



DIVIDED KINGDOM

'Full of contemporary relevance, ambitious scope,
vivid imagination and wonderful rich-textured prose'

Sunday Telegraph

RUPERT
THOMSON

B L O O M S B U R Y

Praise for *Divided Kingdom*

‘Wonderful and full of wonders ... a uniquely disturbing tale for our time’ *Literary Review*

‘The ideas behind Thomson’s novel buzz with originality, sparking contemporary connections and recalling *Brave New World* and even *Gulliver’s Travels*’ *Observer*

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‘With *Divided Kingdom* Thomson extends the reach of his matchlessly strange imagination to create a tightly-knit, deftly-designed political fable and a richly ingenious satire on the arbitrary classifications that often fix our identity’ *Independent*

‘Arresting ... compelling ... Thomson’s most striking talents as a writer are his extraordinarily vivid descriptions and his often hallucinatory imagination ... He is one of the supplest and most imaginative of British novelists’ *LA Weekly*

‘It would be cruel to deprive anyone of the imaginative pleasures, surprise and suspense that [*Divided Kingdom*] offers. Thomson’s new world is utterly menacing and intensely satisfying’ *Newsday*

‘*Divided Kingdom* is Thomson’s best yet; it might be, in fact, his *Brave New World*’ *Salon*

‘A worthy successor to such iconic nightmares as *1984* and *A Clockwork Orange*’ *Seattle Times*

‘Gripping ... genre-defying ... thrilling, insightful, eloquent, moving, wonderful’ *The Tampa Tribune*

‘Thomson is a true master ... He creates a glittering palette of characters with extraordinary insight into the bizarre psychology that makes us all unique – or makes us all the same – depending on how you see the world’ *San Francisco Chronicle*

DIVIDED KINGDOM

RUPERT THOMSON

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

To darling Eva, with a love that knows no boundaries

It was as if a curtain had fallen,
hiding everything I had ever known.

-Jean Rhys

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By the Same Author

Chapter One

There were men in my room, and it was bright, too bright, and I was being lifted out of bed. I didn't struggle or cry out; I didn't make a sound. The uniforms they wore felt cold, as if they had just been taken from the fridge.

I was told to wait on the road outside our house. Rain drifted past the street lamp, rain so fine that I could hardly feel it. I watched as a soldier fastened a strip of cloth around my upper arm. My shadow bent where it fell across the kerbstone, like a piece of cardboard folded in two places.

They put me in the back of a lorry, along with people of every age, all of whom wore armbands, none of whom I recognised. No one spoke, or even moved. I remember no violence, only the silence and the constant, weightless rain.

From where I was standing, by the tailgate, I could see my parents. They hadn't had time to dress properly. My father wore pyjamas, a suit jacket and a pair of slippers, and his face had lines and creases on it, as though sleep had crushed him in its fist. My mother's feet were bare.

My mother's feet ...

And her blonde hair flattened slightly on one side where it had rested against the pillow. She was calling my name in a high, strained voice, and reaching out to me, her fingers clutching at the air. Embarrassed, I turned away, pretending I didn't know her. I smiled apologetically at the people around me.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

That's how my memory begins.

No, not my memory. My life.

When dawn came, I was standing on a railway platform. The sky had clouded over, a swirl of white and grey above the rooftops, and there were puddles everywhere. A goods train rumbled through the station without stopping, its trucks heaped with coils of barbed wire. I was handed tea in a plastic cup and a slice of bread that was thinly spread with margarine. Now it had got light, I could see that the cloth band round my upper arm was red. I didn't feel homesick, only cold and tired, and I seemed to understand that I shouldn't think too deeply, as someone who swims in a river might stay close to the bank for fear of treacherous currents.

That same day, after a journey of many hours, we arrived at a large, dilapidated house in the country. There were only eight of us left by then, all boys. Thorpe Hall crouched in a depression in the land, a kind of shallow, marshy bowl, and the property was surrounded by woods, the massed oaks and chestnuts flecked with silver birches, like a head of hair beginning to turn grey. A moat encircled the house on three sides, the surface of the water cloaked in slime, the banks fenced off by reeds. Ancient stately fish glided through the stagnant depths, the gold of their scales spotted and stained, as if with ink. The lack of elevation and the narrow lead-paned windows gave the house a prying, shortsighted look. I had the feeling it was aware of me. If I ever ran away, it would somehow know that I had gone.

By the end of my first week our numbers had swollen to more than seventy, the oldest boy being fourteen, the youngest five. In charge of us were two grown-ups, Mr Reek and Miss Groves, and they issued us with grey blazers, each of which had a scarlet peacock stitched on to the breast pocket. The house counted eighteen bedrooms altogether, but conditions were cramped and primitive, and some boys, myself included, had to sleep on horsehair pallets in the upstairs corridors.

Winter had set in, and none of the radiators seemed to work. In certain rooms the chill stood s

thick and solid that I couldn't believe it wasn't visible; if I walked through a room like that, my hands would feel cold for minutes afterwards. I scratched my initials in the ice that formed on the inside of the windows, not knowing that my name would soon be taken from me. There was no laughter in the house during those first few days, no grief either, just a curious vacant calm – a sort of vacuum.

In the small hours vixens tore the air with their shrill cries.

One boy hung himself in an upstairs lavatory. His body was removed the same evening in an ambulance. I saw no blue lights flashing on the drive. I heard no siren. Nothing disturbed the darkness and silence that surrounded us. Two days later, a service of remembrance was held in the chapel. In his sermon the vicar described the boy's death as a tragic accident, though everybody knew the truth lay elsewhere. Another boy was found striking his head repeatedly against a wall. He, too, was removed from the house, and no one ever saw him again. These were the early casualties of the Rearrangement, as it was called, and they were seldom spoken about, and then only in hushed tones in some distant corner of the garden, or in bed at night once all the lights had been switched off.

We no longer had to wear the strips of red cloth on our arms, but I would sometimes feel a slight constriction, a tightness around the muscle, and I would find myself glancing down to make sure it wasn't still there.

Christmas came.

On Christmas Eve we watched a carol concert on TV. Mr Reek tried to encourage us to join in with the singing, but we had no hymn books and very few of us knew all the words. In the middle of a carol I saw my parents at the far end of the room. They were smartly dressed, my father in an overcoat, my mother in a knitted shawl and knee-length boots. They would be on their way to midnight mass, I thought, and I rose to go with them. By the time I reached the door, though, they had gone. I called for my mother and felt someone take my hand, but when I looked up it was just Miss Groves. I managed not to cry until I was upstairs, in my bed.

The next morning I stood by the tree with all the other boys. We got one present each. Mine was a pair of socks, powder-blue, with a pattern of brown puppies up the side. I remember thinking that there must have been some kind of mix-up. I remember, also, that there was nobody to thank.

It didn't snow.

Early in the new year an official from the government paid us a visit. At breakfast that day we were told that he was a highly distinguished man and that we should all be on our best behaviour. I watched from a window on the first-floor landing as the limousine slid down the drive on wide, fat tyres, its black roof gleaming in the winter sun. I would have given anything to have had a ride in it. Later, we assembled in the main hall. With his sparse, chaotic hair and his drab raincoat, the government official came as something of a disappointment to us – I suppose we had been expecting him to be glamorous, like his car – but then he began to speak.

