



'HE WRITES LIKE A DEVIL'
MAIL ON SUNDAY

*The
Quantity
Theory
of Insanity*

B L O O M S B U R Y

THE QUANTITY
THEORY OF INSANITY

WILL SELF

B L O O M S B U R Y
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However far you may travel in this world, you will still occupy the same volume of space.

Traditional Ur-Bororo saying

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By the Same Author

I suppose that the form my bereavement took after my mother died was fairly conventional. Initially I was shocked. Her final illness was mercifully quick, but harrowing. Cancer tore through her body as if it were late for an important meeting with a lot of other successful diseases.

I had always expected my mother to outlive me. I saw myself becoming a neutered bachelor, who would be wearing a cardigan and still living at home at the age of forty, but it wasn't to be. Mother's death was a kind of a relief, but it was also bizarre and hallucinatory. The week she lay dying in the hospital I was plagued by strange sensations; gusts of air would seem personalised and, driving in my car, I had the sensation not that I was moving forward but that the road was being reeled back beneath the wheels, as if I were mounted on some giant piece of scenery.

The night she died my brother and I were at the hospital. We took it in turns to snatch sleep in the vestibule at the end of the ward and then to sit with her. She breathed stertorously. Her flesh yellowed and yellowed. I was quite conscious that she had no mind any more. The cancer – or so the consultants told me – had made its way up through the meningitic fluid in the spine and into her brain. I sensed the cancer in her skull like a cloud of inky pus. Her self-consciousness, sentience, identity, what you will, was cornered, forced back by the cloud into a confined space, where it pulsed on and then off with all the apparent humanity of a digital watch.

One minute she was alive, the next she was dead. A dumpy nurse rushed to find my brother and me. We had both fallen asleep in the vestibule, cocooned within its plastic walls. 'I think she's gone,' said the nurse. And I pictured Mother striding down Gower Street, naked, wattled.

By the time we reached the room they were laying her out. I had never understood what this meant before; now I could see that the truth was that the body, the corpse, really laid itself out. It was smoothed as if a great wind had rolled over the tired flesh. And it, Mother, was changing colour, as I watched, from an old ivory to a luminous yellow. The nurse, for some strange reason, had brushed Mother's hair back off her forehead. It lay around her head in a fan on the pillow and two lightning streaks of grey ran up into it from either temple. The nurses had long since removed her dentures, and the whole ensemble – Mother with drawn-in cheeks and sculpted visage, lying in the small room around her the loops and skeins of a life-supporting technology – made me think of the queen of an alien planet, resplendent on a high-tech palanquin, in some Buck Rogers style sci-fi serial of the Thirties.

There was a great whooshing sensation in the room. This persisted as a doctor of Chinese extraction – long, yellow, and divided at the root – felt around inside her cotton nightie for a nonexistent heartbeat. The black, spindly hairs on his chin wavered. He pronounced her dead. The whooshing stopped. I felt her spirit fly out into the orange light of central London. It was about 3.00 a.m.

* * *

When I began to accept the fact that Mother really was gone, I went into a period of intense depression. I felt that I had lost an adversary. Someone to test myself against. My greatest fan and my severest critic and above all a good talker, who I was only just getting to know as a person – shorn of the emotional prejudices that conspire to strait-jacket the relationships between parents and children.

When my depression cleared the dreams started. I found myself night after night encountering my mother in strange situations. In my dreams she would appear at dinner parties (uninvited), crouching

behind a filing cabinet in the office where I worked, or on public transport balefully swinging from strap. She was quite honest about the fact that she was dead in these dreams, she made no attempt to masquerade as one of the living, rather she absorbed the effect that death had had on her personality much the way she had taken the rest of the crap that life had flung at her: a couple of failed marriages and a collection of children who, on the whole, were a bit of a disappointment to her.

When I tried to remonstrate with her, point out to her that by her own lights (she was a fervent atheist and materialist), she ought to be gently decomposing somewhere, she would fix me with a weary eye and say in a characteristically deadpan way, 'So I'm dead but won't lie down, huh? Big deal.'

It was a big deal. Mother had banged on about her revulsion at the idea of an afterlife for as long as I could remember. The chief form that this took was an extended rant aimed at all the trappings of death that society had designed. She despised the undertaking business especially. To Mother it was simply a way of cheating money out of grieving people who could ill afford it.

She had told me a year or two before she died that if it was at all possible I was to try and give her a kind of do-it-yourself funeral. Apparently the Co-op retailed one that allowed you to get the cost of the whole thing down to about £250. You had to build your own casket though and I was never any good at anything remotely practical. At school it took me two years to construct an acrylic string holder. And even then it wouldn't work.

So, after Mother died we arranged things conventionally, but austerely. Her corpse was burnt at Golders Green Crematorium. My eldest brother and I went alone – knowing that she would have disapproved of a crowd. We sat there in the chapel contemplating the bottom-of-the-range casket. One of the undertakers came waddling down the aisle, he gestured to us to stand and then moved off to one side, conspicuously scratching his grey bottom, either inadvertently or because he considered us of no account. Electric motors whirred, Mother lurched towards what, to all intents and purposes, was her final resting place.

A week or so later when I was going through more of Mother's papers I found a newspaper clipping about the DIY funeral. I threw it away guiltily. I also found a deposit book that showed that mother had invested £370 in something called the Ecological Building Society. I phoned the society and was told by a Mr Hunt that it was true. Mother had been the owner of a seventh of a traditional Mongolian *yurt*, which was sited for some reason in a field outside Wincanton. I told Mr Hunt to keep the seventh; it seemed a suitable memorial.

Meanwhile, the dreams continued. And Mother managed to be as embarrassing in them as she had been alive, but for entirely different reasons. With death she had taken on a mantle of candour and social sharpness that I tended to attribute to myself rather than her. At the dream dinner parties she would make asides to me the whole time about how pretentious people were and what bad taste they displayed, talking all the while in a loud and affected voice which, needless to say, remained inaudible to her subjects. After a while I ceased trying to defeat her with the logic of her own extinction; it was pointless. Mother had long since ceased to be susceptible to reasoning. I think it was something to do with my father, a man who uses dialectics the way the Japanese used bamboo slivers during the war.

About six months after Mother's death the dreams began to decline in frequency and eventually they petered out altogether. They were replaced for a short while by an intense period during which I kept seeing people in the street who I thought were Mother. I'd be walking in the West End or the City and there, usually on the other side of the road, would be Mother, ambling along staring in through windows. I would know it was Mother because of the clothes. Mother tended to wear slacks on loan from hippopotami, or else African-style dresses that could comfortably house a scout troop. She also

always carried a miscellaneous collection of bags, plastic and linen, dangling from her arm. The were crammed with modern literature, groceries and wadded paper tissues.

And then, invariably, as I drew closer the likeness would evaporate. Not only wasn't it Mother, but it seemed absurd that I ever could have made the mistake. This late-middle-aged woman looked nothing like Mother, she was dowdy and conventional. Not the sort of woman at all who would say of effete young men that they 'had no balls', or of precious young women that they 'shat chocolate ice cream'. Yet each time the fact that Mother was dead hit me again, it was as if it hadn't really occurred to me before and that her failure to get in touch with me over the past six months had been solely because she was 'hellishly busy'.

When I stopped seeing fake Mothers in the street I reckoned that I had just about accepted her death. Every so often I thought about her, sometimes with sadness, sometimes with joy, but her absence no longer gnawed at me like a rat at a length of flex. I was over it. Although, like Marcel after Albertine has gone, from time to time I felt that the reason I no longer missed Mother with such poignancy was that I had become another person. I had changed. I was no longer the sort of person who had had a mother like Mother. Mother belonged to someone else. If I had run into her at a dinner party fully conscious, she probably wouldn't have recognised me. My mother was dead.

