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UNSEEN STARS

**A psychogeographical journey through
time and dream towards acceptance**

by Peter William Bailey

Submitted for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Creative and Critical Writing

University of Sussex

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I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:

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Peter William Bailey for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Creative and Critical Writing

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SUMMARY

Nick is a young graduate with no direction in life until a friend introduces him to the concept of *dérive* and explains how Nick can become a twentieth-century *flâneur* in London. The result is a unique meditation on life, love, friendship and time, set against the urban landscape.

However this is no ordinary story of a graduate, facing feelings of aimlessness and lethargy. When he was twelve, Nick learned he has an illness which means he will be confined to a wheelchair. The story encompasses Nick's reveries on loss, romantic dreams and sharp observations of the contrasts between his life and others'.

My writing is classed as fictional autobiography. The narrative of the novel is split between two realities. The first is the present, in which Nick (confined to a wheelchair) is struggling to write his novel and find his place in life. The second is based on Nick's recollections, expressed through written accounts of his dreams. The two realities are described in alternate chapters.

Unseen Stars is centred around the idea of the *dérive*. A *dérive* is a concept developed by French philosophers in the 1960's. It proposes a journey whereby the individual lets himself be drawn towards places that appeal to him. Nick goes on *his* *dérive*; a voyage of self-discovery. A *dérive* is psychogeographical, one's surroundings have a direct effect on one's state of mind. I merge the realities in the novel by making a *dérive* psycho-memorial too (i.e. where one is in time – memory - affects one's state of mind).

The critical introduction addresses the principal themes arising from my novel. The themes examined are psychogeography and urban wandering (especially The Arcades Project). I will focus on dream, psychologies and perception of time, discussing the inspiration of literary works following similar psychogeographical/philosophical guidelines.

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UNSEEN STARS

Critical Introduction

A psychogeographical journey through time and dream towards acceptance.

This critical introduction will address the principal themes arising from my novel, *Unseen Stars*. The themes examined will be those of psychogeography and urban wandering (with particular attention being paid to *The Arcades Project*). This introduction will also focus on the philosophical notions derived from my writing, especially those involving dream, psychologies and the human perception of time. Also, I will discuss the inspirational role played by other works of literature that have followed similar psychogeographical and philosophical guidelines. Through these investigations I hope to show that the ideas drawn from them can not only be applied to my own novel but also applied to the practice of creative writing in general. I feel that my book is driven by a spirit of random wandering governed by chance and the unknown, which also provided a backdrop conducive to my creative endeavours. I hope to show that this backdrop can serve as contributory to an artistic and psychological creativity.

There follows a very brief précis of the storyline and then a slightly longer one of my novella *Unseen Stars*.

The grandson of the man who made the Fortnum and Mason clock is a young, twenty-something exploring the city of London with his friends. He is dreamy and philosophical, a young graduate with no clear direction and no particular place to go ...

until a special friend introduces him to the concept of *dérive* and explains how Nick can become a twentieth-century flâneur in his own city.

Nick and his friends begin their wanderings, deciding on their routes and wandering as the mood takes them. The result is a unique meditation on life, love, friendship and time, set against the urban landscape of the city they know and love.

However this is no ordinary story of a graduate, facing feelings of aimlessness and lethargy about the future. When he was twelve, Nick learned he has an illness which means he will spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. The story thus encompasses Nick's reveries on loss, romantic dreams and sharp observations of the contrasts between his life and others', narrated in a voice which is speculative, romantic and intermittently witty, as life, landscape and identity become inextricably linked.

My writing is classed – broadly speaking – as fictional autobiography. The narrative of the novel is split between two realities. The first reality is the present, in which a young writer, Nick (who is confined to a wheelchair) is not only struggling to write his own novel but is also struggling to make sense of life and of his place in it. The second reality is one based on the memories and recollections of Nick, which are expressed through accounts written by him of his dreams. The two realities are described in alternate chapters of the novel

Unseen Stars is centred around the idea of the *dérive*. A *dérive* is a concept developed by French philosophers in the 1960's. It proposes a journey whereby the person taking it drops all obligations and sense of being a member of “the general public”, and lets himself be drawn towards places that appeal to him. In the novel Nick tries to go on his own *dérive*, looking on it as a kind of voyage of self discovery. A *dérive* is described as being psycho-geographical, meaning that one's location and surroundings can have a direct effect on one's state of mind. I intend to merge the two realities in the novel by making a

dérive psycho-memorial as well (ie: where one is in time – memory - can affect one's state of mind), re-defining a dérive as being bound up with the idea of memory and dream. The synopsis of the book contains the potential for vagueness and confusion, a major theme of the novel will thus be of confusion and uncertainty. Uncertainty about life, writing, sexuality, disability and the future.

The opening chapter of my novel is set in Sydney, Australia. The protagonist, Nick (who is loosely based on myself) is visiting an old school friend of his, James. James is living and studying in Sydney. The scene takes place on the terrace of a luxury penthouse apartment overlooking Circular Quay, where James lives. Nick is in a reflective and downcast mood. His friends all seem to have moved on in life, *guided by an underlying purpose* – whereas Nick has been left behind. Largely owing to his disability, Nick is single, lives with his parents and has no prospect of getting a job. Nominally, he tells people he is a writer in the process of writing his first novel, but in reality he has written 1,500 words in six months – he is stuck, awaiting inspiration. He gives what he has written so far to James. The passage that James reads is an account of one of Nick's dreams – in it, he is walking alone through London one summer's night and is taken by the spontaneous desire to commit suicide. Realising the fragile state of mind of his friend, James recommends that he go on a dérive in London (hopefully to gain some literary inspiration from it). Nick feigns indifference at the idea but secretly likes it.

The introduction of Lucy, James' sister and the secret object of Nick's desire for the past ten years, offers a degree of sexual tension to proceedings. At the end of the night, a drunken Lucy tells Nick to write the novel about himself. Nick says he'll think about it and the chapter ends as he falls asleep.

The second chapter, like every alternating chapter, is an account of a dream/flashback. These alternating chapters are written in such a way as to suggest that they are Nick's novel in progress.

The third chapter introduces Gerald. Gerald is a friend of James' father and has agreed to be Nick's companion/carer for the journey back from Sydney to London. During the homeward flight, Gerald and Nick discuss his novel and the concept of the *dérive* – in the following “real-life” chapter, they arrange to jointly go on their own *dérive*. Chris, Nick's carer – the other major character of the story – is introduced in chapter nine. The rest of the novel will tell of the unlikely trio's physical and psychological journey through London as well as through the changing landscapes of Nick's dreams. One of the effects of the *dérive* is to make Nick more or less banish Lucy from his mind.

Towards the end, there is a brief reunion between James, Lucy and Nick, and in the final chapter – having completed his first *dérive* – Nick unexpectedly meets Lucy, who asks to stay with Nick in London. The book ends as Nick reaches some kind of realisation and resolution about his life.

Through having an intermingling of a real past and a fictive present, I feel that my writing carries a greater potential for invention and spontaneity. Also, because I have split my novel into a 'dream-world' and a 'real-world', I feel it explores themes of fantasy and surrealism.

As well as containing philosophical allusions to the *dérive*, surrealism and the selective qualities of memory, a major part of this novel will focus on various descriptions of London – its scenery, its atmosphere and the relationship it holds with Nick. As the novel progresses, so too does Nick's journey through London (his *dérive*). As readers find out more about the life and personality of the protagonist, so too will they become more intimate with the novel's urban setting. I hope that in the development of the novel, Nick's

identity as an individual and London's landscape will become inextricably linked, uniting inanimate geography and life.

In the following critical introduction I propose to elaborate on and elucidate six main topics. I feel these topics are integral to the underlying tone and content of my novel and also have provided me with insight and inspiration for its continuation and conclusions. The six main topics for discussion are the Dérive, Time, The Flâneur and The Arcades Project, Dream, Literary Motivation and finally a Redefinition of the Dérive in the light of ideas arising from the other subjects discussed.

Before I begin my discussion of the points listed above, I feel it necessary to further elaborate on the genre and on the authorial voice I have employed in *Unseen Stars*. I term *Unseen Stars* autobiographical fiction because it is true details and recollections from my life interspersed with an entirely fictional reality, so it is autobiography alternating with fiction. Max Saunders comments usefully on these questions in *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature*.¹ As I have noted, a book that has heavily influenced my writing is Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. According to Saunders, Proust's masterpiece can be termed as aesthetic autobiography. This heavily artistic style of writing can be seen negatively as being over-sentimentalised, recounting the past in too idealistic a way. However, Saunders also feels that autobiografiction aesthetic can be most honest, frank and revealing. This is shown in the fact that in much aesthetic autobiografiction the protagonist is written of in the third person to detach the author from his work, to an extent. In *Unseen Stars*, though it is written in the first person, I do make myself more remote from the story by calling the protagonist Nick. Other texts which I was influenced by in developing the narrative voice of *Unseen Stars* include J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and two poems by Wordsworth, *The*

¹ Saunders, Max, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: OUP 2010).

Prelude and the ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’.

In both *Unseen Stars* and *The Catcher In The Rye*, the protagonists, Nick and Holden Caulfield, feel a need to tell the reader about themselves in quite an intimate way. Their narrative makes the reader feel as if they are a trusted confidant, alone in being told all these secrets. In both texts, the narrator addresses the reader directly, as ‘you’.

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born...²

In contrast to their direct, close relationship with the reader, both narrators communicate feelings of estrangement from the wider world. They both feel they do not fit in or know their place in the world. They are both close observers of the world around them. Nick paints himself as someone outside the rest of society and comments on the characters in his life, as a bystander. Holden takes the observer's stance throughout the narrative and feels estranged from the rest of the world. For example, in the club in New York, he keeps commenting how strange and phoney everyone is. Indeed, he describes most adults that he meets as “phoney”. They both observe themselves too, and are self-critical, perhaps even more harshly critical of themselves than of others. Nick says, after being critical of others, “Who am I to cast these opinions against them? I am everything I think they are, but I am too embittered to see it.” Holden often refers to himself as a “moron”.

The observer's role played by both Nick and Holden is consistent with a sense they share of being in limbo, i.e. of being suspended and uncertain. For both of them, the future is open. In *Unseen Stars*, Nick's generalised uncertainty about the future and how he will live is reflected in the way he turns away from making even small decisions. At several points in the book, Gerald says to Nick, “Where are we going now?” and Nick replies “Why don't we just go, and see where we end up?” Holden, in a similar way, refrains from

² Salinger J D, *The Catcher in the Rye* (London: Penguin, 2010) p. 5.

committing to decisions. In Holden's case, he criticises the logic of commitment:

A lot of people, especially this one psychoanalyst guy they have here, keeps asking me if I'm going to apply myself when I go back to school next September. It's such a stupid question, in my opinion. I mean how do you know what you're going to do till you *do* it? The answer is, you don't. I think I am, but how do I know? I swear it's a stupid question.³

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth looks back on his life, treating it as a kind of box full of memories over which he plays the role of almost a third person narrator. In this way, his life becomes more of a story than a personal experience. *The Prelude* and *Unseen Stars* share the selective quality of both memory and concentration/attention. Wordsworth uses the phrase 'spots of time' to denote the memories and experiences - no matter how mundane or fleeting – that the mind chooses to fixate upon.

There are in our existence spots of time./ That with distinct pre-eminence retain/ a renovating virtue,⁴

Both Nick and Holden have developed a way to distract themselves from their ongoing uncertainty about the future. For Nick, the *dérives* serve as distraction or escape from his underlying concern. In Holden's case, when he does not want to focus on his situation, he has the ability to go somewhere else in his mind, and a recurring thought he escapes to concerns the ducks in Central Park:

I was thinking about the lagoon in Central Park, down near Central Park South. I was wondering where the ducks went when the lagoon got all icy and frozen over. I wondered if some guy came in a truck and took them away to a zoo or something. Or if they just flew away.⁵

Both kinds of distractions can be seen as metaphors for the challenge that the protagonists

³ Ibid p. 230.

⁴ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude XII*, 208-210 ff. De Selincourt's edition of the 1850 version (Oxford, 1926)

⁵ Ibid P86

are grappling with. For Nick, Nick uses the *dérive* as a means of escape. In a literal sense, the *dérive* is running away (de-banking, as in the bank of a river). The ducks can be seen as a metaphor for Holden's situation: because of a change in external conditions, i.e. the winter cold freezing the lagoon, or in Holden's case, his expulsion from school), the ducks' usual habitat is no longer hospitable (which parallels Holden's feeling that he may no longer be welcome at his parents' house. Holden is wondering whether someone will come and take care of him, or whether he should just run away.)

Unseen Stars is a journey towards acceptance and in a way *The Catcher In The Rye* is too. Both protagonists come to accept normal life and responsibility during the course of the text. In *Unseen Stars*, Nick faces up to the idea that he will be in a wheelchair and decides to take on the responsibility to find out more about the condition and find out ways he can help himself. In *The Catcher In The Rye*, Holden initially wants to rebel and run away, but in the end he decides that there is no point. He accepts that life continues and you cannot run away from making decisions. In the poetry of William Wordsworth, acceptance is a major theme. In 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood' the underlying theme is devoted entirely to acceptance of the passing years and reconciliation with continuing life. *The Prelude* is like a much more detailed precursor to this poem in which Wordsworth details every aspect of his past as if to show exactly what he has left behind him. Though there is no outward sense of emotion conveyed in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth repeatedly makes the point that he feels a great need to share his life with the reader. The literary voice behind all three works comes from the same place – the author's compulsion to convey and almost give explanation for his life to others.

Another book I have found indispensable to my elaboration on the subject of an authorial voice is *Realist Fiction and the Strolling Spectator* by John Rignall. This book confirms and puts into words my feeling and intention when I wrote *Unseen Stars*. Though

my writing is not and does not seek to be realism (it is far too surreal and – in a sense – abstract for that) I very much identify with what Rignall says about the strolling spectator and the impact his observation have on my writing. In Rignall's words the *dériveur*, *flâneur* or strolling spectator exhibits a 'detached curiosity'⁶, an unwitting determination to discover, with the hero of the novel playing a role of a disinterested detective. I have found (especially since reading John Rignall) that writing from the viewpoint of a spectator or outsider allows for a far greater sense of freedom and honesty. Concentrating on the objective, one is able to show and not tell. I also found what Rignall said about discovery enlightening. He said that when you play the role of a strolling spectator, you cannot seek diversion or try to discover new things, but must simply sit back and let it wash over you.

I will now return to the discussion of the points I previously mentioned. Firstly I will address the topic of the *dérive*, giving a brief account of its political and historical background, then I will expand on its general philosophical ideas of formlessness, the geographical as well as psychological application – its ideas about space and time.

The second section will address ideas and philosophies involving the human perception of time. As a major point of reference to this section I will be discussing the work and ideas of Henri Bergson. Discussion will focus on the way in which Bergson saw time as being more formless than hitherto and the way in which, in *Unseen Stars*, time can play an illusory, enigmatic but also reassuring role.

The third section of this thesis will address another notion of wandering, that of the *flâneur* and the Arcades Project, conceived of by Walter Benjamin in the early part of the twentieth century, referring back to the nineteenth century modern tendency to wander through specifically urban spaces, observing urban life. I shall refer to particular ideas in Benjamin, making clear precisely which aspects of the *flâneur*'s wandering through the

⁶ Rignall, John, *Realist fiction and the Strolling Spectator*. (London: Routledge, 1992) p.3.

metropolis are relevant to and shed light on aspects of *Unseen Stars*, and make particular reference where they occur in Benjamin, to ideas to do with enigma, escapism and fantasy.

Fourthly, I will discuss the use and manipulation of dream as an alternative mode of consciousness, referring to particular aspects of Freud, Jung and Bergson that relate specifically to the dream portions of *Unseen Stars*. I will comment on how the dream sections increasingly seem to set the tone of the creative work and to take the story into new areas and also to establish a particular language in which I alternate dream portions with the *dérive* portions. I shall also discuss, here, the philosophical perception of dream as an alternative language

Next I shall extend the discussion on *Unseen Stars* by including detail of literary inspiration behind it. Each of the three parts of *Unseen Stars* begins with a brief epigraph taken from William Wordsworth's poem, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood'. The poem holds a direct, and indeed a directive influence on my novel. I will discuss this poem and other literary works and authors in relation to *Unseen Stars*. Poetry and romanticism emerge from my work on dream, taking me back to Keats, who becomes a strong inspiration and driver, developing into his ideas about negative capability.

The last section will thus naturally become a section in which I can re-assess and re-define the *dérive*, in the light of what I have discovered about the concept in relation to the way in which it is portrayed in *Unseen Stars*, and also having brought into relation with it connected ideas as above (Time, Flâneur, Dream, autobiography/poetry/romanticism, Negative Capability).

A subject provoked by a quotation from my novel and one which I constantly refer back to during this critical introduction as a point of further discussion, concerns the

repetitive and cyclical nature of reality created as time progresses. The quotation talks of the way in which creativity and diversity can be derived from such repetition.

A friend of mine once likened the practice of creative writing to waves on a beach as they repeatedly meet the shore. In order to write about anything, a repeated acquaintance with it and distancing from it is required. What is represented to and conceived by each writer will be different. Also, repeated acquaintance with the subject will produce a multiplicity of subtly different results – the action of acquaintance may be repeated but what is perceived will always change...

This idea of repetition is echoed throughout the novel, thus uniting writing with everyday life. Indeed, repetition is shown in the stopping and starting of each weekly *dérive* and there is also an intimation made toward the idea of comfort and security afforded to Nick by repetition and routine. In this thesis I propose to write the following critical analysis in a similar way to Gerald's analogy of waves on a beach. I will therefore focus, draw back and re-focus on issues arising from the text. By constantly zooming in (to talk about specifics) and zooming out (to talk in more general terms) I hope to provide a more detailed and lucid account.

Dérive

The fundamental subject-matter both of this thesis and of *Unseen Stars* is the concept of the *dérive*. The plot of *Unseen Stars* can be described as being speculative and peripatetic – two words that can also be attributed to the *dérive*. To introduce the concept of the *dérive* as it relates to this thesis, I will firstly produce a succinct overview of it, situating it in its historical and social contexts. I will then focus on the central ideas that arise from it; principally those of surrealism, formlessness, its geographical as well as psychological application, and its ideas about space and time.

French society in the years following the Second World War had to adjust to its new-found status of mediocrity. The institution of the Fourth Republic (1946 – 1958) proved to be short lived and ended in failure. The post-war reunification of France – that of Northern France (occupied – under resistance - by the Germans) and Vichy France (characterised by a successful resistance to the Germans) – was played out against a backdrop of tacit hostility and resentment. The country was now in receipt of and reliant upon Marshall Aid from the U.S. The 1950's especially were a period of global decolonisation, during which France lost the majority of its empire – most damaging was the emancipation of Algeria, which France lost in six years of costly war from 1956 – 1962. But for a brief period of political excitement in 1959 when Charles de Gaul became president, French politics underwent a sustained period of banalisation. During the 1960's the French media picked up on the spirit of boredom which prevailed over the nation and expressed it in newspaper headlines such as *La France bâille* (France yawns).⁷

'Of all the affairs we participate in, with or without interest, the groping search for a new way of life is the only aspect still impassioning.' (sic)⁸

⁷ Jonathan Dewald. *Lost Worlds: the Emergence of French Social History, 1815-1970* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006) p.137.

⁸ Gilles Ivain. "Formulary for a New Urbanism" (1953) *Internationale Situationniste 1* (June 1958) p.11.

A growing dissatisfaction with contemporary society was felt most acutely in the industrialised cities of France. Paris, being the birth-place of such dissatisfaction, became the focus of much of the written polemic on the subject.

The renovation of Paris (1852-1870), commissioned by Napoleon III and designed by Baron Haussmann was a contributing factor to the agitation expressed in these polemics. The nineteenth century construction of the centre of Paris, with its wide boulevards and ordered street patterns, was designed as a preventative measure against the possibility of there being another revolution. The new layout of the city was such that people could no longer take to the streets and barricade them against the authorities - as was the case in 1789. The resultant landscape may have been eulogised in many architectural circles, but intellectuals in the early 1950's found it to be restrictive, authoritarian and stultifying to their collective senses of freedom and creativity.

'We are bored in the city, we really have to strain to discover mysteries on the pavement billboards, the latest statement of humour and poetry.' These are the words of Gilles Ivain, who wrote 'Formulary for a New Urbanism' in 1953⁹. That opinion was further elaborated on by Guy Debord in 1955, when he wrote 'An Introduction to a critique of Urban Geography'¹⁰, where he also elaborated on the term Psychogeography. 'Psycho-geography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment...on the emotions and the behaviour of individuals.' Psycho-geographical findings thus constitute the potential of a geographical environment to 'influence human feelings...' and refers to 'any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery.' Such a spirit of discovery can easily be translated into a spirit of creation (through writing). Indeed the written word can also have an effect on one's interpretation of geographical surroundings, rendering psycho-geography synonymous

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Guy Debord, "Introduction to a critique of Urban Geography" *Les Lèvres Nues* 6 (September 1955) p.35.

with psycho-literature.

The *dérive* is a concept formulated by Guy Debord in 1956 - the idea was subsequently developed by French philosophers of his generation in the 1960's. The English translation for *dérive* is 'drifting' and it pertains to 'a transient passage through varied ambiances.'¹¹ It proposes a journey whereby the person taking it drops all obligations and sense of being a member of "the general public", and lets himself be drawn towards places on the basis of personal appeal. The *dérive* was largely undertaken by students of the day, looking on it as a kind of voyage of self discovery. A *dérive* is described as being psycho-geographical, meaning that one's location and surroundings can have a direct effect on one's state of mind

The *dérive* – as a formally named idea – rose to prominence in the 1960s through a group named '*Les Situationistes Internationales*' – though its basic tenets had previously been alluded to in literary works such as *L'éducation Sentimentale* by Gustave Flaubert and *La Nausée* by Jean-Paul Sartre. '*Les Situationistes Internationales*' was a group composed primarily of disgruntled university students who purported to provide a social commentary incorporating theories and criticism of French society in the 60s. It will be enduringly linked to the student riots, which took place in Paris (and subsequently other European cities) in May 1968. The *dérive* can thus be perceived in the light of youth rebellion and dissatisfaction with the world as it is. In many ways the *dérive* is about the will to subvert convention and to assert an important individuality within mass society.

In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view cities have psycho-geographical contours,

¹¹ Guy Debord, "Theory of the *dérive*," *Les Lèvres Nues* 8 (1956). Reprinted in *IS* 2 (1958) p.62.

with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.¹²

As I have mentioned above, the creation of the *dérive* stemmed from a number of differing factors – none more influential than an essay written in 1952 by Chombart de Lauwe, 'Paris et l'agglomération parisienne.' As part of his study, he followed the movements made in one year by a student living in the sixteenth arrondissement of Paris, explaining that 'her itinerary delineates a small triangle with no deviation, the three apexes of which are the School of Political Sciences, her residence and that of her piano teacher.'¹³ The results of this experiment provoked indignation, both from the author of the essay and from Debord himself. The indignation stemmed from the fact that some people chose to spend their lives in that way. Freedom, in its potentiality, existed – but no attempt was being made to utilise it. *Dérives* therefore represent a rebellion against this way of life, advocating a new way of life, governed by chance, freedom and - rather than pure randomness - also advocates a banishment of the habitual.

The concept of the *dérive* and the realm of psycho-geography were both defined within the confines of the urban landscape. Although a psychological relationship with one's surroundings and environment can be cultivated anywhere, the situationist definitions placed the ideas in more of a humanist light – a city, being both planned and constructed by man is an ideal environment. 'The *dérive* is in its element in the great industrially transformed cities – those centres of possibilities and meanings' this idea that humans can intuit more about themselves in an environment designed and created by fellow humans, is 'expressed in Karl Marx's phrase: "Men can see nothing around them that is not their own image, everything speaks to them of themselves. The very landscape

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

is alive.’”¹⁴

'One can *dérive* alone, but all indications are that the most fruitful numerical arrangement consists of two or three people... The average duration of a *dérive* is one day, considered as the time between two periods of sleep.'¹⁵ If one chooses to *dérive* over a sustained period of time, it may involve multiple excursions.

The idea that amid all the conformity that modernity implies, there is still the potential for adventure, that imagination and creativity exist in a city not just in spite of but because of that conformity, provides the inspiration for my novel and for my creative writing as a whole. 'I suppose *dériving* is the closest thing you can get to a waking dream... you abandon the conventional, banish the habitual, letting your body be taken by it, in a spirit of randomness but with an ease of predestination.'¹⁶

The *dérive* in my novel takes the three principal characters across London - from London Bridge to Piccadilly, from Piccadilly to Westminster, from Westminster to Hyde Park, from Hyde Park to Regents Park, from Regents Park to Hampstead Heath, from Regents Park to Chinatown, and from Chinatown back to the River Thames. Once a week, over a period of roughly two months, the three distinct lives converge, each unconsciously giving strength to the others.

As Gerald says to Nick, 'You know, I was thinking about the word “*dérive*” this morning. You told me that “*dériver*” meant “to drift”, but what hadn't occurred to me was that “rive” is French for “riverbank”. So to “*dé-rive*” is literally to “de-bank”, “to float away”... very aquatic – as it were...'¹⁷ Water, used as a descriptive motif, plays a role of pivotal importance throughout my novel. Constant references are made to it, it is the setting for Nick's dream-suicide and it is also the setting for much of the *dérive*. The plot of *Unseen Stars* with the *dérive* it consists of encircle the River Thames. My aim in the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Peter Bailey. *Unseen Stars*, p.145.

¹⁷ Ibid., 138.

novel is to make water the life-blood and sustaining force of the *dérive*, as it is of life.

Though I enthusiastically support the idea of the *dérive* as a means to discover a city, as a statement of defiance against the constructs of urbanism, on reading about the *dérive* I became increasingly sceptical of its psychological value. It seemed a practice founded by impetuous, rebellious and confused students who wanted to do something different - solely for the sake of being different. The literature surrounding the idea seems convoluted and pretentious, written by the students to demonstrate their dubious intellectual capacity.

The ecological analysis of the absolute or relative character of fissures in the urban network, of the role of microclimates, of distinct neighborhoods with no relation to administrative boundaries, and above all of the dominating action of centers of attraction, must be utilized and completed by psychogeographical methods. The objective passional terrain of the *dérive* must be defined in accordance both with its own logic and with its relations with social morphology.¹⁸

The above is from an article on the theory of the *dérive* published in the journal 'Situationiste Internationale'. Some responsibility for obfuscation lies with its translator, but nevertheless this is an unnecessarily complicated way to say that a *dérive* must take account of all the varying aspects of city life, and that its route must be planned logically, taking into account the setting and social norms.

In chapter eleven of *Unseen Stars*, before Nick and Gerald begin the *dérive* they have a conversation in which they almost agree that the *dérive* is meaningless but they carry on with it anyway, on the pretext that it is vital for the completion of Nick's novel. In the end the *dérive* becomes an excuse for two lonely people to meet once a week. Of course they do not admit that what they are doing is pointless, but it is tacitly understood between them.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant proposed that all we can know of the external world is representation - the image we give to it is in accordance with the structure of our minds. This is the definition of "phenomenon". 'Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward

¹⁸ Guy Debord, 'Theory of the *dérive*,' *Les Lèvres Nues* 8 (1956): Reprinted in *IS* 2 (1958) p.35.

something, as it is an experience of or about some object.'¹⁹ From a phenomenological viewpoint, the practice of the *dérive* represents the physicality behind the philosophical and psychological theory. If representation is everything, the *dérive* provides an opportunity to actively encounter (first-hand) the elements of chance and randomness that aimless wandering affords. Choice or intentionality has a huge bearing on experience.

I have found that both the *dérive* and the practice of creative writing are closely linked to the ideas of both phenomenology and multiplicity. To explain it I will use the analogy of waves on a beach as they repeatedly meet the shore. In order to write about anything, a repeated acquaintance with and distancing from the subject is required. What is represented to and conceived by each writer will be different. Also, repeated acquaintance with the subject will produce a multiplicity of subtly different results – the action of acquaintance may be repeated but what is perceived will always change. I explain this analogy in *Unseen Stars*. The structure of *Unseen Stars* is such that in every alternate chapter a *dérive* takes place (normally in London); with the analogy I seek to create the effect that, as with writing, repeated acquaintance and re-acquaintance with the *dérive*, London and daily routine not only instil a sense of order into Nick's life but also stimulate creativity. In other words, repetition enhances both the psychological and physical aspects of life.

¹⁹ Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy – Phenomenology - <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/> - accessed 21/05/09.

Bergsonian Time

Into the midnight air break the all-too-familiar chimes of Big Ben, simultaneously marking the end of one day and the beginning of the next. We all watch and listen to the clock in silent reverence. The silence between each sombre strike is broken only by the drone of a plane overhead. I look up at it, and though I can't see it, I decide there is a Qantas logo on its tail. I keep watching the plane as it slowly disappears from sight, embarking on its epic journey. Maybe it is merely due to the singularity of the moment, but I think for the first time in years I can see the stars sparkling in the London sky. A vision? A lucid dream? The chimes have finished. Am I awake or asleep?²⁰

These words, coming at the close of my novel, mark the end of Nick's *dérive*. One of the strongest metaphors for repetition in the novel is the striking of Big Ben. In this final paragraph, there is repetition of each stroke; also, as it is midnight, the chimes evoke time flowing perpetually from one day to the next. It is with the idea that everything – humanity, the natural world and even the imagination – is governed by a cyclical continuum, that I here propose to discuss the concept of time and its implications for human experience.

Time – its flow, perception and manipulation – is a significant element in *Unseen Stars*. The novel is primarily set in the present tense, though alternate chapters – describing Nick's dreams - are set at random moments within the life of the protagonist. Often something minor happens in the previous 'present' chapter which triggers a new dream/flashback in the next. The subject and theory of time is therefore explored within the novel experientially rather than scientifically. In this 'Time' section of the Critical Introduction I here provide some explanation for Nick's contradictory experience of a time-frame both continuous and non-linear, (showing that time has a formless and intellectually indefinable quality) and for the effect that consciousness and recollection have upon his experience of time itself.²¹

In writing *Unseen Stars* the theories and writings of Henri Bergson have been conducive to my creative practice and to the process of invention. Bergson (1859–1941)

²⁰ Peter Bailey, *Unseen Stars*, p.293.

²¹ Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (Cornell University Press, 2006). This is the source of my general account of Bergson.

began his academic career as a promising mathematician, but during the 1880s switched to philosophy, writing about the effects of hypnosis and about consciousness in general.

Towards the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century, Bergson's philosophy became increasingly creative and intuitive – during the 1890's he wrote several essays which were to contribute to *A Creative Mind*, and in 1907 he published *Creative Evolution*.²²

Henri Bergson's early work mainly concerns the scientific determinism and mechanics of time. However, in later essays which came to form *Time and Free Will*, he defines time from a human perspective. Perception, consciousness and freedom give the subject almost an existential and phenomenological dimension, Bergson openly denounces scientific endeavour when used to explain the inexplicable. Bergson argues that if scientific modes were applied to explain matters concerning ourselves, we would become like things. 'If we tried to measure and count our feelings, to explain and predict our motives and actions we will be transformed into automata – without freedom, without beauty, without passions and without dreams. We will become mere phantoms of ourselves.'²³ By firmly distancing his inquiry and postulation on the subject from a scientific point of view, he outlines ideas about the subject of time which I explore in *Unseen Stars*.

Bergson argues that our perception (of time and in general) is governed by two states of consciousness; immediate consciousness and reflective consciousness. Immediate consciousness refers to the way something feels to us directly, before we stop and think about it or try to communicate it in any way. Time experienced in this way, is known as real duration. Real duration/time is continuous and indivisible. This kind of consciousness cannot be quantified numerically or spatially. The human passage through time can only be seen as a

²² 'Henri Bergson', *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (First published Tue May 18, 2004; substantive revision Thu Jan 3, 2008): <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bergson/> accessed 21/05/09.

²³ Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson*, (Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 54.

multiplicity of varied, distinctive experiences. This kind of time is qualitative, not quantitative. Thus, time is seen as a succession of distinct non-linear moments. Reflective consciousness, on the other hand, involves thought, language, logic and memory association. Time experienced in this way is known simply as Time, being quantifiable numerically and spatially.

Rather than being an ever-increasing continuum, Henri Bergson defines the flow of time as a series of distinct but consecutive multiplicities. He explains the theory of multiplicity using the analogy of pain. As the sensation of pain increases, it may appear that pain is added to existing pain in a quantitative sequence. However, according to Bergson pain is qualitative and at any given moment may be perceived in a different way – not simply as a slightly increased or decreased sensation, but as a new kind of sensation. For Bergson, time is similarly experienced in a variety of ways, not simply as an ongoing continuum.

In *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*²⁴ Bergson introduces the notion of intuition, understood by Bergson as a state of subconscious thinking within the realm of pure duration. It is best described as an experience which happens upon the immediate consciousness rather than a practice carried out by reflective consciousness. Intuition is not the same as instinct or feeling. Intuition is a mode of reflection - not a single act, but a fluidity of psychological action. According to Bergson, the intuitive method transcends the limits of idealism or realism. The work explains how intuition can be used as a philosophical method. Intuition is described as a method of 'thinking in duration' which reflects the continuous flow of reality. Bergson distinguishes between intuitive and conceptual thinking, explaining how intuition and intellect may be combined to produce a dynamic knowledge of reality.

According to Bergson, real time cannot be analyzed mathematically. To measure time is to try to create a break or disruption in time. In order to try to understand the flow of

²⁴ Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (Dover Books on Western Philosophy, 1960).

time, the intellect forms concepts of time as consisting of defined moments or intervals. But to try to intellectualize the experience of duration is to falsify it. Real duration can only be experienced by intuition.²⁵

As well as the two distinct states of consciousness (immediate and reflective) and therefore two distinct ways of thinking (intuitive and intellectual) which relate to two distinct conceptions of time (duration and mathematical), Bergson introduces the notion that there are two distinct personae within the human character; the waking-self and the dreaming-self. When someone is dreaming, reflective consciousness plays the role of immediate consciousness – in a dream one's thoughts, impressions and experiences of the past are played out as physical or visual events – the subconscious is made manifest. Without any thoughts or reflections to accompany the events, the most elaborate dream may take place within a few seconds.

In *Thinking Time – An Introduction to Henri Bergson* Suzanne Guerlac writes,

For sleep, by slowing down the play of our organic functions, mainly modifies the surface of communication between the self and external things. We no longer measure duration, we feel it. From quantity it returns to the state of quality. Mathematical determinations of elapsed time no longer occur, giving way to a confused instinct, capable as with all instinct greatly slowed down, of committing enormous errors and also sometimes of proceeding with amazing assuredness.²⁶

This style of fluctuating inexactness and assuredness is reflected in the sections of *Unseen Stars* which describe Nick's dreams, by contrast with the style of the sections of the narrative which describe his waking experience, in which conscious experience is reflected as struggle, rather than flow.

Bergson maintains that reality consists of both extension and duration. For him, space, not being a void or vacuum which is filled by reality, cannot be filled by things, rather, space

²⁵ Henri Bergson: *The Creative Mind*, <http://www.angelfire.com/md2/timewarp/welcome.html>, accessed 20.3.11

²⁶ Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An introduction to Henri Bergson* (Cornell University Press, 2006), p.70.

occupies things. Thus, emptiness can only be conceptualized by suppressing a space-occupying reality. In the same way, nothingness can only be conceptualized by suppressing the awareness of being. In other words, Bergson's argument is that emptiness cannot be directly perceived, only mentally visualized. An underlying message of *Unseen Stars* is that life is only as good or as bad as your perception of it, you can choose to perceive either emptiness in life or life amidst emptiness. In the final chapter of the novel, Nick has the following realization :

The word nostalgia hits me again as a pang of inescapable nausea. That word has been haunting me for years – nostalgia – sickness for return. Tonight, though, I feel is a night for transcendence, for revelation and resolution. What occurs to me is obvious, but it strikes me as shrewd and unprecedented – that is, the past is irrevocable, the future unknowable; the present is all that matters. And the present is ultimately how you choose to see it, the choices are endless. In short, life is what you make of it.

The subject of language and its effect on consciousness and time perception runs throughout *Unseen Stars*. Bergson advances the idea that time experienced in immediate consciousness (real duration) can often be too rich and complex to be reduced to mere words: language plays a restrictive role in our consciousness and in our perception of time. As Bergson puts it, 'Language simplifies and reduces experience, evacuating mobility of impressions, nuance, complexity, and qualitative richness.'²⁷

Indeed, there is a strong connection between the idea of nausea and that of language in the novel – the feeling of nausea that plagues Nick is bound up firstly with his inability to write and secondly with the word nostalgia.

If reality is always changing, then this variability contradicts the theory that every event is causally determined, and that every event must necessarily happen the way it does happen. If reality is not a succession of static moments or immobile states of being, then

²⁷ Ibid. p.293.

there is an indeterminateness and uncertainty in events which produces a freedom of creative possibility.²⁸

The idea of fate and its unchanging nature is a pivotal one in the context of *Unseen Stars*. I share Bergson's view that reality cannot be predestined. The novel, in reflecting the idea that events cannot be predicted in advance, thus gives way to relative confusion and uncertainty, while also stimulating the creative process for Nick - as for the author.

Language, through the inevitability of repetition it implies, plays an influential role in slowing down the human perception of time. Bergson gives another example: when one sees a tree, one first sees an object, then subsequently assigns the object with a word (tree). Once the tree has been recognised and been designated a word, communication to others of the sighting requires a repetition of the word. This sequence of recognition and repetition appears to be instantaneous but requires an artificial and reflective process which affects one's appreciation of passing time, no matter how imperceptibly. The action of writing slows time down to a further degree, almost opening up a new realm of time – one based entirely on reflection.

The events in Nick's everyday waking life are responsible for provoking the events in his dreams but often they also free up memories of the past. Again, Bergson's theories provide an explanation:

... the recollections which disappear from consciousness are probably preserved in remote planes of memory, and the patient can find them by an exceptional effort like that which is effected in the hypnotic state. But, on the lower planes, these memories await, so to speak, the dominant image to which they may be fastened. A sharp shock, a violent emotion, forms the decisive event to which they cling; if this event, by reason of its sudden character, is cut off from the rest of our history, they follow it into oblivion.²⁹

²⁸ Henri Bergson: *The Creative Mind*, <http://www.angelfire.com/md2/timewarp/welcome.html>, accessed 20.3.11.

²⁹ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (Dover Philosophical Classics, 1958), p.157.

Bergson argues that memory and free will are one and the same thing. The selective power of memory and the fact that it has no constraints means the mind can at any point revisit any moment from the past. This raises an interesting question about determinism: whether memory association is triggered by outside forces or by human will. I see memory as being triggered by the subconscious, over which one can only ever have – Nick only ever has – partial control – something to be celebrated rather than regretted. Indeed, the story of my novel revolves around the idea that recollection and association are random processes, induced by physical or mental stimulus. For example, in chapter fifteen Nick sees a discarded firework, and in the following chapter he dreams about a firework display. Later, he watches a low-flying plane over London, and in chapter twenty-two he has a dream about the events of 9/11.

Bergson reaffirms his idea of memory construction, insisting that the building of a memory is not like building with bricks, rather, the memory is constructed like an abstract painting, with elements taking their place in relation to one another in a more complex, less regular process of composition.

Recollection, it is not a mechanical adjunction of more and more numerous elements which, while remaining unmoved, attract around it, but rather an expansion of the entire consciousness which, spreading out over a larger area, discovers the fuller details of its wealth. So a nebulous mass, seen through more and more powerful telescopes, resolves itself into an ever greater number of stars.³⁰

Bergson recasts recollection here from being part of the scientific realm to a realm of subjective psychology. He speaks of memory recall as being like an image viewed through a telescope, its assets made clearer as you zoom in. His description sounds starry, almost fantastical.

Elsewhere, he portrays time as a living continuum (a force) in the process of which

³⁰ Ibid., 128.

present moments are continually relegated to an ominous and somewhat overbearing past. As I have indicated above, the way in which Bergson writes demonstrates his elaborate flair for language and his creative approach to his subject – Bergson’s style also seems in keeping with and has provided inspiration for the writing of *Unseen Stars*.

‘In reality, the past is preserved by itself automatically. In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought and willed from our earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it, pressing against the portals of consciousness that would fain leave it outside’³¹ – time pressing, as it were, into the arcades of lived experience.

³¹ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (Cosimo Inc., 2005), p.28.

The Flâneurs and The Arcades Project

Our waking lives are realms which, at certain hidden points, lead down into the underworld - lands full of inconspicuous places from which dreams arise. During the day, suspecting nothing, we pass them by but no sooner has sleep come than we are eagerly groping our way back to lose ourselves in the dark corridors. By day, the labyrinth of urban dwellings resembles consciousness; the arcades – galleries leading into a city's past – issue unremarked onto the streets. At night, however, under the tenebrous mass of houses, a rich complexity of situation bursts forth.³²

Whilst Bergson describes a process in which memory is stored up in the subconscious waiting to be retrieved, Walter Benjamin is here above writing about adventure and illusion within the subconscious as lying dormant, waiting to come to life (in this case in the form of a walk through the arcades of Paris).

The Arcades Project (Passagenwerk) is Walter Benjamin's lifelong, unfinished work - a huge collection of writings on the city life of Paris during the nineteenth century, concerning (above all) its arcades. Though the book, as it was left on his death in 1940, appears an amorphous mass of fragmentary citations, it was hailed as one of the milestones of twentieth-century literary criticism, history and theory. Through an in-depth elaboration of the theory and practice of existential discovery, centred around the Parisian arcades, Benjamin redefines the traditional 'bourgeois conception' of history, casting it all in a social light – one governed by human production, custom and convention.

The word 'flâneur' is understood within the French lexicon to mean stroller, idler or walker. In Heather Marcelle Crickenberger's definition: 'He has been portrayed in the past as a well-dressed man, strolling leisurely through the Parisian arcades of the nineteenth century--a shopper with no intention to buy, a walker with no destination in mind.'³³ Relating primarily to chance or random drifting through certain parts of cities and through varied states of

³² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Prepared on the basis of the German volume edited by Rolf Tiedemann (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England. First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 2002), p.117.

³³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. Accessed 5.5.11. <http://www.thelemming.com/lemming/dissertation-web/home/flâneur.html>.

consciousness, Benjamin's theories also correspond with more creative, artistic and literary elements. Essential qualities associated with the flâneur are those of time, freedom and imagination. These are all important themes within my own novel.

In this brief introduction to and discussion of salient aspects of *The Arcades Project*, I aim to show that the subject is a source of creativity, fantasy and escapism. I hope to show too that Benjamin's flâneur was a dreamy, bohemian figure who, as a result of his liberated wanderings, unlocked his thoughts from the constraints of the rational. In an introductory synopsis of *Unseen Stars* I see Nick as a twenty-first century flâneur. Here in this Critical Introduction I aim to establish parallels between Benjamin's flâneur wandering in the arcades and Nick's psycho-geographical journey.

The arcades (passages) of Paris were mostly built during the years between 1822 and 1837. They were 'a recent invention of industrial luxury, [they were] glass-roofed, marble-panelled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners [had] joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of these corridors, which get their light from above, [were] the most elegant shops, so that the passage [became] a city, a world in miniature.'³⁴

For Benjamin, 'Construction plays the role of the subconscious.'³⁵ In *The Arcades Project*, he introduces the notion that the materials used in architecture are dictated by social trends. For instance, the construction of the arcades, with roofs made of glass and iron, coincided in time with the construction of the first railways. Iron was not at the time used to build dwellings but it was used in railway construction and in the building of exhibition halls and arcades). Thus the use of iron was associated with buildings that served transitory purposes. Construction of the first Parisian arcades also coincided with the introduction of gas

³⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Prepared on the basis of the German volume edited by Rolf Tiedemann. (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England. First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 2002. p. 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

lighting and the arcades were the first buildings in which it was used. Just as artistic design was guided by materials available to and modish in contemporary society, the fashion for walking and shopping in arcades was also guided by practicalities of weather and traffic. Not only did the sheltered streets provide protection from rain and wind but also (in the narrow streets on the east bank of the Seine, where the arcades are primarily situated) from the horses and carriages which often came perilously close to buildings on either side of the road.

Pre-dating the Parisian arcades were two arcades built in London's Piccadilly; the Royal Opera Arcade (1816-1818) and the Burlington Arcade (1819)³⁶. The Burlington Arcade - a former side street running between Piccadilly and Jermyn Street – was commissioned by Lord George Cavendish and designed and built by Samuel Ware. It was a typically grandiose example of nineteenth century architecture, but was initially built to serve a practical purpose. George Cavendish commissioned its construction because he was becoming annoyed by passers-by throwing oyster shells and other rubbish over the side of his garden wall. It was therefore his wish to build a roof over the street and to employ two beadle to stand guard at either end. The Burlington Arcade provides the setting for chapter twelve of my novel, in which Nick dreams of going on fantastical journeys into the shops of the Arcade.

The history of the appearance of arcades in both Paris and London illustrates Benjamin's argument that out of practicality and the mundane can arise creativity and the adventures of dreaming mind.

³⁶ Peter Ackroyd, *London: the biography* (London, Chatto & Windus, 2000).

As Baron von Haussmann himself wrote, in his poem “A New Paris”,

I venerate the Beautiful, the Good and all things great;
 Beautiful nature, on which great art rests -
 How it enchants the ear and charms the eye!
 I love spring in blossom: women and roses.³⁷

Haussmann's vision of a new Paris involved the building of wide, straight thoroughfares that led into one another and lent the city an aspect of freedom. It was also to do with circulating air through the city and providing housing for the bourgeoisie, with shops on the ground floor and servants' quarters in the attic, thus addressing the issue of the new social mood of commerce and connection. Some said the practical aim behind the design was to render it impossible to mount another rebellion which could lead to a civil war; widening the streets prevented the erection of barricades and the idea of the new open-plan style was to increase visibility and access for controlling authorities. Haussmann's general aim was to 'ennoble technological necessities through artistic ends.'³⁸ Haussmann came to hate his creation, saying he had created a rootless urban population. The previously distinctive *quartier* became homogenised, by driving out the working class Parisian population, who could no longer afford to live in the centre, turning the city centre into an inhuman metropolis.

The arcades, however, being situated outside the political and economic centre of Paris, were mostly untouched by Haussmann's innovations. They managed to cultivate and combine precisely the two atmospheres of ergonomics and creativity that Haussmann's vision came to lack. The *passages* became popular with orators, thespians and musicians, who would all perform in these sheltered public spaces. The arcades also provided inspiration to poets, who saw them as romantic and bohemian hideaways from the harsh city surrounding them. Benjamin's conception of the arcades project and of their psychological effect, was inspired

³⁷ Baron von Haussmann, “A New Paris”, quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Prepared on the basis of the German volume edited by Rolf Tiedemann. (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England. First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 2002). p. 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

by artistic endeavour. The idea of the arcades providing a bohemian haven to get away from the mundaneness and conformity of life is also what they do for Nick, providing escapism from worries, preoccupation and reality in general.

Also of significance for *Unseen Stars* is Benjamin's definition of history. He sees the present as the product of countless influences from the past, inextricable from it. Moreover, he claims that human beings cannot conceive of the past without imagining their place in it. Walter Benjamin's theory of history thus involves an intermingling of past and present and of objective and subjective. He concludes his theory with the idea that every present moment is eternal and that the human perception of history is cast in our own image. Like Benjamin and Bergson, in writing *Unseen Stars* I have been preoccupied with the notion that everyone is a creation of his or her past – an idea I have been able to fully explore by making the novel partially autobiographical. As Nick says, in the novel,

I have never seen language as being a limitation imposed on experience, but rather as a means to prolong it. For me, the experience-inspiration-writing process is like the indelible marking of an instant in time. Once it has been committed to paper, a moment not only gains resonance, but also becomes eternal - saved for posterity.³⁹

Phantasmagoria is a word Benjamin uses liberally in his depiction of the arcades and the practice of the flâneur. The Oxford English Dictionary defines phantasmagoria as a 'shifting series of phantasms, illusions, or deceptive appearances, as in a dream or as created by the imagination.'⁴⁰ A flâneur in a normal environment can be defined simply as a random walker or as an enquirer into his or her surroundings, but in an arcade this enquiry becomes a more psychologically adventurous experience, even moving, on occasion, into aspects of the surreal. The flâneur's investigations within the particular environment of the arcade can have the effect of transforming found objects, yielding up a fantastical new reality. In *Unseen Stars*

³⁹ Peter Bailey, *Unseen Stars*, p.186

⁴⁰ Oxford English Dictionary . Accessed 9/5/2011.
http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/cgi/entry/50177120?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=phantasmagoria&first=1&max_to_show=10.