'Children of the Red Quarter,' he said, and a thrill went through every one of us. We didn't know what the man meant exactly, but clearly he was referring to us. Children of the Red Quarter was what we were. What we had become.

In his speech he told us we should be proud of ourselves. 'You're to be admired,' he said, 'because you're rare. Although there are only a few of you, your significance cannot be overestimated. The future depends on the example you set to others. One might even say that the fate of the entire nation rests in your hands.'

Afterwards we ran down the corridors and out on to the drive, all holding imaginary steering wheels and making engine sounds. We had, each one of us, become the chauffeur of that shiny night black limousine. *Children of the Red Quarter*, we were shouting. *Children of the Red Quarter*. We still had no idea what it meant. We were excited without knowing why. It was the effect of flattery

instantaneous and powerful, but strangely hollow too.

That night we ate pork that had been roasted on a spit, and we drank juice made from crushed apples, and we were allowed to go to bed an hour later than usual, on account of it being such an important occasion.

On the following Monday classes began in the old ballroom. Along one edge of the room four windows stretched from floor to ceiling. Through their watery, distorting glass I could see the formal garden with its lawn, its box hedges and its gravel paths. The other side of the ballroom had been panelled in wood and painted a delicate shade of green. Set into the panels, and echoing the windows in their dimensions, were four mirrors in which the light that flowed in from outside seemed to deepen and shimmer. At the far end of the room stood a low stage where string quartets or dance bands would once have played. Sometimes I would catch a glimpse of a trombone in the shadows, or the curve of a French horn, the brass perfectly smooth and glowing, like honey poured over the back of a spoon, and sometimes the air would rustle at my elbow, a flurry of movement that only lasted a second, as if a girl in an evening gown had just whirled by. I never felt the room was haunted. I simply thought it had seen happier days, livelier days, and that traces of that time remained, as the smell of toast or bacon will linger in a kitchen long after breakfast is over.

Desks had been arranged in rows on the parquet floor, and we were seated alphabetically. My name being Micklewright, I found myself between Maclean and Abdul Nazir. Nazir was always crying, or on the point of crying, the dark sweep of his eyelashes permanently clogged with tears. I hadn't cried at all except for once, on Christmas Eve, after the carols, but I'd had no sightings of my parents since that night. There was something in me, perhaps, that couldn't stand it. Couldn't stand to be reminded. I often had the feeling, looking at Nazir, that he had taken on the burden of my sadness, and that he was crying not just for himself but for me too. As for Maclean, he didn't seem remotely upset. If I caught his eye, he would flick paper pellets at me. He had long bony wrists, and both his ears stuck out like the handles on a sporting trophy. Our teacher was the stout but enthusiastic Miss Groves. Sitting beneath crystal chandeliers, frowned down upon by several gilt-framed portraits of men in armour, we were to learn about the new political system that had come into being, and why the government official thought we were so special.

On our first morning Miss Groves taught us about our country's recent history. It had become a troubled place, she said, obsessed with acquisition and celebrity, a place defined by envy, misery and greed. Crime was rampant: the courts were swamped, the prisons overflowing. Divorce followed marriage as quickly and predictably as teenage pregnancies followed puberty. Homeless people slept in every doorway, ditch and underpass. Racism was more widespread and more firmly rooted than ever before. Violence lurked round every corner. It wasn't just a matter of grown-ups killing grown-ups. Children were killing children. With the police force woefully undermanned, people had started taking the law into their own hands. If you didn't like the way somebody drove, you smashed his headlights with a jack. If you had a suspected child molester living in your neighbourhood, you lynched him. If a burglar broke into your house, you shot him dead. For decades, if not for centuries, the country had employed a complicated web of manners and convention to draw a veil over its true nature, but now, finally, it had thrown off all pretence to be anything other than it was – northern, inward-looking, fundamentally barbaric.

It had been a time for extreme measures, Miss Groves went on, two smudges of pink colouring her cheeks, and the government had not flinched from its responsibility. The Prime Minister and the members of his cabinet had met in secret chambers, far from the eyes and ears of the electorate. Down there – for the chambers were underground, relics of a war that had been fought roughly half a century before – they talked, they argued, they even wept, and in the end they reached a decision: they were

going to do something bold, something extraordinary ... In our makeshift classroom, we were breathless with anticipation. Miss Groves told the story so well, with such a gripping command atmosphere and detail, that we could hardly wait to find out what happened next. At this point however, she stepped back.

‘See you here at nine o’clock tomorrow,’ she said.

We were there, of course. We were even early. We were going to school, we were being taught history of all things, but at the same time we were learning about ourselves, what had happened in the recent past and what would happen in the near future. Our lives had become books that we couldn’t put down.

What the government had decided to do, Miss Groves told us on that second morning, was to reorganise the country’s population – the entire population, from the royal family down. She paused. It was a lot to take in. We had probably heard the word ‘rearrangement’, she went on. Well, that was the name they had given their initiative. They divided the population into four distinct groups, not according to economic status or social position, not according to colour, race or creed, but according to *psychology*, according to *type*. How had they defined types of people? Miss Groves turned to the blackboard and wrote THE HUMOURS in block capitals. She asked whether any of us knew what the words meant. No one did.

For almost two millennia, she said, from Hippocrates onwards, medicine had been based on the idea that there were four bodily fluids or humours – black bile, yellow bile, blood and phlegm. She glanced at Maclean. We both wrinkled our noses. But Miss Groves had already faced the blackboard again, and she was drawing a large circle, which she proceeded to divide into four equal sections. She wrote BLACK BILE in one section, YELLOW BILE in another, and so on, until each section contained a humour. It was then that a boy called Cody interrupted her.

‘What about piss, Miss Groves?’

Laughter skittered through the ballroom, a brittle, breathy sound, like leaves being blown across the floor. Leaves that were dead, though. Miss Groves swung round. Her face was stiff, and all the colour had drained from her lips and cheeks.

‘Who was that?’

Cody put his hand up. ‘It was me, Miss. I wanted to ask about urine. Isn’t urine a bodily fluid?’

He had something of the fox about him, I’d always thought, his brown hair tinged with red, the cast of his features alert, sardonic, sly.

‘Leave the room, Cody. I’ll deal with you later.’

All eyes followed Cody as he stood up and walked to the door.

‘Any other questions?’ Miss Groves said.

I stared at the scarred lid of my desk, my heart beating hard, my throat dry. I felt Miss Groves’ gaze pass over my head like a searchlight’s penetrating beam.

‘I want you to imagine,’ she said carefully, her voice still drawn tight, ‘that the circle is your body. Imagine your good health depends on the correct, the *judicious*, balance of all the humours. Once you’ve imagined that, then let the idea expand. Imagine the circle is the whole country – the body politic, as it’s sometimes called.

‘You see’ – and she stepped towards us, enthusiasm rising in her once again – ‘the theory of the humours is built on notions of harmony and equilibrium, and these were the very qualities that were lacking in the country prior to the Rearrangement. In the deep and distant past doctors used humours theory to address all kinds of human ailments, everything from physical infirmity to moral imperfection. All of a sudden, though, it was the body politic that needed treatment.’

