

The Ecliptic

BENJAMIN WOOD



SCRIBNER

LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

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FOR STEPH

History repeats itself, but the special call of an art which has passed away is never reproduced. It is as utterly gone out of the world as the song of a destroyed wild bird.

JOSEPH CONRAD

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Habituations

O n e

He was just seventeen when he came to Portmantle, a runaway like the rest of us, except there was a harrowed quality about this boy that we had not seen before in any of the newcomers. A private torment seemed to clamp the muscles of his face, as though every disappointment in the world had been disclosed to him too young and stunted his expression. We knew him as Fullerton: an ordinary name, a plain one, but not the sort that sinks into the depths of memory without unsettling others.

Our anticipation of him was enough to disrupt our normal routines, setting us off course the way a premature adjustment to the wind can strand a kite. Rarely had we paid so much attention to the refugees, or given more than a terse thought to another resident's circumstance. But he was presented to us as a special case, a kindred spirit worthy of our time and interest. So we offered it.

We were conscripted to his cause from the beginning: Quickman, MacKinney, Pettifer and me. The provost himself had called a meeting in his study to explain, over a glass of pomegranate juice, that Portmantle was about to receive its youngest ever resident, and had made a show of outlining how much he would personally appreciate our support. 'You know I'm loath to burden you with this kind of responsibility,' he had told us, 'but the boy's going to need some help finding his feet, and Ender can't manage on his own—his English isn't up to it. I need the four of you to be there for him while I'm gone. You remember what it's like to be gifted at that age—a sympathetic ear can really make a difference.' In truth, we were cajoled into a volunteering mood by the hint of a reward, some luxury that might be procured from the mainland in return for our good deed: Earl Grey tea leaves, smoked bacon, porridge oats; the most banal of pantry items were great delicacies to us, and we wilted at the thought of them.

There was plenty that the provost did not make clear and much that we were not privy to. The details of Fullerton's troubles were as confidential as our own. No doubts were raised as to his temperament. Nothing was discussed as to his reasons for admittance. We only asked for some small insight into the type of work the boy was known for, but getting answers from the provost was like trying to press cider from geraniums. 'You can ask him yourselves in a few days,' he said. 'I wouldn't want to prejudice the boy before he even gets here.'

We awaited his arrival from the mainland for two eventless days, like prisoners expecting mail, and cursed him on the wasted afternoons he did not show. 'Assuming the little sod ever gets here,' Pettifer said, 'he's going to work off every last bit of time he owes me. He can start by polishing my boots. I want a shine so good I can see up my nose.' This after we had given up an entire Saturday morning to assist the caretaker with his preparations. While Ender and his staff had cleaned and organised the boy's lodging, we had dug the snow from all the footpaths around the mansion, taking turns with the shovel, only for another flume of mothy flakes to come down overnight, leaving just a faint and rutted trail to show for all our grunt work by Sunday lunchtime. Our charity did not extend to shovelling a

path twice, which is why the snow was so thick and undisturbed when Fullerton finally appeared.

He came stumbling up the hill with nothing but a canvas bag and the hood of his cagoule cinched tight around his head. MacKinney spotted him in the window of the mess hall—‘Hey-o,’ she said, ‘here comes trouble’—and we abandoned our plates and gathered on the landing to get a better look at him.

It was clear from the simple determination of the boy’s strides as he pushed and staggered through the white-dusted pines that he needed the sanctuary of Portmantle as much as we did. From our very first glimpse of him, we understood that he was one of us. He had the rapid footfalls of a fugitive, the grave hurriedness of a soldier who had seen a grenade drop somewhere in the track behind. We could recognise the ghosts that haunted him because they were the same ghosts we had carried through the gates ourselves and were still trying to excise.

‘He hasn’t even stopped to catch his breath, you know. It’s quite impressive,’ Quickman said, bothering to lift his pipe out from his teeth for the first time that day. He had run out of tobacco so long ago that the bowl was dry, but he was content just to chew on the mouthpiece—there was residual flavour there, he insisted, that would suffice in lieu of smoke. (He still kept an empty pouch of Golden Harvest in his trouser pocket and would often be found inspecting it, as though in hope the contents had replenished by some miracle.)

MacKinney tilted down her glasses, peering over the lenses. ‘What kind of coat is that to be wearing in winter?’ she said. The boy was stooped now, battling the slope, both hands folded into his armpits. ‘I don’t understand why it’s so hard to get a man into a proper coat. There’s nothing heroic about freezing to death.’ She was the most parental of the four of us, being the oldest by a distance, and the only one with daughters of her own out in the world. Her mothering nature often surfaced at mealtimes, lending her the compulsion to cant her head and tell us, too often, that we were drawn or undernourished. She had this very look about her now.

Pettifer gave an amused little snort—his own peculiar laugh. ‘No scarf, no hat, no gloves. Stupidity is more like it.’ The boy was stumbling over the frosted Mediterranean scrub, into the open space before the boundary wall. When he reached the gates, he fell forwards, gripping the bars, pressing his head to the metal as though in prayer. ‘Look at him—he can barely stand up in those silly shoes of his.’ And, with this, the boy bent and vomited. The yellowy liquid steamed by his feet. ‘Oh dear. The boy goes breakfast.’

‘Don’t laugh,’ I told them. ‘He’s got to be exhausted.’ It was a mile uphill from the ferry—a draining enough hike in clement weather. And the boy was not even wearing proper boots. No wonder he was retching.

