‘Probably. Mind if I step outside for a minute?’

They went and stood in front of the pub. It was on a quiet, pristine Chelsea street—Toby’s local. In summer it looked like it was made of flowers, and even now it was festooned with elegant wintergreens. Toby sucked hungrily on a duty-free Marlboro Light in the sharp, smoke-blue evening air. ‘So how’s it going, generally?’ he said.

James told him it was going fine.

What he did not tell him was how on Saturday night after

supper, though she had with some solemnity invited his hand into her unbuttoned jeans to feel how wet she was—very wet—she would not let him fuck her. He was left pleading there, literally kneeling on her living-room floor (Summer was away for the weekend again) while he unknowingly paraphrased Marvell.

*Had we but World enough, and Time,
This Coyness, Lady, were no Crime . . .*

He had not in fact actually fucked her since the night of the fiasco. She had not let him. In that sense the fiasco was very much ongoing—the latest thing was that she had started to talk of wanting to get him looked over by a doctor. ‘I don’t know where you’ve been,’ she said. ‘I don’t know what you’ve been doing.’ He promised her that he had no diseases. They were at that point in bed and he finally turned over and sulked.

No, he did not tell Toby these things.

‘Are you married?’ he said.

What followed—they were having a late supper in the trattoria with the plastic plants next to Russell Square tube—was surprisingly short and simple.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Separated.’

She was obviously prepared for this.

‘Were you planning to tell me?’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I know I should have told you already. It doesn’t make any difference, though. I haven’t seen him for more than a year.’

He was full of questions he wanted to ask her. He had imagined that they would spend the whole evening on the subject. In the end, however—it was obvious that she did not want to talk about it—he just said, ‘Is that his watch by your bed?’

And she said—‘Yes.’

(And the next time he looked, the watch was no longer there.)

So that was that. Except that that night, for the first time since the fiasco, she took the erection which was pressing fervently into the small of her back and pulled it into her. She immediately started to sob. In the very faint light that leaked in from the street he saw her scrumpled face, the shine in the tiny valleys to the sides of her eyes. ‘It’s okay,’ she whispered, worried that he might not understand her tears. ‘It’s okay.’ She smiled tearfully. ‘It’s okay.’

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Things must have been okay then, in mid-February—there was a minibreak. In the monochrome interior of the Eurostar as it flew through the Kentish twilight, she laid out the key facts—a medieval port, the largest in northern Europe, a sort of doublet-and-hose Hong Kong or Singapore. Then the Scheldt silted up and stopped the opening to the sea (a poor fate for a port), leaving it, for the last four hundred years, an exquisite fossil.

She had a list of things she wanted to see, and he tried to keep her warm—they would have needed a polar explorer’s microfibrils to do the job properly—as she led them to grey-skinned emaciated Christs, and many quiet vistas of narrow little houses with their feet in the water. It was the water that made the strongest impression on him. The very sight of it, its black viscosity, made him shudder. In the morning, seen from the hotel window, steam stood thickly on its still, house-edged surface. At the end of each afternoon the sun shone on it, a strange cold yellow. It was heavy and heatless. He pitied the fish in it, and wondered why it wasn’t frozen. The streets were frost-scoured, and the tourist-trade horses—he pitied them too—steamed with their dung in the stone squares.

There was something almost hallucinatory about the place. The tangle of streets, squares and waterways. Everything was extremely small in the Middle Ages—that was very evident. For instance, the tavern they stooped into one twilight. It occupied the lower floor of a tiny house which teetered forward into its alley. There were only two tables, space for no more than a dozen people. The whole interior was made of wood, and smelled of warm smoke from the fireplace. They stayed there for an hour or two, the evening thickening in the quarrels of the windows, while she told him about John of Gaunt—that is, John of *Ghent*—son of Edward III and Chaucer’s friend and patron, who was born in the Flemish city in 1340 while his parents attended a summit meeting that went on for more than a year. Time, she thought, was different then. Partly for technological reasons. Partly because of the presence of a living idea of eternity. Look at Jan van Eyck’s *The Madonna and Joris van der Paele*. (They did look at it, in the Groeninge Museum.) The living presence of eternity—a painter striving to paint it. Who would try to paint such a thing now? And why?