The wind lifted and hurled itself against the tall windows. Above our heads the chandeliers

shuddered and shook like glass birds ruffling their feathers. I thought of Cody waiting in the draught corridor outside and wondered whether he was beginning to wish that he had held his tongue. —

There were four humours, Miss Groves explained, and each humour could be matched to a different personality or character. She drifted towards the blackboard again. Under YELLOW BILE she wrote CHOLERIC, under BLACK BILE she wrote MELANCHOLIC, under PHLEGM, PHLEGMATIC, and under BLOOD, SANGUINE. Difficult words, she said, turning back to us, but not so difficult to understand. Choleric people were known for their aggressive qualities. They led lives packed with action and excess. Melancholic people, by contrast, were morbid and introspective. What interested them was the life of the mind. Phlegmatic people were swayed by feeling. Empathy came naturally to them, as did a certain spirituality, but they tended to be passive, a little sluggish. As for sanguine people, they were optimistic, good-humoured and well-meaning. They were often held up as an inspiration to others. Miss Groves's eyes swept over our faces. 'Do you see where this is going?' she said. 'No, not yet, perhaps. But you will – you will.' And she smiled knowingly.

That night, in the bathroom, Cody showed us the backs of his thighs. The skin was striped with livid weals where Miss Grove's cane had landed, but he had no regrets. Rather, he seemed to view the punishment as the price he had paid for some valuable information, which he was now in a position to pass on.

'When she beats you she sort of grunts,' he said, 'just like a sow.'

During the next few days Miss Groves gave us the rest of the story. Everyone in the country had been secretly examined, assessed and classified, all in strict accordance with the humours. As categories they were only approximate at best, and there had been injustices, of course there had, but that could not be helped. At this point she had stepped forwards again, her eyes seemingly lit from the inside like lamps. In times of crisis, she said, the good of the many always outweighed the misfortunes of a few, especially when the health of an entire nation was at stake.

Once the population had been split into four groups, the land was divided to accommodate them. What had been until then a united kingdom was broken down into four separate and autonomous republics. New borders were created. New infrastructures too. New loyalties.

'All this is going on,' Miss Groves said, 'even as we speak,' and turning to the nearest window, her face took on a kind of radiance.

In her opinion, symbolism would play a crucial role during this transitional phase. People's lives, both public and private, had been disrupted. They had to be given something fresh, something clean and powerful, with which they could identify. It had been decided that the countries would be colour-coded. The territory assigned to those with a choleric personality would be known as the Yellow Quarter, cholera being associated both with yellow bile and with fire. Since phlegm was allied to water, the home of the phlegmatics was to be the Blue Quarter. Although melancholia originated in black bile, the authorities rejected black as a defining colour. It had too many negative connotations. They drew on the earth instead, which was the melancholy element, and which was generally personified in ancient iconography as a woman in green garments; it was to the Green Quarter, therefore, that the melancholic people would belong. As for sanguinity, it derived from blood. The region set aside for those of a sanguine disposition became the Red Quarter.

To strengthen the identity of the four new countries, each had been provided with its own flag. In one of her lighter, more creative moments, Miss Groves invited us to come up with our own version based on what we had already learned. A fair-haired boy called Jones won first prize. His design – flag for the Red Quarter – made use of a magnified photograph of blood, which he'd found in a magazine. The pattern of red and white corpuscles looked industrious and poetic, and it was

wonderfully clever too: all sanguine people would carry their national flag inside themselves, whether they liked it or not (so would everybody else, of course, but as Jones quietly pointed out, for them it would be something to aspire to, a goal, a dream).

After the prize-giving, Miss Groves produced examples of the real thing. The choleric flag had a yellow background on which there stood a salamander. According to Aristotle and several other early naturalists, the salamander was believed to live in fire. On the phlegmatics' flag a sea horse floated on a cobalt ground, the sea horse suggestive of the diffident, the indeterminate, while the melancholic flag showed a rabbit crouching on a field of green, the rabbit being one of the animals used in the iconological representations of the earth. The flag that would fly in sanguine territory was a peacock resplendent on a scarlet ground. Those of sanguine temperament were held to be ruled by the air, and Juno, its goddess, was often portrayed in a chariot drawn by peacocks. Though the use of animals appealed to me, especially the mythical salamander, I still thought Jones's effort outshone everything I'd seen, and I told him so, which made him blush and look away.

In Miss Groves's final lesson, she returned to her point of departure. A chill wind blew that morning, and the chandeliers shivered and chattered overhead. Untidy scraps of grey cloud flew past the windows. The desk to my immediate right stood empty. Poor Abdul Nazir had been removed from the house some days before.

'The reason why you are special,' she said, 'as I'm sure you will have realised by now, is because you have all been classified as sanguine.' She raised her voice a little, to combat the moaning of the wind. 'If you will bear with me, I would just like to read you a short passage from a work that was written more than four hundred years ago.' Producing a small thick book with a cover of worn brown leather, she cleared her throat and began:

If there were a monarch or prince to be constituted over all temperatures, this sanguine complexion should, no doubts, aspire to that hie preheminance of bearing rule; for this is the ornament of the body, the pride of humours, the paragon of complexions, the prince of all temperatures. For blood is the oile of the lampe of our life.

Even when she had fallen silent, Miss Groves continued to stare at the page from which she'd read, then she slowly closed the book and let her eyes pass solemnly across our faces. 'You have been wonderful pupils,' she said, her voice trembling now, 'and I have nothing left to teach you. Go out into the world and do your best. I wish you all every success.' With that, she turned and hurried from the room.

Maclean nudged me, and I looked round. The light shone through his big, translucent ears. 'A little too much phlegm this morning,' he said, 'don't you think?'

He had learned his lessons well.

Among other things, Miss Groves had taught us that the family had been in serious decline for years, decades even, and it was a measure of people's conservatism, their fear of change, that the idea had lasted as long as it had. How could people with little or nothing in common be expected to live together? How could they achieve stability, let alone happiness? Anyone with an ounce of common sense could see that it was a recipe for disaster. In short, the family could be held responsible for society's disintegration, and the politicians who masterminded the Rearrangement had felt compelled to acknowledge the fact. But how to act on it? They soon realised that the answer was already lying on the table in front of them. If they rearranged the population according to the humours, then they would automatically be dismantling one concept of family and establishing another in its place. The new family would be a group of people who shared a psychological affinity – people who got on, in other

words. Blood ties would be set aside in favour of simple compatibility, and if that wasn't a proposition on which to base an efficient and harmonious society, Miss Groves had argued, then she would like to know what was.

As the weeks went by, I noticed that the number of boys being billeted at Thorpe Hall was gradually decreasing. By the end of February only thirty-six of us remained. Slowly but surely the authorities were finding us new families, new places to live. You never knew who was going to be taken next, though, or whether you would ever see each other again. In this uncertain climate, our friendships deepened and became invested with an air of desperation and romance. We started making rash promises, secret pacts. *We'll remain in contact, no matter what. We'll seek each other out. We'll never forget.* Some boys cut the palms of their hands or the tips of their fingers and then mixed the blood together, swearing that they would be brothers for fifty years, a century – for all eternity. Others went further.