Pettifer grinned. ‘How do you know he didn’t eat something bad while he was on the mainland? That street offal the Turks love so much. The chopped-up stuff.’ He turned to Quickman. ‘What’s it called again?’

‘*Kokoreç*,’ Quickman said. ‘Sheep’s innards.’

‘That’s it. All very tasty while it’s going down, but once it’s in your system—’ He mouthed a silent explosion, then made the action with his spreading fingers to illustrate it.

I ignored him. ‘You’d think someone could’ve warned the lad.’

‘About what?’

‘The snow. I’ll bet he doesn’t have much in that bag of his, either.’

‘Nobody warned me about *kokoreç*,’ said Pettifer, ‘and I survived. He’s a teenager, not an eight-year-old.’

MacKinney wiped a circle in the fogging glass. ‘Tif’s right. You start telling people what to pack, next thing they’ll be showing up with their valets.’

‘Especially the women,’ said Pettifer, winking. ‘We can’t have them coming here with evening

gowns and whatnot.’ This sort of provocation was a feature of his company. He was a flirt by reflex and, because the pickings of women at Portmantle were so scant, he quite often directed his affection towards me in the manner of schoolyard teasing. That I harboured no physical attraction for him and made this fact consistently evident was what gave him the confidence to be flirtatious—such was the male tendency, in my experience. He was no more a chauvinist than a fascist, but sometimes he liked to test my temperature for his own entertainment.

MacKinney leaned closer to the pane. ‘A bit of snow shouldn’t stop anyone who needs this place enough. Man or woman. And, anyway—he seems fine now, look. He’s not complaining.’

‘Can’t be anything left to spit up,’ Pettifer said. ‘Half his guts are on the ground.’

He took my boot tip in the shin for this. ‘I wish you wouldn’t revel in it quite so much. When was the last time *you* hiked anywhere?’

‘I ran cross-country when I was his age.’ He patted his paunch. ‘Now I can’t get off the toilet in the morning.’

‘Jesus,’ Quickman said. ‘What an image.’

‘You’re welcome.’

It was difficult now to recall the days when Pettifer and Quickman were strangers to me. They had landed at the refuge a season apart, but they had bonded almost immediately, over a dinnertime discussion of the weather (what better topic was there for two Englishmen to deliberate upon?). Later when MacKinney and I had been playing backgammon at the shady end of the portico, they had both lurked some distance from our board with glasses of çay, making disparaging remarks about our game in whispered voices. ‘If you’re going to sit there tittering all day,’ MacKinney had called to them, ‘why don’t you come and show us how it’s done? We’re not exactly playing to the death.’ They had apologised for their rudeness and sat down with us. ‘Didn’t anyone ever tell you,’ Quickman had said ‘that all games should be taken seriously? My father used to drill that into me.’ I had scowled at him then, uncertain of his meaning. ‘Still, once you’ve seen a grown man break his ankle playing musical chairs, you start to question his advice a bit.’ Mac had laughed her big, ingenuous laugh, and that was it—the beginning of our attachment. It did not seem to matter that we had travelled thousands of miles to remove ourselves from the hindrances of life in Britain only to hitch ourselves to each other.

‘Has anybody seen Ender? Someone’s got to let the boy inside.’ I looked back into the emptying mess hall, where the old caretaker had last been spotted at the back of the line for bluefish stew. A few of the other guests were still finishing their lunches, alone together on the same long table. We had hardly taken the time to learn their names, but we had heard about their projects in various ways and dismissed them as short-termers already—‘transients’, Pettifer called them, which was his way of saying ‘lesser talents’.

It was our judgement that the duration of a stay at Portmantle was equivalent to the value of the work being done: if you were gone after one season, it was likely because your project could not sustain a greater period of gestation. For example, there was the Spanish poet we had spoken to at lunch, who had proudly announced that he was working on a sequence of minimalist poems that were disdainful of linearity, narrative, and meaning. ‘Sounds like an important collection,’ Quickman had responded, and turned his head to roll his eyes at us. ‘If anything needs to be eradicated from poetry, it’s meaning.’ The Spaniard had nodded at this, deaf to the sarcasm, and proceeded to discuss the remarkable complexity of his work with Quickman, whose feigned interest was admirably upheld throughout.

We gave this poet two seasons, maximum. Any guest who could not wait to talk about the project he was working on was usually a short-termer—that was our evaluation. Anyone who proclaimed his own genius was a fraud, because, as Quickman himself once put it, genius does not have time to stand admiring its reflection; it has too much work to get finished. We never sought out the company of

short-termers. We left them to work and find their clarity alone, while we got on with jabbing at our own unwieldy projects. None of us seemed to recognise the fact that our separation from the others was, in fact, a tacit declaration of our own genius—and, thus, it surely followed that we were the biggest frauds of all. We did not even consider that the purest talent at Portmantle was standing at the front gate in a pool of his own vomit.

‘No point calling the old man,’ said Quickman, eyes on the window. ‘Our boy’s about to hit the buzzer.’ And right on cue, the hallway below us echoed with the sound of it: three long, grating blasts. Quickman set the pipe back in the crease of his mouth. ‘Places, everyone,’ he said, his voice betraying a little excitement.

The buzzer sounded again.

Ender, the old caretaker, emerged from the mess hall with a napkin stuffed inside his shirt collar. I was streaked with pale stew-stains. He was still holding his spoon. ‘It is him?’ he said. ‘The ringing?’