Nick's 'arcade dream', in Chapter twelve, shows him creating a new reality, the action within the arcade occurring strictly outside the bounds of possibility.

Walter Benjamin repeatedly speaks of the way in which commodities – when seen in an arcade setting - acquire new dimensions, qualities and significance. As in a magic-eye picture, everyday, ergonomic objects trigger imaginative, even uncanny visions. Also suggested is the idea that the new dimension or significance (of commodities) leads to artistic and literary inspiration. Benjamin cites two examples from English literature to illustrate his point. Arthur Conan Doyle, who lived in London's West End, is supposed to have gained inspiration for *The Speckled Band* through seeing a collection of neck-ties in an arcade. Also, the jacket illustration for *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins shows a woman peeking through a slightly open door at a starry night sky. This picture was also used in an advertisement for perfume which appeared on posters in the arcades.⁴¹ Benjamin argues that the atmosphere of and commodities sold in the arcades not only created a catalyst for the imagination but also played heavily on the flâneur's subconscious, exposing the passer-by up to the influence of suggestion – a kind of commercial hegemony – for Benjamin in Paris, “Where doors and walls are made of mirrors, there is no telling outside from in, with all the equivocal illuminations. Paris is a city of mirrors.”⁴²

The shopping quarters and grand boulevards of Paris were – still are, to some extent - seen as worlds of mirrors, of which the arcades were the perfect example. Men and women walking through the arcades were constantly exposed to the spectacle of their own reflected images. Critics have developed this element of the arcade experience into ideas which have led them to question whether the activities of the flâneur were necessarily narcissistic and thus whether the experience of window shopping was actually essentially an exercise in vanity.

⁴¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Prepared on the basis of the German volume edited by Rolf Tiedemann (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England. First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 2002), p. 876.

⁴² Ibid., 877.

Benjamin's own definition of the flâneur originated in ideas to do with the practice of self-discovery, and the related experience of being seen by others – a practice he identified as being indulged in only by the elite, since it was they who could afford the time for such adventures.

“Let two mirrors reflect each other; then Satan plays his favourite trick here...opening a perspective on infinity.”⁴³ Benjamin's mirrors, in the confined spaces of the arcades, create merely the illusion of space. This visual deception perpetuates the idea that arcades and their contents are not always as they seem. It also echoes Benjamin's assertion that arcades are 'worlds in miniature'. The Satanic undertones of this deception suggest guilty pleasure in the activities of the flâneur. The relevance of this idea of mirroring for Nick's experience in *Unseen Stars* is that for Nick, nothing in life is as it appears. Appearances can be deceptive; one of Nick's favourite aphorisms is 'still waters run deep'.

The philosophical and psychological implications of being a flâneur for Nick in *Unseen Stars* also relate to the concept of the *dérive*. The difference is that whereas the *dérive* requires a process of psycho-geographical alignment in order to achieve some form of enlightenment, the flâneur's adventures require only the action of leisurely perusal, so that the moment of enlightenment, when it comes to the flâneur, is haphazard.

While he was writing *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin was also working on his translation of the works of Charles Baudelaire. Indeed, there is a strong Baudelairean influence detectable in much of Benjamin's writing. Baudelaire's surreal, indulgent, excessive, sensual and languid phrasing describe a soporific, dreamy reality of luxuriant splendour, echoed in the language of *The Arcades Project*. The two works share a similar sense of urban wonder, sensuality and bohemian escapism.

In a sub-plot of *Unseen Stars*, Gerald is reading the poetry of Charles Baudelaire

⁴³ Ibid, 877.

whilst undertaking the *dérive* – particularly poetry from *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Many poems within *Les Fleurs du Mal* describe and evoke transit and voyage, both in the realm of the imagination and in descriptions of urban reality. Some of the poems can also be said to explore concepts of time consciousness - themes common to both writers.

L'invitation au voyage

The tables would glow
 With the lustre of years
 To ornament our room.
 The rarest of blooms
 Would mingle their scents
 With amber's vague perfume.
 The ceilings, rich
 The mirrors, deep-
 The splendour of the East-
 All whisper there,
 To the silent soul
 Her sweet familiar speech.

There, all is order and leisure,
 Luxury, beauty, and pleasure.⁴⁴

Benjamin echoes the style of *L'invitation au Voyage* in his description of the quasi-fetishism of commodity – here, that idea is strongly linked to the encompassing themes of sensuality and other-worldliness. Here is an example:

Le voyage

Fabulous voyagers! What histories
 Are there behind your deep and distant stare!
 Show us the treasures of your memories,
 Those jewels and riches made of stars and air.⁴⁵

In his verse, Baudelaire describes a voyage of the imagination, and in so doing, he explores themes of memory, recollection and temporality.

Benjamin's writing - like Baudelaire's - has a richness and, at times a narcotic quality which suggests a connection to drugs. Benjamin was a frequent user of both hashish and

⁴⁴ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil* (Oxford World's Classics, 2008) p. 108-9.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 282.

opium, on occasion he also experimented with mescaline. He explores the effects of drug use in *On hashish* as well as in several short essays on the inspirational effects of drug-use on writing.⁴⁶ The narcotic element in Benjamin's writing mirrors the likely activities of the flâneur. As a nineteenth century gentleman of leisure the flâneur was generally associated with the use of opium and other mind-altering drugs. At times, the process of writing *Unseen Stars*, and imagining Nick's journeys, felt close to a narcotics-induced experience.

⁴⁶ Information taken from Adam Kir, "The Philosopher Stoned", *The New Yorker*. Accessed 12.05.2011, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/08/21/060821crbo_books.

Dreams

The practice of both the flâneur and the dériveur strongly relate, as I have shown, to the practice of dreaming. In the establishment of an alternative state of consciousness in *Unseen Stars* (waking and sleeping), the dream-like state brought about by a spirit of random wandering leads aptly into the alternate dream sections. As Nick remarks, in chapter 13:

“... I suppose dériv[ing] [and flâneur[ing]] is the closest thing you can get to a waking dream. Like I was saying about dreams a moment ago, you abandon the conventional, banish the habitual, letting your body be taken by it, in a spirit of randomness but with an ease of predestination.”⁴⁷

The subject of time is closely related in *Unseen Stars* to that of dream. In the novel, the literal creation of a new somnambulant time-dimension allows for a simultaneous exploration of time, memory and dream. Also in chapter 13, Nick explains:

“You know my novel is about dreaming, right? Well – as I say, there are two types of consciousness - immediate and reflective, two notions of time - “time” and pure duration, which correspond to two types of experience, to two instances of the self. The act of dreaming binds these two states together. It both withdraws us from the world of reflective consciousness and, at the same time, gives us direct access to it. Reflection becomes instantaneous, thought becomes symbolic, everything becomes immediate. Dream opens us up to the influence of suggestion, everything happens effortlessly.”⁴⁸

The act of dreaming in *Unseen Stars* comes to represent an alternative mode of consciousness and ultimately plays a role of greater importance than that of external reality in guiding Nick's thoughts and feelings. Every alternate chapter is a dream and as the novel evolves, the stabilising influence of dreams on the protagonist becomes ever more apparent – providing Nick with reassurance and answering questions as his subconscious accumulates through observation on his journey. As the novel progresses the dream sections increasingly set the tone, taking the story into new areas of consciousness and establishing a particular language in which reality alternates

⁴⁷ Peter Bailey, *Unseen Stars* p.177.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 175.

seamlessly from a memorial dream-world to a present *dérive*-world. In this critical analysis of the dreamed sections of *Unseen Stars*, I will make specific reference to the novel's allusions to its sources of inspiration, by Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung.

As a way of setting my discussion of dreams in a firm context, a brief discussion of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* may be helpful. As Kevin Wilson remarks in *Introduction to Sigmund Freud's Theory on Dreams*:

Freud maintained the notion that the dream fundamentally acts as the guardian of sleep. When we go to bed, the curtains are drawn, the lights are turned off and in effect we are attempting to disconnect from our reality by extinguishing all external stimuli...Freud's work was solely concerned with internal stimuli. Essentially, for a person to continue to sleep undisturbed strong negative emotions, forbidden thoughts and unconscious desires have to be disguised or censored in some form or another. Otherwise, confronted by these, the dreamer would become distressed and they would eventually wake up. Therefore the dream, if understood correctly, could lead to a greater understanding of the dreamer's subconscious.⁴⁹

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud makes four principal points. Firstly, he makes clear a constant connection between some part of every dream and some detail of the dreamer's life during the previous waking state. As Anthony Stevens writes in *Jung: A Very Short Introduction*: 'This positively establishes a relation between sleeping states and waking states and disposes of the widely prevalent view that dreams are purely nonsensical phenomena coming from nowhere and leading nowhere.'⁵⁰

Secondly, from an in-depth examination of the dreamer's life, feelings and motivations, noting all the dreamer's mannerisms and the apparently inconsequential details of his conduct (which conceal secret thoughts), Freud deduces that there is in every dream the attempted or successful gratification of some wish, conscious or unconscious.

⁴⁹ Kevin Wilson, *Introduction to Sigmund Freud's Theory on Dreams* (Insomnium, 2005) p. 8.

⁵⁰ Anthony Stevens, *Jung: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2001) p. 10.

Thirdly, he suggests that the reason we have previously dismissed our dream visions as absurd and unintelligible is because they need to be read symbolically since the unconscious substitutes particular objects and events for lived desires and motives. The universality of these substituted symbols makes them very transparent to the trained observer.

Fourthly, Freud shows that sexual desires play a significant part in our unconscious and that often sexual desire is repressed, expressed only in dream.

Discussion of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* may be of some broad relevance to the dreams I describe in *Unseen Stars*, but my dreams rely much more heavily on memory recall. The usefulness of Freudian dream interpretation is therefore only of relevance in terms of allusion or suggestion.

In *Unseen Stars*, Nick never speaks openly of his disability but always gestures towards his wheelchair. His phantasmagoric openness about the issue is evident. Indeed, in the writing of the dream sequences, as opposed to the waking sequences, I address everything about Nick's disability from his finding out about the illness to his premonitions of his death from it.

The views of Sigmund Freud on dreams are broadly concurrent with those I express in my writing, but *Unseen Stars* should not be read as strictly Freudian. Work on the subject by Carl Gustav Jung has also enriched my understanding of dream, and Jungian ideas have also functioned as a resource for my novel.

Like Freud, Jung believed in the existence of the unconscious, but unlike Freud, Jung viewed the unconscious as being not animalistic, instinctual, or sexual but primarily spiritual.

For Jung, dreams were a communicative stepping-stone - acquainting the conscious self with the unconscious. Dreams are thus not attempts to conceal true feelings from the waking mind, but rather a window on the unconscious. They serve to guide the waking self to achieve wholeness and offer a solution to problems faced in waking life. This idea reflects

precisely what Gerald says in *Unseen Stars*;

'Hmm – no matter how real they seem, dreams have a tendency to idealise perception. They say dreaming is a way for your mind to sift through and sort out recent events in your life. Maybe your sleeping mind is responding to the preoccupations of your waking mind and providing you with some reassurance.'⁵¹

Jung, for a while a consistent supporter of the Freudian cause (chiefly in the promotion of psychoanalysis and of dream interpretation), eventually split from Freud and developed his own theory which included a few basic elements: the subject level, prospective aspect, compensation and amplification method.

Where Freud interpreted dreams at the object level; that is, according to the relationship between the dreamer and the people/details of his or her life, Jung introduced the subject level. That is to say, he works on the basis that the dream reveals, in a symbolic way, some features of individual psychological life or of the dreamer's internal psychological transformations. Thus, if a person dreams of his or her mother, she is not, in Jung's view, an evocation of the real mother, but of the male dreamer's emotional, feminine side of the psyche (anima/animus for a female's masculine side). This subjective, non-literal derivation of meaning better suits what I explore in my writing. The suggestion that the inclusion of my mother in some dreams relates to a fixed oedipal model, for example, would be misleading in the context of *Unseen Stars*, for instance, in the chapter recounting my first memory (when I am on holiday with my parents). This is because references to family members are chiefly made in order to recount personal memories and not to psychoanalyse a familial relationship.

Freud's dream approach was retrospective, referring mainly to past events, back in the dreamer's childhood (psychological trauma, sexual fixations and desires, and so forth). By contrast, Jung's dream approach was prospective. For Jung, dreaming becomes like a map of future psychological evolution, thereby achieving a more balanced relationship between the ego and the Self, Jung's notion of the ego being a sense of self-portrayal to the world. Part of

⁵¹ Peter Bailey, *Unseen Stars*, p.144.

Jung's theory was that all things could be viewed as paired opposites: good/evil, male/female, or love/hate. Working in opposition to the ego, is the "counterego" or what he referred to as the shadow. The shadow represents the rejected aspects of the self, not wished to be acknowledged. The shadow is more primitive, somewhat uncultured, and a little awkward.

Though I am broadly in accordance with Freud's theory of dream interpretation – the dreams I write of being primarily retrospective – I also agree with Jung's assertions that dreams provide a balanced (if fantastical) view of reality, and that the dreaming mind constitutes two conflicting parts (ego and counterego) which seek resolution in sleep. That is why dreams are often confused and sometimes even incoherent. Jung elaborates on his theory by offering a number of further refinements, and his theories of compensation and amplification, in particular, are connected with Bergson's theories of time.

Within the concept of compensation, the dream is seen as an attempt to counterbalance a certain deficiency or adversity the dreamer is consciously facing in waking life by transforming perception and psychologically gifting the individual with a desired ability or turn of events. In dreams which recount memory, the unconscious may choose to omit any "painful" detail of that memory. In the chapter of *Unseen Stars* which recounts a dream of Nick's Oxford entrance interview (which he did not pass), I recall all the surrounding events but I write that the memory of the interview itself has vanished from his memory. Generally, the dreams I describe are positive – as with the conscious mind – most details of unhappiness are airbrushed from Nick's memory.

In his description of his theory of amplification, Jung states that there are elements of the dream for which the dreamer cannot provide personal associations. These elements, being symbolic, are associated with material from various cultural areas: mythology, religion, alchemy, folklore, and so forth. These "gaps" of "conscious knowledge" in dreams often come from a subconscious aversion to something. The chapter of *Unseen Stars* set in Spain

recounts various dreams. In some, Nick speaks Spanish with an added fluency, using words he is apparently unfamiliar with in his waking mind. Maybe these instances of greater fluency in sleep are due either to a removal of inhibition or to an unconscious aversion to his having his native language replaced by a new one.

Jung's ideas, especially those of the compensation and amplification methods, in some senses chime with Henri Bergson's. Bergson – also fundamentally in accordance with Freud – casts the dreamer in a realm of complete freedom in which he or she can gain or lose knowledge or abilities at will. Though I have used this quotation previously, in the section of my thesis devoted to time, I found it useful to look again at it firstly to show how the two subjects (time and dream) coalesce, and secondly to take a different viewpoint from it. As Suzanne Guerlac writes in *Thinking in Time – an introduction to Henri Bergson*:

For sleep, by slowing down the play of our organic functions, modifies the surface of communication between the self and external things. We no longer measure duration, we feel it. From quantity it returns to the state of quality. Mathematical determinations of elapsed time no longer occur, giving way to a confused instinct, capable as with all instincts when greatly slowed down, of committing enormous errors and also sometimes of proceeding with amazing assuredness.⁵²

Here, Bergson makes the point that in dream a new reality is created – in which there may be many different people – all governed by one mind. In other words, perception of that reality is homogeneous, there is no opportunity for contradiction or alternative perspectives. The dreaming mind is therefore much more likely to be accepting of errors of judgement and memory than the waking mind. In chapter 15 of *Unseen Stars*, Nick asks:

“... do you ever have that thought? Well, I suppose it's more of a concern, that what you see is not always what everyone else sees. I mean, take for example the sky. I say it is blue, and so does everybody else. But what if the blue that everybody else sees is what I think of as orange? My eyes could work in a

⁵² Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time: An Introduction to Henri Bergson* (Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 64.

different way altogether, and I might have assigned the wrong names to things. What if everything I perceive is completely skewed? Maybe my idea of the way everything is is utterly wrong... there's no way of knowing... “
 “Yes, I believe I do... but why should you be wrong? Just because your perception is unique doesn't make it wrong... All we can know of the external world is representation - the image we give to it is in accordance with the structure of our minds. Surely mental diversity is something to celebrate... variety being the spice of life, and so forth...”⁵³

This passage from *Unseen Stars* illustrates the point, but in the waking mind. In dreaming the 'concern' would disappear. For example, the farming chapter (chapter 16) recounts a surreal dream in which various impossibilities occur, but they are just accepted as part of normality. Diversity of perception and acceptance of the irrational is advocated here as being a strength.

The significant point, for Nick in *Unseen Stars*, as here endorsed by ideas in both Bergson and Jung, is that dreams offer resolution, explanation and an acceptable form of alternative reasoning, in response to concerns of the waking consciousness, particularly when the dreamer, in his waking life, is faced with a reality he finds fundamentally hard to rationalize. They are thus crucial, life-enhancing mechanisms for spiritual survival. In *Unseen Stars*, moreover, they offer not only an insight into Nick's hopes and the spiritual certainties called into question in his waking life, but also serve as a mechanism for establishing and maintaining the poetic rhythms and meanings embedded in the novel.

As Jung puts it, in *The Practice of Psychotherapy*, the importance of the psychological evolution of the unconscious mind supersedes that of the conscious mind. He argues that it is therefore incumbent upon academics and psychotherapists to devote further study to the interpretation of the unconscious.

No amount of scepticism and criticism has yet enabled me to regard dreams as negligible occurrences. Often enough they appear senseless, but it is obviously we who lack the sense and ingenuity to read the enigmatic message from the nocturnal realm of the psyche. Seeing that at least half our psychic existence is

⁵³ Peter Bailey, *Unseen Stars* p.198.

passed in that realm, and that consciousness acts upon our nightly life just as much as the unconscious overshadows our daily life, it would seem all the more incumbent on medical psychology to sharpen its senses by a systematic study of dreams. Nobody doubts the importance of conscious experience; why then should we doubt the significance of unconscious happenings? They also are part of our life, and sometimes more truly a part of it than any happenings of the day.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ C.G. Jung, *The Practical Use of Dream Analysis: The Practice of Psychotherapy* (1934) (London: Fontana Press, 1995), p. 325.

Literary Inspirations

In the following section of this introduction I focus on the poetic and fictional inspiration behind my novel, considering how various literary works influence both the aesthetic and formal content of my writing.

The Bergsonian theory of time - as when experienced it is a seamless, continuous flow and when analysed is a complex multiplicity of quantifiable data - can serve as a metaphor for the composition and analysis of my own writing. Time, according to Bergson (and many others), when seen as a successive and linear progression, is relatively straightforward until it is put into words for interpretation, when it tends to elude description. I have found it equally difficult to describe the plot and themes of *Unseen Stars*. Bergson also believes that, in almost every instance, experience and intuition supersede philosophising and intellect – art or description often serve as a more powerful explanation than the use of logic or psychological knowledge. In short, Bergson suggests that experience is sometimes better suggested by art than philosophy. Thus I have introduced into my novel quotations from literary texts which I hope will indicate nuances of meaning which veer off from the language of analysis. No matter how eloquent the language of analysis, the language of the Romantic poem will express my intended meanings more eloquently.

Unseen Stars falls into three parts, each introduced by a brief epigraph from one verse of the same poem, Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality, from Recollections of Early Childhood*. The word best used to describe the poem is nostalgia, a word subjected to scrutiny at several points in my writing, when Nick reflects on its suggestions of comfort, escapism from the present into the past; and his ultimate realisation of its futility.

Wordsworth's Ode contains eleven stanzas (though I quote only three verses in all) split into three movements. I propose to construct the following literary section of my thesis in the same way as the quoted poem – in three principal sections. The three sections also

reflect the mood and tone of the three respective sections of my novel.

The first movement of Wordsworth's Ode is four stanzas long and discusses the poet's inability to see the divine glory of nature, the problem of the poem. The first part of this section will therefore address frustrations of expression, sadness and nostalgia, loss of past self, and the desperation experienced by Nick. I will consider poetic inspiration from Philip Sidney and Shakespeare and the influence of novelists who have also expressed this feeling of loss, desperation and frustration, including Gustave Flaubert and Jean-Paul Sartre. In particular I will discuss two novels by Flaubert and Sartre, *Sentimental Education* and *Nausea*, respectively.

The second movement of Wordsworth's Ode is four stanzas long and has a negative and a positive response, seeking a resolution to and defiance of the problem. Thus the second part of this section will concentrate on artistic beauty and loss of self in diversion, but also of finding the ability to "lose oneself" in a positive and creative way. I will focus here on the poetry and thinking of John Keats and will discuss works by Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* and *Street Haunting*.

The third movement of the Ode is three stanzas long and concludes the poem in a spirit of positivity, accepting the inevitability of loss and looking towards the future. The third and final part of this section will thus address themes of stoicism, of the realisation that time is merely a continuum and can never be recaptured. In the spirit of lost time, remembrance and acceptance I will also refer in this section to the poetry of John Donne and the writing of Marcel Proust, in *Remembrance of Things Past*.

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
 The earth, and every common sight,
 To me did seem
 Apparell'd in celestial light,
 The glory and the freshness of a dream.
 It is not now as it hath been of yore;--
 Turn wheresoe'er I may,
 By night or day,
 The things which I have seen I now can see no more...⁵⁵

The Ode begins by contrasting the narrator's view of the world as a child and as a man, with a life once connected to the divine now fading away. The overwhelming feeling expressed in this verse is one of loss and regret. In the opening part of this section I will focus, as I do throughout my novel, on loss – the loss of Nick's former self and the loss of future direction in his life. I will show how this aimless feeling of futility is mirrored and complemented by quotations from Philip Sidney and William Shakespeare, in Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* and in Sartre's *Nausea*.

Living in dream, and fain in prose my life to show,
 That you (dear reader) might take some pleasure of my pain:
 Pleasure might cause you read, reading might make you know,
 Knowledge might insight win, and insight grace obtain...⁵⁶

This sonnet, from Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, is the epigraph to the first of the novel's dream chapters and sets the tone for the opening part – a tone of desperation, to give vent to Nick's feelings and anxieties and to his seeming inability to give expression to such feelings.. The sonnet also echoes Nick's sense of humility and establishes for the reader a position of superiority over the writer.

⁵⁵ William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations Of Immortality" from *Recollections Of Early Childhood - English Romantic Poetry: An Anthology*, William Wordsworth, ed. Stanley Appelbaum (London: Dover Thrift Editions 1994), p. 41.

⁵⁶ Sir Phillip Sidney, *An Apologie for Poetrie*, ed. Henry Olney (electronic resource) (London 1595).

...the innocent sleep,
 Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,
 The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
 Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
 Chief nourisher in life's feast....⁵⁷

This quotation from *Macbeth* appears in the novel before Nick falls into a deep sleep. The words therefore evoke a sense of finality and of a means of release, the rejuvenating nature of sleep, describing the way sleep can sort through events of the waking life and provide partial and piecemeal resolution to them. In *'The Interpretation of Dreams'*, Sigmund Freud introduces the idea that the unconscious dreaming mind is made up of varying temporal dimensions. Reflection plays a vital role in dream – almost every detail of a dream is a remembered (rather than invented) detail. Reflections are projected by our subconscious minds onto a non-specific present. The subject and effect brought about by the language used in each quotation is mirrored in the novel by subsequent dreams. The range of literature quoted – from various styles and periods – and the description of Nick's dreams in the present tense, are both intended to indicate that the time scale of dream is fluid and temporally unspecific.

The initial feeling that Nick is at a loss as to the direction and purpose of his life is mirrored for me by Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*. Flaubert's novel describes the life of a young man (Frédéric Moreau) living through the revolution of 1848 and the founding of the Second French Empire. Frédéric lives and studies in Paris. After only a few weeks, he becomes disillusioned by and disinterested in, his university work, and thanks to some family inheritance, he is in a financial position to abandon his studies and pursue a life of relative luxury, wandering freely through Paris, eating and drinking in various cafés and bistros, and consorting in the social circle of his unrequited love.

⁵⁷ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (London: Penguin, 2005).

The tone of Flaubert's novel is ironic and pessimistic; it lampoons contemporary French society, which – in an era characterised by revolution and controversy – is evocative of the circumstances in which the *dérive* was conceived. One of the most poignant moments of the novel comes at the end, when – after a countless series of friendships, arguments and love affairs - Frédéric and his best friend reminisce about the past. They decide that their best memory is of when they tried to sneak into a brothel when they were much younger. The episode describes the selective attachment we all place on indiscriminate memories from our past, which reflects the tone and level of consciousness behind my writing.

'I'm sure I have spoken before of my bafflement at the selective qualities of memory... Inconsequential details of events keep coming back to me, without the details of the actual event.'⁵⁸

Apart from the obvious similarity between this work and *Unseen Stars*, in which a man in his twenties wanders at leisure through a city, the authorial perspective from which Frédéric views the world and describes others mirrors that of Nick. An element that *Sentimental Education* and *Unseen Stars* share with *Nausea* by Jean-Paul Sartre is the certain degree of confusion brought about by being unpreoccupied or having a lack of diversion in life. This state is often overcome by playing a peripheral and even over-thinking role regarding immediate surroundings or people. This is the situation that the protagonist of *Nausea* finds himself in.

Sartre's hero, Antoine Roquentin, is a historian living in the fictive French town of Bouville. He begins a diary to help him explain the strange and sickening sensations that have been bothering him for the previous few days (similar to the feeling Nick experiences whenever the word 'nostalgia' occurs to him.) He is not sure what exactly is wrong with him, often doubting if there is any need to keep a diary at all. Nevertheless, a few days later, he is so overcome with what he calls the Nausea, that he begins to furiously list every insignificant

⁵⁸ Peter Bailey, *Unseen Stars*, p.277.

fact, detail, feeling, and impression occurring both inside himself and the outside world. The book is entirely written in the first person and predominantly consists of a series of personal and existential enquiries - a style I try to replicate in my novel.

The diary (within the novel) is largely written from inside a café; intricate thoughts and motifs arising from such understated and mundane circumstances as also punctuate Nick's daily life, in *Unseen Stars* – as Nick comments:

'That so often happens to me – when everyone is concentrating on one focal point, my attention is hijacked by the smallest and most inconsequential of anomalies. They lead me down completely different tangents of thought, away from what I'm sure everybody else is thinking. When I wake up to myself, it takes me a minute to reacclimatise myself to the situation.'⁵⁹

Literary inspirations behind the opening part of my novel help to convey a principal feeling of hopelessness, weariness, apathy and resignation towards the future. As with the first movement of Wordsworth's poem, its purpose is to set out the problem, a problem that will hopefully be overcome in the following parts.

*

...What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower,
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind...⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ibid., 196.

⁶⁰ William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations Of Immortality" from *Recollections Of Early Childhood - English Romantic Poetry: An Anthology*, ed. Stanley Appelbaum (London: Dover Thrift Editions, 1994), p. 42.

The second quoted verse, marking the beginning of the second part of my novel, presents perhaps most significant resonances within '*Unseen Stars*'. Wordsworth writes in a tone of resilience, strength and stoicism – accepting nostalgia as an inevitability and summoning the courage to look beyond it. Part of the search for acceptance and resolution includes for Nick a diversion away from his habitual thoughts and activities, embodied in a literal sense by going on a *dérive*. The poetry of John Keats appears at several points, comprising an ongoing tribute to his aesthetic disposition and theory. His poetry is about escapism: escapism from reality through imagination, giving way to whims and caprices and letting the fancy roam, which is similar to going on a *dérive* (psychological as opposed to physical).

Ever let the Fancy roam,
Pleasure never is at home:
Let the winged Fancy wander
Through the thought still spread beyond her:
Open wide the mind's cage-door,
She'll dart forth, and cloudward soar...⁶¹

This quotation, taken from the poem 'Fancy' by John Keats issues an open invitation to take leave of mundane reality and embark on a journey of imagination and pleasure. Words such as 'roam', 'dart' and 'soar' help create a feeling of escaping constriction and exulting in liberty.

Negative Capability is a phrase coined by Keats in a letter, in which he reflects that great people (especially poets) have an ability to accept that not everything can be resolved. In a letter written to his brothers George and Thomas on 21 December, 1817, he wrote: 'I mean negative capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.'⁶² 'Negative capability' is thus a state of intentional open-mindedness, a removal of the intellectual self while writing (or reading)

⁶¹ John Keats, "Fancy", *English Romantic Poetry: An Anthology*, ed. Stanley Appelbaum (London: Dover Thrift Editions, 1994), p. 60, lines 1-6.

⁶² John Keats and Jon Mee, *Selected Letters*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford World's Classics, 2009).

poetry. Keats thereby creates a tone of humility and increases a sense of enigma in his poetry, as in the lines from 'Ode On A Grecian Urn', 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all/ Ye know on earth and all ye need to know.'⁶³

Throughout his poetry and letters Keats reflects on the idea that beauty is valuable in itself and does not need to declare anything for us to know that it is important. That is, beauty does not have to refer to anything beyond itself. Indeed, a lack of certainty and a certain rumination on things is seen by Keats as a strength rather than a weakness.

The idea of Negative Capability can be applied effectively to the idea of the *dérive* and to Nick's experience. Spontaneous wandering, an unplanned journey, based on chance, is intrinsically linked to the concept of uncertainty. The idea that a lack of foresight as to where one is going can be a strength, of sorts, is also present in *Sentimental Education*, in which Frédéric leaves his life open to chance and fate and somehow emerges either better off or unchanged. From this uncertainty can be derived strength, from spontaneous wandering can be derived a richer psychogeographical experience is a fundamental aim of the *dérive*, as Guy Debord, theorist of the *dérive*, has suggested, though Debord plays down the importance of chance. He writes;

If chance plays an important role in *dérives* this is because the methodology of psychogeographical observation is still in its infancy. But the action of chance is naturally conservative and in a new setting tends to reduce everything to habit or to an alternation between a limited number of variants. Progress means breaking through fields where chance holds sway by creating new conditions more favorable to our purposes. We can say, then, that the randomness of a *dérive* is fundamentally different from that of the stroll, but also that the first psychogeographical attractions discovered by *dérivers* may tend to fixate them around new habitual axes, to which they will constantly be drawn back.⁶⁴

Débord believes that chance can often be reduced to mere routine. In order to truly

⁶³ John Keats, John, "Ode on a Grecian Urn", ed. Stanley Applebaum (London: Dover Thrift Editions, 1994), p.189, lines 49 – 50.

⁶⁴ Guy Debord,, "Introduction to a critique of Urban Geography", *Les Lèvres Nues* #6 (September 1955) p.62.

dérive, one must reach a new level of uncertainty and let oneself drift through time and space. This means that the role of fate, both within a dérive and life generally, enters in, but without offering conclusion or closure.

Concentration on the aesthetic and pleasurable aspects of life is also a feature in this part of *Unseen Stars*. Nick's day is structured around food, drink, novelty and romantic poetry. The poetry of John Keats reflects these activities and states of mind.

Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite...⁶⁵

Throughout the novel, constant reference is made to stars. This poem, 'Bright Star' by Keats, emphasises the beauty of nature and the way in which escapism is possible for Nick (or Nick and everyone) within this world. Another literary example of losing oneself in daily routine is *Mrs Dalloway*.

Invoked as a simplifying and tangible metaphor for the passing of time, the chimes of Big Ben are repeatedly referred to and evoked in *Unseen Stars*. When I wrote the novel I had not read *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf - I read it when I came to write the critical analysis and discovered that – in *Mrs Dalloway* the chimes of Big Ben also mark the passing of the hours and the progression of the novel.

The narrative of *Mrs Dalloway* covers the events of a single day, from morning to night, in one woman's life. Clarissa Dalloway, (wife of a leading politician), walks through her London neighbourhood to prepare for the party she will host that evening. During the day, Clarissa meets people and revisits episodes from her past. There is a Bergsonian emphasis on the theme of time:

The word "time" split its husk; poured its riches over him; and from his lips fell like shells, like shavings from a plane, without his making them, hard, white, imperishable

⁶⁵ John Keats, *English Romantic Poetry: An Anthology*, ed. Stanley Appelbaum (London: Dover Thrift Editions, 1994).

words, and flew to attach themselves to their places in an ode to Time; an immortal ode to Time.⁶⁶

The experiences of Clarissa can be said to be qualitative rather than quantitative although the novel recounts the events of a day, time does not appear to be a progression, rather a constant flitting between varied timeframes and ambiances.

The writing of *Unseen Stars* was inspired not by *Mrs Dalloway* but by Virginia Woolf's essay, "Street Haunting, A London Adventure", which details a *dérive*-like journey through the streets of London. The following passage gives a précis of its themes and similarities to my work. It provides a unique and detailed perspective of city life in London. As our narrator walks along the cobblestone streets, we are given glimpses into flower shops and bookstores, bursting with light, and energy. The narrator actively interacts very little in the story, but rather, interacts with everything, letting even the smallest moments of her evening walk wash over her.⁶⁷ The notions of the *dérive* and of the *flâneur* are most closely suggested in this work. The story, eleven pages in length, covers a time period of just an hour or so, but in it themes of adventure, excitement in the mundane and stories within stories are "derived." The use of London as a basis for such wonder is precisely what I have hoped to achieve in *Unseen Stars*. The title of the work, "Street Haunting", seems to fit in to an activity of the nocturnal, dreamlike, urban realm. Furthermore, in my novel, the idea of haunting streets in sleep is addressed:

'And yes, I briefly fell in love with the place. I'm sure if I had lived there, its streets would have become as familiar to me as London's, I would have haunted *them* in my sleep, too. Oxford would *also* have become inextricably mine... but, two cities - that just seems selfish...⁶⁸

The second part of this essay and the second part of my novel thus both provide a constant and peripatetic search for a summation to the problem proposed in the first. Though

⁶⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Penguin Classics, 1972), p.78.

⁶⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Street Haunting* (Penguin Classics 2000) Introduction, p. 3.

⁶⁸ Peter Bailey, *Unseen Stars*, p.278.

in *Unseen Stars*, it is clear that Nick derives pleasure from the search, his finding of a solution is deliberately left unresolved.

*

The Clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.⁶⁹

The final verse of the poem marks the beginning of the final part of my novel. The adult narrator's recollection of childhood allows for an intimation of returning to that mental state. The imagination allows one to know that there are limits to the world, but it also allows for a return to a state of sympathy with the world lacking any questions or concerns: The poem concludes with an affirmation that, though inevitably changed by time, the narrator is able to be the same person he always was by accepting the inevitability of time's progression, at once cherishing the past and looking to the future. The theme of this extract is one of acceptance, one of ultimately making peace with life. In the same way, *Unseen Stars* concludes in a spirit of discovery, of realisation that, though nothing dramatic has changed, life can and must continue with a new sense of purpose.

The word nostalgia hits me again as a pang of inescapable nausea. That word has been haunting me for years - nostalgia – sickness for return. Tonight, though, I feel is a night for transcendence, for revelation and resolution. What occurs to me is obvious, but it strikes me as shrewd and unprecedented – that is, that the past is irrevocable, the future unknowable; the present is all that matters. And the present is ultimately how you choose to see it, the choices are endless. In short, life is what you make of it.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ William Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations Of Immortality From Recollections Of Early Childhood' in *English Romantic Poetry: An Anthology*, ed. Stanley Appelbaum (London: Dover Thrift Editions, 1994), p. 41.

⁷⁰ Peter Bailey, *Unseen Stars*, p. 293.

Towards the end of my novel I quote from John Donne's poem, 'Death'. Donne's poem exhibits the qualities of stoicism and strength in the face of adversity that I hope to convey in the final part of my novel.

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, thou art not so; ...
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.⁷¹

More than stoicism, Donne shows strength through acceptance of the inevitable in this poem. By admitting to the unavoidable, he diminishes the power of what is to come.

If the themes of "Street Haunting" and Mrs Dalloway explored by Virginia Woolf are of the closest relevance to the subject matter of *Unseen Stars*, nevertheless Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* provides the closest inspiration for the tone of my writing, and in particular for the evocation of memory within my narrative. The first volume of Proust's work, *Swann's Way*, serves as an introduction to Proust's elaborate and linguistically inspiring work. Through the use of involuntary memory recall, Proust conjures up past episodes and chapters from his life, themes identical to those which I explore in my writing, including time, consciousness, uncertainty, nostalgia and sexuality.

In *Unseen Stars*, Nick says of Proust:

'Yes, slightly too beautiful, too wonderful... next to him I feel quite inadequate. Virginia Woolf once read Marcel Proust – afterwards she wrote to a friend that it was pointless trying to emulate him. She could never measure up. A few weeks before her suicide, she started to re-read Proust. It's not looking very good for me, is it? ...I wouldn't worry if I were you, Proust probably read Flaubert and thought the same thing.'⁷²

The idea of authorial awareness is central to my novel. As one of the principal themes is time and Nick's place in it, several such references are made to historical context within a

⁷¹ John Donne, *Death*, *Poetical Works* (OUP, 1968), p.87, lines 1-4.

⁷² Peter Bailey, *Unseen Stars*, p.244.

literary field. Indeed, the unifying theme of all the literary works I have discussed can be said to be that of time. Given that the majority of my sources are autobiographical or accounts of the chronology of someone's life, they also connect in that sense with *Unseen Stars*. Also, as I have previously said, my writing of this critical introduction is chronologically peripatetic – I liken the process of creative writing to waves on a beach, requiring a constant acquaintance, distancing and re-acquaintance with subject. Veering towards varied accounts of varied people in varied time-frames means I am constantly jumping back and forth in the literary time-frame, and thereby providing constancy through variety – which is what Nick endeavours to do throughout *Unseen Stars*.

Dérive – a re-evaluation

In this last section of my introduction, I shall re-discuss and redefine the *dérive* in light of what I have discovered about the concept through its portrayal in *Unseen Stars*. Also, having brought into relation with it the connected ideas of time perception, dream, the *flâneur*, literature and negative capability. In this way I feel I will provide a closer demonstration of the integral nature of the *dérive* to my writing and show how the fundamental tenets of the *dérive* can be applied to a range of subjects related to a spirit of creativity, chance and surrealism.

In this section I will therefore initially discuss the *dérive* and its relationship with the Arcades Project. I will discuss the centrality of London and its relationship with Nick. I will also talk about my scepticism of the worth of the *dérive* and my redefinition of it.

By way of closer analysis of the *dérive* I will look into the realm of psychogeography and the effects of dreaming and recollection such that these qualities transmute into waking and physical *dérive* practice.

I will also discuss human time perception and the elements of chance intrinsic to a *dérive* and how this chance can play an overarching role in the governing of it. Also I will discuss the ultimate realization brought about by the *dérive* that time is a living continuum and that a constant reaching backward to exalt in the past is fruitless.

Finally I will re-focus on the literary inspiration behind *Unseen Stars* and examine how the *dérive* and its psychogeographical precursors have influenced literature over the last two centuries.

Along with narrative-based and autobiographical works of fiction, poetry has played an influential part in inspiring the form and content of my creative writing. The poetry of John Keats has been perhaps the biggest inspiration. I will look further into his concept of negative capability and its effect upon the *dérive*. I will discuss its effect on contemporary writers such as Will Self, Stewart Home, Peter Ackroyd and Ian Sinclair.

In many ways the idea of the *dérive* is one belonging more aptly in the Nineteenth Century. At a basic level, it can be attributed to a rebellion against a conformist and authoritarian society reflected in the physical layout of urban environments. It can be said that dissatisfaction with urban landscape in the 1950s and 60s was at the same time a harking back to a time of relative freedom within an urban setting (a Nineteenth Century setting.) A *dérive* can therefore be strongly likened to the practice indulged in by the *flâneur* and the activity advocated in the Arcades Project.

What the Arcades Project focuses on (and also what I focus on) is the spirit of creativity and adventure brought about by urban wandering. Of course in *Unseen Stars* the backdrop is not Parisian but takes place in ‘London where nothing is as it seems and where the mundane and the familiar obscure the true nature of the city’.⁷³ The pivotal role of London in the novel is such that London is made to seem like another major character in the story. It has its own anthropomorphic character traits and the constancy mixed with the variety of the city helps provide Nick with both reassurance and creative stimulation. In his book, *The London Adventure or The Art of Wandering*, Arthur Machen says,

Here, then, is the pattern in my carpet, the sense of the eternal mysteries, the eternal beauty hidden beneath the crust of common and commonplace things; hidden and yet burning and glowing continually if you care to look with purged eyes ... I think it is easier to discern the secret beauty and wonder and mystery in humble and common things than in the splendid and noble and storied things. (p.62).

He seeks and finds the eternal behind the commonplace, sourcing diversity from the unknown, summing up the way in which Nick seeks and finds diversity in order to overcome his preoccupations. Prior to starting my research for this thesis I had not heard of the *flâneur* or the Arcades Project. Since reading more about them I became aware that maybe the practice of the *flâneur* was more relevant to my creative and artistic work than the *dériveur*. A *flâneur* has no philosophical or psychological agenda in mind, rather he lets any effect of

⁷³ Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Herts: Pocket Essentials, 2010) p.62.

his walk come to him. In contrast, as I have mentioned, the *dérive* sets out its agenda (often in overly complex and even obtuse ways.) For this reason, though I have found the *dérive* to be an exciting and potentially awe-inspiring idea I have found, at times, its description by those who conceived it to be somewhat pretentious and risible. In *Unseen Stars*, as Nick is reading about the *dérive* for enjoyment rather than academic purposes, he very much takes against any overly complicated or pretentious things and chooses either to mock or ignore them. I have therefore chosen to redefine and personalise the *dérive* to Nick and Gerald's characters – it is fundamentally a *dérive* but with a lot more freedom, without many of the rules and more closely drawn from the Arcades Project. Though London does play a central role in both the novel and Nick's life, it is, at the same time, home to millions of other life stories and though London may be personal to Nick, Nick is by no means personal to London.

Will Self illustrates this point perfectly in *Psychogeography: disentangling the modern conundrum of psyche and place* when describing Peter Ackroyd's vision of London:

Some see psychogeography as concerned with the personality of place itself. Thus, in his novels and biographies, Peter Ackroyd practises a 'phrenology' of London. He feels up the bumps of the city and so defines its character and proclivities. To read Ackroyd is to become aware that while the physical and political structure of London may have mutated down the ages, as torrents of men and women coursed through its streets, yet their individuality is as nothing, set beside the city's own enduring personification.⁷⁴

As I have said earlier in this thesis, time, according to Henri Bergson can be interpreted in two ways. The first being pure duration, which is the unconstrained flow of time without the complications of human thought, and the second is Time as we know it, which involves thought and recollection, so is greatly slowed down and confused. In trying to practise the *dérive*, Nick is aiming to separate these two definitions so that the *dérive* becomes more akin to the first, pure duration. The idea is that the *dérive* will become thought-provoking but during its practice its construction will be left to chance, fate, randomness and

⁷⁴ Will Self, *Psychogeography: disentangling the modern conundrum of psyche and place* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007).

suggestion. By using psychogeography in literature I believe that the presence of the *dérive* also produces a greater potential and meaning behind jumping around in time (Psychochronological or Psychomemorial.)

A quotation and a subject that appears around half-way through *Unseen Stars*, and one that I revert and refer to at several points throughout this thesis is one regarding the diversity of perception and the importance of repetition when living and working creatively.

'This diverse-perception business, I suppose it helps when you're writin'...' 'Quite!' Gerald replied 'When I wrote poetry, it was something I thought about a great deal. A friend of mine once likened the practice of creative writing to waves on a beach as they repeatedly meet the shore. In order to write about anything, a repeated acquaintance with it and distancing from it is required. What is represented to and conceived by each writer will be different. Also, repeated acquaintance with the subject will produce a multiplicity of subtly different results – the action of acquaintance may be repeated but what is perceived will always change.'⁷⁵

This idea of repetition is echoed throughout the novel, thus uniting writing with everyday life. Indeed, repetition is shown in the stopping and starting of each weekly *dérive* and there is also an intimation made toward the idea of comfort and security afforded to Nick by repetition and routine. Time and its tangible symbols – the ticking and striking of clocks, the regularity of meeting times between Nick and Gerald and the constraints put on time through the *dérive* (the *dérive* can only be undertaken in daylight hours) evokes the same pattern of 'consistent variation' and 'uniform multiplicity' seen in both the human perception of time and of the two friends undertaking of the *dérive*.

The element of chance is a significant facet to the human understanding of time and a hugely significant facet of the *dérive* in *Unseen Stars*. Though, as I have said before, in his theory of the *dérive*, Guy Debord downplays the elements of chance involved in a *dérive*, the journey through London in *Unseen Stars* is heavily influenced by chance and psychogeographical fate. In the novel, Gerald discusses the idea of chance and leaving oneself open to the influence of suggestion:

⁷⁵ Peter Bailey, *Unseen Stars*.p.198.

'Well... for instance... half an hour ago, when we followed the suggestion of that man and went to see the crypt – nothing happened – we went down and immediately decided to come back up. What if, by following that suggestion, we had unequivocally changed the predestined course of events? – For example, if we had stayed overground we might have decided on a different route - who knows what might have happened then. We might have lived the rest of our lives in blissful happiness. We might, however, have lived for only a few seconds... you see, it's all down to chance,' Gerald says. 'But surely that's true of life in general – it's just a long chain of chances and choices. Chance after choice after chance after choice...' Chris responds, trailing off in song. 'That is very true, Christopher! Dériving is like living, but with the element of choice played down. By opening up to suggestion, by surrendering to whim, the governing force behind life becomes nothing but chance. I love the idea of parallel universes – that for every decision made or eventuality played out, a new universe is created in which another decision or eventuality happens.'⁷⁶

In my writing, the idea of chance is primarily applied to dériving, but is also shown to be integral to life itself. This is yet another way in which a dérive becomes an all-encompassing metaphor. The notion of planned impetuosity, of, for example, walking along a street, seeing a turning and taking it, just to see what happens, whether it be fruitful or not is integral to the dérive practice in *Unseen Stars*. The final revelation Nick has in *Unseen Stars*, that time, being a living continuum, cannot be regained, can be said – in large part – to be a byproduct of the dérive in that the dérive is all about living in the present, accommodating impetuosity and leaving behind ideas of routine.

Dream is another all-encompassing metaphor in *Unseen Stars*. It involves subjects of time, dérive, psychology and of course fantasy and surrealism. In his book, *Lights Out for the Territory*, Iain Sinclair speaks of the way in which by leaving your mind open to the physical and aesthetic qualities of life, one can gain psychological wealth and even transformation:

Walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city; the changes, shifts, breaks in the cloud helmet, movement of light on water. Drifting purposefully is the recommended mode, tramping asphalted earth in alert reverie, allowing the fiction of an underlying pattern to reveal itself.⁷⁷

Another way in which psychogeography is depicted in my novel is through dreams.

⁷⁶ Peter Bailey, *Unseen Stars*.p.182.

⁷⁷ Iain Sinclair, "Lights Out for the Territory" in Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Herts: Pocket Essentials, 2010), p. 118.

As I have mentioned before, something minor either happens or occurs to Nick in a chapter in which he is *dériving*; this experience triggers a subconscious memory in Nick's mind which is played out in the guise of a dream in the subsequent chapter. The dreams often take place in varied locations or maybe even involve travel of some kind. This can be described as being psychogeography in its purest form.

The founder of the concept of the *dérive*, Guy Debord, in setting out his theory, decries the lack of inquisitiveness which goes towards an understanding and a greater potentiality for richness in one's immediate environment:

The sudden change of ambiance in a street within the space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres; the path of least resistance which is automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical contour of the ground); the appealing or repelling character of certain places – all this seems to be neglected.⁷⁸

In spite of the wealth of literature written about the *dérive* and psychogeography it remains quite aptly (in my opinion) an illusive notion.

The *dérive* was a constituent part of the situationist international movement – it expressed the feelings of unrest and dissatisfaction of a whole generation of French students. By making the *dérive* psycholiterary in *Unseen Stars* I transform the feeling of unrest and dissatisfaction onto a personal level. For me a principal aim of literature in general is to take an issue affecting many and to personalise it in a way that is tangible and understandable.

The echoing and foreshadowing of the *dérive* in various novels and poetry from the nineteenth century and early twentieth century highlights exactly the ease with which the practice of *dériving* can be related to creativity, imagination and artistic freedom.