In early March Cody and Maclean got married. The wedding was held in a bathroom on the top floor after lights-out. Cody improvised a bridal veil out of a pair of net curtains which he had pilfered from a little-used passageway behind the kitchen. Maclean wore a crocus in the top buttonhole of his pyjama jacket. Their rings were identical – chunky, dull-silver, hexagonal in shape (Maclean had crept out of the house one evening and unscrewed two nuts from the back wheel of Mr Reek's car). I can still see Cody's eyes glittering behind his veil as he walked along the moonlit landing, the rest of us singing 'Here Comes the Bride' in a harsh whisper, and I can see Maclean too, waiting patiently beside the bath with his hands clasped in front of him and his chin almost touching his collarbone. After the ceremony the happy couple slept in the same bed, arms wrapped around each other, rings wedged firmly on to the middle fingers of their left hands. A few days later Mr Reek had a crash. I imagined one of his wheels bowling away along the road, merry, almost carefree, like a race-horse that has unseated its rider, while the car slewed sideways, the exposed hub and axle spitting sparks.

It was during this time that I became friends with Jones, the boy who had won first prize in the flag-drawing competition. He was one of those who felt threatened by the idea of being moved, being placed once again among people he didn't know, and there came a point in our friendship when he would talk of nothing else.

'But what if I don't like them?' he would say. 'What if they're cruel to me?'

'You'll be all right,' I would tell him.

'I don't know. I can't sleep.'

'Stop worrying so much,' I would say. 'You'll be fine.'

He would shake his head and stare at the ground, his eyes watery and anxious.

One day I found him in a shabby, cheerless corridor towards the rear of the house. He was standing on one leg, like a stork. Thinking he was playing a trick on me, I laughed and pushed him on the shoulder. He hopped sideways, but managed to steady himself by putting a hand against the wall, and once he had regained his balance he continued to stand on one leg, as before. He didn't speak at all. Behind him, at the far end of the passage, the door had been left half-open, revealing an upright section of the garden – sun falling across a gravel path, a canopy of leaves. I walked round and stood in front of him.

'Jones?' I said. 'What are you doing?'

The look in his eyes was so blank that I couldn't think of anything else to say. I had never seen such an absence of expression, such utter emptiness. My first impression was that he was staring at an object or a surface only inches from his face but there was nothing there, of course. Later, I thought it was more as if some vital component had gone missing, the part of him that made him who he was. The thin strip of illuminated gravel at the end of the corridor had the brightness of another world,

world that lay beyond this one – a world Jones might already have entered. I think I shivered as I stood in front of him that morning. ~~He didn't seem to see me, though. He didn't even appear to be aware of me.~~

At first nobody noticed, but Jones carried on, day after day. He would stand on one leg for hours at a time, and always in that same gloomy passageway. Other boys jeered at him and called him names, but he never once reacted. If they pushed him over, he simply picked himself up again and went on standing as before. His expression never altered. After a while the boys lost interest and more or less ignored him. 'There's Pegleg,' they would say. Or, 'Hello, Stork.'

In the end, someone must have alerted the authorities, I suppose, because Jones was removed. I had been sent out to the vegetable patch that day to plant onions with Maclean and several others, and I didn't realise Jones had left until we sat down to supper in the evening. I assumed a home had been found for him, and I hoped his new parents would treat him well. I was sorry not to have been able to say goodbye.

Curiously enough, the corridor he had occupied didn't seem empty after he had gone. It was as though he had left something of himself behind, a kind of imprint on the air, as though, by standing there like that, he had changed that part of the house for ever. Perhaps that's what is meant by the word 'haunted'. In any case, I never felt comfortable in that corridor again and avoided it whenever I could.

It must have been spring when I was summoned to Mr Reek's office because I remember looking through the window and seeing daffodils beside the moat, their yellow trumpets nodding and dipping in the wind.

Reek stood in front of me, a sheet of paper in his hand. 'From now on,' he said, 'your name will be Thomas Parry.' He laid down the sheet of paper, then took off his spectacles and stared intently at the far wall. 'Thomas Parry,' he said. 'A good solid name. You could be anything with a name like that. Anything at all.' He brought his eyes back into focus and peered down at me. 'Do you realise what an opportunity this is?' His voice shook ever so slightly, as if he suspected I didn't appreciate what was being done for me. 'Just think of it. A completely fresh start. A new beginning.'

He must have made dozens of such speeches.

'There's something I want you to bear in mind.' He had walked to the bright window, and was gazing out in the direction of the woods. I had found a bird's skull in there, bleached white, light as air. 'If you should see any behaviour,' he said, 'which doesn't fit in with your notion of the sanguinary disposition, it's your duty – your *duty* – to report it to the authorities.' He looked at me over his shoulder, a shaft of sun picking out a tuft of ginger hair in his right ear. 'Do I make myself clear?'

'Yes, sir.'

He studied me for a long moment. 'All right, my boy. You may go.' He stood there in the sunlight, waiting for me to leave the room.

'I've been worried about Jones,' I said.

'Jones?' The skin on the bridge of Reek's nose knotted momentarily. 'Ah yes. Jones. He's been' and he paused – 'well, he's been transferred.'

'Where to?'

'I'm afraid that's confidential,' Reek said. 'I can't tell you that.' He came and squinted down at me, his mouth crumpling in an attempt at a kindly smile. 'There's nothing else, is there?'

A few days later I was put on a train. A woman travelled with me, I've forgotten her name. She had been given the task of introducing me to my new family, overseeing what must, in many cases, have been an extremely awkward transition. During the journey I got my first glimpse of how the country

had been divided up. Towards lunchtime, in the middle of nowhere, the train slowed down and stopped. I could see no sign of a station, only an embankment bristling with spear-shaped purple flowers.

‘The border,’ my companion murmured.

I opened the window and looked out. A poorly made wall of concrete blocks had been erected at right angles to the track. Starting on level ground, it sloped up the embankment and then vanished from sight. Two parallel lengths of barbed wire straggled along the top, making the wall higher and more difficult to scale. Soldiers with guns stood in the spring sunlight. Their shadows pooled around their feet, blackening the stones. Half closing my eyes, I pretended that everyone was melting. A man walked an Alsatian down the outside of the train, the dog tugging on its lead so forcefully that the lead and the man’s arm formed a continuous straight line. I crossed to the window on the other side. Here, too, the wall stopped just short of the rails, but the gap was filled by a sliding wire-mesh gate. Soldiers began to pass through our carriage, some with green braid on their uniforms, some with scarlet, and each time they appeared the woman travelling with me had to produce a sheaf of official documents which the soldiers scrutinised, their eyes shifting between the lines of writing and my face. At last, after a delay of perhaps an hour, the train lurched forwards again and the border was behind us.

‘I hate being checked like that,’ the woman said. ‘I always feel guilty.’

I nodded, as if I understood. ‘Me too,’ I said, which made her laugh.

The train gathered speed. We had entered the Red Quarter, which was to be my new home, and I felt my heart beat harder. Our destination was Belle Air, the woman said. A pretty place, apparently. She’d never been before. As the train swayed through a landscape of open fields and narrow lanes, she told me a little about the family to which I was going to belong. My father’s name was Victor Parry. He was fifty-two years old and worked for the railways, as coincidence would have it. He was an electrical engineer. My sister, Marie Parry, had just turned seventeen. She wanted to go to university to study environmental law.

‘And my mother?’ I said. ‘Who’s going to be my mother?’

The woman’s face clouded over for a moment. I was to have no mother, she told me, but she was sure that Marie, my sister, would be more than capable of looking after me.

‘No mother,’ I said quietly.

Gripping the point of my chin between finger and thumb, the woman tilted my face upwards until she was staring into her eyes, which were round and solemn. ‘You must take things slowly,’ she said. ‘Give everyone time to adjust, yourself included.’