‘Yup,’ said Pettifer. ‘He’s probably got hypothermia by now. Better hop to it.’

‘OK. I go. You stay.’ Ender tore the napkin from his collar, dabbed his moustache clean, and tucked the spoon into his breast pocket. He went scuttling down the stairs. ‘You can wait inside the library, yes?’ he called back to us from the bottom step, putting on his coat. ‘I bring him.’

From the window, we watched the old man tread across the thick white lawns, making holes in the snowpack. He carried the provost’s shotgun with him, as was the customary practice, hinged over his left forearm, unloaded. The fur trim of his parka matched the two-tone grey of his hair. When he got to the gate, he spoke to the boy through the ironwork.

There was a passphrase incoming guests were told to use, which the provost changed every season, though it was usually a line from a poem or some favourite literary reference. MacKinney and I had both been given the same quote to recite: *Eastward we turn and homeward, alone, remembering*. Pettifer had: *To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping, glad from a world grown old*. Quickman’s had been a translation of a Turkish author, Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpınar, whose work was the provost’s academic fetish, though Quickman claimed he could not remember the line in detail. Poor old Ender had to memorise all of these passphrases every season, his spoken English being the most reliable. His mind must have been loaded with enough disordered verse to rival our resident Spaniard. But, in all his time as caretaker, there had been no cause for him to fire a single shot. The system worked too well. Anyone who deigned to buzz the gate at Portmantle had to know the procedure for entry. You would be turned away at gunpoint if you did not.

After Fullerton had spoken his noiseless passphrase, the old man let him in. The boy stepped through, peering up at the window where we stood above the portico. If he saw us staring back at him he did not let on. He waited patiently for Ender to lock up, and then the two of them slogged across the grounds in single file.

At the front steps, Fullerton stopped to kick the powder off his heels and switched his bag to the other shoulder. He gazed back in the direction he had travelled, pausing there awhile, as though the gate signified a line between the present and the past and he was taking a moment to acknowledge the gravity of his circumstance. We had seen this quirk of behaviour in others. Some time ago, too far back to recall how it felt, we had made the same gesture ourselves.

‘We ought to get a move on,’ MacKinney said.

We went along the corridor, into the dark library with its classroom smell and its awkward collection of furniture. I opened the curtains and switched on the lamps. Pettifer and Quickman crouched at the hearth, debating the merits of lighting a fire. ‘How long are we expected to entertain this lad?’ Pettifer asked of nobody in particular. ‘I mean, there’s only so long I can sustain these airs and graces.’

‘Just hurry up and light the thing. He’ll be in need of it,’ MacKinney told him.

‘Seems to me—’ Pettifer sighed, reaching for a block of firewood, ‘that others are getting the benefit of my exertions a little too often these days.’

Quickman nudged him. ‘How about you give us the benefit of your silence then, instead?’

‘You’re going to wish you hadn’t said that.’

Quickman laughed. ‘Here—toss this paper on the pile.’

‘You should twist it first. Burns better.’

The two of them were still lighting the fire when Ender shuffled in. The boy loomed behind him, shivering on the threshold. He was wrapped up in a blanket, standard issue: scratchy orange wool with a hand-embroidered P.

Ender coughed and said, ‘Excuse me, our guest is very cold and tired, so maybe not much of talking for today. Hello, hello, and then we go—OK?’ The old man took a step to one side, presenting the boy with an extended arm, as though he were the conclusion of a magic trick. Then he said, ‘Fullerton, there is some people who take care of you now, for today, and soon the provoss hisself will be here.’ In the old man’s unaccustomed tongue, it sounded more like *Foolertinn*. ‘They are old but not so bad for talking. You can like them.’

‘Crikey.’ Pettifer rose, wiping soot on his trousers. ‘Impossible to live up to that sort of introduction.’

The boy lifted his chin and forced out a whisper: ‘Hey.’ He was trembling so much the blanket quivered about his body like a storm sail. Now that his hood was down and he was close enough, we could see the wholeness of his face. His small brown eyes were close together, sunken, drawing attention to the slim pillar of his nose and its bell of soft cartilage. He had a slack lower jaw—what my father used to call a ‘lazy mouth’—the tongue nesting behind the bottom row of teeth, giving wetness to his lips. His dark hair parted easily in the middle, like the pages of a Bible, and it was fashioned in that lank teenage style, curtaining his brow, obscuring what appeared to be a birthmark on the left of his forehead. He was probably shorter than most boys his age, though his broad, hod-carrier’s shoulders held an arching shape beneath the blanket that made him seem older.

I was the first of us to speak to him. The others hung back, unsure. We had almost forgotten how to talk to anyone but ourselves. ‘Hell of a trek, isn’t it?’ I said. ‘Your feet must be aching. Sit down.’ For some reason, I did not offer him my hand to shake but gave an odd sort of Sitting Bull wave, palm flat and raised. ‘I’m Knell. With a K. Good to meet you.’

He nodded back, shuddering.

‘Come on in by the fire. It’s going a treat now. Get yourself warm.’

He moved in closer to the hearth. Then, casting off the blanket, he leaned with both arms spread across the mantelpiece, imbibing the heat. From behind, it seemed as though he was holding up the wall itself.

‘The two gents to your right are Pettifer and Quickman.’ They both waved, but the boy’s back was turned to them, and he did not seem to be listening. ‘And that’s MacKinney there by the window. She and I have been here since, oh, I’m not sure it’s polite to say.’