Later they hurried through silent streets laughing at the sheer shocking lowness of the temperature, every last joule having seemingly evaporated into the yawning interstellar spaces overhead. For a moment she stopped and looked up at the mess of stars and thought tipsily—*The living presence of eternity . . .* Tight-jawed, he hurried her on through the stinging air, towards the lobby of the hotel.

He has often wondered how small birds, stuck outside in them, survive nights like that. Walking Hugo on winter mornings when the puddles are ice and hearing, in the leafless park, their pathetically subdued tweeting always touches him with pity, and a sort of wonder that they are able to survive the subzero night, to make it through to the morning to whistle

with such touching fortitude—though weakly—as he walks by swaddled and scarfed up to the eyeballs, and *still* shivering, still stamping his feet in a struggle to keep the numbness from them. How do they survive?

She shrugged. ‘Don’t know,’ she said.

The question did not seem to interest her.

‘You’ve never thought about it?’

She shook her head. ‘No,’ she said.

They were on the train to Ghent. Outside the windows the Netherlandish banality of the landscape was mitigated by a frost so thick it looked like snow and sparkled in the flooding sunlight.

He said, ‘Am I just being sentimental?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe anthropo . . . whatever.’

‘What?’

‘Anthropocentric? Is that the word?’

There was something about the way she said, *Is that the word?* Without the slightest fear of seeming stupid or ignorant. She just *knew* she wasn’t stupid or ignorant. It was something that secretly impressed and intimidated him, which took him uneasily back to the times he used to sit with Miriam and her friends on his Islington terrace. In the presence of those men—and they were invariably men—James the estate agent would tend not to have much to say for himself, especially when the talk turned intellectual. And the talk was often oppressively intellectual when Miriam’s visitors were there, sitting on his terrace, with the faint odour of vegetation floating up from the water, supping his champagne. Magnus. Karlheinz. And Linhardt. Linhardt. He was the worst. That French twat, with his high forehead and serial killer’s blue eyes . . .

‘The famous are part of us,’ he is saying, when James steps onto the terrace with the second bottle of Veuve Clicquot, ‘of

our identity. That is why they are so fascinating to us, why we feel strange when we see them, why we have even a sense of awe. You can say they are half-abstract beings, ideas, belonging to the world of the mind . . .’

‘Who’s your favourite celebrity?’ Miriam says.

Linhardt ignores her. ‘I make visible these ideas,’ he says, looking at James, ‘which I think is completely consistent with the definition of art . . .’

James nods, pours . . .

Linhardt. The thought of him still makes James want to kick something. Then, he took it out on the towpath—pounding it all the way to Victoria Park, under the low bridges, through the spaces laced with moving light when the sun was shining on the water.

Katherine’s lack of interest in the travails of little birds should not have surprised him. A week or so earlier, he had told her the story of the hatchling thrush—another one set on the terrace of his old Islington flat. One spring morning he had looked out through the French windows and seen a dead hatchling thrush on the decking. It must have fallen from a nest somewhere higher up. That in itself was sad, but what made it so memorably so—what in fact pierced him with a sorrow he has never been able to forget—was the way its parents spent the whole morning offering it worms. With worms in their beaks, its mother and father would frequently land next to it, where it lay lifelessly still on the decking, and wait there for a few moments, turning their heads in the way birds do, unable to understand why it wasn’t taking them.

She said, ‘Aaww.’

Though she was trying to sound sad, she didn’t. It was obvious, anyway, that she was not being pierced by a sorrow she would never be able to forget.

He was irritated that the story had flopped. He wondered, in his irritation, if this meant that she was just not a very nice person. *Was she just not a very nice person? Was that it?*

No, she was just not as sentimental as he was. He was sentimental. She made him feel sentimental.

The train pulled into Ghent station at noon. They had lunch, then walked to Sint Baaf's cathedral to see van Eyck's altarpiece. That was why they were in Ghent. That was what she wanted to see. One of the Masterpieces of Western Art. It was a strange image. In the middle, an important-looking sheep stood on a table with blood flowing in a neat stream from a hole in its front into a metal cup. The sheep did not seem to be in pain, or even to have noticed what was happening. There was a subtly painted suggestion, too, that it was shining with light. In the field around it were lots of expensively dressed people, mostly men, some with wings . . . Yes, it was very strange. He knew that the sheep was a symbol of Jesus Christ—he knew about the angels and saints. He was familiar with the iconography. What made it *seem* strange, and this was what she was explaining to him as they perambulated around the altarpiece in its perspex house, was the way it was painted. The familiar symbols of medieval art had been painted as if they were real things. *That* was what made them seem strange. The sheep looked like a real sheep, like a photo of a sheep. That was what was strange. And she drew his attention to the swallows or swifts flitting about in the luminous evening sky near some palm trees—very small, to indicate their distance from the spectator—and not one of them the same as the others, each painted in a specific position in flight, obviously observed from nature—one swooping, another soaring, another spiralling—escapees from a world of symbolic and stylised art.