All of this made the events that transpired in the winter of the year she died even more shocking. I was walking down Crouch Hill towards Crouch End on a drizzly, bleak, Tuesday afternoon. It was about three o'clock. I'd taken the afternoon off work and decided to go and see a friend. When coming up the other side of the road I saw Mother. She was wearing a sort of bluish, tweedish long jacket and black slacks and carrying a Barnes & Noble book bag, as well as a large handbag and a carrier bag from Waitrose. She had a CND badge in her lapel and was observing the world with that familiar 'there will be tears before bedtime' sort of expression.

The impression I had of Mother in that very first glance was so sharp and so clear, her presence so tangible, that I did not for a moment doubt the testimony of my senses. I looked at Mother and felt a trinity of emotions: affection and embarrassment mingled with a sort of acute embarrassment. It was this peculiarly familiar wash of feeling that must have altogether swamped the terror and bewilderment that anyone would expect to experience at the sight of their dead mother walking up Crouch Hill.

I crossed the road and walked towards her. She spotted me when I was about twenty feet off. Just before a grin of welcome lit up her features I spotted a little *moue* of girlish amusement – that was familiar too, it meant 'You've been had'. We kissed on both cheeks; Mother looked me up and down to see how I was weighing in for the fight with life. Then she gestured at the shop window she'd been looking into. 'Can you believe the prices they're charging for this crap, someone must be buying it.' Her accent was the same, resolutely mid-Atlantic, she had the same artfully yellowed and uneven dentures. It was Mother.

'Mother,' I said, 'what are you doing in Crouch End? You never come to Crouch End except to take the cat to the vet, you don't even like Crouch End.'

'Well, I live here now.' Mother was unperturbed. 'It's OK, it's a drag not being able to get the tube, but the buses are fairly regular. There's quite a few good shops in the parade and someone's just opened up a real deli. Want some halva?' Mother opened her fist under my face. Crushed into it was some sticky halva, half-eaten but still in its gold foil wrapping. She grinned again.

'But Mother, what are you doing in Crouch End? You're dead.'

Mother was indignant, 'Of course I'm dead, dummy, whaddya think I've been doing for the last ten months? Cruising the Caribbean?'

'How the hell should I know? I thought we saw the last of you at Golders Green Crematorium.'

never expected to see you in Crouch End on a Tuesday afternoon.' Mother had me rattled, she seemed to be genuinely astonished by my failure to comprehend her resurrection.

'More to the point, what are you doing in Crouch End? Why aren't you at work?'

'I thought I'd take the afternoon off. There's not a lot on at the office. If I stayed there I'd just be shuffling paper back and forth trying to create some work.'

'That's an attitude problem talking, young man. You've got a good job there. What's the matter with you? You always want to start at the top, you've got to learn to work your way up in life.'

'Life, Mother? I hardly think "Life" is the issue here! Tell me about what it's like to be dead! Why didn't you tell any of us you were having life after death in Crouch End? You could have called ...'

Mother wasn't fazed, she looked at her watch, another crappy Timex, indistinguishable from the last one I'd seen her wearing. 'It's late, I've got to go to my class. If you want to know about life after death come and see me tomorrow. I'm living at 24 Rosemount Avenue, in the basement flat, we'll have tea, I'll make you some cookies.' And with that she gave me the sort of perfunctory peck on the cheek she always used to give me when she was in a hurry and toddled off up Crouch Hill, leaving me standing, bemused.

What I couldn't take was that Mother was so offhand about life after death, rather than the fact of it. That and this business of living in Crouch End. Mother had always been such a crushing snob about where people lived in London; certain suburbs – such as Crouch End – were so incredibly non-U in Mother's book of form. The revelation that there was life after death seemed to me relatively unimportant set beside Mother's startling new attitudes.

I probably should have gone and told someone about my encounter. But who? All a shrink could have offered would have been full board and medication. And anyway, the more I told people how real the experience had been, the more certain they would become that I was the victim of an outlandish, complex delusionary state.

I had no desire to be psychiatric cannon fodder, so I went off to see my friend and had a fulfilling afternoon playing Trivial Pursuit. Just suppose it was all for real? I had to find out more about Mother's resurrection, she'd always been so emphatic about what happened to people after they died. 'They rot, that's it. You put 'em in a box and they rot. All that religious stuff, it's a load of crap.' Setting aside the whole issue of the miraculous I really wanted to see Mother eat humble pie over the afterlife issue, so much so that I went through the next thirty-odd hours as if nothing had happened. It was an exercise in magical thinking. I figured that if I behaved as if nothing had happened, Mother would be waiting for me, with cookies, in Rosemount Avenue, but if I said anything to anyone, the gods might take offence and whisk her away.

Rosemount Avenue was one of those hilltop streets in suburban London where the camber of the road is viciously arced like the back of a macadamised whale. The houses are high-gabled Victorian, tiled in red and with masonry that looks as if it was sculpted out of solid snot. Calling it an avenue was presumably a reference to the eight or so plane trees running down each side of the road. These had been so viciously pruned that they looked like nothing so much as upturned amputated legs. Poised on the swell of the road I shuddered to myself. What had brought these macabre images into my mind? Was it the prospect of my second encounter with a dead person? Was I losing my balance? Examining myself I concluded in the negative. In truth suburban streets, if you look at them for long enough, always summon up a sense of mortality – of the skull beneath the skin. The Reaper always waits behind the bus shelter. You can see his robe up to the knee; the rest is obscured by the route map.

The basement of No. 24 looked rather poky from the street; I couldn't see in the windows without going down into the basement area. Before I could do so Mother appeared clutching a tea strainer

one hand. 'Are you going to stand up there all afternoon? The kettle's boiled.' Death had done nothing to dampen down Mother's impatience. She still carried around her a sense of barely repressed nervous energy; in a more active, physical age Mother would have probably broken horses, or gone raiding with the Bedouin.

I noticed as I stepped into the flat that Mother's name was under the bell. For some reason that shocked me. I felt that Mother ought to be incognito. After all it was pretty weird her being alive after death. What if the Sunday papers found out? It could be embarrassing. I said, 'Mother, why have you kept your name? Surely if you're going to go on living in London you should change it? Aren't the people in charge of death worried about publicity?'

Mother sighed with exasperation. 'Look, there aren't any "people in charge of death". When you die you move to another part of London, that's all there is to it. Period.'

'But Mother, what about that performance at Golders Green? Weren't you in that coffin?'

'All right I'll admit it, that part of it is a bit obscure. One minute I was in the hospital – feeling like shit, incidentally – the next I was in Crouch End and some estate agents were showing me around this flat.'

'Estate agents! Dead estate agents?'

'Yeah, they were dead too, the whole thing is self-administered, a bit like a commune.'

Mother's eschatological revelations were beginning to get to me a little and I had slumped down on a sofa. My new vantage point jolted me into looking around the flat. I'd never seen a piece of elysian real estate before. What struck me immediately was that Mother's final resting place, if that was what it was, was remarkably like the flat she'd spent the last ten years of her life in.

There was the same large room with sofas and chairs scattered round it. There was a kitchenette off to one side, and high double doors at the end of the main room led to the bedroom. Through another door at the back of the room I could see a set of french windows and through them a small well-kept garden. The flat was furnished haphazardly with odd posters and paintings on the walls and a lot of books; some shelved, others stacked on tables. A set of half-corrected proofs lay on the arm of a chair.

The principal difference was that whereas in the past it had been photographs of my brothers and me that had stood, either framed or mounted in plastic cubes, scattered around on the available surfaces, now the impedimenta that betrayed Mother's affections were entirely unfamiliar to me. There were photographs of people I had never seen before. Young men who looked rather too smooth for my taste. And other, older people. A jolly couple grinning out from a particularly ornate silver frame looked like Cypriots to me. I picked up a postcard someone had sent Mother from Madeira in all places and scanning the back recognised neither the bright feminine hand, nor the scrawled maternal salutation and signature.