‘Not so long as me,’ said Ender, still in the doorway. ‘I am getting the white hairs.’ He combed his moustache with his fingers and crowed.

The boy did not move. ‘Please,’ he said, so quietly it was almost lost amid the crackle of the flames ‘if I could just have a minute to—’ He clutched his stomach. We took a few paces back as a precaution, but nothing came up. The boy sighed and continued: ‘Just to thaw out, that’s all. I still can’t feel my toes.’ He turned now, his back to the fire, a radiant outline about his middle. His eyes were shut and he was inhaling through the nose, exhaling through his puckered mouth. ‘You can talk . . . I just need to . . . to be quiet for a sec . . .’

‘Of course,’ I said, sitting down on the couch, making eyes at MacKinney. We shrugged at each

other. 'The provost asked us to be your welcoming party. He thought, with the four of us being so used to the place, and speaking the same language, it might help you bed in quicker. A little familiarity goes a long way here. He wanted to give the induction himself, but—'

Fullerton kept on trying to regulate his breathing. I was not sure that he was receiving me.

'He's had to go off-island,' I continued. 'Organising your paperwork, I should think, just in case you decide to stay longer. So we're only substitutes, I'm afraid. But I promise you're getting the same treatment as everyone else.'

Pettifer spoke up then: 'Actually, we've never rolled out the red carpet like this before. For *anyone*. He cleared his throat, as though the implication of this noise would prompt the boy into a response. But it did not, and Pettifer folded his arms, affronted. 'Well, I'm really feeling the glow of philanthropy right now, I must say.'

'Leave him be,' said MacKinney. 'He's just got here and we're crowding him.'

'It's OK,' the boy said at last. 'I told you . . . I'm just cold.' He opened his eyes then, and stared back at us. 'And I *do* appreciate you all being so friendly. But I didn't come here to make friends. I just want to get out of these clothes and rest, and maybe we can all have dinner sometime later. That's how it works, right? I was told I'd be left alone.'

Quickman bit down on his pipe, smirking. 'That's the long and the short of it. Dinner is any time after the bell goes. There's a rule about taking it in the mess hall, so I suppose we'll save a place for you.' He narrowed his eyes at the boy, checking he was being heard. 'There are other rules, too, of course—but I expect you've been told most of them by now. The rest you can figure out as you go. Or ask the provost when he gets back. When *does* he get back, by the way?'

'Three days,' Ender informed him.

'Well then.'

Fullerton blinked. He tucked the strands of his hair behind his ears.

'Perhaps we should let Ender take him out to his lodging,' I said. And then, flicking my eyes to the boy: 'We were asked to show you how things worked, that's all, answer your questions and such. But suppose we can leave you alone, if that's what you'd prefer. We'll be around, in case you need anything.'

'You can't miss us,' said MacKinney. 'We're always somewhere.'

'All right, thanks,' the boy said. He bent to retrieve the blanket from the floor and then began to study the shelves above the mantel. 'Are we allowed to take these books?'

'Some of them,' Pettifer said. 'You're not old enough for *Lady Chatterley*, are you?' He tried to engage the rest of us in his amusement but we kept quiet.

'Funny, I don't see that here.' The boy browsed the spines serenely. 'Maybe you could bring it back when the pages are dry.'

Pettifer flushed. 'That's disgusting.'

'OK, OK,' Quickman said, 'let's get back to work.' He made for the door, patting Pettifer on the shoulder as he went past. 'We'll adjourn this for later.'

I stood up, smiling at the boy. 'It's nice to have a young face around.'

He nodded back.

Pettifer waved at the fire. 'You can let that burn out. Or you can get more wood from downstairs. Up to you.'

'Yeah, all right. Thanks.'

We were reluctant to leave him. Not just because we felt guilty for renegeing on our promise to the provost, but because we found the boy such a confusing presence. We were not used to having gloom teenagers about the place. He had a very modern manner that we did not know how to decode. There was something discomfiting about him in the most thrilling sense, the way a familiar room can be

changed by a new arrangement of furniture. He enlivened us, shook us out of our habitations without even trying to. ~~Of course, we could not anticipate how much he would affect the next period of our lives.~~ It was as though, on that first afternoon with us, he loosened our connecting bolts quite accidentally, and the slow turn of the days saw to the rest.

On our way out, Quickman stopped, gripping the doorframe. 'Say, Fullerton,' he called. 'You don't happen to have any pipe tobacco, by any chance? I'll strip down a cigarette, if that's all you have.'

The boy, for the first time, showed a glimmer of warmth towards us. His jaw hung open and he ran his tongue over his teeth. Then he reached into the pocket of his jeans and drew out a packet of cigarettes, a Turkish brand. He threw the whole crumpled box to Quickman. 'I recognise you,' he said. 'I think I do, anyway.'

Quickman remained polite. 'Ah well, don't hold it against me.' He clutched the cigarettes to his heart. 'Thanks for these.' But the box made no sound when he shook it. He pulled out the foil lining and scrunched it in his fist. 'I won't lie: that's a blow to morale.'

And the boy smiled at last.