Negative capability – the ability to gain assurance, contentment and a degree of artistic wealth through uncertainty and lack of objective or psychological exactitude – is also seen in the *dérive*, in time perception and in dream interpretation. All (aforementioned) subjects

⁷⁸ Guy Debord, "Introduction to a critique of Urban Geography." *Les Lèvres Nues* 6. (September 1955) p.32.

share the idea of letting go and living in the moment. An important word used in relation to (Bergson's) notion of time is Intuition. While doing what you feel and think is right allows an enhanced experience in all these areas, not only providing a greater variety of possibility, but also eradicating regret.

The close connection shared by my writing, the poetry of John Keats and the concept of Negative Capability is reinforced by Keats in a letter he wrote to his brothers, 'The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth...'⁷⁹

The re-casting of uncertainty here is shown not only to be a natural human condition, but also, in literary terms, to be a facilitator, having potentiality for wonder and imagination.

According to both John Keats and Nick, uncertainty and lack of knowledge is something to be exalted in and made the most of. As Walter Jackson Bate wrote, 'The only means of strengthening one's intellect is to make up one's mind about nothing - to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts. Not a select party.'⁸⁰ He also writes that invention and fantasy can even supersede logic and reason, when speaking artistically: ' "Reason," as Coleridge wrote, "is aloof from time and space; the Imagination has control over both."'⁸¹

As Merlin Coverley writes in the introduction to his book, *Psychogeography*, the psychology brought about by physical environment has only scarcely been investigated;

Psychogeography. A term that has become strangely familiar – strange because, despite the frequency of its usage, no one seems quite able to pin down exactly what it means or where it comes from. The names are familiar too: Guy Debord and the Situationists, Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd, Stewart Home and Will Self. Are they all involved? And if so, in what? Are we talking about a predominantly literary movement or a political strategy, a series of new age ideas or a set of avant-garde practices? The answer, of course, is that psychogeography is all of these things, resisting definition through a shifting series of interwoven themes and constantly being reshaped by its practitioners.⁸²

⁷⁹ John Keats, 'Letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 21, 1817' in Walter Jackson Bate, *Negative Capability: The intuitive Approach in Keats* (New York: AMS Press, 1976), p.7.

⁸⁰ Walter Jackson Bate, *Negative Capability: The Intuitive Approach in Keats* (New York:AMS Press,1976) p18

⁸¹ "Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism", ed. T.M. Raysor (Cambridge, Mass, 1930) in Walter Jackson Bate, *Negative Capability: The Intuitive Approach in Keats* (New York: AMS Press, 1976), p.23.

⁸² Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography* (Herts: Pocket Essentials, 2010), p. 12.

The writers mentioned above (with the exception of Guy Debord)⁸³ have all played a decisive role in keeping the practice of psychogeography alive throughout the 1990s up to and including today. Writers (celebrities) such as Will Self and Peter Ackroyd (writer of *London: A Biography*) have done their part in helping transform a relatively esoteric discipline into a mainstream interest.

Though there is not – to my knowledge – express mention of the *dérive* in any contemporary fiction, the concept lends itself very well to imaginative and philosophically inspired novels which both pre-date and come after its formulation. In this critical introduction I have concentrated on works pre-dating the conception of the *dérive*. There is no doubt in my mind that the works of Gustave Flaubert, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf and Jean Paul Sartre not only foreshadowed details of the *dérive* but also heavily influenced its creation.

⁸³ Ibid., 10 – 11.

Conclusion

The journey in *Unseen Stars* is contributory to and reflective of the overall journey of *Unseen Stars* – a journey of memory, nostalgia, stoicism and ultimately acceptance. This journey I have hoped to also convey in this critical introduction.

It may seem that in my account of the *dérive* I have been slightly too sceptical of its worth and slightly too dismissive of a concept which plays a fundamental role in my novel – but I feel my scepticism towards it and dismissal of it have been only in terms of the original idea. I have used my criticism of it in order to refashion the idea and to make use of it on my own terms, both in order to suit my artistic means and (in the novel) to suit Nick's personal needs for diversion and frivolity. The urban setting of my novel and the inherently urban nature of both the *dérive* and The Arcades Project also provide an important facet to the autobiographical nature of my work. The fact that everything in an urban environment is man-made and that through walking in a city you are re-tracing the footsteps and looking at the visions of contemporaries and ancestors who all have their own distinctive life-stories provides a compelling story in itself. In the novel, Gerald quotes Karl Marx; 'Men can see nothing around them that is not their own image; everything speaks to them of themselves. Their very landscape is alive...' Gerald pronounces theatrically. 'Not me, Karl Marx.' In the opening sections of this critical introduction I mainly used the sources of Guy Debord and the Situationistes Internationales for the *dérive* and Walter Benjamin for the Arcades Project.

The subject of time is one that – in the novel, at least – remains somewhat of an enigma and is deemed by Nick to be a bit too complex. Nonetheless, it remains a fascinating and compelling problem throughout the story, and Nick's ultimate (admittedly simplistic) revelation that time is a living continuum infers an ending to the story but not – of course – an ending to his story. In my critical introduction, I hope to have provided a slightly more comprehensive explanation of the human experience of passing time, using, above all, the writing and research of Henri Bergson on the issue.

The appearance of dream and flashback in *Unseen Stars* constitutes roughly one-third of my novel. It occupies a role of fundamental importance, not only in the information given through the dreams but also in the preceding and subsequent styles of my writing – it can be said to be perambulatory and laconic in its content. Concentration on Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung in talking of this theme has been of significant and enlightening worth.

Mention of the fundamentally inspirational influence of various Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century works of fiction (Flaubert, Proust, Sartre and Woolf), poetry (Baudelaire and Keats) and historical philosophy (Bergson and Benjamin), have helped shape this critical introduction and maybe more importantly have helped shape *Unseen Stars*. The one common facet that the works all share is their common view of things as being complex and surreal – the writing style employed in all of them demonstrates a linguistic flair and a concentration on aesthetics.

The literary voice I employ to tell of Nick's story in *Unseen Stars* is also driven by a Proustian sense of elaborating upon the beauty and pleasure in life. I found Max Saunders' *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction* very useful in explaining the aesthetic form of autobiographical writing. To an extent, the Proustian aesthetic model for writing autobiografiction is linked, as well, to a Keatsian dedication to beauty, frivolity and detachedness. Negative capability is also of strong relevance in my writing, as I say in greater detail in my critical introduction, lack of knowledge of certain subjects can be of little consequence and in some cases can lead to a sense of liberation from doubt or worry: 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all/Ye know on earth and all ye need to know.'⁸⁴

⁸⁴ John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', ed. Stanley Applebaum (London: Dover Thrift Editions, 1994), p.189, lines 49 – 50.

The writing of an author's first novel is often said to be almost an explanation, an exposition of the author. In making *Unseen Stars* a fictional autobiography I have obviously followed the often-suggested model for a first novel. But in expatiating on the themes of the novel, I have found that a spirit of dreamy wandering and pensive acceptance of passing time are also of huge pertinence, not only to the creative process of writing one's first novel but also to a greater understanding of oneself.

Unseen Stars

By

Peter Bailey

UNSEEN STARS

by Peter Bailey

Part One : Mostly Australia

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
 The earth, and every common sight,
 To me did seem
 Apparell'd in celestial light,
 The glory and the freshness of a dream.
 It is not now as it hath been of yore;--
 Turn wheresoe'er I may,
 By night or day,
 The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

William Wordsworth, Ode: Intimations Of Immortality From Recollections Of Early Childhood

Chapter 1

“People say it’s a bad thing that you can no longer see stars in the London sky. I don’t mind it; I mean, it’s not as if they’re not still there, is it? The huge expanse of lonely, black sky punctured by sparkles of light has been replaced by a homely dome of light and air pollution, as if London is a jewel glowing in the darkness. If you look hard enough, you can still see a crystalline night sky beyond.

“It is not important where I have been, I’m just living for the moment. I am walking confidently and seamlessly down Regent Street. It is mid-summer, and London has acquired a carefree, Mediterranean atmosphere.

The people around me almost seem to see through me in good-natured indifference - a heaven of anonymity. The regency buildings either side seem to protect me as I make my way through the metropolitan maze to Piccadilly Circus.

“Traveling through the happy euphoria of bodies is an uplifting experience, as if other people’s sense of freedom and elation has somehow rubbed off on me, as if by being part of the scene they have given me the empowerment of a shared experience. I walk through the crowd and begin to descend the steps to Piccadilly tube station. As I leave my new-found friends, who continue their joyful reverie with the same carefree indifference, I am filled with a sense of exhilaration for the new subterranean world that awaits me. I disappear below the surface of the vibrant city to my unknown destination.

“But where am I going? I stand unnoticed by the other passengers studying a tube map. I can go anywhere I want. In the end I decide to go for Embankment Station. Just one stop away, and on the same line! Ever since I can remember, I have always had a fascination with the river Thames; with its smooth snake-like body of water, twisting and turning, winding its way through an urban landscape laden with lights

“I buy my ticket and make my way towards my platform, still seemingly invisible to everyone else. As I approach the platform, so does the train – it’s so easy it almost seems as if it’s on purpose. Boarding the train, I am confronted with the same kind of people in the same kind of mood – that happy, sleepy intoxication that comes at the end of a good night out. The train is not too busy, there is enough room for everyone to sit down apart from me. I stand in the corner by the door surveying my companions. Almost directly opposite is a man wearing black jeans and a white t-shirt, his girlfriend is lying asleep in his arms. She is wearing a long green and white skirt with a matching shawl over a white top. She has a contented smile; her face is beautiful. There are flowers in her hair and she has long dangly earrings, which add to the air of frivolity about her. I smile to myself as I christen her ‘the beautiful hippie’

in my head. I have been looking at her for about a minute now, so I turn away to see two boys in their late teens, also staring at the beautiful hippie. Every now and then they share a private joke and burst out laughing. The rest of the carriage is full of youngish people all engaged in animated conversation – we are oblivious to each other.

“As the train pulls into my station I turn to silently bid farewell to the beautiful hippie. I step off the train as others bustle past me, and I am left alone on the platform, the train slowly beginning to accelerate behind me. When standing on train platforms, I am often overcome by a desire to throw myself off – for no reason other than the thrill of doing so. Not tonight, though. Tonight, even though I’m acting on impulse, I have a purpose; the purpose is improvised but it almost seems predestined, beyond my control...

“The balmy night air caresses my skin as I glide along the Thames Embankment. On the spur of the moment I turn to climb the stairs leading to the Jubilee footbridge. I walk along the bridge over the river and stop half way along. To my right is a menagerie of floodlit buildings closely nestled by the banks. Great created nature! I turn to see the figure of the London Eye looking down on me, its austerity offset by the twinkling lights at its edge. Turning again to the right I see the Houses of Parliament standing in their magisterial, golden glow, the centre of political power and economic sway, but in my mind, London is so inescapably mine. I stand leaning on the rail of the bridge, now gazing out at the dark and forbidding river. Intermittent strips of light fall across it showing a leathery and glossy façade – an image of cleanliness! I smile to myself. With rivers, as with people, appearances can be deceptive. Yes, still waters run deep.

“And then it strikes me... the present can never be appreciated for what it truly is because the past is always holding you back. I say “you”, maybe it is just “me”, but I have a feeling it is not. The thing is with memory, it always idealises the past, casting it in a resplendent, halcyon light. You never think “I am so happy now”, always “I was so happy then”. Come to think of it, surely everyone has thought about that at some time or another... it’s even got a name; nostalgia – sickness for return. That’s typical me; a thought hits me and I think it is some perceptive insight into human existence, when really it is a platitudinous old cliché. I could call myself a writer, but I’ll never produce anything original.

“Anyway, all this brings me to why I’m here this evening. Tonight’s the night. The perfect setting for the perfect suicide... I tentatively step up onto the handrail, clutching a slanted metal pole for support and assess my final surroundings, flanked either side by a multitude of celestial lights. Brave old World, that had such things in it! I look down at the dark, dark water; where all memory and fate will be driven beneath the current. Suddenly I lose my footing, my arms flail towards the metal pole in a reflex attempt to save myself. Once I am secure again, I realise what I have just done and begin to laugh – self-preservation isn’t really the right way to go about killing yourself. I am still grinning as I let go of the pole and step backwards into the darkness below...”

‘I always wake up at that point,’ I explain as James folds the scraps of paper and puts them back on the table before me.

‘...Right...um...well...err...’ he breaks off, lost for words. ‘So how often do you have this dream?’

I smile at him, ‘I’d say, on average, about once every other night, doctor.’

‘Fucking hell! No wonder you’re so bloody weird! And by the way, I’m not a doctor yet.’

I turn away from him to look wistfully across the harbour. James is an old school-friend of mine. Well, maybe not ‘old’, but at the age of 25 our school-days are receding into the past at an alarming rate. The question of where my life is going and what I do best with it has been looming unresolved for a number of years now. University eats up some time, but once you have exhausted the opportunities of further procrastination in the guise of ‘academia’, options to the true apathetic are limited. I had stopped after doing a masters degree, but James is now doing a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Sydney. Why? Because at the age of 24 he realized he had a life-long dream of living in Australia. After returning from the pub (where the plan was hatched), he clumsily mentioned the idea to his father and began a drunken search for Australian university courses on the internet. Six months later and we were sitting on the terrace of his perfect apartment, admiring the perfect view of Sydney harbour as the sun was setting. James was from a family where these things were possible – his mother had died when he was ten, leaving his father – who regarded his son as a ‘persistent nuisance’ – to ‘care’ for him and his sister. His one saving grace, as far as James was concerned, was that he was insanely rich. There was never a clear distinction between what James wanted and what he had. In many ways I envied my best friend, though mostly I pitied him.

‘So, why did you write it down?’ asks James. ‘The dream, I mean.’

‘I was talking to this psychologist at a party – a friend of my dad’s. He suggested that I write about it. After all, it’s what I do – what I’d like to do.’

‘Ah yes! The famous novel – sorry, I forgot to ask – how’s it going?’

I was glad we had gone three days without mentioning my ‘famous’ novel. As if it weren’t embarrassing enough to admit to myself the pathetic fruits of my labours, I couldn’t tell anyone else. It was my own fault, I had walked straight into it – so to speak. ‘That’s the problem - it’s not going anywhere.’

‘Still, I’d love to read some one day.’ he said with false enthusiasm.

‘Actually, you just read it,’ I said, peevishly, gesturing towards the table.

‘That?’

‘Yes’

‘That?’

‘I’m glad you liked it...’

‘Oh no, I thought it was nice... well, I wouldn’t be disheartened. It’s just quite - brief’ James concludes.

Nice? The bastard. That’s all my literary aspirations have ever amounted to for him – a desire to write nice little story-books... fair enough, I suppose that is what I’m trying to do - if only I had a story to tell.

‘So anyway, about your dream... do you want me to use my fund of psychological knowledge to tell you it’s about you wanting to fuck your mum?’

‘No, thank you’ I replied in a mock-offended tone. ‘But what did you think of it? You know, as the opening to a novel?’

‘Well, what is your book going to be about?’ Maybe a conversation about maternal incest would have been less awkward.

The brilliance of the day is fast giving way to the resplendence of the night. As the natural light fades down over the bay, the sky becomes a deeper blue, the water glistens and sparkles in the glow of the maturing sun, and the city lights come up. Quiet but restless noises hang in the warm evening air; the perpetual murmur of

traffic, the buzz and hum of animated and contented conversation, the clapping of cutlery on plates and glasses on tables. People from all around gathered in *al fresco* restaurants and bars, around the bright lights that fringe Circular Quay.

I ask myself my usual question, am I happy? Of course I am, what is there to be unhappy about? The warm air and temperate skies? The neon-clad sky-scrappers swimming on the surface of the shiny water below me? The soothing sound of people enjoying themselves? No, but leaving all that superficial stuff aside, am I *really* happy? How *could* I be?

Where I am at this moment, sitting on a balcony, over-looking all these people - who are talking, eating, drinking, having fun – sums up my place in life; forever on the periphery, always the outsider looking in at other people's ordered but diverse lives. This holiday has helped me gain more insight into how other people's lives are better than mine. I had spent the previous three weeks in Brisbane with my ex-girlfriend, Jennifer, who has a job there teaching in a primary school for a year, and now I am down in Sydney with James for four days before flying back to London. During this time, my brain has been filled with stories of exotic and frivolous experiences - how the best way to do a parachute jump is to get blind drunk first, how James had spent the entire night inside the Sydney Opera House, how my ex-girlfriend once had sex while swimming on The Great Barrier Reef (that's my personal favourite). And what do I have to tell them? Rises in the Congestion Charge (not that I have a car), my parents are thinking of moving house down the road, the latest goings-on in the Big Brother house. My friends' lives seem to be guided by a prevailing sense of purpose. I need some of that.

Boats still cut a constant path through the waters of the now-glowing harbour. Under the sturdy harbour bridge, past the ornate symmetry of the Opera House and

out they go, fading into the ever-darkening bay. I reach out for the balcony-rail, pull myself closer to the edge and look down at the people dining on the quayside. They all seem to know what they are doing; exactly the right amount of conversation, always knowing what to say, and then back home to continue their meaningful lives. I hate them. No I don't, I hate me.

What the hell is wrong with me? I want to write a novel and I've written a thousand words in six months. In that time, James has made a new life for himself on the other side of the world. The thought of James being a practical role model momentarily makes me smile. I have to write; otherwise I would spend my life in silent contemplation, as I had been doing for the last six months.

I am aware of a presence behind me.

'Oh, for a muse of fire, that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention...' James says in a theatrical voice and presses my shoulder.

Unsure of how to respond, I turn awkwardly and half-smiling, half-bemused say, 'Um yeah...something like that'

'Hungry?'

'I'm starving... where shall we go?'

'Actually, I thought we could eat in tonight.' James lets the idea hang in the air for a moment, as though it were something to be marvelled at. To be fair, the idea of him preparing a palatable meal is fairly miraculous. 'A friend gave me a bottle of *Clarendon Hills Australis* for my birthday – I've been waiting for an occasion to drink it - it should be gorgeous'

'Very nice... I'm sure', I assume he is talking about wine, unfortunately the occasion is wasted on me. I am pleased to be thought of as an occasion, though. 'So what are you cooking?'

‘I’m not, I’m ordering pizza.’ He says, seemingly proud of himself.

‘No need to push the boat out on my account’

‘It’s only cheese and tomato,’ James assures me, either unaware of the sarcasm or choosing to ignore it.

‘Oh ...’

‘I think I have some olives in the fridge... but I wouldn’t trust them.’

We sit out on the terrace to eat. Under the purple night sky, opposite a cornucopia of multi-coloured city lights, above the softly lapping water stands a pine table, on which was the best pizza I’ve eaten in my life... I even appreciated the wine.

‘Are you happy?’ asks James, in a concerned voice.

‘That’s a very strange question’ I say, suddenly realizing how peculiar it sounds.

‘I know it is, but you seem a bit... detached... pre-occupied... reticent...’ His brown eyes dart around as he carefully selects the words.

‘I’m fine’ I answer with a smile of reassurance. ‘it’s just that everyone who was close to me is moving on, everybody is moving to the next stage, and I’m stuck – stuck in my ways – stuck in a novel that won’t start.’

‘It’s only a book – you’re only 25’

‘I know it’s melodramatic, and I don’t want any sympathy.’ I pause. ‘I just feel that I don’t belong here. Everything’s too nice.’

‘You don’t mean what you wrote about in the dream, do you? You’re not going to try to throw yourself off my balcony?’

‘Take away my spontaneity and I have nothing left.’ I peer instinctively over the chrome rail of the balcony at the film of phosphorescent gleam reflected onto the surface of the cold dark water. A veneer of deceit...no – A tissue of lies... I must remember to put that in my novel one day.

‘You’ve gone again!’ interrupts James

‘Sorry...’ I say, giving an indulgent and knowing smile.

‘I know what we need...’ he suddenly gets up and saunters in, through the open French windows and across the dimly lit living room. ‘...some music!’ he shouts. James has the unerring ability of switching on a radio and instantly finding the right song for the moment... Frank Sinatra – *Beyond the Sea*. He’s still got it.

Returning from the living room, James pours me another glass of wine. I flash my eyes towards him and he puts his finger to his lips – I would drink it whether I wanted to or not. Happy that any choice has been removed from my path, we sit back and drink in a comfortable silence. Inside, Frank Sinatra was meeting his lover on the shore, kissing her just as before. Outside, my eyes meet a mesh of stars, outshone by the harsh brightness of the moon, though *I* was now embalmed in warm darkness.

We aren’t talking at this instant, but when we want to, it will just flow. Unlike nearly everyone else, with James I have always felt safe, unconstrained. We have started conversations today, which have been left unfinished, but we can always come back to them and finish them off. After leaving school, we would only see each other at sporadic intervals, but still we shared a common intuition.

‘You know, I was thinking about that passage of yours I read earlier,’ he says, as if to no one, ‘and about what you said earlier. I think you should go on a *Dérive*. Do you know what a *Dérive* is?’

‘No... I do know that you would be more than happy to enlighten me, though!’ James loves to know about things that nobody else does, to delight in his own erudition and use it as a weapon to exert his intellectual superiority over everybody else. Part of the reason we get on so well was that I am always willing to submit.

‘It’s a French idea that came from the May 68 student revolt. It’s a kind of journey - on a *dérive*, you drop all your usual motives for movement and action, and you let yourself be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters you find there. It’s psycho-geographical, you see – so you literally just drift in and out of places depending on how they affect you psychologically – if certain places make you happy, go there.’

Back inside, on the radio, the gravelly tones of Edith Piaf begin their crescendo, as if she knows we are talking about her country.

‘It sounds a bit random to me, a bit vague. What’s the difference between a *Dérive* and a stroll, for instance?’

‘*Dérives* involve playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psycho-geographical effects, they’re quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll. Chance is a less important factor than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view, cities have contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.’ He is clearly reciting from a textbook now.

‘Cities? So you can only do them in cities?’

‘They were originally designed with cityscapes in mind...but I see no reason why you couldn’t do one without boundaries.’

‘Hmn...I’m still not sure... I mean, it doesn’t sound very constructive.’

A wry smile falls across James' face, 'Of course it's not constructive, it's French. It's very pretentious, though – which is what matters.'

Pretentious and vague it is, but I *do* like the idea. I fancy myself as a Jean-Paul Sartre type figure, sitting in cafés and bars, plotting out my life. And the freedom...

The moment's silence is broken by a key opening the front door. I look up, unsure.

'That'll be Lucy...you've not seen her yet?' Lucy is James' twin sister. Though I have known her since the age of ten, she has always remained somewhat of an enigma to me. She was always *just* my best friend's sister, and for the past ten or so years I have *just* been hopelessly in love with her.

'Evening...' James calls out.

Lucy appears in the doorway, 'Good evening! How are you, my darlings?' I often feel like I'm in an Evelyn Waugh novel with her.

I smile without looking at her, in case she reads something in my eyes. 'Nick has been sampling my culinary expertise' James points at the empty pizza box. 'Won't you sit out here for a bit? Nick hasn't seen you yet - I'm making coffee – sober you up a bit.'

As James disappears into the kitchen, Lucy takes my hands in hers. 'It's wonderful to see you, are you here for long?'

'I'm afraid I'm going back to England tomorrow.'

Lucy looks genuinely hurt, 'There's no way you can stay longer?'

For a moment, ideas of ringing the airline company and cancelling my flight swim through my head, but then I realise she is just trying to be nice. I shrug and smile. She turns away. ‘So... are you enjoying Sydney?’

‘I love it, it’s gorgeous! Call me a philistine but I think it’s more than a match for Paris or Rome. James is letting me stay here for a few months...then I think I might go to California, we’ll see.’

‘And what have you been up to tonight?’

She begins an enthusiastic monologue on her evening’s activities. Something about going to the opening of an art gallery... after a few seconds I am lost, mesmerised by the movement of her lips, following the curvature of her intonation – nodding or smiling at what seem like appropriate times to give the impression that I am still at the table. Lucy is looking well, I have been watching her closely for ten years and now she is nearing the zenith of her loveliness. At the age of twenty-five she wants to project her ‘grown up’ persona onto the world, but tonight the alcohol is making her adopt the mannerisms of her teenage self. I wonder if she is aware of that...

I am awoken from my thoughts by a smash from the kitchen ‘Nearly ready!’ James pokes his head through the kitchen window. Lucy gives an understanding nod, as though she knows all too well the trials of making coffee all by oneself. Sometimes I feel a bit uneasy about looking at Lucy in a sexual light. I can see traces of James in her and vice-versa; it is a bit disturbing.

‘So anyway, enough about me, what about you - what are you up to?’

‘Oh nothing, really, I’ve been up in Brisbane for the last few weeks visiting Jennifer, did you meet my ex-girlfriend Jennifer?’

‘Mm-hmn’ Is that a yes or a no? Either way, she seems distinctly unimpressed by this. ‘And, what are you doing when you get back to England?’

I lean forward across the table and whisper ‘Don’t tell James, but I’m going on a *Dérive*.’

‘That’s fantastic, mum’s the word!’ She puts her finger to her nose – to show that we are in cahoots – and misses. She sits back and giggles to herself. I’m sure she doesn’t have a clue what a *dérive* is. There is a moment’s silence. She sits there looking expectantly, waiting for me to entertain her with some more conversation. The moment grows, it is getting out of hand now. I am no good in these situations.

Inside, the radio, which seems to grow louder with every further second of silence, starts a soft acoustic melody;

When you were here before

I couldn’t look you in the eye,

You’re just like an angel, your skin makes me cry

You float like a feather, in a beautiful world

You’re so fucking special, I wish I was special

But I’m –

...Oh, Shut up! How is that bastard-radio doing this - betraying my thoughts, pre-empting my state of mind. I hope she isn’t listening, but a look of understanding passes between us – she seems to find my evident embarrassment a source of amusement. Does she just *assume* that she is the angel, whose skin makes me cry? I blame her arrogance on the drunkenness - besides, she is probably right. Sitting up, Lucy takes a cigarette lighter from the table and lights it. With no cigarettes to light,

she sits and watches the flame until the lighter becomes too hot to hold. I should really break the silence...

James comes to my rescue, carefully carrying a tray laden with cups, a cafetière and a bottle of *Jack Daniels*. 'Sober me up, indeed!' exclaims Lucy.

'What makes you think you're having any?' asks her brother. She goes back to playing with her lighter.

The silence continues, though the return of James has introduced a more comfortable mood.

Light suddenly breaks through the dreamy darkness between us as a flame bursts into the air. Lucy drops the lighter and jumps back, frightened and surprised at the ease with which the empty pizza-box is being consumed. They both stand there, static – numbed by the unexpected drama, captivated by the spreading blaze. The fire soon dies down to a smouldering glow, panic over. No! In an instant, a flame runs silently along a rung of the table. James finally dashes inside and emerges a second later with a bowlful of water.

'No!' Lucy wrestles the bowl from his arms so it spills on the floor, 'Water only makes it worse!'

'That's chip-pans, you stupid bitch!' he yells, running inside to refill the bowl.

Between them, a few pans and bowls of water later, they have successfully put out the fire. We all sit on the perfect terrace, in front of the perfect flat, before the charred remains of a table. At least this gives the place some character...

'I'm so dreadfully sorry, James!' Do people still say that? Obviously Lucy does, 'I just wasn't thinking.'

'That's what you said last time. You know, I've a good mind to take that lighter off you. '

‘Well...no need to call me stupid...’

The fire could either have livened things up that night, or ended in ruin, like the table – as it turned out, there was a bit of both. The rest of the evening is spent on the sofa in the darkened living room, drinking whiskey in remembrance of the lost table. The only light comes from a small table lamp in the corner of the room and from the glow of activity which radiates through the balcony windows. The mood is subdued but friendly.

James is the self-appointed guardian of the alcohol and as such, is drunk. He has found a crossword in a newspaper and is attempting to make its solution a group activity. Lucy and I are not a very responsive audience.

‘Extremely eager to eat spring grass... seven letters... Anyone?’

Lucy is not bearing up too well. She had already gone too far when she returned to the flat, the whiskey has now dumbed down all the joviality in her and a languid sleepiness has taken over. Abruptly, she turns her head and resting it against the sofa she looks at me, imploringly. The temptation to reach out and wrap her in my arms is becoming too great

‘Ni-ick?’ It seems the more she drinks, the further she regresses into her childhood.

‘Ye-es’

‘Ruminate?’ James looks up.

‘Are you writing a story?’ Lucy asks me.

‘No.’ I won’t be drawn down that path again.

‘Yes-you-are... James *said* you are... what’s it about?’

‘Of course not, you idiot...too many letters, anyway.’

'OK, I am. But it's not about anything yet.'

'I thought you'd already – um... err... started'

'I have, I think. The plot has so far eluded me, though.' This is apparently the funniest thing she has ever heard. She falls back laughing uncontrollably, nestling her head between two cushions. A few seconds later she is asleep.

'This is stupid, I'm going to bed...shall I help *you* to bed or are you gonna share the sofa with Lucy?' James asks.

I would have liked nothing more... but from the way he asks and from the smile that slowly appears on Lucy's face, I know it is a joke. With an uneasy smile, I shift myself across the sofa, towards my chair.

'Tell us about you.' Lucy still has her eyes closed. It is hard to tell whether she is talking to us or whether she is dreaming

'I'm sorry?' I say.

'The subject of your novel. Make it you – your...situation.'

'I'll think about it.'

James lifts me from the sofa and I sit back in my wheelchair. 'Goodnight, Lucy. Sweet dreams!'

She doesn't reply.

Chapter 2

*Living in dream, and fain in prose my life to show,
That you (dear reader) might take some pleasure of my pain:
Pleasure might cause you read, reading might make you know,
Knowledge might insight win, and insight grace obtain;
I sought fit words to paint the solace and the woe,
Studying inventions fine, your wits to entertain:
Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sun-burn'd brain.
But words came halting forth, wanting Invention's stay,
Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows,
And others' feet still seem'd but strangers in my way.
Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,
Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite-
"Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in your heart and write."*

Philip Sidney, Astrophel and Stella

Have you ever had one of those transcendent moments in life? I have, and let me tell you, every day I've been waiting for my next. You almost become detached from yourself. You float up and look down on yourself, as if you're in a Hollywood film. I suppose you could call it an 'out-of-body' experience, but I had never felt so together in my life. My new-found life was suddenly so clear, nothing was explained, nothing resolved, but nonetheless, it was a defining moment of my childhood.

I was twelve when it happened, but in my mind it will always be fresh. Over the years, of course, the memory of it has been embellished with all sorts of meaning and conjecture, but the details all remain intact. The clarity of the moonlit sky and the distant haze of city lights became merged together behind a film of welling tears, which almost froze to my cheeks in the unforgiving chill of the December air, into which my grandad appeared, his arms enveloping me in a warm embrace.

I have never told anyone about it before. My grandad knows, but we have a tacit agreement not to speak about it, it is our secret. The main reason I haven't told anyone is because I can't really explain why it was such a fundamental moment - it

just felt like one of those things that deserved significance. So you are my first audience - feel privileged

Let me set the scene for you, in true Hollywood style, given that whenever I think about this it feels as if I'm watching myself on screen. The date is 25th December 1995, the time is about 5 o'clock - as I say, I am twelve years old. The opening shot pans down onto a tall Victorian house in Clerkenwell, just north of central London. The second shot is inside the house, of a bright and warm dining room. My family has just finished Christmas lunch, my parents still seated at the table congratulating my grandmother on the turkey, my brother sits in the corner of the room, reading a book about Arsenal he was given for Christmas, and my little sister is out in the hallway, playing with – or rather annoying – the dog. I sit on the other side of the room - watching everyone, watching my brother's eyes as they move intently across each page, watching my sister as she dashes past the open door chasing the dog - listening to the reassuring chatter of my parents.

Suddenly an impulse takes hold of me. I get up and walk towards the door. At that moment my grandad comes in.

‘Where are you off to?’

‘Grandad, can I go upstairs and watch TV?’

‘Course you can, mate. Off you go...do you need any help on the stairs?’

‘I think I'll be alright.’

I make my way past my sister, past Mitzy, the tormented Staffordshire bull terrier, and up the stairs. My sister is the last person to see me – the old me.

My grandad makes and maintains clocks for a living, so there are clocks everywhere you turn. Every fifteen minutes the house is flooded by the sound of the

Big Ben chimes. As I climb the stairs I pass a grandfather clock, which strikes a short tune to show it is five-fifteen. As I haul myself up the staircase to the second floor, using the banisters on either side, I look above me at the window in the ceiling. The sky through the window looks almost purple, invitingly purple. Up the stairs, on the right, is a cupboard in which there are six wooden steps, which lead to another window, which opens out onto the roof.

This is one of the pieces of the story I can't explain. When the idea had struck me to go upstairs, I hadn't exactly planned on climbing onto the roof, I just had a feeling that was where I would end up. I slowly ascend the steps, clinging to the rail. I have been up here before, but my grandad has always led the way – the window might be tricky. It opens effortlessly and I hoist myself up through the frame and crawl along the frozen tiles. A metal ridge runs between two slanted roofs, which gives way to a sheer drop. Tentatively I begin to stand, using the chimney for support – I'm not as steady on my feet as I used to be.

Looking up at the lonely sky is easy, so is looking across at the confusion of London lights, but to look down over the precipice at the tiny dark patio is impossible. To stop myself from being tempted, I focus on the tall, thin figure of the Post-Office Tower, rising up through the ordered mess of its surrounding buildings – a metaphor for something? I am up here to do some thinking, I think – to take stock of all the changes taking place in my body and my mind. Did I really think by coming up here and thinking, that everything would just fall into place? That everything would be alright? But it does... and it is.

I fear I might have built this up too much, that you may be disappointed by an anticlimax. The truth is that the thought of jumping off the roof never even enters my head. I am twelve, the concept of suicide is one completely ridiculous to me, no

matter what the circumstances. But there are twelve year-olds out there who do it. Which sets me thinking at a new tangent...

As I stand there, looking across a panoramic view of the city - my city, my home - the faint sound of a Christmas carol seeps into the still air - *Silent Night* - it is probably being played inside a neighbouring house. I can only just about hear it, but its familiarity to me gives it an added clarity. I anticipate each note in my head. I sing in my school choir – last night I sang *Silent Night* at the Royal Albert Hall. The choir-boy singing on the radio could be anyone, but at this moment and in my mind it is me. I am standing on top of a tall house, at the top of a steep hill, over-looking everything, contemplating my own fate, when I hear the sound of me, singing to myself. Uncontrollably, and for no particular reason, I start to cry.

Tears stream down my cheeks and my whole body silently begins to shake. I should explain – the reason I am up here “contemplating my fate” is because I am destined to suffer from a genetic condition that will soon put me in a wheelchair. It is a degenerative condition and, in time it will affect my speech, my sight, my hearing... but tonight, the tears are not of regret or hopelessness, they are tears of relief and thankfulness.

I cannot describe the feelings that come to me at this moment. They both weigh me down and set me free. I feel small and yet fulfilled. I can only tell you that I suddenly realize how lucky I am. It's as if I am transported from my body, slowly receding but always motionless. As my mind draws away from my body I gain perspective, I see myself in the grand scheme of things.

I see myself standing on the roof of a house full of the people I love, people who love me. How dare I stand here feeling sorry for myself when I am so fortunate? These past few months, I haven't been myself, though. I suppose you could say I have

gone off the rails, but now I can see everything so clearly. I don't think I can tell you what I realize without making it sound mundane and prosaic, even materialistic. But as I say, to me it is like a revelation...

I live in a fairly affluent, middle class area in south London. My family is loving and supportive, I go to a good school, I have plenty of friends, and fairly soon I will not be able to walk for the rest of my life. It strikes me that I have already been graced with such good fortune that it would be selfish to be upset about one misfortune. True, it will affect my life in more than one way, but when I consider how many people there are in the world who are facing worse problems than me, it all seems so trivial.

I can't hear the music any more. Maybe there never was any music, it was just my mind's way of making me think. Well, it worked. From now on, I have to make do with the resources that I have. It's not as if I won't be able to live... it's up to me

'Nicholas!' My grandad's voice cuts through the peaceful silence. I can hear his muffled footsteps on the staircase. I love the way he calls me Nicholas – nobody else does, I detect a note of panic in his voice, though. 'Oh, christ!' he must have made the discovery of the open door and the open skylight. I hear him run for the steps and see him in an instant, emerging from the window. He holds out his arms. 'No,...please come over to me, mate. I promise everything's gonna be alright.'

'Everything is alright...' I try to reassure him, but my words are lost to the biting cold. I try to move away from the chimney but I suddenly realize where I am, as if for the first time, and I cannot. My grandad slowly approaches me, his arms still outstretched, ready to scoop me up. As he reaches me, I let go of the chimney and fall into his arms. We stay like this for more than a minute.

'Are you alright now?' He doesn't ask why I am up here or what I am thinking – which is good. He doesn't need answers and I don't want questions. I do, however, want to tell him about *Silent Night*, about everything that has dawned on me, about how blessed, how grateful I am. I am resolved, now, rather than just resigned, to face the future.

'I'm quite cold...' Maybe I'll tell him later.

I'm not too sure whether the events in this memory also constitute a dream I have had – even if they do not I definitely think they have been responsible for evoking many others I have had. Ever since that time, pretty much ever since that day, my dreams have felt peculiarly real. I still have a lot of fantastical and psychedelic dreams filled with countless impossibilities, but between them I have dreams that take me back to particular instances of my past, playing them out again and again. If my rooftop incident impinges on nothing else, it certainly provided the inspiration behind my writing about my dreams.

Chapter 3

...Out at sea, the year is 1770. Captain Cook has landed in Sydney, twenty-first century Sydney. He and Joseph Banks turn up on Circular Quay and, utterly bemused, sit down at a table. An immaculately dressed waiter comes over, 'What can I get for you, gents?' They look back and forth between the HMS Endeavor and the waiter, '...Erm...' Joseph Banks is now staring, open-mouthed at the Opera House, he points... 'The Opera House? Sorry mate, not on the menu!' More blank looks... 'You need a minute – no worries – I'll be back in a moment...'

I wake at the sound of the front door being opened and closed, followed by shuffling footsteps and the faint aroma of food. It's Lucy - it sounds like her anyway – James walks in assertive strides, while Lucy wanders apparently aimlessly, as if every time she blinks she opens her eyes to find herself in an entirely different world - and it is always a world in which she is supremely special. On opening my eyes, I see that the room is flooded with light, and I quickly close them again. I hadn't noticed my surroundings in the haze of last night, but my bedroom is rather striking in its simplicity - Minimalist, I think... or insane-asylum-chic. It has a white ceiling, white walls, white furniture. There is one large window with a cream-coloured blind, which I didn't use last night; below the window is my bed, also dressed in white; the wooden floor is covered by a huge rug, the same shade as the blind. The only flash of colour in the room, apart from my wheelchair and discarded clothes, is in the two expensive-looking purple silk cushions, arranged at the end of the bed... no doubt one of Lucy's whim's... *"I know shouldn't have, but I just couldn't resist!"* ...spoilt little bitch!... my

darling spoilt little bitch! I turn into the light and lie there with my eyes closed, smiling.

Why is it that in Australia everything is so annoyingly perfect? I cannot see any water from where I am lying, but I can see the phosphorescent gleam on the sun-kissed sky-scrapers against before the pure aquamarine sky. Effortlessly, it seems to have struck a balance between style and ergonomics, and both qualities are bounteous. It seems I am the only imperfection here, and I am leaving today... Shit, what time is it? ...Good, only nine – flight's at 2.30... once again I close my eyes.

Seconds later, I hear James trudging through the room, his hangover audible.

'It's too bright in here,' he says, shielding his eyes from the sunlight.

'Yes, I'm sorry about that. It's the sun.'

He makes a 'Hmnp' sound, as if he is having trouble deciding whether to forgive my indiscretion.

After ten minutes, involving a lot of cursing and a certain degree of pain, James has helped me out of bed and now pushes me through to the kitchen, where Lucy, bright-eyed, is waiting to taunt her brother.

'Sleep well?' She asks breezily.

'Fine... thank you.' James directs a look of civil hostility toward his sister.

'Did I smell breakfast?' I inquire, hopefully.

'Mm-hm, most probably – fresh croissants, strawberry jam and lots of coffee – it was lovely! You should go one day, James – the baristas nhon Taylor Street.'

'Oh... nice!' I say, deflated.

James puts four questionable pieces of bread into the toaster and makes some instant coffee. Lucy sits at the table staring at me. She often does that, and it makes

me feel more than a little self-conscious 'You're going home today?' She speaks as if she only vaguely knows who I am.

'That's right, back to London.'

'Looking forward to it?'

'Not really, to be honest.'

'So don't, Nick – *Please...*' She does this a lot, too – in a matter of seconds you can go from being virtually anonymous to being the key to future happiness in Lucy's eyes.

'You should come to London and see me...'

'You should be careful what you say, I might just do that.' We exchange a lasting smile.

'They're slightly burnt.' James deposits two ashen slices on the table next to a cup of coffee which smells more like gravy. He is wearing a pair of grey shorts and a faded 'Danger Mouse' t-shirt, though he seems oddly at home in his lavish surroundings. He sits down next to Lucy, opposite me. 'You haven't met Gerald, have you?'

'No, I don't think so,' A look of conspiracy passes between them. Lucy starts to play with her hair, 'What?'

'No really, there's nothing to worry about, Gerald's lovely,' Lucy says, intending to pacify me but achieving the opposite effect 'He's a friend of daddy's from Oxford. He's very... funny.'

'I'm not sure he means to be,' James adds, 'but I'm sure he can help you with things like food.'

I had flown out to Australia with my father, and maybe mistakenly had told James that I was returning to the UK on my own. Unbeknown to me, he had arranged

for a friend of his dad to accompany me on the plane. I had once had ideas of being designated my own personal stewardess but James had greeted me in Sydney with the news that Gerald would be helping me. I am grateful for the gesture, it is just that nobody could say the man's name without then having what seemed to be a private moment of hilarity... or terror.

'But, what if you need the toilet?' asks Lucy, with sudden concern.

'I think I can hold it,' I assure her, with some trepidation

*

Going to an airport and getting on a plane involves, for a disabled person, a process of dehumanisation. Once you no longer see yourself as an individual, but as an object sitting on a piece of luggage, you are ready. Maybe it's just me, but as soon as I enter an airport, any intelligence and personality I once had must be transferred across to my able-bodied companion, leaving him or her to answer questions about me while I sit there, an empty shell of a person. "Can the gentleman stand? Can he walk at all? How do we fold his wheelchair?" I answer, but nobody seems to want to listen. Don't get me wrong, I don't mind, it's just something else I've had to accept. It has a potential for fun as well... as long as someone treats you like a fucking idiot, you have license to be a fucking idiot. Nowadays I just smile sweetly at the person at the check-in desk, as if to say "*I'm going on an aeroplane today!*"

Gerald is just as I had imagined him. Minus the walking cane and glass of gin and tonic, he is the exact stereotype of a middle-aged English gentleman holidaying in the colonies, about sixty years ago. He is wearing a white flannel suit, a panama hat and a slightly harassed but enduringly cheerful look on his face. His walking cane

and gin and tonic must be in his brown leather suitcase, which reminds me of Paddington Bear's. 'Nick, this is Gerald,' James says.

'Hello! I'm Gerald!' He holds out his hand.

'Yes, nice to meet you. I'm Nick.'

'Yes...ahm?' we look towards James for help, no doubt he is also thinking "*My God, he's as socially awkward as I am!*"

'Why don't you check in? Then we'll go and get a coffee.' James pushes me to the check-in desk, Gerald obediently follows and Lucy trails behind us, looking inquisitively at everyone, like a child who isn't sure exactly why he or she has been brought along.

*

In the end, we stop – at Lucy's request – at a place called the 'Coffee Shop', because it reminds her of the 'Coffee Shop' in *Neighbours*. 'Do you remember *Neighbours*, Nick? So bad it was funny!' Not wanting to admit to her that I am still an avid fan, I nod and grin in agreement.

'Quite...' Gerald adds. He has not spoken since check-in and has given the impression he is utterly bored by our inane bits of conversation. 'Although it is rather good... I mean... *Neighbours*... that is.' We all stare at him in amazement - Lucy and James probably in mocking amazement, mine is amazed admiration. Not realizing the gravity of his confession - which raises his character further in my eyes – he continues. 'They make me laugh, these Australians – they are so charmingly unimaginative with their names. I was in Brisbane last week, the river there reminds

me of the Thames, but what do they call it? The Brisbane River! You own a shop which sells coffee, why not call it The Coffee Shop?'

James and Lucy look down at their cappuccinos. James gives me a furtive glance which seems to say, "Ignore him, he doesn't know what he's talking about." I have immediately taken to Gerald, though. I am wondering how to break the silence that has engulfed the table, when Lucy says, 'Nick was in Brisbane last week.' So she *was* listening to me last night.

'Oh, right...yes... I ah... I – Great!' he mumbles, unsure how to go on. With that, he retreats back into his own mind and goes back to surveying us in apparent disdain.

'We should go!' says James suddenly, looking at his watch 'You're going to miss your flight...'

Maybe it is the restless buzz of activity in the airport or the frantic look on everyone's face, but the morning has taken on an air of unnecessary haste. When we reach the security gate, my goodbyes to James and Lucy are hurried, unsatisfactory affairs; James pats me on the shoulder and says, 'Nice to have you here, mate. Keep in touch!' As James is talking to Gerald, Lucy leans forward to kiss me, but in a moment of awkwardness, she ends up patting me on the shoulder as well. 'Safe journey, Nick. See you soon!'

'Yeah, sure' I say, immediately wondering what the hell that was supposed to mean. Once past security, I don't look back.

'Hi, Nick! My name is Dave! I'm here to help you get on to the plane!' a man says in cheerful, lucid tones. He starts pushing my chair, almost running towards the departure lounge.

'We should wait for Ger-'

'What was that, mate?' He is still running.

'My friend, Gerald. He's behi...'

'Ten past two, mate – Plenty of time! Just sit back and relax!' So I do.

We reach the departure lounge, and Gerald breathlessly appears a minute later clutching two boarding passes. We are ushered past the desk by a concerned-looking stewardess, down the jet-way and towards the open door of the plane; we are the first to board. My chair stops alongside a narrower aisle wheelchair which fits between the seats. Dave stands behind me, ready to lift me.

'Right, how should we do this?' He addresses Gerald.

'Do you *know*? I don't know!' He makes a gesture, encouraging wonder at his lack of knowledge. I'm starting to like him more and more.

'Actually I - '

'Don't you worry, sport. We'll soon get you on that aeroplane!'

'I am not your *fucking* sport - Fuck you..'

'Sorry?'

'Sorry?'

'Did you say something?'

'No'

'Must be goin' mad!' I smile, in confirmation. 'Now, if you put your arms out... like this' - he moulds my body into shape for me, in case I didn't see his visual demonstration – 'I'll grab you under your shoulders, and my friend here' – he points at his friend – 'will lift your legs. Ready?'

'Ready.' I am lifted across into the aisle chair and onto the plane. When we reach my seat, the whole explanation, preparation and process of the transfer from chair to seat is repeated.

'Thanks, Dave,' I say.

He leans over to me, smiling. He ruffles my hair. 'You're welcome, buddy! Safe journey!' Buddy? I'll let that one go. I smile too...

As other passengers take their seats, a beautiful woman comes and kneels beside me. 'If there's anything I can do for you, just say the word – okay?' For a moment I don't know where I am or who she is – I stare and she smiles back. The whine of the engine brings me back to reality. I see her name badge.

'Thank you, Beth,' I whisper, inaudibly. She backs away, still smiling but looking slightly perturbed. I watch her as she goes, reflecting on the seemingly evident fact that the longer the flight is, the more attractive the flight attendants are; there must be some kind of equation for it. I once flew from London to the Isle of Man and it definitely works the other way round...

'Damnation!' Gerald mutters. He is holding the plastic cover of his armrest. 'Ahm, excuse me...Ahm- ...' True to her word, Beth comes bounding over. 'Hullo! I'm afraid I seem to have...um..er – as it were...' He mimes the accident over and over, until Beth tells him not to worry and that she will go and get someone to fix it. She retreats, once again slightly perturbed.

'I must say, this *is* rather exciting, I've never been on such a long flight before,' he tells me, enthusiastically.

'How about when you came out here?'

'... Yes! I suppose that's very true!' he says after a moment's calculation, marvelling at my profound insight.

With everyone seated, and Gerald once again with a fully-functioning armrest, the incessant whine steadily increases in volume as the aircraft begins to taxi around the runway.