We changed trains in the capital, then travelled south, passing red-brick houses with grey slate roofs, street after street of them, all parallel, as if that part of the city had been combed. One row of terraced housing swept up towards the railway line, and I was able to look through windows into people’s homes. I saw a young woman pulling a sweater over a child’s head. Then another woman, older, standing at a sink. Something about these glimpses made the breath catch in my throat, and I had to look away, but before too long the houses were gone and we were out in the countryside again.

By the time we approached Belle Air, the sky had taken on a pale, almost supernatural colour, neither green nor blue, and a shoal of tapering clouds swam close to the horizon, their bellies tinted amber by the setting sun. In the foreground a river coiled lazily through flat meadows. A man sat huddled on the far bank, fishing. Two swans paddled near by, a disdainful arch to their long necks. The town itself stood on a hill, the houses clustered round a medieval castle that appeared to have been carefully restored. While at the holding station, I hadn’t tried to imagine what the next stage of my life was going to be like. I hadn’t dreaded it, as Jones had done, nor had I looked forward to it, particularly. I suppose I simply assumed that everything would somehow fall into place. But now, for

the first time, I could see the future taking shape around me, and I felt that my faith in things was about to be tested.

The train stuttered and slowed. Through the windows of a brewery I saw beer bottles jostling on a conveyor belt. It occurred to me that similar bottles would pass along the belt tomorrow, and the next day, and in six months' time. Where would I be by then? Who would I be with? On the bottles went the man, impervious, determined, slightly unsteady. Next door, at the bowling club, the floodlights had been switched on. A solitary man in a white shirt and grey trousers stood on a lawn that was so smooth that it might have been shaved rather than mown. As I watched, the man leaned down. His right arm swung forwards, and a big dark ball came curving across the perfect grass towards me. No sooner had the man released the ball than he began to follow it with nimble, urgent steps, as though he regretted having let go of it, as though he no longer trusted it, as though he feared what it might do. The ball kept rolling, growing larger and larger, until it seemed that its voluptuous, hypnotic revolutions might swallow me completely, but then the train slid into a tunnel, its brakes wincing and grinding, and when we emerged again into the fading light, the brick walls and hanging baskets of a station rose up before me, and the train shuddered to a halt. My companion touched me on the arm. We were there.

I had been hoping for a long walk, which would have given me the chance to prepare myself, but the woman stopped outside a green door no more than a few hundred yards from the station. My nerve held all day. Now, though, I found my stomach tightening, and the palms of my hands were wet. She heaved a sigh – almost, I felt, on my behalf – and pressed the bell once, firmly. A window on the first floor scraped open, and an elderly man with a huge bald head peered down.

‘Ah,’ he said.

The man's head withdrew, and the window crashed shut. The woman smiled at me, dimples showing in her cheeks. She was trying to convince me that what was happening was normal.

When the front door opened, the man's eyes jumped from the woman's face to mine and his lips drew back and his teeth appeared, grey-white, like ancient cubes of ice. Was he smiling or gloating? I couldn't tell. It was even possible that he had suffered an involuntary spasm of some kind. Clearly we had come to the wrong address. I'd been led to believe that people who lived in the Red Quarter were special and rare, like black pearls or white whales, like four-leafed clover, but so far as I could see there was nothing remotely special or rare about the man standing in the doorway. He was just plain odd. I turned and gazed at the woman who had brought me there, endeavouring to compress all my doubts and fears into a single look, but she merely nodded at me and those smooth dents showed in her cheeks again.

‘You must be Thomas,’ the man said finally. Reaching down, he took my right hand in his and shook it vigorously. ‘Very pleased to meet you. Very pleased indeed.’ He tried to step back, so as to let the woman pass, but the doorway was too narrow. ‘Do come in,’ he said. ‘Both of you. Follow me.’

There had been no mistake. This was Victor Parry, my new father.

My first glimpse of my new sister, Marie, came half an hour later, and with her appearance I felt the anxieties that had taken hold of me begin to loosen their grip. I was sitting in the living-room with Victor Parry and my travelling companion, about to reach for a cup of tea, when I heard light footsteps on the stairs – or, rather, I heard a series of subtle creaks, as though someone was walking on tiptoes, trying their utmost not to make a sound. Glancing beyond Victor Parry's shoulder, I saw a girl framed in the open doorway. She was dressed in a black ribbed sweater, a short, slightly flared red skirt and a pair of black tights. As I caught her eye, she winked at me and put a finger to her lips, then she disappeared from view.

‘Marie? Is that you?’ Victor's head half turned, but only in time to hear the door to the street click

shut. He let out a heavy, almost vaudevillian sigh. ‘You’ll have to forgive her,’ he said. ‘She’s always off out somewhere, doing God knows what.’

I had already forgiven her, of course. That dark hair curving in beneath her chin like the blade of a sultan’s dagger, those lips that slanted a little, as if one side of her mouth weighed more than the other. That conspirator’s wink, which the grown-ups hadn’t noticed. During the weeks that followed Victor would often refer, half in jest, to the fact that Marie had abandoned him in his hour of need and what’s more, as a result of her leaving the house like that and staying out for half the night, poor Thomas had been forced to wait until the next day before he even so much as *set eyes* on his new sister, whereupon Marie and I would exchange a look of barely suppressed amusement. We knew better. It was our secret, though. I loved Marie from the beginning – but not as a sister exactly, and not as a mother either.

I quickly realised how lucky I was to have been placed with the Parrys. Marie led her own life, the exuberant, dishevelled life of a seventeen year old, but she never made me feel excluded or unwanted. As for my father, Victor, it simply wasn’t in him to treat me badly, though he did tend to veer between mild hysteria and complete absent-mindedness, a pattern of behaviour which, like so much else, I would only fully understand in years to come. This much I knew: his wife, Jean Parry, had been taken on the same night as I had, another victim of the Rearrangement, and he was still mourning the loss of her, still adjusting to her absence. Marie seemed to care less – on the surface, at least. Maybe, like me, she kept all those feelings hidden. I sometimes wonder if there wasn’t a sense in which they looked on me as some sort of substitute for Jean, a kind of reimbursement. But perhaps that’s overstating it. Distraction might be a better word. I was something that would take their minds off the violence that had been done to them, something that would alter the shape of their sorrow. Marie took it upon herself to try and occupy the maternal role, just as my travelling companion had implied she might while Victor assumed responsibility for the running of the household. Seen from the outside, then, my arrival had a beneficial effect, since it forced them to pull together and begin to function as a unit again.

As for my other parents, my real parents, I never heard what became of them, and I could never quite bring myself to ask. There was the loss itself, of course, which was hard enough, but I was also battling a sense of shame. I had turned my back on them, you might even say that I’d betrayed them, and I didn’t know how to come to terms with that. It was easier to pretend they didn’t exist. What’s more, in the circumstances, asking such a question would have seemed ungrateful, if not callous – and besides, I doubt whether Victor or Marie would have been able to tell me anything. The rift between past and present was absolute, for all of us. The image I was left with, of two people standing on a road in the middle of the night, people who hadn’t even had the time to dress properly, was one that I consigned to the very darkest corner of my memory, and there it remained, like a discarded childhood toy – the ukulele with its broken strings, the moulting, one-eyed teddy bear.