Two

We were told that Heybeliada lay twelve miles off the coast of Istanbul, the second largest in a constellation of islands the locals knew as Adalar. It was crowned by two steep forested hills to the north and south, and its middle section bowed into a plain of settlements where the natives lived and plied their trades. Much of the work there was seasonal. In the winter, the squat apartment blocks and rangy wooden houses stood vacant and unlit, but when the bright weather came again they filled up with summering Istanbulus, who sat out on their fretwork balconies, sunbathed on the rocky beaches, flocked upon the shining Marmara like gulls, and drank merrily on their roof-decks until dark. The Turkish meaning of its name—Saddlebag Island—evoked its shape at sea level, but, looking down from a higher vantage as we did, the place bore a closer resemblance to a hipbone. It was far up on the south-eastern peak, amidst the dense umbrella pines on the tubercle of the island, that Portmantle was positioned. The only part of it that could be seen from the ferry as you approached was the upper limb of its gabled rooftop, and even this had been seized by so much moss and grime that it was lightly camouflaged.

Every guest who came to Portmantle took the same route from the dock. It required specific information just to find your way. You could not step off the boat and expect to pick up signs. You could not stop into any of the cafés or *lokantas* on the waterfront to ask for directions. The horse-drawn *fiytons* would not take you there. It was too removed from the populated strip for any of the locals to be concerned with, and those few natives who knew of the place believed it was a private residence, owned by a reclusive academic who took violently to trespassers. And so the refuge was afforded the same courtesy of disregard as any other private mansion or holiday villa on the island, which made it a perfect spot to disappear.

The only way into the refuge was from the east, via Çam Limani Yolu, a dirt road that led up to a spear-top fence, cordoning off the property. MacKinney always said it might be possible to circumvent the gates by swimming across the bay from the south-western point of the island and climbing up the promontory on the blind side, but we had never seen her theory put to the test. The phoney warning posters stapled to the fence along the slope were a good enough deterrent: DIKKAT KÖPEK VAR/BEWARE OF THE DOG.

It was not known how long Portmantle had existed, but we understood that many others had sought refuge there before we ever claimed it: to rescue the depleted minds of artists like us was the reason it was founded. In the seclusion of the grounds, artists could work outside the straitjacket of the world and its pressures. We could tune out those voices that nagged and pecked, forget the doubts that stifled us, dispense with all the mundane tasks, distractions, and responsibilities, detach from the infernal noises of industry—the endless ringing of the telephone, the urging letters that came in logoed envelopes from galleries, publishers, studios, patrons—and work, finally work, without intrusion or

the steering influence of another living soul. 'Creative freedom', 'originality', 'true expression'—these terms were spoken like commandments at Portmantle, even if they were scarcely realised, or just phantom ideals to begin with. It was no more than a place for recuperation. A sanatorium of sorts—not for the defeat of any physical affliction, but for the relocation of a lost desire, a mislaid trust in art itself. Clarity, we called it: the one thing we could not live without.

It was a custom at Portmantle to forgo the mention of time except in the barest measurements: the passing of days, the turning of seasons, the position of the sun above the trees. Both Ender and the provost kept pocket watches to ensure the smooth running of things, but there were no clocks in our lodgings, and we were not encouraged to have timepieces or calendars of any kind. It would be wrong to say that we were not *allowed* them, because we were free to do as we pleased, within certain limits. Any of us could have smuggled in a wristwatch or made a sundial with our bodies and a line of chalk, but the idea was acknowledged by everybody as self-defeating. Why should we let our thoughts run clockwise? Why should we live by the laws of a world we were no longer governed by? Art could not be made to fit a timetable. Instead, we used vague descriptors—'tomorrow morning', 'last Wednesday', 'three or four seasons ago', et cetera—and they served us well enough, liberated us from the notion we had that our pulses were countdowns to zero.

That is why I cannot say with complete accuracy how long I had been at Portmantle by the time of Fullerton's admission. The year I arrived was 1962, but since then I had watched so many winters frost the surrounding pines that they had begun to blur into one grey season, as vast and misted as the sea. Early on, I ran out of things to write in my journal, so I could not extrapolate a definite figure from the tally of entries. According to my best calculation, though, I had spent at least ten years at Portmantle along with MacKinney, while Quickman and Pettifer were closing in on eight.

We were given false names because our real ones were too much baggage; some reputations were greater than others, and Portmantle was intended to be a place of parity. It was also believed that our real names fostered complacency and restricted us to established methods, familiar modes of thought. So the provost chose new surnames for us from telephone directories and old ship's manifests (he collected these on his travels and archived them in folders in his study). Our given names took no account of race or ethnicity, which is why MacKinney—the daughter of Russian émigrés—bore the handle of a Celt, and why the place had been home to numerous other oddities: a Lebanese painter called Dubois, an Italian novelist called Howells, a Slav illustrator called Singh, a Norwegian architect who answered only to O'Malley. In a funny way, we became more attached to our false names than to the true ones. After a while, they began to suit us better.

I was born Elspeth Conroy in Clydebank, Scotland, on 17th March 1937. I had always thought my family name quite unremarkable, and my Christian name so formal and girl-pretty. Elspeth Conroy, I felt, was the name of a debutante or a local politician's wife, not a serious painter with vital things to say about the world, but it was my fate and I had to accept it. My parents believed a refined Scottish name like Elspeth would enable me to marry a man of higher class (that is to say, a *rich* man) and, eventually, I managed to prove their theory wrong in every aspect. Still, I always suspected my work was undermined by that label, Elspeth Conroy. Did people exact their judgements upon me in galleries when they noticed my name? Did they see my gender on the wall, my nationality, my class, my type, and fail to connect with the truth of my paintings? It is impossible to know. I made my reputation as an artist with this label attached and it became the thing by which people defined and categorised me. I was a Scottish female painter, and thus I was recorded in the glossary of history. One day, when I felt secure enough to leave Portmantle, I would return to being Elspeth Conroy, take her off the peg like a stiff old coat and see if she still fitted. Until then, I was allowed to be someone different. Knell. Good old *Knell*. Separate and yet the same. Without her, I was nobody.