'So...What have you been doing in Australia?' I ask, just about making myself heard above the noise. Gerald embarks on a long and detailed description of his travels. I have been hoping he would do that, I also hope he doesn't notice I can't hear a word he is saying. After a minute or so I am in tune with his facial expressions, his intonation, and I nod and smile in the right places, I hope. It's not that Gerald is particularly softly spoken or that he can not be heard over the noise the plane is making, it is rather that he *will* not be heard *with* the noise the plane is making. My hearing is fine, until I am in a situation with any background noise – my ears cannot distinguish between the two sets of sounds and the thing I am listening to becomes lost in the cacophony. Judging by the speed at which he is talking and the intensity with which he makes his points, I think he has hit on something interesting; then again, it's Gerald, he could be talking about the artistic merits of the Eurovision Song Contest.

Hysterical softness - I read it somewhere, I can't remember where – but it springs to mind now, as I look around the plane, during the brief gaps in Gerald's monologue. It's a strange experience, getting on a plane; you and your fellow passengers – all former inhabitants of earth – board another, much smaller world. In this world, things from the other world have been re-created – seats, TVs, cutlery – but everything is unashamedly fake, even the air we are breathing is false. Everyone on the plane just sits there as if it were completely normal, watching TV or reading the paper until our new world deposits us back into the old one, in a completely different location.

Gerald is still talking, he talks through the announcements made by the pilot, through the safety demonstrations and through take-off. I only realise we are airborne when I glance over Gerald's shoulder at the window and my eyes are caught by the

blinding rays of the afternoon sun, which sits in a sea of cloudy blue sky. The sound from the engines has died down now, the incessant whirring is still there, but now it merges more deeply into the background.

'...So as you might see, my so-called holiday in Australia proved to be a rather trying adventure!' Gerald says, rounding off his story, now audible.

'Yes! I can imagine!' I say, with maybe too much enthusiasm.

After a moment's silence Gerald says, 'I *am* slightly concerned about your mobility...'

'Right...erm – me too. What is it that worries you most?'

'Well, I can get up and potter about, but you're stuck there will you not be uncomfortable? And what if you need to pee?'

'A few weeks ago, I was reading a book about crocodiles. You know, they can go for up to two hours without oxygen. Their heart rate slows down to two or three beats per minute. If they need to stay underwater for a long time, it can control its body-clock to suit its surroundings. I think if I just tell myself that I'm not going to move much and that I won't need to "pee" for the next twenty hours then I'll be fine. I suppose it will be a bit like going into hibernation.'

'Interesting, very interesting,' Gerald says. I am fast learning that the more frivolous the tangent at which you talk about something, the more you are speaking on his level.

'Would you like a drink, sir?' Beth has approached without my noticing.

'Why, yes! I'll have a gin and tonic,' says Gerald. I try to suppress a smile. Beth looks at me.

'I'll have the same, please.' Beth pours out the drinks and hands them to Gerald along with a bag of peanuts, which Gerald seizes and tries in vain to open.

'So, James tells me you're an aspiring writer!'

'Oh, God...' I moan, under my breath. 'Yes, aspiring is right,' I reply. 'I'm a bit lost actually, I'd like to write a novel but I don't know where to start... or where to end.'

'Most writers' first works are autobiographical, you could write about yourself.'

'That's what Lucy said. But I think it might be harder to write about me than it would be to write about a fictional character. Too close to home. Though, I suppose autobiography is a means of self-justification, an explanation of inadequacies. Because of my various disabilities, writing has become my most effective way of communicating...'

'...These peanuts are *quite* horrid.'

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After a two-hour stop in Singapore, during which Gerald regales me with more tales of his fateful Australian holiday over a paper cup of murky brown water that says 'coffee' on the side, we slowly make our way back to the boarding gate. I am given the explanation of the transfer from chair to plane again, this time in broken English. We are ready.

The engine starts up as Gerald begins a new monologue. I think he knows I can't hear him, but he continues anyway. I get the impression he has grown accustomed to not being listened to, and that he would be quite surprised if someone interrupted him to make an observation about one of his stories. I love people like that, who talk on even when they are the only one listening, people who compensate

for what the other person doesn't say, apparently without realising they are doing so. With Gerald I have managed to string a few sentences together, but it seems we have been talking more or less constantly. Since meeting Gerald over ten hours ago, I can write down everything I have said to him on a couple of pieces of A4 paper whereas Gerald has spoken volumes to me.

'...Do you not agree?' With once again impeccable timing, the engine has calmed down as Gerald looks at me, awaiting a response.

'Erm – yes, I think I do.'

'So what is your first memory from your childhood?'

'Oh, I don't know. Maybe from when I was about three years old - on a family holiday, I think.'

'You see,' he pats me on the shoulder, suddenly animated. 'Precisely my point! The whole business of going on holiday holds such psychological sway over us that it often forms one of the first, vivid memories in one's head. Especially so with me – but with me, its the process of going on holiday, as I said...the journey to and from...That's why I am so excited about the prospect of this flight – it puts me in mind of my childhood.'

'Right!' I exclaim, now with genuine interest. 'Although I don't think of that when I'm on a plane. Whenever I'm on a plane, I always think about my imminent death.'

'Why would you die?' asks Gerald, raising his eyebrows slightly.

'It used to be because of engine failure, but since 9/11 it's been because we'll be hijacked. But the strange thing is, it doesn't worry me in the least. If it's going to happen, then it's going to happen. Besides, I have quite enjoyed my life - no regrets...' - Gerald's gaze slips down to my legs - '...that I can control.'

'C'est la vie, as it were.' Gerald suggests.

'Exactly!' I say, with some consternation. Never before have I met someone - anyone, let alone someone from a different generation - with whom I have such an instant understanding. I could not previously have imagined effectively communicating my simultaneous antipathy and ultimate indifference towards death to anyone other than James, yet here is someone who I have just met who seems to think the way I do – confusedly. The fact that everybody else thinks he is strange to the point of lunacy is a bit concerning, though. Still, if it is my destiny to be a lunatic too, then it is my destiny to be a lunatic too. '...So, tell me more about this memory-association thing - It sounds interesting.'

'I'm glad you think so too,' he replies 'it's one -of my great interests. I'm fascinated by the way it selects itself, orders itself in our subconscious, and dictates – to an extent – the kind of person one is. But I am told I can be an awful bore when I start to wax lyrical about memory and such.'

'Not at all...I'd love to hear more,' I say, really meaning it.

Gerald doesn't reply. His eyes are closed. His breathing becomes heavier. He is still holding the boarding passes. I turn my head and look down the aisle. Beth is standing at the end, waiting to be called upon. I catch her eye and we smile at each other. A moment later I am asleep.

Chapter 4

Remember tonight... for it is the beginning of always

Dante Alighieri

Of course I still remember my first childhood memory – if that makes sense. I believe the earliest memory you have is of paramount importance, it plays a definitive role in shaping your identity, it tells you who you are... it does for me, anyway. I don't mean it prophesies your future or has any controlling force over your destiny, I just mean that when you look back on it, you can see why your brain chose to give it such prominence. It's a recurring dream, the one about my first memory. As with any recurring dream, my subconscious has added to it over time, inventing accompanying thoughts and feelings. I am only two years old in this memory, I'm sure two year-old children are not capable of having such complex thoughts... But I believe every dream has a pervading mood which governs it and drives it; in this one, I feel a pressure to appreciate and exalt in the present because I also feel an acknowledgement of the temporality of things. An “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die” kind of mood.

It is 1986, mid-August, I am two-and-a-half years old. I am on a family holiday in Tuscany. It is some time after dinner and we are outside on the terrace of a hotel. My parents and my grandmother sit at an ornate, white, metallic table drinking coffee. For me, the smell of coffee after dinner is as natural as hearing the theme tune to *The Antique Roadshow* on a Sunday evening; it is grounding and comforting, especially for a child – everything in life is still as it should be. At the time I probably didn't realise it was the smell of coffee, the coffee part is probably something that has

been added in subsequent dreams. Maybe I added the faint smell in the air of mint from the chocolates they are eating as well. I don't remember my brother's being there, though he must have been, he would have been five, almost six.

I am standing alone on the neatly trimmed lawn of the hotel garden. In one direction is the table my family is sitting at – they are silhouetted against the brilliant light pouring out from the dining room of the hotel. In the other direction is the black outline of rolling hills below an obsidian-blue night sky. The hotel must be on a hill because I can see the whole panorama from here; the stars are bright and the moon is big. I think it has been a warm day, the evening air is still warm, but there is a cool breeze blowing through the garden. Under my feet, the grass is silky and soft, making me want to lie on it. So I lie on the ground looking up at the sky, my left hand clutching my novelty multi-coloured lawnmower.

The plastic lawnmower is my favourite toy. It's a transparent plastic ball on the end of an elongated handle; inside the ball are several small multi-coloured balls which rotate as you push it. The faster you push, the faster the balls rotate. That's the bit I remember most, fixating on those little balls dancing around as I run up and down the lawn – the only flashes of colour amidst the surrounding darkness.

I get up and begin another race with my lawnmower. I run down the garden, away from the hotel and into the murky gloom. I reach the end of the garden and look back at the table. From here, everyone is tiny. I look down at my feet, proud of my superior size. It is now, in my dream, I realise that things are only as big or as small as you choose to see them. I lift my hand and hold it against the sky. I am holding the entire moon in my cupped hand – it's all about perspective. Tonight is nice, really nice – I must enjoy it, hold onto it. In the future, when things aren't so great, I hope I will remember this, that it will give me some perspective.

My mum creeps up behind me, retrieves my discarded lawnmower and holds out her hand for me to take.

“Come on, darling. Time for bed-y-bies!”

A few years ago, I was talking to my dad and discovered that we didn't go to Italy in 1986; we went to the Isle of Wight. If I have forgotten where it was, maybe I have forgotten when it was. Maybe I have forgotten everything, it might all be in my head. That's the problem with dreaming - it's about reflection, but it's also about imagination – sometimes the two are hard to reconcile. But it doesn't matter to me whether it happened that way or not. I have been dreaming about it in that way for at least ten years, so the memory of that night, whether real or not, is still part of me.

I can't remember much else from that period in my life. In fact, my next clear memory comes from two years later when I am on holiday again, this time in Mallorca. We arrive late at night and take a coach from the airport to the hotel. The hotel is right next to the beach, and as we pull up at our destination, my brother and I dash out onto the beach and roll around in the sand. There is a light at the entrance to the hotel, and I can vaguely see my dad in the distance, carrying our suitcases inside. My mum stands closer, no doubt straining to see us, my baby sister in her arms.

Everything around me is pitch-black. I can't see my hand in front of my face I sift and dig through the sand without any real purpose in mind. It feels warm, moist, almost preternatural; other-worldly. It's the uncertainty about what exactly I am delving into that makes it exciting. Ironic, since I find it anything but exciting now. Uncertainty makes me nauseous now.

I have dreamt about this memory once or twice lately. In this dream none of the details are there – the holiday, the coach, the beach – it is just a dream about

holding something – I don't know what - in my hands. This “something”, I get the feeling, is very important, but I can never find out what it is because it keeps slipping through my fingers.

Chapter 5

I'm lying in my bed, on my back. My four limbs are tied to each corner. My bed is attached to a car and we are speeding down the motorway, through the black night. Though I can see other cars around me, I can see nothing to gauge my progression along the road other than the steady drone of the engine in my ears. But for that sound, a unique feeling of serenity and independence pervades. Serene, maybe, but the presence of cars following the same road either side of me, gives me a sense of solidarity, security.

Though it seems from the sound of the engine that the car in front is maintaining the same speed, the others seem to easily overtake me. I am left alone. I am left to gaze up at the starlit immensity, with a feeling of vulnerability at both my perpetual motion and my complete catatonia. I feel so lonely...

I am semi-conscious, resting against a cushion at the back of my seat. My head flops forward, almost into my lap. I wake with a start. It must have been a deep sleep, because for a moment I don't know where I have come from, where I am going, or who the smiling man is sitting next to me. Looking up, my sleepy eyes begin to focus on the screen in front of me. I now know we are flying at a height of 36,000 feet, that the outside temperature is minus 56 degrees and that we are currently somewhere over Siberia. There is a dull but persistent pain running through my neck. Everything around me is dull – the lights have been turned down, the windows are closed and the air is full of drowsy restlessness. Most people are attempting to sleep, some are watching films and some are reading under a single beam of bright light. On a plane, even the night seems fake.

My wandering eyes settle on the by now familiar figure of Gerald, sitting cross-legged, cast in a halo of overhead light, engrossed in a book. Fifteen hours spent on a plane seem to have equated to about fifteen years back in our world, for he appears to be notably older, almost elderly. His posture is frail, his clothes – once bright and immaculate – now look creased and dull. As his bloodshot-grey eyes slowly make their way down each page with a calculated deliberation, he makes little 'mmh-hmm' noises to himself every so often. I smile to myself and look away.

It slightly worries me that I seem to be the only person who doesn't find Gerald a source of annoyance or embarrassment. I like his endless and inane anecdotes, I sympathise with his bizarre and awkward social graces, I even find it endearing that he seems unable to listen to anyone for more than a minute without introducing his own whimsical agenda. Yes, it's a bit annoying when he asks your opinion on something then ignores what you say, but at least that way it doesn't matter what you say, you can't lower his opinion of you. At the moment, I am at a stage in life where I don't know who I should be or what I should do - and I don't think I have the energy to find out – I am lost. I suppose a lot of people in their early twenties go through this same stage of uncertainty, but for me it's different, I physically don't have the energy to find out – so many options in life are already closed to me. James and Lucy don't like Gerald but I do like him. I'm worried about liking Gerald because I'm worried about one day *being* Gerald.

I am looking at him now, absorbed by his book. I can see him, in my mind's eye, sitting in a big armchair by the fire, a tumbler of whisky in his hand, twittering on about nothing in particular. There are worse places to end up. James told me that Gerald used to have a good job, a nice house; I can't imagine him having a family, though.

'Gerald, do you have any children?'

'Oh, hullo... Ah, no, I don't. No wife either... I have never really been interested in that type of thing.' I nod. A brief silence ensues. 'I'm not gay', Gerald almost shouts this, sleepy faces from the next aisle peer over in our direction. 'Not that there is anything wrong with it...' he continues. Our audience focus on me. 'Nothing at all, I just don't have the inclination... for marriage, that is.' I sit looking, for all the world as if *I* have just proposed and been rejected out-of-hand, while Gerald delves back into his book. For the rest of the journey, whenever I look around the plane I am greeted with looks of disdain and sympathy. Maybe he can be slightly embarrassing.

The main lights are switched on and Gerald's halo is dimmed. A caffeine-induced, fresh-sounding voice wishes us all a good morning and tells us breakfast will be coming round shortly. Gerald carries on reading as if unaware of any extra light or voices.. I should be reading, too – I started a novel a few days ago at James', but have no recollection of what it was about. When you are trying and failing to write a novel of your own, reading a bad one is unhelpful because it provides no inspiration, but reading one that is good is worse because it fills you with feelings of inferiority and insufficiency – “I couldn't come up with an idea like that in a million years, if only I had thought of that first!” Often, when I read a book and love it, I wish I were the only person in the world who had read it, so I could pass it off as my own. I think the book I am reading at the moment is bad, but I'm not sure, ... I've been a bit preoccupied lately – preoccupied by nothing.

For about a minute now I have been staring vacantly past Gerald at the closed window shutter. Someone somewhere has opened theirs and a shaft of dazzling dawn light outshines the lights on the plane. That's another unnatural thing about plane-

travel – you are told by a disembodied voice that it is night and everything goes dark; just a few hours later the same voice tells you it is morning and you are instantly greeted with brilliant sunshine. Gerald makes another 'mmh-hmm' noise and slowly shakes his head – I'm not sure whether in approval or disapproval of his book. What is he reading, anyway? Craning my neck to see the front cover, I make out the title, *Theory of the Dérive and other situationist writings on the city*.

'Dérive!' I exclaim. Gerald is taken aback by this; he drops the book in his lap and looks at me wide-eyed. He does this to other people all the time, though. He should be used to people spurting out random words. 'You know about the Dérive?'

'Ahm, not really...it sounds very interesting, though.' Gerald replies, recomposing himself. 'I take it you are somewhat of an aficionado, yes?'

'Sorry?'

Gerald holds up the book 'This is not mine...I found it in your bag when you were asleep.' He is smiling at me, not a guilty smile, a relaxed smile.

Torn between surprise and outrage, I articulate neither, and meekly settle for 'Um, right...'

'So, have you Dérived yet, so to speak?' he asks

'No...James told me I should...I suppose that book belongs to him.'

'And James is?' Gerald enquires, momentarily mystified.

'Erm...' I look at him with the same wide-eyed mystification. 'James Chadwick... Remember, at the airport?' I try not to sound too patronising, but sometimes with Gerald it's hard. Besides, it's nice to be the patroniser for a change.

'Quite!' says Gerald 'Well, he should know, being a philosopher!'

'Well, kind of...' He really isn't a philosopher. 'You look like you're enjoying it, though...' I say, gesturing toward the book, '...had you heard of it before?'

'Would you like tea, coffee or fruit juice?' Beth asks, handing us each a tray.

Gerald takes them both 'Why, thank you – Ahm, coffee please. No tea! No! In point of fact, I believe I shall have orange juice.'

Beth smiles at me as if to say, "Your dad is funny, isn't he?". 'Coffee, please!' I say, smiling back. It hadn't occurred to me that people might think Gerald was my dad – I didn't mind the idea, though maybe I should have.

The breakfast does not look very appetising. Beads of condensation slide down the silver lid as I peel it back to reveal its anaemic contents. The scrambled egg looks stodgy and bland, the bacon looks as if it has been boiled rather than fried, the sausages are pale and artificial and the congealed baked beans cling to one side of the container. I look across at Gerald and we exchange a look of mutual understanding, I take a croissant from the other side of the tray and Gerald holds up the coffee for me to take a sip. It is strange, Gerald is the last person you would expect to make a good carer – I haven't even known him for a day and he is second-guessing my every move. What is more, he does it all so unobtrusively. I dart my eyes over to give him a secret look of admiration.

'No, I hadn't...though maybe I should have...' says Gerald, diving back into our previous conversation. '...it says here that it came to prominence during the May 68 student rebellion – I was at Oxford then – working too hard, no doubt!' he chuckles 'Of course, I was aware of the riots. I remember seeing the pictures in the newspaper of students in the streets, ripping up paving stones to throw at the police...and all that graffiti, too... "sous les pavés la plage", and so forth...a wonderful idea, isn't it? A huge metropolis like Paris being built on top of a beach!' He tears off a bit of croissant and furtively gulps down some coffee, 'but I thought it was a protest against an authoritarian education system; I didn't realise there was more to it.'

I suddenly realise what we are doing, we are discussing this *Dérive* thing over a breakfast of croissants and coffee. It's like last night when James brought it up – or was it two nights ago – and Édith Piaf started singing on the radio. Either the idea has occupied my subconscious, controlling what I hear and what I eat, or fate is conspiring so that any time it is mentioned there is something appropriate going on to compliment it. Either way, it is a sign – of what, I am not sure, but the prospect of doing one seems ever more attractive.

'...I had rather thought those protesters would have been against the idea of urbanism, but the *dérive* seems to embrace it...' Gerald is almost visibly inviting a response.

'Or maybe the *dérive* is a kind of statement of defiance,' I say, making it up as I go along. 'Maybe it encourages people to enjoy the city in spite of the “controlling authority.”’ I even do that little quotation mark sign with both hands. 'I suppose doing a *dérive* helps you to see a city in a new light- it helps you see yourself in a new light.'

'Men can see nothing around them that is not their own image; everything speaks to them of themselves. Their very landscape is alive...' Gerald pronounces theatrically. 'Not me, Karl Marx.'

I'm not sure how to respond to that. Fortunately, the moment's awkward silence is broken by the man sitting next to Gerald, who hasn't previously spoken a word to either of us, asking if he can get out to go to the toilet. Gerald, who is assuming he doesn't speak English, reluctantly tries to stand, holding the two breakfast trays, and the man wordlessly hops over my legs.

Once again seated, replacing the trays, Gerald says 'Indeed! I suppose it is saying that a *dérive* is as much about the discovery of oneself as it is about the

discovery of a city. I love the notion of using the urban landscape to one's own advantage, all this capitalism and commercialism is used, not to serve itself, but to serve the *dérivé*, as it were....subverting the rules...'

'Precisely,' I say, not really knowing whether it was or not. It sounded good though, and surely inventing your own definition of it is even more subversive.

After breakfast, we talk about the *dérivé* for what seem like a few minutes, when a voice tells us we are approaching London and will be landing shortly. The man next to Gerald, who since returning from the toilet has been asleep, wakes up at the announcement, looks around and opens the window next to him. Mostly I can just make out a pallid blue sky, but sitting up I can see the ground through thin wisps of cloud. In the media, we are bombarded with stories of overpopulation due to immigration, of the overspill and expansion of cities and of the gradual urbanisation of the whole country, but to see it from the air you would never think they were true. From up here, looking down on the countryside of southern England, I am struck by how green it is – each small field a shade of its own – so neat, compartmentalised. The hedgerows almost make it look as though the country has been wrapped in a patchwork quilt. Soon the fields turn into mist, through which I can see a dingy sprawl of buildings. For a moment I feel ashamed that my home is part of the sprawl. The plane descends through the clouds and London grows clearer. Gerald too, seems transfixed by the view out of the window. He abruptly says exactly what I was thinking:

'I suppose this could be called your first *dérivé*...a birds-eye journey over your terrain... as it were...'

'Yes, although I'm not really in control of where I am going. I bought a ticket to Heathrow and the pilot is taking me on *his* route. It's a good way to start, though – a panoramic view of the city.' I haven't decided to do the *dérive* until I say that.

'A passive *dérive*...almost accidental.' Gerald suggests. I smile, and at the same time my ears pop.

ooo

Streams of tired-looking people flow down the aisles past Gerald and me. It surprises me how many people there are getting off the plane - I'm sure there weren't this many getting on. A steady line has been moving past us for a few minutes and still they come. Eventually, Beth appears at the end of the line and gives me an exasperated look of recognition, which seems to say "At last, they've gone, we can be alone!"

She approaches and says to me 'You know, you're amazing. You haven't been to the toilet once in over twelve hours!'

'Oh, no...I didn't need to,' I say glumly. I spent the whole flight with fantasies turning in my head that when we landed, Beth would come up to me, confess her undying love and we would disappear together into the sunset. But in reality, it is 6:30am, it is damp and grey outside and I am being drawn into a conversation about bladder control.

'So, have you got far to travel to get home?' Beth asks me.

'No, we both live in south London,' Gerald replies 'Nick lives in Dulwich and I am currently living in erm...Greenwich! And you, where do you live?'

'Sydney, excuse me, I've got to go and help someone.' Beth purposefully walks away.

'A nice girl – a bit nervous, though...' Gerald must find a lot of people he talks to “a bit nervous”, I think. 'Ah, here they come with your wheelchair... as it were.'

ooo

We are waiting on a darkened underground platform for a train. Gerald doesn't drive, so we are taking the tube to Earls Court station and a taxi from there. Even though the train will not be arriving for another five minutes, everyone on the platform still looks expectantly into an empty black tunnel. Gerald spends an age at the tube map, “ascertaining our optimum route” as he put it. To be fair, it wasn't as simple as it sounds - we had to find a station on the Piccadilly line that was accessible to wheelchairs – in the end, it was decided that Earls Court would be “the most prudent choice”. Gerald now stands behind me, yawning and pretending to listen to the man pushing the trolley with our cases. I haven't taken the underground for years and am reacquainting myself with that familiar musty smell and the cool breeze that comes from the tunnel. The ground starts to shake and the breeze increases, there is a thunderous sound and the platform is flooded with light - the train is here.

The airport employee who brings our suitcases along insists on pushing my chair onto the train. Gerald clumsily follows with the suitcases. 'Are you ok there, Nick?' I am in the corner, facing a wall.

'Oh, yes sir, he's fine, don't worry about a thing, sir!'

Gerald reaches into his pocket. The smallest thing he pulls out is a crumpled five pound note. Reluctantly he hands it over, saying, 'Thank you very much.'

'Thank *you* very much, sir. Very generous.' He moves the cases again, needlessly. 'Is there any way I could further assist you...the wheelchair?'

'No. Thank you,' says Gerald, incisively.

'Yes, much obliged! *Fuckwit!*' I say the last bit under my breath. He turns and gives me a surprised smile, as if to say "You can talk! Good for you!" I give him a look of scorn. He looks confused as he hops off and the train leaves the platform. I sit there looking straight ahead at the wall.

Why do I get so angry about the smallest things? That man was doing us – well, me – a favour, for which Gerald pays him, and I choose to be mortally offended by a few of his gestures that I deem insensitive. There is a cynical voice inside my head that feeds on all my thoughts, looking for the worst in everything. It's especially got a taste for people – James and Lucy, for example. They are both living truly exciting, enviable lives, and yet I look down on them for being superficial and capricious. Gerald is a genuinely intelligent and sensitive person, and I look down on him for being socially inept and indecisive. Who am I to cast these opinions against them? I am everything I think they are but I am too embittered to see it.

'Nick. Are you ok there?' Gerald asks from behind my shoulder.

'Can I face the other way, please?'

'Certainly' Gerald clambers off the seat on the opposite side of the carriage, visibly tired now, and turns my chair to face into the carriage. He leans down confidentially to whisper into my ear. 'A self-satisfied little fuck-wit, was he not?'

*

Gerald leans over my shoulder to ring the doorbell. He is wearing his panama hat again, has removed his jacket, and has taken on a look of debonair worldliness. It has turned into a bright morning – the mid-September sun shines against the front room window highlighting a golden layer of dust on the window. The birds singing in the trees on the pavement seem to be the only signs of life in the otherwise sleepy street. It must be all the relative noise in the airport and the plane, but the road is

engulfed in a muted somnambulance. Through the frosted stained glass in the front door I see some movement and the door is opened by my dad. Before he has a chance to speak, Gerald says,

'The wanderer returns... as it were...'

'...Yes! Welcome back! Let me help with the wheelchair, you must be exhausted.'

'We *are* rather tired.' Gerald retorts.

'I've just put the kettle on. Make yourself at home,' my dad tells Gerald, ushering him into the living room. 'Tea?'

'Well, we *are* English, after all!'

'...Yes!' My dad, unsure what to make of Gerald, helps me out of my chair, onto the sofa and escapes into the kitchen. I sit back, it's so comfortable, I haven't been this comfortable in weeks. Everything is so soft and cool, much smaller and more immediate than I remember. I close my eyes.

When I open them again, Gerald and my dad are talking about Oxford. I had wondered how long it would take them to get on to that.

'Hi, you've joined us again!' my dad says.

'I heard every word you were saying.' I protest. They both laugh at me.

'Well, I had better get going.' Gerald pronounces suddenly. He stands up and walks over to my dad. 'It was nice to meet you, hopefully we will meet again.'

'Hopefully, indeed. Thank you ever so much for all you have done.' They shake hands and both look at me.

'My pleasure,' Gerald is now foraging in my bag. 'I will leave you with a quotation..' My dad looks at him, nonplussed. Gerald pulls out my *dérive* book and opens it, 'Ah, here we are! "One can derive alone, but all indications are that the most

fruitful numerical arrangement consists of several small groups of two or three people who have reached the same awakenings of consciousness”.’ He picks up his Paddington Bear suitcase, turns and leaves. He lets himself out.

‘...Explain to me later,’ My dad says ‘you look too tired now. Mum has gone out for the day so we will both hear about your trip later. Shall I help you to bed?’

‘Ok,’ I say meekly, stifling a yawn. I am helped back into my chair, pushed out into the hallway and I transfer onto the stair-lift. Once upstairs, I am pushed to my bedroom. The curtains are closed – at the edges of the window, bright mid-morning light shines through. I’m helped to take off my clothes and lifted straight into bed.

‘Goodnight,’ I say.

‘...Yes, I suppose it is, for you...see you later.’

I lie there in silence – too tired to sleep. I look across at my bedside table. My *dérive* book is there - it's following me! I pick it up and open it at a random page. I read one sentence: “The average duration of a *derive* is one day, considered as the time between two periods of sleep.” I let the book fall down beside me, and go to sleep for a good fourteen hours.

Chapter 6

*...the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast.*

William Shakespeare, Macbeth

The back garden of my house gives onto a field. It is a sports field belonging to the local school. From my bedroom window you can see a football pitch, which is circled by an athletics track, beyond the track, a small hill rolls down into another green expanse – used for football in winter and cricket in summer. Next to that are two tennis courts. At the other end of the field, a hill leads up to a ridge where the grass is thicker and matted. Beyond the grass, the brambles and weeds are overgrown, but beyond them, mighty horse-chestnut trees lining the edge of the field loom down on it all. Sitting on the ridge, on a clear day and especially at night, you can see out across the landscape of south London.

This field holds the memories of my childhood. It grew with me, over the seasons and through the years, bracing winter excursions to play football, endless summer days playing cricket, picking strawberries, blackberries, conkers, sitting out on the hill waiting for the sun to set. The great thing was that it came round again and again. It played host to new experiences in my life – the first goal I scored, the first wicket I took, the first time I got drunk, my first cigarette, my first kiss. But now it remains unchanged, unlike me – now it looks up at me through the window as if in mocking indifference.

I shared - continue to share - a bond with that place that became so tight, I can link nearly everything that has happened to me back to those innocent but intimate lawns. Sometimes, I still feel myself running in the field, the grass flowing beneath my feet, flying through clearings between trees and down hills so fast that I can

barely keep my balance. I never fall though, I feel as though I can go on forever, until the lush green carpet gives way sharply to a grey reality ...

... I am awake, and am only just coming to the realisation - I don't usually wake during the night – for a moment I wonder whether I had even been asleep. After a stifled stretch, my eyes slowly drink in the azurite gloom of my darkened bedroom. Light creeps under the closed curtains behind me, giving the surrounding furniture an added shape and firmness. I turn my head towards the window and in languid movements wave my right arm out at the curtain. I have the sudden urge to sit up and look out of the window. I'm not sufficiently awake to ask myself why, I just go with the flow. Lifting my head I am enveloped between the curtain and the window. Then, using both arms I push down on the mattress and raise my body up to rest against the window frame.

I look through the window and immediately see why I woke in the first place. In the garden of the house next door there is a small party going on. About ten boys in their late teens are sitting at the garden table, drinking beer and listening to music. Light comes from the open kitchen door and from a bright bulb on the wall of the out-house, casting the scene in near daylight, sending a beam down the garden and into the field beyond. The half-lit field has taken on a kind of portentousness tonight. It is mid-September and summer is in its death-throes – changeable during the day, a growing chill pervades the night; there is no wind, no sound, no movement - yet the trees, with their cladding of green-black foliage, give off a sinister aspect.

I slump back onto the bed and turn away from the window. The music seems to have amplified, but that's all right. I have never understood people who get

annoyed at this type of thing – music, lights, dripping taps. The trick is to adapt yourself to it, accommodate it, until it becomes part of you. The music I am hearing now is of that mind-numbing electronic variety with the relentless drumbeat; easy. You just lie there, still. Synchronize your breathing, your thoughts with it, and pretty soon it will become part of you. You will almost come to rely on it to fall asleep. Let your mind wander, but keep the rhythm in your head. It's a skill I have had to pick up. To live with things, accept them, carry on. But things like fear, like uncertainty, they're different...

Now, where was I? Oh yes... the field. I have had so many dreams connected to it – it is so built into my subconscious – that I don't know where to begin. The moment my thoughts wander back to my childhood, the field is recreated in my mind. For these reasons it is somewhat difficult to separate fact from fiction, but I will do my best.

One dream - of which I only ever have the briefest snatches – marks, in a way, a turning point in my life. The word idyllic does not do justice in describing my early childhood; I leapt through the first ten years of my life blissfully unaware of what would soon befall me. In this dream I am eleven years and a couple of months old. The gradual deterioration in my balance and in my ability to do any physically complex things has been around for a few years now, but it is only now that I'm becoming aware of the certain progressing limitations that are affecting my body. I have heard the name of the condition I am to suffer from being banded about by my family before (my brother already has the condition), and I also have a vague notion of genetics and of the possible implications of the condition. Either because of a subconscious aversion to admitting I might have it, or by adopting a *laissez faire* attitude towards the future, in the dream I am genuinely mystified as to why I used to

be able to do about eight 'kick-ups' with a football, whereas now I can do no more than four.

I am standing, hands on hips, at the end of my garden. The football is at my feet, my house is behind me and I am looking out through the gaps in the fence across the field. I am not angry about my apparently decreasing ability to play football, more puzzled. Through the fence I see a group of older boys walk past. They are probably about fourteen or fifteen, but - being eleven - I see them as adults. The 'man' who seems to be the leader sees me and they all walk over.

'Y'alright mate?' says the leader in a poor middle-class imitation of a cockney accent.

'Alright?' I reply, similarly.

'Do you know what this is?' He holds it up like a prized possession.

'Uhm - a cigarette,' I say, slightly insulted.

'Yeah, but do you know what's inside it?' He grins surreptitiously at his friends.

I have seen pictures of Bob Marley holding those kinds of cigarettes before...
'Marijuana?'

'You're not as stupid as you look! But this joint has a special ingredient in it - it's a surprise!' The gang erupts in laughter. 'So do you want some, or what?'

'OK,' I say. So we venture up towards the brambles and the weeds, sit under the horse-chestnut trees, and smoke the joint. I don't know if the others are just pretending, but I don't feel any different afterwards. I tell them I like it, though, because I do. It makes me feel adult, like I'm moving on. I'm not really, though, actually I'm falling backwards.

I never found out what that weed was laced with, though I had some again the next day. The following week I tried some other stuff, and each time we met, one of us would contribute some alcohol we had managed to get hold of. I would like to tell you that these were the budding days of a drug-crazed few years of excess and regret, that I was like a child-version of Jim Morrison or someone, but those boys only gathered in the field for a month or so. From that point onwards, my early experimentation with drugs quickly came to an end. Some school friends and I would steal beer or wine or cigarettes from parents or older siblings for a few months, then sit under the same horse-chestnut trees, stoically working our way through them – we never much enjoyed them.

The reason why I would have liked to tell a tale of drug-fuelled excess and regret is because I think it would have given some substance to the way I felt over the following years. It would have provided a vent to, an explanation for the feelings of confusion and frustration, and for the ultimate realization that I would be spending the rest of my life in wheelchair, suffering from a degenerative nervous condition. Maybe it would also have put some glamour into my teenage years, which were largely spent in awkward dislocation from my peers and at times, in private contemplation. My parents still afforded me the ingredients of a privileged life – a private education, holidays abroad - and I did make a couple of close and lasting friendships at secondary school, but I would still yearn hopelessly for those irrecoverable days when the worst I had to cope with was the death of a pet rabbit.

As I say, details of one episode in that field easily become merged with others in my dreams. The details of that day, though, are quite mundane compared to the times I have flown over back-gardens, soared through treetops and had epic gun-battles with friends in among the brambles. In my later teenage years, my dad or a

friend would take me out into the field and I would sit there surveying it. Ridiculous – the idea of a seventeen year-old trying to recapture the memory of his youth. I thought about the future, too, about how I would cope with my new-found inabilities. I'm doing OK, I suppose. .In the last five or six years I have become a lot more comfortable with myself, learning to become more assertive. For instance, regardless of the damage they do you I have decided I don't like cigarettes.

Part Two : Derive

What though the radiance which was once so bright
 Be now for ever taken from my sight,
 Though nothing can bring back the hour
 Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
 We will grieve not, rather find
 Strength in what remains behind;
 In the primal sympathy
 Which having been must ever be;
 In the soothing thoughts that spring
 Out of human suffering;
 In the faith that looks through death,
 In years that bring the philosophic mind.

**William Wordsworth, Ode: Intimations Of Immortality From Recollections Of Early
 Childhood**

Chapter 7

Often, I find that waking dreams can be just as spontaneous and richly complex as sleeping ones. It all happens unconsciously, you can't do it at will. You are thinking deeply about something, close your eyes, and there it all is...

I have been trying to pinpoint the exact moment when I found out about my oncoming disability – it's very hard to say. It is like the revelation that Father Christmas doesn't really exist, my parents never told me outright, they just let me assume. I remember a few moments, but on reflection, they were moments in which I was already aware.

I'm nine, and in the park with friends. We have been playing football, but we all sit now in a circle eating things we have bought from a nearby ice-cream van. I'm not sure why the conversation has turned to me, this is just a transitory moment, a

singular snippet that is constituent of the memory. A friend of mine says, 'My Dad told me that you are going to be like your brother, that you won't be able to walk soon...' My ice-lolly suddenly seems colder, colder than I can manage, I drop it on the ground. In a way I had always been perfectly aware of this, but it was as if this boy was betraying a family secret, something that was known but never spoken of.

I flash forward to the age of eleven – my brother and I are just home from school. I am still walking, but my fourteen-year-old brother has been in a wheelchair for four years. Because he is unable to get on a bus we both take a taxi home from school. Again, the memory only lasts a couple of seconds...

We are walking up the garden path, me followed by my brother, who is being pushed by the taxi driver. I am looking for my keys, they are talking about my brother's disability. As I put my key in the door the taxi driver says, 'Is it hereditary?'

'Well, it's genetic, so it can be...' My brother replies.

Genetic, I know what that means, we are doing that in biology at the moment. Suddenly another penny drops – a gene-diagram forms in my head, one to confirm my suspicion. As I say, I have known for some time what lies in store, but all devastating revelations will be associated with keys going into doors from now on.

I look up, I'm back...

'You always liked the idea of journalism, you could do that...'

'Yeah, but I could never keep up with all the deadlines. You know I can't work very fast, and I think it would all be too much for me.'

'But you could be a freelance journalist... write articles when you want to, and submit them to newspapers or magazines when you're ready. We know people who are freelance journalists, maybe you could talk to them about it...'

'Maybe...'

I am in my dad's car, he is driving me home. I have just been for a 'review' at the local job centre. I receive income support, because I am deemed incapable of finding a job or working – a decision that, on the whole, I agree with. There are people who do not agree, though – my parents are among them. Refusal to allow disability to stand in the way of leading a relatively normal life is all very courageous and admirable, but at times you have to face facts and accept the inevitable restrictions it puts on your life.

Is that it? Or is it that I am using my disability as an excuse not to join the real world? It is so easy for me to let disability feed a general sense of apathy towards life. Every minute of every day I am reminded of my physical deficiencies. In order not to be consumed by them and in order not to give up and spend the rest of your days sitting on the sofa watching daytime TV, you need to have certain ambitions, even if they are unattainable. The problem at the moment is that I don't have the energy or the inclination to realise any ambitions.

The car turns into our road and after a moment, we approach our house. 'Also, I've been writing more lately. I still like to think I might be published one day,' I say.

'Yes, I had noticed you were writing again. What are you writing about?' he asks me enthusiastically.

'Dreams... myself... I'm not entirely sure...' I trail off.

'You've always had a philosophical soul, haven't you?' he says. I smile distractedly and look away, unsure whether it is a compliment or a weary attempt to make light of my lack of assertion. I think it might be the second.

It is a cold, damp, Friday afternoon in early October – three weeks since I returned from Australia. It is hardly possible now to imagine that twenty-one days ago I was sitting out in the antipodean sunshine, sipping cocktails and looking out

onto Circular Quay – he can't cook, but cocktails are James' forte. I have spent pretty much the entirety of the last three weeks of my waking hours on the sofa, reading, watching inane television and writing. I read the *dérive* book from cover to cover and I still want to do one.

I look at myself in the windscreen mirror. My hair is getting too long and I haven't shaved for a week – I look a mess, but I am quite pleased with my appearance – I think I look more like a novelist now. My dad stands behind me in the road, re-assembling my wheelchair. Needless to say, he is not getting any younger – I wonder for how much longer I'll be able to go on living at home, him caring for me and working full-time. Last week, I had a meeting with my social worker, I asked him to arrange for an agency carer to help during the day. I have a carer starting next Monday. My dad brings the chair out into the road, opens the passenger door, and on the count of three, helps lift me from car to chair.

Once we are inside the house, my dad presses the flashing button on the answering machine; we have one new message. After the beep, there is a pause. There is someone there, though, you can hear them breathing.

'Oh, hullo! I am leaving this message on Friday the 3rd October 2008. The time is 1:38pm...SORRY, sorry, 2:38pm. I am leaving this message for Nick... sorry Nick, I don't know your surname. How are you? I must confess, I am somewhat missing life 'down under', now that I am 'up over', as it were... at a loose end, you know? Anyway, I digress. I don't suppose you have had a chance to peruse your book on the *dérive* any further? I have done some research on it in my local library. I was rather hoping we might meet for a drink somewhere and discuss both going on our own *dérive*... or *dérives*. How about Monday the 6th October? In true *dérive* style, you can

choose the time and the place – wherever and whenever your mind takes you! Let me know... incidentally, this is Gerald, Gerald St, Aubyn.”

We both stare at the machine and then at each other; we both smile indulgently.

'I'm afraid I've got to rush back to work. Sofa?' my dad asks.

'Please.'

My dad leaves. My mum won't be home for a few hours. I close my eyes and sit in complete silence for a couple of minutes. After a while, the silence becomes oppressive, and I have to break it. I turn on the TV, but don't watch it.

I had almost forgotten about Gerald. Hearing his voice made me feel guilty for almost forgetting him, but it also cheered me up. In the past few weeks I have needed someone I could comfortably talk to (aside from my parents), a means of escape from the house and from my own head - Gerald represents both. He is funny too, although I don't think he realises.

I will definitely return his call, will definitely meet him. The timing is good – since coming home my dad has been my sole carer, but social services have arranged for me to have a carer helping me during the day next week, so I will have somebody to take me to and from wherever I met Gerald. I stare down at the cordless phone my dad left by my side. There's no time like the present... I hate speaking on the telephone – my speech is not very clear at the best of times, when I'm on the phone I get worried that the other person won't understand me, and when get worried I get nervous, when I get nervous I can scarcely understand myself. I pick up the phone book my dad has also left beside me, find the number that Gerald scrawled in it the day he brought me home, and falteringly I begin to dial... Thank God, it's the answer-phone.

'Hi, Gerald, it's erm Nick. Thanks for your message. Yeah, Monday sounds good to me. How about we meet at 12pm in the courtyard of Somerset House? Is that random enough? I came up with it just a second ago. We could meet at one minute past twelve if you'd prefer – a bit more random... see you then... err... Thanks!'

That was OK... a bit disjointed, but I think he will understand it. I put the phone down and pick up the remote control for the television. I indiscriminately flick through the channels until I settle, for some unknown reason, on an educational program aimed at young children, about Newton's laws of motion. Beside the TV and through the French windows a ray of sunlight flows through a gap in the heavy dark clouds, making everything look healthier. On the screen, a cartoon dog wearing sunglasses is explaining that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. I close my eyes and lie back in the sofa, only vaguely listening, as the dog concludes his physics lecture.

Chapter 8

Mira a la derecha y a la izquierda del tiempo y que tu corazón aprenda a estar tranquilo.

Federico Garcia Lorca

I am looking deep into the purple light of a summer night in Spain. It is two minutes past midnight and next to the clock down on the *Avenida de Carlos V* the temperature gauge reads 28 degrees. Occupying my usual position on the balcony of an apartment, there is a party going on in the room behind me. Before me is an empty wine-glass, and the rest of the world. The rooftops and TV aerials of nearby buildings become skeletal outlines against the sky. The wafer of moon tries its hardest to cast light down on the city, but there is a layer of darkness separating it from the golden lights illuminating the sandstone buildings and monuments of Seville. There is a law in Seville that no new buildings can exceed the height of the Giralda, a former minaret, which now haunts over the cathedral - a remnant of the city's Moorish days. Looking across its skyline is like looking into the past.

For me, unlike everyone else, it seems parties are occasions for morbid introspection...I don't have the energy to sustain a conversation with anyone amid the cacophony of music and other conversations – when I do manage to make myself heard, it is even harder trying to hear a response, especially one in Spanish - so I generally sit on the periphery, smiling at people from time to time to show them I am having a good time. That is, until my mind gives way to my thoughts and I just sit there, watching in quiet contemplation. There's no morbid introspection for me tonight, though. Tonight it's more like inflective jubilation.

I am nearing the end of a year spent in Spain as part of my university course, and tonight I am coming to the realisation that this has been one of the best years of my life. Tonight is special in that I am staying up later than normal on account of the party. As a child, bedtime for me was something I don't remember ever being formally set; but now, at the age of twenty-one, I have a strict bedtime of eleven o'clock. At eleven, my carers go home and there is no one to help me to bed. Of my three Spanish carers Andrés is working tonight, and we have come to the party of an English friend of mine who is also studying in Seville. I think we are the only two English people here, and she is half Italian; the other forty or so are a mixture of Spaniards, Germans, Italians and Americans.

The glass doors slide open behind me, letting out a wave of what sounds like flamenco music. Andrés joins me on the balcony, a bottle of wine in his hand and a retinue of women at his side. 'Más vino, Nick?'

'Por supuesto,' I reply, raising my eyes in greeting

They all talk for an hour or more, in a mixture of Spanish and English, about Seville, their numerous countries of origin and their future plans; I listen, mostly. As the girls slowly make their way back inside, I turn to Andrés and say "Nos vamos?"

He looks puzzled for a moment, and shrugs, as if to say "It's up to you..." and says 'Vale'. I am touched, he is only paid to work with me until eleven. As we leave, the party is just getting into full swing. I exchange kisses with the Spanish and Italian girls, shake hands with the German and American girls, and promise to keep in touch with my friend. We have to half-dismantle my wheelchair in order to fit inside the lift. At the ground floor, we reassemble the chair, walk out of the building and make our way home, past the deserted *Plaza de España* and through the silent *Parque de Maria Luisa*

We leave the park through its high wrought-iron gates, cross the road and take *Felipe II* street, just around the corner from where I am living. We approach the cafe that I go to every day, it has cultivated and nurtured my addiction to coffee. Amazingly it is still open – the doors are wide open and a homely light spills out onto the street.

'Nick? Quieres un café?' Andrés asks.

'Por qué no?' I think the wine has given us both a taste for spontaneity. And it doesn't matter if I'm awake all night, it's not like I've got any plans for tomorrow. The café is empty, there is no one at the counter, but we go inside and sit at a table. It is called the *Café de Indias*, I think it's part of a chain of cafés. The decoration is colonial style – dark and heavy wooden floors, windows and furniture with a rich cream paint on the walls. The walls are crowded with black and white photos and faded imitation relics from Spanish-owned coffee plantations. The counter is wooden with a thick marble slab on top. Behind it, there is a series of shelves crammed full with different pots of coffee-beans and all sorts of exotic spirits, mostly for show, I'm sure. The coffee machine is gold. A waitress suddenly appears from behind the counter and saunters over to us with a knowing smile. She says,

'Dos cafés con leche?' Andrés mumbles something to her in idiomatic Spanish, and they both laugh.

To be honest, the coffee is not the only reason I come here every day. Since the first time I came here I have been in love with one of the waitresses – well, 'in love' is a bit strong, maybe 'in lust' - but if I were to make a list of the most beautiful people I have ever set eyes on, she would definitely be in my top three. I have never spoken to her. I prefer to keep it that way. She's not working tonight, though. As tonight's waitress pours out the coffee, she keeps giving me furtive, almost apologetic

looks. She knows me, she's seen me a lot in here, I think she knows why I come here, and now she is saying 'sorry, she's not working tonight' with her eyes. She brings the coffee over and we both thank her.

Andrés lifts the cup to my lips and cautiously I take a sip. In the past hour, we have not exchanged more than a few words. When I really feel comfortable with someone, I find it easy to retreat into my own mind when I'm with them – the silence becomes hardly noticeable to me. Often I have days with Andrés when it feels as though we have had hours of in-depth discussion and then I realise I haven't said more than a few words to him all day. I hope he doesn't assume this is just because of my physical inability to speak at any great length, I hope he understands that it's just me being me. I look at him across the table, he looks at me, smiling...the silence continues.

We finish our coffees and walk the last leg home. I have been living in a student hall of residence for the past year – the first time I have ever properly lived on my own - my apartment is miles away from anyone else's. The rooms are huge – stone floors, white walls – all the space makes me feel lonely. Andrés opens the front door, it's still warm and hazy outside, but inside it is cool and fresh. I go into the bathroom and Andrés helps me get ready for bed. In the bedroom I take my tablets and he deftly lifts my legs. I transfer from my chair onto the bed. He leans over and shakes my hand.

'Muy buenas noches, Nick!' he says.

'Muchas gracias!'

'Muchas de nada!' He turns and leaves. I am alone in my huge room. I turn off the light and stare at the ceiling. I think the energy from the coffee has been offset

by the drowsiness from the wine I had earlier. Within a few minutes I am asleep. I have a dream about balance and the harmony brought about by it.