We were living in momentous times, historic times – the country had been dismembered, families had been torn apart, whole sections of the population were suffering from what became known as ‘border sickness’ – and yet I seemed to take it all in my stride. I remember Victor sitting at the kitchen table with a newspaper on one of my first mornings in the house.

‘That Song fellow’s going to be Prime Minister,’ he said.

I remembered Miss Groves mentioning the name. To her, Michael Song had been something of a hero. He had attended the underground meetings that altered the nation’s destiny for ever, and later when he had been classified as sanguine, he had founded a new political party, installing himself as its leader.

‘I saw a poster yesterday,’ Victor said. ‘Michael Song. Voice of the People.’ He snorted. ‘Talk about putting the cart before the horse.’

He picked up his newspaper, but put it down again almost immediately.

‘There was rioting in the Yellow Quarter last night,’ he said. ‘The police used tear-gas and rubber bullets.’ He mentioned a place I’d never heard of ‘I used to live round there, when I was in my twenties.’

He wasn’t talking to anybody in particular. He was just talking. As I watched him, it struck me that he might be addressing the space that had formerly been occupied by Jean, his wife.

‘There are tanks on the streets,’ he said. ‘There are *curfews*.’ This last word came out high-pitched as a measure of his disbelief.

Marie was slouched over the table, face propped on one hand, eyes lowered. Her other hand rested loosely against a mug of tea, which she had yet to touch. I had heard her come in late the night before, swearing under her breath as she collided with the linen chest outside her room.

‘What’s a curfew?’ I asked eventually.

In truth, I wasn’t all that curious. I was just trying to fit in. The events that had upset Victor seemed academic to me, remote, even foreign. Perhaps I lacked the proper context – after all, I had spent five months in the middle of nowhere, shielded from the worst of what was going on – or perhaps it was the eerie matter-of-factness of a child who, having experienced a trauma of his own, decides simply to get on with the business of living, which in my case meant acquainting myself with my new environment. And there was so much to get used to, so much to explore.

The house itself was more than a hundred years old. Appropriately enough, an antiques dealer occupied the ground floor, though the over-elaborate and gloomy furniture didn’t sell, and a health food shop soon took its place. We lived in the maisonette above. The staircase that led up from the pavement was dark and uneven, with creaking wooden steps, and the walls bulged, as if, like bodies, they contained a variety of soft yet vital organs. There was a sitting-room on the first floor at the front and three smaller rooms – kitchen, store-room and toilet – at the back. From the sitting-room I could look down into Hope Street, a narrow, bustling parade of shops, and if I leaned out far enough I could see the pub on the corner, the Peacock, where Victor sometimes stopped for a pint on his way home from work. Climb another flight of stairs, which felt still more rickety, and you would find three bedrooms and a bathroom. Victor spent most evenings up there with his door ajar and his radio tuned to the concerts of classical music that were broadcast live from the capital. He had become involved in redesigning a section of the Red Quarter’s railway network, a task which he appeared to relish. When going to bed, I would often glance into his room, and there he would be, poised over a sheet of tracing paper with a pencil. His detailed maps of electrical systems covered every available surface, the long slim cardboard cylinders in which his finished drawings travelled to and from the office leaning against the wall in the corner like so many snooker cues.

One night, though, just a few weeks after my arrival, I stopped in his doorway and saw a high-heeled silver sandal on the table, illuminated by a lamp. Victor was sitting in front of it, hunched over a pair of kitchen scissors in one hand. When he sensed my presence, he almost jumped out of his chair, trying at the same time to hide the sandal under a newspaper. ‘Off – off to bed, Thomas?’ he stammered. ‘Well, goodnight. Sleep well.’ I looked at him for a moment longer, then I, too, said goodnight. I couldn’t expect to understand everything about these people, I thought to myself, not all at once, and there were probably questions I would never be able to ask.

Moving away across the landing and down a short corridor, I passed Marie’s room. I would often pause to gaze in wonder at her clothes, which would be lying in a tangle on the floor, her dresses drooping across the foot of the bed like people who had fainted, her underwear foaming and frothing

out of her chest of drawers in little frozen waterfalls of cotton, silk and lace. The room I had been given was one of the smallest in the house, no more than eight feet square, and its single window gave on to a row of scrubby back yards and gardens, a car-park half buried in weeds, and the blank side wall of a working-men's club, but after the noise and overcrowding of the holding station I loved the feeling it had, of being an eyrie, a refuge, my own private domain.

Sometimes, when Marie came home after an evening out, she would look in on me. Light would open in a triangle across my bed and she would lean down, placing her lips on my forehead or my cheek, and a scent would float off her, not just the perfume she wore, but alcohol, cigarette smoke, and cold, clean sweat from all the dancing she had done, it was the sweet smell of the night, a world I didn't know as yet, and I would lie there with my eyes closed and my heart leaping, and I would breathe her in, right to the bottom of my lungs. When she straightened up again, her clothes would seem to whisper to me, then the fan of light would fold itself away, the door would shut and I would hear her stumble back into her room and kick off her shoes, two quick tumbling sounds across the floor, like dwarves turning somersaults, and a new silence would descend, thicker than before and deeper, more inhabited somehow, the silence of my breath mingling with my sister's and my father's – the silence of our dreams.

Despite the promises I had made to other boys – *I'll look for you, I won't forget* — and despite the enduring clarity of my memories of those days, I thought I had left Thorpe Hall behind for ever, but this turned out not to be the case. I had only been living on Hope Street for a few months when I discovered that Maclean had been placed with a well-to-do family at the top of the town, and that I would be attending the same school as I was. The first time I saw him again, that autumn in the playground, I had no trouble recognising him, his wrists protruding from the arms of his blazer, his ears the size of dustbin lids.

'What's your new name?' he asked.

'Parry,' I said. 'Thomas Parry.'

He nodded.

'What about you?' I said.

'Simon Bracewell.' He shrugged. 'It's all right. Now listen,' he said, and he threw a furtive glance round the asphalt yard, then drew me close. 'About Cody,' he said. 'We're divorced now, but we're still good friends. He's living with a family in the northwest. His new name's De Vere, by the way.'

'De Vere?'

'I know.' Bracewell shook his head.

I glanced at his left hand. 'What happened to your ring?'

Bracewell grinned. 'On our last night we took them off and tied them together with a piece of wire and threw them in the moat.' He looked down at the ground, and his face became serious. 'I don't think I'll ever marry again.'

Though we used to sit next to each other for lessons, we hadn't been particularly close, but this now changed. In term-time he came round to my house at least twice a week, and during the holidays we spent whole days together. I was both intrigued and delighted by the way his mind worked. If it hadn't been for Bracewell, for instance, I'm not sure I would ever have noticed Mr Page. There was a dry cleaner's on Hope Street, almost directly opposite our house. If you walked past the open doorway you could smell the fluid they used, which was called perchloroethylene and which would become – not inappropriately, I thought much later – the defining smell of my childhood. Mr Page ran the place. He had narrow eyes that curled up at the edges, and his mouth was the same – a wide, thin curve, like a slice of melon after you've finished eating it, like the rind seen sideways-on.

‘He looks as if he’s smiling all the time,’ Bracewell said.

He told me that it put him in a good mood, just to look at Mr Page. If everybody had a Mr Page living somewhere near by, the world would be a much happier place, he thought. One question did bother him, however, and he returned to it again and again. What if Mr Page lost his temper? Would he still appear to be smiling?