When they had seen the masterpiece she said, 'Should we get totally pissed?' They were leaving Sint Baaf's. It was not something he normally did. Pensively, he stroked his jaw. Then he said, 'Yeah, okay,' and they went and drank a lot of Duvel, and Westmalle Tripel, and Piraat, and Sint Bernardus Abt 12, with its laughing monk on the label. It was still just about light when they stumbled out into the Grote Markt several hours later, and presumably freezing though they were insensible to it now. Looking for the station, they quickly found themselves lost in the streets of a disappointingly twenty-first-century town—plastic trams, ATMs . . . A taxi . . . A stifflingly overheated Merc. When James addressed the driver in slurred French, the man answered in unfriendly English. The fare for the two-minute drive was €6. At the station, they struggled with the question of which platform to wait on. A well-insulated local told them to take the next train to Zeebrugge.

And Zeebrugge, very tediously, was where they woke up. They spent two whole minutes on the platform there in a knifelike wind that whipped in off the North Sea, then took another taxi—another overheated Merc—all the way to their hotel (the fare was €80), where they went straight upstairs and fell asleep.

The next morning, their final morning in Flanders, hungover and eating hot *frites* from a paper cone, she snuggled into him as they walked under the frozen copper-sulphate sky and said, 'I feel nice with you.' Things seemed okay then.

*

On Friday, towards the end of the afternoon, he takes Hugo for a walk. The St Bernard dislikes the subterranean flat. He usually spends the day lethargically filling the sofa, or when

James is sitting on the sofa, the whole vestibule—a huge, sad-eyed harlequin.

Under the sky-scraping London planes of Russell Square, which are just starting to venture forth their leaves, James throws a tennis ball for him; and if he is throwing it with more than usual vigour it may be an effect of what she said to him on the phone as he walked to the square from Mecklenburgh Street. She said she was tired. She did not want to meet tonight. Someone was off sick, she said, and she had to work an extra-long shift. Then, perhaps hearing the disappointment in his voice, she said, 'Let's do something tomorrow.'

He perked up slightly, said he'd try to think of something special . . .

'No,' she said, 'nothing special. Let's just go to the cinema or something.'

He asked her what she wanted to see.

'I don't know. What is there?'

He said he'd have a look.

And then, just when that seemed settled, he said, 'Are you sure you don't want to do something tonight?'

And she sighed and said, 'I'm tired. Let's do something tomorrow.'

He slings the tennis ball in the twilight under the trees, slings it with all his strength, twisting his torso and whipping into the throw, trying to find the trajectory that will send Hugo furthest over the still-wintery lawns. His excitable voice as he pursues it punctures the low moan of the traffic endlessly orbiting the square. Something is not okay. He is thinking again of that strange moment on Monday afternoon at the poolside. Something happened in Marrakech, something he does not know about. When they leave the square it is evening and the signs on the hotel fronts are illuminated.

On Sunday there is this lunch at Isabel and Steve's. 'No Katherine?' is the first thing Isabel says, opening the door to see her brother standing there on his own. He wishes she hadn't mentioned her. Everything is pretty fucking far from okay.

He spent Saturday morning under the skylight in the living room, seeing what films were on, interrogating the Internet in his seldom-used spectacles. Surveying the listings he felt lost, ill-equipped to find something that she would like. He does not yet have any sort of instinct for her taste. It is not easily predictable. Miriam, for instance, only touched unimpeachably art-house films, made him sit through the plotless offerings of French and Russian men, whose names still affect him the way memories of lessons at school do—a trapped mind-numbing feeling, a surly sense of personal insufficiency, and a quiet thankfulness that he is not in the experience now. Though Katherine sometimes shows an interest in such films too—he has noticed some DVDs lying around her flat with titles like *Andrei Rublev* and *Tokyo Story*—she is more omnivorous, more promiscuous in what she enjoys. This does not make working out what she will enjoy any easier. Quite the opposite.