Of the four of us, it was surely Quickman who valued his detachment most. In the early days, we

could not look at him without thinking of the famous photograph on the back cover of his novels—the sunflower lean of him towards the lens, arms crossed defiantly, the brooding London skyline on his shoulders. We had grown up with him on our shelves, that stylish young face squinting at us over bookends, from underneath coffee mugs on our bedside tables. His real name was known in many households, even if it was not part of daily conversation; in literary circles, it was a synonym for greatness, a word that critics added *esque* to in reviews of lesser writers. Every resident at Portmantle—even the provost—had owned, or at least seen, a copy of Quickman’s first book, *In Advent of Rain*, published when he was only twenty-one. It was a required text on school curricula in Britain, considered a classic of its time. But the good-natured soul we knew as Quickman was not quite the same person—he was prickly at times, though self-effacing, and stood opposed to all the fuss and fanfare of the literary scene. Now he hungered only for a quiet room to be alone, a basic legal pad, and enough Staedtler HB pencils to fill an old cigar box. His given name suited him perfectly. His speed of thought was exceptional. And he was so unbothered with grooming that his beard spread all across his cheekbones like gorse; it hid the handsome symmetry of his features and gave him the look of a man long shipwrecked.

Pettifer’s real name also held some weight out in the world. As an architect, he was rarely in the public eye and, in truth, his stubby face did not register with me at all when I first saw it. If he ever spoke of buildings he was responsible for (it happened, on occasion, when he got maudlin), their shapes could be summoned to mind, but only in the nostalgic way you might recall a favourite chair or a special bottle of wine. His real name was the type brought up at dinner parties and society gatherings, after which people nodded and said, ‘Ah yes, I always liked that building. That’s one of his, is it?’ Now he was so used to being called Pettifer, and its various abbreviations, that he had vowed to adopt it when he left the island. He would establish a whole new practice one day, so he claimed, under the banner of Pettifer & Associates. We did not know if this was a serious promise, but it would not have surprised us to find such a plan eventuated.

Of course, we assumed that Fullerton’s real name must have held some equal notoriety on the mainland—everyone at Portmantle had earned a reputation in their field, which is why great measures were taken to safeguard its location. The fact is, we were too removed from the world to understand the scale of the boy’s renown. He was a frequent surprise to us.

He did not show up for dinner on his first evening, and I found myself worrying about him more than I had reason to. What if he had caught the flu, I wondered, or pneumonia? I could not bear the thought of him alone and suffering in his room, having had a bladder infection myself during the summer: there were few things quite as lonely as a summertime fever, with the sunshine spearing in through the shutters as you lay waiting for the provost’s medicine to take hold. I believed a winter illness might be the only thing worse. And so the four of us agreed—not entirely unanimously—that we should pass by his lodging after dinner, just to make sure he was in decent health.

Pettifer was curious to see the boy’s studio and find out what he was working on. ‘He’s surely too young to be a painter,’ he had suggested at dinner. ‘I’ve known a few good illustrators under twenty, but still—*seventeen*. Awfully young to have any sort of authoritative voice or style. Unless he’s one of those ghastly pop artists. He doesn’t look the type to me. But then, why would they have given him a studio when there are plenty of free rooms upstairs?’

Fullerton had been allocated the remotest lodging on the grounds, set fifty yards back from my own in a closet of pomegranate trees and dwarf oaks, and so many varieties of oleander in the spring. The refuge comprised ten buildings, spread over what was said to be nine acres but which felt more like fifteen. An imperious fin-de-siècle mansion with spindly wrought-iron cornices loomed at the dead centre; its timber panelling was so weather-struck that its entire bulk had taken on a dreary, elephantine colour. The provost lived on the top floor. He had decided against repainting as the

building's very drabness was its most effective disguise. In certain places, below the guttering and such, we could make out the remnants of the original aquamarine gloss and could imagine the house as it once was, the majestic thing it was made to be.

At full capacity, the other twelve bedrooms in the mansion were occupied by artists whose projects demanded little by way of space or apparatus: the playwrights, the novelists, the poets, the children's book writers were all sheltered here in humble rooms, along with Ender and his staff of two: a youngish woman, Gülcan, who cooked, cleaned, and laundered, and an ungainly fellow called Ardak who saw to the garden and generally fixed things about the place that did not work (if only he could have fixed us too). The day room was on the ground floor, the kitchen and mess hall on the level above. Orbiting the mansion were eight basic cinderblock huts with flat shingle rooftops that guests would often sit upon when the weather allowed, watching the trawl of the sea, examining the stars. These were the studio lodgings for the painters, the architects, the performance makers: any artist who required a broader plot to work in, or who had materials and equipment to store. (Only one sculptor had been admitted in our time, and she had made such a commotion throughout the workday with her chisels and hammers that there had been great relief when she finally left—no others had been invited since.)

The studio huts had all the grandeur of shoeboxes, but they were spacious enough to feel untrammelled, and had large windows that vented cool air and natural light. Mine served its function as well as any workspace I had ever owned. I had everything I needed: a bed to sleep on, a coke-burning stove to warm my fingers by, regular meals up at the mansion, a place for ablutions and calls of nature, and, above all, a glorious peace I could count on not to be broken.