I persuaded Bracewell to push the prospect of Mr Page not smiling to the back of his mind, otherwise it would never happen. Bracewell agreed. Instead, we sat on my doorstep and were content simply to soak up a sense of well-being from the man on the other side of the road. Later, I realised that what we saw in Mr Page was something the authorities called ‘eucrasia’, a state of balance where all your humours are in harmony with one another. In that respect, at least, we were proving ourselves to be true disciples of the new regime.

By the following spring the work of rearranging the population had largely been accomplished. Throughout the divided kingdom the walls of concrete blocks had been reinforced with watch-towers, axial crosses and even, in some areas, with minefields, which rendered contact between the citizens of different countries a physical impossibility. If you had been classified as sanguine, then you remained in the Red Quarter for the term of your natural life. Attempts to cross the border illegally were punishable by prison sentences, and if you defied the guards they had the right to open fire on you. All this to prevent what was now being referred to as ‘psychological contamination’. In the hush between Christmas and New Year, a hush intensified by a heavy fall of snow, an Internal Security Act was simultaneously passed in all four countries. Anybody suspected of ‘undermining the fabric of society’ could now be arrested on unspecified charges and held without trial for up to two years. Some time afterwards, when I was in my twenties, I heard it rumoured that the government had introduced tranquillisers into the water supply in order to guarantee a peaceful transition. This seemed a little far-fetched. But even if the rumours had some truth to them, there were obviously quite a few who never drank from the tap. In the Yellow Quarter, for instance, where resistance to the new regime was at its strongest, not a day passed without somebody being shot dead for trying to escape. In the Green Quarter, on the other hand, a number of people killed themselves, leaving notes and letters which claimed the government had deprived them of the will to live; special cemeteries were set aside for those who had died by their own hand, and several bridges and tall buildings had to be pulled down since they were believed to encourage suicidal thoughts. Only in the Blue Quarter was the protest non-violent, but even there the authorities witnessed a spontaneous outpouring of grief and despair. Every morning border guards had to remove the bouquets, photographs and hand-written elegies that had been deposited at the base of the wall during the hours of darkness, and it was said that their barracks were so full of cut flowers that they resembled maternity wards.

We paid very little attention to any of this during those early years, Bracewell and I. One could make a case for the fact that we were behaving in character, I suppose. We were sanguine, after all. We liked to look on the bright side, make the best of things. But also – and more importantly, perhaps – our energies were entirely taken up with the man who ran the dry-cleaner’s. Though we spent many tranquil hours basking in Mr Page’s aura of well-being, there was always a part of us that remained on tenterhooks, waiting for the miraculous, the almost unimaginable moment when he no longer appeared to be smiling.

I had been a member of the Parry household for about twelve months when a brown envelope arrived in the post. Victor took one look at the scarlet peacock stamped in the top left-hand corner and passed the letter to Marie, then he went and stood by the kitchen window. I watched Marie’s dark eyes skim the half a dozen lines of type. I was being summoned to the Ministry of Health and Social Security, she told me. She didn’t think it was anything to fret about, just a routine interview, but the air in the

room had stretched tight, which told me there was probably more to it than that.

When the day came, Marie walked me down to the Ministry, an imposing edifice of glass, flint and pale stone that backed directly on to the river. It was April or May, a chill wind blowing. The Royal Quarter's flag snapped and shuddered on its pole. As we climbed the wide, shallow steps to the entrance I tilted my head back and looked up at the roof, and the rapid flight of clouds past the eaves gave me the impression that the building was falling on top of me. My hand in Marie's, I hurried onwards, through the double-doors. The hallway in which we found ourselves had the atmosphere and dimensions of an atrium, the space filled with the whisper of voices, the slither of shoes and also with an inexplicable ghostly laughter, and all these sounds seemed to swarm and mingle in the air above us. We reported to reception and were told to take a seat. A man in a dark-grey suit appeared in front of us just moments later.

'Thomas Parry?'

Smiling at Marie, he asked her to wait where she was. He led me through a roped-off area guarded by a man in a maroon uniform, then past a bank of lifts and on into a maze of open-plan offices. As we walked, he asked me all about myself – how old I was, where I went to school, what I was going to do in the holidays. Though there was nothing original about his line of questioning, he seemed relaxed and jovial, which put me at my ease. At last we reached a door. He knocked twice with a crooked forefinger, then drew the door open and ushered me inside. Installed behind a desk was a stout woman with pink cheeks.

'Sit down, Thomas,' she said.

My stomach slowly turned over. 'Miss Groves. What are you doing here?'

She smiled. 'I work for the Ministry.'

'But I thought –'

'You thought I belonged at Thorpe Hall,' she said. 'I was just there temporarily, the same as you. How are you settling in?'

'Fine, thanks.'

'And your father? How's he?'

I watched Miss Groves across the desk. The transformation she had undergone since I last saw her reminded me of the fairy tale where the grandmother is actually a wolf. I thought about Victor with his pair of scissors and his silver shoe, and somehow I trusted him more, even though he had been trying to hide things from me. I felt that his lie was visible whereas hers was not and I decided that while it would be politic to appear to be cooperating I would say as little as possible.

'It's difficult,' I said.

Miss Groves leaned forwards hungrily, as I had suspected she might. 'Really? And why's that?'

'I don't see very much of him. He's working so hard, for the railways.'

'The railways. That's right. Is he enjoying it?'

'Oh yes. Sometimes, on my way to bed, I stop outside his door. There's always music on, some kind of singing usually, and he'll be studying his plans.' I looked down into my lap and wrinkled my forehead, as if I were thinking. Abruptly my forehead cleared and I looked up again. 'Sometimes he even chuckles to himself.'

I'm not sure why I said that. It wasn't true. But somehow I felt that Victor was under threat, and needed protecting.

Without taking her eyes off me, Miss Groves straightened in her chair. 'And your sister Marie? What about Marie?'

'We get on really well'.

‘No sign of melancholy?’ Miss Groves said casually.

I shook my head.

‘No hints of phlegm or cholera?’

‘No.’

Her short pale fingers began to peck viciously at the keys on her computer like a flock of blind herons eating grain. From time to time she glanced up at me suspiciously, as though she expected to catch me in the middle of an indiscretion.

At last she closed the file and sat back. ‘Do you remember our final lesson together,’ she said, ‘when I read to you about the sanguine temperament?’

“‘The paragon of complexions,’” I said. ‘“The prince of all temperatures.”’

‘Very good.’ Miss Groves’s eyes glowed, just as they had glowed in the ballroom at Thorpe Hall with the chandeliers trembling above our heads and the men in armour watching us sidelong, across their cheeks. ‘And to the best of your knowledge, Thomas,’ she said, ‘is that what you see around you?’

For some reason I thought of Mr Page just then, conjuring him up so vividly that I even caught a whiff of perchloroethylene.

‘Yes, Miss Groves,’ I said. ‘That’s exactly what I see.’

I would have been roughly eleven when Victor took me on my first field trip. As we climbed into his clapped-out four-door saloon that morning I thought once again what an unconventional car it was – unconventional for the Red Quarter, that is, sanguine people having little or no attachment to decay – though, knowing Victor, he would probably have argued that the old banger was proof of his optimistic nature, since he firmly believed that it was going to last for ever. I remember asking him where he was taking me to the office. The office? he said. No, not today. He grinned at me across his right shoulder. Knowing better than to press him on the subject, I settled back and watched as we reversed past a wall smothered in convolvulus, the limp white bells brushing against the side of the car. In the end, I was happy just to be going somewhere with him.