I was shocked by all of this, but kept silent. Once again I felt sure that if I pressured Mother she would tell me nothing substantial about the afterlife.

The kettle boiled. Mother filled the pot and placed it on a tray, together with cups, sugar, milk and a plate of my favourite chocolate chip cookies. She brought it over and placed it on the low table in front of where I sat. She poured me a cup of tea and offered me a cookie. The conversation lapsed for a while. I munched and Mother went into the kitchenette and opened a can of cat food. She let a couple of black kittens in from the back garden.

'New cats, I see.'

'Uh-huh, that's Tillie and that's Margaret.' The cats lurked and smarmed themselves around the furniture. I wondered idly if they were familiars and if my mother had really always been the kind of witch my father had said she was.

I started browsing through the books. They weren't the same as her mortal collection – I had those – but they covered the same ground: Virago Classics, a lot of Henry James and Proust in several different editions, scores of miscellaneous novels, books on gardening and cookery. By now I was quite openly looking for something, some clue. I couldn't admit it to myself but once again Mother was managing to rile me as much dead as she ever had alive.

I went over to the phone table. There was an address book lying open which I started to flip through idly. Again there were the same kind of names, but they belonged to totally different people, presumably the ones in the photographs, the ones who sent cards. Mother had always struck up acquaintances fairly easily. It wasn't so much that she was friendly as that she exuded a certain wholesome quality, as palpably as if a vent had been opened on her forehead and the smell of bread baking had started to churn out. In my view this wholesome quality was the worst kind of misrepresentation. If there had been such a body as the Personality Advertising Standards Commission, Mother would have been the subject of numerous complaints.

There were phone directories stacked under the table – phone directories and something else, phone-directory-shaped, that wasn't a phone directory. I bent down and pulled it out by its spine. It was a phone directory. *North London Book of the Dead*, ran the title; and then underneath: A–Z. The cover was the usual yellow flimsy card and there was also the usual vaguely arty line drawing – in this instance of Kensal Green Cemetery. I started to leaf through the pages.

'So, you're not here five minutes and you want to use the phone,' said Mother coming back from the kitchenette.

'What's this, Mother?' I held up the directory.

'Oh that. Well I guess you might call it a kind of religious text.' She giggled unnervingly.

'Mother, don't you think it's about time you came clean with me about all of this?'

We sat down at the table (similar melamine finish, similar blue, flower-patterned tablecloth) with the *North London Book of the Dead* in between us.

'Well, it's like this,' began Mother. 'When you die you go and live in another part of London. And that's it.'

'Whaddya mean, that's it?' I could already see all sorts of difficulties with this radical new view of death, even if I was sitting inside an example of it. 'Whaddya mean, that's it? Who decides which part of London? How is it that no one's ever heard of this before? How come people don't notice all the dead people clogging up the transport system? What about paying bills? What about this phone book? You can't tell me this lists all the people who have ever died in North London, it isn't thick enough. And what about the dead estate agents, who do they work for? A Supreme Estate Agent? And why Crouch End? You hate Crouch End.'

'It could have been worse, some dead people live in Wanstead.'

'What about the people who lived in Wanstead when they were alive?'

'They live somewhere else, like East Finchley or Grays Thurrock, anywhere.'

'Mother, will you answer my questions, or won't you?'

'I'll just get another cup of tea, dear.'

I wrung it out of her eventually. It went something like this: when you die you move to another part of London where you resume pretty much the same kind of life you had before you died. There are lots of dead people in London and quite a few dead businesses. When you've been dead for a few years you're encouraged to move to the provinces.

The dead community are self-administering and there are dead people in most of the major enterprises, organisations and institutions. There are some autonomous services for dead people, b

on the whole dead services operate alongside 'live' ones. Most dead people have jobs, some work for live companies. Mother, for example, was working for a live publishing company.

'OK. I think I've got it so far, but you still haven't explained why it is that no one knows. Now I know I could shout it to the rooftops. I could sell my story to the tabloids.' I was getting quite worked up by now, hunched over and absent-mindedly gobbling chocolate chip cookies with great gulps of tea. I didn't even notice the kittens eating my shoelaces. Mother was imperturbable.

'The funny thing is, that very few people seem to meet dead people who they know. It just goes to show you how big and anonymous the city really is. Even when people do meet dead friends and relatives they don't seem inclined to broadcast the news.'

'But Mother, you've always had an enquiring mind, you always thought you'd rot when you die. Why haven't you got to the bottom of all this? Who's the main man? Is it the "G" character?'

'How should I know? I work, I go to my class, I feed the cats, I see a few friends, I travel. I'm not as clever like you, if I do reflect on it at all it seems wholly appropriate. If I had spent days trying to visualise the afterlife I probably could have only come up with a pale version of the very real Crouching End I'm now living in.'

'What class?'

Mother gestured at the phone directory. 'The people who compile the phone book hold regular classes for people who are newly dead. They run through the blue pages at the beginning of the book and explain the best and most appropriate ways for dead people to conduct themselves.'

'I should imagine that there are a lot of newly dead people who are pretty badly traumatised.' I probably said this with unwarranted enthusiasm. I was still trying to look for the gaping holes in Mother's suburban necro-utopia.

'Oh no, not at all. Put it like this: most people who've had painful illnesses, or are lonely, are only too relieved to discover that instead of extinction they're getting Winchmore Hill or Kenton. The classes only go to underline the very reality of the situation. There's something immensely reassuring about sitting on a plastic chair in a cold church hall reading a phone book and watching a pimply youth trying to draw on a whiteboard with a squeaky magic marker.'

'I see your point. But Mother, you were always so sparky and feisty. It's out of character for you to be so laid back. Aren't you curious to get the whole picture? What happens in other cities? Is it the same? If dead people move to the provinces after a while don't these areas get clogged up and zombified? There are a million questions I'd like the answers to. You always hated groups and here you are submitting to indoctrination in a religion ostensibly run by dead employees of British Telecom. Why? For Christ's sake, why?'

'Yeah, it is kind of weird, isn't it. I think death must have mellowed me.'

We chewed the fat for a while longer. Mother asked me about my sex life and whether or not I had an overdraft. She also asked about the rest of the family and expressed the opinion that both my brothers were insane and that some gay people we knew were 'nice boys'. All this was characteristic and reassuring. She let me take a closer look at the *North London Book of the Dead*. It was genuine and uninspiring, based entirely on fact with no prophecies or commandments. The introductory pages were given over to flat statements such as: 'Your (dead) identity should hold up to most official enquiries. Dead people work in most major civil service departments ensuring that full records of dead people are kept up to date. Should you in any instance run into difficulties, call one of the Dead Citizen Advice Bureaux listed in the directory.' And so on.

Somehow, reading the book calmed me down and I stopped harassing Mother with my questions. After an hour or so she said that she was going out to a party a friend of hers was throwing. Would I like to come? I said, 'I think I can probably do better than socialising with dead people,' and instantly

regretted it. 'Sorry, Mother.'

~~'No offence taken, son,' she smiled. This was completely uncharacteristic and her failure to g~~
violently angry filled me with dismay. She let me out of the flat just as a small wan moon was lifting
off over the shoulder of Ally Pally. I set off towards Stroud Green Road buzzing with weird thoughts
and apprehensions.