The dream about balance, I have had a few times. In this one I am on some kind of quest. At the end of each stage I cannot go through to the next one without first making sure that everything around me is in perfect equilibrium – the weights in weighing scales must be equal, things on the floor and the walls must be symmetrical, temperature and light levels must be just right. Only then can I breathe easily and progress to my next challenge. I think I know why I have this dream at this time in my life. In Spain I am detached from all family ties, I don't have a past that anyone knows about; I am free from all responsibility. My life is suddenly so simple, so ordered, so free. It is also around this time in my life that I start to believe that as long as everything is balanced in life and as long as my mind is clear, then I could transcend physical problems and inconveniences just by thinking I could. For years, I had felt an increasing tension in my legs from sitting in a chair all day. The muscle tension in my left foot was so bad that it had started to curve inwards, causing blisters to appear on it. But in Spain, the calmness in my head is complimented by calmness in my body, and the tension and blisters disappear. Sometimes I wonder whether my whole condition is psychosomatic, whether I could be cured just by believing I'm cured. Sometimes I even try to catch myself out, by getting up and spontaneously starting to run – it hasn't worked yet, but I'm ever-hopeful. Deep down, I have always known it is delusional – still, hope is always better than resignation.

The whole episode on the balcony and in the café is not a dream I have had - rather a waking recollection. When I am day-dreaming, thinking about nothing in particular, the memory of that night creeps on up me and makes me nostalgic. Nothing outstanding happened to me that night, no great insights struck me as I sat on

the balcony or in the café; I'm not even sure why my subconscious has chosen to remember it so well. I just remember a feeling of extreme contentment and serenity.

In a way, I lead a very restricted life since arriving in Spain. I don't leave Seville over the entire time I am there. Other overseas students would travel around the country at weekends and on holidays. Most nights I go to bed at eleven o'clock, a time when for most people in Spain the evening has only just begun. In fact, Andres would often help me to bed at eleven and then go home to have dinner. I would get up at around nine-thirty or ten most mornings - unless it is one of the two days per week that I go to university, when it is eight o'clock. I spend most days working minimally, going out for coffee and going on aimless walks with my carers through the city. I am always wide awake when I go to bed, so I sit in bed and read into the early hours of the morning. I read novels, mostly – contemporary, classic, fantasy, – anything and everything. When I can no longer keep my eyes open, my sleep is often full of the most vivid and extravagant dreams.

These dreams are mostly too fantastical to read a meaning into. They are often of things I had read and seen that day, in a mixture of Spanish and English as well. In one recurring dream, I am in a luxurious palace somewhere in northern Africa. The palace is carpeted throughout in soft, thick and silky Persian rugs. I am wearing a pair of skis. The dream consists of me skiing down a seemingly never-ending series of staircases and through countless huge, lavish rooms, maybe I'm on another quest of some kind. The rooms all have people in them, but I don't talk to anyone, I'm too busy skiing. I never get to a “a destination” of any kind... I don't think I want to either.

Chapter 9

Routine and repetition are two words I would not usually associate with dreaming, but there is a customary dream, a default vision from my early childhood that I regularly return to. This dream induces a somatic response, a physical feeling of both excitement and fear in my stomach. I am not sure what circumstances bring about the dream, when my mind is not preoccupied with anything else, it's always there...

I am three, I think, or at any rate old enough to understand what is being said to me and believe it unquestioningly. My brother is six, we are on holiday in Devon. He has told me about the fact that everybody else in the world is, for no particular reason, out to get us. It is only him and me from now on. We are staying on a farm, so we use a nearby field in which to escape our predators. After an hour or two my worried parents must have got the farmer involved. The image that remains with me is the sight of the farmer and my parents, seen over the top of the waving ears of corn, desperately looking for us while we lay secluded in the long grass. It is a feeling at once of safety and conspiracy that-

'Are you awake, mate?'

I immediately open my eyes, then immediately close them. I open them again, gradually, blinking in the light. 'Wha...?'

There is a man I don't know standing in my bedroom. He steps forward and holds out a hand for me to shake. Instinctively I reach out from under the covers and limply shake it.

'I'm Chris, the agency sent me to come and care for you today. I wondered if you wanted to get up – it's 10 o'clock.'

'Oh, shit. Sorry.' I say, trying and failing to sit up. Chris sees what I am trying to do. He picks me up - as if I were as light as a feather – and puts me down in my chair. 'Erm, thank you...' I had been expecting a carer today, of course – but it takes me a while to get my bearings in the morning. 'So... erm... where have you come from?'

'Jamaica,' Chris replies.

'Right... I meant where did you come from this morning?'

'Oh,' he gives me a good natured look of confusion 'Camberwell – only ten minutes on the bus.'

'Yeah, I'm afraid we'll need to take the bus back that way in a minute. I'm meeting a friend at twelve outside Somerset House, I didn't mean to get up this late. We must run, metaphorically speaking.'

'No problem!'

*

We are on the bus, approaching Waterloo Bridge, my favourite bridge in London. It is nothing to look at - in that respect I like Blackfriars Bridge – but when crossing it I find it impossible not to gaze in both directions, eastwards and westwards. Eastwards you'll see a profusion of plane trees lining the northern bank, with the city behind. Lodged between the modern sprawl of offices is the familiar and ghostly dome of Saint Paul's cathedral – for more than three hundred years it has outlived its neighbours and will probably outlive all newcomers. Look westwards and you'll see Jubilee footbridge and the railway bridge that leads to Charing Cross station, partially obstruct the view of the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben. On the

bus, I sit in the allocated wheelchair space behind the stairwell. Chris sits opposite me, looking attentively between me and the two mobile phones resting on his lap. Getting up and dressed was not too stressful this morning, considering Chris has not cared for me before. He seems nice, I like him.

We stop at the lights by the side of Somerset House, the moist air and dull light lend it a sombre, funereal aspect. The bus trudges past it now, turns a corner and after twenty or so yards, comes to a halt. We get off and turn back along the Strand. The entrance to and the open quadrangle in Somerset house remind me of those of an Oxford college – except everything is bigger here, yet more intimate, a paradox that London always holds for me. I see Gerald immediately. He is standing in the dead centre of the quadrangle. He seems to be wearing the exact same clothes as he was when I last saw him, though they've been washed and pressed since. I imagine him taking all his clothes to a dry cleaner – he doesn't strike me as the sort who'd be bothered with a washing machine. I point him out and we walk over. We approach him, but he doesn't see us.

'Hello, Gerald'

'Oh! There you are!'

'Yes, here I am...and this is Chris, my carer.'

'Good afternoon, Christopher!' They shake hands.

'A pleasure to meet you, sir,' says Chris, reverentially. When I said I was meeting a friend, he probably imagined the friend was the same age as me – to him, I think Gerald is a bit of an oddity. The three of us walk through the far doors of the courtyard, past the café and out onto the terrace, overlooking the river. Dérive-wise, this is where I had wanted to be.

None of us has had any breakfast this morning, so we order breakfast from the French-themed café which has sprung up on the terrace since I was here last. As we sit waiting for Gerald's croissants and my croque monsieur, the sun comes out and casts us in bright warmth. It takes only the slightest alteration in the weather or circumstance and the whole ambience of the city changes. I look down at the mossy grey pillars at the edge of the terrace, through the bright green leaves of the plane trees lining the street below. Beyond it, the sun-kissed, murky-brown river rushes and rivets its way past bridges and around boats. It's as if we have been suddenly transported to Paris. Our food arrives. The waitress gives us a wide-eyed smile and slowly walks away. I suppose we are quite an unlikely trio.

'So, Nick!' says Gerald, who has been talking to Chris for the last five minutes – for some unknown reason he has decided that Chris is from Haiti, and has been speaking broken French at him, despite his protestations of ignorance. They seem to be getting along quite well. 'How have you been occupying your time since our return from Australia?'

'That's a good question. To be honest, I am struggling to occupy it.' Chris feeds me a piece of toast and holds up a cup of coffee for me to take a sip. 'One thing I *have* been doing lately is writing...' Gerald looks at me as if to say, "Go on." 'It's a continuation of what I had started, of sorts. A collection of accounts of dreams I've had. The only trouble is I want to write a novel... these accounts can never make a novel... they're like the rest of me, they lack coherence.'

'What are these dreams about?' Gerald enquires.

'Well... it's hard to explain... I know, I know – I'm writing about them and I can't explain what they're about – pathetic, isn't it? I mean, most dreams I have consist of a random series of events – they make no sense. But my recurring dreams

are different. I have these recurring dreams about specific moments of my past. I see everything clearly, as it was... Those are the dreams that I'm writing about.'

'So you *do* know what they are about?'

'I suppose so... I also suppose I'm writing in order to find a meaning, to find out what I'm about. I'm sure you've already noticed I'm not really in the best frame of mind at the moment. In truth, the "moment" started when I left university. Since then I have been lost. It's mainly due to my, situation' - I gesture at my wheelchair - 'I feel I can't move on, I'm left behind. Either I'm not able to move on or I just don't have the energy. By writing about these dreams I hope to get some clue as to why I'm feeling the way I'm feeling – but so far, what I have written seems to be overwhelmingly positive. The thought that I'm depressed when there is nothing to be depressed about is the worst part of it...'

This is incredible. I am pouring out my innermost thoughts – things I haven't shared with anyone before – to a relative, and by most other accounts "weird" – stranger. What's more, I am talking with a freedom and fluency I'm not normally capable of – I am a very shy person. Words are falling from my mouth without my thinking about them. As I hear them, though, they speak for me perfectly.

'Hmm – no matter how real they seem, dreams have a tendency to idealise perception. They say dreaming is a way for your mind to sift through and sort out recent events in your life. Maybe your sleeping mind is responding to the preoccupations of your waking mind and providing you with some reassurance.'

Everything this man says not only makes complete and perfect sense, but whenever it is said, it seems like a revelation to me. 'So anyway, it sounds to me like a *dérive* would help clear your mind, don't you think?'

'I think you may be right,' I say.

'Have you read any of the book the Chadwick boy gave you?'

'I have flicked through it, yes... although I must confess I couldn't make much sense of it. That's the problem with philosophy. Well, that's the problem with academia in general. Most people who write it are on a mission to prove they are more intelligent than the reader. Any sense of lucidity goes out the window. Most of the book is just a convoluted mess.'

'Yes, I did rather get that impression. But in spite of all that, I couldn't help feeling that beneath all the pomposity it was saying something perceptive and even exciting. I love this city,' He gives a theatrical wave, as if sprinkling his surroundings with invisible fairy dust. 'I love going on long, aimless walks in London. The idea that amid all this modern conformity there is still the potential for adventure is something I have always thought to be true. I must say, I *do* want to try one... a *dérive*, that is.'

'So do I,' I say, realising I want nothing more.

'Excellent. Is tomorrow too soon?'

'Oh – umm...a bit,' I say, though of course I have no plans. 'How about Friday?'

'Perfect!'

*

The homeward journey is unusually fluid. The bus eases its way through traffic, past green lights. Everyone on the bus meets my drifting eyes with pleasant smiles. Occasionally I get an odd look which betrays a mixture of sympathy and admiration. What are they trying to say with these faces? 'I think it's wonderful that, given the wheelchair, you have the courage to show your face on this bus'? I don't

mind them in the least. I return the look with a stoical one that I hope says, “Well, yes, I *am* pretty fucking brave, aren't I?”

Chris holds silent vigil over his phones. Every now and then he has a hushed conversation into one of them. I sit opposite him, reflecting on the irony of life. Why is it that when I'm feeling everything in life is against me, nature conspires to make everything run smoothly. I'm busy trying to feel sorry for myself and suddenly people and things come along to enthuse me and make me see everything differently. It's like I was saying to Gerald, I obviously wasn't too badly off in the first place, which doesn't cheer me up at all.

'Oi, Nick!' says a mock-harsh voice from behind me. I turn my head and see David, my longest standing friend from primary school. 'Long time, no see, eh?'

'Hi – yes it's been a while. We should both go for a drink some time.' I say, knowing that we won't be going for a drink any time soon.

'Yeah! This is my stop. I'll give you a bell this week...see you soon!' David hops off the bus and disappears amid a crowd of people. I turn back to Chris, who is occupied with one of his phones and apparently hasn't noticed David.

*

This evening, like most evenings, is spent watching mindless tv – the kind of tv that makes you feel utterly depressed that you have nothing better to do than to watch it. At ten-thirty I ask Chris to help me to bed, just so that I have something to do. The process of going to bed proves to be as quick and easy as the process of getting up, this morning. Chris has a gentle, deceptive strength and I am transported from stair-lift to wheelchair to bed with the minimum of fuss.

“Aaright, eleven o' clock, that's me!” Chris says “I'll see you at nine tomorrow morning. Sweet dreams, mate.”

“Thanks, you too.”

He leaves and I have only myself to talk to. No worries, I have a lot to say. I really must stop going to bed so early, too much sleep is bad for me, though I never suffer from insomnia. I turn over, close my eyes and start a conversation with myself. I talk and talk until I fall asleep.

Chapter 10

Recollection, it is not a mechanical adjunction of more and more numerous elements which, while remaining unmoved, attract around it, but rather an expansion of the entire consciousness which, spreading out over a larger area, discovers the fuller details of its wealth. So a nebulous mass, seen through more and more powerful telescopes, resolves itself into an ever greater number of stars.

Henri Bergson, Matter and Memory

'Hot enough for you?' David breaks the silence, making no effort to conceal an ironic smile.

With laboured deliberation I turn my head in his direction and give him a look of unadulterated disdain. I was going for unimpressed geniality. I had better qualify it with some words. 'I'm f-fucking f-f-freezing!'

Conversation over.

It is not excessively cold tonight, about two or three degrees. But we have been sitting still for ninety minutes, getting rained on. Before the game tonight I was provided with a black plastic bin-liner to drape over my knees to stop them getting wet. I am watching now as the rain water collects in various neat little puddles on my lap; until they overflow and race down to the ground in tiny rivulets created by pleats in the bag. We are both cold, we are both wet, but neither of us could be happier – tonight we are both watching our beloved Arsenal.

Suddenly, a stronger burst of rain begins a new assault as, simultaneously, Arsenal come streaming forward in what will surely be their last attack. Someone – through the rain I can't quite make out who – is bursting through the midfield – it's up for grabs now! The ball skids along the wet grass and into the net. Thirty eight thousand people go spare. As the four walls of noise around me die down I hear a man behind me mutter, 'About bloody time!'

The remaining seconds are played out in slick assuredness – the ball skims over the immaculate and saturated pitch between the Arsenal players. I feel slightly warmer now.

The stadium holds a Proustian power over my mind. My Dad first took me to a game when I was seven. Arsenal vs. West Ham United, I don't remember the score – I didn't see much of the football, my attention was lost to the four stands around me. The East and West stands, painted in cream and red, adorned at the front and sides with hundreds of art-deco-style windows, face each other in almost artistic rivalry - the terraced North Bank, a choppy sea of people all hungry for excitement - the Clock End, a single tier of seating, one corner of which is devoted to the West Ham fans. The clock on the roof of the stand keeps time for thirty-eight thousand. I have a feeling of security, of belonging – safety in numbers, almost tribal – a tribe in a stylish but sturdy house.

The final whistle is greeted with a universal murmur of approval and everyone instantly turns to leave. In recent years, we have all become so accustomed to high scoring attractive football that a simple 1-0 win leaves everybody cold. We slowly make our way, behind the masses, to the entrance.

'Alright, lads?' asks my grandad. This is one of my fondest memories of my trips to Highbury. I would often ask my grandad, who lives a mile or two from the ground, to give me a lift home. To my mind, his familiar conversation, thawing out in his warm car and the fish and chips we would sometimes eat on the way home were all as much a part of football as the players themselves.

'C-cold' I reply.

'Hmm – treacherous weather, ruddy treacherous!'

'At least we won, though... one-nil,' David says.

'Yes, I got here ten minutes early, so they let me in to watch the end... Shall we make our way to the car, then?'

'Mm-hm,' I murmur, too cold to force out words.

We make our way through a sea of bodies up Avenell road. Like the Red Sea, as soon as anyone sees my wheelchair a path is instantly forged through the crowd. We get in the car and it gradually forges its way through another Red Sea.

'So, David, how's school?' My grandad asks.

'What?'

'SCHOOL, how is it?'

'Oh, alright... I'm concentrating more on my football these days, though,' David says.

'Right you are!' My grandad replies, with a heavy twist of irony in his voice.

'Yeah – I had a trial for West Ham last week - turned them down, though – they only offered me a grand a week...'

'Quite right too! A thousand pounds a week is not enough for a fourteen year-old!'

'...Err, yeah...' David trails off. To hide the smirk of embarrassment on my face, I look out of the car-window at the ever-thinning crowds of supporters.

Like chalk and cheese his mum says of us. We are, but it works. He comes from a council estate, thinking it would be cool to have more. I come from middle-class suburbia, thinking it would be cool to have less. He is loud, I am quiet. He likes to tell stories, I like to believe them. I may harbour dreams of becoming a novelist, but my imagination and manipulation of the truth will never be a match for his. To

believe in something so dubious it is almost ridiculous is to be granted access to a whole new world of truths. After all, that is how religion works.

The next thing I know, we are in south London. The car comes to a halt before a bridge at the turning for Coldharbour Lane.

'Sorry, lads, I'm busting for a piss. I think I'm gonna go in this alleyway, down here. '

'But – no! Grandad, it's pretty dangerous around here...' I protest.

'Good point, I think you should lock the doors while I'm gone.'

'No, I'm serious... last week I heard about a murder in that alleyw-'

'Won't be long!' With that, he slams the car door and walks away, out of sight.

He is gone for what seem like hours. While we wait, David and I discuss the finer points of tonight's game – all the time, I think I hear gunshot or see blades of knives caught in the moonlight from the alley. After an age, I hear footsteps approaching the car and I see my grandad reaching out to open the door. Relief courses through my veins. The door is opened. For an instant, a cold blast of air hits my face. He climbs in and closes the door. Thud.

And that is it. That is when I wake up. Sorry for the anticlimax.

Chapter 11

L'esprit d'escalier – the spirit of the staircase. There really should be an equivalent idiomatic expression in English. My life is full of *l'esprit d'escalier* moments. It is when a moment has just passed and you think – Brilliant! That's the perfect thing to say! Oh, that would have been the perfect thing to say. For a long time afterwards, you regret not having said it.

We are in central London - Holburn springs to mind – my Dad, my brother and I. Having just been to visit my Mum in hospital, we eat lunch in a small Italian restaurant, and are now coming out into a shadowy backstreet. At the end of the street, we meet a homeless woman, she sees my brother's wheelchair and at once believing herself to share a common status with him,

'Life ain't fair, is it? Stuck in that thing, all day?' she says.

'It's alright, he's used to it,' says my Dad. I know now, I think I knew then that my Dad was only saying that so he wouldn't be drawn into a conversation with this mad woman, but at the time I really wish I'd said *No, he's not! Of course he's not!* I'm sure my brother was thinking the same thing...

I wake up and get up early this morning. My dad helps me before he goes to work. I sit at the kitchen table musing, a cup of coffee in front of me. From time to time, my mum comes in and holds it up for me to drink from it. I am waiting for Chris to arrive.

The doorbell rings and I hear my mum's footsteps shuffling down the hallway. A few moments later a tall, elaborately dressed African man walks in.

'Allo, Nick? My name is Solomon. I take care of you today.'

'Right, do you know where Chris is?'

'He is infirm, so I am....sorry,' says Solomon, solemnly.

'That's no problem.' I say, hiding my disappointment. '... I like your clothes.'

'Thank you! They are from Senegal. Me too!'

'Donc, vous parlez Français?' I say.

'Oui, Monsieur,' he says, saluting officiously. 'Qu'est ce-que nous allons faire aujourd'hui?'

'Well,' I sheepishly slip back into the safety of English, 'I am meeting a friend at ten-thirty at London Bridge.' I feign a look at my watch. 'Actually, we should leave now. Don't worry – I'll give you directions and everything.'

Solomon is already standing up with his hands on the handles of my wheelchair, 'Allons-y!'

*

The bus pulls up by London Bridge, the ramp is extended, we get off and turn left. It is a Friday morning, we are walking against a tide of people wearing suits and walking purposefully to work. Looking at them – all so industrious – I get the feeling that that is where I should be – in a suit, going to work – but instead I am going to meet my new friend, who is sixty years old and retired, for what will be our first official *dérive*.

We turn and walk down some back streets which bring us out to Borough market, which has always seemed to me a secret, dreamy place. Tourists discover it almost by accident behind the relatively high-rising buildings of the Thames embankment, and are charmed by its bright colours and heady atmosphere. I have heard it is over two thousand years old, that the Romans had stocked up on food there

before they laid siege to London. I'm not sieging today, just deriving, so I quickly pass through. The last stall I pass is selling Indian food. A girl about my age, wearing a business suit, is buying something fried with onions and potato. She looks self-consciously in my direction and I muster something approaching a smile. She considers me for a moment, then looks mortally offended, pays for her food and runs off.

The Golden Hind sits before me in its anachronistic splendour – a replica of a sixteenth century ship hidden between two office-blocks. Beyond the ship is the *Old Thameside Inn*, where Gerald and I had agreed to meet. Gerald is already seated at a table on a balcony over-looking the river. He is drinking a pint of orange juice. He sees me approaching,

'Good morning, Nick! How are you today?'

'Oh, I'm fine, thanks... No! Sorry, wait - I'm not fine, I'm anything but fine. "I'm fine, thanks," seems to have become my standard, unthinking response to that question. Do you ever have those days when you're overcome by paranoia?'

'I don't think so...but, yes! Maybe I do...' I look at him quizzically, unaware of the attempted joke. I take it as being just another Gerald-ism and continue.

'It starts when one or two friends are apparently ignoring you – not answering emails or messages, et cetera. You start sifting through your memory to find something you may have done to offend them. You can't find anything, but you must have done something... You *did* do something! Come to think of it, none of your other friends have been in touch recently. They must have spoken to the people who are ignoring me, you think, and have found out what I did or didn't do, and they are now in a secret pact never to speak to me again.

'You decide to go out to get some fresh air. As you set off, you see somebody you know, somebody who always says, "Hello, Nick! How are you?", but they don't even acknowledge you. That can mean only one thing – your former friends must have spread the word, told everyone everything. The worst thing to do is to admit you are feeling a bit depressed, that maybe you're being slightly paranoid. Now you start consciously looking for signs that confirm your paranoia. You pass a stranger in the street. You don't smile at them – this is London - you give them a friendly look of feigned recognition, though. They scowl at you and look away. My God! This is much worse than you thought. Somehow, everybody must have found out what a horrible person you are...'

Gerald is listening quietly and intently, his chin resting on his cupped hands 'And then?'

'And then you asked me how I was. How are you?'

'Oh, you know...mustn't complain...I could but I shan't!' he beams. I feel guilty for having complained. 'Hullo, there... Gerald St Aubyn!' Gerald tentatively holds out a hand in Solomon's direction. I feel even more guilty now for not having made an introduction.

Solomon gratefully reaches out to shake Gerald's hand. 'Solomon Diallo, pleased to meet you!'

'Can I offer you both a drink?' Gerald asks.

Solomon politely refuses, but seeing Gerald's orange juice, I am suddenly taken by the urge to have the same. I need a drink after my long monologue. I smile apologetically at Gerald, as Solomon goes inside the pub to order my drink.

'You know, I hear that depression and emotional instability help to stimulate one's artistic and creative endeavours.' Gerald says.

'In some cases,' I reply, disparagingly.

'So how is your great *opus* progressing? Thrown yourself off any more bridges recently?'

My eyes dart across to look into his, 'Sorry?' I say, disconcerted.

'Oh yes... sorry! I meant to tell you, I found the opening pages of your novel inside the cover of the book on the *dérive*. I read them on the plane – very good, though killing off your main character in the opening pages hardly makes for a compelling read!'

'Right... no...' I lose my train of thought. Gerald is doing no favours to my sense of increasing paranoia. 'Well, that suicide of mine was just a dream, you know. But yes, my novel seems to have no real plot, so far it's just a collection of supernatural memories, expressed in dreams – no cohesion to it, no beginning, middle, no end...'

'But life should not always be about cohesion... and in an autobiography – unless you intend on killing yourself in the process of writing it – there should be no resolution. Life is not about resolutions - time keeps ticking away, regardless. Besides, maybe you will find a storyline in what we are doing now – a *dérive*.'

'I suppose so, although to be honest I am still quite sceptical about this *dérive* thing,' I say, squinting against the rising sun.

'Me too - I don't necessarily see that as a bad thing, though. As I say, I have done a bit of reading about it - the group that came up with the idea was largely made up of disgruntled students, rebels without causes. Their other ideas are all a bit vague, even a bit silly, impetuous. I suppose the *dérive* is a product of their age, a product of *the age*.'

'The 1950s and 60s?'

'Yes, the post-war generation - I am part of it. It was a time of uncertainty. The death of an old world order and the birth of a new one. Europe was relegated to a new position of dependence on America. There was economic and political stagnation, but at the same time there were great advancements in technology – space travel, television... It was also a time of fear, the cold war, and all that. Our parents were only too keen to remind us how they fought for our freedom and that we should be grateful for it – but we didn't feel particularly free... we felt trapped, as if we were going nowhere.'

Gerald pauses to finish his orange juice. A pigeon lands on the wall beside us, and stands stock-still, staring at him. Gerald continues, 'The 1960s was a very important decade for Britain, socially speaking. All the spirit of rebellion and dissatisfaction young people had with the world was released through sexual liberation, drugs and rock music. France and other European countries had much less of that, though. The youth of Europe were bursting with the need to express a spirit of freedom. I think that's why this group existed, and why there was an uprising in 1968.'

'I'm sure...' I say, trying in vain to imagine Gerald in “sex, drugs and rock and roll” mode. Gerald has obviously done his homework. He has even brought along a book he bought about the *dérive*, which he had given to Solomon when he had arrived back with my drink.

So far, Solomon has been quietly reading and has kept his counsel. He leans forward now and drops the book on the table, 'Les flâneurs...' he pronounces, decisively.

'Precisely what I was thinking!' Gerald excitedly responds. I look at them both with an air of mystification.

'Can someone enlighten me?' I say.

'The flâneur? The arcades project? ...Walter Benjamin?' at each question I give a solemn shake of the head. 'The idea or fashion for wealthy Parisian gentlemen to wander along the boulevards and through the arcades of the city, simply looking at and blending into their surroundings. They were like shoppers without any inclination to buy, businessmen with no decided destination. Flâneur, you know, from the French verb “flâner” - to wander?'

'Of course,' I say, as if it suddenly all made sense, though I had no idea what flâner meant. I am often ashamed at the state of my supposed 'degree-level' French. 'I'll have to find out more about it. How did you know about it, Solomon?'

'I like readin',' Solomon replies, grinning. Solomon's voice has a strange air of finality to it. He speaks affably, but once he has spoken there is an unmistakable sense that the conversation is now over.

'Est-ce-que vous voulez flâner – umm... as it were?' Gerald addresses us both in his own, idiosyncratic way.

Solomon and I smile at him in affirmation. We leave the table with my half-finished orange juice and begin walking westwards along the Embankment. Gerald starts speaking, as if thinking aloud, 'But that is what I like about the *dérive*, you see. It was borne out of a rebellious boredom. That leads to so much creativity. I much prefer it to the idea of the flâneurs – with the Arcades project it was a case of wandering around, trying to merge with your surroundings. With the *dérive* though, it's more a case of wandering around and forming an empathy with your surroundings. It's a lot more psychologically complex. Inspired, is it not? The architecture in a city is all man-made... as I speak, we are surrounded by the remnants and the visions of people, the landscape *is* alive!'

I don't reply, but I breathe the words in, and repeat them to myself. Maybe there is more to the *dérive* than I have chosen to see. Undoubtedly there is more to life than I choose to see. Paranoia? What paranoia? We stop. I look up and see the Millennium footbridge in front of me. I am annoyed. We started the *dérive* three hundred yards ago and for the past three hundred yards I have been day-dreaming.

'Have you been to the Tate Modern before, Nick?' Gerald asks me.

'A couple of times, yes.'

'And you, Solomon?' Gerald persists.

Solomon passes a cursive eye over the building, 'No, I have not.'

'Shall we go in?' Gerald suggests, with a hint of excitement in his voice. I didn't think Gerald would have been the type to like modern art.

'Do you think we should? I mean, it's a bit touristy... a bit run-of-the-mill... isn't it against the rules of the *dérive*?' I say.

'Why should it be against the rules? We are going on the spur of the moment and we are going because we want to – you *do* want to go, do you not?'

Before I can answer, in a fit of uncharacteristic decisiveness, Gerald turns extravagantly and begins marching down the walkway to the entrance.

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I have never really understood art. I can distinguish between what I like and what I don't like, but I often can't say why. Other artistic forms – literature, music, theatre – I can understand. You can lose yourself in them, they can inhabit part of you, in some way. I definitely appreciate that others feel differently, but I also appreciate that feigning interest, staring blankly at canvases for hours, would be false and disingenuous to myself. If I had had a choice in the matter we would not be here – but we are. I get the impression that Solomon shares my opinion of art. We vacantly

drift through each room, at a slightly quicker pace than everyone else, unabsorbedly “taking in” each painting. When we finish “taking in” one room, we stay by the doorway leading to the next, waiting for Gerald.

It's not as simple as that, though. Me and art – it's a lot more complicated. I have a poster on my bedroom wall, it's entirely blue – a single shade of deep blue in a rectangular block on a white background. No, not much talent was involved in its composition, but I like it. I can't say why I like it, I don't know why. So yes, art *can* have an effect on me, but the reason for the effect remains a mystery. Gerald rejoins us and we go in to the next room.

I find it just as interesting to watch other people looking at pictures as to look at them myself. I look around me now – we are in a room full of off-white canvases, all adorned with a single, thick, black smear of paint. People are standing or sitting on benches positioned in the centre of the room and staring at them, waiting for an unseen meaning to jump out and capture their imaginations. The theme and composition of the art seemingly makes no difference to the captivated reverence with which it is beheld. I remember once going to an exhibition of erotic art – it was a collection of pornographic photographs. People - including one elderly couple – were mesmerised by them. I watched the couple as they moved methodically around the gallery, intently scanning each photo. Every now and then, they shared a hushed conversation. I wondered what they were saying to each other; *“Oh look, darling! That lady's cunt looks just like mine! - So it does, dear! So it does!”* That was porn, but it was hanging in a smart gallery, so it automatically acquired a sophistication, it became high-brow smut. So much about art, so much about life is dictated by the felicity of circumstance, by superficiality, I hate that.

What makes a work of art good? Talent? I look at the walls around me – no! Originality? Maybe. Luck? Definitely! So much depends on contingency... I mean, who decided that the *Mona Lisa* was so good? I don't like it, personally. And it's not just paintings whose deemed merit rest precariously on coincidence and serendipity, it is all art – even the novel. Maybe that's why I can't get anywhere with my novel – A subconscious fear that even if I invest my life in writing it, it might not be lucky, it might not even get to the stage where it is read by anyone. I was reading the other day about *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, apparently it was rejected by a hundred and twenty-one publishers before going on to sell four million copies. I know I wouldn't have the patience for that. We reach the end of the last room and come out to the main corridor by the lifts.

'I say! Could we sit down for a moment? You'll have to make allowances for the older generation. It's all that standing, you see,' Gerald says.

'Of course,' I say, 'after all, I have been sitting down all day.'

'Ah – yes...' Gerald replies, pleased that I was the one to have pointed it out.

Solomon and Gerald take a seat on a sofa, over-looking the vast emptiness of the building. I lean forwards and peer in each direction of the huge warehouse.

'Impressive, is it not?' says Gerald, anticipating my reaction, 'you really get the feeling of industry here. You can still see the great turbine down there, still see all the installations from when it was a power station.'

'Mmm,' I murmur in distracted response. 'In truth, I prefer the actual gallery to what is inside it. It's a lot more...human.' The moment I say this, I regret it. Gerald looks surprised, almost hurt.

'You mean you don't like modern art? But why did you not say?'

'It's not that I don't like it, it's just that I don't really understand it. I can't see how anyone does, it all strikes me as being a bit pretentious,' I confess. 'I didn't say anything because I didn't want to disappoint you.'

'I *do* wish you had said something. I feel precisely the same way. I could make neither head nor tail of most of it. I cannot see that there *is* anything to understand – as it were... I only suggested it because it seemed like quite a frivolous idea...very French.'

'...Yes.. and maybe the *dérive* is the same – superficial and empty, and ultimately meaningless. You said yourself that the *dérive* was invented by pretentious young students who thought they were more intelligent than they were...do you think we are wasting our time?'

'This art gallery idea of mine was a bit of a *faux pas*. I can understand your disillusionment at the moment but I really think things will pick up,' Gerald assures me defensively. 'If this does all turn out to be meaningless, at least we've had a nice walk in London...'

'That's true...' I concede.

'Shall we continue, then?' Solomon suggests after a moment's pause.

'Yes please!' I say

We leave the gallery and turn left, continuing our journey in silence. Gerald walks alongside me looking down at the river, every now and then waving self-consciously at the people on boats passing by. I look in the other direction. The irony of my bemoaning people who claim a fascination with art for the sake of appearing to be cultured and sophisticated, when all along we were doing exactly that, is not lost on me – I feel suitably stupid.

At Blackfriars Bridge, we walk through an underpass. A busker is playing Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* – not very well. The acoustics make up for it, though. The tunnel is tiled, with murals on the walls depicting the construction of the bridge, back in 1869. As we pass the busker, Gerald drops a two pound coin in his open violin case. The busker continues playing, a look of surprise in his eyes. 'Very good, very... atmospheric!' Gerald assures the violinist. 'It was the smallest coin I had,' says Gerald regretfully, addressing Solomon and me as we move on, 'more than he deserved...'

In the near distance, the chimes of Big Ben start abruptly, the hour is struck – five o' clock. 'I say, I *am* feeling rather peckish – how about a coffee and a bite to eat?' Gerald says.

'Sure – I know a place a bit further on...' I reply without looking up. We walk on until we reach Gabriel's Wharf. We sit a table outside the café, still looking out at the river. A waitress comes out immediately, Solomon and I order coffee. Gerald dissects the menu with greatest deliberation and eventually orders the same, plus a slice of carrot cake.

'So... the evenings are drawing in earlier these days...' Gerald raises both arms above his head, as if to embrace the oncoming twilight. 'I seem to remember reading somewhere that one should not *dérive* after dusk, *dérives* are only to be undertaken in daylight hours. It seems rather strange to me – I love walking through London at night.'

'Yeah, me too,' I say. The waitress comes out with our drinks, Gerald ravenously tucks in to his cake. 'Although I'm feeling fairly tired. Do you mind if we call it a day?'

Gerald looks up at me, his mouth still full of cake. 'Right - yes - um – if you would rather.'

I have evidently disappointed Gerald . He obviously wanted to break the rules and *dérive* into the evening. I see nothing wrong with this but I cannot help feeling slightly disappointed by our first attempts. 'No doubt we will meet again for another *dérive*.'

'Oh yes, of course...we must.' Gerald quickly adds, 'shall we say same time tomorrow – eleven am?'

'I'm afraid I'm busy tomorrow and for the next few days...how about we make it the same time next week?' I have no plans for tomorrow, or for any day in the near future, but for some reason I do not want Gerald to know that.

'Right you are...' Gerald assents glumly. He takes a consolatory swig of coffee and, reinvigorated, says, 'Where do you suggest we meet?'

'I like to think of all our *dérives* as being part of the same journey. How about we meet at the point where we end this one? Maybe under Waterloo Bridge? The National Film Theatre has got a café there, what do you think?'

'Perfect!' Gerald says, with an arbitrary grin. 'So, how is this paranoia of yours coming along?'

'To be honest, I had forgotten about it. It's always lurking at the back of my mind, though. I think it's partly due to my novel – it doesn't help. As I said on the plane coming back from Australia, Lucy Chadwick suggested that I make myself the subject of my novel. That is what I'm doing, although I'm writing all my experiences in the format of dreams. The real world and the dream world have become indistinguishable. It's becoming harder for me to extricate memory from dream, dream from memory. When you have trouble telling what's true and what's not true, paranoia pounces... I'll pay for this,' I say, as the waitress re-emerges with the bill.

'Thank you – but do you mean it, or is this all just a dream?' asks Gerald, dryly.

I give him a laconic smile, but can't help wondering. We finish our drinks, leave the money on the table and continue in the direction of Waterloo Bridge. I point out our next meeting place to Gerald and after a brief farewell, we turn left at the National Theatre to re-join the bustling commuters on their journeys home.

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I spend the evening on the internet – looking up the Arcades project and *flâneurs*. Why had I not heard of them before? The *flâneurs* seem to be just like the *dériveurs* except that their habit for wandering through Parisian shopping arcades had a distinctly bohemian, literary bent – just what I need! I blame James for leading me down the wrong path. Though, as Gerald said, the *dérive* – with its links to realms of history and psychology – is more complex, I love the idea of meandering aimlessly through glass-roofed, marble-panelled corridors, all the time being suffused with literary inspiration. A city, a world in miniature!

Solomon leaves at eleven. My dad helps me to bed half an hour later. I fall asleep straight away and dream of the arcades.

Chapter 12

Our waking lives are realms which, at certain hidden points, lead down into the underworld – lands full of inconspicuous places from which dreams arise. During the day, suspecting nothing, we pass them by but no sooner has sleep come than we are eagerly groping our way back to lose ourselves in the dark corridors. By day, the labyrinth of urban dwellings resembles consciousness; the arcades - galleries leading into a city's past - issue unremarked onto the streets. At night, however, under the tenebrous mass of houses, a rich complexity of situation bursts forth.

Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project

One book that had a big effect on me as a child was *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The appealing idea that a mundane wardrobe could turn out to be somewhere of such untold wonder was one which I held close to me, it became the subject of both my waking and my sleeping dreams. These dreams would often involve getting into a lift and going down. At each subterranean level there was a different world – the contents and characteristics of the worlds would vary, but each one was more picturesque and luxuriant than the last. One thing that doesn't vary is the bottom level, that always consists of a bare room with pale green walls and a dark green carpet. It is filled with a bright light. Through the window there is more greenery, the verdant grass and bushes are dappled by flashes of floral colour. Beyond all this there is an ordinary street lined with cars – it looks a lot like my street, in fact, the room I am in looks a lot like a room in my house. Just as I come to the realisation that this level is my favourite level, I wake up. I'm sure that this part of the dream has a deeper meaning of its own. As with all my dreams, make of this one what you will.

We are standing out on a traffic island in the middle of Piccadilly. I say “standing” but I am sitting in my wheelchair. I'm not sure how old I am, I guess I'm about fifteen. Behind me are my parents. Hundreds of impatient cars weave their way around us – it is as if we are stranded on this island, amid an unrelenting ocean of headlights. It is 4:59 pm, the sky is pitch-black - it's the shortest day of the year, you

see. Around me though, everything is light – from the cars, to the lamp-posts, to the gaudy Christmas decorations and the festive effervescence of Christmas displays in shop windows. The reason why we are standing out here in the middle of the road at 4:59pm is because we are waiting for the clock outside Fortnum & Mason to strike the hour. The clock hangs in magisterial finery on the wall at the second floor of the shop, cyan blue in colour trimmed with gold-leaf. It was made by my Grandad. Behind me, my mum looks up at it now, with a look at once of nostalgia and expectation in her eyes.

'Look! It's starting...' whispers my mum, excitedly.

From the two doors, either side of the clock-face, come out miniature models of Mr Fortnum and Mr Mason dressed in eighteenth century regalia and holding a tray of tea and a candelabra. As they meet, they acknowledge each other with a nod and turn to us as if to ask us in.

'I remember those models when they were in your grandad's workshop, back in 1964...' My mum reminisces. I imagine my nine year old mother creeping down to her father's workshop, being confronted by the heady smell of oil and polish, discovering those two sober-faced men in their antiquated dalliance, and being struck both by their looks of severity and by the beauty and elegance of the clock.

A fine rain starts to fall – the kind of rain you think you can ignore until you realize your clothes are soaked through. We have already been to Fortnum & Mason – to buy mince pies, as we do every year – so we cross the road and walk back in the direction of our parked car. As we walk, the rain becomes heavier. We take refuge under a high stone archway, the Burlington Arcade. The rain seems to be setting in, for a while at least, so we wander in and do some window-shopping.

The first shop-window we come to is a nineteenth-century-style chemist's. Brown glass bottles are ranged along shelves on every wall, at the counter - in the middle of the shop – the till is the old-fashioned kind, more like a type-writer. In the window there is a variety of Victorian-esque medical instruments, incongruously arranged between rows of Christmas lights. My parents go in, but I stay outside, I am more intrigued by the shop next door. This shop has no name above it, its windows are filled with nothing but a bright white light. The door to the shop is open, I push myself over to it and look inside. The open door leads down a bridge-type corridor at the end of which, is the same white light. I proceed down the bridge with a certain trepidation and swiftly disappear.

I say I disappear but it's all very surreal, I can't really explain. My head is still there but all I can see is whiteness. I look down to where my legs should be and there is nothing. I try to bring my hand up to my face but I don't have one. All the time, though, I'm conscious of moving forward. After a few seconds, I break through the nothingness and emerge somewhere completely different.

I am now floating, it would seem, in the town square of an ancient and grandiose city. The town-hall and other public buildings seem almost to touch the clouds. Around them the sky looks a deep shade of blue – as if a pot of navy blue ink has been poured into a glass of water. The perimeter of the square is adorned with great stone columns. Fountains of clear water play incessantly in the square. The edges of the square are populated by brightly-lit bars and restaurants, from which come a mixture of muted guitar music and the suggestion of activity. Though in reality, in my current reality, there is nobody else around – the city seems to be alive but completely deserted of people – I am alone.

I turn my head and float serenely down a narrow alleyway between two tall buildings. The alleyway brings me out to a broad boulevard. On each side of the boulevard, rows of palm trees reach high up into the air. Further back, gardens are laden with exotic and colourful flowers, a gentle breeze carries a scent of cloves and cinnamon overlaid with a salty freshness that tells me the sea is nearby. Indeed, in the distance I hear the regular crashing of waves against the shore. I wonder where I am - I could be anywhere. Oddly enough, I don't feel surprised at my being so drastically transported into another world – it's almost as if I am aware that this is just a dream; at the same time, though, I am utterly lost in the moment. As I move forward, the road seems to be getting shorter – in no time at all I am looking down at the sand.

Looking up, to my right extends a headland on which a large building with stone columns, wide steps and ornate balconies stands floodlit among flowering trees and bushes. Before me, the starlight glitters on a calm, desert-like sea. I am suddenly taken by the urge to paddle, curious to see the effect it would have on my apparently absent feet. I cautiously approach the water and the moment I reach it I jump in. My feet are back! For an instant the water is shockingly hot – inexplicably so. Then everything disappears. For a few seconds I am stranded in a world of darkness. Slowly everything comes back into focus. I am sitting in the arcade again.

I now sit in front of a shop selling modern art. In the window are glazed marble sculptures standing – in abstract sexuality - on stone plinths. The rest of the shop is white and minimalist, in fact, they are the only decoration to be seen, but for a counter and till adorned in a purple silk sheet. My gaze is pulled from the strangely alluring sculptures to the shop next door. The shop looks familiar - empty and nameless with the door left invitingly open. Inside is the same darkness, the same

bridge leading to the same distant light. As before, I proceed with apprehension across the bridge towards the light. It's all instantaneous – there is no curtain-like intermission, no mysterious portal - I just reach the light, and in the blink of an eye I am somewhere new.

I am in a land of snow, there is snow as far as I can see, exuding brightness into the night sky. The sky is almost black, though the billions of stars lie on it like diamonds on velvet. The air is most probably bitingly cold – though I can't feel temperature – I no longer have a body. Without a sound I head on through the monochrome, featureless landscape at satisfying speed. The silence is immense.

Ahead of me on my distant right, a huge lake lies under a vast sheet of ice – a mirage? I set my sights on it, winging my way along, as if on a giant conveyor belt. In a few seconds I am there – it's not a mirage! The ice glimmers and shines in the starlight. Tentatively, I step on, in a manner of speaking. My feet reappear. The ice begins to crack. I panic and try to jump back to safety, but I'm paralysed by the inevitability of it all. The ice breaks. My foot falls through with a sharp blow followed by the same shocking heat. At this I wake up to find myself kicking the radiator to the side of my bed. With disappointment I turn over and fall asleep again.

Chapter 13

I am sitting in a park - I do not recognise the park, I sit by a bench on one of a network of pathways woven into a huge treeless field. It is kind of like Hampton Court Maze, only without the hedges.

It is a warm and sunny day, everything seems to be colourful and peaceful, without a care in the world – other than that there is a vicious dog chasing me. In my childhood, I had this dream plenty of times. I would run and run, and I would always wake up just as the dog might have caught me, it was always unclear as to whether he did. Now I am having the same dream, except I am in a wheelchair, one of those wheelchairs with the small wheels at the back. Needless to say, escape is impossible. I am watching the dog hurtling towards me, working his way through the maze, coming ever-closer. I am resenting and regretting my stupid idea ever to be in a wheelchair. I mean, what did I think would happen

There is a sharp knock at my bedroom door and I wake with a start. Chris pokes his head in, 'A alright?'

'Erm...mustn't complain... How are you?' I say, stretching languidly.

'I'm ok – much better, thanks.'

'I didn't hear you ring the doorbell...'

'No, I met your father on his way out – so, are we *dureevin'* today?' he asks.

'We are indeed,' I am touched that so many people have picked up on this silly idea of Gerald's and mine, 'we are meeting at 11 o'clock under Waterloo bridge.'

Chris moves further into the room, hooks his arm under my legs and gets ready to transfer me into my wheelchair. 'One, two, three – let's go!'

The bus slowly progresses past the Old Vic theatre, then stops at the lights. In his absence, Chris seems to have acquired a new mobile phone. He now sits staring intently at three phones arranged on his lap. As I am watching him, one of the phones rings – I think I have lost him to it, but as we pass under the railway bridge he duly stands up and comes over to me.

The bus stops at Waterloo station, the ramp extends, we alight and cross the road by the Imax theatre. It is a bright November morning, a morning where everything seems to be fresh and brilliant, like new contents in an open fridge. The buildings around me all look crisp and angular against a thin, watery sky. We walk down the slope which descends from the main road to the riverside and approach our agreed meeting place alongside the Festival Halls. As we turn the corner I immediately see Gerald standing under the bridge, perusing his way through several tables, second-hand books laid out on them. As we near him, he looks up to greet us:

'Christopher! How are you?' Sometimes Gerald's selective memory takes me by surprise.

'Aaright! Aaright!' they shake hands warmly, as though they are old friends. Suddenly I feel like a bit of a third party.

'And how are you, Nick? Can I get you both a drink?' says Gerald.

'Hi...Yes please, can I have a cappuccino?' I ask.

'I won't say no, I'll take a coke, but I'll go in and get them.' says Chris.

Gerald gives him some money, 'Can you get me another espresso while you're in there?'

Chris nods affably and ventures inside. Gerald takes me over to a free table just next to the books

'So, it has been a week since we last met, have you made much progress with your novel?'

'Not much, to be honest...I have been reading more recently.' There is a pause. Gerald is evidently waiting for me to elaborate. 'About the philosophy of time...Henri Bergson and co. I hoped to work it into my novel in some way.'

'Ah, time, a fascinating subject, most elusive.' Gerald enthuses.

'Precisely – too elusive! It seems to be utterly insoluble. It's ironic, isn't it, that often the things closest to us, or most innate, seem to be the most enigmatic. Time, consciousness, memory...' I list, struggling, trying to find more examples. 'Dream!' Chris brings back the coffees, Gerald thanks him with his eyes and then looks back at me. I can tell that he wants me to go on, I really wasn't ready for this. '... Erm, well, time, in a literal and objective sense is perfectly simple. Five seconds for a tree is five seconds... tick-tock, tick-tock, tick... That's time in immediate consciousness. It seems that we have it all wrong, though – humans have, anyway. Our perception of time is also governed by something called reflective consciousness. This kind of consciousness involves thought, language and logic – it cannot be quantified numerically or spatially. The human passage through time can only be seen as a multiplicity of varied, distinctive experiences. This kind of time is qualitative, not quantitative,' I conclude, earnest and straight-faced as I can.

'Fascinating, just fascinating... I'm afraid I don't follow.'

My cynical half smile breaks into a little giggle, 'No! I'm glad, I'm not sure I do either. I understand the bit about time and space, I think, and why it's a naïve way to imagine it... For instance, when I was about seven, my parents took me to Blenheim Palace.'