As we approached Fullerton's lodging, we found his door hanging open. The lamps were on and a stream of yellow light was angling out onto the trodden snow outside. 'I'm quite sure he said to leave him alone,' Quickman warned us. 'He might actually be getting work done in there.'

'Shsshh,' I said. 'Can you hear that?'

There was an odd din emanating from behind the studio. It was not a musical sound as such, though it had a bouncing sort of cadence. 'See, I told you—he's perfectly all right,' Pettifer said. 'We've done our duty. Let's go.'

MacKinney pulled on my elbow.

'I'll fetch the board then, shall I?' Quickman said. 'Pretty sure I had it last.'

'Knell—are you coming?'

'You three go. I won't be long.' I could not settle until I saw the boy again. Quickman's backgammon games sometimes ran late, depending on how well Pettifer fared against him, and I planned to stay up afterwards, working until dawn—I would probably miss breakfast. It seemed cruel to leave Fullerton unchecked for all that time. 'I'm just going to look in the window.'

The others started backpedalling through the snow. Then they paused, waiting in the moon-blue space between the dwarf oaks. They made hurry-up gestures with their hands: 'Go on then!' 'Get on with it!' 'Don't take all night!'

I walked up to the bare front window of Fullerton's lodging. The shutters were folded back and the inner blind was not yet closed. Nobody was inside. His canvas bag lay open on the floor with most of his clothes spilling out. There was a classical guitar leaned against the bedframe. He did not quite have the look of a composer to me, or the swagger of a rock'n'roll singer, but I thought perhaps he could have written music for the theatre or the folk scene.

It was then that he emerged from around the side of the hut, dragging an oil drum behind him. I had no time to move away. When he saw me, he stood still, but he did not flinch or seem surprised. He carried on hauling the empty drum through the snow, towards a patch of level ground, where he shoved down hard on its edges to stabilise it. 'Knell with a K,' he said, sounding less angry than I

expected. 'Are you lost?'

~~'I just wanted to see how you were feeling.'~~ This came out rather meekly. 'You missed dinner.'

'Wasn't hungry,' he said. 'Mystery solved.'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

He gazed at the ground. A fat bird cawed and streaked the dark above us. Fullerton jerked his head up. 'The crows are all grey here. I can't get used to it.'

'You should see the herons when they come in the spring. They make nests all round the island. It's wonderful.'

The boy gave an uninterested murmur. Then he turned for his lodging and walked straight inside, leaving the door wide open. I was not sure if he was coming back. I waited, hearing the scuff of his footsteps on the floorboards. After a moment, he came out with a stack of what seemed to be pamphlets or magazines, bearing them in his arms like offerings. He did not look at me, just tipped the entire set into the rusty drum, rumbling it. The glossy covers glinted as they dropped into the can. He dusted off his fingers and headed for the door again, stopping only to squint into the trees. 'Your friends are waiting,' he said.

'Will we see you at breakfast?'

'I doubt it.'

I could not understand his hostility, so I did what felt most natural to me: I turned the problem inward, assumed that I had spoken out of turn. 'I'm not usually one for small talk,' I said.

He sighed. 'That makes two of us.'

'Well, I'm trying to make a special effort.'

'That's nice of you,' he said, 'but I don't need it. The whole point of coming here was to be alone. I really don't get on with people much.' And he threw up his hands and carried on into his studio.

'You're much too young to talk that way,' I said, when he came back. Now he was holding a set of ratty papers, banded with a thick elastic. A burgundy passport was on top of the pile, under his thumb.

'I'm old enough to know my limitations.' He dumped everything into the drum. 'Why did *you* come here? For company?'

There was a lot I could have told him then, but I sensed he would not be glad to hear it. 'There's a difference between privacy and solitude, you know.'

'Uh-huh. I'll take your word for it.' He padded the pockets of his cagoule. Underneath, he had on a coarse wool sweater that could not have been his own, as the round-neck collar was so loose it revealed his bare clavicle. It must have been one of Ender's, or taken from lost property. He was wearing sturdy boots now, too, which gave him extra height. 'Shit,' he said, frisking his torso. 'Do you have any matches?'

'There should be some by your stove.'

He cleared his nose and spat. 'There aren't.'

'Well, I've a full box in my studio. I can fetch it if you like.'

'Nah, don't bother. I'll have to do it the hard way.' With this, the boy dropped to his haunches and began to burrow into the snow and mulch and pine cones. Soon enough, he was bringing up clods of rust-red soil. He tossed an armload into the drum and it rained fatly on the metal.

'What are you doing?'

He did not answer, just kept on digging with his hands and plunking the loose earth inside the can.

'What are you burying?'

It did not seem to bother him that I was watching—there was something tunnel-eyed and frantic about him as he quarried the ground, like a fox hunting rabbits. After a while, the drum was about a quarter full, and he stopped, sitting on the snow with his back against the metal. Strands of his fringe were stuck upon his forehead. He looked so young and afraid.

‘Fullerton,’ I said—it was a difficult name to speak tenderly. ‘Is everything all right?’

He sat there, panting, gazing at nothing.

‘Do you want me to go?’

‘I couldn’t care less what you do,’ he said.

The others were still waiting. I saw their huddled shadows and felt glad of them. But Fullerton called after me as I walked away: ‘Wait a sec. Hold on.’ There was a note of contrition in his voice.

I turned.

‘It’s nothing personal,’ he said. ‘It’s just—look, I haven’t sussed this place out yet. There are loads more rules than I thought there’d be.’