That night I thrashed around in bed like a porpoise. My duvet became saturated with sweat. I felt as if
I were enfolded in the damp palm of a giant ... Mother! I awoke with a start, the alarm clock blinking
3.22 a.m., redly. I sat on the edge of my bed cradling my dripping brow. It came to me why I should be
having such a nightmare. I wanted to betray Mother. It wasn't out of any desire to change once and for all
all the metaphysical status quo, or because I wanted to open people's eyes to the reality of their lives
or even in order to try and blow a whistle on the Supreme Being. It was a far more selfish thing
wounded pride. Mother could have kept in touch, she let me go through all that grief while *she*, she
was pottering around the shops in Crouch End. She could have fixed up some sort of gig with a seance
or a medium, or even just written a letter or phoned. I would have understood. Well she wasn't going
to push *my* buttons from beyond the grave. I was determined to blow the whistle on the whole set-up.

But the next day came and, standing on a tube platform contemplating the rim of a crushed
styrofoam cup as if it contained some further revelation, I began to waver. I sat at my desk all
morning in a daze, not that that matters. Then, at lunch time, I went and sat in a café in a daze.

When I got back to my desk after lunch the phone rang. It was Mother.

'I just called to see how you are.'

'I'm fine, Mother.'

'I called while you were out and spoke to some girl. Did she give you the message?'

'No, Mother.'

'I told her specifically to give you the message, to write it down. What's the matter with the
people in your office?'

'Nothing, Mother. She probably forgot.'

Mother sighed. For her, neglected phone messages had always represented the very acme of
Babylonian decadence. 'So what are you doing?'

'Working, Mother.'

'You're a little sulky today. What's the matter, didn't you sleep?'

'No, I didn't. I found yesterday all a bit much.'

'You'll adjust, kid. Come over tonight and meet Christos, he's a friend of mine – a Greek Cypriot
– he runs a wholesale fruit business, but he writes in his spare time. You'll like him.'

'Yeah, I think I saw his photo at your place yesterday. Is he dead, Mother?'

'Of course he's dead. Be here by 8.00. I'm cooking. And bring some of your shirts, you can iron
them here.' She hung up on me.

Ray, who works at the desk opposite, was looking at me strangely when I put down the receiver.

'Are you OK?' he said. 'It sounded like you were saying "Mother" on the phone just now.'

I felt tongue-tied and incoherent. How could I explain this away? 'No ... no, ah ... I wasn't saying
"Mother", it was "Mudder", a guy called Mudder, he's an old friend of mine.'

Ray didn't look convinced. We'd worked with each other for quite a while and he knew most of
what went on with me, but what could I say? I couldn't tell him who it *really* was. I'd never live down
the ignominy of having a mother who phoned me at the office.

'Ha ha ha, ha-ha ... Hoo, h', hoo, far, far and away, a mermaid sings in the silky sunlight.' An idiot cooed to himself on the park bench that stood at the crest of the hill. Below him the greensward stretched down to the running track. In the middle distance the hospital squatted among the houses, living ziggurat, thrusting out of a crumbling plain.

The idiot's hair had been chopped into a ragged tonsure. He wore a blue hooded anorak and belted bottomed corduroy trousers, and rocked as he sang. As I passed by I looked into his face; it was a face like the bench he sat on, a sad, forlorn piece of municipal furniture – although the morning sun shone bright, this face was steadily being drizzled on.

This particular idiot lay outside my jurisdiction. He was, as it were, un-gazetted. I knew that by ignoring the opportunity to indulge in the sickly bellyburn of self-piteous caring, I was facing up to a occupational challenge. If I was to have any success in my new job I would need to keep myself emotionally inviolate, walled off. For, this morning, I was to begin an indefinite appointment as a therapist, attached to Ward 9. My destination was the squat fifteen-storey building that rose up ahead of me, out of the tangled confluence of Camden Town.

I bounced down the hill, the decrease in altitude matched pace for pace by the mounting density of the air. The freshness of the atmosphere on Parliament Hill gave way to the contaminated cotton wool of ground-floor, summer London. Already, at 8.45 a.m., the roads around Gospel Oak were solidly coagulated with metal while shirtsleeved drivers sat and blatted out fumes.

As I picked my way through the streets the hospital appeared and then disappeared. Its vastness made its sight seem problematic. In one street the horizon would flukily exclude it in such a convincing way that it might never have existed, but when I rounded the corner there was its flank rearing up – the grey-blue haunch of some massive whale – turning away from me, sending up a terrace of concrete flats with a lazy flip of its giant tail.

I walked and walked and the hospital never seemed to get any closer. Its sloping sides were banded with mighty balconies, jutting concrete shelves the size of aircraft carrier flight decks. The front of the building was hidden behind a series of zigzagging walkways and ramps that rose in crisscross pattern from the lower ground to the third floor. At the hospital's feet and cuddled in the crook of its great wings-for-arms, were tumbles of auxiliary buildings: nurses' flatlets; parking fortlets; generator units two storeys high, housed in giant, venetian-blind-slatted boxes; and ghostly incinerators, their concrete walls and chimneys blackened with some awful stain.

I rounded the end of the street and found myself, quite suddenly, at the bottom of a ramp that led straight up to the main entrance. The two previous times I had been to the hospital it was a working wasps' nest in full diurnal swing. But now, their photoelectric cells disconnected, the main doors of the hospital were wedged open with orange milk crates. I picked my way through the long, low foyer past the shop, at this hour still clad in its roll-over steel door, and in between miscellaneous islands of freestanding chairs, bolted together in multiples of two, seemingly at random. They were thin and upholstered in the same blue fabric as the floor covering. The room was lit by flickering strips of overhead neon, so that the whole effect was ghostly; the overwhelming impression was that this was a place of transit, an air terminal for the dying. It was impossible to differentiate the ill from the dosse who had leaked in from the streets and piled their old-clothes forms into the plastic chairs. All were reduced and diminished by the hospital's sterile bulk into untidy parasites. The occasional nurse or doctor or auxiliary walked by briskly. They were uniformed and correct, clearly members of some other, genetically distinct, grouping.

In the glassed-in corridor that led to the lifts there was an exhibition of paintings – not by the

patients, but by some pale disciple of a forgotten landscape school. The etiolated blues and greens chosen to take the place of hills and plains were flattened to sheens behind glass, which reflected the dead architectural centre of the hospital: an atrium where a scree of cobblestones supported uncomfortable concrete tubs, which in turn sprouted spindly, spastic trees.

I shared the lift to the ninth floor with a silent young man in green, laced at hip and throat. His sandy, indented temples with their gently pulsing veins aroused in me an attack of itchy squeamishness – I had to touch what repelled me. I scratched the palms of my hands and longed to take off my shoes and scratch the soles of my feet. The itch spread over my body like a hive and still couldn't take my eyes off that pulsing tube of blood, so close to both surface and bone.

At the ninth floor the sandy man straightened up, sighed, and disappeared off down a corridor with an entirely human shrug.

I'd been on to the ward before, albeit briefly, when Dr Busner had shown me round after the interview. What had struck me then and what struck me again now was the difference in smell between Ward 9 and the rest of the hospital. Elsewhere the air was a flat filtered brew; superficially odourless and machined, but latent with a remembered compound of dynasties of tea bags – squeezed between thumb and plastic spoon – merging into extended families of bleaching, disinfecting froth and great vanished tribes of plastic bags. But in Ward 9 the air had a real quality, it clamped itself over your face like a pad of cotton wool, soaked through with the sweet chloroform of utter sadness.

A short corridor led from the mouth of the lift to the central association area of the ward. This was a roughly oblong space with the glassed-off cabinet of the nurses' station on the short lift side; a dining area to the right looking out through a long strip of windows over the city; to the left were the doors to various offices and one-to-one treatment rooms; and straight ahead another short corridor led to the two dormitories.