'A marvellous place! The finest example of English baroque architecture. And beautiful grounds, too...'

'Yeah, it was nice. So, before we left I went into the gift shop and my Dad bought me a ruler. The ruler had written on it the names and dates of all the English monarchs. I took it home and learnt the dates of all the reigns of the kings and queens, all the way from William the Conqueror to Elisabeth II in thirty centimetres. And -'

'I know exactly which rulers you're referring to! I have one myself. Very durable, made of wood! I often wonder what they will do when Prince Charles comes to the throne – make it thirty-one centimetres!'

I sometimes wonder whether Gerald is actually interested in what I have to say, or whether he is just looking for someone to talk to about anything. 'Hmn, anyway – my point is, well, I suppose that *is* kind of my point. As I said, I learnt all the reigns of the monarchs and to this day, whenever anyone mentions a date to me, I locate it on the ruler. Say 1790 – George IV – twenty-three centimetres. It's what we all do, on some level – imagine the past as a long line with events marked on it. And as the future happens, the ruler is just extended. Human history cannot just be boiled down into tick-tock...'

Gerald seems to be asleep. He is still sitting upright but his eyes have closed and his breathing is heavier. Suddenly he sparks into life, and stares almost accusingly at me, 'I must say, I am rather fond of tick-tock, tick-tock..' He rubs his eyes and with the other hand picks up the small espresso cup, downs it, and replaces it on the table in one fluid motion. 'Anyway, what was it you were saying about consciousness?'

'That's the bit I am struggling with. Though it's also the bit that most intrigues me. Reflective consciousness, in people, is apparently what slows time down. It kind

of makes sense; time flies when you're having fun, and drags when you're bored. Until reflective consciousness or confused multiplicity kicks in, time is experienced in pure duration, and duration is time without the constraints of quantity. It is different from the linear narrative development of past, present and \future. It involves a temporal synthesis of memory that knits the immediate and reflective dimensions together.'

I pause for a moment, slightly confused myself. Chris instinctively holds up my cappuccino for me to take a long ponderous sip. Behind me, Big Ben begins to strike the hour 'Yes! That's it, Big Ben!' It is Gerald's turn to be perturbed by me. 'You see', that is how time works! I hear Big Ben striking and for a split-second I am experiencing it in my immediate consciousness. Then I start to recognise the tune, and all kinds of memory associations and past experiences are triggered in my mind. For example, I always associate the Big Ben chimes with my grandfather – he used to wind that clock, you know. Anyway, as soon as this recognition and association takes place in my mind, time slows down for me and it's experienced as pure duration.'

I see, I think...so time doesn't literally slow down, rather our perception of it is deluded... as it were.' Gerald ventures

I nod. Gerald is visibly pleased with himself. Chris starts playing a game of snake on one of his phones.

'And how does all this relate to your novel?'

'You know my novel is about dreaming, right? Well – as I say, there are two types of consciousness - immediate and reflective, two notions of time - “time” and pure duration, which correspond to two types of experience, to two instances of the self. The act of dreaming binds these two states together. It both withdraws us from the world of reflective consciousness and, at the same time, gives us direct access to

it. Reflection becomes instantaneous, thought becomes symbolic, everything becomes immediate. We no longer measure duration, we feel it. Quantity returns to the state of quality. The idea of elapsed time no longer occurs to us. Dream opens us up to the influence of suggestion, everything happens effortlessly. I can't talk about it with any confidence – I don't think anyone can – but I find it enthralling.'

'...Yes...how did we start talking about this, again?' Gerald asks.

'You asked me what I was reading... I'm reading about time.' I reply, trying not to sound too patronising.

'...Indeed...' he says, distractedly, and looks down into his empty cup – as if to say, "Well, I won't be doing *that* again." but then he looks up at me in earnest and says 'I love this. I hope we'll talk about it again soon.'

Chris's snake dies. He reaches out for his coke and finishes it in one gulp, 'What say we do some dureevin?'

'A capital idea, my good man!' says Gerald as soon as Chris finishes the question, as if Gerald has been waiting to suggest it all morning. Chris takes the empty cups back inside and Gerald stands up to put his scarf on. I'm sure Paddington Bear has got a scarf like that too.

We leave the café and the tables of second-hand books behind and turn left into uncharted *dérive*-territory. As we leave the relative obscurity we were in under the bridge, a new light dawns on us and we amble along the Embankment towards the London Eye. As Big Ben comes into view my attention is caught by the doors to a lift on my left hand periphery. The lift ascends the side of the Jubilee footbridge, there must be another lift at the other end of the bridge. I have passed under this bridge at least one hundred times, but not once have I seen this lift.

'Shall we go up in that lift, over there?' I suggest, on the spur of the moment.

'Why not?' Gerald responds, evidently pleased with the spontaneity.

Gerald calls the lift and the doors open instantly, as if it has been waiting for us. There is a prolonged silence as we ascend, then we make our way across the bridge. We have time to reflect and take in our surroundings. About half way across the bridge, Gerald suddenly comes to a halt, 'I have a good feeling about today's derive, more spontaneous, more detached from the norm. I feel our last *dérive* was somewhat of a failure and that was largely my fault. The idea of going to an art gallery is so normal, so conventional. We got no appreciation of urban geography. Today will be different. A *dérive* should be about letting go, about letting emotion and insight come to you, rather than expressly finding a place for them.'

'Exactly... I suppose *dériving* is the closest thing you can get to a waking dream. Like I was saying about dreams a moment ago, you abandon the conventional, banish the habitual, letting your body be taken by it, in a spirit of randomness but with an ease of predestination.' The more I dress it up in words, the more the *dérive* seems like a worthwhile activity. Of course I'm deluding myself, but I like delusion, sometimes. I turn my chair to face the river and peer under the handrail into the distance, my eyes fixed on the proud figure of St Paul's, the 'erotic gherkin' queuing patiently behind it, an appreciation in heterogeneity.

Gerald leans against a handrail running along a wall, behind which runs a railway line down the centre of the bridge. He is wearing his brown duffel-coat and is clutching to his chest a leather satchel I had not noticed before. Chris stands opposite, with his back to us, both arms perched on the edge. He is looking out pensively at his surroundings.

'Those few pages of your novel that I read,' Gerald continues, 'they were set on this bridge, weren't they?'

'Yes, they were. I had no idea there was a lift, though. I have often wondered what it would be like up here – now I am...it's kind of disappointing...' I trail off. Gerald looks at me and nods slowly.

Abruptly, Gerald says, 'Well...*on y va*...as it were...'. Chris turns and, guessing at the meaning, we are on our way.

The end of the footbridge appears to lead into a tunnel. The fact that we don't know where exactly the tunnel will take us adds an unexpected excitement to our diversion. As we reach the north bank of the river and approach the tunnel I see through the grated floor of the bridge, a back street of central London that I have never been to. On this small street I can see a man cleaning the windows of a pub. Next door two men in suits are having an early lunch, sitting among overflowing hanging baskets at a table out on the pavement, a waiter wearing black and white comes out carrying two glasses of white wine on a tray.

The tunnel is not exactly a tunnel, more a corridor. In spite of the bright light outside it is lit by a florescent strip-light making the beige tiles on the wall seem more dingy than they are. On the wall, at the end of the corridor in red spray paint someone has written in copperplate graffiti, "I'd give my right arm to be ambidextrous". I smile to myself. Just as the succession of corridors and walkways threaten to become labyrinthine, we are brought out into an open market. The market stalls are decked out in sheets of frivolously coloured material – momentarily I feel lost, an alluring kind of lost, though. The market is small; we pass through it quickly to the small doorway at the other side. The doorway leads into Charing Cross station – of course it does! I feel a bit ashamed of myself for not having guessed, but at the same time I feel slightly proud of myself for having discovered something new about a city I had lived in all my life.

'So, where would you like to go?' asks Gerald. We are standing outside Charing Cross Station, the busy commuters bustling around us like ants.

'Trafalgar Square, I think,' I say. To me, Trafalgar Square has always been the centre of London, it is the connecting point to everything. The Strand leads to the city, Whitehall leads to Westminster, The Mall leads to Buckingham Palace and Haymarket leads to the commercial West End. We take none of these routes, though, instead crossing the road outside the station to cut down Duncannon Street. We come to a halt outside St Martin in the Fields.

'I say, do you think we would be making the same mistake as last time if we were to go into St Martin in the Fields? It's just that I have not been inside that church since I was a child.'

'Not at all. I don't think I have ever been inside.'

At the side of the building there is a ramp leading to two immense church doors. Chris presses the silver button with a picture of a wheelchair on it and the great doors slowly open automatically, a striking anachronism. We pass through a dark anteroom into a big, open, bright white hall, decorated with a ruby-red carpet, mahogany pews and filled with a sense of celestial hush. Golden chandeliers hang above the central aisle leading to an altar and a monochrome latticed glass window. Gold leaf ornately lines the intricate panelling on the ceiling. Whenever I see gold in a church, I recall a story told to me by a friend about the priest of his local Catholic church. For years he saved up to visit Rome and the Vatican. When he went, the ceaseless, resounding images of ornate decadence and gold-encrusted iconostases spoke to him of greed and pomposity. When he came back he renounced his faith.

'Wonderful, is it not...' Gerald says encouragingly, 'Adam Gibb...you know, this design of church was taken and used across America.'

'Yes, it's very nice...' I say, the simplistic brashness of it all suddenly making sense, 'but don't you think it's a bit decadent – unnecessarily so? I'm sorry, are you a Christian?'

'No, I am an atheist...' Gerald says a little too loudly, inviting a few pointed looks of disapproval. 'No, I'm afraid I take all that with a healthy dose of cynicism.' Gerald continues, seemingly oblivious to those around him. 'I like churches, though. I love architecture. I suppose that makes me a hypocrite.' I shake my head. 'And you are a non-believer, I take it?'

'Cynicism rules the day!' I whisper, smiling up at him. We wordlessly agree to leave and slowly make our way back to the door through which came in.

'We have a new lift installed – it takes you down to the crypt...' The caretaker addresses Gerald, looking at me. Going on a *dérive* is about opening yourself up to the power of suggestion - the idea is to let yourself be guided by your own whims and the invitations of others. Again, Gerald and I wordlessly agree to go to the crypt in a shared, almost conspiratorial look – we are getting the hang of *dériving*.

'Err - thank you very much..., indeed...' says Gerald, haltingly.

'Out the door and turn right – you can't miss it.' says the kind-faced man.

'Err - thank you very much...indeed...' says Gerald, haltingly.

The huge, old, automatic doors give back onto St Martin's place, where we call and wait for the lift. As we descend so too does a sudden shower of well-timed rain. The three of us share an awkward and faltering conversation about the weather - the kind of trivial interchange that being confined within a lift induces. It comes as a relief when the lift-doors open to the crypt. It is a huge place supported by ancient stone walls and hundreds of arched pillars dotted around the room, all lit by a golden-

white light which emanates from the floor. In the centre of the room is a café at which crowds of people sit, drinking tea and coffee.

'Amazing! I had no idea this was here! I love going down into the depths of London and discovering... novelty... curiosity... a subterranean city!' Gerald speaks effusively, not leaving an opportunity to reply, 'I say, would you like another drink, or should we brave the rain?'

'I'm feeling brave... besides, dérivin' in England – if we had a coffee every time it rained, we'd never get anywhere...' I say.

'Not to mention the caffeine overdoses!' Gerald adds, stepping back into the lift.

At ground level, the rain has disappeared as abruptly as it had arrived. Tiny puddles have collected in the gutters at the roadside, its only remnant, shimmer and gleam in the blinding brilliance of the afternoon sun. With intuitive decision we turn right and rejoin the hoards of tourists walking idly up Charing Cross Road. Gerald stops every now and then to stare wistfully at the bills outside the Garrick and the Adelphi theatres. After about two hundred yards, with a swing of my left arm I indicate an extempore urge to turn up Cranbourne Street and cross Leicester Square to Piccadilly Circus. Five minutes of sunshine seems to have transformed the Square into a laid-back holiday haven – surely they can't *all* be tourists...

'Oh dear – here comes the rain again!' says Gerald as we reach Piccadilly Circus. I mimic the *C'est la vie* gesture that Gerald is making with his shoulders. 'What do you want to do?' he asks.

I suddenly remember the dream I had last week about the Arcades. '... there is an Arcade in Regent Street, isn't there?'

'Arr yes... the Quadrant Arcade. Yes, that will make a very good refuge!' We make our way through a crowd of Japanese tourists all looking at the sky with a universal look of puzzlement.

The Quadrant Arcade is located fifty yards from Piccadilly Circus - a uniformly opulent but inconspicuous Regent Street portal that opens up to another *indoor* street. As we enter through a cavernous stone archway, the rain suddenly becomes a downpour. Inside, the arcade is made to seem even more lavish and palatial by the conditions outside. The walls and high ceiling are painted in a shade of white, the floor is marbled, and on the balconies overlooking the shops – mostly an assortment of tailors, jewellers and hairdressers - are black iron grilles.

'As an Arcade should be, is it not?' Says Gerald, pre-empting my thoughts as he so often does. Sometimes I wonder with real concern whether he has access to my mind. 'It looks as though the rain is setting in – what say you to a spot of lunch?' Gerald suggests, pointing in the direction of some tables laid out before an empty restaurant – as if it were waiting for us.

I instinctively consult my watch, supposedly hoping it will tell me whether or not I am hungry.

'We have no need for watches! We are *dériving* – notions of time and convention go out of the window! We must do what and go where we feel is right!' I hang my head and muster a guilty smile of agreement; we find a table to sit at.

'I must say, I think the *dérive* is going awfully well today. I am fascinated by the element of chance involved in it,' Gerald says as the waiter hands out the menus.

'How do you mean?' Chris asks in his low, gravelly voice.

'Well... for instance... half an hour ago, when we followed the suggestion of that man and went to see the crypt – nothing happened – we went down and

immediately decided to come back up. What if, by following that suggestion, we had unequivocally changed the predestined course of events? – For example, if we had stayed overground we might have decided on a different route - who knows what might have happened then. We might have lived the rest of our lives in blissful happiness. We might, however, have lived for only a few seconds... you see, it's all down to chance,' Gerald says.

'But surely that's true of life in general – it's just a long chain of chances and choices. Chance after choice after chance after choice...' Chris responds, trailing off in song.

'That is very true, Christopher! *Dériving* is like living, but with the element of choice played down. By opening up to suggestion, by surrendering to whim, the governing force behind life becomes nothing *but* chance. I love the idea of parallel universes – that for every decision made or eventuality played out, a new universe is created in which another decision or eventuality happens.'

'...But I suppose in this universe, everything works out for the best...' I join the conversation.

'Indeed, my dear Pangloss! Indeed...' says Gerald, at first smiling, but then, with a deferential look towards my wheelchair, falling into silence. I hadn't intended the comment to be snide.

'I was thinking, all this rain – it's a good thing, in a way – I mean, the weather adding a new dimension to all the chance,' I say, enthusiastically, trying to lighten the mood that had suddenly descended on our table. I look up to see the waiter standing over me, pad and pencil at the ready. I haven't even looked at the menu yet. Gerald and Chris both order, so without taking in what I am ordering I point to a random dish. I should do that more often, I like the anticipation of what I will get.

'Quite... according to several essays about the *dérive*, chance is of much less importance than one might think. Though I don't put much stock in what is written about it. As far as I can see it is a subjective philosophy and I'm a lot happier with my own interpretation of it. Besides, I don't think that the people who conceived the idea were entirely sure what they were talking about. Did you read about the press conference they gave in London?' Gerald continues without waiting for a response, 'A journalist asked them what their group stood for and what the *dérive* was about, they got up and stormed out – apparently on the pretext that they were insulted by such an uninformed and mundane question. Though I think it was because they didn't know the answer...'

Chris and I laugh, Gerald looks bemused. 'That's what I like about you, you don't realise how funny you are – you're a comedian.' Says Chris.

'Close, a Civil Servant... well, a retired Civil Servant... really rather dull.'

'Oh yeah, sorry. I have known you for six weeks and never asked you what you do...' I say, guiltily.

'That's quite all right. In social circles, I find there is a tendency to define people by “what they do”. I don't want to be known as a Civil Servant by anyone – I was quite happy to be known by you as “just another person”.'

'Oh, I'm sorry I asked,' I say, again guiltily.

'That's quite all right, you didn't.' There is a moment's silence while Chris and I wait for Gerald to elaborate on his job, but he doesn't. 'I studied Philosophy at Oxford and was going to stay on as an academic, like my father, but at the last moment I had a change of heart. I was an aspiring poet, you see. I never found a publisher...'

'I'd like to read some,' I say.

'I'm afraid I burnt it all... I became quite depressed for a couple of years... wasn't myself.' The sombre mood is threatening to descend over our table once again.

'... Still waters run deep,' I say, as Chris lifts a glass of water to my lips. It's a lesson I am constantly learning. James and Lucy probably have no idea about the poetry or about the depression - when they see Gerald they just see an amusingly odd, perhaps prematurely senile, middle-aged man.

'Do you still write?' I venture, after a short silence.

'No... though I consider it every day. I am happy just to live my life, not write it... leave the writing to those who can.' Gerald gestures towards me, and I turn my head away in embarrassment.

'Surely you can do both...' I say.

'You would think so, but no... I think that is why I am so intrigued by this *dérive*-idea of yours... more immediacy... reality is richer than words...' I am looking at him, puzzled. 'Language simplifies and reduces experience; it does away with mobility of impressions, nuance and complexity. There should still be writing, of course - just not from me!' Gerald finishes with a good-natured chuckle.

'Hmn... I'm not sure I agree' I say, but I can see that Gerald seems uncomfortable talking about this, so I don't say any more.

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Lunch was very enjoyable, all the more so because of its improvised selection. I chose it all at random, down to dessert and coffee. King prawns fried in ginger with a sweet chilli sauce, followed by a pear and almond tart, then an Irish coffee. Gerald and Chris are now engaged in animated conversation, about what I don't know – I

have retreated into my own mind. I am thinking over what Gerald said about language. I have never seen language as being a limitation imposed on experience, but rather as a means to prolong it. For me, the experience-inspiration-writing process is like the indelible marking of an instant in time. Once it has been committed to paper, a moment not only gains resonance, but also becomes eternal - saved for posterity...

'You ready? Shall we go?' Chris says into my ear. I look up in surprise, my train of thought coming to an abrupt halt.

'Erm... let's get the bill.'

'Gerald already paid it...' Chris replies, smiling 'You were in a world of your own!'

'Oh – sorry... I'll pay you back...' I say to Gerald, feeling slightly piqued at the idea of him being more “on the ball” than me.

'No – don't mention it. You can buy our next meal.'

'I will.'

We leave the arcade, rejoining the bustling city bathing in the mid-afternoon sun. 'So, where to, boss?' Chris asks me.

'Anywhere, I really don't mind. You choose.' After a moment's hesitation, Gerald leads the way across Regent Street. We turn and walk down Air Street. The sun is low, about to set. In the distance, through squinted eyes I make out the street-sign - “Piccadilly” - the promise of more arcades... On reaching Piccadilly we cross and turn right. There is an open market on the street outside St James' church. Instinctively, we veer towards it and become immersed in the small crowds gathered around the stalls. I decide I like the girl behind the herbal tea stall, so I buy some herbal tea.

'Ahm... would you like to go into the church? It is just that I have not been in there since I was a child – I'm feeling rather nostalgic! It would develop the ecclesiastical theme of this *dérive*, too.'

'Yes, I'd like to... are you sure you're not a Christian, though?' I ask, in a mock-accusatory tone.

'Quite sure!' Gerald replies, picking up on the joke, 'I am not trying to convert you... cross my heart... as it were!' The church door opens to a small anteroom. Glass doors separate us from the main church, where a large congregation sit listening to a pianist. The three of us stare through the doors for a moment, straining to hear the piano.

'Would you like to go in?' whispers a voice from behind us. A woman I had not noticed when we came in is sitting behind a desk, on which is a donation box.

'Ahm, yes please!' Gerald says fishing some loose change from his pocket and dropping it into the box. The lady gets up to hold the door open for Chris to push me through, Gerald follows, 'Much obliged!' he says in a voice far too loud for the circumstance. We are greeted at the piano recital by a number of pointed frowns. Today Gerald has been more or less normal – but every now and then he shows a complete lack of awareness of other people, reminding me of James' and Lucy's warnings about him. I smile sweetly at the frowns, though the sight of my wheelchair seems to instantly placate them. We take a seat at the back.

The pianist is a Japanese girl of about my age. She is playing pieces by Claude Debussy – I haven't heard them before, but I love them. The church, in contrast to the first, is not decorated in gold, but is no less elaborate. Intricately carved wooden panels reach from the walls to the softly-lit ochre-coloured ceiling. The small windows directly below the ceiling give glimpses onto the encroaching darkness

outside. Yet another deluge of rain begins to thunder against the roof of the church, the tempo and volume of the piano responds in kind. I look across at Gerald, he is awake but his eyes are closed. I close mine too.

We stay at the recital until the end, about an hour or so. After rousing applause, people slowly made their way towards the door. 'You see – chance! Follow your instincts and it is amazing what it can do for you.' Gerald exclaims, walking through the open doors.

'Hmn... so do you think the fact that we didn't know about the concert made it more enjoyable?' I say

'Quite possibly... I suppose what I am saying is that life naturally seeks order and convention. Today we have given entirely to chance, to caprice – yet we had lunch in a Regent Street arcade, and then went to a wonderful concert at St. James, Piccadilly – as if it were planned.' I can tell that unless I interject, Gerald will go on postulating his ideas about life ... 'I believe it was Voltaire who said ...'

'... Same time next Friday?' I say, cutting Gerald short.

'Ah... yes... Indeed!' We leave the church, entering the dying light of the day, 'Well, I must say, I think today has been a real success!'

'I agree, thank you,' I say.

'For what?'

'I'm not entirely sure, but I do know that I'm grateful ... 'For lunch.'

'My pleasure... well, *à bientôt* – as it were...'

'See ya, mate!' Chris says. He pushes me to the end of the street where we turn to cross. I look back, Gerald still stands there in his grey raincoat, hoping to hail a taxi – against the lights from shop-windows and passing cars he looks frail, almost decrepit – my new best friend.

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Chris leaves early tonight and my dad helps me to bed. Once I am in bed and alone, I go over the events of the day in my mind. I have no idea why or to whom, but I say a prayer before I go to sleep.

Chapter 14

*The way that can be told of is hardly an eternal, absolute, unvarying one...
God has made different religions to suit different aspirations, times and countries...one can reach God
if one follows any of the paths with wholehearted devotion*

Dao De Ching / Ramakrishna

Ever been to a Christening? They're quite sinister. I mean, parents bringing their child – who hasn't even learnt how to speak, let alone form a measured opinion – to initiate them into what is essentially a cult. The congregation look on as the parents make a solemn vow that this child – as a sinner – will live in fear of an omniscient God and learn to cherish his infinite love. God, who gave his only son for our salvation, which was unfortunately sacrificed due to humanity's sheer evilness – of which this child is an inherent part – when we killed him. I do not know the child being christened, this is just a run-of-the-mill church service to which a family has bought their son to be into a new system; of belief. Throughout the service he hasn't appeared very happy, at the moment the vicar paints a cross on his head with holy water he lets out a deafening scream.

But what is a non-believer doing at church? My family are Christian and when my dad asks me if I would like to come along, I often say yes out of intrigue. I always go with an open mind, but what I see and hear nearly always ends up feeding my atheism.

The date is the 2nd January 2005. I am at home from university for the Christmas holidays and am at church for the third time in two weeks. A week

ago the Indian Ocean Tsunami struck, destroying the coastlines of Thailand, Indonesia and other neighbouring countries. The huge death toll is still rising. During the week a priest was speaking on the news about the story of a boat carrying missionary nuns to Sri Lanka being miraculously untouched by the wave. He said that it was events like these which prove the existence of a loving God. Evidently the three hundred thousand people killed were not Christian enough. It is senseless events and disgusting comments like these which discourage me from believing in a caring and all-forgiving “superior” being.

The boy is named Nicholas. I don't register at first, but as I look around the church at the clothes and hair of the congregation, I have the distinct impression that – while I may be from 2005 – everyone else is from 1984. I am watching my own Christening! I look closer. The boy's parents are my parents in 1984! For a moment I am overcome with indignation at having this ceremony unwittingly enforced upon me, but I am dreaming, I cannot and do not do anything about it. What's wrong with a Christening anyway? It will give me an identity, a sense of belonging. Even if, in the future, I decide that I no longer want to belong.

The congregation rise and the organ plays them in. *'Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son.'* As a child this hymn was one of my favourites. I listen to the words now, as if for the first time – glory, conquering, victory – it's all very militant, bellicose. As a child it never occurred to me. On they sing, *'Lo! Jesus meets us, risen from the tomb; lovingly he greets us, scatters fear and*

gloom...' Most Christians may be eagerly awaiting the Second Coming, but either He has already come and we ignored Him, or we are doomed to ignore Him when He

does come. Because whenever anyone claims to be Jesus, they are dismissed out of hand for being both insane and blasphemous. Apologies in retrospect or advance God, but as we tell you every Sunday, us humans, we're complete bastards.

To take an anthropological stance, religions are just expressions of human culture. Mostly they are “clubs” whose founders have invented supernatural beings and whole new dimensions because they cannot stand living in a world where there is nothing more, no deeper meaning, where no one is watching over them. Once established, if the beliefs held by one club are in conflict with those of another, then violence, injustice and death ensue. This is all carried out under the byword of piety and righteousness.

Ok, yes, I concede – maybe I am just jealous - of the certainty of some people's belief and of the security and companionship it affords them. I get the impression, though, that unless you are willing to sacrifice all sense of reason in favour of blind faith, there is no point in believing anything. You see, I do denote an importance to religion – if there is an omniscient creator out there It will know whether I believe in It or not. I have even cultivated a standardised “insurance” prayer that I say every now and then, along the lines of; “Dear God, if you do exist, I am very sorry for having doubted you. Also, I would really quite like to go to Heaven when I die. Amen.”

I think I have a problem with spirituality and belief in general. With Christianity, I could consciously choose to be a Christian and say I believe in an all-knowing God, but surely that all-knowing God would know of my deep-seated lack

of belief, rendering my faith empty. I also want to believe in the power of positive thinking, to help me overcome my medical condition. I have heard of cancer sufferers who got rid of their cancer simply by believing they could heal themselves. I could try the same with my disability, but behind all the positivity, there will always be a voice of negativity, saying “This is rubbish, it will make no difference”. I want to believe, I really do, but I can't.

I have daydreamed my way through the sermon, the communion – in which I do not partake - and the prayers. As I come to my senses, the vicar is singing the words of the Dismissal. “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord...” I listen carefully to the words, ready to pounce on any infeasibility or hypocrisy. I can't argue with any of it – it's actually quite uplifting. Religions are generally full of good intentions. I slightly resent the way they seem to have monopolised concepts like forgiveness, pacifism and altruism. What's wrong with living your life according to those words, while rejecting the mythologies and fairy-tales that go with it. What's wrong with taking responsibility for yourself, for being answerable to the world rather than to a Spirit who apparently lives in the sky?

Pluralism seems to be the answer – each to their own – celebrate the difference. When asked about religion, Gandhi said there was no one path to truth. Whatever people believe in becomes true to them by virtue of faith... I

am once again awoken - and this time properly – by the opening notes of an organ, concluding the service... I gradually, blinkingly open my eyes, I turn over and quickly fall back to sleep.

Chapter 15

It is a warm and tranquil evening in London, maybe it is summer, maybe it is about 10pm. I am looking down over the city, I am almost at the top now. The city is strange tonight – I can still see the hectic ant-like trail of cars in the streets below me and I can still see the thousands of blinking lights in buildings and streets around me, but I cannot see any people, I am seemingly alone. I assume there is the regular hum of activity as well, but everything is silent as I sit alone in my glass capsule in the London Eye.

There is a low-flying plane coming towards me. With no way out of the capsule and no control of the wheel, I can only sit and watch my imminent death. Everything around me slows down. This is the moment for profound reflection on my life... Shit, I really should have gone on the London Eye with Gerald...

My eyes open on another Friday morning. Extricating my arms from under the covers, I look at my watch - two minutes to nine. While I am looking at my watch I hear Chris's footsteps on the garden path then a ring on the front-doorbell. Everything is perfectly synchronised this morning. I have come to look on Fridays with a great fondness – a day of staid frivolity before the weekend. Weekdays leading up to Friday are filled by endless walks around Dulwich, broken up by endless cups of coffee. I wonder if Gerald whiles away the week with the same fretful expectation, waiting for Friday. I've a feeling he does. Downstairs I hear my mum opening the

front door, followed momentarily by the sound of feet ascending the stairs. A knock on my bedroom door, a brief pause, a head appears from around the door.

'St James, Piccadilly?'

'Mmn-Hmn' I reply.

'Aaright! Aaright!'

*

After what seems like an interminable bus journey we get to Piccadilly fifteen minutes late. Chris spots Gerald sitting in the window of a café next to the church, reading a copy of *Heat* magazine. We join him.

'Well, hello there! And how are you both today?' Gerald says, looking up as we enter.

'Can't complain, can't complain,' Chris replies.

'Yeah, good thanks! You don't strike me as the kind of person who reads *Heat* magazine...'

'No, no. It was on the table when I sat down. I see Jordan and Peter André have split up, how sad...'

'Yes – although it was about eighteen months ago, so I'm over the worst of it now.'

'Eighteen months ago? How odd... completely passed me by.'

'Very odd...' Chris exclaims, still unaccustomed to Gerald's idiosyncrasies.

A round of coffees later we are ready to begin today's *dérive*. We leave the café and turn left down Piccadilly. Almost immediately we turn left again and walk through Princes Arcade. Princes Arcade is a straightforward rectangular corridor connecting Piccadilly to Jermyn Street. The ceiling, the floor and all the shops are identical – black framework and creamy white panelling. I once read that the idea for these arcades' construction was conceived through a need to prevent passers-by throwing rubbish into neighbouring gardens and courtyards. There was once a fishmonger on Piccadilly, from which people would buy oysters and discard the empty shells over nearby walls. The solution was to build streets with roofs on them down these connecting alleyways. Necessity may be the mother of invention, but practicality is certainly the mother of convention.

For the first time ever, I manage to reach the end of Jermyn Street without visiting the cheese shop. We turn onto St. James' Street and amble along it, stopping every now and then to stare at the ridiculous prices of shoes in the windows of various cobblers. By now at a junction at the end of St. James' Street, we continue down Marlborough Road until we come out onto The Mall. Union Jacks line the promenade – the remnants of a royal celebration. That flag always makes me slightly nervous – a memento from a violent and jingoistic past. We cross the road, ignoring all the pageantry, into St James' Park and make straight for the bridge crossing the stream that flows through the park to Buckingham Palace.

On the bridge we join fifteen or so tourists, all looking over the water, between the trees at the palace. Not me though, I am looking at a stray used firework that is lying among the rushes at the riverbank. That so often happens to me – when

everyone is concentrating on one focal point, my attention is hijacked by the smallest and most inconsequential of anomalies. They lead me down completely different tangents of thought, away from what I'm sure everybody else is thinking. When I wake up to myself, it takes me a minute to reacclimatise myself to the situation.

'Shall we move on now?' Gerald breaks a reverent silence.

'Erm...right,' I reply, unsure for a moment of where I am.

We follow a footpath down through the park, westward from the receding palace. At the end of the path is a gate which leads on to a main road, Birdcage Walk. We walk through the gate and turn left. The distant sound of Big Ben strikes half of its repertoire to tell us it is one-thirty.

'Lunchtime! What do you say?' Gerald asks.

'How about that place, over there?' I say, pointing across the road at a restaurant with a green awning hanging over it, obscuring the name. Gerald nods and we cross over towards it.

Inside, the restaurant is bright and quite empty. As we enter, we are greeted by a matronly-looking waitress in her fifties.

'Good afternoon, gentlemen,' she says to Gerald and Chris. Then, stooping over me with her hands clasped between her knees, 'hello, *you!*' She says slowly and phonetically.

'... Afternoon,' I reply, demurely.

'A table for three, please,' Gerald says, with rare authority in his voice. She casts a careful gaze over the empty tables and chairs, searching for space to put us. In the end she suggests the table right next to us. We all sit at the table and the waitress

gives Chris and Gerald a menu. I share Chris's with him. It is a contemporary European-type menu, and with it I practice my new trick of choosing without looking.

'So,' Gerald says, looking at menu 'apart from the waitress, a good choice!'

'I think it was the green awning that drew my attention.' I say.

'Really? Curious – I would have said the awning was blue.'

'Hmn... maybe... do you ever have that thought?' I continue, addressing everyone and no one. 'Well, I suppose it's more of a concern, that what you see is not always what everyone else sees.' My audience looks confused. 'I mean, take for example the sky. I say it is blue, and so does everybody else. But what if the blue that everybody else sees is what I think of as orange? My eyes could work in a different way altogether, and I might have assigned the wrong names to things. What if everything I perceive is completely skewed? Maybe my idea of the way everything *is* is utterly wrong... there's no way of knowing... '

Gerald stares into the middle-distance for a moment, making me wonder if he has been listening at all, 'Yes,' he says eventually, 'I believe I do... but why should you be wrong? Just because your perception is unique doesn't make it wrong... All we can know of the external world is representation - the image we give to it is in accordance with the structure of our minds. Surely mental diversity is something to celebrate... variety being the spice of life, and so forth...'

A waiter comes to collect our order. Chris then joins the conversation. 'This diverse-perception business, I suppose it helps when you're writin'...'

'Quite!' Gerald replies 'When I wrote poetry, it was something I thought about a great deal. A friend of mine once likened the practice of creative writing to waves

on a beach as they repeatedly meet the shore. In order to write about anything, a repeated acquaintance with it and distancing from it is required. What is represented to and conceived by each writer will be different. Also, repeated acquaintance with the subject will produce a multiplicity of subtly different results – the action of acquaintance may be repeated but what is perceived will always change... how about you, Nick – do you ever think in those terms?

'I haven't, but I will now... always... '

*

A spontaneously selected lunch proves once again to be a success - chicken linguine in a creamy white wine sauce followed by mango and passion fruit cheesecake and an espresso. My waitress-friend brings us the bill.

'Remember, I am paying for this,' I say.

'Very well then, thank you!'

Chris takes my card from my wallet and I whisper my PIN number into his ear. 'Thanks, Nick!' he says, punching in the code.

'Yes, thank you, sir...' the waitress continues, but to Chris '...in fact, this transaction qualifies you for our loyalty card. Every time you buy two meals, you get a third one free. Would you like one, sir?'

'I don't know...' says Chris, hastily dodging the line of questioning 'Nick, would you like a loyalty card?'

'Oh, I don't think *he'll* be wanting a loyalty card, *bless 'im!*" the waitress interjects.

There is a fine line between indignation and amusement. In these situations I often fall on the side of amusement. Chris is speechless. I give her my most angelic smile. She returns the smile to Chris, an *isn't he just adorable?* smile.

'Erm, no thanks.' I say. We promptly leave.

We walk back along Birdcage walk into Parliament Square. Like the tourists we are today, we are drawn towards Big Ben. It is nine minutes to three. Too impatient to wait for it to strike, we walk slowly past the Houses of Parliament.

'How do you do it, Nick? Remain so calm, I mean... when people talk to you – or about you - in that way?' Gerald asks.

'Oh, the waitress – hm. It's all right... I mean, not understandable, but forgivable. People are so concerned with speaking in the right tone to me, they sometimes get it entirely wrong. After all I *am* a bit of an oddity... whether I like to admit it or not.' We reach the end of the House of Lords and turn into the gardens lining the riverbank. In front of Rodin's statue, *Les Bourgeois de Calais*, Chris and Gerald sit on the grass...

'... I rather think if I were in your situation I would not be so tolerant.'

'Still waters run deep... I say it again and again, I know... it's becoming my mantra... maybe it should be the title of my novel... if it is ever finished. My point is that no one has the slightest clue as to what goes on in my head... I don't expect them to... nor do I want them to.'

'You *are* somewhat of a closed book...'

'Mmmn... Perhaps that's why I'm writing one. I've come to the reluctant conclusion that I should open it... give people the slightest clue... before it's too late.'

The three of us remain on the grass in the shadows of the towers of The Palace of Westminster. The sun peeks through the dark cloud-cover to cast our surroundings in a golden, late-autumnal light. Other than the steady hum of traffic to my left, quietness descends. Chris and Gerald are most probably waiting for me to explain myself, but I won't.

Next to us, two young people wearing suits sit down on a park bench, smoking. They must be no more than twenty-one or twenty-two – they look uneasy, engulfed by their ill-fitting suits. They are deep in conversation. '...I don't know,' one of them is saying 'maybe Germany, Spain, or maybe further afield. One thing's for sure, I've got to get out of this country – it's a shit-hole!' His friend nods in agreement. He lists, 'The weather is awful, always raining, I hate the government, the public services are crap; the NHS...'

'Don't talk to me about the NHS,' his friend interrupts, 'it's a fucking shambles! But more than the disastrous health system and the ridiculous levels of tax, I can't stand all the hypocrisy in the government. I hate hypocrisy. Not to mention all these fucking immigrants...'

'I hate hypocrisy too,' the first one affirms. They look up and – seeing that they have an audience – walk over to the wall to finish their cigarettes and conversation.

'So – what is it that you most hate about this country?' Gerald asks me.

I consider the question for a moment. 'I'd have to say, self-righteous little cretins like those two.' I gesture towards the boys standing at the river. Gerald grins, Chris exhales and slowly nods. 'I'm serious!' I protest. 'At the risk of sounding prematurely old – people like that don't know they're born... they don't appreciate how fortunate they are. Fair enough, it rains... that is why the country is so green... at least there is no drought, no earthquakes, flooding is minimal. It's all very fashionable to slander the NHS – and yes, like any institution, it has its faults. But this welfare state is the most benevolent I know of. Did I tell you I studied in Spain for a year?' I pause to catch my breath, 'My Spanish carers couldn't believe my care was being funded by my local council in London. In the vast majority of countries, to be disabled is to rely on family or charity. Who helps me? The British taxpayer. It's something I am grateful for and humbled by. But I can't conceive of any other system... a society in which everyone pitches in – to help each other when they are in need... it makes sense to me. And as for hypocrisy, that is a human condition. It exists everywhere. So, he hates hypocrisy, he hates immigrants and he wants to emigrate... oh dear!' I hadn't meant to go on a rant like that, it just happened. The two boys throw their cigarette butts into the river and walk off.

'Are you patriotic, then?' Chris breaks the long silence.

'Not in the traditional sense... not for any of the history... oppression... war. I am proud that my country is seen by others as being a safe-haven of affluence, political freedom and freedom of speech. I am proud we are in a position to help others with aid or refuge. When our freedoms are lacking, of course I support criticism of the government, but I can't stand this utter disdain for it.' The silence

continues 'Anyway, enough about politics and nationalism... it's turned into a nice afternoon, hasn't it?'

'Glorious... glorious,' Gerald says, opening his eyes, coming out of a Zen-like trance. 'Do you know? I've never been in these gardens before. Nearly forty years in London - and not once! A perfect day for a riverside *dérive*. You know, I was thinking about the word “*dérive*” this morning. You told me that “*dériver*” meant “to drift”, but what hadn't occurred to me was that “*rive*” is French for “riverbank”. So to “*dé-rive*” is literally to “de-bank”, “to float away”... very aquatic – as it were...'

'Of course...' I assent, in wonder. I love it when the linguistic penny drops like that, and a whole new avenue of meaning opens up before your eyes. We walk over to the wall at the riverside. I cannot see over it but I can look up at the pinkish sky.

'The glory of sunlight upon the purple river

The glory of the city against the setting sun,

Kindled in our hearts a troubling desire

To plunge into a sky of alluring colour,' Gerald recites.

'...Lovely. One of yours?' I ask.

'... No - I wish...Charles Baudelaire – a translation. I felt it rather apt.'

'Definitely!' We walk on in peaceable wordlessness, along Millbank and past Lambeth Bridge. We approach Vauxhall Bridge.

'Right! This is my bus-stop – same time next week?'

'With bells on – as it were...'

The bus arrives momentarily and Chris pushes me on. I can still see Gerald waving through the window as the bus speeds away over the bridge.

The evening is spent reading. It turns out they are all related – Henry Bergson, time, Walter Benjamin, the arcades project; Charles Baudelaire, the city. Every now and then I look over the top of the book I am reading and catch a glimpse of Chris, sitting unoccupied in an armchair. I often feel slightly guilty about having a carer and not using him – he looks bored. The highlight of his evening comes when he helps me to bed at eleven.

'Thanks, Chris.'

'Night, mate.'

After an hour or so, I fall asleep.

Chapter 16

*Ever let the Fancy roam,
Pleasure never is at home:
Let the winged Fancy wander
Through the thought still spread beyond her:
Open wide the mind's cage-door,
She'll dart forth, and cloudward soar.*

John Keats, Fancy

In my mind there are worlds in which anything can be true, where creativity unequivocally transcends reality. The greatest of all these truths comes with the understanding that the transcendent world is part of our own world. Why do we let our minds be blunted by the mundane aspects of life when we have the capacity at our fingertips to take flight from it and imagine a richer reality. This may all sound a bit idealistic and a bit airy-fairy – forgive me. Blame it on my fanciful and over-active seven-year-old head...

Focus... focus... I methodically adjust my stance at the crease and gently tap my toes three times with the end of my bat in preparation – more in superstition than anything else. I raise my eyes and stare ahead fixedly. He's in, he bowls – it all happens too quickly. Luckily, I peremptorily swing my bat behind me, and now I bring it down to meet the speeding ball. I hit it clean and true, the resounding smack fills my ears with pleasure. The ball hurtles its way through the air on its way to the fence – six! At the last moment my mum comes running out the back door and plucks the ball from the air.

'Careful! You nearly broke Nana's kitchen window! What do you reckon... pretty impressive, eh?'

'Very, well done,' says the bowler, my dad, deftly redirecting my praise to her.

'These heels weren't made for running in, either,' my mum says casually, examining her feet.

'Ha ha,' my brother laughs, pointing at me, 'you're out – it's my turn to bat now.' I look around the garden, searching in vain for some kind of excuse. Finding none, I hang my head, more in resentment than shame.

'Later - it's tea time now,' says my mum. 'Nick, Nana has bought some Jaffa Cakes just for you, are you coming?'

'I'll be in in a minute,' I scowl, swinging my bat as if to practise my stroke-play. But I'm not really upset, just mildly peeved. As I say, I can switch from one world to another in the blink of an eye, thanks to the caprices of my youth. And I always have the familiar 'real' world to fall back on. One blessed by the safety and security of routine. It is Sunday, therefore we are at Nana's house. The journey out through the grey suburbs of south London, down roads where whispering tree branches meet overhead – into the comparative countryside, a new world. You see, a simple trip to visit my grandmother in Surrey can be the source of the most elaborate escapism in my head...

I drop the cricket bat and slump down under a nearby apple tree. I am lying on my back looking up through a network of branches and leaves, beyond which is a bright blue Summer sky dappled occasionally with wispy white clouds. The hum of a nearby bi-plane circling and twisting through the air provides the backdrop for a restless wood-pigeon cooing in the trees beside me. The garden is enclosed by tall trees, hedged thick and evergreen.

I am about to get up and go inside to have some tea when my little sister creeps up behind me and wordlessly drops a tiny green frog on the face of the cricket bat lying before my eyes. She turns and without comment and proceeds into the house. The frog is about one centimetre in length but perfectly proportioned, his minute eyes look up at me as I hold out a finger to stroke his back, but he jumps away.

Tea is a hurried affair. My Sister and I do not openly talk about our discovery, but we smile at each other and casually drop the names of various amphibians into the conversation. I remember that kind of thing being hilarious to us back then. After tea, we venture back out, accompanied by the theme tune to the Antiques Roadshow. My sister leads me to the end of the garden through a gated fence, where a huge compost heap lies. Just below the surface of the heap there are thousands of miniature frogs.

We spend an hour or so at the bottom of the garden, feverishly collecting frogs. We collect about twenty and put them all in a big jam jar with grass and water in it. It is 6:30 when we are told to get into the car. We are leaving, going to see a concert in Crystal Palace Park.

I don't remember much of the car journey. It all gets a little hazy at this point. I'm sure I spent it keeping a watchful eye over my new captives, though. The next clear vision I have is of sitting on a rug in Crystal Palace Park listening to an orchestra playing the music from the Hovis advert, or as I have since found out, The New World Symphony by Antonin Dvorák. The audience is all sitting or lying on a big grassy bank, at the bottom of which is a

circular pond - the orchestra sits on the other side of it. Down at my feet, the frogs seem to be ailing in their jam jar. At the interval my mum persuades me to set the frogs free. With heavy hearts my sister and I trail down to the pond, the jar held tight under my arm.

Emancipation is a joyous occasion. Nineteen frogs lustily leap from the jar down to the edge of the pond. The remaining frog, too weak to jump, is carried down to the water on the outstretched palm of my sister, as if he is some kind of prize. When they are all successfully relocated, we both remain next to the pond for the rest of the concert. As the night reaches its grand finale the fireworks begin.

The fizz and hiss of the Roman candles which line the far edge of the pond, the scream of the rockets with their golden white tails shooting high above my head and bursting in a profusion of colours all make me worried for the safety of our former prisoners. They do not seem to mind – they are jumping and pirouetting in the shallow water, in formation, in time to the Fireworks Overture by Handel. So many noises! So many bright lights! I close my eyes to take partial refuge from this intoxicating sensory excitement. I'm starting to feel a bit strange myself. I close my eyes, but as well as hearing the crackles and explosions of the fireworks I can also see them from behind my closed eyelids. The glow emanating from the orchestra pit, the brilliant splashes of colour reflected on the surface of the pond, the dancing frogs, they are all there.

Have you ever heard of a lucid dream? It is a dream in which the dreamer realises that he is asleep, and that he is dreaming. To some extent, the dreamer can

control the dream, make conscious decisions and even say things. Well, the opposite to that is happening to me this evening. I am not entirely sure whether I am awake or asleep. It's all very surreal, all beyond my control.

I suppose that is what happens when your imagination runs too far. To a seven year old, there is already so much wonder in the world that to add much more can be dangerous. The fact that the fleeting moments from this day are recalled to me now in the format of dream adds another confusing irony to the story. It may be a story, but it is true – ask my sister. If she doesn't remember, ask the frogs in Crystal Palace Park.

Chapter 17

'Beer?' asks one of my brother's friends.

'No thank you,' I say, taking a swig of apple-juice.

'Happy with your Mr. Juicy, are you?' He says, smiling at my brother.

I don't reply. They have no right to make fun of me, they are only thirteen themselves, and my Dad is only allowing them a can between them as a treat. It is a beautiful summer's day in 1992 – the perfect day for a beer, maybe. We are at the Oval to watch Surrey vs. Kent in a one-day match.

The ground is almost empty. I have been following cricket for about two years now. I like it, though haven't yet grasped the concept of loyalty. I suppose I am a fan of Surrey, but really I don't particularly care who wins. Last year my Dad took me to see a test match versus the West Indies. When we were buying lunch I saw a stall nearby selling merchandise of England and the West Indies. I wanted to get a West Indies hat, because I liked the colour. The Surrey batsmen finish an over - 75 for 3

'I am just going to do something,' I get up with the air of someone with something important to attend to. I walk across to the other side of the ground to a stand of about 500 seats, all of which are unoccupied. For some reason my eight-year-old brain decides it would be fun to sit in each seat in quick succession. Stranger than this must be the reason why I am having this dream now. There must be some significance behind the empty seats and my unrestrained ability to sit in them...

The phone wakes me – for a second the urgency of the sound makes me panic – I don't know where I am, I don't know when I am. After a brief and muffled conversation involving my mum and someone, followed by a series of quick and heavy footsteps mounting the stairs, Chris opens my bedroom door with the phone in his hand;

'Maanin', it's your friend from Australia...' Chris says, handing me the phone. I take it, smiling. I was waiting for a phone call from James at some inopportune time.

'Um, h-hello?'

'God, you sound like I will feel tomorrow! Oh yes, of course, the time difference, what time is it over there?'

'Erm, about 9am,' I say, guessing. 'What time is it in Sydney? Are you drunk?'

'Slightly, slightly!' says James, as if letting me in on a guilty secret of his. 'And it's only 8pm! Lucy and I went to a small gathering this afternoon and drank a little bit too much. Anyway, how are you?'

'We-'

'Listen, I'm really sorry I haven't called you for two months – I keep forgetting.'

'That's quite all right, you know how I feel about speaking on the telephone, anyway.'