It bothered me that he had been admitted without understanding everything. My own sponsor had spent two full days readying me for the prospect of Portmantle, explaining everything that lay ahead. So I went back to the boy and said, ‘If you have any questions, just ask.’

He spat again. ‘I was told no drinking, no drugs, no phone calls and whatever. But your mate Quickson said there was other stuff, too. I don’t know if he meant the ferry tokens, but I bought two of them like they told me—there’s one in my bag somewhere. You think that’s what he was talking about?’

‘It’s *Quickman*.’ I smiled. ‘And, yes, that’s part of it.’

‘Do you still have yours?’

‘I do, but not on me. Somewhere safe. That’s more a superstition than a rule.’

‘Oh.’ He gave another sigh. ‘Well, that old bloke went through my bag before. I thought that’s what he was after.’

‘Ender, you mean?’

‘Yeah, he patted me down. It was weird.’

‘Ender’s OK—just doing his job. If there weren’t any rules, this place would fall apart.’

‘So everyone gets frisked?’

‘Only once. You’re no different from the rest of us.’

‘It just took me by surprise, that’s all.’

‘Your sponsor should’ve warned you.’

Fullerton got up from the snow. He studied my face, as though gauging every pore of it for weaknesses. ‘Well, I don’t plan on staying here that long anyway. I just need to clear my head and then I’m going back to finish what I started.’

‘If I were you, I wouldn’t set myself too many restrictions. It’ll take as long as it takes.’ I wanted to tell him that I had believed the same thing when I came to Portmantle. That I would find my clarity in a matter of days. That I would not need the provost’s intervention: the visa documents specially acquired and signed on my behalf. But there was no point in daunting the boy any further. ‘You know I said instead, ‘when I came here, I was lucky. I had someone to help me through the early part, the hard part. You remember MacKinney?’

He nodded.

‘She and I were admitted on the same afternoon. We took the same ferry from Kabataş and didn’t even know it. If it hadn’t been for her, I wouldn’t have made it this far.’

‘Look, I’m glad it all worked out for you,’ said Fullerton. ‘But that doesn’t mean we’re the same. I’m not like that. I can’t count on anyone but myself.’

‘Well, maybe you should try.’ I held my smile this time, until I was sure he had received it. ‘We’re all loners here. With the right people, you can be alone *and* together—that’s something you learn how to do when you get older.’

‘I don’t see it happening. No offence.’

‘It’ll happen all on its own.’ It was easy to feel sympathy for the boy. Not just because he was

sweat-shined and muddied, but because I could remember what it was like to be his age, so wearied by my own guardedness, letting nobody in, too frightened of getting hurt. ‘And, in the meantime, Tif and Q can probably help you with—whatever it is you’re trying to dispose of there.’

The boy eyed the can and kicked it. ‘I can sort it. And besides—’ He nodded to the space behind me. ‘They’ve already gone.’

But they were not quite beyond sight. I could still make out their shapes between the trees, heading for my lodging. ‘Can you whistle?’ I asked. The boy thought about it, then put his grubby fingers behind his teeth and made the cleanest steam-kettle sound. It took a moment for the others to realise we were calling them.

Pettifer was the first to arrive, covering his ears. ‘I think they heard you in the Serengeti. What’s the big emergency?’ He leaned an arm on my shoulder.

‘Fullerton needs your advice.’

‘Does he now. You hear that, Q?—I’m being asked for *advice*.’

‘Goodness,’ said Quickman, appearing behind him. ‘Whatever next?’

The two of them laughed.

MacKinney noticed the boy’s condition. His cheeks were striped with the dull red soil. ‘Everything OK here?’ she asked.

‘Trying to get rid of a few things, that’s all.’

He went about explaining his intentions for the oil drum, which caused Pettifer to push out his bottom lip and shake his head. ‘No, no, I wouldn’t recommend a drumfire unless you have kerosene. You need to build up a little pyre of timber in the centre to direct the flames. Otherwise, things don’t burn right, and it can all get out of hand rather quickly.’

The boy stood back. ‘Just as well I don’t have any matches then.’

‘I tried to barbecue a manuscript at my editor’s house once,’ Quickman said. ‘Made a glorious mess of his lawn. There was a lot more ash than I expected. Dangerous thing to do, really.’

Pettifer hummed in agreement. ‘Even a small fire can creep up on you if you don’t know what you’re doing.’

‘How d’you know so much about it?’ Fullerton asked.

‘My father was a scout master.’

‘That’s cool.’

‘He certainly thought so.’

‘Mine wouldn’t even take me camping,’ the boy said. ‘I still went, though.’

‘I don’t blame you.’

‘Did he let you have a jack-knife?’

‘No. But he kept one for himself.’

MacKinney looked back towards the attic lights of the mansion, yawning. The only lines that did not smooth out of her skin were the furrows round her eyes, which seemed to have the deep-set quality of woodgrain. ‘I suppose we should start getting used to all this macho conversation, Knell. They’ll be duelling with pistols before we know it.’

‘That’s an idea,’ Quickman said.

‘Well, I’m turning in before it gets to that.’

‘What about our game?’ Tif said.

‘I’m not really in the mood. But I hope my money’s still good.’ She leaned into my ear and mumbled: ‘A scoop of French roast on Quickman. Double down if it’s two-two.’

I nodded. ‘I’ll hold on to your winnings.’

She kissed my cheek. ‘Night, all.’

‘Night, Mac.’

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