Every attempt had been made to present Ward 9 as an ordinary sort of place where people were treated for mental illnesses. There were bulletin boards positioned around the association area festooned with notices, small ads, flyers for theatrical performances by groups of hospital staff, clippings from newspapers, drawings and cartoons by the patients. Over in the dining area a few of the tables had rough clay sculptures blobbed on them, left there like psychotic turds. I assumed that these were the products of my predecessor's last art therapy session. Around the open part of the area there were scattered chairs, the short-legged, upholstered kind you only find in institutions. And everywhere the eye alighted – the dining area, the nurses' station, dotted in the open area – were ashtrays. Ashtrays on stands, cut-glass ashtrays, lopsided spiral clay ashtrays, ashtrays bearing the names of famous beers; all of them overflowing with butts.

There are two kinds of institution that stand alone on the issue of smoking. Whereas everywhere else you go you encounter barrages of signs enjoining you to desist, slashing your cigarette through with imperious red lines, in psychiatric wards and police stations the whole atmosphere positively cries out to you, 'Smoke! Smoke! We don't mind, we understand, we like smoking!' Ward 9 was no exception to this rule. Empty at this hour (the patients had no reason to get up, they didn't roll over their beds at 8.00 sharp and think to themselves, 'Ooh! I must get up quickly and have my shot of thorazine ...'), the whole ward still whirled and eddied with last night's acrid work.

I walked down the short corridor to the nurses' station. A young man sat behind the desk, completely absorbed in a dogeared paperback. He wore a black sweat shirt and black Levis; his sneakered feet, propped on the cluttered shelf of clipboards and Biro's, pushed the rest of him back and up on two wheels of his swivel chair. As I stood and observed him, he rocked gently from side to side, his body unconsciously mirroring the short, tight arcs that his eyes made across the page.

I shuffled my feet a little on the linoleum to warn him that he was no longer alone. 'Good

morning.'

He looked up from his book with a smile. 'Hi. What can I do you for?'

'I'm Misha Gurney, the new art therapist, I start on the ward today and Dr Busner asked me come in early to get a feel for things.'

'Well, hello Misha Gurney, I'm Tom.' Tom swung his feet off the ledge and proffered a hand. I was a slim, white hand, prominently bony at the wrist with long, tapering fingers. His handshake was light and dry but firm. His voice had the contrived mellowness of some Hollywood pilgrim paterfamilias. There was something unsettling in the contrast between this and his beautiful face, sandalwood skin and violet eyes. The body, under the stretchy black clothes, moved in an epicene undulant way. 'Well, there's not a lot to see at this time. Zack isn't even in yet. He's probably just getting out of bed.' Tom rolled his lovely eyes back in their soft, scented sockets as if picturing the psychiatrist's matitudinal routine. 'How about some tea?'

'Yeah, great.'

'How do you take it?'

'Brown – no sugar.'

I followed Tom down the corridor that led to the staff offices and the consultation rooms. There was a small kitchenette off to one side. Tom hit the lights, which flickered once and then sprang into hard, flat, neon glare. He squeaked around the lino in his sneakers. I examined the handwritten notices carefully taped to the kitchen cabinets. After a while I said, 'What do you do here, Tom?'

'Oh, I'm a patient.'

'I assume you're not on a section?'

He laughed. 'Oh, no. No, of course not, I'm a voluntary committal. A first-class volunteer with exemplary courage, first in line to be called for the mental health wars.' Again the light mocking irony, but not mad in any way, without the fateful snicker-snack of true schizo-talk.

'You don't seem too disturbed.'

'No, I'm not, that's why they let me go pretty much where I please and do pretty much what I want, as long as I live on the ward. You see, I'm a rare bird.' A downward twist of the corner of his sculpted mouth, 'The medication actually works for me. Zack doesn't really like it, but it's true. As long as I take it consistently I'm fine, but every time they've discharged me in the past, somehow I've managed to forget and then all hell breaks loose.'

'Meaning ...?'

'Oh, fits, delusions, hypermania, the usual sorts of things. I carry the Bible around with me and try to read and arrange spontaneous exegetical seminars in the street. You know, you've seen plenty of crazies, I'll bet.'

'But ... but, you'll forgive me, but I'm not altogether convinced. If you're on any quantity of medication ...'

'I know, I should be a little more slowed down, a little fuzzier around the edges, *un peu absent*. Like I say, I'm an exception, a one-off, an abiding proof of the efficacy of Hoffman La Roche products. Zack doesn't like it at all.'

The kettle whistled and Tom poured the water into two styrofoam cups. We mucked around with plastic dipsticks and extracted the distended bags of tea, then wandered back to the association area. Tom led me over to the windows. The lower decks of the hospital poked out below us. Up here on the ninth floor, more than ever, one could appreciate the total shape of the building – a steeply sloping bullion bar, each ascending storey slightly smaller than the one below it. On the wide balcony beneath us figures were wafting about, clad in hospital clothing, green smocks and blue striped nightdresses.

all bound on with tapes. The figures moved with infinite diffidence, as if wishing to offer no offence to the atmosphere. They trundled in slow eddies towards the edge of the balcony and stood rocking from heel to toe, or from side to side, and then moved back below us and out of sight again.

‘Chronics,’ said Tom, savouring the word as he slurped his tea. ‘There’s at least sixty of them down there. Quite a different ball game. Not a lot of use for your clay and sticky-backed paper down there. There’s a fat ham of a man down there who went mad one day and drank some bleach. The replaced his oesophagus with a section cut from his intestine. On a quiet night you can hear him farting through his mouth. That’s a strange sound, Misha.’

I remained silent, there was nothing to say. Behind me I could hear the ward beginning to wake up and start the day. There were footsteps and brisk salutations. An auxiliary came into the association area from the lift and began to mop the floor with studious inefficiency, pushing the zinc bucket around with a rubber foot. We stood and drank tea and looked out over the chronics’ balcony to the Heath beyond, which rose up, mounded and green, with the sun shining on it, while the hospital remained in shadow. It was like some separate arcadia glimpsed down a long corridor. I fancied I could see the park bench I’d passed some forty minutes earlier and on it a blue speck: the tonsured idiot, still rocking, still free.

Zack Busner came hurrying in from the lift. He was a plump, fiftyish sort of man, with iron-grey hair brushed back in a widow’s peak. He carried a bulging briefcase, the soft kind fastened with two straps. The straps were undone, because the case contained too many files, too many instruments, too many journals, too many books and a couple of unwrapped, fresh, cream-cheese bagels. Busner affected striped linen or poplin suits and open-necked shirts; his shoes were anomalous – black, steel-capped, policeman’s shit kickers. He spotted me over by the window with Tom and, turning towards his office, gestured to me to follow him, with a quick, flicking kind of movement. I dropped my foam beaker into a bin, smiled at Tom and walked after the consultant.

‘Well Misha, I see you’ve found a friend already.’ Busner smiled at me quizzically and ushered me to the chair that faced his across the desk. We sat. His office was tiny, barely larger than a cubicle and quite bare apart from a few textbooks and four artworks. Most psychiatrists try to humanise their offices with such pieces. They think that even the most awful rubbish somehow indicates that they have ‘the finer feelings’. Busner’s artworks were unusually dominant, four large clay bas-reliefs, one on each wall. These rectangular slabs of miniature upheaval, earth-coloured and unglazed, seemed to depict imaginary topographies.

‘Yes, he’s personable enough. What’s the matter with him?’

‘Actually, Tom’s quite interesting.’ Busner said this without a trace of irony and began fiddling around on the surface of his desk, as if looking for a tobacco pipe. ‘He’s subject to what I’d call mimetic psychosis ...’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning he literally mimics the symptoms of all sorts of other mental illnesses, at least those that have any kind of defined pathology: schizophrenia, chronic depression, hypermania, depressive psychosis. The thing about Tom’s impersonations, or should I say the impersonations of his disease, is that they’re bad performances. Tom carefully reiterates every recorded detail of aberrant behaviour but with a singular lack of conviction; it’s wooden and unconvincing. Your father would have found it fascinating to watch.’

‘Well, I find it pretty fascinating myself, even if I don’t have quite the same professional involvement. What phase is Tom in now?’