'Oh yeah, sorry, I'll keep it short. How are you, though? Gerald wasn't too annoying, I hope?'

'Not at all.' I decide not to tell him I am meeting Gerald this morning. 'He is actually really interesting, if you give him a chance.'

'Hmm, *interesting* is the word! Anyway, the real reason I am phoning is to tell you that I will be coming back to England for Christmas.'

'Excellent.'

'Yes, I haven't booked the flight yet. I'll let you know... Can Lucy have a word?'

'Of course!' I reply, before he has finished his sentence.

'Hullo?' says Lucy after a moment. I can see her in my mind's eye, a picture of wide-eyed inebriation.

'Hello, Lucy.'

'Hullo, I'm drunk,' she proudly declares.

'Yes, yes...' I have wanted to speak to Lucy ever since I got back from Australia, but suddenly I realise I have nothing to say. '...It sounds like you had a nice afternoon, anyway...'

'Sorry?'

'I said – I am very much looking forward to seeing you at Christmas.'

'My darling! The feeling is more than mutual!' I know I should not read much into this - after all, she is drunk, I'm sure she loves everyone at the moment – but I can't help being instantly love-struck. I haven't a clue what to say now.

'...Well, I just wanted to tell you I was drunk... I will see you soon, darling!' Lucy slurs after a protracted pause. '

'See you at Christmas, Lucy.'

'Oh yes, Christmas...' With that she disappears. I am expecting to hear James' voice again, but after a moment the line goes dead. With a sigh of satisfaction, I hand the phone back to Chris.

'Vauxhall Bridge?' He asks.

'Mmm-hmm.'

*

We get off the bus before Vauxhall Bridge. Walking over the Thames is one of my favourite pastimes - Blackfriars, Waterloo and Westminster are the best bridges in terms of view, but Vauxhall is not without its charms. On the south bank is the suave, many-layered MI6 building, which faces a huge complex of luxury riverside apartments. On the north bank, some older but no less chic apartments are opposed by a dull office-block surrounded incongruously by a more sedate row of Victorian buildings, leading down Millbank to Westminster.

As if he has stayed rooted to the same spot for a week, I see Gerald standing in the exact place I last saw him a week ago – wearing the same brown corduroy trousers, beige flannel shirt and grey raincoat. On his face he wears a perennial look of both exited expectancy and worried hesitancy.

'Morning! You are both well, I hope...' Gerald chirps.

'Aaright, aaright!' Chris replies, joining Gerald in an air of care-free expectancy. I smile and nod to show my agreement with Chris.

'Coffee?'

'How about we walk a little first?' I say. Gerald smiles, and without a word we set off.

It's strange - it seems we all have an identical map in our heads. We rarely discuss the route we will take, but through some kind of telepathy we have become attuned to each other. The three of us are notably very different – could not be more so - but our like minds can mutually anticipate the slightest inclination for variety in our journey. Instead of continuing on the logical route along Vauxhall Bridge Road, we cross at the lights and walk through Bessborough Gardens and Drummond Gardens, out onto Bessborough Street. We appear to be heading for the heart of Belgravia.

We continue on to Lupus Street and cut through St. Georges Square. We have entered a world of just four predominant colours. The cream-white buildings sit elegantly between the dull-grey road and the blue-grey sky. The public gardens – between each block – provide variations on the fourth colour. The assorted colours of passing cars seem crude and garish by comparison. Onwards to Eccleston Square.

'I must say, I really rather like this square. All these white regency façades, they make a good contrast to the green of the gardens ...' Gerald says.

'My thought of the moment! Yes, Eccleston Square, I think it made it to my top five.'

'Sorry?' Gerald says

'When I was about ten I compiled a mental list of my most desirable London addresses. I used to do that a lot, make lists of all sorts – on an endless quest for

order...' I look down at my skinny legs and deformed left ankle '... I failed!' Gerald sees that I am smiling and tries uneasily to reciprocate.

'What else was on your list?' Chris asks.

'Erm, well... Eccleston Square was number five. Numbers four and three were apartments overlooking the Thames - one next to Tower Bridge and the other by the OXO Tower, between Blackfriars and Waterloo.'

'And... how about second and first places?' Gerald urges.

'I won't say for now – we may come across them later,' I say, secretively.

'Answer me this, then; would you like to have some lunch?'

'Yes, are you thinking of anywhere in particular?'

'Quite, I was thinking of finding somewhere “accidentally”, as it were...'

'My favourite!'

*

We choose a pub on Belgrave Road. Inside, a compact semi-circular room holds a semi-circular bar in the centre with tables and chairs ranged along the perimeter. Apart from an elderly man reading a newspaper at the bar, we are the only customers in here. We sit at a table and Chris hands me a menu.

'Ah, Young's. Excellent! Would you both like to join me in a pint of beer?'

'I'm not very fond of beer, I'm afraid. Could I have a gin and pineapple?' I say, as if it is a completely normal request.

'How very flamboyant – I like it!' Gerald remarks, after a slight pause.

'Hmmn! My taste in drinks is dictated by the authors I read. I'm going through a gin phase at the moment. In the afternoon it's gin and pineapple, courtesy of Vladimir Nabokov, in the evening it is gin and ginger – Sarah Waters.'

'I'll take a beer,' Chris pitches in.

'And to eat? I think I shall have the Beef Wellington from the specials board behind you, shall I read them to you?'

'No, could you order the third dish on the menu for me? Don't tell me what it is.'

'Right – why?'

'I like the idea of randomness that defines the *dérive*. I've decided to leave everything to chance; where I go, what I eat, what I write...'

'I'll have the same,' Chris declares, as Gerald waits at the bar to place the order.

*

Today's mystery lunch is fish - red snapper with rice and roasted vegetables. Together with my two gin and pineapples, it puts me in a tropical mood. I remember eating the same meal fifteen years ago on a family holiday in Jamaica – in an open-air restaurant on the Montego Bay seafront. The weather that night was warm and breezy, it was so dark I could not see what I was eating. I look through the open door of the pub - outside it is grey and rainy. Apart from the fish I couldn't be further from that restaurant in Jamaica now.

I look up – a prolonged silence, a moment in which to say “...anyone seen any good films lately?” No one does. Chris and Gerald both peer absent-mindedly into their beer-glasses. For all our “shared psycho-geographical inclination”, we are still three very different people.

'Oh yes,' I suddenly remember, 'James Chadwick rang me this morning – he's coming home for Christmas.'

'Excellent!' says Gerald, 'I saw his father last night, he *will* be pleased.'

'Hmmn...' I'm sure he won't, he might not even notice.

'Well, once more unto the breech, dear friends... as it were...'

For a moment, Chris stares at Gerald with seeming hostility. The stare quickly dissolves into a smile, 'aaright den!' he says, in an exaggerated Jamaican accent. We leave the pub and rejoin Belgrave Road, turning right into the rain.

We walk on, crossing Buckingham Palace Road and continuing down Eccleston Street.

'There it is... Second place on my list – Eaton Square.'

'A worthy second!' Gerald says, 'Shall we..?' he gestures, suggesting we take a tour of it. As we walk through the iconic square with its stucco facaded terraces, pillars, balconies and black railings, Gerald begins another of his enquiring monologues, in which he provides answers to his own questions. 'Curious, I cannot help but feel we are walking into a completely new and distinct city – the people are different, the buildings are different, the whole ambience is different. Because London is just a conglomeration of villages, each with its own character. The trouble is, according to the book a *dérive* should be undertaken in one single environ –

psychologically speaking. Still, all the more enriching, I suppose – variety is the spice of life, as they say...'

I'm not sure whether that speech was addressed to us or to him. I add an 'mmn-hmm', just in case. We cross over Kings Road and on to Belgrave Place past the various mews belonging to the grand Georgian and Victorian houses that surround them. Belgrave Square is host to a panoply of foreign embassies, a myriad multinational flags marks our progress into Grosvenor Crescent. We pass number two in my list of top five most desirable London hotels – The Lanesborough – and reach Hyde Park Corner.

'How about we go into the park, walk alongside the lake, for a change of scenery?' Gerald suggests.

'Variety is the spice of life,' I reply, without looking up.

'How uncanny! I was just thinking that very thought myself!' So he *was* talking to himself.

Once in the park, we walk along a path adjacent to Park Lane. Huge skeletal-looking plane trees on either side create a corridor through it. It has stopped raining now but the grass is soaked. To our far left, more plane trees border a gleaming silver strip I take to be The Serpentine. We turn left along a path approaching the lake. Four o' clock strikes somewhere, dusk is beginning to fall.

'Let's finish with a drink,' says Gerald, 'how about that cafeteria, up there?' He points ahead to a café by the lake.

In the café we order at the counter and find a nearby table. 'Tell me, how are these *dérives* working out in terms of providing inspiration for your writing?'

'Erm, they're working – they must be working – subconsciously. A few weeks ago I wrote about inspiration in my novel. I was saying that new ideas hit you in an instant, when you are not looking for them. You can spend the entire week labouring over the construction of one paragraph and then the next chapter can write itself in your head in a few seconds.'

'Have you had a “hit of inspiration” today, then?'

'I'm sure I have... it's hard to say what it is, though. It's quite a vague feeling, but a feeling nonetheless. Inspiration for me is often accompanied by music in my head. Today it's Bob Marley – I'll sit in front of my computer tomorrow, no doubt it will sort itself out...' I am distracted by a girl, probably in her mid-twenties, sitting at the table next to ours. When I came in she was reading a book, but a moment ago we made sustained eye contact and she smiles sweetly at me. I automatically look down in embarrassment, but dare myself to look up again – the same smile. The momentary sense of excitement and confidence it gives me is soon replaced by the sudden realisation the reason she is staring and smiling at me is because I am a 25-year-old man, sitting in a café, being fed by another man. I feel foolish and hopeless. The girl starts to read her book again.

The coffee is not very hot. I finish it with a swift gulp. 'So, same time next week?' I say, making to leave.

'Indeed!' Gerald says, 'In this café?'

'Err, how about outside the café?'

'Right you are!' He stays in his seat, waving as I leave.

Tonight, I have decided, is one for reminiscence. Until eleven o' clock I trawl through endless photo albums of past family holidays and occasions, closely examining my former self. The boy in the pictures seems barely to resemble me now. I have only a dim recollection of ever being him.

At eleven o' clock, Chris helps me to bed.

'Night, Nick.'

'Night, Chris,' I turn over and close my eyes, tight.

Chapter 18

No amount of scepticism and criticism has yet enabled me to regard dreams as negligible occurrences. Often enough they appear senseless, but it is obviously we who lack the sense and ingenuity to read the enigmatic message from the nocturnal realm of the psyche. Seeing that at least half our psychic existence is passed in that realm, and that consciousness acts upon our nightly life just as much as the unconscious overshadows our daily life, it would seem all the more incumbent on medical psychology to sharpen its senses by a systematic study of dreams. Nobody doubts the importance of conscious experience; why then should we doubt the significance of unconscious happenings? They also are part of our life, and sometimes more truly a part of it than any happenings of the day.

Carl Jung, The Practice of Psychotherapy

I have been awake for about an hour, I think. So far I have preferred to keep my eyes closed, though. The room is silent – indeed, I am slightly worried as to whether my brother is still breathing in the bed next to me – and it smells of sun-tan cream – a smell forever associated in my mind with family holidays. Outside I hear the familiar introduction to the song I hear every morning – it must be the barman's favourite;

If you wanna leave, baby

I won't beg you to stay

And if you wanna go, darling

Maybe it's better that way

That will be the signature song of this holiday, I reflect, as I open my eyes and prepare to get out of bed. The room is long and narrow; our beds are at the far end, next to the bathroom. Apart from a wardrobe, a desk and a TV, the room is empty. I walk barefoot beyond the beds on a cool tiled floor, which spaciouly stretches to a pair of sliding glass doors. Before the doors

hang curtains of varying terracotta shades. As the morning sun beats down on them, the room is bathed in a warm glow. I draw back the curtain and open the door. A harsh luminescence blinds me for a second, but I soon see the bougainvillea lining the top of the outer wall of the hotel and tall voluminous palm-trees beyond. Our room is on the ground floor, a small terrace directly outside, beyond which is an outdoor swimming pool.

I have been planning this since we arrived two days ago. Last night, I went to bed wearing my swimming trunks in readiness. I take a run-up, out of the room, along the terrace and jump. It is every bit as refreshing as I had imagined. The sharp coolness of the water, in spite of the relentless heat everywhere else, is both shocking and intensely satisfying.

'Maanin', fella!' says the man behind the bar next to the pool, already mixing someone a cocktail.

'Hello!' I say in return, half inquisitively.

'Nicholas!' cries my mother in disdain, emerging from the room next to my brother's and mine. My dad is smiling behind her.

I swim over to the steps, get out and nonchalantly say, 'Let's have breakfast.'

The events in this dream take place in Jamaica – February 1995, I am eleven years old. In 1994 my brother underwent major surgery on his back, for which he was in hospital for five months. Soon afterwards, my Mum saw a man collecting for a charity which sent children who had suffered from illness or hospitalisation on dream holidays – my brother chose to spend a week in

Montego Bay, Jamaica - only seven days in the sun, but maybe the most impressionable and treasured week of my life.

The journey to breakfast is something I must only have done about six times, though in my mind I've done it on thousands of occasions. The dining room is at the far end of the hotel and to get to it we must follow a footpath which winds through the gardens. Vines, ferns, palm-trees, banana-trees and flowers of all colours populate the gardens, and in a clearing marked by rows of pink and white orchids is a bandstand-like construction with steps leading up to a jacuzzi.

For breakfast each morning at the hotel, my mum has fruit salad, my dad has Eggs Benedict; I tend to alternate between the two. At this stage I should probably warn you that this dream contains no real action, no diversion; no untoward events. Do you ever have those dreams where you wake up and think, "Well, what was the point of that?" This definitely isn't one of them - every detail is precious to me. I want to preserve each recollection as I would a photograph.

I say these memories take the form of a dream, maybe they don't; maybe they're just engrained into my consciousness – always accessible to me. I look back on this holiday now as representing my last spree of childish hedonism before I had to accept that, like my brother, I would soon lose the ability to walk.

I have other dreams about that holiday, day-dreams and night-dreams. In one, I am floating downstream on a raft along the Martha Brae River. My legs hang over the side, cutting through the warm, diaphanous waters. Tropical flora and fauna

grows on each bank and meet above my head, making an arbitrary roof, which breaks up the rays of the beating sun. It seems the river will never end - at least, it doesn't in my dream. In another I am climbing, trying to climb up Dunn's River Falls. The inexorable gush of the waterfall makes it almost impossible, though the dream always ends when I am at the top.

I also have a recurring dream that's not so nice – more “anxiety with pictures” than a “recreated memory”... I am in the sea on the coast of Montego Bay. The warm shallow water is of that idyllic turquoise variety, I can see my feet perfectly through it. My family sit on the beach, if my parents are concerned about me, I can't tell. I suddenly become aware that I am being carried out to sea by a strong but slow-moving current. I shout for help but nothing comes out, it would be of no consequence anyway, no one can stop the current. The turquoise water gradually turns to indigo, on its way to sapphire. I instantly recognise that the current is metaphorical – the receding shoreline represents safety and normality, my regression into the ever-darkening ocean represents an ongoing degeneration and ultimately death – metaphorical, but no less real.

There is nothing I can do - my fate is written in the unseen stars. I feel that while I'm still breathing I must make the most of my life, live every moment purely and spontaneously. But I can't do that either, I am treading water, and I don't have the energy for anything else. Regret at not having seized the moment pains me, but I guess I am condemned to just go quietly...

Chapter 19

Sometimes, but not often, I have dreams that recount reality from the recent past. This one recalls events from yesterday. Nothing dramatic happened, indeed my dream doesn't even recast them faithfully but it is – I'm sure - in the way I was thinking. Yesterday afternoon my sister was round with her two-month-old baby. Chris was on a break and my sister had gone upstairs to get something for her son, leaving me alone with him.

In the last few days I have been reading nothing but poetry – mostly romantic. I have decided that if I were ever to have children, in their earliest infancy, I would read poetry to them when they were crying – it has a very soothing effect. This morning I have been reading Coleridge. This is where the dream definitely becomes a dream. I'm not sure if it is me reciting the poem to my nephew or a separate “dream narrator”, but the words "are spoken

He lies next to me, dozing on the sofa. My sister has *left me to that solitude, which suits abstruser musings: save that at my side my cradled infant slumbers peacefully. 'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs and vexes meditation with its strange and extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood, with all the numberless goings-on of life, inaudible as dreams!*

'Is he still ok,' shouts down the concerned voice of my sister.

'He's fine!' I reply. I want to add *Stop being so neurotic* but I refrain.

My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart with tender gladness, thus to look at thee, and think that thou shalt learn far other lore, and in far other scenes! For I was reared in the great city, pent mid cloisters dim, and saw nought lovely but the sky and stars. But thou, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze by lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds, which image in their bulk both lakes and shores and mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear the lovely shapes and sounds intelligible of that eternal language, which thy God utters...

'Are you ok?' asks my sister, coming back into the room.

'Yes, why?'

'Are those tears?'

For the past week I have been unable to sleep properly. When I go to bed I fall asleep more or less instantly, but at around three in the morning I wake in breathless panic - a nameless, non-specific panic. My composure eventually recovered, I spend the rest of the night in a state of wide-eyed insomnia - thinking. My condition is a degenerative one. Thus far, the depreciation in my physical abilities has happened at a rate slow enough for me only to notice it upon reflection. Now it seems that week by week my body is steadily relinquishing functions I had once thought elementary – sight, hearing, speech. I am a great believer in not worrying about things over which I have no control – *Que sera, sera*. Sometimes, though, it is hard.

My dad gets up at six-thirty every morning. As soon as I hear his footsteps on the landing outside my room, I call out for him to come and help me get up – to release me. Today is Friday. It is seven-thirty in the morning. I sit, bleary-eyed, at the

kitchen table, looking through the window at the half-light, as dawn unwillingly gives way to daytime. At my redundant hands waits a cup of coffee for my dad to hold up so that I can drink it. My mum comes into the kitchen, she has been very unwell herself recently.

'Alright Ma?' I ask - that's what I call her.

'Yep! Alright Nicklas?' she asks - that's what she calls me.

'Yep!' The irony is palpable.

*

'Aaright, mate?'

'... Hello, Chris.' I didn't hear him come in.

'So, Friday,' he says, rubbing his hands together, 'Hyde Park?'

'Mmn,' I affirm. His cheeriness offends me, but I know deep down that *I* am in the wrong.

During the morning Chris' demeanour slowly mellows. By the time we meet Gerald in Hyde Park, my mood is approaching normality, for me.

'Good morning, gentlemen! How are you?' The same old Gerald greets us in the same old manner – I have returned to normality, for me. I smile at him.

'Aaright, aaright?' Chris asks rhetorically '... shall we begin?'

'*Let's!*' Gerald looks at me. 'Which direction do you suggest?' After a moment's hesitation I point in the direction of Park Lane. 'A good choice, sir!' We set off.

We cross Park Lane, typically busy, passing number one in my list of top five most desirable London hotels – The Dorchester – and continue along Upper Brook Street, on our way to Mayfair. We cut across Grosvenor Square, taking in Brook Street and Davies Street to bring us into Berkeley Square.

'Berkeley Square! A most historic place – not just for the nightingale!'

'Really?' I speak to Gerald for the first time today, 'I don't really know anything about it... I know my grandfather worked here...' I scan the buildings, searching in vain for his.

'Your grandfather, the horologist?'

'No, the other one – on my dad's side.'

'Do you see that building over there, number forty-eight?' Gerald points between the trees at a narrow, four-storey building. Winston Churchill lived there as a child... and that house there, number fifty' - he points to a similar high-rise, Georgian building - 'that is said to be “the most haunted house in London”!' I make a face to convey the appropriate response. 'Yes, another former British Prime Minister, George Canning once lived there. After the succeeding tenant's death it remained unoccupied for thirty or so years. There were various stories of apparitions and noises seen and heard there.' We walk closer to the old building, “Maggs Brothers Antiquarian Book Dealers,” reads the sign above the window. '... Anyway,' Gerald says, making a surreptitious retreat 'coffee?'

'Yes, I know a place nearby – in Shepherd's Market.'

'Excellent!' I choose not to ask any more about the “haunted house”. To me, he doesn't seem the type to believe in ghosts. He does seem a bit edgy, though. We turn down Charles Street, then Queen Street, to get to Shepherd Market.

'A rather notorious place, I believe!' Gerald says, in a loud and jocular tone of voice, as we pass a woman standing in the open doorway of her shop. 'Prostitution, debauchery, criminality... and so forth...' I turn to look at her apologetically, but she has gone back inside and closed the door. 'Of course, that has all changed now – fashion boutiques, jewellers and expensive restaurants seem to be the order of the day... indeed, we could almost be in Paris!'

'This is the place I had in mind...' I point at an Italian bistro.

'Marvellous!' Gerald seems slightly *too* “Gerald” today. We go inside, sit at the nearest table and order.

'Oh yeah, before I forget – I'm afraid I can't do next week. It's my Birthday next Friday; my parents are taking me away for the weekend.'

'Oh – that *is* rotten luck... No! Frightfully sorry! Many happy returns! I meant it was rotten luck because I shan't be able to do the following week – I am taking my father to the Loire – his first holiday for twenty-eight years! Are you quite sure you can't do any other day next week?'

'Afraid not, no.' I am lying, Chris knows I am lying. I can't tell him why I am lying. I couldn't tell myself why I am lying. There is something about *dérives* and Fridays, they have become a regular fixture in my life. Chris remains silent. 'Anyway, a break might be good – to give us some perspective; see where this *dérive* is taking us.'

'Where is it taking us?'

'I haven't a clue...' I say, feeling foolish. I only said it because it sounded philosophical.

'Still, I *shall* miss our Friday-dérives, they have become somewhat of a regular fixture in my life.'

'Exactly.'

Gerald finishes his espresso, 'Right, I'll pay – then shall we make a move... as it were?'

'Erm – yes, just a minute...' I haven't even started my cappuccino yet. Chris holds up the cup and I take a sip – perfect temperature – I down it in one. 'Let's go.'

Down Curzon Street and back across Berkeley Square, which takes us down Bruton Street and out onto New Bond Street. After a peaceful Friday morning in Mayfair, New Bond Street seems all the more busy and loud, oppressively so. We pass “The Fine Art Society” and “The Society of Fine Art Dealers” - for a moment they almost appear tempting – if only as a means to escape the clamour of the street. Gerald and I share a look of common knowledge - that going in would be a mistake “dérive-wise”. We carry on without mention of it. It's not that I dislike it - no, fine art doesn't make me as angry as modern art does. I don't entirely “get” fine art, either – though I believe others do. Last week, on one of my boredom-induced whims, Chris and I visited Dulwich Picture Gallery. I didn't have a favourite painting – none of them “spoke to me” - I thought they were all good. All bore an uncanny resemblance to their subjects, I'm sure. Come to think of it, that is probably why they were hanging in a gallery in the first place.

We cross where New Bond Street is intersected by Oxford Street, continue for fifty yards then turn down Vere Street.

'I *am* feeling rather peckish, how about you two?' Chris and I nod, simultaneously. Where are we? ...ah, Henrietta Place... I know of another Italian place fairly nearby, I think... in Wigmore Street.' We set off for the restaurant, via Marylebone Lane.

*

Today's lunch is seafood linguine followed by tiramisu. My new ordering system has yet to fail me. We are back out on the street now, turning immediately into St. Christopher's Place. Early Christmas decorations hang around lamp-posts and across shop windows. I'm all for the commercialisation of Christmas – the lights, the trees, the festive food and drink, all form an alternative annual religion for me. We continue on, through the nexus of streets - James Street, Wigmore Street, Duke Street, Manchester Street, George Street – until we are making our way down Marylebone High Street, laughing at the hugely inflated price-tags attached to the modest items in shop-windows. On Marylebone Road Gerald stops, as if to locate himself.

'I think we are nearing Regent's Park, what do you think?'

'I think you are reading my mind again.' Gerald gives a half-apologetic smile and we continue.

We pass through York Gate and are in Regent's Park. Then Hanover Gate brings us through to Park Road. We walk on in silence, across the road a series of

symmetrical, romanesque-style terraces extend before us. I wait until we reach Cumberland Terrace.

'There it is – number one of my top five most desirable London addresses...'

'I quite agree! Wonderful, are they not? John Nash again, you know. My grandfather lived in one of them - Sussex Place, I think...'

'Oh, right, you know more than I do then, I've never been inside one. About fifteen years ago my brother spent a year in Stanmore hospital – every evening my dad drove through Regents Park on our way to visit him – I fell in love with them then. I think Cumberland Terrace is my favourite...'

'Shall we cross over... finish the day in that café next-door to it... as it were...?'

'Sure,' I say. I'm not hungry or thirsty, but this is an established conclusion to a *dérive*. Far be it from me to get in the way of tradition.

The café is Parisian in its theme - black and white photos of Paris adorn the walls, the tables are made of wrought-iron with glass surfaces, the counter of solid, green and arterial marble. Chris and I order hot chocolate, Gerald his habitual espresso. Outside the day is fast-fading, one dying ray of sunlight shines through the window and hits the prismatic glass of the table, scattering rainbows onto the opposite wall.

'So, London is the only city for you, you have never considered living further afield?' Gerald asks.

'Oh no, I've certainly considered it... I have other lists in my head... Venice, Barcelona, Rome, Seville...'

'... and at number one?' A coffee machine on the counter starts to make a cappuccino.

'Paris – I have a clear image of it in my mind but... do you know Paris?' Gerald nods encouragingly. 'Do you know the name of the island in the Seine, the one with Notre Dame on it?'

'Indeed, it sounds marvellous!' Gerald obviously can't hear a word I am saying. My voice is lost to the whirl of the coffee machine and the increased volume of conversation around us. It happens a lot, people nod and say what they hope is appropriate, while I talk to myself. It's ok, I don't mind. I'm telling this story primarily for me, anyway.

'... well, behind the cathedral, at the other end of the island, is a row of apartment buildings, undulating in size, above the riverbank. When I was about fourteen, I went on a boat-trip along the Seine. It was late May – warm and sunny – people were out sunbathing on the balconies of those apartments. Ever since then I have been taken by the romantic notion of owning one of them – just to stand out on the balcony and survey the city.' I finish talking and Gerald finishes nodding, pretending to follow. I omitted from the story the fact that when I picture this scenario, Lucy is lying on the sofa in the room behind me, sometimes reading, sometimes watching TV. There's always a chance Chris was listening, he *does* have freakishly good hearing. I wait for the machine to stop and an interlude of quiet, '...we should be going...'

'Oh – ok... nearly three weeks before we meet again... I shall miss you both, terribly.'

'M-me too,' I say, uncomfortably, but at the same time I mean it, sincerely.

Chris gets up and pats Gerald on the back, 'see ya, mate!'

Why can't I have that kind of self-assurance?

'Let us meet in the park next time, outside the café we passed?'

'Right you are,' I say, unintentionally echoing Gerald's idiosyncrasy. He remains seated at the table as we leave, drinking the water that came with his espresso. Outside, as if by magic, there is a taxi waiting by the kerbside. It takes us as far as Victoria, where we get a bus home.

*

As Chris and I approach the house, my mum is standing in the open front-doorway, speaking on the phone, '... actually, he's here now – I'll pass you over...' she hands me the phone, '- it's Lucy...'

'Lucy?' I exclaim. I have never spoken to Lucy before without first speaking to James. 'Hello?'

'... Hullo, Nick, I am bored, fancied a chat.'

'Oh' - she is speaking to the wrong person – I don't *do* telephone-chats. She sounds strange - either she is drunk or has been crying, or both. I suddenly realise it must be the middle of the night over there.

'...It is, I can't sleep, I am bored and lonely' - her voice is trembling slightly.

'What's wrong?'

'... Nothing really ... it's just, I have no friends here, no one to talk to...'

'I'm sorry, I'm afraid I'm not much good at talking, myself... but you were having a great time when I saw you, meeting lots of people... '

'... No one special... Nick? Have you ever- oh, sorry, of course... how *is* Jennifer?'

'Fine... I don't know, actually. I haven't spoken to her since I saw her in Australia.' Silence. It is painfully obvious what she was about to ask. It makes me feel small and piteous; I don't feel like talking any more.

'Oh yes, maybe James told you, when we get back to England, Daddy is taking us both up to Scotland to stay with the family for Christmas. We are only spending a few days in London. I'm sure we will see you, though...we must see you.'

'Mmn... definitely.'

'...Well, I just wanted to hear your voice, to know somebody was thinking of me...'

'I am, always...' but she has already gone.

*

Countless times, tonight, I recite to myself the brief exchange I shared with Lucy, hoping to find some hidden meaning or intention behind her question. I have plenty of hypotheses and idealisations, but the likelihood of any of them actually being true is slim to non-existent. Chris leaves at his usual time. I forecast another night of insomnia. I fall asleep, at least for the time being, after about an hour.

Chapter 20

*Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art
 Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
 And watching, with eternal lids apart,
 Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
 The moving waters at their priest-like task
 Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
 Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
 Of snow upon the mountains and the moors -
 No - yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,
 Pillowed upon my fair love's ripening breast,
 To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
 Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
 Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
 And so live ever - or else swoon in death.*

John Keats, Bright Star

I lost my virginity when I was seventeen. So surreal was the experience that when I recall the details of it, in waking or in sleeping thought, I wonder whether I imagined the whole thing. Remembered natural elements that contribute to the memory provide firmer grounding for it – the enveloping starlit sky, the incessant and calming sound of waves as they hit the shore, the ambrosial flavour of freshly blended strawberries. The perfection of that night, given the anticlimactic years that followed it, holds bitter-sweet significance for me now. I cannot begin to describe the momentousness of that night without first putting it into some kind of context.

I always had friends in my teenage years, I was never bullied – yet I look back on them now as being years of sadness and loneliness. I was fourteen when I had to go into a wheelchair – as my newly-discovered physical iniquities spread, so too did the low estimation I had of myself, I

became increasingly reclusive. *A quiet boy, rather self-deprecating* was the unvarying appraisal of me from my teachers at parents' evenings. Now, I'm sure you all know or can imagine how often a teenage boy thinks about sex. I could think about sex all day, but in my situation I thought I had to accept that it was a rite of passage to which I would never accede.

It is the summer of 2001. I am on holiday with my family and one of my few school-friends on the north-eastern coast of Spain, just south of Barcelona. As so few holiday destinations do, it far exceeds my expectations. The hotel is called *Estela – Hotel de Arte*, the place is full of art – in reception, in the corridors, in the bedrooms, there are paintings, murals, sculptures... as a rule, I'm not a big fan of art, but being surrounded by it I fancy myself as a kind of Oscar Wilde figure. The room my friend and I are sharing doesn't have a number, it has a name – *Blue Dreams* – the walls and upholstery are all done out in Egyptian blue. At the head of the beds is a board of glazed mosaic, at the centre of which is a single blue eye that looks down over the sleepers. In the past, the small town that surrounds the hotel was lived in by fishermen and artisans; now the port is populated by yachts, the seaside hills by the second homes of those who can afford them.

Like a mini Monte Carlo, I think to myself as Jack, my friend, pushes me past crowded restaurants and empty bars, down to the harbour – or maybe a mini Saint Tropez. It is almost eleven o'clock, evidently too early for the Spanish to begin their evening revelries. We do a circuit of the harbour – to kill some time – and walk back to a bar. It is still empty, except for a girl,

possibly slightly older than us, sitting on her own. There is a beautiful familiarity to her, yes, I saw her by the pool at the hotel earlier.

'Hiya – do you want to join me?' she asks. She is English.

'Yes, please...' Jack replies, a little too quickly and as if to a school-teacher.

Her name is Jessica, she is twenty, she is from, or at least studying in, Manchester. We only have one drink at the bar – then she suggests going to the bar in our hotel. It is a short distance back to our hotel. When we get there Jack goes to our room to change his clothes, leaving us alone in the corridor. After a minute's halting conversation she leans over and whispers into my ear.

'One rum and I'm yours!' - on reflection, not the most romantic way of putting it. Far from admonishing her uncouthness, though, I answer her bold statement with a stunned smile – it's all I can do. It is, however, vastly preferable to what I was going to say – my initial reaction was to check behind me and then say, *'erm... my friend's in the bathroom, he'll be out in a minute...'* but I stop myself just in time. Of course, the thought of her and me had crossed my mind – as a matter of fact, she had been naked, in my mind's eye, since we left the bar – but I had immediately dismissed the chance of anything actually happening between us. Now I have no idea what to say. Fortunately, Jack rejoins us at that moment and we go off to the hotel-bar.

From the menu, Jessica orders a Strawberry Daicquiri - light rum, triple sec, lime juice and strawberries – I order the same. We watch the barman as he slices the strawberries. When we make eye-contact she looks away in sweet embarrassment. It

tastes amazing – in my dreams of this night, I think I still get a tiny hint of its flavour. Jack starts talking to the barman about Spanish football, leaving Jessica and I to talk. I think he knows, I don't know how, I still don't think I've got it straight myself. What to say? We are sitting on the hotel veranda - a night of cloudless climes and starry skies.

'What are you thinking about?' she asks.

'Erm, about Byron...' What luck, this is the first and only time anyone has asked me that question and I've been able to give an answer that is both worthwhile and that doesn't lower me in the opinion of others. She rests her head on my shoulder – thanks, George!

I don't have a clear memory of the rest of the night. In dreams and recollections I only ever get the smallest snippets of it. I don't know how we managed to get rid of Jack for an hour, or exactly what happened afterwards. I will spare you the details of the actual event, save to say it wasn't a disappointment to either of us, I hope. Over the next few days, we see each other often by the pool. She is very friendly, but we don't repeat our exertions of the first night. After a week, she goes back to England. I don't ask for her address or phone-number – in a way I'm glad I won't see her again, rather than time's fading her, it will preserve her.

So, my first sexual experience was a one-night-stand. In the following days, weeks, even months, I feel the usual senses of elation and relief, but I also feel an overwhelming sense of acceptance - not from anyone in particular, but from life in general. There was I, certain that my disability had cut off a whole avenue of experience from me, when I am suddenly granted access to it simply by being myself. No pretension, just me...

Thank goodness this newly-granted feeling of acceptance didn't raise my expectations. For the next four years, I am celibate – and not through choice. That is why this moment abides with me so strongly. It holds the key to a whole recess of my subconscious.

Chapter 21

Something I have found often to be the case is that dream-consciousness lags behind waking-consciousness by about ten years. It was Freud who suggested that the reason we have so many dreams in our childhood in which we are flying is because it mimics the feeling we had of being rocked or carried about in our early infancy. I have felt the same throughout my life with my physical state. For example, when I first used a wheelchair at the age of fourteen, in the majority of my dreams I could still walk. At around the age of twenty, walking and balancing in my dreams became difficult. Nowadays I am normally in a wheelchair in my dreams.

I am about fifteen, at home and watching television – or something. Though I have used a wheelchair for about a year, I often do without it when moving around the house. I have decided to get up and go in the kitchen – everything is a logistical operation for me now. I clench my fists and precipitously push them down on either side of me in order to give myself the momentum I need to get to my feet. I must have pushed too hard because I am now falling forward towards the fireplace. As I put my hands out to protect my face, my twelve-year-old sister comes in and jumps in front of me.

As I land back on the sofa, she says, 'Are you okay? Just stay there I'll get what you want...' She sounds very pleased with herself, why shouldn't she be? I suppose I owe her some thanks.

Within this dream I have another flashback, this time to when I was six, my brother was nine. My mum was taking us out somewhere, we are walking down the pathway by my house when my brother slips and lurches forward. I dive in front of him and catch him before he hits the ground. I remember feeling so proud of myself, like I had suddenly become his six-year-old guardian. I was mystified and deflated when he didn't thank me profusely for what I had done, he just seemed annoyed.

'I'm fine...' I almost shout at my sister. I must have said that a bit too loudly, because I-

*

I wake some time in the early morning, I think. It is too dark to see my watch and I can't reach to turn on a light. I lie in the dark for hours on end, thinking about... Lucy... her smile, her laugh and the absolute futility of my feelings towards her. For that reason it is a positive relief when I hear the bell ring, followed momentarily by Chris' familiar voice. Today is the day of the long-awaited resumption of our *dérive*.

*

We take a bus as far as Victoria, and complete the journey to Regents Park in a taxi. For the first time, we manage to beat Gerald, arriving first at our agreed meeting point. Only just, though – I see Gerald in the near distance attempting to run. A gust of wind catches his raincoat, making him resemble an unlikely superhero,

complete with rudimentary cape. In his left hand he is clutching a mobile phone, as if he had never held one before.

'Gentlemen! I am most *frightfully* sorry for my late arrival...' he says, breathlessly.

'No problem, man - you're right on time...' Chris assures him.

'Excellent – I *have* missed you both! Yes, our train home was delayed. As soon as we got back to Greenwich, I hopped into a taxi and came here. I sent my father off to his residential home in another taxi – he promised to ring me when he got there. Hence, I have this contraption,' he holds up the phone as though it is some kind of nuclear grenade. 'Anyone for coffee?'

'I'd like that,' I say. 'How was France?'

'Sorry?'

'France, it was France you went to, right?'

'Oh, I see what you mean – France – it was smashing.'

We enter the small café we were waiting outside and sit at a table. Being the only customers, we place our order from the table. 'So, tell me, how have you been for the past three weeks? What have you been doing?'

'Oh, I have been ok. I haven't really been doing much. Mainly writing, and reading Proust.'

'Ooh! Is that my phone, my phone? No, no... your phone?'

'No, it was just another customer. There is a bell above the door...' Chris points the bell out to Gerald as if explaining something menial to a child.

'I see... Proust, that sounds exciting. I must confess I only made it halfway through the first volume. I got a sense of how beautifully it is constructed though. The use of language is wonderful... Ooh, is that my phone?'

'Another customer,' I say, careful not to reply in a tone of sarcasm. 'Yes, slightly too beautiful, too wonderful... next to him I feel quite inadequate. Virginia Woolf once read Marcel Proust – afterwards she wrote to a friend that it was pointless trying to emulate him. She could never measure up. A few weeks before her suicide, she started to re-read Proust. It's not looking very good for me, is it?' Gerald's phone begins to ring. He ignores it.

'Are you going to answer your phone?'

'Right, yes – now, what do I press?' As Chris gives Gerald a brief tutorial on his phone, I flatter myself into thinking that my presence provides a grounding effect to Gerald's madness and that these past weeks without me have sent him over the edge. 'Hullo... excellent... cheerio!' He stares at the phone for a while. 'Sorry! Now, where were we? Ah yes, Proust and suicide. I wouldn't worry if I were you, Proust probably read Flaubert and thought the same thing. It sounds as if you're making progress, anyway.'

'I'm not sure if you can call it progress. I am writing, but I've still got the same problems with cohesion and a storyline.'

'Well, what genre would you place it in?'

'I'm not even sure of that... nostalgia? The inclusion of dreams makes it a bit fantastical, a bit surreal. Contemporary, I suppose... whatever that is.' Gerald nods at me, though I haven't said anything worthy of it.

'It is hard to characterise time, is it not? I would venture to say that at the moment we are living in an age of confusion – malevolent confusion. Global warming, global pandemics, global terrorism – the world is fighting against invisible enemies.'

'Yeah, although the first two are slightly different, they are part fact part hysteria. The war on terror is just ridiculous. Terror is a by-product of war. We're creating what we're trying to destroy. It's like declaring war on obesity, but in so doing, creating lots more fat people...' I stop mid-flow - rather pleased with the analogy, creating a moment of confusion myself.

'... May I propose a toast? To confusion!' Gerald says.

'To confusion and nostalgia,' I say. We all take a gulp of coffee, as if it is whiskey.

'Well, *andiamos*, as it were...'

From the café, we take a path leading to the inner circle of the park. Our route takes us momentarily out of the park on to Chester Road, before we re-enter the Outer Circle.

'Well, that was Regent's park... we should probably decide where we are going.'

'Hmn...' I begin to reply, but say no more. We keep going straight, along Prince Albert Road and Primrose Hill. At the top, Chris needs five minutes to recover from pushing me up the hill.

'You see, Christopher, it was all worthwhile! Look at that view – immense! ... Look, Nick, there is St Paul's – near where we began our *dérive*.'

'... And that's Charing Cross... where I joined you...' Chris points out, between deep breaths.

'I'll take your word for it...' I say, under mine - in the bright sunlight, the mass of buildings look like amorphous patterns, to me. I just about make out a plane over the city. On its way to land at Heathrow – it's flying alarmingly low – it flies safely over the buildings and off into the distance. In what feels like almost voyeuristic disappointment, I turn to Chris.

'Aaright, I'm aaright now – shall we go?' We continue down Elsworthy Terrace and Elsworthy Road, which brings us out onto Primrose Hill Road.

'I know it is rather early, but I *am* feeling quite peckish – a spot of lunch?'

'That suits me – I didn't have any breakfast,' I say. We find a restaurant on Englands Lane.

*

Today's lunch is less of a culinary experiment and more of a practicality – I'm famished. I still order randomly, though. I have pizza – two of them. Afterwards, the three of us remain by the restaurant window in quiet satisfaction, looking out at the encroaching dark. It is two-thirty and the light is already fading.

'So, where do you think we are going?' Gerald asks.

'Well, it looks like we are heading for Hampstead Heath...'

'It certainly looks that way... I last went to Hampstead Heath – many years ago... shall we?'

We walk back out onto Englands Lane and soon turn up Haverstock Hill. After Pond Street we cross South End Road and enter Hampstead Heath.

A map of the Heath stands before us, 'now, where do you want to go?'

'I'd quite like to see The Vale of Health... but why don't we just walk, see where we end up...'

'Quite right! Sorry!'

After about half an hour's steady walking, the path becomes increasingly steep, until it's a virtual staircase. I feel guilty for eating two pizzas and then expecting Chris to push me across a whole heath. He trudges on, through verdurous gloom and winding mossy ways...

'... Very evocative, this place... puts me in mind of Keats... are you a fan of John Keats, Nick?'

'Very much so... he was a genius. I've been reading a lot of poetry recently, I've found it's very conducive to this *dérive*... English and French poetry – Keats, Shelley, Baudelaire, Mallarmé...'

The path brings us out to a lake. Its smooth, still waters perfectly reflect the light of the moon. The moon isn't full, isn't crescent-shaped, but somewhere in between - ever changing, like a joyless eye that finds no object worth its constancy...

'Shall we get going, now?' says Gerald, looking at his watch.

'It's getting pretty dark – maybe we should be heading back...'

'... If my calculations are correct, this path leads up Parliament Hill. Let us finish the day over London... as it were...'

'This Parliament Hill – it's not a hill, is it?' Chris asks, in good-natured sarcasm.

'I am afraid so, would you rather not?' Gerald asks.

'I was only joking – this is good for me...' Chris pushes me determinedly up our final ascent of the day.

At the top of the hill is a café. No one says anything, we are all familiar with the routine. We go in and find a free table in the corner, by a Christmas tree. Chris and I drink lattes, Gerald his espresso.

At the table next to us is a small girl with her mother. Mother is trying to feed her daughter a boiled egg, the little girl holds an errant soldier in her left hand. She is distracted, though – staring at me. She is about four years old, wearing a burgundy coloured, corduroy dress, navy-blue tights and some shiny, leather, buckled shoes – she seems almost as if she is from another time, an earlier era. She looks intently and seriously at me and at my chair, wanting to give me her thorough perusal before making her next move. Beside her, her mother looks at me in awkward apology. All at once, the girl's look of sullen inquisitiveness melts into a beaming smile. Ideas of parenthood are quite alien to me, but moments like these send sharp twinges of longing and regret to my heart. I return her smile with the warmest one I have.

'Do you want to go and take in another view of London?' whispers Gerald, in my ear.

'Of course...' We leave the café and make our way back to Parliament Hill. Chris and Gerald take a seat on a park bench, looking over the whole of London. It is four-thirty in the afternoon and the sky is almost pitch black. The presence of bright

lights adds clarity to the view that was missing earlier, I can see nearly everything, now.

'Tell me – but only if you want to, of course – does it ever irritate you that children stare at you?'

'No, it's only natural. I'm sure I did the same when I was a child.'

'But still – I suppose it must be hard for the parents, not knowing whether to stop the child or not...'

'Hmn...I would say no – don't stop curiosity, or else the child will grow up in fear of difference, not being able to look certain people in the eye... Although the best reaction to that situation I saw was from a neighbour of mine about ten years ago. I was meeting him for the first time, he had a daughter about the same age as that girl, and she was staring at me. He said to his daughter, “this must be strange for you, I don't suppose you've met anyone in a wheelchair before.” You could see her utter indignation at this accusation of unworldliness. She said, “Daddy! I've met loads of people in wheelchairs!” - as if to say, “*Daddy! How dare you! Don't be so insensitive!*”

Gerald laughs, Chris smiles – though possibly at something on one of his phones. 'You should include that in your novel.'

'Maybe...'

'... Well, we never made it as far as The Vale of Health... or did we?'

'We probably *should* have looked at the map, I suppose... I liked it, though.'

'Indeed! Indeed – like accidental tourism... as it were... So, we shall meet in this spot next week?'

'I'm not sure, actually. Chris, what do you think?'

Chris looks up from his phone, 'to be honest, I don't fancy doing those hills again, but I don't mind. I thought this "durrive" was meant to be a city thing, though.'

'... Good point... shall we meet in the place where we met this morning?'

'Regent's Park? Right you are!'

We descend the hill and head towards our bus stop. Gerald walks a pace ahead of us. He has a golden tail of tinsel stuck to his coat, he must have unknowingly picked it up from the Christmas tree in the café. I don't say anything – it suits him. We all catch a bus back to Victoria, where Chris and I leave Gerald and get another bus to Dulwich.

*

Tonight, my parents take Chris and me out to dinner. I feel that every day Chris is becoming more and more a part of me – so I am becoming more and more complete. It is in this mood that I go to bed and fall straight to sleep.

Chapter 22

...the recollections which disappear from consciousness are probably preserved in remote planes of memory, and the patient can find them by an exceptional effort like that which is effected in the hypnotic state. But, on the lower planes, these memories await, so to speak, the dominant image to which they may be fastened. A sharp shock, a violent emotion, forms the decisive event to which they cling; if this event, by reason of its sudden character, is cut off from the rest of our history, they follow it into oblivion

Henri Bergson, Matter and Memory

Every now and then, something happens in the world which the media makes so iconic, so devastating that soon it seeps into our subconscious and becomes a feature of both our waking and our sleeping lives. I have had countless dreams related in one way or another to the day in question or to the events of its aftermath – they all merge in my head now. Of course, the most logical way to recount it would be to start at the beginning.

I close the book and put it on the table – that's probably when the first one hit. 1:45pm, nearing the end of my allocated one hour lunch-break – double English awaits. I am sitting in the school-library. As part of a slightly naïve attempt at intellectual betterment I have committed myself to reading every work of 'classic' literature before the academic year is out. After just a week into the school year I am aware of the futility of my plans. Today's book is a play, *The importance of being Ernest* by Oscar Wilde. After a few minutes a classmate of mine approaches my table.

'Have you heard about New York?' he asks, rhetorically, 'A plane flew into a skyscraper...'

'Oh dear – that's... unfortunate.' I assume it is a by-plane, a freak accident.

A while later, on my way to double English, I see the same classmate:

'Hey!' he addresses a few of us, 'Another plane has hit another skyscraper...'

Please don't judge me too harshly for what I find myself thinking next. For a few seconds I hold onto the inane belief that the two “accidents” are merely been a coincidence, also I have just finished reading Oscar Wilde – the line just pops into my head : to crash one plane into a building may be regarded as a misfortune; to crash two looks like carelessness.

Throughout the afternoon, I hear increasingly fantastical rumours - the skyscrapers have fallen down, more planes have hit Washington, they're on their way to London. When I get home I find that they are mostly true. In the living room my family is seemingly locked in silent vigil over the TV. The TV report will last for a month or two.

Nine Eleven, Nine One One, for the greatest emergency in American history. When I wake from dreams connected to that day and to my reaction to it, I feel a profound sense of regret - not for the flippancy of my initial reaction, but for my reaction later that evening. I felt the attacks in New York as attacks on my culture. I even looked forward to America's exacting a brutal revenge. When I put those reactions into context with the murderous villainy which took place over subsequent years in Afghanistan and Iraq, I feel deeply ashamed.