We didn’t talk much during the journey. We never had talked much. I often felt the pressure of his curiosity, though, especially since I received my first summons to the Ministry. There had been other interviews, of course – like visits to the dentist, they occurred at regular intervals and filled me with a sense of trepidation – and I had stuck to my theme, embroidering a little when I thought it appropriate – how grateful I was to have been placed with such a wonderfully sanguine family, how lucky I had been, and so on – but I had never mentioned the content of these interviews to Victor, nor had he asked. His was a silent insistence. It was as though he was trying to get me to own up to something but without compromising himself, without committing himself in any way. At the same time there was the feeling that if nothing was said then everything must be all right and we could go on as we were.

After driving for an hour, we turned along a one-lane road that led to a modest red-brick railway station.

‘It’s derelict,’ Victor said, ‘but not for much longer, I hope.’

We stepped out of the car into hazy sunlight.

The line used to serve an area of the country that was now the Blue Quarter, Victor told me, but as a result of the Rearrangement it had been suspended and the station had become irrelevant. In his opinion, though, it could be resurrected. With a bit of imagination and some capital investment, it could be turned into a junction station for the Red Quarter’s new southwestern network.

Ignoring the danger signs with their jagged lightning bolts and hollow skulls, we struck out across

the tracks, the silver of the rails concealed by rust. We climbed down into a urine-stained underpass, our feet crunching on broken glass. We stood thoughtfully on silent platforms. Weeds flowered among the sleepers. The smell of buddleia and cow parsley was everywhere. But Victor's eyes were darting about, and I knew that his vision had come alive. He was imagining the trains that would pass through the station, some pausing, others rushing on towards the coast. He could already hear the power humming in the insulators that hung like grubby concertinas above our heads.

I left him standing in the shade and wandered off along the rails. Two or three hundred yards from the station, where the track curved to the west, I came across a row of carriages that had been abandoned in a siding. A window in the top half of one of the doors had been left open. Glancing round, I made sure nobody was looking, then I hoisted myself through the gap and half fell, half dropped to the floor inside. It was quiet in the carriage, the way someone who's been gagged is quiet. A feeling of suppression and restraint.

Entering one of the compartments, I slid the door shut behind me. Two bench-seats faced each other, both covered in a faded turquoise velour. I sat by the window for a few moments. The sun draped itself across my lap. Twisting quickly, I pulled my trousers and pants down, then I lay full length on the seat and began to rub myself against the rough, almost prickly upholstery. I was thinking of the time I came home to find Marie sunbathing on the small tar-papered roof below my bedroom window. It was one of those warm, still afternoons when the sky forfeits all its colour. The smell of dandelion sap floats in the air, and the tarmac softens at the edge of the road, and if you put your weight on one foot you can leave a print that lasts for ages. Marie had been lying on her back in a blue-and-white-striped bikini with a pile of unopened text-books beside her, one hand beneath her head, the other resting lazily across her belly, and I had to step away from the window, into the shadow of my room, so as to hide my erection. Closing my eyes, I thought of Marie in her bikini, then I thought of how she often bent down to kiss me late at night and how, once, by accident, our lips had touched, and before too long a cloudy juice came springing out of me.

I was just pulling my trousers up when I heard Victor calling.

'Thomas? Where are you?'

I dropped to the floor between the seats, then slowly lifted my head until my eyes were on a level with the window. Victor stood fifty yards away, next to something that looked like a giant cotton-reef. He was staring southwards, the fingertips of his right hand pressed upright against his mouth. Still crouching low, I crawled out of the compartment and into the corridor.

'Thomas?'

I could tell he was worried, and somehow that made me feel good. I took it as proof of something I didn't want it to end, not yet.

Leaving by the same half-open window, I lowered myself on to the loose chippings and edged cautiously along the row of carriages, back in the direction of the station. Once, I kneeled down and peered past the great brown disc of a wheel. I watched Victor take a few paces and then stop. He called my name again. Bending double now, I hurried on. Only when I was clear of the last carriage did I straighten up and walk out into the bright white sunshine.

'I'm over here,' I shouted.

Victor moved towards me, shading his eyes. 'I've been looking for you everywhere.'

'Sorry. I was just exploring.'

Victor nodded approvingly. 'Just think what we could do with this place ...'

Driving home, we wound all the windows down. The warm air that rushed through the inside of the car smelled of creosote and new-mown grass. Victor put on one of his opera tapes and we both sang along as loudly as we could, even though it was in a foreign language and we hardly knew any of the

words.

That summer Bracewell and I would often cycle out into the lush countryside that surrounded Bel Air. One cool grey morning we found ourselves in a thickly wooded area somewhere to the north-west of the town. To record our presence, we decided to carve our names on a tree. Bracewell used the penknife first. I watched him work, a knob of bone protruding on his wrist, as if he had a marble seal beneath the skin. When my turn came, I used one of the letters in his name to make my own. Apart from anything else, I thought it would save time.

B
P A R R Y
A
C
E
W
E
L
L

Afterwards, I stood back, pleased to have found a connection between our names. In demonstrating that they could be intertwined, I had harked back to the secret ceremonies that had taken place at Thorpe Hall, the mingling of who one was with someone else, the sense of a shared destiny.

But Bracewell just frowned. 'Like something in a cemetery,' he said.

Which, in the light of what happened moments later, I came to perceive not as a rebuke so much as a presentiment.

As the road left the wood, it dipped downwards, curving right then left, with grass banks on either side. By the time it straightened and levelled out, we were pedalling frantically, racing each other. I saw the danger first and shouted out. We both braked hard, Bracewell's back wheel sliding sideways and spilling him on to the tarmac. No more than fifty yards ahead of us, the road broke off in mid-air.

Leaving our bicycles on the ground, we crept towards the drop and then looked over. Thirty or forty feet below lay a heap of shattered concrete and macadam. On either side of it a motorway reached into the distance, its six lanes silent, utterly deserted. Nothing moved down there except the weeds and grasses shifting in the central reservation – a kind of narrow wild garden. All thoughts of the grim fate that might have been ours were obliterated by the mystery of what now awaited us.

Though the citizens of the Red Quarter still drove cars – no one could deny the pleasures of the open road, especially in a country where the population was relatively small, just over five million – they had launched a series of impassioned campaigns against the motorway. To sanguine people, motorways signified aggression, rage, fatigue, monotony and death. Motorways were choleric, in other words, and had no place in the Red Quarter. Some had been converted into venues for music festivals or sporting events, and others had been fortified, then turned into borders, their tall grey lights illuminating dogs and guards instead of traffic, but for the most part they had simply been allowed to decay, their signs leaning at strange angles, their service stations inhabited by mice and birds, the bridges choked with weeds and brambles or, as in this case, collapsing altogether. In time, motorways would become so overgrown that they would only be visible from the air, half-hidden monuments to an earlier civilisation, like pyramids buried in a jungle.

We only had to look at each other to know what should happen next. We hauled our bicycles over the fence, then wheeled them down the embankment and out on to the motorway's hard shoulder. W

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