‘You tell me.’

‘Well, he seems to be playing the “Knowing Patient Introduces Naive Art Therapist to Hell”

Ward” role.’

‘And how well is he doing it?’

‘Well, now you mention it, not too convincingly.’

Busner had abandoned his search for a pipe, if that’s what it had been. He now turned and presented me with his outline set against the window. In profile I could see that he was in reality rather eroded, and that the impression of barely contained energy which he seemed determined to project was an illusion as well. Busner sat talking to me, rolling and then unrolling the brown tongue of a knitted tie he wore yanked around his neck. Overall, he reminded me of nothing so much as a giant frog.

Behind him light and then shadow moved across the face of the hospital at a jerky, unnatural speed. The clouds were whipping away overhead, out of sight. All I could see was their reflection on the hospital’s rough, grey, barnacle-pitted skin.

The hospital was big. Truly big. With its winking lights, belching vents and tangled antennae, it slid away beneath the cloudscape. Its bulk was such that it suggested to the viewer the possibility of spaceships (or hospitals) larger still, which might engulf it, whole, through some docking port. The hospital was like this. I couldn’t judge whether the rectangles I saw outlined on the protruding corners opposite Dr Busner’s office were glass bricks or windows two storeys high. The street lay too far below to give me a sense of scale. I was left just with the hospital and the scudding shadows of the racing clouds.

Busner had given up his tie-rolling and taken up with an ashtray on his desk. This was crudely fashioned out of a spiralled snake of clay, varnished and painted with a bilious yellow glaze. Busner ran his fleshy digit around and around the rim as he said, ‘I’d like you to stick close to me this morning, Misha. If you are to have any real impact on what we’re trying to do here you need to be properly acquainted with the whole process of the ward: how we assess patients, how we book them in, how we decide on treatment. If you shadow me this morning, you can then get to know some of the patients informally this afternoon.’

‘That sounds OK.’

‘We’ve also got a ward meeting at noon which will give you an opportunity to get to know all your fellow workers and appreciate how they fit into the scheme of things.’

Busner set down the turd of clay on his desk with a clack and stood up. I stepped back to allow him to get round the desk and to the door. Despite being the senior consultant in the psychiatry department, Busner had about as much office space as a postroom boy. I followed him back down the short corridor to the association area. By now the sun had risen up behind the clouds and the bank of windows on the far side of the dining area shone brightly. Silhouetted against them was a slow line of patients, shuffling towards the nurses’ station where they were picking up their morning medication.

The patients were like piles of empty clothes, held upright by some static charge. Behind the double sliding panes of glass which fronted the nurses’ station sat two young people. One consulted a chart, the other selected pills and capsules from compartments in a moulded plastic tray. They then handed these over to the patient at the head of the queue, together with a paper beaker of water, which had a pointed base, rendering it unputdownable, like a best seller.

‘Not ideal, but necessary.’ Busner cupped his right hand as if to encapsulate the queue. ‘We have to give medication. Why? Because without it we couldn’t calm down our patients enough to actually talk to them and find out what the matter is. However, once we’ve medicated them they’re often too displaced to be able to tell us anything useful. Catch-22.’

Busner cut through the queue to the dining area, muttering a few good mornings as he gently pushed aside his flock. We sat down at a table where a young woman in a frayed white coat was

sipping a muddy Nescafe. Busner introduced us.

~~‘Jane, this is Misha Gurney, Misha, Jane Bowen – Jane is the senior registrar here. Misha joining us to manage art therapy – quite a coup, I think. His father, you know, was a friend of mine, close contemporary.’~~

Jane Bowen extended her hand with an overarm gesture that told me she couldn't have cared less about me, or my antecedents, but because she thought of herself as an essentially open-minded and kind person she was going to show me a welcoming smile. I clasped her hand briefly and looked at her. She was slight, with one of those bodies that seemed to be all concavities – her cheeks were hollowed, her eyes scooped, her neck centrally cratered. Under her loose coat I sensed her body as an absence, her breasts as inversions. Her hair was tied back in one long plait, held by an ethnic leather clasp. Her top lip quested towards her styrofoam beaker. The unrolled, frayed ends of her stretch pullover protruded beyond the frayed cuffs of her cotton coat. Her pockets were stuffed full. They overflowed with pens, thermometers, syringes, watches, stethoscopes, packets of tobacco and boxes of matches. The lapels of the coat were festooned with name badges, homemade badges, political badges and badges of cutout cartoon characters: Roadrunner, TweetyPie, Bugs Bunny and Scooby Doo.

‘Well, Misha, any ideas on how your participation in the ward's creative life will help to break the mould?’ She gestured towards an adjacent table, where several misshapen clay vessels leant against one another like drunken Rotarians.

‘Well, if the patients want to make clay ashtrays, let them make clay ashtrays.’ I lit a cigarette and squinted at her through the smoke.

‘Of course they could always try and solve The Riddle.’

I hadn't noticed as I sat down, but now I saw that she was shifting the four pieces of a portable version of The Riddle around on the melamine surface in front of her. Her fingers were bitten to the quick and beyond. Busner flushed and shifted uneasily in his chair.

‘Erumph! Well... bankrupt stock and all that. We have rather a lot of The Riddle sets around the ward. I err ... bought them up for a pittance, you know. At any rate, I still have some faith in them and the patients seem to like them.’

Busner had been responsible for designing, or ‘posing’, The Riddle in the early Seventies. It was one of those pop psychological devices that had had a brief vogue. Busner himself had been forging a modest career as a kind of media psychologist with a neat line in attacking the mores of conventional society. The Riddle tied in with this and with the work that Busner was doing at his revolutionary Concept House in Willesden. His involvement with the early development of the Quantity Theory also dated from that period.

Busner was a frequent trespasser on the telly screens of my childhood. Always interviewing, being interviewed, discussing an interview that had just been re-screened, or appearing in those discussion programmes where paunchy people sat on uncomfortable steel rack-type chairs in front of a wove backdrop. Busner's media activities had dropped away as he grew paunchier. He was not remembered, if at all, as the poser of The Riddle – and that chiefly because the short-lived popularity of this ‘enquire-within tool’ had spawned millions of square acrylic slabs of just the right size to get lost and turn up in idiosyncratic places around the house, along with spillikins, Lego blocks and hairpins. In fact it had become something of a catch-phrase to cry as you dug a tile out from between the carpet and the underlay, or from behind a radiator, ‘I'm solving The Riddle!’ Eventually The Riddle itself – what you were actually meant to do with the four square slabs in bright pastel shades which you got with The Riddle set – was entirely forgotten.

‘I'm sorry Zack, I didn't mean to sound caustic.’ Jane Bowen placed a surprisingly tender hand on Busner's poplin sleeve.

‘That’s all right, I think I still deserve it, even after all these years. The funny thing is that I don’t believe in ~~The Riddle~~. I suppose a cynic would say that anyone would believe in something that brought in enough income to buy a four-bedroom house in Redington Road.’

‘Even shrinks have to have somewhere to live,’ said Jane Bowen. The two of them smiled wryly over this comment – a little more wryly than it strictly merited.

‘Well, we’re not helping anybody sitting here, are we?’ said Busner. Once again this was a key motif. It had been his catchphrase on all those discussion and interview programmes – always delivered with falsetto emphasis on the ‘helping’. The catch-phrase, like ~~The Riddle~~, outlived Busner’s own popularity. I remember seeing him towards the very end of his TV sojourn, when he was reduced to going on one of those ‘celebrity’ gameshows where the celebrities sit in a rack of cubicles. Zack trotted out his obligatory line and the contestant dutifully pushed the button on the tape machine – as I recall, she ended up winning a suite of patio furniture. It was really quite a long way from the spirit of radical psychology. Now Busner was using the phrase again, clearly with a sense of irony but somehow not altogether; there was also something else there, a strange kind of pride almost.