I don't know, maybe such thoughts are inevitable... I have another dream of that day, a dream in which I have a bird's-eye-view over Manhattan. I am tracking the motion of a man in his late twenties as he runs in terror

down a city street. Blood is streaming down one side of his face, onto his pristine white shirt and silken blue tie. He has lost a shoe in his struggle to escape from

Ground Zero. Why is it that this recurring image of a white man wearing a suit in wounded panic is so unsettling, so horrific to me? Why do I not have any nightmares about Iraqis running from attacks against them? I suppose, deep down, we are all racist – most of us just keep our racism constantly in check.

I have more stories to tell and more dreams to recount, but I think I will leave it there. All this talk of global terror is making me feel sick.

Chapter 23

'You're mean, I hate you both...' With that, my five-year-old sister turns with a theatrical sweep of her dressing-gown and stomps back upstairs. We fall about laughing.

During the night, there is tendency for my sister's hair to become bunched up. The result is that in the morning it looks as if her head has grown. To two boys aged eight and eleven – especially two brothers – this is hilarious. It wasn't a regular feature of our childhood, but it was definitely a phase we went through, such that whenever I see someone now with a large head, I feel a mixture of amusement and guilt. My sister's bedroom door slams shut...

...I'm dreaming, but I'm not dreaming. I'm in that purgatory-like state of consciousness where I can reflect on a dream but at the same time, revert into it. It's strange to see my little sister in that light again – she is now married with two children. Who's laughing now? Not that she would laugh, but, you know...

I wake, and as soon I do, I hear the beeps on the radio – it's nine o'clock. I've taken to listening to Radio Four at night, for company, I suppose – it helps me sleep, too. It's strange, though, as with dreams, little snippets of news from the World Service come back to me throughout the following day – so that I'm no longer sure whether certain events really happened or whether they were just part of an elaborate

dream. The doorbell rings, heavy feet climb the staircase, a head appears from around my bedroom door

'Maanin', - the day's routine begins again.

'Hello.'

'Regents Park?'

'Mmn-hmn...'

*

We follow the same routine this morning, a bus to Victoria and a taxi to Regents Park Mosque. Order is once again restored, Gerald is waiting anxiously outside the café.

'Good morning, gentlemen!'

'Aaright, aaright!'

I smile.

'So... coffee?'

'Yes, but let's go somewhere different...'

'Right you are!' we take a path, zig-zagging its way through the park, until we find a café. We sit at a table outside – for a morning in mid-December it is fairly mild, sunny; full of promise. Potted Christmas trees mark out the seating-area and white fairy-lights are woven into the trellis on the wall behind us. I have a cappuccino and an almond croissant.

'One would scarcely believe it is almost Christmas!' Gerald says, squinting in the sunlight, sipping his espresso. '...Still reading Proust?'

'I think I will be reading him for another year or so...'

'I have been reading, too – Keats. Our trip to Hampstead inspired me – I went there again the next day to visit his house. I have been reading his letters.' Gerald pulls out a tatty-looking paperback from the pocket of his tweed blazer. 'I was reading one in the taxi on the way here...' he opens the book, a Paddington Bear bookmark falls out – I can't help but smile. 'This is from a letter he wrote to his brother about going for a walk with a friend...' he clears his throat and starts to read aloud, "...In those two miles he broached a thousand things – let me see if I can give you a list – nightingales, poetry – on poetical sensation – metaphysics – different genera and species of dreams – nightmare – a dream accompanied by a sense of touch – single and double touch – a dream related – first and second consciousness – the difference explained between will and volition..." I thought it rather fitting... as it were...'

'Definitely...'

Finishing his espresso, he takes a ten pound note from a different pocket and places it under his empty cup. 'Sitting comfortably? We shall begin... as it were...'

We leave the café and walk further through the park, down Avenue Gardens. There is no sign of rain, but the untrodden grass surrounding beds of winter flowers and ornamental stone fountains is saturated with dew. I am suddenly overtaken by a completely irrational desire to lie on the wet grass, to bathe in the cold freshness with the warm sun on my face, to stay like this for the rest of my life... we move on to Park Square East and cross Marylebone Road into Park Crescent.

'Very Parisian, these streets – the wide, stretching boulevards... the art-deco style houses... I suppose the whole concept of what we're doing is rather Parisian... circumstance and location mimicking state-of-mind... psycho-geography at work...'

At Portland Place and Langham Place the colour and architecture change. From black and white we move into sepia, from Victorian to a mixture of Georgian, Victorian and Modern. After walking briefly down Regent Street, we turn onto Great Marlborough Street.

'I say, I need to pee... I think I shall make use of the facilities in one of these shops...' We are standing outside a mock-Tudor building, a department store.

'How about this one, here?' I suggest. We go in. Gerald wanders off in search of a toilet, leaving Chris and me to browse the women's jewellery and accessories.

Gerald rejoins us a few minutes later, 'How about an early lunch? I saw the restaurant upstairs – very nice...'

I look at my watch, it's twelve-thirty, I only had breakfast about an hour ago, I'm not at all hungry... I never object to eating, though.

*

Lunch is a modest affair, given the exuberance of our surroundings. Everything, down to the cutlery, is in two predominant colours, beige and brown, apart from a single red flower in a vase at the centre of each table. I order the soup of the day and specifically ask the waitress not to tell me what it is. She looks at me

quizzically and smiles. I think she thinks I'm on a special outing from my day-centre – it's mushroom soup. Having finished lunch, we are waiting for the bill.

'I have an announcement to make,' Chris says, 'this'll be my last durrive for a while. My mum phoned me last night, she's bought me a ticket to fly home – I'll be spending Christmas in Jamaica – won't be back until mid-January...'

'... sounds great...' I say, trying to conceal my dismay.

'Yeah, I leave on Tuesday – I'll be with you this weekend, then my agency will find you a new carer...'

'Mmn, I'll speak to them...'

'I must say, our next *dérive* shan't be the same without you... you must take your own tropical *dérive*.'

'I promise!'

Back on street level, we turn down Great Marlborough Street, then Carnaby Street. The colour has drained from the day, though the sense of cosmopolitan vibrancy found in Beak Street, Marshall Street, Broadwick Street and Berwick Street shines through – we head further into Soho.

Gerald has taken to keeping a notebook with him. Every time we begin a new street, he writes down its name. As we walk through a relative maze, the task becomes almost obsessive - Wakkers Court, Brewer Street, Wardour Street, Old Compton Street...

As we walk down Greek Street, Gerald reads out the signs above the various strip-clubs. 'Lap dancing, pole dancing, non-stop striptease – crikey! Waitresses in bikinis, waiters in bikinis – good Lord!' Like watching a film with your parents in

which there is suddenly a passionate sex-scene, I've decided it is more than a little uncomfortable being here with him. At Soho Square, Chris and Gerald sit on a park-bench in the communal garden.

'Sorry – the relative elderly among us need to rest of their bones. Shan't be for long though, it's turned rather chilly... not much more of this for you, Christopher – what is it, thirty, thirty-five degrees out there?'

'It's paradise...' Chris says, dreamily.

After a minute or two Gerald rises. 'Where to next? Chinatown?' I nod. We walk down Frith Street and cross Shaftesbury Avenue into the hustle and bustle of Chinatown. Brief journeys down Gerrard Street and Wardour Street bring us on to Lisle Street.

'Coffee?'

'Mmn-hmn.'

We cross the road and go into a French-style bistro. Instead of coffee we order mulled wine and mince pies.

'These days are becoming so short now, there is scarcely time for a *dérive*... as it were... I say, do you think this a fitting end to our first *dérive*? Finishing with wine, our dear friend off to the New World...' Chris looks up in surprise.

'I agree, it would be somewhat poetic... I don't know why, but I've got a vague feeling that there is one stage left, that we must go just a bit further... As for the daylight thing – like you said, we don't have to strictly adhere to the rules – it's our *dérive*, we can do as we wish. Let's make our last *dérive* an evening one.'

'Yes! Let us meet in one of those restaurants we passed in Chinatown.'

'Right you are!' I say.

'When?'

'Erm... how about the Friday after Christmas?'

'Right you are!' Gerald says. He takes an age to finish his mince pie and wine, gazing, between mouthfuls, through the steamed-up window at the traffic, the Christmas lights and the darkness. 'So, Christopher,' he eventually says, 'I suppose this is farewell!'

'See you in a month...'

'With bells on... as it were...' he stands up, doffs his imaginary cap, turns and leaves.

*

Tonight, we go out to the pub with my dad. I think by eleven, Chris is fairly tipsy.

'See you tomorrow, N-Nick.'

'Hopefully...' I turn over and more or less immediately fall asleep.

Chapter 24

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell;
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

John Donne, Death

Contemplation of my own mortality is something which hasn't occurred to me until recently. In the last few weeks I've started to have a recurring dream at the end of which I die. Don't get me wrong, it's not a morbid dream, I don't wake from it in hysterical fear. I think I'm about nine or ten, walking home from school, along Dulwich Village and through Dulwich Park. In the park, I'm overcome by a sudden exhaustion – I lie down in a patch of long grass and succumb to the inevitable. Fairly obviously, this dream doesn't portray a specific incident from my past. As with most dreams, though, memories and familiar influences are strewn through it. I read somewhere that people we see in dreams, even strangers, are all variations on people we already know, the most fantastical dreams we have rely on memory, to a certain extent. In that case, I have seen death – and it is nothing.

I've decided it's almost impossible to describe the process of slipping into a dream. I don't mean Rapid Eye Movement or anything like that. I mean

the process as experienced by the actual dreamer. One moment there is nothing and the next there is everything, and because the dreamer is part of the illusion, nothing seems out of place or any different. As far as the dreamer is concerned a millisecond equates to a lifetime. So, as the curtain is abruptly raised on this one, I'm walking out through the gate of my primary school, down Turney Road, past my former infants' school and across to Dulwich Village. It is a warm, early summer's day, the cloudless skies seem to reflect the smile on everyone's face - pathetic fallacy, maybe even pathetic fallacy with a twist of irony, given what's about to transpire.

I'm an emotional chameleon – by which I mean my state of mind, the eyes through which I see the world modify to match those around me. If everyone's happy, I'm happy; if everyone's sad, I'm sad. I would make an awful Samaritan – they'd say “I want to kill myself”, I'd say “Right... Fair enough...”. I am happy today. On some level, I know what's going to happen, but I'm ok with that, too.

On past The Crown And Greyhound pub, past the capacious, fastidiously kept houses set back from the busy street, I reach a fork in the road. On my left is College Road, on my right is Gallery Road and my former nursery school. Between the two roads is the gleaming whiteness of Christ's Chapel, behind which is Dulwich Picture Gallery. I take College Road and head for the park gates.

I have walked this journey thousands of times, and in my sleep, thousands more. On days I deem special enough, I permit myself an ice-

cream – for I am generally quite an abstemious little character. There is no question about it, today definitely merits an ice-cream. As yet, of course, I have no idea why, it just does. I enter the park and walk down the centre of an empty road, bordered by

verges of grass and brightly coloured flower-beds. The road leads onto two immense and – given my diminutive size – seemingly boundless playing fields. I join a path to my right in order to get to the café.

My favourite flavour of ice-cream is rum and raisin, though that is mainly due to the novelty of its being rum-flavoured and my still being allowed to buy it. As I stand there devouring my purchase, I feel suddenly transported to adulthood – a vague, unimaginable time. After the ice-cream I could, normally do, turn left and walk home, but for reasons unknown to me I go straight on.

On my right is an adventure playground, on my left yet another far-reaching field, with several games of football being played on it. From one game, a ball escapes and comes bouncing towards me – it's at the pleasingly perfect height for me to chip back into the waiting arms of its owner.

'Thanks – would you like to play with us?' says the owner of the ball. He is about ten, the same age as me, obviously from that breed of unaccountably affable children. Coming from London I'm always a bit wary of friendliness among strangers.

'I'm sorry, i've got to go...' Where i've got to go, I don't know, though I'm aware that wherever it is, something needs to be fulfilled. Besides, I'm suddenly feeling indescribably tired.

At the end of the field I take a path leading to the left. Now the park becomes wilder, more herbaceous. It is that time of day when everything touched by the sun takes on a healthy glow – the children playing football, the bicycles speeding past me

on the pathway, the brightly-coloured group of 9 Rhododendron bushes ahead of me. I feel exhilarated, but at the same time, I don't know if I can go much further.

I cut through the rhododendrons and slump down in a soft nest of long grass. I lie on my back and look up at the bending rays of sunlight as they curve past the leaves and branches of nearby trees, casting dancing constellations of luminous shadow on me and on the grass around me. The clearing is almost completely encircled by trees – a temple, a mausoleum, of sorts. I have found it, my elysian resting-place. As I realise the end is in sight, my vision fades... I wake up, not in alarm, in peace; in an 'oh, right, that was nice' kind of mood.

Part Three : Christmas

The Clouds that gather round the setting sun
 Do take a sober colouring from an eye
 That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;
 Another race hath been, and other palms are won.
 Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
 Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
 To me the meanest flower that blows can give
 Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

William Wordsworth, Ode: Intimations Of Immortality From Recollections Of Early Childhood

Chapter 25

It is boxing day, I think I'm about sixteen, which would make it 1999. I am sitting at my Grandmother's dining room table. Opposite me in his wheelchair sits my brother and behind me in an armchair sits my sister. It's funny the way that random events and ideas from your memory merge inconspicuously together in a dream, creating a reality that while seeming perfectly natural is actually perfectly ridiculous. Yesterday morning, after exchanging presents, my parents were in the kitchen operating on the turkey, leaving us, my brother,, my sister and me in the sitting room to flick through the meagre offering of Christmas day television. On one channel was a film of *A Christmas Carol*. I wasn't really paying attention to it, it must have seeped into my mind unnoticed.

So, at this moment in my dream, I am part of *A Christmas Carol* – Scrooge. I don't think I have done anything wrong but nevertheless I am

graced by an unseen presence. The presence makes me look over to my sister, who is trying on a new pair of Christmas slippers – she is there but not there – I realise that she is the ghost of Christmas past. I look across at my brother who is cast in the same deathly light, my dad is helping him to a drink - he is the ghost of Christmas yet to come. That must make me the ghost of Christmas present. I look down at myself, I am indeed slightly translucent.

It is at this point in the dream that I become suspicious as to whether this is actually happening. At the centre of the table, my grandmother has an ornament she decorates it with every Christmas – it is four plastic reindeer walking along a track of polystyrene snow, the reindeer are red with gold antlers. In dreams I find that my doing something mundane, I snap out of it and wake up – often it is caused by bending down to tie a shoelace – but I now think that if I reach out to touch one of the reindeer's legs and remain in this reality, it will be real. I hold out a hand and gently pinch a leg of the one at the back... I am still here, just about. It must be real...

I am conscious, but not yet awake. The abrupt sound of the telephone downstairs completes the process. I draw back the duvet cover and look around. My dad must have been in here earlier because the curtains are partially drawn - a gentle hint that it is time to face another day. Yesterday was Christmas day. Outside it is cold, but this “bleak mid-winter” is “sunny and bright”. From my supine position I can only see the tops of trees and a pale, inky-blue, cloudless sky through the window. These days, I often wake up with a song in my head – just a few bars or a lyric, but it plays over and over. Today, *There'll be bluebirds over the white cliffs of*

Dover by Dame Vera Lynn is unaccountably accompanied by a calypso beat - in my imagination, Dame Vera is playing the steel drums.

My dad opens my bedroom door, 'It's for you, it's Gerald.' He hands me the phone and I reluctantly take it. Ordinarily, I don't like speaking on the phone and I've never spoken to Gerald on the phone before but I imagine with Gerald it will be even more awkward than usual.

'Gerald! Happy Christmas!'

'Ah! Indeed, likewise... as it were...'

Silence. I can't think of anything more to say. I'm about to go on with "So, what did you get?" when Gerald says, 'Would you like to meet my father? He would love to meet you – I'm sure...'

'Erm, yes, certainly...'

'Excellent! I shall commandeer one of those wheelchair taxis and drop by your house to pick you up at, shall we say, late morning-early afternoon?'

'What? You... sorry?'

'I shall see you anon...'

Gerald's voice is instantly replaced by the dialling tone.

*

I am waiting on the pavement outside my house as Gerald approaches in the taxi.

'Merry... um... Christmas!' Gerald stammers, opening the passenger door of the taxi, 'Have you been waiting long? You must be quite chill...'

'Merry Christmas! We're ok. Quite warm for the time of year, isn't it?' my dad replies.

'Glorious!' The driver gets out and pushes my chair up the fold-out ramp and into the cab.

'When do you think you'll be back?' my dad says to Gerald through the window.

'Oh, ahm... later, I should imagine...' The taxi pulls away, leaving my dad standing puzzled in the middle of the road. 'Nick! How are you? Christopher's replacement is a worthy one, I hope? How about that Senegalese fellow? Nice enough chap...'

'Actually I didn't replace him, my dad has been caring for me over the Christmas period.'

'Maybe he would like to accompany us on our final derive. This Friday evening still all right?'

'I think I'd rather do it in the new year...' I trail off, looking out of the window. I'm not exactly sure why, but now that the end of this *dérive* is in sight, I can't bring myself to end it.

*

At first it had seemed that Gerald was keen on the idea, but now he seems a bit nervous about the prospect of my meeting his father. As we approach the entrance to the retirement home, I can feel his hands shaking as they push my chair.

The place is more like a hotel than a retirement home. At the entrance a huge Christmas tree decorated with tiny blue lights stands before us in the corner of a wide, open-plan atrium, which leads into a large sitting room.

'That's my father over there,' Gerald points to a small man sitting hunched over in a huge armchair in a corner of the room. The man is reading, he doesn't see us. 'I'll just go and say hullo.'

We walk over to the armchair, the old man still doesn't look up. Gerald says, in his usual enthusiastic but slightly hesitant voice 'Hullo, father... umm, Merry Christmas!'

'Ahh, yes. Hullo... seasons greetings!'

'Father, this is Nick. Nick this is -'

'Wilberforce St Aubyn,' the old man declares. I have never asked Gerald his surname before, how very apt.

'Nice to meet you, Wilberforce,' I say.

'Don't call me Wilberforce. Call me Wilbur,' he pronounces, scornfully.

'Sorry, Wilbur,' I say.

'No harm done. Forget about it, I already have,' he says, and I believe him.

Gerald is hovering above a similarly well-proportioned armchair, unsure whether to sit or stand. In spite of their rather frosty opening exchange, I do not think there is any lack of affection or goodwill between father and son, just a shared awkwardness - it seems to run in the family. Eventually Gerald decides it would not be too ill-mannered of him to take a seat and perches on the edge of the armchair.

'Well, shall we go through to the dining room?' Wilbur suggests.

Gerald gets up immediately. 'Indeed, father. No time like the present!'

Wilbur leads the way into a huge dining room full of long, decorated tables lined with mahogany chairs. For me, today was supposed to be a day for recovery, a break between the turkey we had yesterday and the turkey we will have tomorrow. I don't even *like* turkey. A huge turkey on a trolley is paraded before us. My eyes meet it and I can feel a pained smile slowly form.

*

After a huge meal, Wilbur leads us back into the atrium, where a girl of about my age stands in front of an audience with a violin in her hand.

'Right, now then, I am going to play for you all a few songs by Glenn Miller. Who here can remember Glenn Miller?'

A sporadic and unenthusiastic affirmative slowly ripples its way through the audience of about thirty or so.

'Of course you do! Ok, to start off with I will play a song called, "In the mood". Do any of you remember the last time you were "in the mood"? No? Well anyway, I hope you like this song!'

She starts playing – she is good, very good. But that is not the point. She is nauseating, patronising to the point of ridicule. I look across to Wilbur, seated beside the Christmas Tree. I wonder what he is thinking – so far he has remained silent. He sits there, listening respectfully.

'There we go! Did we enjoy that? Right, now I'm going to play you all a medley of Glenn Miller songs from the thirties and forties. For this, I am going to need some participation from you lot! Now, when I start playing, I need you all to

pretend you are soldiers in the army and give me an army salute.' She demonstrates an army salute. 'Then, when I say, "ready!" I need you all to pretend you are riding a pony, like this' - she bobs up and down on her seat to imitate riding a pony. A few half-hearted attempts at riding a pony are made in the audience.

'Come on! We can do better than that. You, Sir,' she approaches Wilbur, 'you have a lovely pony there. Don't you want to ride him?'

Wilbur sits up. For a moment he scans the room behind the girl's shoulders. He clears his throat and leans forward, as if to intimate something quite profound to her. 'Fuck off, dear...' A few seconds of shocked silence ensue. Wilbur leans back in his chair, a harmless look of endearment on his face.

She turns, quickly walks back to her seat and starts to play her violin. As most of the audience give their tepid attempts at a salute I look across at Wilbur in admiration.

Maybe it's because deep down I'm just a cold-hearted cynic, but I'm delighted by what Wilbur said. Being in the position I'm in, I feel I have a certain affinity with the elderly. If I didn't live at home, with carers coming in to help, I would be living in a residential home and would be liable to this kind of treatment from people. Looking around the room, I'm sure some of these people are senile or suffer from dementia. I suddenly feel a pang of sympathy for the violinist – it can't be easy trying to gauge the right tone of voice to use for everyone. The assumption that everyone does in fact know who they are and where they are would be nice, though.

Slightly falteringly, Wilbur rises from his seat and, slightly too loudly, says, 'I am off to my room, you can accompany me if you so wish.' This must be Wilbur's standard form of invitation because Gerald gets up and we dutifully follow him.

Wilbur's room is exactly as I had imagined it – leather-bound books litter the floor and surfaces, old photographs and watercolour paintings of various landscapes occupy every inch of available wall-space, and a television – probably state-of-the-art in the early eighties – sits in the corner.

'Am I to believe you are an author?' Wilbur asks, accusingly.

'No, not yet... I haven't even finished my first novel, let alone had it published.'

'Hmn... probably best to finish your *dérive* first...' Wilbur mimics my surprise with a piercing look of his own. '... Gerald speaks of you incessantly.' He is starting to make me feel uneasy, as though he assumes Gerald and I are an item and we are at the “meet the parents” stage. '...Gerald had visions of doing the same thing as you,' he turns to Gerald, '... as I said to you in our tutorials, the vision would never amount to anything, just a flight of fancy.'

'My father was a don, teaching philosophy at Oxford – he taught me. Maybe I should have followed in his footsteps, who knows? I dare say, I have no idea...' Gerald explains diplomatically, he must be well accustomed to this particular exchange by now.

'There is no “*who knows*” about it...' They digress into a conversation about people I don't know. Meanwhile, my attention is grabbed by an old photograph of Gerald standing outside the Sheldonian Theatre, degree in hand, bohemian streak in

hair and rebellious glint in eye. I turn and face Gerald now, deep in discussion – so straight-laced, so understated – I find it hard to equate the two. Things didn't quite go according to plan for him after that photo was taken. Maybe he's tormented by the same sense of painful nostalgia as me...

'So, you were at Oxford?' Wilbur sees me looking at the photo.

'No, I was-' I begin to say.

'Cambridge...' he states, gruffly.

'No, I wa-'

'Would you like some mulled sherry?' he asks, holding a crystal decanter of something that looks and smells like cough mixture.

'Mulled sherry?'

'Yes, I... a mistake was made in its preparation.'

'Erm, yes please,' I say, slightly unsure.

'Oh! Marvellous,' he pours in earnest and hands me the glass, 'personally I find it quite horrid, but you may like it...'

I gingerly take a sip. I *do* like it. 'It's nice!' I encourage.

'Each to their own...' Wilbur muses.

I scan the room in search of something to re-ignite this odd conversation. On Wilbur's bed lies an open book, *Creative Evolution*.

'By Henri Bergson!'

'Oh, yes, him... Gerald was gibbering on about him the other day... I thought I would...as it were...'

Gerald picks up the book and starts to read from the open page, “In reality, the past is preserved by itself automatically. In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought and willed from our earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it, pressing against the portals of consciousness that would fain leave it outside.” He examines the book objectively, as if to assess its price. He carefully replaces it on the bed.

Wilbur has fallen asleep. For a minute, we watch and listen to the heavy and languorous breathing of the old man, no doubt both reflecting on the ominous and somewhat overbearing words Gerald has just read. If time really *is* a living continuum – which preserves and imprints itself on consciousness – the thought of Wilbur carrying around his ninety-six-years-worth of vacuum-packed past is tiring, to say the least. No wonder old people move so slowly.

With *dérive*-like intuition, Gerald and I quietly leave the room. We go back downstairs to order another taxi. In the lobby, we see the ill-fated violinist, packing away her instrument.

'I say – I am most *dreadfully* sorry about what my father said to you...'

'Oh! Don't mention it...' she says, turning to me and crouching slightly, '...hello! Did you like my playing?'

'Erm, very much so...' I say.

'Good! That makes it all worthwhile!'

Fuck off, dear... I should say. Unfortunately I lack the courage of Wilbur – I smile and Gerald waves as she leaves.

*

My dad helps me to bed tonight. All evening, I cannot get that Bergson quotation out of my mind - everybody I have ever met carrying their entire lives in their heads. One day, a machine will be invented that can reproduce the vision of the mind's eye, and we will have instantly made movies that would last for years and years. It is with this thought that I fall asleep.

Chapter 26

'For sleep, by slowing down the play of our organic functions, modifies the surface of communication between the self and external things. We no longer measure duration, we feel it. From quantity it returns to the state of quality. Mathematical determinations of elapsed time no longer occur, giving way to a confused instinct, capable as with all instincts when greatly slowed down, of committing enormous errors and also sometimes of proceeding with amazing assuredness.'

Suzanne Guerlac, Bergson: Thinking in Time

Assuredness - one thing I am lacking at the moment, though the wine I drank tonight has falsely told me that I have it in abundance. I have spent the evening in the company of my fellow interviewees, discussing – quite sincerely - things we knew nothing about. At one point we were dissecting and appraising Einstein's theory of relativity – I haven't got a clue about Einstein's theory of relativity, red wine does this to me. I am now in bed, in a large and lonely college dormitory, still marginally tipsy but no more – tomorrow is the big day...

This dream recounts my Oxford entrance interview intermingled with previous memories of Oxford. I have only ever been to Oxford a few times in my life, why my subconscious has granted it such phantasmagoric prescience I don't know – I just like it, it appeals to me. Walking through Oxford it sometimes feels as though you have unwittingly entered a parallel world - or at least strayed onto a giant, antiquated film-set, an archaic and grandiose microcosm set in the midst of normality. The first few times I went were for my dad's college reunions – garden parties to which families were invited. More recently I have come to see prospective colleges. As I say, in my dream I am

now in bed, staying a few nights for my exam and interview at St John's, my dad's former college.

Ever had a dream within a dream? That's what I often do now. Of course, to the sleeping mind it is nothing out of the ordinary – part of the course. But if, when you wake, you remember any of it, you can spend days puzzling over it. So I am lying in my wine-induced haze, and the next thing I know, it is a bright summer's day. For some reason I know I am at St John's, in the college gardens, standing before an ornamented wrought-iron gate. Through it I see a garden, a marquee on the lawn and several grown-ups milling around outside it. At the centre of the gate is a disc of burnished, brown stained-glass – I stand on my six-year-old tip-toes and peer through it. I could, I probably should open the gate, go to the marquee and find my parents – for the moment, though, I prefer to stay on the periphery, looking into the world in sepia – everything preserved in aspic...

I'm sure I have spoken before of my bafflement at the selective qualities of memory. Why on earth should I recall hanging around by a gate, but nothing else? Inconsequential details of events keep coming back to me, without the details of the actual event – I can't tell you the date of Princess Diana's death, for instance; I can however tell you which pyjamas I was wearing when I found out. So, after the little garden-gate interlude, I am back in my eighteen-year-old body – after my interview, my dad is taking me on a walking tour of Oxford. The creative portion of my brain has obviously chosen

to blot out the interview from my memory-bank. I can't remember what I said in the interview now - something silly, no doubt.

It is freezing – my feet are so cold, they are painful. It is mid-December, the tour – in my dream – is a mixture of Christmas trees, Christmas lights, flashbacks to childhood visits to the Ashmolean museum and the Bodleian library, and – for some reason, etched in my mind – walking under the Bridge of Sighs. Lastly, we are walking in the grounds of Magdalen College, through the deer park. I just have time to reflect that it might be nice to go to a university with its own deer park, when the dream ends, I wake up...

Looking back on it now – through the smallest vignettes of surrealist recollection – I think I am glad I wasn't offered a place at Oxford. Yes, there is prestige associated with having studied there, but would it have profoundly changed my life? Would I have been any happier had I gone to Oxford? To quote a good friend of mine, “Who knows? I dare say, I have no idea...”

And yes, I briefly fell in love with the place. I'm sure if I had lived there, its streets would have become as familiar to me as London's, I would have haunted *them* in my sleep, too. Oxford would *also* have become inextricably mine... but, two cities - that just seems selfish...

Chapter 27

So, the best pizza I have ever eaten was not – as you may expect, in Italy – but in Brighton. It is summer 2006, I am in Brighton with two – people - university friends I suppose, it's not important. We are sitting at table outside an Italian restaurant. The evening is warm but a cool sea-breeze glides in and out of the maze-like network of streets in the South Lanes. I do not recall what we have been up to today, but at the moment a happy satiety graces our table as we all quietly study the menus. From the table next to ours a couple are ordering their meals.

I am watching them with a carefree curiosity; after his girlfriend orders, the man points to something on the menu, 'I'll have that one...is that four seasons?' The waitress nods and thanks them. I had been wondering what to eat. When making any kind of minor decision I take my cues from other people.

The waitress approaches our table. My friends place their orders, they and the waitress then look at me. 'Quattro Stagioni,' I say in what I hope is an Italian accent. The waitress looks at me for a few seconds and smiles. Just because I have said two words in Italian, I'm sure she does not think that I speak her language but maybe from her first impression of me she thought I would have trouble ordering in English. I do not catch what she says as she leaves but I think the last word was 'grazie'.

There is a state of consciousness between dreaming and waking in which the mind, while being aware that a dream has just taken place is not completely alert to the fact you are sleeping. This state will critically analyse your dream and provide

pertinent memories to complement it – you experience something like a sequel to it. My sequential memory is of last week – yes, just a couple of years later - when I was in a restaurant with Gerald and Chris. Far from impressing the waitress with my Italian accent, I had to whisper my order into Chris' ear, who then had to relay it to the waitress... I will soon wake with a vague yearning for olives, capers and pancetta, and a definite feeling of loss...

I can hear voices, a clock above the fireplace strikes eleven times. I open my eyes on a softly lit room. Sheets have been draped over the two lamps, one in each far corner. A small candle burns in a translucent, amber bowl on the table before me. I am sitting, lying on a sofa, next to me is Lucy, diagonally opposite is James.

'Are we *that* boring?' James asks, drily.

'Erm...' but that is all I can manage. I am always slightly annoyed when I'm caught sleeping by other people, especially by James and Lucy – it's a sign of weakness. I have spent the day with them, the first and only day of the Christmas period, they are both flying back to Australia tomorrow. We rattle around all day in their gargantuan house – far too big for them – flitting between kitchens and sitting rooms – talking of everything and nothing. I have missed these conversations. James had earlier read my novel. He said it was “good”, which meant a lot to me – we both make a point of never paying any compliments to each other. The room we have

finally settled on is my favourite – its wooden floor is carpeted in places by various Persian rugs, the walls are of a soft grey tone, as are the thick velvet curtains. Opposite the sofa is a pair of French windows, flanked on either side by bay windows

that look out into a never-ending garden. In a corner of the room is a grand piano, which Lucy passes now, playing a brief tune on her way to get some more wine.

The sound of a car entering the driveway followed by familiar voices draws my eye towards the front door – after a few seconds, James's dad and Gerald come in.

'Hullo, children...' James's dad says, wearily.

'Hello, father,' James replies, as if to a business associate, 'hello Gerald, where have you both been tonight?'

'A dinner party...' his dad answers, yawning. He turns and swiftly disappears into the kitchen, passing Lucy on his way.

'Gerald! How are you?' She is already tipsy, and she's holding two more bottles of wine.

'I shan't complain! One mustn't complain!' Gerald comes over to the sofa and pats me on the head. 'Your father mentioned you were both here. Is this a flying visit?'

'Yep, back to Australia tomorrow,' James says.

'Ah! Yes, you have your scholarly commitments...'

James looks surprised for a moment, as if suddenly reminded he is doing a PhD, 'if you can call them commitments, yes. I'm studying anthropology.'

'Marvellous... and Lucy, what does the future hold for you?'

'Well, I am flying back to Sydney with James, staying in Australia for a month or so, then I am coming back to Europe – Italy. A friend of mine has just bought an

apartment in Venice... I have always wanted to live in Venice... And you? What are your plans?'

'Me? Oh, I think I shall be staying put. Hopefully I shall be doing a few more *dérives* with this gentleman,' he pats me on the head again, 'that and getting older, inevitably.'

'Yes, I hear you have been keeping our Nick company!' she adds a little giggle at the end. Lucy and James still cannot take seriously my friendship with Gerald. She sits down next to me, almost on top of me.

'I would rather say it has been Nick keeping *me* company... and Christopher, of course.'

'Who is Christopher? Have I met him?' James asks.

'No, he's my new carer – very good, I like him.' I say.

'A charming fellow... very keen on portable telephones...'

'Have you read Nick's "work in progress"? I had a look earlier...' says James.

'No, I think I would rather wait and see the finished article... as it were... what is your opinion?'

'Yes, Dr Chadwick, what *is* your opinion?' Lucy chides, also aware of her brother's aversion to compliments. She starts to stroke my hair.

'I thought it was good. One thing I would say is that... they're just dreams, just disconnected dreams. There's no continuity, no coherent plot. I'm not entirely sure whether it constitutes a novel.' James says, turning to me.

'Those are precisely my reservations. I have been thinking recently of interspersing the dream chapters with some reality – maybe writing about my *dérives*

in London, about conversations between me and you, Lucy, Gerald. They would provide an explanation for the dreams, and maybe they would carry a plot of their own.'

'Right... no offence – but that sounds shit.'

'Fair point...' I concede, smiling. James's dad comes back in from the kitchen, holding two tumblers of whiskey.

'I shall be waiting for you in the library...' he says.

'Right-o...' Gerald retorts, obediently. James continues, unperturbed,

'But other than that, I found it very... erm... positive. I suppose you could call it “life-affirming”. Not what I was expecting – you're always complaining, Nick.' A half-hearted compliment followed by an insult, that's more like it.

'I know, I can't explain it. With all the things I have to complain about, I could write a whole series of books, but as soon as I started, all this positivity started flowing. Besides, it would do no good to complain, not at this stage in my life – I don't want to take a parting shot at anyone...'

'Parting shot, not at this stage in my life - what are you talking about?'

'Nothing – I'm still talking shit...' The stroking increases in pace. My head now rests in Lucy's lap.

'Before I depart, we must arrange our final *dérive*. Tomorrow evening, at seven-thirty – what say you?' Gerald asks me.

'Mmm-hmm, yep, sure...' I say, eyes closed, drifting back to sleep.

'Excellent, I'll come to your house around seven... *arrivederci*... as it were...'

Chapter 28

*Mon enfant, ma soeur,
 Songe à la douceur.
 D'aller là-bas vivre ensemble!
 Aimer à loisir,
 Aimer et mourir
 Au pays qui te ressemble!
 Les soleils mouillés
 De ces ciels brouillés
 Pour mon esprit ont les charmes
 Si mystérieux
 De tes traîtres yeux,
 Brillant à travers leurs larmes.*

*Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,
 Luxe, calme et volupté.*

*Vois sur ces canaux
 Dormir ces vaisseaux
 Dont l'humeur est vagabonde;
 C'est pour assouvir
 Ton moindre désir
 Qu'ils viennent du bout du monde.*

*- Les soleils couchants
 Revêtent les champs,
 Les canaux, la ville entière,
 D'hyacinthe et d'or;
 Le monde s'endort
 Dans une chaude lumière.*

*Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,
 Luxe, calme et volupté.*

Charles Baudelaire, *L'invitation au voyage*

“A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:

Its loveliness increases; it will never

Pass into nothingness; but still will keep

A bower quiet for us, and a sleep

Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.”

I whisper these words into Lucy’s ear as she sleeps. Her eyes remain closed but a subtle smile slowly breaks across her face and she nestles her head deeper between the mattress and my outstretched arm. We are in

Venice, lying in a king-size bed in a huge and opulent hotel room. Around us, gleaming furniture, polished by passing years; high ceilings, bordered by bands of blue and gold; deep mirrors, shining in the reflected sunlight that seeps through a gap in the curtains; they all ornament the bedroom in abundant splendour.

This dream is different, on many counts. It's not recurring in any way, I have only had it once. Nor does it recount any kind of memory. I haven't even been to Venice. It's supposedly set some time in the near future. In the dream I have regained the ability to walk and I'm seemingly "with" Lucy, the sister of my best friend. Of course it is a fantasy, my mind's way of indulging me. I should, by all counts, be blissfully happy, instead I'm in a reflective, you might even say resentful mood...

I extricate myself from Lucy's warm embrace and leave her to her golden slumbers. Wearing only a pair of boxer shorts I walk across the room to the windows and draw back a curtain. The room looks out onto a narrow canal, along which a burdened water taxi makes sedate progress. On the other side of the canal rise the decadent, tired-looking palazzos I always picture when I imagine Venice. We are here for reasons quite inexplicable – a school reunion, a Venetian school reunion, though the guests are all people I have known in the past. The reunion was last night, which is why I'm reflective and resentful.

I'm hungry and thirsty and thinking of breakfast. When Lucy gets up maybe we could go to that café we found yesterday off St Mark's Square. On

the table to my left is a box of truffles and an opened bottle of champagne – congratulatory gifts given to me last night on account of my apparently miraculous

recovery. Naturally I received each gift and congratulation with gratitude and understated pride, but they all seemed to be accompanied by unspoken, unwritten sentiments that slightly upset me. People spoke to me as if with my newly regained ability to walk I had also gained a personality, an intellect. As they are the only edible things in the room – apart from Lucy, I think to myself - I smile at her and she stirs in response – I eat two of my *Well done on becoming a new person!* truffles, and wash them down with some *Welcome back to the human race!* champagne. It's flat.

I see her from the mirror on the dressing-table. Lucy gets up silently, creeps up behind me and presses her naked body against my back. I feign surprise, but the pleasure is all genuine. For a minute we stand, Lucy in my arms, gazing at ourselves in the mirror.

She listlessly raises her eyes to mine, 'Are you ok?' she asks, with concern.

'Yes, fantastic... It's just... I'm exactly the same person I have always been... it's other people's opinions of me that have changed... I just feel... I don't know...'

'I know,' and I believe she does. At times, it is almost scary – she seems to know me as well as I know myself. 'Well, before we have breakfast, would you like to fuck me?'

'Well, since you ask so nicely, how can I refuse?' She takes my hand in hers and, as she leads me back to bed...

...A sharp clap of thunder wakes me... I open my eyes, my head rests in Lucy's lap. No longer stroking my hair, I feel her breathing deep and heavy against my ear. She's asleep. Through the French-windows on the other side of the room, a streak of lightning momentarily illuminates the sprawling and desolate lawn, the rain is

torrential, the wind immense. Inside, the candle on the table has nearly burned out. My wheelchair is next to the sofa, reminding me that it was “just a dream”. From the room next door I can hear James laughing - it sounds as if Gerald is telling him a story. I think I catch the word “dérive”. I close my eyes and drift back to sleep.

Chapter 29

There is a room at the top of the dome on St. Paul's Cathedral – a library. I think there is, anyway. I think I saw it on television once. Either that or it is a complete fabrication of my mind. The room is big - about twenty feet in height and thirty feet in diameter – all along the circular wall, from floor to ceiling, are bookshelves full of old-fashioned leather-bound books. In the centre of the room is the only piece of furniture, a huge king-sized four-poster bed. I live here, I take it.

I am lying in the bed, though my eyes seem to be on the outskirts of the room. I seem to be engrossed in a book – it's one of those books with a silk-lined cover that has been tie-dyed with exotic colours and exuberant patterns. I'd better not disturb myself, so I quietly let myself out...

Once again I am awoken by the doorbell. I look up at the clock. It is coming up to seven pm. I don't know what's happened to me recently, I seem to be constantly falling asleep during the day. There is no one else in the room, I hope for a second that no one has been witness to the event, but from the hallway I hear my mum explaining to Gerald that I am fast asleep.

I said my farewells to James and Lucy this morning, it was as awkward as ever. After spending the whole night asleep in Lucy's arms we both wake at the same time in the early hours of this morning, and take the same cue from each other's faces, which betray our abashed discomfort. Like two strangers who, on a long coach-

journey, discover they've both been sleeping in compromising positions, we silently move to opposite ends of the sofa and pretend to instantly fall asleep again. Lucy and James are leaving the country tonight, but they are busy during the day – so my dad comes at eleven to pick me up. My parting with James is friendly, but at the same time formal. With Lucy it's similar – affectionate but uneasy. With hindsight of course, such a parting is inevitable – I am never honest about my feelings, not deceitful, just never honest.

'Good morrow! How art thou... as it were?' I wave in partial response, not yet awake enough to speak.

'Hello Gerald, happy new year!' My dad comes into the room behind Gerald.

'Ah, yes... quite... Will you be accompanying us tonight?'

'I'd love to, I'm afraid I can't, though. I'm in a play with my local amateur dramatics group. Tonight is my first rehearsal.'

'Ah, break a leg... as it were... I think I should be able to, push, and so forth.' Gerald doesn't sound too confident, 'So, we shall see you... ahm...'

'Later?'

'Precisely!'

My dad helps me from the sofa into my chair, out through the front-door and we are on our way down the road to the bus-stop.

We take a bus as far as Trafalgar Square and then walk to Chinatown, finding a restaurant on Wardour Street. Apparently, about ten years ago, Gerald took some evening classes in Mandarin, in which he insists on ordering now. Our obsequious waiter stands patiently at our table – pad and pencil in hand – while Gerald labours to decipher the menu. We are both ordering at random tonight, so it really doesn't matter.

*

The meal was delicious. I have no idea why I don't eat Chinese food more often - still, I have that thought whenever I eat food of any nationality. We are now waiting for coffee.

'Have you made any new year's resolutions, Gerald?'

'Me? Oh no – I rather think I'm too old for that sort of thing... keep breathing, I suppose. And yourself?'

'It's not very interesting, I'm afraid... it's to take more of an active role with regards to my medical condition – find out more about it, go to more appointments, see if there is anything I can do to help myself. In the past, I have shied away from finding out more about my condition – I didn't want to know what was going to happen to me, I saw no point in fighting against the inevitable. If nothing else, with knowledge I might be stronger, better able to face the future.'

'I think you cope with your various problems quite admirably...'

'Thank you... but the truth is, I'm teetering on the edge...' Gerald helps me to my coffee, which arrived a moment ago. I need a pause to collect my words, I've never spoken these thoughts to anyone before, I collect carefully... 'you know the phrase about clutching at straws? Well, I believe that everyone is born with a handful of straws – as yet they are straws of potentiality – they come to represent the things that you care about, the things that define you... hobbies, abilities, loves... In recent years I've had to let go of most, I only have a few straws left to clutch... lose many more and I don't know what I'll do, what I'll be...'

Gerald takes a ponderous sip of coffee. He is quiet for a minute, lost in thought. Why do I always do this, ruin a perfectly nice evening in the space of a few words? He deeply inhales, and after an audible exhalation says, 'Alors, nous dérivons?'

'Bien sûr...' I haven't finished my coffee but, bien sûr...

It is cold outside, but unusually for a January evening the still air has a soft and almost inviting quality to it. We leave Chinatown and rejoin Charing Cross Road. A few tourists wander past, 'dérive-style', as we follow a long procession of red buses and black taxis down into Trafalgar Square. A tall tree still stands in the centre of the square, our Christmas present from Norway. I suppose they'll be taking it down tomorrow. We stop at the bottom of the square, looking back beyond the column beyond the tree at the National Gallery.

'Next?' Gerald asks, but continues without waiting for an answer 'How about we end this chapter of our journey at the river... now that we have 'de-banked', let us 're-bank' – as it were... I know of a street that runs alongside Charing Cross station, it leads through the Embankment gardens to the river. How about it?'

'Sounds like a plan.'

'Ahh... excellent!' says Gerald, looking at his watch.

We unhurriedly make our way to Charing Cross station, turn down Clarke Street and into the deserted gardens. Down here – by the river – a cool and gentle breeze blows, as if to announce the imminent arrival of something momentous.- but here there is only calm. Gerald pushes me over to a park bench and takes a seat.

'So – to conclude... have these *dérives* helped you to resolve those uncertainties you were having over your novel?'

'Erm...' I haven't considered this for a while. 'I think they have,' I say, tentatively, 'I think they will.'

'... Indeed!' Gerald replies 'Yes – I suppose the next question is – where does our next one take us?'

'I'd quite like to go east. Start at Covent Garden and leave the rest to chance.'

'A good idea! And then we could go west. .. Kensington, Chelsea, Richmond, Kew?' Gerald seems to be asking.

'The choices are endless...'

There is a comfortable gap in the conversation while we both collect our thoughts. It is hard to believe, as we sit secluded in this quiet garden, that we are surrounded by a thriving metropolis.

'I think it would be rather poetic if we were to finish our *dérive* on the Jubilee footbridge, where you started your novel...' Gerald finally says.

'... Where I ended my life?' I reply, smiling. We walk out of the gardens towards the lift that will take us up to the bridge.

The lift-doors open, we walk in, go up and come out again onto the bridge 'Ahh, there she is...' Halfway down the bridge - looking up at the London Eye – is the diminutive but unmistakable figure of Lucy. We approach her, me open-mouthed, Gerald, behind me, probably with a grin on his face. It is unexpected, I'll give him that.

'Oh, hello there!' Lucy says, turning abruptly '... I decided not to go back with James... thought I would stay here for a while... Gerald was telling me about your *dérive*... it sounds fun - can I join you?'

We speak in subtexts, Lucy and I. Though I think, I *hope* I understand this correctly. While she is talking, I am planning what I will say in response, aware of the potential momentousness of the question. But at the last minute I falter, 'Erm... if you want...' I stutter.

'I do,' she says, succinctly and decisively. She comes to stand behind me and rests one hand on my shoulder. No need for more words, we'll come to those later.

I peer through the railings, down at the river. The word nostalgia hits me again as a pang of inescapable nausea. That word has been haunting me for years - nostalgia – sickness for return. Tonight, though, I feel is a night for transcendence, for revelation and resolution. What occurs to me is obvious, but it strikes me as shrewd and unprecedented – that is, that the past is irrevocable, the future unknowable; the

present is all that matters. And the present is ultimately how you choose to see it, the choices are endless. In short, life is what you make of it.

The reality I knew in the past no longer exists. Remembered time and experience belong now only to the little world of space where I map them for my own convenience – past instances of happiness are no more than thin slices held between the continuous impressions that compose my life. Marcel Proust put it better than I ever could. Remembrance of things past is but regret for moments lost. Memories of countries, cities, people, are all as fugitive as the years.

'Look!' Lucy says in abrupt excitement, pointing down at a figure standing at the edge of a wall overlooking the river. He looks down at the water, indecisive.

'Indeed! Standing perilously close to the edge... I *do* hope he doesn't jump – as it were,' Gerald says.

'Lets go and save him!' Lucy cries, characteristically melodramatic, running down the bridge towards the steps. Gerald, doing his best to keep up, pushes me in hurried pursuit into the open lift. We can't catch her, though. As we descend, I hear her shout excitedly;

'Please! Don't kill yourself! I'm sure you have lots and lots to live for!' the lift-doors open again and we rush out.

'I say, are you all right?' Gerald rejoins in a breathless but more measured tone.

The man turns in obvious bewilderment, a camera - formerly pointed at the Houses of Parliament – at his side. 'Oh, yes! It's just... beautiful!'

'Why - indeed, my dear fellow! Indeed!' Gerald says. I open my mouth to say something similar, but... I can't articulate. I silently nod

I turn my head to see Lucy and Gerald standing a few feet behind me, also watching the brightly lit buildings across the water. Their heads are haloed by neon-blue lights arranged in the branches of a nearby row of trees, their eyes captivated by the relentless flow of the smooth, vital river.

Into the midnight air break the all-too-familiar chimes of Big Ben, simultaneously marking the end of one day and the beginning of the next. We all watch and listen to the clock in silent reverence. The silence between each sombre strike is broken only by the drone of a plane overhead. I look up at it, and though I can't see it, I decide there is a *Qantas* logo on its tail. I keep watching the plane as it slowly disappears from sight, embarking on its epic journey. Maybe it is merely due to the singularity of the moment, but I think for the first time in years I can see the stars sparkling in the London sky. A vision? A lucid dream? The chimes have finished. Am I awake or asleep?

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