‘I want you to shadow me while I do the ward round.’ Busner guided me by placing his palm on my shoulder. We both nodded to Jane Bowen, who had forgotten us already and fallen into conversation with a nurse. Busner stashed his bursting briefcase behind the nurses’ station, after extracting from it with difficulty a clipboard and some sheets of blank paper. We walked side by side down the short corridor that led to the entrance to the two wards. For some reason Busner and I were unwilling to precede one another, and as a result people coming in the other direction had to crush up against the walls to get around us. We were like a teenage couple – desperate to avoid any break in contact that might let in indifference.

The dormitories were laid out in a series of bays, four beds in each bay and four bays to the dormitory. Each bay was about the size of an average room, the beds laid out so as to provide the maximum surrounding space for each occupant to turn into their own private space. Some of the patients had stuck photographs and posters up on the walls with masking tape, some had placed knick-knacks on the shelves, and others had done nothing and lay on their beds, motionless, like ascetics or prisoners.

Busner kept up a commentary for my benefit as we stopped and consulted with each patient. The first one we came to was a pop-eyed man in his mid-thirties. He was wearing a decrepit Burton suit which was worn to a shine at knee and elbow. He was sitting on the easy chair by his bed and staring straight ahead. His shoulder-length hair was scraped down from a severe central parting. His eyes weren’t just popping, they were half out of their sockets, resembling ping-pong balls with the pupils painted on to them like black spots.

‘Clive is prone to bouts of mania, aren’t you, Clive?’

‘Good morning, Dr Busner.’

‘How are you feeling, Clive?’

‘Fine, thank you, Doctor.’

‘Any problems with your medication? You’ll be leaving us soon, won’t you?’

‘In answer to your first question, no. In answer to your second, yes.’

‘Clive likes everything to be stated clearly, don’t you, Clive?’

At the time I thought Busner was being sarcastic. In fact – as I realised later – this wasn’t the case. If anything, Busner was being solicitous. He knew that Clive liked to expatiate on his attitudes and methods; Busner was providing him with the opportunity.

‘You’re staring very fixedly at the opposite wall, Clive, would you like to tell Misha why this is?’

I followed his line of sight; he was looking at a poster which showed two furry little kittens bo

dangling by their paws from the handle of a straw basket. The slogan underneath in curly script proclaimed, 'Faith isn't Faith until it's all you're hanging on to.'

'The kitten is powerful.' Clive smiled enigmatically and pointed with a dirt-rimmed nail, 'The kitten holds in its paws the balance, the egg of creation and more.' Having pronounced he lapsed back into a rigid silence. Busner and I left him.

Although there were only thirty or so patients on the ward they soon resolved themselves, not into names or individuals, but into distinct groups. Busner's catchment area for his ward was an L-shaped zone that extended from the hospital in one dog-leg into the very centre of the city. The hospital pulled in its sustenance from every conceivable level of society. But on Ward 9 insanity had proved a great leveller. A refugee sometimes seems to have no class. The English depend on class, to the extent that whenever two English people meet, they spend nano-seconds in high-speed calculation. Every nuance of accent, every detail of apparel, every implication of vocabulary, is analysed to produce the final formula. This in turn provides the coordinates that will locate the individual and determine their Attitude. The patients on Ward 9 had distanced themselves from this. They could not be gauged in such a fashion. Instead, I divided them up mentally into the following groups: thinnie-pukies, junkies, sads, schizes and maniacs. The first four groups were all represented about equally, whilst the fifth group was definitely in the ascendant; there were lots of maniacs on Ward 9 and by maniacs I mean not the culturally popular homicidal maniac, but his distant herbivorous cousin, hyper, rather than homicidal, and manic, rather than maniacal.

As Tom had already characterised himself earlier that morning, hypermanic types are lecturers, extramural, al fresco professors, who, like increasingly undulant or syncopated Wittgensteins, address the world at large on a patchwork syllabus made up of Kabbalah, astrology, tarot, numerology and Bible (specifically Revelation) study. They are sad-mad, they know they are ill, they have periods of conformity, but they are always somehow out of joint.

'Art therapy is very popular here, Misha.' Busner detained me in the vestibule between the two wards. 'We can't keep the patients sufficiently occupied, they have treatment sessions of various kinds in the mornings, but in the afternoons you'll be all they have to look forward to. Sometimes we can arrange an outing of some kind, or a friend or relative will be allowed to take them out on the Heath, but otherwise they're cooped up here in a fuddled daze.'

We went on into the women's dormitory. Here things seemed, at first, different. On the men's dormitory Busner and I had spoken with a few isolated individuals, backed off into their individual bays. But here the patients seemed to be associating with one another. They reclined on beds chatting or sat round the formica-topped tables which formed a central reservation.

A skeleton with long, lush hair rocked on a bed in the bay to our right, an obscenely large catheter protruding out of her lolly-stick arm. Busner took me in under tow and introduced us.

'Hilary isn't that keen on eating – or at least she is sometimes, but she doesn't really like the nutritional side-effects of food. Hilary, this is Misha Gurney, he's our new art therapist.' Hilary stopped rocking and gave me a level smile from underneath neatly coiffed chestnut bangs.

'Hello. I'll look forward to this afternoon. I like to paint, I like watercolours. These are some of mine.' She gestured towards the wall at the head of the bed, where an area about a foot square was tiled with tiny watercolours, terribly painfully precise little paintings – all portraits, apparently of young women. Busner wandered off, but I remained and walked to the head of the bed, so that I could examine the pictures thoroughly. They had been executed with a fanatical attention to the detail of make-up and hair which made them almost grotesque. Hilary and I sat sideways to each other. With her neck canted around so that she could face me, Hilary's greaseproof-paper skin stretched, until I could see the twisted, knotted coils of tendon and artery that lay within.

‘They’re very good. Who are all these people?’

‘They’re my friends. I paint them from photographs.’

‘Your pictures are very detailed. How do you manage it?’

‘Oh, I have special pens and brushes. I’ll show you later.’

I left Hilary and went over to where Busner was sitting at one of the tables in the central area of the dormitory.

‘Has Hilary been telling you about her friends?’

‘Yes ...’

‘Hilary doesn’t have any friends, as such. She cuts pictures of models out of advertisements in magazines, then she paints over them. She’s been in and out of this ward for the past three years. Every time she comes in she looks like she does now. She’s so close to death we have to put her on a drip. She’s usually completely demented; the amino acids have been leached out of her brain. After she’s been on the drip for a while we transfer her to a tight regime of supervised eating based on a punishment/reward system, and at the same time she undergoes an intensive course of psychotherapy with Jane Bowen. Jane is very much the expert on eating disorders. After six weeks to two months Hilary is back to a healthy weight and eating sensibly. She’ll leave and we can predict her return usually to within the day – some four months later.’

‘I thought a lot of anorexics and bulimics grew out of it?’

‘To some extent, but there’s always a hard core and at the moment it seems to be growing. The long-term anorexics are different, they’re placid, resigned and apparently unconscious of any motivation. The temporaries tend to be wilful, obstinate and obviously powerfully neurotic. The hard-cores, like Hilary, could almost be psychologically blameless. Some of them even have fairly stable relationships. They’re at a loss to explain what comes over them, it seems to be somehow external, imposed from elsewhere.’

I should have been paying attention to what Busner was saying, but I couldn’t concentrate. From the start there was the strangeness of the situation – I’d only ever spent isolated periods of a few minutes on psychiatric wards before. I had known what to expect in broad terms, but it was the relentlessness of the ambience that was beginning to get to me. There was something cloacal about the atmosphere of the women’s ward. None of the patients seemed to have bothered to dress, they sat here and there talking, wearing combinations of night and day clothes. There was a preponderance of brushed cotton. I sensed damp, and smelt oatmeal, porridge, canteen; indefinable, closed-in odours.

I could walk away from the tonsured idiot on the Heath, but inside Ward 9 I was trapped. And these people weren’t pretending. They weren’t closet neurotics or posing eccentrics, Bohemians. They were the real thing. Real loss of equilibrium, real confusion, real sadness, that wells up from inside like an unstaunchable flow of blood from a severed artery. I felt my gorge rising. I felt my forehead, it was sandpaper-dry. Busner was neglecting me and talking to a pneumatic nurse. The nurses on Ward 9 didn’t wear a uniform as such, rather they affected various items of medical garb: tunics, coats and smocks, nameplates and watches pinned at the breast. This nurse had a man’s Ingersoll attached by a safety-pin to her jacket lapel. She had blonde baby curls, bee-stung lips and the creamy, slightly spongy complexion that invariably goes with acrid coital sweats. I forced myself to listen to what they were saying, and fought down nausea with concentration.

‘Take her out to the optician then, Mimi, if she has to go.’

‘Oh, she does, Zack, she can barely see a yard in front of herself. She can’t be expected to deal with reality if she can’t see it.’ The voluptuous Mimi was squidged on to the corner of the table. Behind her stood a short woman in her thirties with the hydrocephalic brow and oblique domed crown of an intelligent child. She stared at me with sightless eyes.

‘Rachel shouldn’t really be off the ward, considering the medication she’s on.’

‘But Zack, it’s a walk down to the parade, ten minutes at most. Give her a break.’

‘Oh, all right.’

‘Come on then, Rachel, get your coat on.’ Rachel bounced away into one of the bays. Mimi lifted herself off the edge of the table and winked at me in a languid way.

‘Come on, Misha, we’ve got an admission for you to see. I’ll leave you at the front desk. Anthony Valuam will pick you up and take you down to casualty.’ We walked out of the women’s dormitory and back to the association area. Tom, my friend from the earlier part of the morning, was back behind the nurses’ station, reading his dog-eared Penguin. Busner despatched me to wait with him by giving me a gentle shove in the small of my back, then he crooked his finger at a scrofulous youth in a tattered sharkskin suit who sat smoking and disappeared with him towards his office. Tom put down his book and treated me to another little conspiratorial exchange.

‘Has the good doctor given you a little tour?’

‘We’ve been round the ward, yes.’

‘Beginning to catch on yet?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, who did you get introduced to? No, don’t tell me. Let me guess. You talked to Clive and then you saw a lot of other male patients quite quickly until you ended up scrutinising Hilary’s watercolours.’

‘Err ... yes.’

‘And did Zack come out with his catch-phrase?’

‘Yes, when we were talking to Jane Bowen.’

‘Thought so. He’s so predictable. That’s one of the truly therapeutic aspects of this place, the unflinching regularity of Dr Busner. What are you doing now?’

‘I’m meant to be going down to casualty to sit in on an admission with a Dr Valuam.’

‘Tony, yeah. Well, he’s my kind of a shrink, not like Dr B; more practical like, more chemical.’

A door opened to the right of the nurses’ station which I hadn’t noticed before. A very short man came out of it and with neat movements locked it behind him, using a key that was on an extremely large gaoler’s bunch. He turned to face me. He was a funny little specimen. He had wispy fair hair teased ineffectually around his bare scalp. It wasn’t as if he was going bald, it was more as if he had never grown any hair to begin with. This impression was supported by the watery blue eyes, and the nose and chin which were soft and seemingly boneless. He wore a stiff blue synthetic suit of Seventies cut and vinyl shoes.

‘You must be Misha Gurney. I’m Anthony Valuam.’ His handshake was twisted and rubberised, like holding a retort clamp in a laboratory, but his voice was absurdly mellow and basso. A voice-over rather than a real voice. His foetal face registered and then dismissed my surprise; he must have been used to it. Tom was stifling an obvious giggle behind his paperback. Valuam ignored him and followed suit. We walked off down the short corridor to the lift. Valuam launched into a brief introduction.

‘It’s very unusual to have an admission through casualty at this time of day. On this ward we deal almost exclusively with referrals, but we know this particular young man and there are very good reasons why he should be treated on Ward 9.’

‘And they are ...?’

‘I don’t wish to be enigmatic, but you’ll see.’

Valuam fell silent. We waited for the lift, which arrived and slid open and closed and then dropped

us down through the hospital to casualty, which was situated in the first sub-basement. The lift stopped on every floor, to take on and drop passengers.

The architects, interior designers and colour consultants who had made the hospital were not insensitive to the difficulties posed by such a project, they had earnestly striven to make this vast labyrinthine structure seem habitable and human in scale. To this end each floor had been given slightly different wall and floor coverings, slightly different-shaped neon strip-light covers, slightly different concrete cornicing, slightly different steel ventilation-unit housings and slightly different colourings: virology an emphatic pale blue, urology a teasing (but tasteful) green, surgery and cardiology a resilient pink and so on. At each floor the patients and their orderlies were also different colours. The faces and hands of the patients as they were transferred from ward to ward, on stretchers, on trolleys, in wheelchairs as heavy as siege engines, were stained with disease, as vividly as a pickle specimen injected with dye.

The orderlies were violently offhand; they manhandled the patients into the lifts like awkward fifty-kilo bags of Spanish onions. Then they stood menacingly in the corners, lowering over their lives charges, their temples pulsing with insulting health. Occasionally a patient would be wheeled into the lift who was clearly the wrong colour for the direction we were headed in (this was evident as soon as the lift reached the next floor) and the orderly would back the chair or table out of the lift again, the faces of both porter and cargo registering careful weariness at the prospect of another purgatorial walk.

We reached the sub-basement. Valuam turned to the left outside of the lift and led me along the corridor. Down here the colour scheme was a muted beige. The persistent susurrations of the air conditioning was louder than on the ninth floor and was backed up by a deeper throb of generator. The industrial ambience was further underscored by the pieces of equipment which stood at intervals along the corridor, their steel rods, rubber wheels, plastic cylinders and dependent ganglia of electrical wiring betrayed no utility.

The beige-tiled floor was scarred with dirty wheel tracks. We whipped past doors with cryptic signs on them: 'Hal-G Cupboard', 'Ex-Offex.Con', 'Broom Station'. The corridor now petered out into a series of partitioned walkways which Valuam picked his way through with complete assurance. We entered a wide area, although the ceiling here was no higher than in the corridor. On either side were soft-sided booths, curtained off with beige plastic sheeting. The beige lights overhead subsonically wittered. We passed stooped personnel – health miners who laboured here with heavy equipment to extract the diseased seam. They were directed by taller foremen, recognisable by their white coats, worn like flapping parodies. Valuam turned to the right, to the left, to the left again. In the unnatural light I felt terribly sensitive as we passed booths where figures lay humped in pain. I felt the tearing, cutting and mashing of tissue and bone like an electrified cottonwool pad clamped across mouth and nose.

At length Valuam reached the right booth. He swept aside the curtain. A youth of twenty or twenty-one cowered in a plastic scoop chair at the back of the oblong curtained area. On the left a fiercely preserved woman leant against the edge of the examination couch. On the right stood a wheeled aluminium table. Laid out on it were tissues, a kidney dish of tongue depressors, and a stream of disposable hypodermics wound out of a dispenser box.

Valuam pushed a sickly yellow sharps disposal bin to one side with his blue foot and pulled out another plastic chair. He stretched and shook hands with the woman, who murmured 'Anthony'. Valuam sat down facing the youth and untucked his clipboard from the crook of his arm. It was left for me to lean awkwardly in the opening, looming over the gathering like a malevolent interloper. I was conspicuously ignored.

'Good morning, Simon,' said Valuam. Simon drew a frond of wool out from the cuff of his

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